

# Shaela

## “Hopes Blade”

Book 1

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# Preface

Utaemia holds the promise of a bright future for those who fight to keep hope alive . . .

“Please don't do this,” she pleaded.

There are those who rise above defeat . . .

Horrified, she recalled killing her love in this same manner.

Utaemia holds the assurance of pain and suffering for those who champion the cause of hope . . .

. . . he forced her to turn and face him.

Some despise hope; the blade that wounds the deepest . . .

Gliding his teeth over her jaw-line, he stopped just over the soft area of her neck.

With some, there is no mercy . . .

. . . pain . . . suffering . . .

With others, unlooked for alliances . . .

. . . a dragon's fury . . . salvation . . .

The true meaning of life is revealed when it begins to dim . . .

. . . she felt the change . . .

When you have lost your humanity, what then?

. . . unnatural desire . . . hunger . . . cravings . . .

Exhausted, hungry and dehydrated, a young girl struggled her way through the endless maze of inhospitable vegetation that seemed to have a mind of its own as it grasped and tore at her once elegant, lengthy, black-satin dress. Gritting her teeth, she stopped, caught her breath, gripped a handful of satin and yanked it loose from the undergrowth, leaving a strip of the cloth dangling from a plant that looked more like the back of a hedgehog than a bush.

Smoothing out the tattered folds of her once beautiful dress, she desperately squinted through the density of the jungle in all directions in a desperate attempt to find the only road that led through the Ever`Shade Jungle. It was getting dark again. Once the sun went down, she knew it would be useless to continue searching. She was lost, hopelessly lost. Through the exhaustion, through growing desperation, and the waning of her strength, she leaned up against the base of a large tree for support.

She could no longer ignore that same, nagging, familiar thought, one that had been surfacing in her mind more frequently as each day passed. If she failed to find the road, this evening would mark the beginning of the third night out in the jungle.

Something snapped behind her. Terrified, she spun about, taking in a sharp breath as she probed the area with widened eyes. Nothing, there was nothing there. Desperately, she began seeking for the only road that cut through the Ever`Shade Jungle. If she could only find the road, it would lead her out of this horrid place.

Another snag left yet another piece of satin dangling within a large cluster of thorns, grown into a bush to torment her. Weakened from lack of food and water, she numbly continued, her will to take another step nearly failing. Not giving up, she searched on, plagued by nightmarish images and sounds which were steadily becoming more prevalent as the darkness set in.

She remembered little after the monsters had attacked. She did recall her father screaming for her to run, and not look back. The panic in her father's voice,

his terror, had propelled her to flee into the jungle.

Again, tears began to stream freely down her cheeks, mingling with three days of filth. She could still hear the screams of her father when she fled, leaving her family to those unmerciful abominations. As she retreated into the thickness of the woodlands, she glanced back, hoping to see her father and mother close behind, but the density of the jungle had blocked the scene.

Falling to her knees, she hugged herself, shivering, but not from cold. The triumphant echoes of the monsters still hung in her mind, torturing her. She knew they had caught them. Their triumphant bellows were easy to discern. Hearing the heavy footsteps of those terrible monsters in the forest behind her, she looked back, then cut off to the left in another direction to lose them, sprinting as fast as her legs could carry her . . . only to catch a low hanging tree branch in the face. The impact knocked her to the ground, forcing the wind out of her.

As she lay there, stunned, fighting for breath, she tried with all her will to stay conscious, clawing desperately at the dirt and foliage beside her, fighting in vain to take a breath that would not come. She felt her hands and legs jerk as she struggled for precious air. Twisting in agony, she tried in vain to take one single breath as her vision faded, like the collapsing of a dark tunnel. Curling into a ball, she gagged, feeling her chest burn like fire. In vain she tried to fight off the darkness quickly engulfing her, but to no avail.

“I’m dying”, she screamed within.

When she awoke it was pitch black, except for when the trees above her let a star peek down from above. Her head felt like it was going to shatter, especially the left side of her face. She sat up and looked around for anything to focus on. She was nearly blind -- it was night.

Her thoughts wandered to her family; they were taking a trip for her seventeenth birthday. Where she was going had been a secret. Now, everything had changed. She tried to stand and walk back to the road, but it was so dark, she didn't know which way the road was. Making a guess, she struck out, struggling

her way through the timberlands and dense undergrowth. She had chosen the wrong way into the jungle. She did not know it, but had she simply turned around, she would have found the road within a short time.

Coming back to the present, the sound of running water came to her ears. Unbalanced, she made toward that blessed sound, suddenly very thirsty. All too soon, she found it as she tripped and fell headlong into a stream. Recoiling back onto the bank, the shock of cold water caused her to gasp and sputter.

After regaining control, she crept forward to the water's edge and quickly cupped her hands into the cool liquid, desperately taking her fill. Once she'd had enough, she laid back on the bank of the stream, her limbs rebelling against any further exertion, no matter how simple. Her stomach, as well as her feet, tortured her to no end, but laying down did help a little. Touching the side of her throbbing face, she noticed that it was swollen.

As she lay there, trying to regain some strength, thoughts of her mother and father began to penetrate her every thought. They were all the world to her; a world now far beyond her reach. Maybe they had escaped. For a moment, hope kindled, like a small warm fire within. Then the tears began to silently flow, once again, as they did so often these last few days. She was fooling herself. The realization of what had become of them began to torture her. The shock of it crept over her, like a thousand filthy spiders creeping over every part of her body. Closing her eyes, she shivered in the night air, her stomach twisting up into a relentless knot. If she could just sleep, maybe this would all go away. Maybe this was just a nightmare that would pass.

Turning her head, she tried to rest, ignoring the darkness of the night pressing about her. Listening to the harmonious mockery of the stream play in her ears, she waited until the moon shone through a break in the trees above, granting her enough light to see in patches here and there.

Despair began to overwhelm her. Her thin frame began to feel heavy and cold as she fell deep into dark, foreboding thoughts. Closing her eyes, desperate memories of her parents tortured her; her father, throwing a broad smile her way,

her mother, stern as she was, always teaching her to sew, cook, garden, and preform many skills for the home.

“Mother”, she weakly sobbed, “you never prepared me for this; we didn't expect this.” Her long black hair lay in tangles and knots now, bits and pieces of nearly every organic in the area woven hopelessly into it. Exhausted, she began to steadily fade into sleep. Her name . . . “My name.” She whispered. She could not remember it. “My name, my name, my name . . .”, she repeated several more times before unconsciousness took her into its darkened claws, wherein she dreamed she was back home.

At seventeen seasons, she was remarkably knowledgeable compared to most others her age. She loved books, schooling and, especially, everything to do with animals. She kept her love of animals from the attention of her mother after once being reprimanded for wasting time in the study of such foolishness.

“It's practicality that keeps us successful, not the running after vain knowledge,” her mother would say, among other things. The dream faded.

After three days and nearly three nights in the wild, sleep was as fleeting as a group of startled bats. It came on suddenly, and left as quickly as it overpowered her.

She wasn't sure if she'd dozed off again, or if she had simply faded from lack of energy, but as her eyes opened, she was suddenly aware that the endless chorus of insects about her, the ones which had kept her company, were still and silent. Three solid days of their constant chattering, especially in the evening hours, and now, nothing. For some reason, they had all gone quiet, which disturbed her greatly.

While working at the inn, owned and ran by her family, she recalled gathering up all the scraps of food, after the guests had all gone to their rooms, and heading out the back door to feed them. On a few occasions, when she took the leftovers out after dark, the insects all about the area would suddenly go quiet.

When this happened, the chickens would become still and quiet as well. Her father's explanation was not a comforting memory out here in the darkness, in the wild, where monsters roamed.

“Shaela, when the insects go silent, something, usually a predator, has come into the area. Just come back to the house quickly if you are worried about it.” Remembering his words disturbed her; she had nowhere to go!

She heard something, then, or was it just her imagination? No, there it was again, directly across the stream in the trees, and it was headed in her direction. She froze, not knowing what to do. She wanted to run, but if she moved, the noise would give her away. It was simply too late to do anything but to hold perfectly still and hope she was not noticed.

With any luck, it might only be a deer. Her breathing came to her in shortened gasps as her heart pounded against the inside of her chest so hard, she thought it would give her away. Slowly, she raised up into sitting position, her eyes widening in terror as it, whatever it was, neared. She strained to see, but it was too dark. The sound of steady breathing filled the air, growing louder and louder as she waited, her eyes widening even the more. Maybe if she held perfectly still, whatever it was would miss her and pass by.

Holding her breath, she watched as a large shadowy figure emerged from the trees into an area where starlight fell, illuminating the area just enough to reveal the glitter of its slanted green eyes. The sight of those terrible eyes, stole a breath from her, even as she tried to place a hand over her mouth.

In an instant, the shadowy figure crouched and screamed out a challenge. Panicking, she scrambled back from the bank, a cold dread filling her. As she struggled to retreat, the shadow flew across the stream, landing directly before her. Choking in horror, she raised an arm up to protect herself from the oncoming attack . . . and fainted.

She awoke, finding herself tightly bound to a tree in a sitting position. Hazily she came to, slowly looking up. Even the strain of simply lifting her head was difficult, as if it weighed too much.

The first thing that crossed her mind was how hungry she was. The first thing she saw was a black-furred mancat crouched by a small fire roasting a rather large fish on a stick. Its green eyes centered in on its meal as its razor-sharp talons, nearly as long as her fingers, nimbly picked the bones out of the fish and tossed them aside.

Her heart quickened as she struggled silently in vain against her bonds. Oh, that fish looked so good. She hated the smell and taste of fish . . . she always had; she loved that one. When the creature caught her watching, it hatefully hissed at her, its ears laying back against its neck. Her blood ran cold as it beared its fangs at her.

She pressed her head back into the tree, attempting to distance herself from it, as if she could. Then a sudden thought occurred to her: She was dead whether it let her go, or killed her . . . it did not matter. Hanging her head, she wept as the mancat turned its attention back to its meal once more, slowly eating its fill.

After casually finishing, it began to groom itself thoroughly, taking its time as if it had no care in the world. After cleaning the oils of the fish from its hands and face, it looked up into the trees, stood and stretched, its black fur catching the morning sunlight.

Stalking over to her, it began clawing the tree directly over her head, causing thin shreds of bark to rain down into her hair. When it stopped, she looked up at her captor, finding it glaring down at her, extending and retracting its talons over and over in silence, a fierce look in its eyes.

“Please, don't do it,!” she weakly begged, tears filling her eyes. It was a plea for her life she was beginning to give up on. Why had they come through the jungle? Why? She flinched as the mancat suddenly crouched before her. For a time, it simply glared at her, its face close and its breath mingling with hers. She

held its gaze for a moment before she lowered her eyes, and waited for the end. After a few tense moments, she slowly looked up to see it staring at her, as if it had been petrified, its green eyes boring into hers, unblinking, hard as stone, cold as ice.

She flinched as it quickly raised a hand to the left side of her face. Not daring to move, she winced in pain as it explored her swollen cheek, poking and prodding with its razor-like talons. Abandoning her face, it took a handful of her once beautiful hair and studied it, smelling and glaring at it, then noticed her satin dress, becoming curious. Taking a handful, it sniffed the fabric. It then lifted its folds here and there in curiosity.

Closing her eyes, she began to tremble, wondering what would happen next. As she conjured up the darkest conclusion, she heard it rise and walk away. Opening her eyes, she watched the creature pick up another fish laying beside the fire. Running the stick through it, the mancat moved the fish over the flames.

It didn't kill her! She was still alive! Watching the fish cook, she waited, wondering what would happen next. After the fish was ready to eat, to her surprise, it returned, crouched beside her and began feeding her small pieces. She swallowed the fish without chewing, not daring to believe this was happening.

When half the fish was gone, the mancat put it down beside her, stood and stared at her for the longest time, as if deep in thought. She looked up at it, and then lowered her head, weariness creeping into her like never before. She was so exhausted.

Suddenly her arms fell free as she felt her bonds severed. Coming to her senses, she looked around as the mancat came back around the tree, cautiously watching her. It seemed as though it was waiting for something.

Slowly taking up the fish, she began eating it as the monster watched on. Before taking a second bite, she broke it in half and held the larger portion to her captor, hoping it would think her gesture an act of friendship. It flinched as she held the fish out. Her hand trembled noticeably as she waited to see what it would do. Suddenly its ears pricked up, and it slowly reached out and took the offering.

As they ate together, her trembling ceased. Fear was partially replaced with relief, and she found herself feeling grateful for this creature that had saved her life. It began to fascinate her, though she felt she was still in dire peril. She watched it quickly eat the fish, wondering what would happen after their meal together. As she watched, it caught her eye. Averting her eyes to the ground, she waited in hope that she would not anger it.

At the end of their meal it went down to the stream and began to groom itself. Slowly she stood and followed her captor, but midway her strength failed completely and she stumbled forward onto her hands and knees. Instantly, to her surprise, the mancat was before her, but this time its stern, powerful eyes were not so filled with hate. Even so it aided her to stand, walking her to the water's edge where it let her drop before the water's edge.

After drinking her fill, and after washing, she returned to the fire, feeling weak and heavy. Still, the meal had helped. With a growing weakness in her frame, she felt her eyes grow heavy. She was in need of sleep and rest, and found it impossible to resist, no matter how hard she tried. Moving away from the water's edge, she lay upon the ground, arranging her dress to best cover her throughout the remainder of the night.

As she began to fall into heavy sleep she stole a fading glance at her captor; her rescuer, who stared at her intensely. As her eyes began to close, she smiled slightly.

“Thank you”, she managed to whisper before falling headlong into sleep.

How long it had carried her, she did not know, but so evenly was its gate she had not been awakened. She came to with the sound of a waterfall spilling into a small pool. She was sore, and her face hurt immensely. She was no longer cold, nor chilled by the night. Rather, she felt the opposite. Sweat trickled down her forehead as she felt this animal, this monster, bearing her steadily, and sure-footed, through the woodlands.

It was good not to be starving, though she was yet hungry. In a haze, she was carried to the edge of a wide span of water, where the course of the creek flowed more slowly. For a moment, the mancat stopped at the water's edge, then carried her directly into the pool, turned and set her down into the water. The fall of water was three times her height, spilling from a heavily moss covered shelf of rock that overhung one side of the pool. The coolness of the water woke her up quickly, but it felt inviting. As she swayed, the mancat reached out and steadied her balance.

She noticed suddenly how sore her feet were as her full weight came down on the smaller rocks blanketing the bottom of the pool. Her ankles especially rebelled. The mancat continued steadying her with an arm while holding her traveling boots with the other. Looking at the falls, she timidly tested the water with a hand, took in a deep breath and moved into the cascade.

Gasping from the chill of the water, she coughed and sputtered, but refused to retreat. She needed to rid herself of all the dirt and filth accumulated over the past nightmarish days. Actually, the cool waterfall was rather pleasant, once she began to get used to it.

Relying on his support, she put her head back and let the gentle waterfall wash her full in the face. Losing track of time, she began to enjoy the cleansing effects the jungle had deprived her of.

The mancat, nearly six hands taller, watched her intently as she began rubbing as much filth from her as she could. As she rid a solid layer of filth from

her body, the creature looked down on her, patient, unmoving, watching her begin the task of picking the filth of the jungle from her hair. Its tail swayed serpent-like from side to side, twitching at the end, as it steadied her.

As she let the water loosen her matted hair, she began at the ends and began to untangle it. After a few moments, sudden strong arms grabbed and lifted her, as if she were no more weight than a mere kitten. The creature carried her to the bank and set her upon a large rock. It then stepped behind her, took her head and tilted it forward. To her surprise, it began picking out the tangles, and quickly. Within a short while, to her surprise, it began running its claws from her scalp to the end of her hair, removing the final rebellious tangles, leaving her hair glistening in the morning sun. The mancat then began to sniff her head and pick at it quickly with its teeth, removing various insects which had infested her hair. At first she froze, rigid with fear, as it began to nibble at her head with its foremost teeth. It was painful, but after a time she realized she was being groomed. At one point she actually giggled and rested her hand upon its arm (which the mancat promptly pushed away).

Soon it walked around in front of her and rested a large hand on the top of her head, tilting it back. She did not resist as it bent her head so that her left cheek was exposed. Extending two of its knife-like claws, it reached for her face. As it did, she stiffened, yet stayed as still as she could, eyes widening in fear.

Quickly gripping her cheek, it pinched her without any gentleness, causing her instant pain. She cried out as the mancat, pulled something lengthy from her swollen cheek, and then stepped back, holding a finger-sized shard of wood in its claws.

Involuntarily, she raised a hand to her face, only to feel warm blood begin to ooze through her fingers and continue down her cold cheek. Withdrawing her hand, she stared at it, seeing it was blood-soaked. Pressing her hand back firmly against her face, she looked at the now discarded shard of wood, then at the mancat. Through stinging tears she winced.

“Thank you,” she stated, not meaning it. Her face hurt like she had been

stabbed. After the bleeding had stopped she washed herself again within the cascade of water. As she was tending her wound, she found she missed her family. Would this nightmare never end? Her tears flowed freely . . . quietly. She didn't know what was going to happen to her now. Receiving help like this had been unexpected. She was sincerely grateful for it, but what now? She had nothing . . . nothing left of her former life. Even if she found her home again, she would be alone. Her grandparents were gone. She knew a few people, but they were acquaintances, not friends or relatives.

Picking up a stone from the water she flung it at the bank on the other side and growled in desperate frustration. Instantly, a strong hand gripped her shoulder, lifting and turning her. Intently focusing upon her, the mancat sniffed and let go, glaring at her. For the first time, she held its gaze. The mancat moved its face close to her neck and inhaled long through its nostrils. It then did the same on the other side of her neck. She thought of her family, instantly hardening her heart against the emotions which threaten to tear her heart in two.

“Thank you. I would probably be dead if not for you,” she whispered. The mancat pulled back slightly, looking into her face. A sudden thrumming began to sound from it, and she knew that it was like that of a cat's purr, yet deeper. Quite nervous, she rested herself into its strong arms, missing her mother and father. There were too many conflicting emotions going through her mind and heart to catch hold of just one, and it confused her . . . made her mind numb.

Even though she could not communicate in words with her captor, she knew it was intelligent. It had built a fire, cooked its meal, used rope and treated her injuries. Somehow, even though it was a predator, it wasn't a merciless, mindless, killer. At least she hope it wasn't.

It had saved her. Why? Her mind was a hopeless jumble of confusion. She was just opening a door into a world she was completely ignorant of; a world she never knew existed - life outside of her own. It was amazing, yet she hated being here in this filthy jungle. As she rested, weariness crept over her once again, and she could feel the heat of fever began to slowly overwhelm her. Closing her

eyes, she shivered.

“I want to go home,” she desperately whispered as it lifted her into its arms. Placing the side of her head against its chest, she heard its heart beating; a steady rhythm accompanied with that resonating thrum. Letting herself go, she fell into feverish nightmares where ogres ruled instead of humans.

Her father saw the ogre bring its knotted club down on her mother. In shocked panic he turned to her.

“Shaela, run! Don't look back! Run!” Doing as her father commanded, she turned and dashed away. Shortly after, she heard her father scream. She ran, but as she did she turned to look, hoping beyond hope he was following, but the trees blocked her view! Terrified she turned back to keep running . . . and . . . blackness assailed her. No sooner did she hit the ground than an ogre jumped on her, pinning her to the ground harshly with its massive weight and strength. It raised its club over her, which dripped of blood. It hit her in the head, once again knocking her unconscious.

Pain filled her dreams of death and slaughter.

She awoke.

Thrashing, she opened her eyes, but she could not see. She felt strong arms holding her down. Frustrated, she screamed and struggled in vain, striking out and hitting something. Again she gouged out with her nails until she was fully exhausted, but it was all in vain. With no strength left to fight, she cried out in utter desperation, collapsing. She could feel the warmth of a fire begin to burn, and heard the crackle of wood behind her. A sudden hand gripped her by the head and forced her to turn toward the fire.

In agony, she cried out as she beheld two Ogres, both focused and interested in the meal they were eagerly fixing. In horror, she froze, locking eyes on the meal they were preparing. It was a person, skewered on a large spit. Now and then they began to strip off pieces, tasting their supper and grunting in approval.

Her head throbbed with every beat of her heart as she wept and spit dirt out of her mouth. Crying out for death, she pleaded with them to kill her. They did not. Instead, she remained pinned unmercifully to the ground. The Ogre that held her in place dripped saliva into her face and hair as its sickening breath washed over her. Spitting, she tried to struggle one last time, but her strength was spent. With no more strength remaining, she went lax and gave up.

With a large gnarled hand pushing her face into the saliva stained dirt, she was forced to witness the hideous feast.

The smell of meat cooking roused her into the waking world, causing her stomach to knot and twist in response to the aroma. Weakly, she opened her eyes and exhaled a quivering breath, relieved to realize the macabre feast of last night had only been a nightmare.

Raising up on one elbow, she looked over toward the sound of the fire burning, and of juices steaming as they dripped into the coals beneath a skewered piglet. The mancat turned a stern glance to her and sniffed, narrowing its eyes at her as it pulled a small piece from the cooking pig. It then stood, walked over to her and crouched. She looked at the meat and suddenly felt very hungry. Her dream was fading, giving her stomach time to think twice about rejecting the meal.

Abruptly it held out the piece of steaming pork, growling at her, as if it was trying to communicate. She dismissed the notion and took the meat and ate it all. As she finished, she licked her fingers and looked back over at the roasting meal. The creature arose, turned, stalked over to the fire and stripped off a good sized piece, briefly glancing her way. As it approached, it held out the food as she slowly stood. This time, she remembered her manners and only separated a third of the meat, sharing the larger portion with her captor.

As they ate together she noticed a long scratch just over the mancat's right eye, which was visibly bloodshot and slightly swollen. Not knowing why, she reached up, gently pulled its head down, inspecting its eye. Holding still, it allowed her to investigate, though she felt how ridged and tense this monster was. In an instant, she knew it could kill her. Becoming more interested in its wound, she stood and led the creature down to the stream. Cupping a handful of water, she gently washed its eye. As she cleaned it, the creature stared at her, as if perturbed. Shrugging, she softly spoke to it.

“That is a deep scratch. I wonder what happened that could cause you harm?” As if it understood the question, the man-like cat took her hand and raised her nails just over the wound, and then placed a single, finger-length claw to her chest. Realizing what it was implying, she quickly knelt and cupped her hand into

the creek, stood and washed its eye again.

“I'm sorry if I did that to you. You probably had a terrible night last night didn't you?” she said. It surprised and confused her to feel suddenly attached to this creature as she tended its wound. Falling silent, she held its stern glare. The moment was abruptly shattered by the unmistakable voice of her father, calling her by name, as if far out in the jungle. Startled, she turned toward the sound of his voice, that pit of despair lodged within her chest lightening.

“Father!” she yelled. The mancat raised up and looked into the jungle also, its ears focusing in the direction she faced. She called out again, but there was no answer. Her eyes suddenly widened as a look of surprise burst across the features of her face. She turned to the mancat, and pointed at her chest, as if excited.

“Shaela. My name is Shaela.” She waited as the mancat looked to where she had pointed. Immediately, it touched its own chest.

“Hiska,” The mancat hissed, visibly struggling to give her its name. She smiled without feeling happy, her dark-brown eyes glinting up at the mancat. It was the first success she had experienced since losing everything she held dear to her. Through this terrifying experience, she grasped on to a sense of victory, though the pain of tragedy weighed fresh upon her. Still, remembering her name, and learning the name of her captor was something to hold onto. Something to keep her anchored within.

A tinge of excitement sparked to life within her as she reached up about Hiska's neck and squeezed him tight.

“Shaela, my name is -” Hiska instantly gripped her arms and pushed her back, lifted her off the ground and carried her to her previous resting spot. There, the mancat set her down and returned to the fire. Lowering itself to the ground, it glared at her viciously for a few moments, sending a chill into Shaela's heart. Not wishing to be attacked, she lowered her eyes, frightened and subdued.

“I imagine you are nothing more than an intelligent animal, like the natives that live in this jungle.” Hiska looked at her, tilting its head slightly and listened, its ears raising up a bit.

They did not travel at all that day, but rested. By evening she was feeling much better, though very tired, and it was getting cold. She felt the need for sleep and curled up on the open ground she was slowly growing accustomed to. It did not take her long to fall asleep. As she faded, she began to be afraid, fearful of having another nightmare like the last one — she did not.

During the night, Shaela awoke, chilled by a slight wind that seemed bent on invading every tear and hole in her soiled and torn satin dress. She wondered if Hiska would become angry if . . . well, she would risk it. Quietly, she crept nervously toward where it crouched. As she neared, she noticed the mancat never laid down, and always seemed on the lookout, as if expecting an attack. Carefully, and with a rising dread, she curled up next to it for warmth. After a few moments, she slowly moved against its legs, attempting to get as warm as possible. Without a sound, Hiska picked her up, cradling her against its chest and leaned back against a tree. The sudden motion startled her, nearly making her scream.

Soon she entered into a dreamless sleep, warm and safe . . . for the moment.

The wind had stopped, and the sun warmly picked through the tangles of the trees about them, sending beams of morning light streaking down sideways through the openings in the canopy above, only broken now and then when a gentle breeze disturbed the leaves of the trees. Shaela stirred in her sleep, sighed and curled up in Hiska's arms. The mancat kept watch as she slept on into the morning without a care.

Odd though it seemed, Hiska's demeanor appeared at peace as she slept. She was only a child, and lost. At first he had hated her, and had decided to kill her; one less human to worry about. But she had fainted, and there was no honor in slaying a helpless foe. He had tied her up, and later would release and hunt her down; that would be fair. He would even give her a long head start and a weapon. But even though he could not understand her rash language, she had spoken to him. It was the very tone of her voice - the feeling that had suddenly welled up within him - that changed his mind. When she shared the fish with him, he knew she was innocent, pure, unworthy of killing. This kitten was ignorant of the Human ways. No, she would not die, at least not at his hand. To rid the world of a filthy Human would be honor, but not this one. To kill her would mark him with dishonor and shame. Killing her would be a crime.

Hiska thought for a long while, and concluded that he must tend her back to health, then take her to the edge of the jungle, closest to the Human civilization. There, he would let her go. Shaking his head ever so slightly, Hiska knew he would break a strict law if he did that. The only other option, then, was simple, though he did not like the idea. He would not kill her, and he could not let her go. Hiska sighed, feeling a sudden burden, placed upon his back. Sniffing her hair, the mancat allowed this Human to sleep and heal as he casually looked about the area, keeping an eye out for danger. No, she would have to remain with him now, or be killed. He did not have the heart to slay her.

After pondering the situation for some time, Hiska realized he would try and teach her the ways of the jungle. By so doing, it would be her only chance of

survival. If the jungle claimed her, nature would take its course. If this kitten survived, what then? What would become of it? Looking down, the mancat grimaced, regretting finding this child. This was going to get complicated.

As he watched her sleep, she mumbled something soft, and then smiled for some odd reason. She was kind and gentle. Weak and soft, yes, but pure . . . ignorant. Yes, Hiska was becoming fond of this fragile kitten. He bent down and instinctively began to groom all the dirt and twigs out of her hair.

Shaela awoke to Hiska licking her long black hair. She mumbled something incoherent, then stated dreamily, “Bad dog”, before snapping to full consciousness, instantly realizing what was going on. The feeling of its whiskers tickling her face, making her giggle, then laugh as it continued to rid her hair of dirt, leaves and twigs. Pushing its face away, she gave the creature an odd look, wondering what was going on inside its head.

“I’m up, I’m up. What is suddenly up with you?” she mumbled, pushing out of its arms and standing. Steadying herself, she looked at her captor, who continued grooming her hair. “Well,” she thought, “it’s better than being eaten.”

As it worked the tangles out of her long black hair, she noticed its intensely green eyes; like two flawless, green emeralds. The fear she had felt for this monster quickly washed away, replaced with a feeling of awe and wonder. This creature stood upright like her, yet had all the traits of a black panther. She never knew such creatures existed in the Ever`Shade Jungle.

“And I was captured by one,” she said. “Thank you for not killing me,” she whispered quietly, then hugged and nestled into him, feeling safe from danger. Hiska began to lick her ear and face. She squirmed, but let him, closing her eyes. In return, she began scratching his neck and under his chin. Instantly Hiska stopped and stretched as she moved to his ears.

In the days to come this became a morning tradition with the both of them; Hiska waking her out of a dead sleep, and she complimenting him with a good scratching. She began to enjoy the creature immensely, like some child who had found a stray cat. If both their worlds could have seen such a friendship, this strange alliance, and followed their example, all barriers between these two races would have been broken down forever.

The days turned into weeks, which turned into months, as they traveled to and fro within the great jungle heartlands, their feet taking them wherever they chose.

Shaela was completely lost, and began to no longer care.

As Hiska was receiving his morning work-over (she had discovered the very best spots), Shaela began moving to the back of his neck and ears. She suddenly became playful and bent down, biting Hiska on the ear. Hiska flinched, turned slightly, became rigid, then and turned upon her in a sudden fury, forcing her to the ground as if she were a mere rag doll.

Shocked and terrified, she curled up and covered her head as Hiska came down, landing over her, so she lay between its two front paws. Her blood chilled as he snarled, causing her to scream. In one motion, the mancat sprang forward from her. She felt dread grip her stomach like an arrow-strike as she cowered, waiting for him to kill her. But at that moment she heard the deep roar of another – not Hiska.

Glancing up, she instantly spotted a large bear rise up on its hind legs, growling in rage at Hiska, who crouched on all fours before it, lips peeled back in a terrifying sight, hackles standing on end. Shaela had only seen the mancat this way one other time, and the memory of that had been short lived due to her fainting. Even though she had traveled with Hiska for quite some time, to see it now more than terrified her.

Undaunted, the great bear lunged, striking out with two powerful arms, missing its mark as Hiska sprang back with incredible stealth and speed, nearly running into her as he dodged the crushing blows of the bear. Rising up to its full height, the great bear toward over Hiska, who instantly leapt into its chest, then sprang away as it attempted to embrace him. Landing upon the ground, the mancat skidded to a stop in a violent display of flying dirt and leaves. Instantly the bear jerked unnaturally as it spun on Hiska, its eyes widening in shock as it quickly backed away. Its offense quickly turned to retreat as it bolted into the jungle from whence it came, bellowing in mortal pain and terror as Hiska inhaled deeply and screamed again.

The sound of his scream filled her mind and heart with thoughts of death. Horrified, she stared at him unable to move. The wild look of his appearance,

with his hackles fully extended, changed the aspects of this creature from the normal sleek humanoid-like figure to that of a raging monster. This was the second time she had witnessed such fury, and she never wanted to see it again. The bellowing of the bear faded as it fled into the jungle. After a time, with the exception of both she and Hiska's breathing, all became silent once again.

Shaela slowly stood, walked over to Hiska, who's hackles were still risen up in a frightening display, and slowly placed a hand on his back. The instant she made contact with him, the mancat jumped, hissing fearfully at her, causing her to retreat a step. Then, ever so slowly, she tried again. As she neared, Hiska slowly lifted up to full height, sniffing the air a few times, testing it. As she closed in on him, Hiska turned to her, keeping his attention riveted in the direction the bear had fled, and wrapped a strong arm about her waist. In a single motion, she found her self lifted into the shelter of his arms, where he cradled her for a long while. It was then that she began to shake as the reality of the situation struck her. She nuzzled into his protective embrace, wrapping her arms about his neck, feeling safe.

As Hiska held her, she slowly came to the realization of something she had never before suspected. Hiska could feel fear. In fact, she realized this terrifying mancat was shaking, and the realization of this emotion flattered her. Hiska cared for her. She wrapped her arms more tightly about her companion's neck, squeezing him unmercifully, and found she could not hold back sobs of relief.

After a while, Hiska gently set her down. She was safe. Turning to him, she raised both hands to each side of his face, fighting to gain control of her emotions.

“Hiska, what would I ever do without you now?” As she spoke, Shaela saw the intensity of his green eyes soften. Smoothing out her once beautiful dress, Shaela's thoughts began to challenge her upbringing. She thought of her feelings toward Hiska, and it suddenly confused her greatly. She began to think, as if having a conversation with herself, no, a debate.

“I am just as strange to him as he is to me. We are so different, he and I.

His physical appearance is similar to mine, he just has fur and a tail, cat's feet and the head of a panther . . . does that really matter? Of course it does . . . not . . . no, it doesn't. He has saved my life more than once. He is a caring, loving, person. Person? What race is he? I don't know; half cat, half man. Oh, he's so beautiful though! Then why am I arguing with myself? Why do I care? I have nothing . . . nothing left in this world but him. He is not . . . Human. But he is caring and responsible. He put his life on the line for me just now. He has feelings, as do I. He's not just some wild animal.”

Shaela sighed, looking at the ground. The jungle was quiet . . . very quiet . . . she just noticed how much so. Her eyes went wide as she felt her body become cold. She looked up slowly into Hiska's eyes and found him watching her, patient as always. Why? She had so many questions. The loneliness at times ate at her mind like starving rats swarming a wheel of cheese.

“He obviously tries,” she thought. Catching hold on that thought, her heart lightened.

“Hiska.” She felt nervous . . . so unbalanced in her thoughts. Her head even felt suddenly light. “Hiska, I love you.” Hiska looked down at her, seeming to physically struggle with something. His face twitched and he closed his eyes tightly for a few moments. Then, to her amazement, he nodded and opened his eyes.

“Hiska needs Shaela.” It was very odd the way he said it, but she heard it clearly, and it struck her speechless. She tried to reply, but could not find any words. The delightful laughter that poured from her after she heard those words would have made fairies stop and wonder (had there been any in the area at the time).

Tears of happiness and relief welled up in her eyes. All those times she had carried on conversations with him, never expecting him to speak back to her in return, and he was listening! Oh how she had filled the air with words, just to hear the sound of someone speaking. Sometimes the silence drove her to the brink of madness. She thought it would always be that way. Yet, in reality, he had spoken

to her. He had actually communicated in Human words!

From that day forth Shaela pointed at things and said the name of them in her tongue. Hiska knew what she wanted and named them in his native tongue. He also did the same, and in return she named them in her language. It was slow at first, but as the days passed, the weeks followed, turning into more months which marked the end of the second year since she had been captured.

Hiska was quite the skilled hunter, and his skills came in handy with the leathers he gathered from his prey. After gathering enough leather, he made her a set of traveling clothes, which consisted of a knee-length leather wrap, under which she wore leather breeches and a long-sleeve tunic.

She wondered at the mancat's skill in curing and tanning hides, for they were so well crafted, she thought them nearly as light as a thick cotton material. Hiska even surprised her with a pair of knee-high, soft leather, moccasins that fit her feet perfectly.

Hiska relied on stealth and the skill of surprise most of all when hunting, but he was adept in the creating of natural traps as well. Because of his skills as a hunter, she rarely felt hunger for long. Watching him work the jungle to his advantage, she slowly began to learn his ways, and tried her best to perfect them.

The two began to understand one another more fluently, and continued to teach each other. Hiska taught Shaela the limited symbols of his language, and she taught him hers, though she had to be very patient with his ability to learn them.

One day Hiska told her she was his own. She never argued the point, for she did not know what it meant. And so with vigilance, Hiska protected and shielded her from all danger. Hiska seemed happy. Shaela was content, though she often missed her mother and father desperately. Their loss was physically painful, and so she often had to harden her heart against their loss.

One day, as Shaela wept beside the large creek they always followed, Hiska noticed her tears and quietly approached. Crouching beside her, he broke the

silence of the morning.

“Shaela cries tears . . . again.” She wiped her face with both hands and nodded.

“Yes. I miss my Mother and Father.” The Mancat began to comb her hair with his razor-sharp talons, no doubt in the attempt to sooth her. Soon she was lost in the only luxury she could clearly remember. She'd gotten used to it, rough tongue and all. She closed her eyes as he removed some leaves from her hair.

“Hiska.”

“Yes Shaela?”

“What is my place?” Hiska thought for only a moment, then stunned her with his words. She had never really asked what it meant to be “his”. Honestly, she did not think the communication between them had advanced enough between them to really know, until now.

“You are mine. Your life I gave you. You are mine.” She turned and stood, facing him.

“I am a slave?” Hiska grimaced and shook his head, then began to clean her hair again.

“You are mine,” he repeated. Hiska held her still and pulled her long black hair into one hand and flipped it over the top of her head and into her face. She instinctively lowered her head down and waited as he removed a tick creeping through her hair with his foremost teeth and spit. When he did this, she knew to hold very still.

As he groomed her, she thought about her situation. She needed to learn more of his culture, more of how to live and survive in the jungle. She had no one else now, and the ache and pain of her former life haunted her much when she slept, or when she slipped into idle daydreaming. There had been no closure for her, and this plagued her heart at every turn.

It had been a long time since the death of her parents, that is if they had truly died. She did not see them killed by those monsters, and so a faint hope dwindled within her, like a spark within tinder, threatening to burn out, taunting

her mind and torturing her every sleeping hour.

One day, as she wept upon her memories, she thought how ironic hope was. Hope was supposed to build character, strength and endurance for the future. She had always been taught, of all things, hope was one thing to never give up on. In the Human culture hope was preached in many studies, taught by her instructors, and instilled by loving, nurturing parents. She believed it . . . used to believe it. Hope kept reminding her, lying to her, that her parents could still be alive.

Her parents could be alive, what a lie! Sobbing, she felt that blade of hope slice her from within once again. It began to cut her heart out, torture and eat at her insides, like a ravaging disease that slowly devours its victim.

Bending down, she went to take up a rock from the stream. She wanted to strike something. But before her fingers touched the water's surface, she beheld herself in the more calm part of the water's reflection, and it struck her still as stone.

Freezing, she stopped and stared as if seeing another person for the first time. Slowly retracting her hand, she bent closer to the water's surface, taking her hair back so as not to disturb it. Gazing closely at the reflection in the water's mirror-like surface, she was astonished to behold a beautiful dark-haired woman peering back. She knew it was her as she could faintly see the scar from the branch which had wounded her so long ago.

Two years had passed by, and yet her hair was properly combed, her face clean and without no more blemish than a fading scar. Her eyes were the deepest brown, complimenting her facial features.

As she stared at herself, memories began to flood into her waking thoughts. Her childhood, growing up, learning, family, friends. In a few breaths her childhood and teenage years caused her to wince in pain, like the abrupt opening of a wound as they danced like haunting marionettes within her mind. Until this moment, Shaela had not realized just how long she had been in Hiska's care.

As her thoughts bent towards him, the reflection of Hiska slowly rose up from behind. At first she saw the ears, lynx-like in height, followed slowly by the

head, eyes and face, barely discernable in the water's reflection. Hiska's eyes . . . so yellow . . . so wild.

Shaela's blood instantly turned to ice, and her heart failed her. She could only choke as she tried to cry out a warning. This was not Hiska! Her mancat's eyes were green. Freezing, Shaela held perfectly still. The learning experiences with Hiska had taught her full well the culture of submission with his race.

In return, the creature spit out a hiss from behind, raised up fully, ready to strike her down. At that moment, Hiska turned and saw the danger, instantly lunging with all the speed and might he could as she dove to the water's surface to avoid being caught up in a fury of talons and flying hair.

Both mancats raged and screamed as they rolled into the creek, snapping and clawing at the other, trying to overcome the other. Water splashed violently in a white froth as they lashed out at each other. Shaela fled to the other side of the wide stream and turned, watching on in fear as the two battled on.

Hiska was the larger and stronger of the two, and when he struck true, the wounds were deep. Yet he did not gain the upper hand without paying the price for victory. Still, he had this enemy, and he pressed the attack without mercy. In no time, the fight turned against the strange mancat, and it fell to defending itself in a growing desperation to survive. Yet it had not come alone, and Shaela's heart froze as she spotted three others streaked out from the thickness of the jungle towards the creek to join in the fray. Hiska was instantly flanked.

“Hiska, behind you!” she screamed, snatching up a fist-sized rock. Pulling back, she let the rock fly, striking one on the side of its nose, doing little more than enraging it. Even so, it was enough to get its focus upon her, and giving him some relief. Freezing in sudden understanding at what she had just done, her eyes widened as it turned on her.

He heard warning, drawing his attention to the other three now bearing down on them. Her warning had been just in time. These Prima Catur, as he knew them, were weaker, hunting in groups only because they lacked the strength to solo the jungles. It didn't matter they were here, now, trespassing his land. Had Shaela not been with him, he would have hunted them down and killed them, and merely for sport. As it was, he could plainly see Shaela was in mortal danger. She was brave, but weak. As she drew the attention of one, Hiska saw it turn, abandoning the attack on him as it lunged at her. Just as it leapt, Hiska lowered himself to the ground, even as the other two caught him with both bloodied talons and teeth. Ignoring the wounds adding upon him, Hiska forced the best suitable foothold within the bottom of the stream and launched himself at Shaela's attacker as she retreated, raising her arms to shield herself.

Just in time, Hiska managed to sink his teeth deep into the back of his

enemy's neck, stopping its assault on her, but at a heavy price. Clamping down with all his might, Hiska wrenched back and forth as the other two continued the assault from behind, feeling their claws and teeth sink deep, increasing his rage and fury as he violently shook the smaller mancat off the ground, feeling its neck snap.

The two remaining Prima managed to overpower Hiska, forcing him into the shallows near the bank where Shaela stood, watching on in wide-eyed terror. Raking and clawing, they viciously attempted to end him. The first Prima in the fray retreated into the jungle, bloodied and limping badly.

Shaela staggered backwards to the ground before Hiska had saved her from the mancat's lunge. She turned and stood as the two cats pinned him down, staining the stream red with blood. Knowing full well he was in dire trouble, she thrust her hands into the stream, picked up the largest rock she could find, staggered over to them and without hesitation took the risk. With all her might, she let the rock fall down upon them, striking one in the back. It screamed and lunged off of Hiska, throwing her into the water, and leaping on top of her in a fit of terrible rage, its claws curling into the flesh of her arm and chest, impaling her. With incredible strength and speed, it gripped her shoulder in its vice-like jaws, piercing deep.

The Prima Catur's movement had been so quick, Shaela had no chance to evade its attack. She cried out in pain as it repositioned one of its claws, about her neck, penetrating deep, even as she heard the death cry of the other mancat, mingled with the sound of her own cry. Without mercy, it shook her viciously, then let go only long enough to maneuver and penetrate its vise-like jaws into her throat.

Even as she felt its teeth sink into her neck, a clawed and bloody hand with finger-length talons reached between her and her killer and quickly ripped back, severing her attacker's neck halfway through.

A feeling of warmth steadily cascaded through Shaela's entire body, coupled with intense pain as Shaela shut her eyes in despair, not knowing what else to do.

Instantly the world beneath her began to spin, as if she was on a stormy sea, tossed to and fro upon the waves.

Hiska saw Shaela's eyes close, causing his blood to chill and his heart to sink. Gripping the Prima's head viciously through its eyes, he squeezed, impaling his talons into his victim's eye sockets. In an instant, every talon and finger vanished into his enemy. Without wasting a moment, he gripped with all his might and pulled, filling the air with a sudden splintering sound. In the same instant, the mancat relaxed, twitched, then exhaled its last breath.

Glancing at Shaela, he noticed she had tufts of her attacker's fur in both hands; a futile defense in her last moment of defiance. Hopefully he had gotten to her in time. He was bleeding badly, and his back burned like fire, almost causing him to falter. Only the thought of her dying kept him focused. Once he worked the Prima's talons out of her flesh, Hiska pulled it away and savagely mauled it to be sure it was dead. As quickly as he could, Hiska did likewise to the other two, making sure they would not be a future problem.

Racing back to her, he lifted Shaela gently out of the water, retreating a few paces upstream where blood did not mingle with the water and began washing and tending her. Despair set in as he saw the deep puncture wounds in her neck. It was at that moment, he realized this was beyond his skill to heal. Without a moment to lose, Hiska took her up and bolted into the jungle at a great pace. He knew of one who could save her, but this gave him little comfort. For the first time in his life, Hiska felt true fear; a fear that grew as he raced deep into the heart of the Ever shade Jungle.

Nimbly the mancat leapt across a large fallen tree, spurring himself onward toward a set destination he instinctively knew, though he had not been there in over a decade. As he sped through the jungle, he knew there would be a price to save her. He did not care. Growling viciously, he spurred himself on faster and faster, thoughts of what he would do to the Prima Catur in their own territory, should Shaela die.

It had been his lack of awareness that caused this; he was to blame. The Prima would pay!

It would be three days to the destination if he slept at night, and so he did not sleep, knowing that every moment was critical. Every now and then he slowed, taking enough time to search out and find Crimson Mud, a red clay, and a yellowish herb, known as Stejgin. Mixed together and placed into a wound would stop the bleeding.

After chewing the two together, he quickly applied the paste into each of her wounds and watched as her bleeding stopped. It helped, but it would not be enough. If the saliva from the Harritt Catur, his own people, or the Prima Catur, his nemesis, mixed in with an open wound, infection, fever and then, often times, death would take the victim. Shaela's wounds were many and deep, and so onward he fled to the very place he thought never to see again; the Resting Grounds.

Midway through the first day of flight, Hiska began to weaken, his wounds dangerously severing his strength. Only by sheer willpower did he hold to his course to the end of the day. By nightfall, Shaela began to weigh heavy on him. Setting her gently down, Hiska took his fill from a small pool, then tended her as best he could, washing her wounds quickly. He then moved on, at war against the unstoppable passing of time. As always, the night brought some energy back into him. Onward Hiska painfully raced through the night, enduring the steadily growing weakness of his limbs.

At one point, as he made his way through an intensely thick part of the forest, he felt Shaela move in his arms, instantly slowing him to a stop. Looking down upon her, he waited to see if she was becoming stronger. To his surprise, Shaela opened her eyes and weakly smiled up at him. She looked pale, as if the finger of death had already touched her in its inescapable power. He nuzzled her, giving her a moment to rest. Weakly she reached up and placed her hand on the side of his head.

“Hiska, you look terrible,” she hoarsely whispered. Hiska felt his eyes dim with tears. Her concern was for him . . . not herself. He leaned his head into her

hand.

“Shaela will live. We will enjoy the moonlight many times in the endless days to come.” She gripped his cheek desperately, closed her eyes.

“Hiska.” She forced through clenched teeth and whimpered as she faded. “If I die, I want you to know I love you with all my heart. I truly am yours. You are mine.” Her hand slipped from his face as she fell unconscious.

Hiska stood and bolted onward.

The second day and night passed in a haze of pain and anguish. He was close to his destination, but his wounds had slowed him considerably. He sought out the Tribal Mystic; the master of his kind. Few had ever seen this Mystic; he had long ago, yet the memory was obscured by the passing of the years.

The third day he faltered to his knees, weakness and exhaustion beginning to consume him. His wounds burned as if fresh . . . worse. He knew Shaela's wounds were inflamed . . . she was mortally wounded, and her blood was tainted with the saliva of the Prima. He knew infection was working with the wounds to kill her. Even if he could heal her, she would die. She needed more than merely fixing her wounds.

Against all caution, Hiska inhaled and desperately screamed, calling out to his kind; calling out to the Mystic. It was a dangerous thing to do, but he had no choice. They were both dying.

At times he would hold her, kneeling on the ground, attempting to regain his strength, then move on until he could go no further. Repeating this, he called out for aid from time to time as he struggled onward.

It was in the latter end of the third day when his call was heeded, but not by his own. They were Prima Catur, and there were six of them. They found Hiska as he rested by a tree. Hiska's senses had dimmed, and so he did not see them until it was too late. As he realized who they were, he lowered Shaela to the ground and crouched over her. It was emotionless. No sound, no challenge . . . nothing. He would die here with Shaela . . . kill one of them if he could manage it. He

looked at Shaela as they began to flank him on all sides. Deeply he would regret the most terrible wound he would ever receive; her loss.

“I am yours Shaela, even in death,” he whispered. Focusing his will upon the nearest one, Hiska bared his teeth, ears laying back against his neck, and readied himself, too weak to even scream at them.

As they cautiously moved in on him, something caught their attention, for they all looked the same direction at once. Instantly, as if one in mind, they fled quickly into the jungle, vanishing.

Hiska’s attention was drawn toward the area the Prima had looked. Not far away, he beheld the most beautiful creature he had ever seen for the second time in his life. She was Harritt Catur also, yet groomed like a queen. She held a staff of white wood, and wore a skin of clothing, set with strange symbols, like glyphs. Her fur was of the deepest black and her eyes burned like two illuminated amethysts. This was the Mystic he sought, and to her right another . . . her Guardian.

He had found her . . . or she had found him; it did not matter. Panting heavily, Hiska crawled before her and placed his forehead to the ground, a display of total loyalty, reverence and utter submission before the master of his race.

“Please spare her life, my queen. I give you mine in trade.” He forced the words out, even as blackness took him.

The Queen of the Harritt Catur had listened intently to the words of Hiska, weighing and judging them without emotion. At length Hiska collapsed, his breath coming in fading rasps as he lay before her. She looked at the Human girl as he delivered his last plea.

Quickly the Mystic approached Shaela and placed a hand to her chest. She closed her eyes, chanted for a few moments, then quickly came back and knelt beside Hiska and did likewise, wasting no time. The mancat had given a life oath . . . and she never rejected such a rare offer. Standing, she pointed at the Human female.

“Take her to the Resting Grounds and return,” she said in a silk-smooth voice, calm and lethal. Quickly the Mystic's Guardian gathered up Shaela and vanished through the trees. After he was gone, the Mystic stood and walked a few paces toward the area where she had witnessed six Prima retreat. Her eyes narrowed, flashing in anger at the trespass.

Within a short time, her Guardian returned and lifted Hiska from the ground, wrapping the unconscious mancat's arm about himself to support his weight. He noticed the Mystic glaring into the jungle and peered into its density for a moment, concentrating, eyes hard as stone.

“They are gone,” he stated. Turning to her Guardian, the Mystic stared at Hiska.

“I must learn why this Human is so valuable to one of my own, and why the Prima dare invade my territory. This intrigues and kindles my wrath.” Her guardian nodded, a gleam smoldering in his black eyes.

“Would you like me to retrieve them for interrogation?” Shaking her head, she turned and led the way back.

“No, I will interrogate the Human for those answers. Then I will deal with the Prima's insolence. Come.”

Darkness fell within the jungle as the two slept in a healing state. A healthy

color filled Shaela's face, and Hiska breathed evenly and deep, at times twitching, as it being tortured by constant, unyielding nightmares.

The Mystic gently caressed Hiska's ears for a long while, her eyes softening, like a faithful mother caring for her child. After a time, she turned her attention to Shaela, who stirred, babbling incoherently in her sleep.

The Mystic watched the Human for a time and then sighed, placing the points of her claws on either side of her head and closed her eyes as her faithful Guardian stood close by and observed. After a few moments, she abruptly opened her eyes and looked at her personal Guardian.

“She is pure.” With widening eyes, her Guardian looked at the Human.

“What will you do with her?” The Mystic stood, deep in thought as she looked down upon them. Retrieving her white staff, she turned and nuzzled her Guardian affectionately, if only for a moment.

“Watch them. I will return.” He nodded, and watched his ward swiftly depart into the night.

She sped through the jungle, aided by the Enchantment of Shadow, a power that changed her form from flesh to Nightshade. She could cover ten times the area in this form, and save her strength for what needed to be done.

It only cost half the night as she passed over stone and tree to find the six huddled together, facing outward in a solid ring, weapons at the ready. Good, they were weathered experts, no doubt accustomed to long journeys and much danger. They were expecting her. With an inner sigh, the Mystic regretted the loss of such talent, even if it was an enemy.

Materializing before them, she shifted from Nightshade to flesh, extending an honorable challenge. She waited as they quickly spread out, readying themselves for a final conflict that would either give them victory, or death. They did not advance, nor did they threaten the Mystic. Each stood in silence, weapons at the ready, open terror and determination in their yellow eyes. Sighing, she realized they would not initiate the fight. They knew what she was.

“Why have you trespassed my lands?” She questioned in a mild voice. There was no need to shout, or be angry. One answered, taking a deep quavering breath.

“We did not know,” he whispered as one of the Prima to his left began to mumble something quietly. She instantly began a spell, her eyes flashing with a white light. All but one turned and fled into the jungle, or that was their intention. Lightning flashed from the Mystics eyes, searing all but one, who waved a quick pattern with her hands and simply vanished from sight, narrowly escaping her wrath.

She was disappointed, but not surprised at her escape. “Let her go,” the Mystic thought. “She will perform my will, reporting to her own of a terror within the jungle, spreading fear in my behalf. Let her go.”

It seemed to happen every so often; the Prima testing their boundaries. She grimaced at the smoldering carcasses of her victims and quickly returned to soothing Nightshade, finished for the night.

She desired to be at the girl's side when she regained consciousness.

Shaela awoke in a circle of padded down grass, set against an embankment of earth near the jungle's edge. She blinked up at the stars in the blackness above, wondering where she was. Reaching up, Shaela felt the faint outlines of scars upon her neck. Yet, even so, her once wounds ached, as if the memory of them now physically haunted her. Tracing each and every scar and puncture wound, Shaela closed her eyes, confused.

"Where are you," Shaela whispered, hoping to hear his voice - yearning to hear him reassure her all was well. The answer she received startled her into the present, as if a crack of thunder abruptly sounded after too close a lightning strike. Shaela, froze at the smooth, silk-like voice of a woman.

"Ah, you have turned away, rejected the open door of death. It was wise, you did not knock." Blinking the haze from her eyes, Shaela slowly turned her head to the woman's voice, only to see a natural wall of tall grasses. She had to know . . .

"Mother?" she whispered, daring to unsheathe that terrible, two-edged blade of hope, now buried more deeply within her than ever before. An instant answer opened a wound of regret within her so deeply, she cried out, as if in pain.

"I am not your mother. Human, can you gain your feet?" Shaela turned to her side, suddenly feeling heavy, so very heavy, as if she had been drugged. Struggling, she managed to get herself into kneeling position, facing in the direction of the woman's voice. Wiping her eyes, she looked about, her vision slowly clearing.

All in wonder, Shaela beheld a womancat, adorned in a fine, full sleeved, leather dress which spanned from her neck to her ankles, tailored to fit close about the neck. Across her knees laid a staff of pure white, not half as thick as her wrists. Her eyes were striking, like sunlight reflecting two slanted gems.

"Welcome back to the earthen plane. You live, though that delicate spark life deep within you was rather arduous to fan back to its original flame." Recalling a certain formality, taught her by Hiska, Shaela bowed her forehead to

the ground and waited, provoking a inquisitive look from the womancat. Slowly reaching out, she set a single talon upon the back of Shaela's head, signifying she could rise.

“How long had your lives been united, you and he?” Shaela blinked.

“He?” She was not remembering.

“Yes, he . . . your traveling companion. The one who gave his life to bring you here.” Then Shaela recalled it all, causing her to suddenly choke.

“Gave his life?” Stunned and shocked by her words, a terrible coldness gripped her. Falling forward onto her hands, her mind began to spin dangerously as her stomach twisted, causing her to heave, as if sick.

“Hiska! she, cried out his name, desperately hoping he would answer, or that she would awaken from this nightmare. Without emotion the Mystic watched Shaela, studying her. That a Human ever allied with her kind was a rare thing. Patiently, the Mystic waited until Shaela was composed enough to speak.

“You have feelings for him. How long had you been together?” Shaela gave up. Hope was a mockery; a murderer. Nothing mattered anymore. Sitting up, she beheld the grasses dancing about, as if mocking her. Falling back, she closed her eyes, seeing Hiska in her mind, wishing this had never happened. Tears streamed down her face into her hair and ears as she mourned the day he captured her. Let death come; she cared no more.

Again she heard the womancat speak, asking the same question, though she paid no heed to anything but the stars above through dim eyes. Once again, the same question was asked, but this time the womancat was crouching next to her. Slowly, she turned her head, looked into her ice-blue eyes. For a moment she froze, then turned away.

“Over two years, I think,” she choked. The Mystic was not one for compassion, especially for Humans. Anger, hate, love, all these emotions were a weakness that eventually led to self defeat. Only in the perfect balance of an emotionless state could she truly guide her people. It had always been this way. Looking down on this wreck of a girl, memories began to surface as the womancat

recalled her own past.

Bending her will upon this girl, she peered into her soul, laying out a glimpse, a vision, of her future. What she beheld made it obvious that Shaela would waste away; die of a broken heart. The Mystic of the Harrit Catur had not sensed such strong emotion in a very long time, and immediately recoiled from it. It was profound and impressive . . . genuine. This Human loved one of her people, and to her recollection this had never occurred. Catching hold of that thought, she allowed herself to pity Shaela, yet only for the moment.

“Human, look at me.” Her voice was soft and less emotionless, drawing Shaela's eye. The womancat took Shaela's hand as their eyes locked.

“I'm so sorry I killed him. He was protecting me . . . I -” The Mystic placed a hand gently over Shaela mouth, stopping her, then withdrew her touch. Standing, she motioned Shaela to her feet.

“Come with me.”

The womancat aided Shaela out of the area, where she found herself upon a small path which led into the jungle. Shaela could not see, but felt guided by another to her right. She stumbled a few times, but was supported by a strong arm, which raised up under her left hand.

Soon they reached a clearing, illuminated by starlight. Upon their arrival, the Mystic turned to Shaela and pointed to the center of the clearing where starlight shed down upon a small cluster of trees and slightly rolling knolls. Shaela blinked hard and wiped her eyes, trying to see more clearly.

“What is this?” she quietly wept, suddenly terrified as she strained her vision to see anything of significance. Failing to notice anything out of the ordinary, she glanced back to find herself alone. Wrapping her arms about herself, she shivered, looking about the area, wondering what would happen. As she strained to see, she scanned the area, her eyes eventually drifting to the center of the clearing, which seemed more lighted. Slowly, cautiously, she moved forward, recalling how Hiska had taught to move more silently, even when she could not see.

As she neared the mid-area of the clearing, Shaela perceived the silhouette of a large humanoid crouched, lynx-like ears pricked up against the starlit sky. Freezing, she held her breath, startled, as her heart began to beat more rapidly, threatening to wake all the jungle. If this was a game, a trap, she gladly accepted it now. She walked closer without hesitation, suddenly shuddering at the memory of the mancat's bite and deadly attack. If this was a sacrifice, she accepted it fully. She had no will to carry on with the death of her parents and Hiska. Truly, she now had nothing in this world.

Accepting her fate, she let out a sob, cursing aloud, instantly drawing the attention of the one she knew would end her. This would be quick, and then, if, just if there was a world beyond, she would find Hiska, and her family. After this one moment of terror and death, nothing could ever harm her again.

Boldly, Shaela walked toward her final destination, no long caring for secrecy, reviling hope, the enemy she despised the most, casting it out, banishing it as a deception.

Seeing the silhouette of the mancat turn, she stopped and waited as it instantly leapt at her, rushing shaela with incredible speed. Holding out her hands, she simply closed her eyes and simply waited for the sudden pain of its talons and fangs to begin their bloody ordeal . . . before the end. As she expected, the mancat did overpower her, driving her thin frame back and to the ground. Without screaming, without regret, she gave herself fully to what would come upon her next.

As it took her down, Shaela did not feel the sharp teeth and talons she fully expected, but its face glide smoothly over the side of her face and neck as that familiar thrumming, one she had heard so many times before, begin to fill the night air. Gasping, she opened her eyes in disbelief and astonishment. It was him!

“Hiska!” She cried out for joy, suddenly embracing him tight, as if she would lose him forever should she let go. Hiska stood and pulled Shaela to her feet, returning her sudden, desperate affection, lifting her from the ground as if she weighed nothing.

“Shaela lives,” he whispered in her ear. Sobbing out in disbelief, she felt all the despair of losing him quickly melt away, replaced by relief and joy.

“I thought you were dead . . . thought you were Prima. Hiska, I thought all was lost.” Hiska nuzzled her affectionately, then gently set her down.

“No. Hiska's life was given to another to save yours. Hiska is now hers'. Come, we must go to her.” Shaela held tightly to him as they left the clearing, her mind in a whirl of confusion and curiosity.

As the skies began to gray with coming of day, the two returned to the Mystic, Shaela holding on to Hiska so hard her knuckles were turned white, though she did not know it. She felt a thrill welling up within her; she hadn't lost him after all. The womancat had said he gave his life to save hers, but Hiska wasn't gone. What had she meant by it?

“Hiska, the womancat said you had given your life to save me. By her words, I thought you were dead.” Hiska shook his head, and stopped for a moment, examining her scars. “How can you see so easily in this light?” she asked. Not waiting for a reply, she became curious. “Are they bad, my scars?” Hiska shook his head.

“No, they are honorable. But Hiska should have them. You . . . you are . . .” Hiska stopped, seeming to struggle for words. “Shaela is like the setting sun to look upon, the lake in the moon's light, the moon in its brightness,” his smooth voice trailed off. At his words, Shaela felt as if she had just been given a rose garden in all its splendor. Smiling brightly up at the mancat, she raised up on her toes and laid her head against him.

“Thank you,” she said, not knowing what else she could say. They held each other for a time, enjoying the moment. Yet, all moments have an ending, and this one was pushed to its end more quickly due to his growing anxiousness.

Pushing her gently away, Hiska motioned her to go with him, then began walking, slowly made their way back to the area where she had awakened. Upon their arrival, Shaela could see the silhouettes of two others, who waited, still, unmoving, silent.

As they quietly approached, for a split second, the Mystic's eyes darted to their joined hands. Shaela noticed the womancat's glance and began to let go, but Hiska tightened his grip, not allowing her hand to part his. After bowing in the formality and custom of the Harrit Catur, they were received.

“Hiska, my servant, do you love this Human?” It was a direct and blunt question that set Shaela off guard. She felt suddenly unbalanced, like the knight who is bludgeoned from his steed during a lancing competition.

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation. The Mystic slowly rolled the white staff from her palm to the ends of her fingers, then back again, showing no readable facial expressions in the growing light of the early morning.

“Shaela, do you love this Harritt Catur?” Shaela began to tremble, and as she did, she could not stop sudden tears from flowing. She pulled close to Hiska only nodding as she buried the side of her face into his chest. The mystic pierced Shaela with a long knife-like stare. Finally, Shaela could not help but lower her eyes.

“Please, I -” “Silence,” The Mystic commanded without harshness. “You are an emotional creature, Shaela. Are all humans this way? You may speak.” Shaela was now fully conscious of her emotions, and the fact that she now was the center of the conversation. She had always been emotional, yes. As for others . . .

“No, not all . . . but many are emotional in different ways.”

“Name these different ways.” Shaela took a finger and pulled back her hair from her eyes, thinking. She felt so uncomfortable, and even more so as a tear inadvertently slid down her face. She forced herself to speak, her breathing irregular, giving away the fact that she was not only out of her element, but terrified.

“Some are angry, some filled with greed. Others filled with life and energy, sharing it with others.” She thought of her parents and Hiska as she described the last. Narrowing her eyes at Shaela, the Mystic Queen persisted, not letting the conversation end.

“And you,” the Mystic interjected smoothly, “What emotions are you mostly inclined to, Human?” Shaela became even more uncomfortable - if that was possible - afraid this might be some trick questioning, or play on words. But even as she caught hold of these thoughts the Mystic whispered gently in her ear.

“I play no games. My inquiries are direct and without guile Human. Answer my question.” Shaela hadn't noticed her move; it was as if she had been at her side all along. She felt the womancat's breath in her ear, felt whiskers touching her face. Oh how she wanted to be away from this womancat, who truly terrified her. Refraining from retreat, she answered her question.

“I . . . sincerely feel . . . angry. Angry, yes. I hate the world. Nothing is safe, nor held sacred.” Her voice began to intensify, and she suddenly heard herself screaming, unloading her true feelings in the presence of strangers. “I hate those filthy monsters! I hate those loathsome Prima, curse them! I hate being cold, being dirty, being crawled on by insects. I hate injustice!!” she abruptly screamed at the top of her lungs. Falling to her knees, she screamed it out again, then began clawing at the earth as if it had caused all her trials. Again and again she struck out at it until all she could do was hang her head and suck in gulps of air through her sobs. “I hate hope, the blade that cuts the deepest,” she sobbed, feeling utterly subdued and broken.

Hiska slowly looked down upon Shaela. She did not perceive his first look of sympathy ever thrown her way. He was usually stern and undaunted. For a while he watched her sob, his piercing emerald eyes riveted upon her. After a time, he briefly glanced at the mystic, who remained standing by Shaela, emotionless, staring at her as if she did not care. Hiska dared say nothing. Apart from her sobs, all was deathly quiet about the three. Even the usual, constant sounds of the jungle seemed to hold its peace, giving respect to the situation.

Kneeling beside Shaela, the Mystic finally broke the silence as she reached under Shaela's chin. Gently, she guided Shaela's attention to her. Slowly, reluctantly, she met the Mystic's piercing gaze. With the care of a mother, who attempts to calm her overly-emotional child, she brushed Shaela's hair back from

her face.

“This was your first step, Human. If you will remain honest, and not lock your emotions away, you will begin the healing process. It will be you who must suffer while on the path to healing, until the pain becomes either your strength, or so faint it poses you no further threat. Then you must fill your existence with the fruit of meaning.” The Mystic sighed. “Shaela, do not idle away your years in the bonds of the hatred you have developed within your heart and mind, for it is of no value. Let your experiences strengthen, not weaken you. In the years to come, and in your turn, do the same for others; help them master themselves as you master yourself. Do you understand, Shaela?” The Mystic looked deeply into Shaela's eyes, and waited in silence.

Shaela's heart lightened at the womancat's words. She thought she understood. Catching hold of this understanding, though vague, something seemed to come to life, sprouting within her soul as she looked into her eyes, like the birth of a young sapling, freed from the containment of its seed to find the warmth of the sun beckoning it.

Shaela straightened, yet remained kneeling before the Mystic. There was something about this womancat she suddenly loved. She could not put a thought to it, not yet, but she was strangely attracted to her. Slowly, Shaela raised a hand and touched the Mystic's face, throwing her a fragile smile.

It was at this point that Hiska's heart fled from him. He was going to lose her, after all they had been through. Unless invited to do so, no one ever touched the Mystic Queen. Shaela was breaking a law. Even the Mystic's Guardian tensed, as if ready to strike Shaela down. Shaela seemed oblivious to the sudden danger as an urgency welled up within her heart.

“Can I stay and learn from you, Mother? I never wish to leave. You are moonlight in a once unlit sky of darkness - the waxing moon in my soul. I beg you, do not send me from your side.” The Mystic was inwardly shocked. It was her right to ignore the law that demanded the sudden death of one who touched her unbidden.

The womancat was not shocked at this Human making physical contact with her, but at the aura she suddenly perceived, illuminating Shaela's being, appearing plainly before her. Remarkably, it was the color of the jungle: Green.

Hiska waited for the Queen to slay Shaela. Tonight, he knew he would bury her with a broken heart. Yet, to his astonishment, his queen simply brushed the back of her hand across Shaela's face in return.

“Yes, you will stay with me. Hiska,” she stated without looking to him, “I now appoint you Shaela's Forever Guardian.” Shaela looked confused as Hiska's heart leapt for joy. Shaela was lifted to her feet by the Mystic.

“Shaela, you are now Hiska's Ward, meaning he is your protector. I command him to be your personal Guardian. This means he will never leave your side unless you command it.” Shaela suddenly understood, and with that understanding, a sudden happiness compelled her to launch at the Mystic, hugging her tightly.

“Thank you, thank you, oh thank you!” The Mystic tensed for a moment, and then gently, yet firmly, removed Shaela from around her neck. Instantly, Shaela lowered her eyes and bowed her head to the ground, smiling from ear to ear. Hiska did likewise and then quickly assumed the position of the Guardian, which was always to the right of his Ward. For a few moments the Mystic stared at Shaela.

“Shaela, we must talk in private. There are some things you need to learn before you break another law”.

Hiska instantly retreated into the jungle with the Mystic's Guardian.

When they found themselves alone, the womancat spoke gently to Shaela.

“Make yourself comfortable. Are you hungry, thirsty?” Shaela nodded, suddenly aware of just how famished she really was. The Mystic gave her food and water from the her personal supply, and both ate a small meal together, kneeling upon the grass. After finishing a meal of dried fish and fresh bananas in silence, the womancat casually put away two empty cups and a leather cloth that was used to hold the meal.

“Your aura is Green,” the Mystic bluntly stated, starting an instantly confusing conversation.

“I don't understand,” Shaela replied.

“And I do not often take on an apprentice . . . never a Human. But now I have, and here you are.” Sighing, the Mystic looked about the area, then back to Shaela.

“Try to listen carefully, and grasp the simple meaning of my words. Then, when I have taught you the simple things, we will put them together as a whole, to create a greater understanding. When you develop a greater understanding, mysteries you have never conceived of shall begin to unfold in your mind, ready to be put to basic application.” She sighed, extending and retracting her talons a few times, looking at them.

Shaela waited in silence, not daring to speak.

“When I look into your soul, you are surrounded by an aura of . . . let's call it light. The color of this light is green, like a new growth of the jungle in its season.” The Mystic paused, thinking for a moment, before continuing. “This aura means you have The Gift of the magic arts, the green signifying the druidic tendencies of nature. Humans rarely have this gift . . . they usually seek to obtain this power by nurture from another. You, Shaela, already possess it, though, before telling you this, you did not know. Do you understand?” Shaela listened carefully, and she did understand. In fact, what she told her made sense, though only in explanation. It was like being shown a saddle, bit, bridal, and all the gear

to ride a horse. It was like listening to instructions on how to ride a horse, but not knowing how to ride the horse itself by personal experience.

“Yes, it makes sense.” The Mystic then continued, taking Shaela from point to point, adding more knowledge of the subject, but refraining from anything deep. Briefly, she rehearsed the history of magic, those who wield it, and of their ways. That evening she listened to the Mystic, and this was only the very beginning.

The instructions went on for days. Those days suddenly turned into weeks. One day a season came and drove the present season away, just like the one before that, and just as the next would soon do in its course. Shaela was fit with new clothes, appointed for her by the Mystic. They consisted of a leather dress similar to the Mystic's, though it had the symbols of her apprenticeship upon the sleeves and collar. She gratefully accepted a pair of new boots, crafted to fit her perfectly.

She saw few others of the pride, for they came and went mostly at their own leisure, for the Harritt Catur were mainly a solitary people, coming together at times for rituals (which she was not admitted to). At times, Shaela was appointed tasks by the Mystic herself, which she did to the very best of her ability.

As the seasons rolled on, Shaela was given books to read. She was to read each three times before returning them to the Mystic. She did so, and became entranced by the knowledge gained. They were histories of the druids amidst all the races. It was amazing the amount of information each book held. She began dreaming these histories at night, and when she would awaken, she would read more and more. Her hunger for knowledge ever increasing with each book she finished.

Shaela was allowed to take a break from her studies one day for every six she studied, and that day she always chose to spend with Hiska. In the beginning of her studies, she was not allowed see him. As she learned, and proved her obedience, the day came when she was allowed to be with him on her free day. The first time he saw her approach, Hiska took both her hands in his and raised them up, obviously impressed at her new attire. They had not seen each other, nor

spoken in a very long while.

“Shaela looks beautiful. Is Shaela still Hiska's?” Shaela nodded, perplexed.

“Yes Hiska, are you still mine?” Hiska pulled her close and began to groom her hair, confirming he was. In return Hiska was rewarded a good scratching.

“Hiska?” Hiska's ears pricked up.

“Yes Shaela?” She hesitated, then fell silent as they sat upon a fallen log deep in the jungle. He looked at her and placed a hand over hers.

“Hiska understands. Let the world of Humans and Catur judge themselves, Hiska cares not. Hiska has you; Shaela has Hiska.” It was all she needed to hear. As he pulled her close, and wrapped his warm arms about her, she snuggled in close and sighed.

“Hiska, thank you for saving my life.”

“It was Hiska's honor and pleasure.” As she looked up at him, he nuzzled her face affectionately. A thrumming filled the air, causing her to softly laugh. She reached up and scratched his neck.

“Hiska, I love you.” Hiska squeezed her gently.

“Three nights after Hiska found you, Hiska loved you . . . Hiska always will.” Shaela thought about the Mystic's teachings, of Hiska, of her place in the pride of the Harritt Catur. Her mind wandered to the memory and loss of her parents, causing tears to build in her eyes.

The time she had with Hiska always sped by far too quickly. She was ever eager to learn more with Mother, as she called her. Secretly she thought up the fail proof plan of gaining the power of a spell to slow time. Yes, that would do nicely. If she could do this, her situation would last forever.

Hiska was always about the area, but was not allowed to speak to her. He was eventually permitted to bring her food and water in silence. As the months passed, Hiska was finally allowed to be with Shaela. He did so, never leaving her side until she slept. Even then, he was ever near at hand.

Often, the Mystic's Guardian would take him away for hours, even days at times. What they did was not spoken of, but Shaela assumed he was being trained in the ways of the Guardian, seeming he had been given charge over her safety. She wished to know more and more with each passing moon, craving more knowledge and asking Mother endless questions. Her Mother never failed to answer her inquires, no matter how insignificant they seemed, presenting her teachings with simplicity so Shaela could comprehend.

As Shaela's knowledge grew, the lessons became more and more difficult to grasp. When she finally understood what Mother would teach her, once again the information given would be taken to a level bordering Shaela's comprehension. It was frustrating at first, though she listened intently, writing all her lessons down in a large book she received from her master.

Another year passed, and Shaela found that she could name the birds in the area, as well as detailed information about them. Through her studies she became familiar with the trees, plants and herbs, and what they were used for. She looked at animals differently now, and when she heard the song of a bird, she began to understand it at times, though it was difficult.

Her reading and lessons continued in a flood of information that never ceased. She did well to study and remember them all. The Mystic was satisfied with her progress, and told her so, informing her openly she had no regrets in taking her on as an apprentice.

The year sped on while Hiska remained mostly silent and attentive. Sometimes Shaela would reach back and hold his hand as she poured over books, documents, letters, maps, scrolls, and all manner of information concerning plants, animals and the relationship and balance druids had with them. It enthralled and fascinated her deeply.

Before Shaela had yet realized, the second year was gone. Yet still, like a constant river's flow, her learning ever coursed its way into a growing sea of knowledge, building up within her mind.

Shaela was happy.

She had read a book on philosophy, studying genius minds through their writings. She became keenly aware that all things are susceptible to time, and bowed themselves to it, powerless to sway the inevitable hand of change. She suspected her learning would end, and hoped it would not be for a long while.

Change is not the end . . . but a new beginning.

As she suspected, one day, the Mystic came to Shaela as she was reading upon the subject of herbs. Whenever she appeared, Shaela would always bow low in deep respect, as is the Harritt Catur custom. When she was permitted to stand, she always, and without exception, embraced the Mystic lovingly. In fact the Mystic had all but adopted Shaela as her own child (which cannot be, for Mystics do not bond with another, nor do they have children of their own -- ever). When Shaela was permitted to stand on this occasion she embraced Mother sentimentally.

“Mother, what can I do for you?” She offered, just as she willingly, happily, did each time she came into her presence. The Mystic let go of her and sighed without emotion.

“You have learned enough from books. From now on you can read and learn from them on your own time, and I do encourage it. Now I will attempt to show you, not what, but who you can become. It is time, come.”

Shaela's demeanor became serious as she glanced behind her at Hiska. She suddenly felt a nervousness creep into her heart. She knew full well what this meant, and it scared her. The path of the druid intrigued her, and not for just a single reason. In this path there was real power to tap, should she be truly successful. She silently followed the womancat and her Guardian deep into the jungle, Hiska close at her side.

As they approached a more tangled and dark part of the woods, Shaela's heart began to beat faster. Fear crept into her mind, causing her to involuntarily stop. She felt as though she would be killed if she continued on. The feeling was so incredibly insistent, she thought it a sign and refused to continue on. Trembling, she squinted into the more dark parts of the undergrowth about her, fully expecting to see the sudden appearance of a terrible creature. Hiska made a short clicking sound, stopping as Shaela did, alerting the Mystic, who turned and sighed.

“Do not fear, Shaela, it is a Warding Spell I have summoned into the trees to frighten others who I would forbid enter this place. Where we go now, there lies your root; your beginning. Remember Shaela, feel with your heart.” The Mystic approached Shaela and took her hands, squeezing them tight. At once the sinister feeling lifted.

“Remember this, my dear child, there is light, and there is dark. Both are real, both are power. You must choose one of these paths. Do not choose one or the other in ignorance.” Distantly Shaela looked into the Mystic's eyes, as if thinking from some far away place.

“Then I shall choose Light Mother.”

“Oh child, do not say what you will do. Only do what you will when the time comes. You associate light with good, and dark with evil. Beware what ignorance lies within you, for therein lies the true evil. Some light is evil while some dark be good. As I stated, let your heart lead you. Your apprenticeship is nearing its end, cut short due to circumstances which I have spoken of to Hiska as you last slept. Now, you must enter therein -- go.” The Mystic turned and pointed

toward two very old looking oak trees, set against each other as if they lacked the strength to stand on their own.

Slowly she looked at Mother, then to Hiska. Solemnly, she squinted as she slowly approached the two trees. As she neared, a presence washed over her, as if she was being observed, watched. She abruptly stopped, failing to suck in a breath of air, as if suddenly rushed upon by a bitter-cold wind. Her long, dark hair drifted, the physical manifestation of what she felt, nearly causing her to retreat. She nearly fled in fear, but was halted in her design to be away from this place as a silent voice drifted into her mind.

“Of what seekest thou?” She caught her breath and tried to reply, but found that her tongue was bound so that she could not speak. Again the same question rippled through her thoughts. “Of what seekest thou?” She thought for a moment, and then answered the question in her thoughts.

“The path of the Druid.” Of a sudden, the Ancient Oaks seemed to part ever so slightly.

“You may enter.” For a moment, she hesitated, inwardly trembling, not sure if she could do this. Hiska had always fought her battles for her, but this time it would be different. She was on her own now. She had come so far, what else was to be done but to move forwards? Backing down now, after all she had been through, would be an unwise and foolish decision.

Glancing back at the others, she caught Hiska's eyes as she slipped between the two venerable trees.

Hiska turned to the Mystic and knelt before her.

“My queen, will my Shaela be harmed?” The Mystic looked down on Hiska with those crystal-blue eyes and placed a gentle hand on his head, extending her claws to full length, each tip, pressing into his skin, yet not drawing blood. Upon the base of each claw, as if etched in silver, were set fine, silvery runes. She gently worked the tips of her talons, scratching his head as she peered down at him without emotion. Hiska lowered his eyes and head in submission, feeling honored at the full attention he was being given. After a time, she blinked, reached under his chin and slowly tilted his head back, compelling him to look at her.

“Hiska, why did you not kill Shaela when you found her?” Hiska inhaled deeply, and then exhaled, thinking back to when he had captured Shaela.

“She fainted. It would have been dishonorable to slay her.” The Mystic's gaze slid over to the Ancient Oaks, taking his attention there as well. For a long while the Mystic peered into the shadows of the two great trees, silent, her eyes fixed on the area, all the while caressing his head with claws of ivory-white. Finally, as if coming out of a daydream, The Mystic whispered.

“Hiska, I believe that is the reason she will succeed; because of you. Your actions have ever been focused upon her safety, and well being. Because of this, I do not fear much for her within The Grove. From you Shaela has learned wisdom.” Hiska's heart lightened at her words, but there was a tone in her voice that chilled him when she had said . . . “much”. He slowly looked up at her, as she looked down upon him, still caressing his head and ears.

“Mother, thank you,” Hiska whispered, causing her to flinch.

“Son, we are alone, but refrain from speaking our relationship aloud. The path of Mystic is a solitary one. I am not supposed to have a child . . . and yet here you are.” She knelt and embraced him with a sentimental sigh, a thrumming emanating from her. Hiska gladly returned the physical affection, reminding him of when she used to secretly hold him so long ago. The Mystic's Guardian was suddenly at their side, and placed a hand upon Hiska's shoulder, all the while

keeping an instinctive watch.

The three rarely had such an opportunity.

Shaela found herself in a grove of trees, ancient and alive! They moved! Each looked down upon her as she stepped away from the Ancient Oaks, quite bent on her being there. There went up a chorus of whispering through them all, like a strong wind flowing through the jungle. She staggered back, falling to the ground as one approached, towering high above her. In a deep and smooth voice it spoke.

“Let us begin. Shaela, we know of you. We, each of us, will ask you one question. Remember one thing, this is more than a test.” It was an Ancient Pine, tall and strong, whose pine cones were as long as she was tall. Astonished, she blinked and rubbed her eyes, not believing she was in the presence of so many living trees, leaders . . . no, kings. She recalled reading about these living organics, known as the Kazar (the head of their own kind). This was quite overwhelming. As the great pine tree spoke, Shaela flinched, feeling the sheer power of its presence overwhelm her.

“Why do you seek the path of Druid?” it inquired. Shaela forced herself to stand. Once up on her feet, she composed herself, trying to gain her balance, but it was difficult with it leaning over her. She staggered and then rested her hand upon a rock for support, thinking. She knew she had to answer. If she did not . . . no, she had come too far to fail now. Mustering her courage, she fought back and subdued her fears.

“I have nothing left in this world. Druid is what I wish to be. I would rebuild my broken life with a new future.” She was startled to hear the sudden swaying of all the trees in this massive clearing. The Ancient Pine gazed down at her, deep in thought, then withdrew as an Ancient Acorn tree approached. It looked her up and down for some time, making creaking sounds now and then with its branches, which sounded like the creaking of a ship rocked by a gentle sea.

“Shaela, do you agree with the cutting down of a tree to make a home?” Her blood went cold within her at the question, for she had never supposed a mere tree to have feelings, let alone move and talk.

“It was what I grew up to believe. No, no longer. If a tree gives itself for such purpose -” She hesitated. “I do not know. Now I realize all creatures are alive. I would say no. I will study this in greater detail.” Again the trees swayed, filling the air with a chorus of noise as the Ancient Acorn withdrew from her.

After this, an Ancient Apple Tree, whose fruit shone brilliant-red, came before her. As she saw the apples swaying, she wished she had one of her own to eat. It looked at her for a long while.

“You are hungry Human?” Shaela did not know what to say. Had it read her thoughts? At length she answered.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it. Your fruit is more beautiful than any I have ever seen.” The Ancient Apple Tree moved upon its many roots and lowered a branch down before her.

“Take as many as you need, Human.” She plucked one and placed it in the pocket of her dress.

“Thank you.” She smiled brightly at it, instantly liking this tree very much. It seemed almost jovial as it withdrew its limb.

“It is always a pleasure to fulfill the measure of what I am. You are indeed welcome. Now for my question. Hmm, ah yes. If being a Druid means being a protector of all trees and animals, what would you do if you came upon a beaver gnawing at a tree? Shaela thought for a moment.

“A beaver is a natural and basic creature. I would leave it alone, for all things have their place. I would call it destiny and move along.” The Ancient Apple Tree looked at her for a long time, making her feel very uncomfortable. Then it departed, but not before giving her another apple. She thought of eating it, but did not. She placed it with the other apple in her dress.

“Thank you,” she called after it. For a time, there was a stillness within the grove. Had she not come into this place, she would never have guessed she was amidst the living Kazar. After a time, a whispering emanated, yet more softly than at first.

Being here was like living a dream. The very jungle was alive around her,

conversing with her like in some grand Bard's tale. One by one each of the Ancients came forth to ask her one question. In return, Shaela pondered, and then gave the best answer she could think of. She felt very young and small in this grove, which humbled her completely.

In the end, when she thought there would be no more, a still and deep quiet fell upon the entire grove. Suddenly they all gave way to an Ancient Willow Tree as it slowly approached. As it came near, the air about her became stagnant, almost as if it were trying to choke her. An absolute silence fell as it looked down upon her. Instinctively, Shaela pulled her knees up to her chin, attempting to find some comfort in hiding behind them.

Its long roots probed and prodded everything in its path. As it moved, Shaela could hear the sound of distant thunder, though very dim. As it looked at her, Shaela felt invaded and uncomfortable. She found her mind wandering into dark thoughts . . . no, not thoughts . . . it was as if darkness had hatched within her, giving her new perceptions of the darker things of which she was once ignorant. It was not unlike drinking liquor for the first time. Her head began to swim and she felt so heavy; so very heavy. The Ancient Willow moved its spider-like branches over Shaela, basking her in a shadow, deeper than moonshade. As it did so, she felt it connect with her -- within her mind and heart . . . words unspoken.

“Shaela, there is much power to gain from the path you have begun. Many injustices lay heavy upon your shoulders; you deserve much in return. You can draw much power from the lesser organics through your knowledge. Choose the new season, your new path, your new root carefully. Stand fast in this world of sorrow.” At its words, Shaela suddenly felt the wonder of creation, and the peace of more pleasant things in life. She craved happiness and belonging. She thought of Hiska, and smiled inwardly. A feeling coursed through her, leading and guiding her mind into the deeper and darker mysteries of the world . . . even the act of death. The vision of the ogres attacking her family, and of the Prima Catur attempting to murder her and Hiska, entered her thoughts. It was obvious that two choices were before her; two paths existing within the same destiny.

“No!” Shaela suddenly shrank inwardly as her mind caught upon the thought of learning the spell to rip an ogre to shreds. Never in her life had she thought of cultivating the power to force her way to greatness, and it greatly disturbed her. The Ancient Willow menacingly communicated with her again.

“Now you see, though still as through a thick morning fog . . . now you see there must be a choice made. What is your heart attuned to child . . . what are you?” She looked up helplessly at it as tears began to cascade her face. She suddenly desired that darkness, that darkness of soul. There was power within such a path, and she perceived it. Closing her eyes, she shivered, recalling Hiska mending her wounds . . . the wounds of an enemy. He had risked his life more than once to keep her safe. Shaela felt confused, suddenly alone and vulnerable.

“I don't know. Help me to understand. Please.” The Ancient Willow moved back into the living, moving, grove, leaving her shivering in the starlight . . . unanswered. As it distanced itself from her, she watched it, feeling drawn to it, as if it were beckoning her. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms about herself, trying to find something to hang onto. She was being tempted, and she liked it.

She did not remember how long she desperately fought to resist something she could not quite fathom, and it confused and disturbed her deeply. She recalled reading and pouring over all the books and tomes Mother had gifted her with. What she learned was incredible, monumental. She had learned more in the last two years, than all her years since she was a child.

Feeling quite overwhelmed and small, she stood, somehow knowing it was time to leave. In the time she had been here, Shaela had gained a greater knowledge and understanding of what she had read on many occasions. She was especially drawn toward the Ancient Willow Tree, though she could not pinpoint the reason. Strangely, the darkness of soul it had presented, drew her thoughts back to it.

Before passing back through the two leaning oaks trees she went before all the Ancient Trees and embraced them one by one. Each one allowed her to touch

it as the others sent up a murmur, filling the Ancient Grove as with the sound of a storm.

Last of all, she stood before the Ancient Willow, peering in through its hanging branches, once again mesmerized by deep poignant feelings as she neared. Her mind quickly became overwhelmed, causing her to stagger slightly as she looked at it. She suddenly dreaded the thought of re-entering its canopy, but she ventured in nonetheless.

Bathed in the darkness of its shadow once again, Shaela felt her senses move. She felt fear, happiness, strength, longing, urgency, patience, and many, many other feelings. Standing near its trunk, she looked up, closing her eyes, basking within the myriad of feelings. The Ancient Willow watched her intensely for a very long while as Shaela stood motionless before it.

“Why are you here child?” the Ancient Willow spoke within her mind. In the same manner as it spoke to her, Shaela answered, not wishing to be heard by any others.

“You know why I came . . . you called me.” A tangle of roots slid noiselessly towards her from behind, creeping ever so slowly toward her feet.

“Then I can teach you Shaela. If you are willing, I can help you. You carry such a heavy burden within your memories, though they be few. I can take those moments away; take the pain away.” The roots had reached her and began to coil up around her feet and legs, yet not touching her. Shaela seemed as if she had been placed into a deep sleep by a powerful spell, her head drifted to one side as her eyes closed.

“The memories of my pain remind me of what happiness is. I will build a better future for myself. I felt you call out to me, and so I was drawn to you.” She opened her eyes just as the tangle of roots closed, encased her, like a living cocoon. Instead of fear, she felt belonging. She longed to touch the deeper shadows of what she felt -- understand more.

“I am drawn to you, I know not why. Even so, there must be a reason . . . a purpose.” As she spoke, the roots that encased her began to steadily uncoil until,

once again, Shaela was left as when she first entered to stand before the king of the willows. Without hesitation, she stepped close, letting her forehead rest against its base. Softly, she whispered aloud, "I feel something, like walking into a familiar door, knowing I am come home, though I cannot see for the darkness." She felt the Kazar Willow Tree faintly shudder.

"Dark Child, you are," it whispered aloud. As she heard it speak, Shaela felt an unexplainable energy wash over her. It was gentle, though steadily intensified with each breath she took. Even through the surprise of what she was experiencing, she did not recoil, but stayed in contact with the bark's surface. In the long silence that followed, Shaela began not only to feel a power, but elected to absorb as much as she could.

In time, Shaela knew she had to leave. She wanted to stay and learn from this ancient, yet she could not. Reaching up, she rested a hand upon its rough surface.

"Master Kazar, I look forward to when our paths cross again." With this she knelt and placed her head upon the ground, as she had done so many times with Mother. As she did so, she felt something emanate from the tree . . . and it was power. It flooded her being, stealing away her conscious thought, sending her into a waking dream where she saw a host of creatures she could not quite make out converging upon her. As they neared, her vision blurred, but she could hear the panting of great beasts, then pain . . . terrible pain. She felt her soul being ripped asunder . . .

. . . Shaela gasped, stifling a scream. Choking she staggered, but was supported by the hanging branches of the Kazar Willow. Shaking her head in disbelief, she began to panic, then realized what had happened.

"I'm alright. Nightmare, just a . . . I must have fallen asleep." She wanted to scream. Fighting to gain control, she breathed deeply a few times. With great effort she calmed and balanced herself. Wiping her face with her hands, she began to weep.

“That was horrible. Why did you . . . did I dream, or did you . . .” She could not finish what she wanted to say. She was confused.

“Go Dark Child. Our roots shall cross again. Go.” As instructed, Shaela did as she was told, and soon found herself standing before the two Ancient Oaks. Before passing back through, she turned and raised a trembling hand, regretting to leave, relieved to go.

“I know you all now . . . all of you . . . and I will never forget.” Shaela turned slowly, placing a hand upon the surface of one of the Ancient Oaks as she passed back through. As she touched it, she became acutely aware that it was alive, just as the owl, a stream of water, just like herself.

Shaela found it a revelation that everything had life. Learning this instilled a profound respect within her . . . even for the ogres and the Prima who had shaped her life, though, still, even with this profound respect, she hated them. Confusion set in, mingled with a resolution to learn more than what very little she now knew. Forcing herself to look up into the mingled canopy of the Ancient Oaks above, she thought about this experience, then passed back through.

It had been more than two days since Shaela had entered. Some tales told of others who had gone into The Grove, never to return. Hiska feared for a Human he had nearly taken the life of over two years earlier. He waited, still as stone, staring into the shadows between the Ancient Oaks, not seeing the Mystic Queen of the Harritt Catur move close.

“She has the gift; she does not strive for it,” she gently whispered, just prior to Shaela appearing, coming into sight. Hiska instantly went to her, taking his proper place beside her, offering his left arm, upon which she leaned heavily upon for support. No words were spoken as the four headed back to the Resting Grounds.

When they arrived, Shaela ate a little meal and then stretched herself out upon the ground, instantly falling into a deep sleep, faithfully watched over by Hiska, her companion and Guardian.

Withdrawing from the area, the Mystic allowed her apprentice to rest, but not before telling Hiska she would return in three days, giving Hiska the charge to see Shaela to full health. Hiska knelt in submission to his queen, placing his forehead to the ground in obedience.

“Yes my queen.” Sentimentally, the womancat's eye fell upon him, squinting. Reaching down, she extended a single white claw, resting it's tip upon the back of his head. She then withdrew from the area, faithful Guardian at her side.

Before the sun was seen, Shaela mumbled, “Bad dog”, as she came out of a dream. Sitting up she arched her back, loosening up. She looked about the immediate area and found herself alone. It was odd that Hiska was not with her. “Maybe he is out hunting,” she thought, then stood.

Looking about the area, she quickly spotted him crouching on a stump at the jungle's border, peering out into the open lands where jungle vines and trees did not venture. In silence, she made her way to him, taking every care to make as little noise as possible. She thought she was doing an excellent job of sneaking until his ears turned back, signifying his sudden awareness of her approach. Not three steps into stalking him, and she was discovered. Well, she would work on that later. As she neared, he stood and turned to her.

“Shaela is well?” She smiled and offered him both her hands. Taking them, he looked at her in silence.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied. “And you? How are you?” Sniffing, Hiska shook his head as though resisting a sneeze.

“Hiska is well. Shaela slept for more than one full day,” her once captor said, looking at their joined hands.

“Thank you for all you do for me,” Shaela whispered, so taken by him. Hiska said nothing in return, but pulled her to him, holding her tight.

They spent that night together, and the next day, enjoying the time together as they used to when they explored far and wide. They talked of all the things they had been through together, both good and bad. Although her thoughts strayed to her mother and father often - a silent reminder of her past - Shaela was content. Though there was a sadness etched deeply into her heart, there was also a happiness.

She would never have shared in the happiness Hiska brought into her life, would it not been for the ogres . . . who murdered her family.

The days passed.

A deafening crack of thunder brought them quickly to their feet. Looking up, Shaela beheld dark, ominous, clouds filling the sky from horizon to horizon. Hiska turned and pointed, bringing her attention to the nearby tree line. As lightning illuminated the sky above, she beheld the Mystic, white staff in hand, and her Guardian.

“Up, both of you, and follow,” she called, her voice void of emotion. Turning, Mother sprinted into the jungle, followed by her Guardian. Both Shaela and Hiska removed themselves from the grass-lined embankment that had kept them relatively dry. In a matter of seconds she was trudging after the Harritt Catur Queen through a torrent of rain, shielded by the canopy above. Still, the thickness of the trees was not enough to keep them dry as water dripped heavily from above. After some time, Shaela began to feel a dread creeping into her heart. Something was about to happen, or she was a fool.

“Mother,” she whispered when the storm allowed her to be heard. The Mystic stopped and turned, remaining silent, gazing at Shaela as if she could bore holes into her with merely her eyes. “Mother, I feel something – something is about to happen.” Halting the Mystic turned, walked back to Shaela and raised her hand, resting the tips of each finger upon her temple.

“Good child, good; you are learning even before it begins. Can you be more specific on what is about to happen?”

“No, mother.”

“Nothing by way of dream or waking visions of any kind?” Shaela shivered, feeling a continuous stream of water stream down the center of her entire back. Before Shaela could answer, the Mystic raised a hand. “No more formalities, Shaela. Three years are gone.”

“I kept my honor, Mother.”

“Ask,” the Mystic persisted, her eyes illuminating slightly.

“I am a great disadvantage being here.”

“Ask,” the Mystic repeated, as if she had not heard Shaela.

"Mother, if I found a way to become Harritt Catur, would you fully accept me? Would you bless me with your mark, so I can stay with you?" Sniffing, the Mystic turned her back on Shaela and shook her head as if attempting to rid water from her ears.

"That was two questions. Which would you have me answer?" Well, it was worth trying.

"I trust you, Mother," was all she could get herself to utter. The Harritt's eyes gleamed of a sudden, as if filled with a violet light.

"And I, you," she returned. "Can you read my thoughts?"

"No," Shaela replied. The Mystic turned without hesitation and continued leading them.

"Good, or you would be sent to another to further your training if you could. This night's storm is of my summoning, for concealment. No more speaking Human, not at all until we arrive."

"Emm murr", (fight it ), Shaela challenged herself in silence. For a moment, she stopped, dropped her head, took in three sharp, quiet breaths. Catching her breath, could not overhear and feel a strange, unbreakable, silence distill upon her, even as thunder hammered the heavens and shook the water from the trees.

In the darkness of the jungle, she followed mother deep into the dense woodlands as best she could. After a near fall, lightning flashed across the sky, giving her a sure place to plant her foot for a jump.

"Hff," she warned, knowing their time spent together had never been that of idleness. Shifting the angle of her run to the right, she leap into the pitch-blackness before her. As if jumping into water, crossing her arms over her chest in the same fluid motion, hands flattened, elbows down. Before her descent, Hiska was there snatching her to him as thunder rolled through the skies above, again showering them with water. They had practiced this very move many times before. To Shaela, it was easy. She trusted Hiska.

Onward they sped, suddenly at a greater pace, following after the Mystic and her faithful Guardian, the only glimpse of the jungle coming to sight and

quickly vanishing as she felt the sureness of Hiska's balance.

Closing her eyes, she laid her head firmly against Hiska's chest and began to think back on all she had learned since escaping the ogres; the monsters yet haunting her. Such thoughts instantly brought on her father's voice. Bitterly, and in silence, Shaela broke down as both tears and rainwater filled her eyes. After a few long moments, she slowly forced her emotions away. Not now, she told herself firmly . . . and not for the last time.

Focusing on the present, she pictured all the key events which had led her to the present. Foremost, she recalled her mother and father, picturing them; taunting images she often cursed after they were gone. With the memories of her past life fading, Shaela anchored herself to Hiska's devotion to.

The more she learned of the culture of the Harritt Catur, the more Shaela realized just how lucky she was to be yet alive. Tradition had enforced the deaths of nearly every Human that ventured into the paths of the Prima and Harritt Catur race. Shivering, she pressed against Hiska, sharing the warmth of his body.

Insecurity began to plague her mind as they traveled, hatching into a profound fear by way of the absolute true respect for she harbored for Hiska, Mother and her Guardian. She did not want to fail, not now, not after coming so far.

Shaela felt Hiska stop. Looking up at him, though she could not see his face, she waited for a moment before wrapping her arms about his neck and pulling her mouth to his rain-soaked ear.

“Why are we stopped?” she whispered. Without answering, Hiska let her down as distant thunder rolled overhead. Looking about did her no good, as she was completely blind in this absolute darkness. Shivering, Shaela waited, ignorant, scared and shivering from the cold. What was happening?

In her childhood, she recalled feeling similar when she would carry the left over scraps of food out back to the pigs after supper. As a child, she feared the jungle, knowing there were wild and ferocious beasts within. Never could she have imagined she would one day be standing her, like this, in the darkness,

anchoring her moral on one of them. She almost laughed, just to break the spell of fear beginning to claw at her.

Then, in the next moment, she felt a distinct presence behind her. Whatever it was, she could feel it was not the other three. Afraid, like that small child long ago, she instinctively clung to Hiska, gripping him tight. To her dismay, Hiska gripped her wrists and gently pushed her away from him. Shocked and terrified, her heart began to beat painfully in her chest. Panicked, she wrapped her arms about herself, nearly calling out for him.

Why would he push her away? Why? He had never done that before, especially when she was in trouble. Something was happening; something significant. Though she felt more terrified than ever before, and though the darker side of her mind assaulted her with terrible imaginings, she refused to call out for him. With widening eyes, Shaela waiting in terrible apprehension for the next flash of lightning.

She trusted the three she was with, especially the one she loved. She wanted to scream, and nearly did, as she looked behind her. Each moment stretch out, as if time itself was lengthening, and it felt like forever as she waited, her heart thumping quickly within her chest.

Lightning flashed, filling the area with a brief light, as is if it were day, followed by a boom that split the air. Two more lightning strikes shed enough light to give her a solid glimpse about the area, causing Shaela's breathing to choke short as she caught the horrifying glimpse of literally hundreds of creatures surrounding them all, filling the jungle floor and trees, all about them, each staring, unblinking, unmoving, as if they had been petrified.

“Hissithur (Moonlight).” Mother softly uttered. The end of her staff illuminated with the spell of waxed moonlight, instantly bringing all the animals about her into Shaela's vision. Shaela looked around, turning a slow circle, the distinct feeling of being a mouse, cornered by too many cats.

After the initial shock of suddenly finding herself surrounded by the beasts of the jungle, it occurred to her that these creatures, in all their varieties, predator

and non-predator alike, seemed unconcerned at being grouped together in such an odd company.

Shaela could now see clearly by the light of the staff. She felt light headed, as if she would faint. She clenched her teeth. No! Mother would not bring her here to die. Shaela trusted the Harritt Catur Queen with her life. Focusing, she regained her senses, to find the Mother staring at her.

“Daughter, for that is what you may become this night, be at peace. I have brought you here to introduce you to all the . . . hmm, how will you understand? In their world, they are known as the Kazar, which title you know. Each here are the greatest of their own, just as each tree is beyond the Ancient Oaks. Each present is a shepherd of their own. Come, let me introduce you to them one by one. You must know them all if you are to serve them. Each can speak the Human tongue.” Shaela's mind staggered as she unsteadily followed.

“Kneel child, for if you were set amidst Humans in this manner, you would be come before kings and queens of nations; there is no difference. Now you shall be washed away of ignorance, or steeped more fully into it of your own will and choice. Kneel child.” Shaela awkwardly knelt upon the soaked floor of the jungle. Once in kneeling position, Mother looked out, eyeing a specific animal. She then spoke to it in a tongue Shaela could not understand. A jungle bear, like the one Hiska had battled long ago, yet much larger, came forward, stopping before Shaela, sniffing her. It then spoke to her, incredible as that seemed.

“Human, you and this Harritt Catur killed one of my own long ago. What is your excuse for this murder?” Shaela's lip suddenly trembled. The great bear set her off guard so badly, her emotions, as always, began to overwhelm her. It had attacked, or had it? Now she was unsure. Dread filled her as she looked upon a bear that looked as though it could easily crush them all. As she gazed upon this king of bears, a deep sadness pierced her heart.

“Milord, I thought it was going to kill me. If I have offended, please take my life to balance your loss. I can see that we - Humans - tread unjustly upon too many.” She bowed low before the great bear only to find herself gently lifted by

one of its massive paws.

“You – you would trade your life?” She nodded, trembling, and reached up a shaking hand to touch the side of the Kazar's massive jaw.

“I'm so sorry. My eyes have become aware of things I thought never existed, turning my ignorance to shame, and I wonder if I can balance the many wrongs I have caused in ten of my lifetimes.” She recollected the time when she first felt the pain of losing her parents to the ogres. Just the same, had she and Hiska inflicted the same pain upon other creatures? Such a thought, left her feeling suddenly doomed.

The great bear moved its nose close to her, almost touching her face, and inhaled long. It invaded her long, thick, black hair with its muzzle as it took in a long, deep breath.

“I reject your offer. I have your scent. I approve in behalf of the my boundaries and domain. Welcome Shaela, Sister of the jungle.” With that the bear turned and approached the Mystic. The Mystic placed her arms about the grand bear's neck and squeezed. In return, the bear placed one paw ever so gently about the Mystic and nuzzled her affectionately as if they were old friends at a reunion. The great bear then departed, vanishing into the jungle.

Mother continued to bring each Kazar before Shaela in the same manner. In return, she was accepted by them all. The absence of the Prima Catur came to Shaela's attention. She wondered why, but did not ask - not yet.

By the time daylight began to illuminate the jungle, the storm had abated to distant, rolling thunder far away. Shaela was finished, and felt exhausted. She was allowed to sleep, yet not before she inquired about the Prima Catur.

“Mother, why was the Kazar Prima Catur not among them?” It was a simple enough question. And she was given a simple enough answer (which confused her even the more).

“The same reason the Kazar Harritt Catur was not. Now sleep, for come evening we must go.” Soon the daylight hours waned. It was time to rise and continue deeper into the jungle. Shaela thought she would go back to the Resting

Grounds now, but Mother had other plans.

“Now the true test comes daughter. Now you must attempt to do what you have been taught in all your studies.” She neared Shaela's face intrusively.

“Believing and trusting on my words, and the words of books, is only a beginning.”

Once again Hiska carried Shaela through the darkness. Seeing there was nothing else to be done, she curled up wearily, resting in his arms as they traveled. The word “do” caused a growing anxiety to plague her mind. “Do,” she thought to herself over and over until she slipped into an uneasy slumber.

The four traveled deep into the jungle for three solid days. They stopped to rest at times, and to eat, but they never tarried long in one place. At the sunrise of the third day, the Mystic stopped and turned to Shaela, who had begun to feel a great exhaustion coming upon her. Turning, she narrowed her sharply slanted eyes at her.

“Get some rest Shaela, Daughter. Not long from now, you will achieve your destiny's beginning, or fail. If you fail, Shaela, you must return to Human civilization, after which our paths will part, no doubt, forever.” Hiska visibly flinched at her words, but said nothing. Shocked at her words, Shaela instantly rebelled within.

“Then I will not fail, Mother.” She stated with conviction, feeling something inside her rise up, like the seed of a tree, growing quickly, unnaturally fast. Firm and resolute, Shaela continued to challenge the look Mother gave her. “Let us do this now, Mother. Then, I want to go home and sleep once again in the deep grasses. The Mystic narrowed her sharply slanted eyes at Shaela as if to pierce her down. This time Shaela held her eyes firm. In silence, the Mystic rolled the white staff in her hands as they gazed unblinking one at the other. At length, the Mystic sighed.

“So be it.” She withdrew three rolled up parchments of thick scroll paper from within her cloak and handed them to Shaela.

“Do not fail even one,” was all she said, then walked away. Turning, she lowering herself to the ground and watched Shaela with eyes which seemed as though they could pierce and shatter the very stars in the heavens.

Shaela opened the first parchment and gave a quiet sigh. It was a spell! She needed a target, and instantly turned to Hiska.

“Remember when we met Hiska? You tied me to a tree.” She laughed and then read the single word scribed upon the scroll.

“Stithiss,” she stated clearly, pronouncing the spell perfectly. She then pointed at Hiska's feet. Startled by the sudden attack, Hiska attempted to retreat, yet fell back to the ground, his feet adhered to the earth. Quickly, she ran to his side.

“It will release you in a moment; don't struggle.” Hiska looked at her, narrowing his eyes. He was obviously becoming angry, so she nuzzled him affectionately, which curbed his mood. At this point, she could tell Hiska was teetering on being angry, or forgiving her, she was not sure which way it would go.

The Mystic glanced over at her Guardian, who returned her gaze. He shrugged, slightly, narrowing his eyes. The Mystic returned the sentimental glance and chuckled quietly.

After the spell released Hiska, Shaela smiled brightly at him and opened the second parchment as her Guardian sneezed twice and tested the ground, making sure it was normal. Again, Shaela's heart lightened at what she read. She pointed at Hiska and spoke plainly.

“Shamur.” Hiska had only enough time to close his eyes and put out his hands in a futile defense, as a mass of cobwebs engulfed him. Hiska froze, now, suddenly, rigid with anger. Through the mass of webbing, he looked upon Shaela with no amusement. The sight of him, draped in webs, caused Shaela to laugh uncontrollably. Hiska spat and hissed, clawing at the webs, which did not seem to help.

Through her tears, Shaela came to him and began helping, but Hiska would have nothing to do with her at this point. He grabbed her, lifted her up, carried her a short ways away and set her down. He then returned, sneezing three times violently, all the while attacking the webs that plagued him. Shaela watched him with aching sides; even the Mystic's eyes took on a tinge of amusement.

The Mystic blinked once as Shaela began to open the last scroll, her eyes briefly

flashing like two stars. Only the Mystic's Guardian noticed the tip of her staff glow prior to Shaela unrolling the parchment. An ice-cold look flashed within the Queen's eyes as Shaela unrolled the scroll. As she read the parchment, the Mystic watched Shaela's demeanor darken, and her smile instantly die, like a firebrand being thrust into deep water, extinguishing its light.

Her shoulders slumped, as if suddenly laden with an unseen weight. She squinted more intensely at the paper again, shaking her head as if to clear her eyes. She looked stunned, like the rabbit that suddenly sees a wolf bearing down upon it with no time to run. Lowering the scroll, she looked up at the Mystic, who glared at her maliciously, slightly baring her teeth. Seeing the Mystic's demeanor, Shaela wasted no time in stalking over to the Mystic. Hissing at her own Mother, she growled, tears already on the flow.

“Mua esth spita! (Then I fail!)” she screamed. “I will live with the Humans!” She turned and walked away from the Mystic, heading towards Hiska. The cool, ice-like, voice of the Mystic following her.

“Simple task, and you will earn the right and power to the Druidic Path. Decline this last test and lose this chance forever.” Without hesitation, Shaela violently wadded up the parchment and threw it at Hiska's feet.

“Then I fail!” she cried out in agony, feeling her insides suddenly being ripped into, as if Hiska had betrayed her. Turning, she bolted into the jungle as fast as she could. After a few seconds, the Mystic snapped her teeth after her. In reaction, her Guardian leapt after Shaela.

Hiska reached down and took up the parchment. He smoothed it out, yet did not read it. As he approached the Mystic, he rolled it up carefully and handed it to her. He then knelt before his queen, confused, silenced. Once again, Hiska felt the gentle touch of the Mystic's talons as she began to caress his head and ears.

Shaela ran through the jungle for a long while, then stopped, panting heavily. Was this some sick and twisted joke? No, it was not. But she would not do what the last test instructed. The instructions were specific: Retrieve a blade from Mother's Guardian . . . and kill Hiska.

“Sicknesses! Vile!” she spat and screamed with all the hate and energy of her soul. As she screamed, she felt something . . . a pulling sensation, a call, similar to the feeling the Ancient Willow had touched her with. The only difference was, this time, that feeling came from within. She could suddenly feel, touch, reach out to the ground and the life essence of the plants about her. Within, she felt a power fill her being. The plants about her wilted instantly, and the earth at her feet moved ever so slightly, as if it no longer wished to bear her weight. She felt this power fill her even as the Mystic's Guardian appeared through the thickness of the jungle before her. In anger, she narrowed her eyes at him, focusing all the energy she felt upon him. Without hesitation the Guardian spoke, holding out his hands to the side.

“Shaela, wait. The Test is over.” Shaela focused on him, the power she felt inside her now matching his. She felt strangely light, and could see much more clearly, as if she was carrying a lighted staff of her own in the darkness. Again in haste he spoke, yet in an even tone, holding up his hands to show he meant her no harm.

“Shaela, will you please listen before you strike me?” His words fell upon her like the impact of a blacksmith's hammer. She nodded shortly, trembling, yearning to release her power, strike out! Clenching her fists tight, her eyes darting from side to side as if she expected some form of ambush. The Mystic's Guardian knelt calmly to show he meant no aggression, still holding his hands out to the side.

“To finish The Test successfully, you had to fail the instructions on the third scroll. The test was loyalty to your Guardian, not to complete the Mystics command, and you did it without fail or hesitation. You have passed The Test

Shaela . . . Druidess.”

Shocked beyond measure, Shaela let the power go within her, letting it fly in all directions. As far as the eye could perceive, the jungle all about the two moved, as if a sudden blast of heavy wind had struck the area. Hearing his words caused her mind to spin. She screamed, and burst out in uncontrollable sobs as she fell to her knees.

“I would never betray my Hiska. Never!” she screamed at him. Her voice then lowered to a whisper. “I love him.” He stood slowly and cautiously approached, briefly placing his hands and forehead upon the ground before her. He then helped her up and held her close to him, wrapping his Guardian robes about her as she trembled with violent emotions.

“I know, I know you would not . . . my Daughter.” Shaela looked up at him, feeling a sense of balance and strength flow into her mind and body as his robes closed about her thin frame. Then she comprehended what he meant. She looked back the way she had run, and then back and up at him, a sudden revelation hatching within her mind.

“You, you are his fath-“ The Mystic's Guardian interrupted quickly. “Never speak of this. It is forbidden.” Briefly, he took and placed his forehead to her hand, then released it.

“Shall we return to them?” he stated kindly, offering an arm to her as he turned back. She nodded and rested a hand upon his arm, accepting the escort.

When she saw Hiska, she broke into a run and threw her arms about his neck, squeezing him unmercifully.

“I will never let anything take you away from me. Nothing.” she sobbed. Hiska gently pushed her away and turned her to the approaching Mystic.

“Well done Daughter Druid. I had to be sure of your loyalty to us. I had to be fully sure. I am sorry, this was not the typical training the Harritt Catur receive. You are Human. My duties are to an entire species; please understand this.” Shaela's tears flowed freely now as she threw her arms tightly about Mother's neck.

“You are my family. I love you all. Hiska is mine; I am his. If the world of Humans should invade this jungle, I will be the first to stand against them.” To Hiska's astonishment tears filled the Mystic's eyes as she returned Shaela's embrace. After a long while, they parted.

“Shaela, Daughter Druid, I believe you. And you touch me deeply. I wish we all were like you in some ways . . . we would be better for it.” Mother licked Shaela on the temple and then nuzzled her neck, inhaling long on each side.

“Now I have your scent forever . . . daughter. Let us go home.” Wiping her eyes, Shaela laughed and did likewise to the Mystic and her Guardian, yet she did not lick them. She then smoothed out her fine leather apprentice robes and fixed her hair. Turning, she embraced Hiska and inhaled deeply on both sides of his neck. And as she did so, she whispered, “I love you forever”.

The journey back through the jungle was done during the day, no doubt for Shaela's sake. After four days of casual journey, she suddenly recognized the area again. The Mystic then informed Shaela, she would be leaving them both. She had much work to do, and that her apprenticeship was officially at its end. Shaela was given a new robe to wear. It was jungle-green, and more finely crafted than any silken apparel she had ever seen or touched. It was the Robe of The Druid, gifted to any taught and accepted at the hands of a Mystic.

It was of the same fashion as her other dress, yet fashioned as the jungle, with the etchings of leaves and vines in all their varieties upon its entire surface. Upon the entire robe's border were words carefully embroidered in the tongue of the Harritt Catur, reciting a very simple history of their people. Upon the neck of her robe there were special words which read, Daughter Druid. Shaela did not know it, but no Human had ever been allowed such an honor among the Harritt Catur in all the histories written.

Now time did have its way with Shaela, as she previously suspected it would. Two paths were followed; the Mystic and her Guardian to one, Shaela and her Guardian to the another. Shaela felt a part of her die in a way, being separated from Mother. She also began to feel more alive in this vast wilder land, once filled with shadows and fear. She had become something other than helpless, which thing quenched her fears.

Before they separated, the Mystic came to Shaela one last time. As she approached, Shaela knelt and placed her forehead to the ground, hands and fingers out wide before her.

“Up Daughter Druid. I command you to never lower yourself in such a manner to me again. We will become equals soon enough . . . or I will become a mother without a child.” She hesitated, suddenly in thought, then placed a single talon at the center of Shaela's chest. “Or you will become a child without a mother.” Shaela stood and embraced her tightly.

“Oh Mother, half the time you speak in riddles. You sound as if death may yet soon take one of us. Of this I know, it would probably be me. This is a gloomy meeting. What's wrong?” The Mystic let go and peered ever so deeply into her eyes, longer than she had ever done.

“I am leaving this area to scout out the borders of this grand jungle. I will say no more on this subject.” She sighed and took Shaela's hand, placing a white staff, similar to her own, within it. Shaela looked at the staff and smiled as her chin began to tremble with emotion. The staff was from the Dremmin Tree, she recognized the wood instantly. It was very rare and valuable.

“Daughter, there will be no ceremony for what you have earned and become, but you have more than earned your right and place among my people . . . and I call you friend forever.” Embracing each other, Shaela gripped Mother tight, feeling as though she would never see her again. As the tears began to flow, her thoughts turned to her father and mother . . . and not for the last time.

“Remember to seek me out if ever you are in need . . . for a price of course.” She gently pushed Shaela away, winking. The Mystic then turned upon Hiska, who bowed with his hands out flat upon the ground, fingers extended, his forehead touching the ground between them. She lifted him to his feet.

“Hiska, I give you back your life to do as it seems you good.” Hiska held her eyes for a moment. Something passed between them then, Shaela could see it in their eyes. Without a word he turned and walked into the jungle. Shaela began to follow Hiska, then stopped and turned as she looked at the white staff.

“Mother, I have a question. Our staves, how is it that we obtain them, but protect the woodlands? Would we not have to harm that which we protect to gain the staff?” The Mystic suddenly chuckled.

“No, no Daughter Druid. We are given the staff; we do not take it. The staff you have was given to me to bestow upon you.” Shaela nodded, questions hatching like a hundred eggs in her mind . . . yet she refrained.

“Thank you Mother, and you sir.” In utter respect, the Mystic's Guardian bowed in silence.

Turning, Shaela followed Hiska into the trees, studying her new staff, which appeared as a shaft of wood carved with many vines in the appearance of growth upon its surface. It was extremely light and beautiful, half as thick as her delicate wrist. When she had taken hold of it, she felt an energy flow into her that she recognized immediately.

As Shaela turned and walked away, the Mystic's eyes followed the staff in her hand, a look of worry giving her emotions away. Her Guardian moved in close and placed a supportive arm up under her hand, which was graciously accepted. Leaning upon his arm, she looked to her Guardian.

"Giving her that staff was the hardest thing I have ever done." Her Guardian looked after Shaela until she had long vanished into the thickness of the jungle, then sighed heavily.

"Lillanthra", he barely whispered, then froze. Turning, the Mystic removed her Guardian's five-times master-crafted helm. Surrendering her his helm, he raised his head and smelled the air. Inhaling long and slow.

"What is it?" the Mystic whispered. "What are your senses teaching you?" Lowering, he slowly retrieved his helm, his hand making contact with hers. Squinting at him, she sighed, waiting for his answer.

"Change, and not in our favor," he stated, the claws of his hand gently sliding across the back of his Queen's hand. With a quick glance in the direction Hiska and Shaela had gone, she slowly shook her head. It then seemed as if she was suddenly laden with a heavy load.

"Be my shield. Hunt with me. We spare all until Final Judgement." At her command, it seems the physical being of her Guardian hardened.

"I am your blood, your mind, your body, your spirit. I am your Soul`Shield," he stated in a voice, unrestrained by ignorance. The Mystic gasped, feeling the power of his being wash through her.

"Always makes my hackles rise," she whispered, then snickered ever so slight. "I run with you," she sighed. All this training had made her soft. In all her

long, long years, the Mystic had never taken that long to apprentice any other. Then again, this was a special case. She hoped it would turn out Shaela's favor. As if she yet saw Shaela, the Mystic Harritt Catur grit her teeth, staring after her, hoping for an acceptable outcome.

"You ready for this one?" she whispered, throwing him a strange look. Rising up, he looked down upon the only woman he had ever loved.

"Always," he hissed. Taking in a deep breath, the Mystic concentrated, willing a spell to life. Gritting her teeth she waited for the spell show her the cost for using it. Aware of its casting, the spell turned, appearing as a shifting, writhing dark. A strand of jagged obsidian energy flashed out, touching the Mystic upon her left temple. It was always like this. The instant shock, and taste of the pain to come for tapping (disturbing) it, flowed into her as if it was a memory. Without hesitation, she tensed, signaling to her Guardian. Slipping into dark illumination, the Mystic leaned heavy against her Guardian, literally absorbing an energy he was in no want for.

As shadow began to weave itself about his lady, he crouched, blending with her movements

"Well of Energy," he stated, then added, "Seventh`Sense". Seventh`Sense was his favorite battle ability – to see was is coming, just prior to it happening had been a heard earned power, nearly devouring him in the process of procuring it.

Focusing on the here and the now, she bolted into a sudden run, her Guardian matching and blending with her. As one, they raced along the border of the jungle, taking a very different course than Shaela and Hiska.

She entered into the density of the jungle where Hiska silently waited. As she approached, his eyes shifted to the staff in her hand. Turning, he bowed his head low to the ground, his hands to either side, fingers spread wide.

“I am yours to command.” She flinched, feeling very uncomfortable. She knew what she should do, according to custom, but she could never imagine Hiska being subservient to her. Kneeling before him, she took his hands in hers, guiding him to sit upright. After he arose, she pulled close and snuggled lovingly against him, her hands working their way up to his neck, scratching all the way. Hiska nuzzled her affectionately, enjoying the attention. Shaela placed her lips against his ear and softly whispered to him, causing his ear to flick.

“I command you never bow to me like that again Milord. Please, Hiska, do not speak to me as though I am now your master. Just be my Guardian; be mine.” Hiska tenderly took her face in his hands and nodded, his intensely green eyes piercing her heart.

“Hiska will try, but please be patient. Shaela is mixing cultures with Hiska. Hiska needs time to follow Shaela's command.” She nodded, smiling and snapping at one of his long whiskers playfully.

“Mother said that you have some information for me.” Hiska turned toward the deep lands of the jungle pointing.

“Shaela must travel back the way she came. Our master counseled Hiska to take Shaela back to the beginning. Hiska can take you to the flowing waters where Hiska found you. From there, we will search.” He hesitated for a moment, giving Shaela, who looked as though he had slapped her, a chance to speak. She did not. Standing, he helped Shaela up, taking his place to her right, awaiting her lead.

Shaela was stricken to silence. She had not expected this wound to heal quickly, but she did not foresee it opening so abruptly; so painfully. Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled freely down her face as she numbly began to walk back along a road she did not wish to travel. It suddenly invoked the razor-sharp edge of hope within her, and she did not like it. Hiska watched on, guiding her now and

then when he was needed.

For the next three moon rises they walked in the silence of their thoughts, Hiska faithfully taking his command as Shaela's Guardian. She noticed this, and it bothered her immensely. It wasn't the same as before; things were changing, and it felt wrong. He guided her to a stream and stopped before it, pointing.

“Following this water, you will find the bank where Hiska found you.” She nodded and smiled, a sudden thought occurring to her. She could command him now; he was, after all, her Guardian. She could command him to no longer take her on as his Ward, and then ask him to be her companion. She just wanted Hiska back, like before.

“Hiska.” She called to him as he watched a rather large fish lazily gliding by. The mancat looked at her, ears suddenly laying back at the tone of her voice. With some hesitation, he acknowledged her slowly.

“Yes, Shaela?”

“I command you now, is this not true?” Hiska's ears flattened completely, his eyes narrowing.

“Do not use Hiska as a spell target. Hiska would be forced to put Shaela in her place.” Shaela smiled slightly.

“I was not thinking that. Hiska, I no longer need you as my Guardian. You are released.” His eyes widened, as if he had been suddenly stabbed from behind by an assassin.” Quickly, before he could say a word, Shaela continued. “I do need my Hiska back. Hiska, things seem different now; so serious.” Hiska's ears perked up, and he actually hissed. She knew he was laughing at her, and it frustrated her.

“I'm serious. We never talk anymore. For three moons we have not spoken to each other, not like we used to. I have not fallen asleep in the warmth of your arms, and I miss you.” Hiska became serious and touched the back of his hand to her cheek, caressing it.

“My lady, Hiska's Queen has said Hiska is your Forever Guardian. Shaela must understand that when the Queen speaks, it is sealed. Hiska will not stop

being Shaela's Guardian.” Hiska looked into her eyes intensely as Shaela peered into his with a pleading look.

“Forgive me. I know she is our leader. I did not know she had set the terms like that. Hiska, I thought things could still be the same.” Hiska quickly cut her off.

“There is power in being druid, yes?” She nodded, for she knew what she had felt, and it was as real as was the feeling of the staff within her hand. She knew two spells, from the scrolls which Mother had tested her with.

“Being a Guardian has power also, just as Shaela does. Hiska feels things all about himself he has never felt before. Hiska can protect you better.”

“And I can now help,” she added. Hiska’s eyes suddenly gleamed fierce and proud. Shaela felt a sudden rush within her body as they both talked. She could not explain it, but it felt like something was giving her energy; power. Hiska stepped back, as if he also felt it.

“Even as we speak, Hiska feels something stronger between us.” Shaela closed her eyes and let her head tilt back as this feeling began to grow more intense. Craving more, she opened herself up to it, willingly accepting it. At first it was faint, but grew stronger and stronger as she bent her mind upon it.

“Shaela, stop!” Hiska called out. Opening her eyes, she glanced at her Guardian to see his hackles fully extended, eyeing her warily and pointing. She blinked a few times and then staggered as she looked at what he was pointing to. All about them, the jungle’s undergrowth was withered and dead, blackened by the force of the power working within her.

“I - I'm sorry Hiska. I did not know.” The mancat was speechless, and for a time he did not even attempt to speak. Shaela stumbled over to a place to sit and lowered herself to the ground shaking her head. It had happened again. Absently, she rolled her staff back and forth in her palms, a distant feeling taking hold. She could still feel the energy of the plant life she had just destroyed, and it felt good amidst her growing shame.

Hiska crouched by her, yet not too close. It looked like she needed some time to think. What had just happened was quite impressive. The withering of the plants brought on him feeling of great uneasiness. She was impressive. Shaela was going to be great, he could feel it. Even so, she was also going to attract too much attention in the process. He was beginning to see why he had been chosen to see her through all this. Mother knew he loved her. He suspected this love between them would help see her through what lay ahead. He knew he would rather die than let anything happen to her. “How much did Mother see into Shaela’s future?” he wondered in silence. “What will Shaela become?”

A long while passed as the two sat by the stream in silence. After some time of quiet, Hiska gently broke the silence.

“There is more to Shaela than Shaela knows. We must be wary even of ourselves at this powerful change.” Hiska stood and approached her, holding out his hand, which she took. Standing, she sighed heavily and rested her head against his chest. Wrapping her arms about him, she squeezed Hiska tight.

“I am glad you are my Forever Guardian.” She then let go and looked at the stream. Without a reply, Hiska turned and began following the creek with Shaela guiding the way.

They traveled casually all evening, until the jungle began to gray with the light of the approaching dawn. Finding the best place to rest, they settled down against a large tree. Shaela insisted on giving Hiska a good work over, especially behind the ears; he always loved that.

With his finger-length talons, Hiska combed out her hair, then made sure she was free from parasites and ticks. He was impressed at the skill she had developed in avoiding such insects, for he found none. Resting his chin on her head, he let her curl up in his arms and fall into slumber.

The last thing Shaela remembered that morning, as they nestled down to sleep, were two words Hiska had spoken earlier that day. He had never spoken to her in this manner, and the impact of it began to sink in as she drifted off into quiet slumber. He had referred to her as 'my lady'.

Hiska kept the watch that day, as she slept warmly in his arms.

In the afternoon he slept more fully as she kept the watch. The tree they slept against proved useful as it had a slight inclining embankment upon which the tree grew. It was covered with the jungles undergrowth, which led up to it from the steadily gurgling stream below.

Shaela was wide awake now, and had some free time to listen to the birds chatter all about her. They fascinated her deeply. She knew the name of each one she heard, what it looked like; even its rarity. One, calling out sharp and clear, she knew loved bananas. Another gently cooing in just a certain tone, she knew to be easing the anxiety of her young before leaving to find dinner for them. Today, the wind was almost non-present, as always, and so it was muggy and hot. Shaela stole a glance at Hiska and then slowly stood, focusing upon the coolness of the creek, and the promise of the cool beckoning water.

Taking up her staff, she slowly crept to the water's edge and knelt down as Hiska's eyes cracked open and then shut again, his ears following her. It felt good to put her hands into the stream. Patting her face and neck down, she relaxed, enjoying the moment. She then cupped her hands and drank her fill.

As the ripples in the water smoothed over, she saw the image of a girl in its reflection. Leaping to her feet, Shaela spun about to see no one there. A sudden feeling of anxiety began to build within her, quickening her pulse as she looked about the area. Seeing no one, she turned her attention back to the stream, first sneaking a glance at Hiska, who had not changed his position. Shaking her head, she blinked hard.

“Shaela, you are seeing things,” she silently chided herself. Looking back at the water's reflection, she was astonished to see the girl's reflection in the water, gliding back and forth gently as the creek flowed on. Shaela knelt, instantly fascinated by what appeared to be a young child swimming to and fro within the water. As the child smiled brightly at her, she resisted the urge to look up. Not knowing what else to do, she ventured speaking to her, absurd as it seemed.

“Hello?” Shaela whispered reluctantly. “Are you real, or am I yet dreaming

that I am awake talking to you?” The child's head bowed slightly as she giggled. Looking down stream, the child made a beckoning motion. She seemed excited for some odd reason. But then, Shaela thought, dreams always were odd.

“She can see us now!” the girl exclaimed. Shaela looked down stream to see another child floating up through the currents, weaving in and out and over rocks gracefully as she neared. For a few moments, both images looked at each other in wonder. Curiously, Shaela stretched her hand out to the water's surface, extending a finger. As she did, the first child reached up out of the water, meeting her finger with Shaela's. She could feel her! Shaela smiled, a sudden joy filling her.

“You are real,” she whispered energetically, extending a second finger to be yet matched by the child's second finger as well. The Water Child giggled and nodded.

“Of course I am – we are. Sorry sister – we.” The second had instantly looked offended and stared angrily at the first, until she apologized. Once amends was made, she resumed her childlike brightness, smiling and nodding enthusiastically.

“And now that you can see us Shaela, we shant be speaking to ourselves.” The second Water Child formed up out of the water next to Shaela and whispered to her in all confidence, “And others won't think we have gone mad in a hole”. She winked, then nodded at each other, as if they had just formed a secret pact. Shaela withdrew her hand from the first girl and stared on in wonder and amazement at what appeared as the perfect image of an actual girl standing up to her shoulders in the creek.

“In all the world, I never knew such beautiful creatures could exist. How is this?” The girl gave Shaela a wry smirk and grabbed her own chin in sudden thought. She then pointed a finger in the air.

“Aha!” She exclaimed, and was suddenly hushed and pulled down into the creek by her sister who pointed up the embankment at the tree behind Shaela. Again she came out of the water, slowly, cautiously, though only her head this

time.

“If we make too much noise, we can be spotted, though this is uncommon. Your man-kitty-cat has a new aura about him. He is more than what he was.”

Shaela looked back, hoping not to see Hiska’s eyes open – they were not, and his ears were not pointed her way.

“He did not notice,” she whispered, enthralled by the two children of water before her.

“Shaela, now that you can see us, does that make us any less real than before? Think about it; we know your name.” Shaela thought for only a moment.

“No.” The girl smiled triumphantly at Shaela, and then at her sister who was beginning to be cross for lack of attention, and gesturing that it was her turn to talk to Shaela. She continued anyhow, ignoring the gesture.

“We've seen you here since first you slept by our water's edge. We were so sad for you; so alone and helpless. Like so many before you, we did not think you were going to live.” She made a sad face, but instantly brightened up, raising a hand out of the water with a splash, forefinger extended dramatically. “But then your kitty friend found you. Little does he know that it was I who helped him catch the two largest fish in the area at the time. It wasn't for him . . . it was for you!” Her last words were like a powerful discourse before a grand audience as she dramatically finished. Splashing backwards, she waved her hand emphatically, instantly displacing far too much water, soaking Shaela thoroughly. Shocked at being suddenly drenched, Shaela gulped in air, blinking in utter surprise at the sudden shower of cool water.

“Sister, you shouldn't have done that!” Suddenly, Hiska was at Shaela's side. She felt his hand come up underneath hers.

“Is Shaela hurt?” Shaela coughed and then began laughing.

“No, no, I'm alright. I just got a little wet is all.” She turned, facing Hiska suddenly, and shook her hair as vigorously as she could, splattering him with water. He flinched, but held his ground, openly, and abruptly, unamused. Laughing, she rested her hand upon his, throwing him a tenacious grin.

“My apologies for getting you wet,” she stated, feeling enlightened and happy.

“Forgiven,” Hiska growled softly, obviously not trusting her. The fact that he was suspicious caused her to bite her tongue to keep from showing any further humor. Sighing, she drew close, embracing her best friend in all the world. As he wrapped her in his ever-sheltering embrace, her attention returned to the flowing stream. She searched for her new friends, but they were no longer there. Sighing happily, she quietly whispered down at the water.

Children fair, so bright your eyes  
Within the purest stream  
As sparkling stars within the skies  
Fair voices in a dream

Where come you hither light of heart?  
No guile taints your wake  
To fill the measure of your part  
Stream yours, not mine to take

She turned her attention back to Hiska, who was now looking at the stream.

“Years ago, when you captured me, you had help catching those two fish. And I thought you were the most skilled hunter in the jungle,” she teased, poking him in the ribs and making him flinch.

“Is Shaela feeling well today?” he stated with ever-growing suspicion. With more content than she felt since leaving her Mystic Mother, Shaela nodded, continuing to search the water.

“Better than when you slept. You were right, we do have to be careful. The jungle is not merely a forest, as I once ignorantly presumed; it is a home.

“Forgive Hiska if he intrudes -” Shaela nestled into his arms more deeply and laughed, cutting him off.

“Now I understand just a little more. I have life, you have life, the stream has life, and not merely do I speak of the fish that are driven into your hands. Such clever little children.” Reaching up, She began scratching his neck, working her nails into his fur.

“Hiska is a good fisherman”, he gently rebelled, raking his talons through her wet hair and shaking off the water. She nodded, moving to a spot just behind his ears she knew he liked the most.

“I believe you Hiska; I doubt not your many skills.”

The days drifted lazily by as the two continued their journey, keeping close to the stream that quenched their thirst, and, at times, fed them. Through the jungle, and downstream, they traversed the woodlands steadily, ever on the watch, ever enjoying each other.

Within her, there was a growing sense of anxiety. Hiska seemed to notice it also, but he only stayed near her in these times, saying nothing of it. She felt more free as they moved on, though she also felt haunted with every day's travel.

On the night of the second waxed moon, Shaela found herself smiling down into a pool of more calm water at the creek side, thinking back on the two Water Children. She missed them, and yearned to speak to them again, but they had not so much as lifted a finger out of the water in greeting since the last time they met.

One day after a rather violent thunder storm had struck the area, during the early morning, as she knelt down beside the water's edge, Shaela saw a flicker of light in the depths of the jungle across the water from her. How far off the light was, she could not say. She stood slowly, dread filling her heart. She feared it could be Humans, and so, cautiously, watched the light grow brighter with each passing moment. After a minute, she called out to Hiska, who was sleeping nearby. Hiska did not stir in the least, she noticed, and this sent a chill settling deep within her. Her hands began to tremble slightly as she called out to Hiska, this time more loudly. Again, he did not respond. She looked at him, seeing him deeply sleeping, and then turned and watched the light, which was now just across the swollen creek before her, not too far into the trees.

“Hello?” She whispered softly, calling out to whoever was there. The light was bright now, but she could not see who was holding it. She squinted, raising a hand to her eyes, thinking she saw a person behind the light, as if holding up a great lantern. Hearing Hiska sniff, she glanced back quickly, yet only seeing him lower his head more deeply into sleep. Turning back she spoke anxiously.

“Who are you? Are you lost?” Shaela heard the soft laughter of a man, and the sound of it brought to her a lightness of heart, so musical was its tone. Bending slightly forward, she peered into the light. “I can't see you. Show yourself, please.” The light dimmed slowly, revealing a winged, fair haired, blue-eyed man, who walked upon the water of the creek, without sinking, to stand before her. He smiled brightly, bowing and eyeing her from head to foot.

“Tis' a pleasure to meet one who has been taught by a Mystic. And more rare be that, you are Human.” He laughed, eyes sparkling brightly. Shaela Curtseyed, greeting him.

“I always knew your kind existed, even when my parents told me otherwise. They said you were a myth. But I secretly knew, I knew. Oh, my manners are terrible. My name is Shaela.” And with that she graciously held out a hand, trying to be somewhat formal. She was taken back so far by this sudden encounter that she did not know what else to do. He beamed a long smile at her and then took her hand and kissed the back of it.

“I see grace be added once again to this green palace we call home.” Shaela blushed and glanced back at Hiska, who remained in a deep slumber. The man's eyes followed hers.

“Oh, your traveling companion be deep within his own dreams, most grand. Chin be my name, and it is an honor and pleasure to meet and serve a lady of the jungle.” Shaela felt so light hearted and carefree in Chin's presence, she knelt down once again by the water's edge. Chin knelt also, wings raising upward so as not to hinder him. She did not know what to say suddenly, and it set her mind spinning. Chin just laughed and placed a finger on his lips, deep in sudden thought. After a moment, he raised it in the air in triumph.

“Aha!” Shaela came to herself and shook her head enthusiastically.

“What?”

“Never will you increase your magic if you do not take more time to listen and learn.” Chin looked at her staff, his eyebrows meeting together for a heartbeat. He then clapped his hands together happily.

“Would you be willing to learn a spell?” Shaela nodded, brightening the mood of Chin further, if that was possible.

“Light! Handy to have if you be Human with darkened eyes.” He looked down at Shaela, who nodded in agreement. Chin pronounced the spell slowly, and then more quickly, taking care to pronounce it plainly. “Thur.” He then gestured at Shaela.

“You try. This spell be easy to cast upon the tip of your staff.” She touched the tip of her staff, repeating the word.

“Thur”. Nothing happened. Looking rather perplexed, Shaela tried again.

Again, nothing happened.

“What am I doing wrong Chin?” Chin shrugged and lowered his head at her teasingly.

“Nothing, other than I need to empower you with the gift of Light. Then, call upon it you can indeed, when you are in need. That is why I'm here, really.” Chin laughed playfully at her and raised his hands up high into the air, closing his eyes. He mumbled about something he ate for breakfast, then let his arms fall and smiled.

“There, now try again.” She smirked at him, once again touching her forefinger to the end of her staff.

“Thur.” An immediate illumination radiated from the staff in a blinding array of rainbow colors, filling the entire area with abrupt radiance.

“Woa!” stated Chin. “Too many colors, you were seeing as the spell you did cast!” Shaela laughed aloud in triumph.

“I was thinking of a beautiful rainbow Chin, and it worked!” Chin danced around her once, flew up, spinning a graceful circle in the air, then bowed in mid air.

“Well done Human . . . very nice.” Shaela laughed, holding up both her arms high, staff in hand. She could feel the magic flowing through her and the staff. She did not wish it to end, ever! She felt light, like she was not standing upon the ground. Then there was sudden darkness as Chin clapped his hands twice.

“Enough be this play, Human. Waste not your strength on the twilights in your mind and heart no more than you need pretty lady.” He flew down to once again stand upon the flowing water, a light beginning to illuminate from him. She pulled her long hair back and shook her head, seeing half wilted plants all about the area, as if they had been through a minor drought. There, she did it again. All about the area were half dead organics. Chin bit his lip and looked at her staff as she looked to see Hiska beginning to stir. He frowned slightly and shook his head, but then composed himself as Shaela turned to him.

“I'm sorry Chin. I'm sorry.” Chin shrugged, faking a bright smile very well,

and lied.

“Happens it does to the best of us. Well, your friend be stirring, and I must be going. Fare thee well friend Shaela. I hope our paths will meet again one day. Until then,” he burst out in a song, making Shaela laugh and wave him away.

Cat purrs strangely with human heart,  
She purrs more than the cat.  
Kitty be a new man if she impart,  
Her great great grandfather's hat!

As the last words of his song faded away, She turned to Hiska, who was now shaking his head groggily. Meeting her eyes, he stretched, tail twitching. Shaela's eyes followed every movement he made. At the end of his stretch, he looked at her.

“Did Shaela speak?” Shaela looked at Hiska and shook her head, throwing him a smile.

Hiska narrowed his eyes, looking at her intently as he saw the dead foliage all about them and froze.

“Shaela?” Hiska stated, a heavy feeling of wariness in his voice. Biting her lip, Shaela lowered her eyes as he came to her. “We need to move out of this area”, he stated looking about them as if he distrusted their safety. She agreed, and began to walk downstream, using her staff to balance her on some wet moss.

The morning air was still, too still. It always was, but today she sensed Hiska’s growing caution and his riveted attention fell to every detail in the area. She knew his rigid posture too well to know, suddenly, they were not alone, and the abrupt realization of this sent icy claws cascading up her back and neck.

She found her knuckles becoming white as they tightened about her staff, which began to warm uncomfortably in her grasp. A low rumble escaped Hiska's throat, sending chills into her face, and washing down her entire body like the water falls she would bathe within. Something was out there, though she could not see it.

Their progress slowly came to a halt until both stood silently, still as stone, watching, waiting. Shaela did not have to see them to know the Prima were near. Her old wounds began to hurt, causing her to flinch as she recalled the memory of their previous attack. At first she felt dread, reliving the scene in an instant. Her face flushed pale as she remembered their vice-like jaws and sharp talons. Her blood ran cold as her face flushed hot. She did not feel Hiska place a warning hand up under hers, nor' did she perceive the stream bubbling and merrily churning at her feet. She remembered the penetrating pain that had sent her fleeing into darkness over two years ago.

Her mind reeled in shock and fear as she recalled the memory of yellow eyes reflecting from still waters before her. She looked up at Hiska as his eyes darted to hers. He was visibly worried for her. Her look of fear must have been carved as if in stone, for Hiska's face was that of worry and uttermost concern.

His right hand snaked up past his left shoulder securing in hand the long and slightly curved handle for the new blade he now carried on his back. It had been a gift from his father. While Shaela had been schooled at the hand of the Mystic, his father had trained him in the art of sword play, among other abilities. Within, Hiska was pessimistic of the blade he now carried. He had fared perfectly well in cutting down threats by tooth and talon. He would prove the blade's worth now, once. If it proved a better weapon than he, it would do. If not, he would wear it as a symbol of his undying faith for his Ward.

Shaela saw his hand slowly creep to the hilt of his blade, fear gripping her heart as a pair of Prima Catur entered into view, searching the earth before them. As one sniffed the ground, the other hissed dreadfully as it become aware of them. The other shot up, ears laid back, the hackles on its neck rising frightfully. Hiska drew his blade and placed himself between Shaela and the enemy. He had never taken the role of protector in this manner, and it was foreign to him. He did not like it. He would rather attack . . . but that would leave his Ward exposed, vulnerable, and that could prove a fatal mistake. And so, he waited.

Then came the memory of her suffering, the fever and pain. The thought of it happening again caused an instant, growing, despair into her thoughts. It was not right what these assassin predators did. It was wrong . . . wrong! As she caught hold of the injustice of what these monsters did, her eyes began to dim. She glanced at Hiska. He was so beautiful. The thought weighed down heavily upon her at the heartache she would suffer should she lose him. At that realization, she gasped as something twisted within her mind, igniting her darkest emotions. She felt the pain in all the hardships she would face, all the loneliness which would fill her life in her every waking moment again, should Hiska fall at the hands of the Prima.

As she desperately clutched the white leaf-etched, Dremmin-wood, staff, she felt the power of life all about her, hidden and waiting in every living organic. She felt an energy about her, tempting her, inviting Shaela to freely take; to wreak

havoc among these vile creatures. Gritting her teeth, she reached out to everything about her, bending their will to her desire. Even the trees about her seemed to lend her strength and bow, as if praying to her, giving themselves to whatever fate she would bestow upon them.

As they bent their will upon her, she growled out a challenge at their approaching enemy, her dark eyes glittered as hate began to steadily fill her entire being. It was at that point when four more Prima entered the area, adding to their numbers.

Even as light as their paws were upon the ground, she could feel their footsteps coming up from behind, as if they were insects, creeping upon the skin of her back. At their approach, she looked inward, and felt a sudden rush of intense energy flooding her entire being. As her Forever Guardian reached out, as if to thwart her intentions, he froze, then pulled back, suddenly afraid.

A storm thundered in her head and she screamed, raising her white staff high. Instantly, Hiska backed away as thunder split the air about her. As the noise of the storm erupted, Shaela closed her eyes, envisioning a large and beautiful tree, bearing varieties of bees and insects, which groomed and combed over the mass of flowers adorning it. Whether she was actually there, or not, she beheld the tree, set upon a mountain of knee-deep, thick-bladed grasses, adorned with the most striking flowers. As she watched on, a sudden burst of wind struck its branches, causing it to sway dangerously, all insect life stripped from it, and carried away in a chaotic struggling cloud. Off in the distance, beyond the tree arose a mountain of green, upon which she beheld a shadow of deep night that overpowered the everlasting rays of the sun as it glided over the peaks, shrouding them in darkness.

Pain, terrible pain, ignited within her fingers and hands, compelling her to look down at the white staff she held. Slowly, Shaela's eyes widened as she witnessed blood dripping from between her fingers. In horror she stared at her own blood raining down upon the jungle floor before her, staining it crimson.

"Shaela, run!" she distinctly heard the cry of her father.

"Father!" She screamed. "Father!"

A terrible trembling ripped through her entire body as she came too, the scent of charred gore instantly penetrating her senses as she struggled to see. As her vision began to clear, the first thing she beheld was Hiska's blade upon the ground beside her and, beyond it, Hiska backed up against a large tree, wide-eyed and off balance, his entire demeanor showing of fear. Slowly lowering her staff, she shook her head, straining for control. Steadily, as her eyesight cleared, the scene of a withered jungle about her, strewn with the torn and blackened bodies of the Prima, came to light.

“Hiska?” She weakly stated as her knees buckled. Shaela fell to the ground, struggling in vain to keep herself from falling onto her back as her staff fell beside her. All became silent then; she no longer heard the ever-familiar gurgling of the stream close by. The once green of the jungle was now withered and blackened as far as she could see. The sight of it pierced her with the sudden feeling of guilt. What had she done . . . how? Tears welled up in her eyes and slid down either side of her head as she sobbed out for Hiska.

Shaela's mind reeled with emotions, some pricking her most tender memories, some kindling an eternal anger and hatred for the Prima. She yearned for more power, and was instantly repulsed by such a thought. A large, warm hand brushed hair out of her face as she heard his voice, as if from far away, calming her, soothing her fears.

“Shaela, be still. You are safe. Rest Shaela, and Hiska will watch over you. Rest.” Opening her eyes, she saw Hiska tending her with every care. She knew it was over, yet even though they were safe, there remained within her heart and mind two emotions . . . guilt and an insatiable craving for more. The two feelings battled within her, one beckoning, the other seductively tempting her, inviting her. It was guilt that brought on the familiar thoughts of compassion and love within. It was the lust for power that contended with all these feelings, seeping into her mind, promising her more power than she could imagine, assuring her no more pain from those who would dare make her fear . . . if she would simply give in. She envisioned the ogres; they who caused all this. She saw them sitting about a

large fire pulling large portions of meat from her father as he roasted upon a spit . .

. . . Shaela shot up from the ground where she lay and began screaming until she no longer had the strength to continue. She fell to her knees clawing at the withered moss and sobbed until, once again, she only found darkness . . .

The scent of freshly cooked fish brought her out of a dreamless sleep. Shaela sat up, still exhausted and weary. At first she had forgotten everything that had happened. The thought occurred that she should to go inquire of Mother what the topic of study would be for the next phase of her training. Confusion set in for a few moments as she stared at the lush jungle about her. Then, slowly, she recalled everything.

She looked over at Hiska, seeing him roasting a fish upon a stick. Standing, she staggered and caught the stalk of a nearby plant as Hiska jumped to her side, steadying her. Leading her to the fire in silence, Hiska aided Shaela to sit on a large rock he had retrieved and placed near the fire. He then handed her a freshly cooked fish. In silence, both ate. After eating, Hiska brought her water to drink, then sat with her, listening to the night sounds of the jungle all about them.

After a time, Shaela missed her staff. Panicked, she stood, looking this way and that, a sudden desperation to have it rising within her. Knowing what she sought, Hiska got up, walked away, retrieved the Dremmin-Wood Staff, and returned to her, instantly relieving her of panic. Throwing him a smile of gratitude, Shaela took it.

Hiska stared at her, a look of concern in his emerald-green eyes. She opened her mouth to say something, then abandoned herself to silence. Reaching out, Hiska gently brushed the hair out of her face.

“Shaela, there are no words to say. Just know Hiska is with you. Hiska will help Shaela in all ways. Hiska is at peace with this.” She smiled and leaned her head onto his arm, gratitude filling her heart for this monster who had captured her so long ago.

Hiska had born her out of the area where they encountered the Prima, and it helped. She only nodded as her hand slipped up over his strong arm. Not breaking the silence, she simply mouthed the words, “I love you.”

Shaela eyed Hiska as he slept, noticing how he always crouched when resting. Never had she seen him lay down upon the ground. His breathing was even and silent, as if he were merely relaxing for a moment. Her eyes strayed to the hilt of the blade he wore on his back, the long, slightly curved handle rising above his right shoulder. She pondered the runes upon the blade; what they represented. She had seen a glimpse of them as it lay on the ground when the Prima had attacked; strange glyphs and markings. She wondered what power was spellbound into each rune; she would find out in the future. She could ask; maybe she would.

She noticed her name repeated along the entire border of the robes he now wore. Her eyes followed the lapel as far as it was visible, and then along the neckline and sleeves. She was flattered, seeing her name repeated over and over, appearing as though silver threads had been sewn directly into the thicker edges. Nearing, she curiously eyed the garment, noticing no seams. It appeared as though Guardian Robes were tailored as one solid, hand-stitched, ink-black garment. She whistled quietly, admiring their construction; noticing the many pleats and folds. She suspected they were constructed in this fashion for the storing of many small items. She knew little of their nature, but one thing: The feeling of stability that entered her mind when Mother's Guardian had pulled her close and wrapped her in his robes. Now, Hiska wore the same robes, and her name was upon every border, signifying he was her Forever Guardian.

Her mind strayed back to the time when she had first met Hiska. A shudder ran through her mind at the thought. When Hiska had released her from her bonds, had she fled, he would have hunted her down. He would have ridded his world of another enemy. She understood now, more than before. It was ironic that she did not miss civilization. She did not miss any part of it but her parents, who were probably dead. Her heart ached for her mother, who taught her everything under the heavens. In fact, her mother never ceased to teach her. She was, indeed the best friend she ever had.

Shaela's eyes clouded over as she felt the pain of loss biting and gnawing at her mind and heart once again. Her mind drifted from her mother to her father, who was a noble man. He had sacrificed himself to save her. Oh, had she known then what she knew now! In the midst of her growing sorrow, Shaela felt an enmity begin to blossom within her heart. Her eyes strayed to the Jungle's canopy as tears of regret slid freely down both sides of her face. Closing her eyes, she struggled inwardly with thoughts bordering violence. Why did events always happen in an order such as this? With the knowledge she had now, she could have defeated the Ogres . . . she was sure of it. The events and people who taught her this magic were after the catastrophe. Why after? Why? Gritting her teeth, she swallowed hard, attempting to force her emotions under control.

It was at this moment of inner turmoil, Shaela felt a strong sensation penetrate her being as if something had connected with her from the earth she knelt upon. At first it startled her greatly, as if a strange man had suddenly seized her. Silently Shaela waited, her sorrow abruptly fading away, replaced by sudden caution laced with fear. As she scanned the area, half expecting something to spring upon her from the shadows of the jungle, a voice entered her mind, though she could discern no words. In feelings it spoke more clearly to her than if she were speaking with Hiska face to face. She waited, focusing on relaxing her mind and letting go of any preconceived notions she might be harboring. She waited, listening . . . feeling. There it was again. She had felt this before . . . in The Grove. She instantly recognized it to be the Ancient Willow from The Grove during her first test.

“Shaela.” The feeling formed into a distinct word within her, and she answered, softly whispering in reply to its invasive, but gentle beckoning.

“I hear you.” Shaela did not see Hiska's eyes slightly open . . . his ears slowly prick and turn her way. She bent her mind upon the connection she felt, focusing her thoughts and will upon the communication between them. As she focused, its presence intensified.

“Shaela, come to me. I will reveal the darker mysteries to you . . . teach

you.” Shaela flinched at the invitation.

“I seek not evil.” she thought. Instantly a reply came to her which shook her mind and challenged her beliefs.

“All that is dark is not evil, and all they who dwell in light are not good. Be not biased; learn and choose for yourself. Come, I will teach you – not sway your mind.” There was a inward silence for a few moments. Then it spoke to her one last time.

“Come to me . . . come . . .”

Opening her eyes, Shaela trembled within, as an excitement welled up within her heart and mind. She sighed heavily, causing Hiska's eyes to open fully. He stood, turning on her, offering his left forearm which she rested her hand upon. Hiska remained silent and still . . . watchful. She looked up at him as he peered out into the density of the jungle, his eyes prying into every shadow about them. Shaela finally broke the silence.

“Milord, we should change our course and strike deep into the jungle. I feel I shall never find peace if I do not.” Hiska turned to her and helped her to stand.

“Shaela, Hiska wonders at your whisperings. The more Hiska knows, the better Shaela can be helped.” At the moment he inquired, she felt the sensation of that dark call once again. She faltered, hesitated, leaning heavily upon his arm. The white staff in her hand felt suddenly warm. Warmer and warmer it became, until she supposed, if she held it any longer, it would burn her hand. With a gasp she let it go, dropping it to the earth. As it fell from her hand, the feeling also left her. Hiska took hold of Shaela, supporting her balance as a breeze stirred about the jungle; an unnatural breeze. Upon the wind, she smelled a pleasant odor, and she smiled without realizing it. She felt as though she were suddenly far away and nothing mattered. She did not see or feel her Guardian place the staff back into her hand. She was too caught up in an incredible feeling which entirely filled her mind and body.

“Shaela, what is it?” She shook her head, whispering, “It calls to me Hiska,

it calls.”

Hiska swiftly took her up and bolted, striking deep into the jungle. At one point, a series of foliage ripped the staff from her hand. Hiska retrieved it then began to race through the jungle once again. His senses told him to leave this part of the jungle, and he did not hesitate. Something was effecting Shaela; he had to get her out of the area. For a long while he fled, bearing her in no certain direction . . . just away.

As the shadows deepened to dark night, Shaela opened her eyes to see Hiska kneeling before her, a small fire burning. The smell of fish came to her senses, provoking the memory of when he had captured and tied her to a tree. She watched him cook a large fish on a stick. After a time, he removed the stick and carefully separated it into two even pieces, removing the bones. When he was satisfied, he crept over to her and offered her the meal. She looked at it hungrily and took one of the halves. They ate for some time in silence, keeping alert for danger. After the meal, Hiska groomed her hair, as he always had, as is the custom of the Harritt Catur. After, she scratched the base of his neck and ears, enjoying the moment of relaxation.

“How long did I sleep Hiska?” Hiska blinked slowly.

“Shaela slept for quite some time into the night. Shaela needed the rest.” Hiska's green slanted eyes gleamed in the reflection of the campfire. Each time Hiska shut his eyes, he seemed to disappear, only to reappear once again as his eyes opened.

Shaela knew she needed to council with her Guardian about what she was doing; where she was being drawn to. She trusted him completely, but did not know how to begin. After eating, Shaela moved over into his ever welcome embrace and remained silent for a time. A gentle breeze stirred the flames of the fire, drawing her eye.

“Hiska, when I was in The Grove, during my initiation test, I met all the great ones of the jungle . . . even the Natur's not of this jungle, as well as those not native to this region.” Shaela looked up at Hiska, who was peering down at her,

his eyes reflecting green in the fire's light. He nodded slightly, but remained silent. She did not know how to explain what she wanted to tell him, and so became silent as well.

“Hiska will go anywhere Shaela goes . . . unless Shaela forbids him.” She got up and hugged Hiska tightly about the neck, feeling a great sense of relief. As she felt Hiska wrap his strong arms about her she relaxed, feeling the warmth of his embrace.

“Hiska, I seek the Ancient Willow Tree from The Grove.” Hiska rested his chin gently upon the crown of her head, hiding the visible change in his countenance . . . fear.

Shaela awoke before the full light of day to the very loud caw of a brightly multi-colored bird apparently trying to work its voice into the center of her head. She opened one eye and looked at it, squinting.

“Okay, okay, I'm up, I'm up.” She chuckled as the bird bobbed up and down her way, leaning forward from the branch so far, it seemed to her it should fall. It was mostly red, with a long flat tail, but had many other colors which complimented it. She smiled brightly at it and arose. No sooner had she gotten to her feet than it leapt from the branch, landed on her shoulder and turned around to peer into her eye. She chuckled and reached up a hand, softly scratching its chest.

“Well, good morning to you too. I trust you had a refreshing sleep?” To Shaela's amusement, the bird bobbed its head as if in answer to her question. She laughed as Hiska appeared out of the trees from some secret errand of his own, startling her new friend, which instantly bolted into the higher limbs of a tree where it began cawing loudly at Hiska. Shaela watched Hiska approach. The glance Hiska gave the bird simply suggested throttling it. Shaela looked up, placing a finger to her lips.

“Shhh.” To her amazement the bird quieted instantly, but continued to eye Hiska, keeping an eye cocked towards him. Hiska stopped and looked at Shaela, and then up at the bird, sniffing.

“Now Shaela speaks with the birds. Hiska was curious when she would.” Shaela smiled at Hiska's remark. She had been able to understand the chatter of the birds more and more after leaving Mother, but she had never tried to speak back to them. This gave her an idea. Stepping close to the tree, where the bird was perched, she peered up at it, noticing its shorter wings and long tail, which was marked with a bright yellow spot in the shape of an eye.

“Do you understand me?” Instantly it bobbed its head. Shaela's excitement began to soar, as if she were flying miraculously for the first time.

“Tell me, friend, are the Prima Catur near?” Hiska ears suddenly flicked up as she spoke to the bird, instantly interested in the odd communion. The bird

launched from the branch and made its way gracefully through the myriad of jungle branches, vanishing. Shaela shrugged, glancing over at Hiska.

“It was worth a try.” Hiska squinted at Shaela, saying nothing. Shaela squinted back at him, feeling comforted by his presence as usual. She did not ask where he had been; probably hunting. She did not want to know the details.

Picking up her staff, she felt that warmth through it again, reminding her of her design: She would seek out the Ancient Willow. Why she had set her mind to this course, she did not know; only that its beckoning enthralled her . . . captivated her heart and mind. Mingled with her longing to be in its presence, she also felt a dread. But that feeling was so overshadowed by the pleasing lure and call, she dismissed the warning in her heart, burying all doubts which crept into her mind as she faintly smiled at her Guardian. After finding the Ancient Willow, she would come back and continue towards the spot where Hiska and she had met for the first time.

They made their way into the jungle, Shaela being led by a feeling that grew stronger as the day wore on. As they traveled, the brightly colored bird she had met suddenly reappeared on a low-hanging branch and began to chatter quietly at Shaela. Shaela smiled brightly at it, her dark eyes twinkling with pleasure. Reaching up, she began scratching its neck, to which it heavily leaned into her hand. After a few moments it gently bit her fingers and fluttered away. Shaela turned to Hiska, who watched on emotionlessly, and pointed.

“The Prima are south of us, but quite some distance away.” Hiska looked into the jungle southward and slightly bared his teeth.

“The bird told you this.” It was a statement, not a question, and so Shaela only nodded, her eyebrows raising as she contemplated the meaning of what had just happened.

“I can hear and understand their chatter in the morning. This grand jungle is not so lonely as we would think.” Hiska turned and affectionately nuzzled her, making Shaela squirm as his whiskers tickled her neck.

For three days, they made their way deep into a part of the jungle Shaela had never set foot. Strange, dark mosses began to appear, hanging heavily from the trees all about them, giving a sinister and foreboding feel to the forest.

On the fourth day of travel, Shaela was suddenly shocked to notice a total lack of birds and insect sounds. The normal life of the jungle seemed to have been left far behind them, which was quite unnerving. Hiska had silently drawn his blade and was intently watchful, hackles half raised. Shaela felt they were being watched. At one point in their travel, Hiska bent toward Shaela, whispering as if he feared being overheard.

“The wind is old in this place. It chokes upon itself.” Shaela nodded, a sudden, uncomfortable chill cascading down either side of her neck and shoulders, as if tiny spiders were creeping upon her skin. Hiska cursed softly and froze in place, stopping Shaela in her tracks. She looked around, but saw nothing. In a barely audible whisper she asked, “What is it?” Hiska was startled by her sudden inquery and turned a full circle quickly, smoothness in his motion.

“Hiska senses movement all around us.” Shaela suddenly felt the staff in her hand become warm again. She began to feel dizzy, and the jungle began to spin as if she were standing motionless, as if it were chaotically dancing about her, spinning about like some evil and twisted carousel. She faintly heard the hissing of Hiska's blade through the air as darkness blanketed the jungle about them.

Closing her eyes, Shaela screamed, though it seemed to be far away, and not her voice. She screamed again, and it was the sound of her father.

“Shaela, run, don't look back . . . run!” Everything stopped abruptly as she opened her eyes wide in astonishment . . . and found herself all alone.

“Father?” she whispered through quivering lips. “Father?” The only answer was a movement of the jungle before her as the foliage and trees uprooted themselves, parting quickly to make way for the Ancient Willow Tree as it rumbled through the jungle, approaching her. She was too stricken with shock and grief to flee. She stood there unable to gather her senses . . . until the Ancient Willow loomed up before her, its branches draping around her in a veil of nature.

Her staff was hot in her hand . . . nearly unbearable. Before she could clear her mind of her father's voice, it spoke, a deafening whisper that pierced her heart and mind.

“I am here. What is the purpose in your coming? I sense much doubt and fear in you, young one.” Shaela staggered; the ground seemed uneven. The air seemed to close in on her, and stick in her throat, causing her to cough as she fell to her knees. Gasping a few times, Shaela tried to gain her composure; latch on to something within to steady the torrent of chaos in her mind. Ever so slowly, she won her senses over and forced herself to take even, slow breaths. The revolutions of the world relaxed and finally stood still.

She stood, panic replaced with alarm. Again it repeated its inquire . . . in the voice of her father, which shocked her greatly. A wave of hopeless sorrow filled her, like the powerful waves of a storm-tossed sea striking the land, eating it away. Shaela despaired as her final hope of ever seeing her parents again was crushed and dashed to pieces. She looked up into the massive bows of the willow and silently wept. After a short time, Shaela whispered.

“What have you to offer other than the hopelessness you inflict upon me now?”

“I lay bear your pain, shattering your hope-filled delusions. Shaela, now is the time to learn. There are many paths to take, but only one you can choose. I am one path, the Mystic is another. There are more, but the two main paths are before you now. Do not follow one way or another in ignorance. Learn all, then choose. Leave your former life in the cold earth.” Shaela sobbed, her sorrow deepening to physical pain, pain so unbearable, she fell forward onto the now barren earth, and closed her eyes, darkness taking her.

When Shaela awoke, she found herself yet in the company of the Ancient Willow. She sat up slowly and gazed into the bows of the massive tree . . . a life form which she knew not to be native to this jungle. It stirred as she slowly arose. Her thoughts focused upon her father and mother. It was useless. They were dead. Why should she go back to the beginning? She should just let go, let go of

it all.

It was at this point that Shaela's thoughts took a turn into the dark alleys of her mind. The ogres caused this misery. They were not merely animals . . . they calculated the attack on her family. It had been planned; this is what monsters did. They were atrocities, monsters . . . monsters! She felt a seething hatred well up suddenly within her as tears of hate flowed. She reached up and laid a hand upon the trunk of the willow.

“Teach me.” She forced the words through clenched teeth. “Teach me please.” The willow shifted in silence and brought one of its roots up out of the ground and touched Shaela's forehead.

“I sense vengeance within your heart . . . apprentice. I give you the power of root to command.” Shaela felt the root touch her. Dirt fell into her face as a feeling cascaded into her mind, her body, her soul. She felt the ground beneath her feet, and her balance became more sure. She could suddenly sense the weaving of all roots in the earth beneath her through a widespread area of the jungle, but it did not last. The area in which she felt them diminished, withdrew, until she could only feel them, but a few paces out from where she conversed with the Ancient Willow Tree. Then, steadily, it faded away altogether.

“Shaela, you must cast a spell to command root. The words you shall speak will be, 'Agrin Mortala', which is to say 'Root obey'. Only the smallest sensation you felt will be yours to command. What you initially felt was what I feel at all times . . . yet what you may one day command. Your power will grow . . . patience my apprentice, patience. You will avenge your family in time . . . in time . . . in time . . .” As it spoke these last words, she felt a heavy slumber take her into darkness, the word 'time' echoing, and fading away slowly.

When she came to, Hiska was holding her, Shaela in one arm, blade drawn in the other. He did not see her eyes open slowly, nor the fresh stream of tears begin to cascade her face. She was touched by his devotion, his unwavering concern for her. A deep admiration and respect solidifying in her heart as she secretly watched Hiska scan the jungle about them, his hackles standing on end. Slowly she reached up a trembling hand and touched his face, to which he leaned into as he continued keeping his vigilant watch.

“Hiska senses movement Shaela . . . three.” Shaela quickly stood and took up her staff. It was then that she understood one of its powers. When it was warm, a challenge was near, or danger was near. When it was cool, she was further from danger. She did not know exactly if this was true, but it seemed logical to her. She was grateful to Mother for the staff. Her being Human, and no native to this new home of hers, seemed to justify such a gift. Shaela would pay more attention to it from now on.

She suddenly remembered the Ancient Willow . . . the spell she had learned. She smiled, pleased to have power added upon her. Hiska noticed the smile.

“What is it Shaela?” She snapped at him playfully, suddenly not caring if twenty of the Prima were about to attack.

“Nothing . . . only that I love you with all my heart and soul, that's all.” Hiska blinked at her, confused. Turning his attention back into the trees about them, he growled softly.

“Something watches us.” She nodded, as if she already knew.

“I know, you told me. I dare say we are surrounded by friends, not enemies this time Milord. Hiska relaxed fully and sheathed his blade in one smooth motion. He turned to her.

“Hiska trusts Shaela, and loves her with all his heart also.” Shaela's heart leapt as he spoke.

Just then three figures revealed themselves from the thickness of the jungle, one holding up his right hand as he moved toward them. He was half horse, half

man. Shaela knew what these creatures were as they appeared. She had read about them and their culture in one of the books she had gotten during her training. They were Centaur; very rare.

“Greetings Druidess. Greetings noble Guardian. I know you both and am honored to parlay with you. May we approach?” Hiska looked to Shaela, knowing her decision was needed. Looking up, Shaela noticed he was waiting for her.

“Your presence is welcome, friends,” Shaela happily stated. The three Centaur bowed and moved in until they stood towering over the both of them.

“Thank you, milady of the woods, I am Kron, and this is my daughter Tamur, and my son Jurin.” Shaela curtsied as Hiska bowed formally to their visitors.

“I am Shaela, and this is Hiska, my Guardian.” All three Centaur pulled a leg back underneath them, placed the inside of their right forearm across their abdomens and lowered their heads. Kron held out his hands to each of his children.

“Shaela, do you know why we have sought you out?” She shook her head, looking up into Kron's eyes, childlike wonder filling her countenance.

“I beheld the sign of a newborn Druid within the jungle not two moons into the past. I knew it was time to teach yet another Druid the way of The Path. I need to first inform you of this: The Kazar you were introduced to, the night the heavens rained fire, have traveled abroad to tell their own who you are . . . that you are confederate.” The centaur's demeanor changed suddenly and it shifted toward Hiska.

“Trials await you both. There is a presence which follows you. Keep sharp Hiska, and faint not in your duty.” The centaur turned to Shaela and continued.

“Shaela, the Kazar of the animal kingdom have given you their blessing . . . you can make many bonds now. You are a heart and soul emanating compassion, and with this great gift, I teach you the spell to comfort the heart of an animal, adding the warning to never betray the bond you make with any creature you rest this spell upon, for enmity will burn like the instinct to survive within its soul should

you break trust. By way of this spell, there is one animal which shall come to you and never leave your side, except one of you should perish. You both shall be familiar in both mind and heart, one with the other. Study always the aspect of this animal friendship and you will eventually discover secrets within its power that will aid you in completing a full measure of your existence.”

Kron neared Shaela, his stern eyes focusing upon her. She trembled at the thought of another power bestowed upon her. The magnificent Centaur came within arms reach, and as he approached her, Shaela noticed the armor he wore. From his neck to his abdomen, he was clad in what appeared to be green leaves of steel, set underneath with a fine chain mesh which made no sound as he moved. Below Kron's abdomen he was a thick-boned stallion. At the point where Kron's body formed into a horse, set a green belt of leather, upon which were fastened two swords in their scabbards. Upon his back lay a short bow and quiver filled with arrows. She looked back up at him as he stopped before her, noticing his sky-blue eyes.

Kron raised a gentle hand to the side of her head, placing two of his fingers upon her temple. As he did this, Shaela thought of words she had never heard spoken. She knew them then, and the memory of them never grew dim from that time forward.

“Ashin nur,” Kron whispered.

A feeling, not unlike those before, entered her being. The centaur smiled down upon her, moved back and bowed formally to Shaela, and then to Hiska. Hiska bowed in return, and Shaela smiled brightly at Kron. Turning one last time to her, he threw her a slight smile, pride filling his countenance.

“My lady, it is my personal pleasure to have made your acquaintance.” Jurin and Tamur bowed formally, yet remained silent. He smiled at Shaela one last time before turning and vanishing into the deep of the jungle, followed by his son and daughter. As they left them, Tamur looked back at Shaela and raised a hand timidly, waving to her, her long black hair trailing like the finest spider silk at her departure. Shaela's heart was suddenly heavy at her parting, she knew not

why. Shaela waved back shyly and beamed a smile her way, watching her vanish into the trees after her brother and father.

Not long after, that familiar beckoning reach out to her. She silently turned to Hiska, noticing he was watching her. Their eyes met and for a long while neither moved. A rare wind moved through the area as distant thunder softly rolled across the veiled skies above to the west. Walking to him, Shaela simply wrapped her arms about his neck and embraced Hiska tightly, nuzzling him affectionately. A soft thrumming filled the air about them as Hiska wrapped his arms about her and began grooming her hair, causing Shaela to snicker as his whiskers tickled her neck. She began working the back of his neck and ears briskly with her fingernails. Shaela did not notice Hiska's eyes prying into every shadow and possible hiding place behind her . . . ready to defend that which he had never loved more.

Shaela lead, entering into a part of the jungle she suspected Hiska had never stepped foot within. She could sense his discomfort and uneasiness and it made her anxious. She felt the unmistakable beckoning in a distinct course toward some destination within a part of this land, and suspected it to be her new mentor guiding her.

Following the path set before her, it became ever increasingly difficult to traverse the floor of the jungle as the morning and storm wore on. The jungle became a path of thick, tangled vines and undergrowth, slowing Shaela to an almost standstill. Hiska had to take the lead, drawing a short blade concealed within his robes, and began clearing a path.

Thunder rolled in closer as the storm front moved their way. A breeze began to gently stir the jungle about them. The first assault of the storm lit up the jungle about them as thunder softly growled in the distance. The wind began to pick up and the rains began to fall. Soon the wet invaded the floor of the jungle in streams and pools, fed by the increasing drips from above. The trees began to sway from the winds which struck the area, causing a chorus of creaks and moans to fill the air.

Hiska cut his way carefully through the barriers which presented themselves, as darkness slowly overtook them. Shaela called to Hiska, stopping him long enough for her to position the head of the staff in front of her. Wiping water from her face, she touched the tip of the staff.

“Thur,” she whispered, thinking of the intensity of a torch, being careful not to let her thoughts stray while casting the spell. A red light flickered from the staff, giving just enough light for the both of them. She nodded to Hiska and motioned him to continue.

As the storm pressed down upon the jungle, Shaela pulled the hood of her robes up, obscuring most of her vision, though she could see what was necessary for the moment. She watched Hiska, ears laid flat, as he carefully slashed a path before her.

At about mid-afternoon, the mancat stopped and turned to Shaela to observe her situation. She hesitated, wiping water from her face and eyes, as if it did any good.

“My lady, Hiska sees a cave here!” he shouted after waiting for an immense rolling of thunder to pass. She bit her lip and nodded as the area lit up brightly, accompanied by an immense thunder crack which nearly shook her to the ground. She reached for him, catching a supportive hand, quickly balancing herself. Hiska sheathed his blade and quickly wrapped a strong arm her and pointed. Lightning flashed dangerously close three times, thunder threatening to deafen them both. Staring into the open mouth of a cave, she hesitated. Fearing the lightning more than what might lie within, she nodded and motioned toward the cave.

“We better go in!” She yelled, just before another crack of thunder shook the jungle about them. “You have a metal sword on your back, Hiska. Go!” Hiska helped Shaela into the opening, which consisted of one very large boulder and a bank of muddy earth. Within moments they were out of the relentless downpour and out of the danger of the storm.

As they entered a fair-sized chamber, Shaela let the spell fade, fearing they might not be the only ones sharing this underground. Breathing a sigh of relief, she let go of Hiska's hand and parted from him, kneeling down upon the floor of the cave to rest near the entrance. Hiska crouched down two steps into the cave, peering into its depths. Lightning flashed outside, answered by cracks of thunder which shook the cave and the very air about them. Time and time again, lightning flashed and thunder answered instantly in return, as if both contended with each other.

Time wore on and the storm only became more intense. All the time she had spent in the jungle, Shaela had never been through such a storm. She began to fear, catching hold of the thought that it was sent to punish her for allowing the Willow to teach her. “That is ridiculous,” she thought, and banished such a notion.

Her mind turned toward the cave's tunnel, which led into the unknown. She

trembled, not only from the cold, but at the thought of the possibilities of this cave being inhabited by some monster. Each time the mouth of the cave lit up, she caught a glimpse of the tunnel leading away into obscurity. She knew caves were a rarity in the jungle, and seldom uninhabited. Any creature which found one instinctively made it a place of refuge from the outside world.

Lightning flashed once, revealing a very drenched Hiska, ears flattened back against his neck. He looked truly miserable and defeated, except for the gleam of defiance in his green eyes, which blazed like two gems each time the light entered the mouth of the cave. Shaela stood, carefully walked over to Hiska and placed a hand upon his arm.

“Hiska, can you see in this pitch darkness?” Hiska nodded.

“Yes, but when the fire from the sky flashes, Hiska is blinded for a moment.” It was amazing how opposite their eyesight was. While she could only see when lightning flashed, he was blinded. It was his eyes; the eyes of a feline.

Slowly, the two carefully made their way to the back of the chamber where set tunnel opening. She could hear him sniff, testing the scent of the tunnel as she held tight his arm, Hiska warily leading her into the tunnel, spying out the area ahead for any sign of danger.

The storm raged on outside, becoming more and more faint as they proceeded inward. Two bends and a sharp turn, and then the cave began to gradually descend. A small stream formed at the center of the floor and flowed steadily ahead in a deep rut, eroded from the runoff of many years.

As they carefully made their way, other streams of water joined with it to create a small creek of dark foamy water. Soon the rush of the stream widened, as did the tunnel. Shaela became curious, wondering where it led to. It was another three bends into the cave when they both saw a faint illumination on the tunnel wall not far in front of them. It wasn't much light, but Shaela found she could see now. Hiska stopped and looked at Shaela, who returned his glance with a shrug. Hiska's hackles rose slightly as he silently padded forward, Shaela following two paces behind.

As they both rounded the bend, the light ahead became steadily brighter. Hiska crouched, slowly unsheathed his Guardian Blade, then continued forwards in silence around a bend in the tunnel as the light grew steadily brighter and brighter. As she tailed behind, Hiska appeared to be no more than a shadow, barely visible in the dim light.

A sudden feeling began to take hold of Shaela as she found herself staring at flames dancing chaotically upon the wall of the cave's tunnel. Beyond the bend, she heard the loud and steady crackling of a fire. Hiska moved to the inside corner, swiftly waving her behind him. She moved slowly up behind the mancat, her pulse quickening, not daring to move too quickly for fear of slipping on the uneven floor and giving away their presence. A fire meant they were not the only ones sharing this underground, and Shaela felt a dread creeping over her as she inched her way up behind Hiska.

Hiska sniffed the air and grimaced, crouching down further against the rock floor and spied around the corner, even as the illuminated wall next to him darkened as something passed by the fire within. Hiska was watching intently, his eyes almost completely shut, so as not to make his presence known. His emerald-green eyes could easily be spotted in this darkened tunnel.

Shaela heard deep grunts and talk she did not understand as she stood frozen behind her Guardian. A sudden feeling of uneasiness began to grow steadily within as her staff began to warm. Curiosity welled up within her, and she leaned over Hiska's back to peer around the corner, much to Hiska's annoyance. Her sudden weight forced him to place a hand on the ground to correct his balance.

Shaela peered into a large cavern with a bonfire burning brightly at the center of the chamber. There she saw three very large humanoids on small boulders about a large fire. On a large spit, being turned by one of the humanoids was impaled an animal, though she could not make out what it was. It was evident from the posture of the meal that it died as it was feeling the flames of the fire, for its head was thrown back, mouth wide agape in a now silent scream. The back

legs were stretched back with the now charred toes of its feet extended out wide. The two front legs were burnt to stillness as if trying to ward off the flames which constantly rose around it, burning it more than properly cooking it. Shaela could see its gaping mouth, revealing the lengthy teeth of a carnivore. The meal, she suddenly realized, was a predator . . . humanoid.

Her mind suddenly wandered back in time as she painfully recalled the wagon which carried her mother, father and one excited young lady towards a destination, planned in secret behind her back. The fond, now bitter, memory played out in her mind in the space of three breaths time . . .

. . . “Where are we going?” she heard her own voice, filled with excitement. Her parents only looked at each other, and then continued packing their trunks and loading the wagon. When her mother was outside at the wagon, Shaela's father had ruffled her hair gently as he walked by, grinning. “Happy birthday trip”, was all she got out of him, no matter how fervently she begged and manipulated.

The ride out of town was cheerful as the sun was warm – a young woman on a journey to who knew where. Oh, the adventure of it all! While they journeyed those first few days, she and her mother talked about a thousand things as her father drove the wagon.

It was two days into the jungle when suddenly all the birds around them abruptly took to the tops of the trees, screeching. They thought it odd and humorous, but thought nothing more about it . . . until two lumbering Ogres broke from the forest to either side of the wagon, even as a third lumbered out in front of the horse and grabbed its bridal . . .

Ogres! Shaela came to her senses, recoiling from the corner and pushed away from Hiska with a stifled gasp. Ogres! The flood of the memory washed over her, opening up painful wounds. She shrank away from the corner of the tunnel and turned, backing away from the area, feeling her heart tear painfully at her chest with every beat.

Hiska quickly retreated from the bend, caught up, gripped Shaela firmly by the hand and stopping her. Shooting him a fearful glance, she attempted to pull free and failed. She instantly threw herself into his arms, hugging him tight about the neck as she looked over at the dancing flames on the tunnel wall. Hiska watched them also, knowing full what she was thinking. Shaela had told him everything during the days they had spent together, and during the free time they shared as she was being trained by Mother.

“Hiska knows; Hiska understands. What would Shaela have Hiska do?” Without hesitation, Shaela looked up at him and growled as if in pain; as if she had just been wounded in the back by an arrow. Then a flood of anger welled up within her as tears began to streak down her face. To Hiska's astonishment, he beheld Shaela's eyes change to solid black. Shocked and concerned, he witnesses a new mood began to twist into her face, sending chills up his back and neck, causing his hackles to stand on end.

“Kill them,” she hissed vehemently. Instantly Hiska pulled away from Shaela, turned and stalked towards the bend, deadly intentions etched into his demeanor as he drew his blade. Behind him, Shaela ground her teeth loudly as she wrapped her arms about herself and sat down on a nearby rock.

“They are monsters, animals - slaughter them!” She hissed after him as he vanished around the corner. Within a moment, a cry split the air like thunder, followed by Hiska's piercing scream as a death match began in the chamber.

Shaela closed her eyes and began rocking back and forth, listening to the anger of the Ogres turn to screams of panic and fear. Her dark eyes glinted unnaturally in the dark as she ground her teeth, a grin of satisfaction etching across her beautiful face. She could almost feel the pain Hiska dealt out. She savored the terror of Hiska's victims as he took their lives one by one. The thought of what they were experiencing pleased and revolted her.

Shaela sprang up and bolted around the corner into the cavern, not caring, or even thinking, that she might lose her footing. She was just in time to see the last Ogre backing away from Hiska, desperately defending itself. Blood was oozing

freely from its side as Hiska struck out relentlessly.

“Stop!” She cried through clenched teeth. Hiska instantly backed away, leaving the Ogre gasping for air as it held its side, bellowing in pain and agony. As she approached, Hiska kept between the two of them, protecting her from any sudden, desperate, move it might make. But Shaela pushed past Hiska and neared it, undaunted by its size.

“Filth!” she shouted hatefully as she raised her arms up, staff in both hands. The panic stricken monster backed against the side of the cave, glancing at an opening to its right. It launched itself toward the tunnel's opening as Shaela shouted a spell.

“Agrin Mortala!” she screamed, and leapt dangerously close to the Ogre as it attempted to retreat. Through the cave's roof above, lengths of living roots broke forth from the earth and rock, snaking out like vipers on the attack. Rock and earth showered the Ogre as each root wrapped it, tearing through its clothing, skin and flesh. The Ogre's death was not quick, but as it screamed, Shaela watched on, her dark eyes glinting as the roots steadily wormed their way into its massive body. As its life begin to fade, she strode forward, gripped it by its filthy hair and lifted its head. As she looked into its eyes, she laughed darkly, satisfied to watch its pupils expand fully as it let out its last quivering breath. Then there was silence; it was over.

Hiska looked on, stunned by what he had just witnessed. Turning slowly, Shaela met his eye. She let go of the Ogre and took a step back, her eyes reflecting the flames of the fire in eyes which portrayed an open, seething hatred.

“Filthy Monsters,” she spit in unbridled hatred.

Hiska narrowed his eyes at Shaela, not understanding how she had developed such power. A pride welled up within his mind and heart for this helpless kitten, now a lethal feline. The prima would fear them now . . . all threats would become their quarry.

Shaela squinted at Hiska, almost desperately, causing her tears of malice and frustration to stream her face. But Hiska did not return her desperate sentiment. He simply approached her, his blade yet dripping the blood of his enemies, and stood before her. Shaela glanced at his blade, a tinge of insecurity beginning to grip her mind. Hiska glanced over at the root-slain Ogre, back down at her and softly hissed, a green fire kindling within his slanted eyes.

“Our enemies will fear us.” Shaela suddenly forced out a laugh. She had feared Hiska would take her display of power as a threat and be angry with her. After all, the Harritt Catur held a similar domineering demeanor, as any cat did; it was in their blood. To her relief, she saw approval burning fiercely in his eyes. She let out a quivering breath and lowered her eyes.

“I thought you would be angry with me.” Hiska reached under her chin, gently lifting her head, then nuzzled her affectionately. Shaela glided her face across his in return, wrapping her slender arms tightly about him.

As she embraced him, relieved, she heard a growl behind her. Hiska instantly wrapped her arms about Shaela and spun her around, exposing his back to this new threat, keeping his body between this new encounter and Shaela, if just for a moment. Hiska reversed his stance, quickly spinning to meet this new threat, blade ready as he snarled viciously. Shaela instantly ran in front of Hiska, placing a hand upon his, pushing his sword down. He did not resist her command, but readied himself to intercept if it suddenly attacked.

Turning, Shaela beheld a wolf, which had, no doubt, been lured to the chamber's entrance by the smell of the ogres dinner. When she looked into its eyes, it pricked its ears toward Shaela and instantly backed a pace, lowering its head and curling its right paw under it, so that it touched the top of its paw to the

surface of the ground. Raising its head, it sat back and howled once, filling the chamber with a dread that nearly cause her to flee. The howl was unearthly, unlike any wolf she had ever heard. Somehow it seemed to carry a duel tone, penetrating Shaela's heart with fear. The wolf's howl was quickly answered by a chorus of others within the depths of the tunnel it had emerged from. Shaela wiped the last of her frustrations and tears from her face, trying to keep her emotions under control. She approached the creature slowly, ignoring a sudden warning in her heart. Quietly, she whispered.

“You are not like any I've ever known.” Its lengthy ears pricked up toward Shaela . . . far too lengthy for the ears of a common wolf. The back legs were longer than normal and muscular. Shaela instantly noticed it was built for speed, and suspected it could instantly leap a great distance. She felt her heart go cold, realizing this creature was only akin to a wolf . . . not a common wolf at all. It slowly rose up on its back legs, shifting into a standing position, startling Shaela as its tail slowly snaked back and forth behind it. Behind her, Hiska hissed vehemently, his hackles rising fully as he bared and snapped his teeth at it. It spoke to Shaela then, its eyes falling upon the creature still roasting over the flames.

“Peace,” it stated in a deep voice. “We mean you no harm. I am Orin, head of my pack. We are here, investigating the disappearance of a cub from our den not two days ago.” Orin looked to the Ogres meal. “We have found him.” Sadness welled up in Orin's eyes as it turned to the fire. The sudden sound of many paws echoed in the tunnel behind him.

“Oh, my brothers, we are too late,” Orin lamented as they entered, gathering about him. Quickly, Orin rushed over and reached into the flames, removing the body. Gently, the wolf-like creature set the body on the cold stone floor. Orin studied the entire cave from end to end as a dozen more of its kind entered at a run into the chamber and stopped, growling and challenging Hiska and Shaela openly. Quickly Orin raised a hand, snapping out at them in a tongue both could not understand. As quickly as they had challenged Hiska, they backed down, but

keeping wary eyes on them both.

Seeing his chance, Hiska sprung to Shaela's side, grabbed her, pulling her away from them, ready to fight. Orin ignored the move, spotting the last Ogre entwined and impaled by a tangled myriad of roots. He looked at Shaela, raising thick lengthy brows at her in surprise.

“Druid? But you wear the apprentice robes of the Mystic. Interesting I should find an ambassador here. Peace to you both; you have unknowingly avenged the wrong done against our pack. For this, I am grateful,” Orin finished in a whisper, glancing at Hiska, who stood ready, not relaxing his stance in the least.

“Peace Guardian, we are not here to fight you. We came to save one of our cubs . . . but, alas, we are too late. Hiska nodded, but did not let down his guard.

“Peace.” Hiska hissed in return.

“Easy Catur, I know my pack and your tribe share a similar distrust for each other, but ill intentions have never been our mindset against your,” Orin hesitated, looking Hiska square in the eyes, “Mother.” Hiska's eyes widened in surprise as the creature bowed slightly.

“I know your leaders well, friends.” Orin looked at Shaela, giving her a strange look. “Milady, let us not make a choice here we all would regret. My pack and I, we take our leave. Safe journey to you both. May the power of your pride ever keep you safe.” With those words, Hiska lowered his blade and returned the compliment, yet wary.

“May your hunt be ever swift and sure.” Orin gathered up the body and headed for the entrance as another of his pack quickly pulled the spit from the body and threw it aside. Two others produced a large canvas and quickly wrapped the victim as another removed a few leather straps from a pack. Quickly, it tied the canvas and departed, leaving them alone with Orin, who turned to them one last time and lowered to all fours, eyeing Shaela with icy-blue eyes.

“Peace ambassador, peace Guardian.” With those last words, it turned to leave, but a quick word from Shaela stopped it.

“Orin, why do you call me ambassador?” It turned to her, shaking its head,

but did not reply. His eyes met Hiska's for a brief moment, and then quickly departed into the tunnel, vanishing. Shaela bit her lip and turned to Hiska.

“Hiska, what did Orin mean by ambassador?” Hiska began cleaning his blade in silence, eyeing Shaela, suddenly deep in thought, watching her eyes slowly change back to normal. Without answering her, he began searching the cave, as if he was looking for something. Shaela, not so patiently, watched him, but did not ask again. She watched on as Hiska retrieved a few coins and oddments from a chest located in a more secretive part of the cave. After collecting what he could find, Hiska turned to Shaela.

“Hiska will answer your questions over a warm fire as Shaela eats. Shaela must leave this cave.” She nodded, feeling no need to argue. As they entered the tunnel, Hiska whispered quietly as he walked beside her.

“They were Lykkinnin. In Shaela's world, she calls them Lycanthrope, or Werewolves.” Hiska's words shocked her. She shot him a glance filled with disbelief.

“I thought they were only a myth,” she stated, paling at his words. Hiska shook his head as he sheathed his blade and raised his forearm up under Shaela's hand. She gripped his arm tightly and lowered her eyes, watching her footing.

As they followed the path of Orin and his pack, Hiska shook his head, keeping a steady watch ahead of them.

“No Shaela, the Lykkinnin are real.”

They followed the tunnel out the opposite side from which they entered, illuminated by a spell of light. Shaela felt it safe to exit this place with less caution now; the Lykkinnin had no doubt cleared any possible threats within the tunnel.

As they made their way through a myriad of twists and turns, Shaela wondered about the title of ambassador, knowing what it meant, but not knowing why Orin had labeled her as such. She had caught the look Orin gave Hiska before departing from the chamber and suspected Hiska knew something, which he was not sharing . . . yet. Shaela also remembered Mother's words before she had entered The Grove. Her apprenticeship had been shortened, much to Shaela's disappointment.

Hiska supported her as she used her staff to keep a steady footing through the traitorous tunnel. She did not need Hiska's help, but it was nice having him close. He was the always the unmovable and constant stone she could set her back against. Enjoying his presence, she allowed herself the luxury of a daydream . . .

. . . she pictured a field of tall, green, wide-bladed grasses, a large grove of trees at its center where she and Hiska lived happily. A flowing stream cheerfully cut its way through the center, allowing her a cool drink any time she desired. Of course, the Water Children could visit as often as they liked, and they often did. She had a beautiful child, who she tended with every care, teaching her the more cheerful things of life . . .

Coming out of her fantasy, Shaela's heart yearned at the thought of building up such a home. She became suddenly curious, and looked up at Hiska.

“Hiska, where are we going?” Her Guardian did not answer until they reached the exit; an elevated ledge overlooking the top of the jungle's canopy. He stopped and surveyed the storm which had all but passed over them, shedding an increasing sunlight at the far edge of the jungle which slowly crept towards them.

It was beautiful. He knelt before the entrance as distant thunder rolled up over the mountain behind them. Shaela walked up behind him and wrapped her arms about her Forever Guardian, leaning against his back and resting her chin on the back of his head between his ears. Hiska reached up a hand and rested it on her arm.

“Shaela must know what Mother told Hiska when Shaela's teachings were shortened.” She waited, not interrupting, her curiosity peaking as he continued, his large, slanted, emerald eyes scanning the area outside the cave for any signs of trouble.

“The Humans have been using our home to build their homes. It was tolerated by Mother, for they replanted three saplings for every tree taken. They only took trees which grew too close together. This was good for the forest, and so our queen decreed they were to be left alone. Some of the Harritt Catur made friends with the Humans, and relations grew stronger. Something has happened,” Hiska sighed heavily, “they are no longer planting the forest they harvest. Armed Humans now escort and watch over the ones who take what is ours.” Shaela suddenly understood; she was Human. She could enter the Human civilization unhindered to investigate the reason. The thought scared her. Ambassador . . . Shaela sighed heavily and squeezed Hiska.

“Hiska, I can go into the city and do my best to find out what is happening. Maybe I could speak with someone in authority and express the concerns of our people. Hiska lifted his head as she spoke and raised a hand to the side of her face where he had removed the piece of branch out of her delicate cheek so long ago. The scar was faint, yet still visible.

“Our people?” Hiska whispered. Shaela placed her forehead against his, closing her eyes.

“Hiska, I will never go live with the Humans again. There is nothing for me there. I hold no resentments against them, I just don't belong.”

“Shaela?” Hiska said quietly.

“Yes?” He turned to her and removed a single strand of hair from her face,

tucking it behind her ear.

“Hiska is your Forever Guardian. Hiska would ask you also to be his wife.” His sudden words stunned her, instantly bringing on tears of joy. She squeezed him tightly as she thought about his proposal, her heart lightening.

“Yes,” she whispered emotionally, “I would like that Hiska. I thought you would never ask.” Shaela's hope for the future began to burn like a flame within her, and this time she embraced it gladly. It was then that her heart began to soften and heal . . . and not for the last time.

Shaela felt the excitement of living, of life; something she had not felt for years. Her family had been taken from her, leaving her deeply wounded. She thought she would die in this jungle, but now, she was betrothed to one of its inhabitants. A smile spread across her delicate lips as she snuggled into Hiska's arms, letting sleep take her.

For the first time since the tragedy of her parents, she slept within a dream of peace and happiness, playing with the Water Children in the stream which cut directly through the center of her forest home . . . a home conjured up within her mind. She pictured Hiska watching her, and beckoned him to come enjoy the fun. Stubbornly, he would not. She splashed water at him, but he only retreated back a step, watching over her faithfully, green eyes constantly probing the area all about them. Her daughter peeked out from behind a nearby tree and giggled, eyes filled with amusement. Shaela beckoned to her, waving her to come. She bolted to the water's edge and leapt into her arms, laughing delightfully. Shaela caught Tarra up in her arms and held her close, laughing and spinning her around and around, splashing water everywhere as the Water Children clapped for joy and began wrestling among themselves, beginning a water fight that seemed to empty the creek of its contents as Hiska watched on.

Life was good.

Shaela came out of sleep, a smile spread across her lovely face. Slowly she opened her eyes to meet Hiska's emerald-green eyes watching her intently.

“Good morning,” she whispered. Hiska did not move, nor answer her. Shaela laid her hand on his chest, concerned.

“What's wrong Hiska?” Hiska blinked and shook his head.

“Hiska knows of nothing wrong. Hiska knows Shaela is the most beautiful feline ever to grace the jungle. Hiska watched Shaela sleep . . . listened to Shaela talk in her sleep. Hiska is most honored to have Shaela in Hiska's life.” The Harritt Catur nuzzled her with a tenderness which completely melted her heart. Raising both hands up, she wrapped her arms tightly about the mancat's neck.

“Hiska, I love you.” For the first time she could remember, she felt tears of joy stream down her face. Her thoughts strayed to her parents. Oh, how she wished she could introduce her fiance to them; they would have loved him.

“Shaela, Hiska must tell you something.” She let go and sat up, pulling her hair back.

“What is it?” Hiska looked out over the jungle for a moment in silence, then sighed.

“Hiska knows you are Human . . . Hiska is not. Shaela's kind will not accept Hiska. This will not be easy.” She felt a sudden flush in her cheeks, stood abruptly and began pacing back and forth, struggling for words which might ease Hiska's apprehension. She found none, and it frustrated her. Turning to him, she raised her hands up, and then let them fall to her thighs with a slap.

“Well, Hiska, why don't we be patient with both our people . . . especially my race; they are not the most open minded of the two. You and I will be the example of how the differences of the Harritt Catur and the Humans are nothing more than -” She hesitated as Hiska stood, sighing heavily. She stopped trying to explain and blew the hair out of her face, frustrated. For a moment, she stood there, looking at him, yearning to say something, anything that would ease the obvious concern written all over his face. After a few moments, she shrugged and

neared him, taking both his hands in hers and peering up earnestly at him.

“I don't care. Let the entire world deal with it as they choose. I know who you are. I look into your eyes, I see who you are, and that is saying something.” Her eyes gleamed in absolute resolution as she pulled his hands to her mouth and kissed them.

Hiska pulled a hand free and placed it to his mouth, suddenly lost in thought. He seemed taken back . . . at a loss. Realizing a truth, she grinned.

“You have never been kissed before,” she teased, “have you?” Hiska shook his head ever so slightly.

“Neither have I.” without hesitation, Hiska drew close to her and kissed her. When they parted, he whispered quietly in her ear.

“Tarra, we will name her Tarra.” Shaela blushed and leaned back in his arms, rather surprised. At first she was speechless, not knowing what to say. Then she laughed.

“Talking in my sleep you said?” Hiska nodded, chuckling softly.

“Shaela talks in her sleep. Hiska likes the name Tarra. Hiska will find the home you dream of and Shaela will have a family again.” His eyes hardened and narrowed intensely out at the jungle.

“Nothing will ever threaten the family Shaela will have. Hiska will make sure.” He looked back down at her. “Nothing.” Shaela smiled. She wanted to say something, but struggled for words and then gave up, resigning herself to wrapping her arms about his neck, one hand sliding up to the back of his head and pulled Hiska in, nuzzling him in silence. Time seemed to respectfully stand still as they held each other.

“Hiska must take Shaela to Mother. Hiska needs Shaela to understand there is . . . Hiska must take Shaela to Mother.” Shaela suddenly walked to the mouth of the cave and held out her arms to the jungle and sighed, tilting her head back as she closed her eyes. She inhaled deeply, breathing the free air.

“Mother told me to call upon her when I was in need.” She turned to her fiance. “When are we to be married, Hiska?” Hiska's reply was instant, as if he

had expected her question.

“Whenever Shaela wishes.” She grinned and nodded.

“Then I will call her now.” Hiska nodded, then abruptly shook his head.

“No, not yet. Hiska and Shaela must first travel to the borders of the Sacred Grove, as is the custom. He stepped between her and the opening of the cave and looked out. “Tell Hiska about weddings in the Human world. Shaela must have the wedding she dreams of.”

“Oh Hiska, I don't care.” Hiska instantly interrupted her.

“Hiska insists.” Shaela smiled up at him timidly, shrugging.

“Well, Humans wear a beautiful elegant white dress. I like black to match my hair, with long sleeves. Not too puffy though.” She then described all she knew about the customs of her people as Hiska remained attentive to her every word. Once finished, she inquired of the wedding customs of the Harritt Catur.

“The two will go to the border of the Sacred Grove. Into this place, one must be invited, but should never enter without invitation. Our Mystic will call upon one who is master of the Sacred Grove, and request permission to enter. If accepted, they are allowed entrance. Once within the Sacred Grove, they both repeat words the Mystic will give them. Once finished, the bonding is completed. The two are allowed to stay in the Sacred Grove for that night only. By sundown the next day, they must leave, never to return again. Any who break this law are severely punished.” Shaela thought for a moment, puzzled.

“Hiska, if the Mystic cannot enter the Sacred Grove, how can the bond of marriage happen within?”

“She cannot, unless granted entrance by one who is the greatest in all the jungle.” Shaela's curiosity was sparked.

“I thought Mother is the Queen; the greatest.” Hiska shook his head, turning to face Shaela.

“No, Mother is high servant of a greater being in the jungle. Hiska can say no more . . . it is forbidden. Shaela must trust Hiska.” Shaela looked up at him, attempting to manipulate more information out of him, but quickly noted the

resignation in his demeanor. She sighed, disappointed, and quickly abandoned the attempt.

“Of course I trust you. How long will it take us to get to the border of the Sacred Grove?” Hiska shook his head, his eyes narrowing in thought.

“Shaela does not wish to go back to the beginning first?” She bit her lip, thinking for a minute, then nodded.

“To go there is my worst fear. I want to, but is now the time to do this?” Hiska stooped and picked her up into his strong arms and began making his way to the bottom of the hill. Gently he set her down and stepped to her right side, taking the proper position of the Guardian, and scanned the area about them as he spoke quietly.

“It is further to the Sacred Grove, than where Hiska found Shaela. Shaela must be reminded, Mother advised Shaela to go to the beginning. Shaela can make her own choice. Hiska will go anywhere Shaela goes.” She smiled nervously, then entered into his arms and held him close, feeling courage from his embrace, his presence. She pointed into the jungle in no certain direction.

“Well, shall we?” He nodded, and they both began to walk.

The jungle was not so thick in this area, and so for the first few hours, Shaela walked deep in thought, wondering what the future held in store for the both of them. She noticed Hiska's wariness as he eyed the jungle about them, alert to every sound and movement. His ears turned this way and that at the slightest sounds, sounds she could not hear.

She had begun to feel safe and at home here, feeling less confined and closed in with the passing of time. A family had been taken from her and a family had been found. Shaela reflected on the Humans intrusion into the jungle. Five years ago she would not have thought twice about the timber being taken. Reflecting upon it now, she knew the Humans were trespassing into territory filled with animals which relied on this jungle and races of people who would defend their home. She was not sure at what rate the Humans were taking the timber; she would have to find out. One thing she did know, this was going to lead to open conflict, and between two societies this was never a good thing.

The day passed in silence. As Shaela began to weary, she kept an eye out for a secluded, out of the way, place to sleep for the night. By the time her eyes were no longer useful, they located a good spot to rest in which Hiska quietly readied the area, making a small fire. As he tended the flames, Shaela became aware of a sound, or thought she could hear something, like a faint rumble. It seemed as though it came up from the earth itself. Curiously she listened and then turned to Hiska.

“Hiska, do you hear that?” Hiska nodded, his ears laying flat as he poked the fire with a stick.

“Shaela hears Mistwalker Falls.” Hiska raised the stick and pointing the glowing end in the general direction they were traveling. “Hiska and Shaela will go to the falls during the light of day. Shaela needs to see clearly for safest footing.” Shaela nodded, very curious, then yawned, suddenly sleepy. She walked over to Hiska and watched him finish the fire.

After he was done, he set his back against a tree and lowered himself down

against it. She walked over to him, curling up into a welcome and warm embrace. She shifted a few times to get comfortable, snuggling into his warmth. Her stomach loudly informed her she was hungry, but the rest of her body ached with the need for rest. Her exhaustion won over her hunger as she sleepily glanced up at Hiska. She reached up and scratched him in the hollow of his jaw, her eyes throwing him a sentimental smile. She worked her nails along his neck and ears as well. After giving him a thorough scratching, he returned the favor in his usual way, lulling her into slumber.

As the night wore into the pre-dawn hours, Shaela awoke. Unwilling to open her eyes just yet, she simply enjoyed the time between waking and sleeping. After a while she slowly reached up and began to work her finger's briskly into the soft fur of Hiska's shoulders and neck, making her way up to his ears. She pulled him down and glided her face across his as she stretched. Lazily she fell back into sleep, which lasted for only a short time.

As she found herself waking up, a smile played across her face. She reached up and grabbed Hiska by the back of his neck and pulled him close, kissing him. She felt his fangs and smiled. Quickly she bit him on the side of the mouth, causing him to flinch and pull away. Gripping his face more tight in her fists, she squeezed and pulled at him, forcing his head down as she snapped at him, biting the bottom of his chin. She began to feel a hunger she could not resist pulse through her mind, taking over her natural senses and dulling her thoughts.

She could feel him beginning to retreat from her, and so, like a viper, snapped up under his chin, sinking her teeth into the soft tissue of his neck, just over an artery pulsing with the rhythmic flow of precious blood. He tensed and gripped her tight, desperately trying to dislodge her from him, but he faltered as she felt a wave of weakness washed through every muscle in his body. She growled, forcing him onto his back as she felt his talons breaking the surface of her skin as he weakly resisted. Tightening her grip about him, she bit deeply into his neck. She felt her fangs pierce an artery as a spasm ripped through his body.

Drinking deep, freely, through her fangs, her bloodlust quenched the burning hunger she felt.

For a few moments, she felt him struggle in vain beneath her, sensing his body weaken more and more with every passing, fading heartbeat. After a time his heart began to slow in its rhythm, beating more faintly by the second, until it shuddered and stilled in its last quivering throb. Hiska exhaled his last breath as his body became limp, forever stilled.

Pulling herself free of him, Shaela arose, wiping blood from her mouth with the back of her arm as she looked down at Hiska laying motionless upon the ground before her. For a moment, it did not matter, her hunger was satisfied. But as her senses returned, the horror of what she had just done dawned within her heart like a searing flame. Staggering back, she tried to breathe, but could only gasp in terror and shock at what had just happened. Shaela screamed in horror and regret, panicking as the realization of what she had done filled her instantly with undescrivable misery.

Jolting from her sleep, she launching from Hiska's arms, screaming and pulling at her hair, a crazed look on her face. She screamed his name over and over deliriously, not seeing him leap to his feet, nor hearing his blade unsheathe with a ring.

She had killed him . . . killed her fiancé.

Within a few moments of hysterical panic, she felt strong hands grip her wrists tight, forcing her to stop ripping at her hair. She opened her eyes and screamed, tormented by the grief and horror of what she had done . . . no, no, it was a nightmare . . . only a nightmare. Hiska was not dead, he was here. As she slowly relaxed, Hiska released her and began gently smoothing the hair out of her face, whispering.

“It was a night terror . . . not real.” She burst into tears and threw her arms about his neck sobbing uncontrollably, as if she would suddenly lose him. Leaning back, she looked at him.

“Don't ever leave me Hiska. I can't . . . I don't want to be alone.”

“Hiska likes it when Shaela talks like that.” His gentle words relaxed her, eased her grief. They both walked over to the fire, which was burning low. Hiska pointed to a place near the fire, motioning her to sit down. As usual, he had located a smooth rock for her to rest upon. She sniffed, wiping her face with yet trembling hands and lowered herself. He then knelt, facing her and took her hands in his.

“Tell Hiska your night terror.” She glanced over at the area where she had killed him, half expecting to see blood staining the ground, and shook her head as she gripped his hands.

“It was only a dream,” she whispered, haunted by the images so fixed into her mind. She shuddered. Hiska watched her quietly, raising a hand to her chin. Gently he guided her face so that both their eyes met. He then began raking his talons through her hair, undoing the tangles.

Tears flooded down Shaela's face as she watched him lovingly care for her.

She slowly reached up to the area of Hiska's neck, where she had bitten him, as if she wanted to be sure he was not injured. To her relief there was not so much as a scratch. She sighed, relief beginning to calm her.

After Hiska had finished grooming her hair back into place, he watched on as she slowly regain her composure. Taking a deep breath, she sighed heavily.

“As I was sleeping in your arms, I began to feel intensely drawn to you. I acted upon my desire, and began . . .” She stopped for a moment and swallowed hard. After a moment, she slowly continued, struggling with deep internal emotions.

“I was drawn to you . . . you gave into my desires. But my passion was not out of affectionate love for you Hiska . . . please don't make me say it . . .” Hiska waited in silence, not answering her. It was obvious he wanted to know, and so she continued, beginning to lose control of her voice as she choked.

“I hungered for . . . blood. I drank yours as you . . . struggled. I killed you - please, I don't want to say any more!” She coughed, choking out the last words, shame filling her.

Moving close, Hiska wrapped his arms about her in the attempt to comfort her. She felt the warmth of his breath and his secure embrace. She clung to him, grateful for his strength and reassurance. After a long while, he softly whispered.

“It was only a night terror.” She nodded and relaxed, feeling much better now. Leaning back, she looked into his slanted, beautiful green eyes. Managing a slight smile, she bore her teeth at him.

“Hiska, if ever I became a monster, I could never turn on you. You are true and faithful, and more wise than me. I was blessed the day you captured me.” Her smile faded slowly as she felt exhaustion take her. Shifting her position, she curled up against him and closed her eyes. As sleep overtook her, she began to play with Hiska's finger-length talons.

Hiska held Shaela in his arms as she slept, stunned at her words. He had been quite taken back by her last statement. As she relaxed into sleep, he gazed

down at her and gently pulled trailing strands of hair from her face with a single talon. He watched her sleep, unable to take his eyes from his soon to be wife. Hiska seemed spellbound as he watched her sigh. Nothing would ever harm this Human. Anything that would ever try, he would rip to pieces.

She slept into the early morning as he watched over their camp. His mind reflected back to the day before when she had gladly, happily, accepted his proposal of marriage. They had been together for a long time now. His thoughts took him back in time to when the female Centaur and Shaela had parted company. Hiska had noticed their eyes as they met, bringing to his attention that Shaela, though she probably did not realize it, needed a friend – someone other than himself. He rested his chin upon her head as she slept. He loved her with all his heart, and because he loved her, Hiska had to increase Shaela's social life. It would be healthy for her to have other friends.

Hiska knew where a people lived very near to here. They appeared as Human, but they were not. He had befriended them in the past. They were a peaceful and genuinely honest people. He would introduce Shaela to their leader, whom he himself had aided to finish a quest with long ago. Holding Shaela tight, he embraced her firmly and sighed. Yes, Shaela needed a friend.

She opened her eyes to Hiska staring down at her.

“Good morning, soon to be husband. Is it late in the day?” Hiska shook his head and let Shaela stand.

“Only the morning has passed, but there is no hurry.” Hiska retrieved Shaela's staff for her. “There is a place Hiska wishes to take you to. Hiska wishes to introduce Shaela to a friend.” Shaela grimaced.

“I smell filthy. Is there a stream nearby? I need to bathe.” Hiska pointed off to the left.

“There is an area where Shaela can bathe. It is close. Hiska will catch breakfast there while Shaela gets ready.” She watched him bury the fire with a

thick layer of soil. After that, they made their way through the jungle, coming to the edge of a sharply inclined slope, and followed it, keeping it on their left.

Before the sun was above them, Shaela felt a vibration under her feet as well as a rumbling sound in her stomach. She was beginning to get very hungry. She wondered at the vibrations in the ground, but kept quiet as they moved along the embankment of earth, richly populated with wide-leaf fern and foliage. As they moved along, she felt the rumbling beneath her feet intensifying, as if some vent deep within the earth was active with volcanic activity. She noticed the rumble in the air becoming louder as they made their way through a dense crop of trees, which seemed to bar their way from passing, as if the jungle did not want them to pass. She looked at Hiska, who did not seem daunted by the thickening of the trees.

After they had traveled a considerable ways, they broke through the barrier of trees, and as they did she plainly heard the once steady rumble in the air fill the area with a constant roar. It filled the air so that if she spoke to Hiska, she had to raise her voice for him to hear. She could feel moisture in the air as well. Shaela stopped and curiously looked up an embankment of earth, listening intently for a few moments before ascending the slope, curious at what she would see if she crested the large bank of earth. Hiska instantly grabbed her by the arm and shook his head.

“Not that way, unless Shaela can fly.” She backed away, feeling a tinge of excitement and fear take hold of her.

“Is this a river?” Hiska nodded.

“Hiska and Shaela are very close. There is a path that will lead us down to the water. It is important that Shaela stays close to Hiska now.” She instantly snaked her hand through his arm, and squeezed tight. She looked up at him, an open excitement in her eyes, as he continued, leading her along the great bank of earth. By mid afternoon, she called out to him above the roar of the river she could not see.

“How far is it now!” Hiska stopped and looked down at her, seemingly

deep in thought.

“Shaela, did the Mystic tell you if the robes you wear have any magical powers?” She smiled slyly.

“Yes, one power.” Hiska waited as Shaela reached up and gripped him on either side of the neck and pulled him down, kissing him. When they parted, she whispered.

“Charm kitty.” For the first time, Hiska laughed and ruffled her hair up, to which she turned and tackled him, using her staff to trip him. Hiska fell to his back as Shaela landed on top of him, dropping her staff. She quickly grabbed his wrists and pinned them down to the ground on either side of his head. Hiska began to say something, but she ignored him. He froze in place, unmoving as she triumphantly grinned down at him. His eyes shifted from her's as he flatly stated,

“Hiska and Shaela are being watched.” She sat up straight and looked around, suddenly startled. She did not see anyone or anything. Looking down, she narrowed her eyes at Hiska.

“Who's watching us Hiska?” she stated, suspecting he was trying to get the advantage over her. Leaning down, Shaela kissed him again. As she did, she could feel his reluctance, giving her a clue as to the truth of his warning. Slowly she stood and held out her hands to Hiska, who took them and stood. Hiska instantly gripped Shaela by the shoulders and turned her, facing away and began combing out her hair, removing a few leaves and a small stick as she eyed the jungle about them. “Hiska, are you sure?” She looked at him, turning. In silence, her Guardian nodded.

“Hiska knows this area is always watched.” She drew close to him and sneered playfully, then wrapped her arms about his neck and kissed him again. As she kissed him, she whispered, “Liar”.

“I take it, you are both friends?” There were a number of people suddenly surrounding them, swords and spears in hand. Shaela let out a small scream and spun about, leaning back against Hiska's chest, smoothing her hair back. As quickly as her hair was arranged, she smoothed down her robes with both hands,

composing herself as fast as she could, her face turning crimson. Hiska did not seem surprised in the least and bowed slightly to the man.

“Jenthra, pardon Hiska's manner of entrance into your land. Hiska and Shaela meant no disrespect.” The man bowed in return and laughed, eyeing Shaela critically as she averted her eyes to the ground and continued to make herself presentable. It was obvious she was embarrassed beyond words.

“Hiska, you know you are always welcome here.” Jenthra walked over and picked up Shaela's staff. Turning to Shaela, he eyed it curiously. His eyes slowly fell upon her, looking her over from head to foot. Holding it out to her, he nodded shortly. Slowly, she raised a hand and wrapped her fingers about the staff, thinking this might be some trick. After giving her staff back, Jenthra put a hand to his chin. Curtseying slightly, Shaela felt truly mortified at how they had been discovered.

“It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm sorry for they way -” “There is no need for apologies, Shaela. I see you are Human.” She nodded and met his eye, biting the bottom of her lip. Jenthra seemed disturbed and looked at Hiska as she felt him wrap her protectively.

“Hiska and Shaela have traveled together now for many moons. Hiska's master has recently released Shaela from her apprenticeship. She follows the path of nature.”

“Ahh, she is Druid.” He looked at her sternly.

“Will you be returning to your own kind?” Shaela instantly shook her head.

“No sir.” This man scared her, even as mild spoken as he was. There was a hardened look in his eyes that meant no nonsense, yet not overbearing. She felt Hiska's breath on her head and was comforted by his presence. “Hiska and I are betrothed.” Her hand raised to his arm as she glanced up at Hiska, making sure he approved of her communications with Jenthra. She didn't notice any change in his demeanor. There was, however, a stunned silence that followed. After a time, that awkward silence was broken by Jenthra.

“One fortnight past, a band of Humans found these falls and killed a band of

my guards near the very spot we now stand. They then fled into the jungle. We pursued them, but lost their track after three days. We retrieved the body of one Human. This is why I know it was an attack from the Humans.” A sudden fear stole the warmth from Shaela's face, causing her to pale. Hiska tightened his arm about Shaela, speechless at the news.

The silence which followed seemed to condemn Shaela. A sudden fear began to rise up within her, stealing more blood from her face. She feared Jenthra would take her prisoner and never let her go, or worse. She then realized why there was a formal coldness in their communications. She began to shake visibly, drawing Jenthra's cold eye of attention upon her. Shaela wanted to leave; if she could just leave. She needed to say something, anything.

“Sir, I would not have returned had I anything to do with such an attack.” Her heart began to beat faster, causing a faintness to threaten her. Hiska held out a hand to Jenthra.

“Jenthra, Shaela has not left Hiska's side for four years.” Shaela looked up, a sudden idea coming to mind. She didn't like what she was about to do, but she felt she had no choice.

“We will find them.” Jenthra and his men looked shocked.

“You . . . a Human . . . you would find them? Then what would you do?” Shaela swallowed hard and took a deep breath, obviously frightened.

“Convince you by my actions that I would never have anything to do with such an act. If I do this, if I bring these murderers to justice, would you let me go? I want to leave and never return here again. I just want to leave”. Fighting back emotion, Shaela felt her staff begin to warm.

Why did they think she was the enemy? Why, if Hiska was with her, would Jenthra question her on this? Once again, she began to feel injustice falling upon her . . . like the Prima, who ever sought to kill her. Like the Ogres, who stole her former life. She felt connected to the ground. She was suddenly aware of an incredible expanse of roots beneath her, which seductively beckoned to her. She blinked, shaking her head as a feeling of intense power washed through her.

Her vision slowly dimmed, and through a haze she saw Jenthra slowly back away, his eyes widening. Hiska instantly turned Shaela about to face him and hissed.

“Shaela, no, don't. The injustices Shaela has been inflicted with are not their doing. They are just suspicious. They are not blaming you. Shaela, are you hearing Hiska?” The Harrit Catur sternly exclaimed, raising his voice in the attempt to get her attention. Jenthra and his men backed away from the two, as the earth stirred beneath their feet. One of them pointed to the ground about them and called out a warning.

“The ground, look!” He then pointed into the trees as the green of the jungle withered and roots began to rip up from beneath the surface of the ground, violently exploding earth into the trees above. Jenthra's eyes widened as he tore his attention from the scene, gazing in wonder at Shaela. He then shot a look at Hiska, as if asking for help. Hiska hesitated, his hackles rising, not sure what to do. Not knowing what to do, Hiska placed his hands on either side of her face and kissed her.

Shaela convulsed, startled at his sudden move. She focused her eyes on him, growling in frustration.

“They aren't going to let me go, Hiska! The Ogres did the same to my mom and dad! They are monsters!” Shaking his head, Hiska kissed her again and began grooming her face and neck, pulling her close to him and wrapping his arms about her tightly. As she hesitated again, he whispered to her.

“These men do not know Shaela as Hiska knows Shaela. We can go find your home and raise Tarra.” Shocked at his words, she threw him a fleeting smile, yet irritated, her eyes filled with the pitch black of night. Trembling, she nodded and dropped her staff, wrapping her arms about his neck. She instantly felt that intense energy began to flow from her.

“Shaela, let it go. These are good men. They don't know Shaela, and do they don't trust Shaela. They are good men.” She nodded, feeling a sudden lack of energy, then promptly passed out.

Hiska picked up Shaela, retrieving her staff and turned to Jenthra as the

earth slowly stilled. The roots of all the trees about them wormed their way slowly back into the soil, leaving only the scars of their passing. Jenthra slowly made his way across the scarred ground, fear in his eyes as he approached. His men did not follow him.

“Hiska, what was that?” he inquired in earnest, his voice shaking. Hiska crouched, holding Shaela close and glanced up at his friend.

“Jenthra, Hiska must tell you of the happenings in this Human's life. Then Jenthra will understand.” Jenthra nodded and knelt before Hiska, waving his men away.

“Go back. I will return shortly. Go.” With looks of worry, each departed, glancing back at their leader, unsure looks etched in their eyes.

After his men had departed, Hiska began the story of meeting Shaela. He continued the tale, taking the whole of the day to finish it. As it became dark, Hiska concluded the history. Gazing upon Shaela in wonder, Jenthra shook his head.

“Had I known, Hiska, I would have welcomed her with open arms.” He slowly placed a hand upon her brow, whispering.

“My dear, welcome to Mistwalker Sanctuary. My home is yours.”

Shaela slowly opened her eyes to an unfamiliar sight, instantly confused. The common canopy of the jungle she was so used to was not the right color. In fact it was not green at all, save but few places where green specs of light twinkled down at her, similar to the stars in the heaven at night. Rubbing her eyes with the palms of her hands, she brushed the hair out of her face, thinking she needed to wake up. All this seemed much too dreamlike to be real. She knew the sky flashed no green stars.

As she came more fully to her senses, Shaela froze, suddenly realizing she was in a place she had never been before, and it scared her. She focused her attention on a cavern ceiling high above, noticing hundreds of gems and crystals set naturally into the rock above. Her eyes widened in wonder as she beheld the beauty of it all. The modest brilliance and beauty of what she saw was astonishing.

She lay on a small bed, scented with a fragrance, instantly reminding her of her own bed she had slept on long ago . . . when she was . . . home. Suddenly aware that she was not alone, she froze, listening to voices that drew her attention past her feet, where she saw people in silver-white robes walking about the far side of the cave, speaking amongst themselves in hushed tones. She noticed their hair was of the purist white.

Looking around, she noticed a girl sitting next to her on a chair, watching her. Startled, Shaela instinctively shrunk away slightly, gripping the soft blanket to her. The first thing she noticed about this girl, was her eyes, which seemed to have been crafted from two of the most beautiful gems in the cavern above. As their eyes met, the girl smiled warmly.

“Welcome to Mistwalker Sanctuary, Shaela.” Shaela sat up slowly, placing a hand to her spinning head.

“Am I in the afterlife? Where are my parents?” The girl laughed softly, shook her head, then bent forward, placing a hand on Shaela's brow, as if checking for fever.

“No, you are quite alive, but no doubt very hungry. I brought you some food.” At the mention of food, Shaela nodded.

“Yes please. If I am not dead, where am I?” The girl stood and walked over to a nearby table, upon which set a pitcher, a small cup and a small tray with an assortment of freshly cut fruits. She poured the content of the pitcher into the cup, set it on the tray and returned, kneeling by the bed. Shaela sat up, letting her feet set upon the rock surface of the floor. The stone was surprisingly warm to the touch. The beautiful girl placed the tray on the bed and positioned a chair in front of Shaela. Taking the tray, she then put it on the chair and motioned her to eat. Shaela was suddenly famished and ate it all in silence. She noticed the liquid in the cup was a golden color, as is honey was mixed in with water.

“What is this?” The girl grinned and looked at the cup.

“It's an herbal drink, made from Goldstem, a root. It's delicious and balances the mind and body.” Picking up the cup, she noticed it was warm to the touch. Brining it to her nose, she smelled it, instantly liking the aroma that reminded her of sugar cane. The girl watched her as she took a sip, a look of excited enthusiasm brightening the beautiful features of her delicate face. This drink was pleasing; like nothing she had ever tasted.

“Oh, I like it. I just discovered my favorite drink.” The girl clapped her hands together.

“I wasn't sure if a Human would enjoy it as much as I do. I'm glad you like it. Wait for its effects”, she stated slyly, “I'm sure you will see why it is my favorite as well.” Snickering, Shaela swallowed a mouthful. She spent the next few minutes drinking her tea and eating the variety of fresh fruits on the tray, during which time her head stopped spinning, and her mind cleared.

“What is your name?” Shaela asked.

“Jewl.” Shaela smiled.

“I see why you were given such a name. You are so beautiful.” Jewl blushed and averted her eyes, then looked up at Shaela, smiling through gritted teeth, an expression of genuine innocence in her demeanor. After an awkward

moment of silence, they both sighed. Jewl stood and sat on the bed by Shaela, slipping her very delicate hand within hers.

“I've never talked to a Human before. I'm glad you came here. Oh, just so you don't have to worry, your cat man friend has gone into the jungle with Jenthra to track down those who attacked us. Hiska - he told me his name - informed me to inform you he will be back, and not to worry about him.” Shaela was startled.

“Jewl, why would Hiska leave without me? We've never been apart.” Jewl placed her other hand over Shaela's, caressing it softly.

“They won't be gone too long. I hope my company won't be too dull for you.” She stared at Shaela for a moment, made a funny face, and then grimaced. Shaela shook her head.

“No, no, you are great Jewl. If Hiska wanted me to stay here, then here I shall stay, but only on one condition.” Jewl looked a bit nervous and averted her eyes.

“What condition?” Shaela leaned over and whispered into her ear, then sat up straight and waited for her reply. Jewl's silvery eyes flashed delightfully and she stood up, pulling Shaela to her feet with her.

“Oh, yes! I could give you a tour if you like. This place is wonderful . . . especially the deep caverns behind the falls. She suddenly embraced Shaela and parted, blushing. Shaela squeezed her hand, suddenly liking Jewl very much.

“How old are you Jewl?” Jewl rocked from side to side slightly, biting her bottom lip.

“How old do you think I am?” Shaela thought for a moment.

“I will guess you are no older than fifteen seasons.” Jewl laughed and shook her head.

“I will give you two more guesses. I am older.” Shaela thought again, stepping back, studying every feature of her new friend. She was very thin, not more than five and a half feet tall. Her skin was flawlessly smooth. Looking into her eyes and studying her face, Shaela saw no signs of aging . . . not a single wrinkle. Jewl giggled and began modeling for Shaela, walking about, spinning a

circle gracefully here and there, loving the attention.

“Okay, you are seventeen.” Jewl laughed, clapped her hands together and placed them to her lips.

“Okay Shaela, I owe you one for the compliment. Okay, last guess.” She winked at Shaela, then snickered at her, holding her arms out and posing. Shaela noticed Jewl was a miraculous attention seeker.

“You are . . . ummm . . .” Jewl's eyes sparkled with delight . . . .  
“Nineteen?” Jewl tilted her head and gave Shaela wry smile.

“I love you.” Shaela laughed and pointed at Jewl.

“So, how old are you?” Jewl gracefully glided forwards and slipped her hand in Shaela's.

“I'm six-hundred and eighteen this month.” Shaela laughed.

“Liar.” Jewl pretended to be offended, pouting up at Shaela. Shaela leaned into Jewl playfully and sighed.

“Okay, if you say you are that old, then I believe you.” Jewl's pout vanished instantly as she nodded.

“I really am.” Shaela instantly hugged Jewl, who hugged her back and laughed. Realizing what she had just done, Shaela parted and lowered her eyes.

“I'm sorry, I won't -” Jewl cut her off quickly.

“Want to see the pools?” Shaela nodded enthusiastically, becoming very curious. She wanted to see everything in this beautiful place. Jewl began walking toward an archway at one end of the chamber, but Shaela held up a finger and walked over to the table, taking up her empty plate and cup on the way. She drank two more cups of Goldstem tea quickly as Jewl watched her, grinning.

“Shaela, I see you are going to enjoy yourself here. If you are not careful, you may just lose the desire to leave.” Shaela shrugged, craving more tea. She poured a third cup and then a fourth as Jewl patiently waited, smiling from ear to ear.

The more tea she imbibed, the more she craved another cup. Soon all the Goldstem tea was gone. She grimaced and set her cup down, turning to Jewl and

sighed in euphoric satisfaction.

“Are you ready to go see some very nice pools?” Shaela nodded happily, noticing Jewl's words seemed so pleasing to the ear. As she moved up to her, it seemed she yet stood by the table. When she reached Jewl, she felt her delicate hand slip into her's. Shaela sighed and looked down at her new friend, who giggled twice, the second giggle identical to the first. She mused for a moment, thinking she had taken a little too much goldstem tea, then she thought the same thing again.

Jewl escorted her out of the cavern and down a beautiful hallway. Each time she moved, or turned a corner, Shaela noticed she did it again. She could not remember all the tunnels and chambers they passed through; there were too many of them to count so many times. Some were identical to the ones she had just traveled through. As they glided along toward their destination, Shaela saw faces, and similar faces, float by her, all pleasant and cheerful.

“Here we are Shaela . . . here we are Shaela.” She shook her head and smiled fondly at Jewl, who pointed twice at a pool of steaming water at her feet. Looking around, she noticed the cavern was empty, except for the two of them. Looking at Jewl, she raised the same eyebrow more than once at her and leaned forward, almost bumping into her.

“Hello . . . hello.” Shaela licked her lips and smile multiple times at her new friend. Jewl quickly stripped down into her underclothes a dozen times, then slipped into the steaming water. Shaela followed her example, though it was odd how she and Jewl were doing the same thing more than once. In fact, it was beginning to make her curious as to why. She slipped down into the hot water three times, laying her head back against the warm rock . . . and then again.

“I think you had too much goldstem tea, Shaela.” Shaela did not care that Jewl didn't realize she was saying the same thing over and over without giving her a chance to respond. But, then again, it didn't matter. Looking up at the chamber's roof far above, she laughed to many times to count. Jewl laid her head back against the side of the pool and sighed happily.

“The intense effects should not last more than an hour or so,” her hostess assured her. They enjoyed the hot water for a while as Shaela's head slowly cleared. It was not an unpleasant feeling, everything just happened more than once. Shaela smiled and closed her eyes, enjoying the hot water immensely.

“This feels so good. I haven't had a hot bath in years.” Shaela opened her eyes and looked at Jewl, who was looking at her with a horrified expression.

“Really? Well, you can come here any time you wish . . . forever.” Laying her head back, she mumbled something about deprived Humans, causing Shaela to burst out laughing. Then, Shaela thought of something and looked at Jewl in earnest.

“What if one of the men come in here?” Jewl laughed and splashed Shaela with water.

“Men do not come into my home uninvited. I promise, we are safe from prying eyes.” Shaela sighed in relief and wiped her face, then splashed Jewl back and moved to the other side of the pool, following herself to the edge. Jewl shook her head and faced Shaela, a wicked gleam flashing in her eyes.

“So, you dare challenge me, do you?” Shaela caught the side with a hand and spun to face Jewl, laughing. But as she did, she caught movement below her and looked down just in time to see a long snake-like creature shooting straight up through the water. Jewl splashed water with a free hand as Shaela screamed. She turned and grabbed the side of the pool, just as something slid past her feet. Screaming again, Shaela pulled herself up onto the side in a panic. Once she was out, she leapt to her feet and spun around to see Jewl being dragged under.

“Jewl! Jewl!” she screamed, panicking. She watched as the serpentine creature unwind from about her friend's waist and vanished into the depths of the pool as Jewl floated motionless, facing down into the water. Shaela hadn't realized how deep the water was until now. She began to cry as she saw Jewl's body begin to slowly rise to the surface. She reached out for her as Jewl slowly came into arms reach. Sobbing, Shaela glanced down into the deep water, fearful of that thing coming back again.

As she grabbed Jewl, the girl raised her head out of the water and laughed, startling Shaela. Confused, Shaela snatched her hand back and stood as Jewl floated calmly to the side of the pool on her back. When she reached the side, she turned and looked up at Shaela, suddenly noticing her mood.

“Shaela? What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost.” Shaela shook her head and pointed into the water, confused. The dawn of understanding instantly spread across Jewl's face as she glanced down into the deep pool.

“Oh, Shaela, I am so sorry. I neglected to tell you about my friend. It is only a Mistwater Eel, playful and harmless as a kitten. Watch this.” Jewl looked down and lowered her hand halfway into the water. She then snapped her fingers. Shaela watched as the eel quickly returned to the surface and wrapped itself about Jewl. She looked at its black body, noticing its length, which was easily six times her height. It gracefully wrapped Jewl from head to foot, with another half a body length to spare. Shaela watched as the eel lifted its head out of the water and looked into Jewl's eyes, hissing. Jewl laughed, rubbed its nose with hers and placed both hands on either side of its head. Turning to Shaela, she smiled brightly.

“See? He's a big kitten. Come in and swim over to me and I'll introduce you to him. Don't be afraid, come on in.” Shaela made a face and slowly slipped back into the warm water. Swimming over to Jewl, she quickly lost the need to tread water as she felt the body of the eel lift up under her, supporting her so that she stood on it in the water. Once stable in the water, Jewl scratched the eel on the head and whispered to it in words Shaela could not hear. The eel pulled free of her hands and turned its attention on Shaela, drawing near to her, its deep black eyes focusing on her face. Shaela stroked it under the chin a few times, causing it to hiss dreadfully.

“Oh, he likes that. You are good with animals, I see.” Shaela smiled, feeling her apprehension melt away. The eel looked quite frightening, but it was friendly. She gently scratched the side of its head, causing it to hiss again. To her delight, the eel nuzzled her hand as if begging for more. Jewl chuckled.

“He wants a kiss. Better do it, or he'll give you no peace.” Shaela laughed and kissed it on the nose, causing it to hiss again. Jewl began caressing it on the gills as Shaela studied it for a minute and then whispered.

“Will you open your mouth, so I can see your teeth?” Jewl gave Shaela an odd look, shrugged and opened her mouth. As she did so, she saw the eel open its mouth wide, exposing razor-sharp teeth lining the entirety of its mouth. Shaela smiled at Jewl, fondly scratching the bottom of the eel's jaw.

“Not you . . . the eel.” Jewl closed her mouth and sheepishly grinned at Shaela, who continued her attentions to the creature.

“You are so beautiful. May I touch your mouth?” Jewl watched in astonishment as the eel hissed and nodded. Shaela reached in and gently probed the inside of its mouth with her fingers and caressing its neck with her free hand. After Shaela had satisfied her curiosity, she withdrew her hand. The eel slowly closed its mouth as Shaela leaned into it, closing her eyes and gently scratched it here and there.

“Thank you Folix. I wish I could swim that far. I would love to see your nest.” The eel wrapped itself about Shaela, begging for more attention as Jewl watched on in amazement.

“You talk to animals?” Shaela nodded. Jewl was astonished.

“Shaela, I can talk to it, I mean, Folix, but I cannot understand what he says. Shaela, you can speak with animals . . . and you understand what they say. That is so amazing.” Shaela felt a great desire to see Folix's nest. He had offered to take her there, but the distance, he had informed her, was far to great for her to hold her breath. Shaela turned to Jewl.

“I know it's a long shot, but you wouldn't happen to have a spell, or an organic, that would allow us to hold our breath for about an hour would you?” Jewl laughed and nodded, suddenly grinning with delight.

“I do.” Jewl looked at Folix and then hugged him tight, causing him to hiss louder than ever. Shaela studied Folix's, enjoying this creature immensely.

“Can we both come with you Folix?” The Eel nodded and hissed, suddenly

splashing the water with its tail in one powerful stroke. Jewl swam to the edge of the pool and lifted herself out. She turned and held up a finger.

“I’ll be back.” Shaela nodded and began scratching Folix’s jaw line and neck, enjoying him, but especially relishing the warmth of the pool.

Jewl returned quickly, carrying two small vials. As she approached the pool, she waved them at Shaela, grinning.

“I have quite a collection of potions and droughts.” She knelt down at the edge of the pool and held a vial out to Shaela. “This one is yours. Drink all of it, all at once.” Shaela took the vial, examining it as Folix peered over her shoulder, seeming as curious as she was. The vial was clear, with a yellow liquid inside. Carefully pulling the cork free, she put it to her lips as Jewl slipped into the water and did likewise. It tasted strongly of lemon, making her pucker and grimace as she swallowed. Jewl’s face contorted in a look which made Shaela point at her in amusement.

“Jewl, now what?” Jewl held up one finger and smacked her lips a few times.

“Wait for the effects. Then we dive.” Shaela waited, and as she did, she felt a tingle on each side of her neck, which quickly turned to an itching sensation. She scratched her neck and then stiffened as instant pain ripped into each side of her neck, as though a knife had instantly slit her neck multiple times. She looked at her hands, expecting to see blood but there was none. Glancing at Jewl, she noticed her face flushed red as she groaned. As suddenly as the pain started, it stopped. Jewl swam over before her and whispered, “There, that wasn't so bad, right?” Shaela laughed weakly in reply.

“Not so bad.” Jewl let out a quick breath, kissed her on the cheek and moved away, resting a hand upon Folix.

“We will have one full day’s time in which we will breath both water and be shielded from the pressure of deep water. Shaela, are you ready for a little adventure?” Shaela placed a hand to her neck, feeling gills, then moved closely to her new friend. Looking at her clothes, she bit her lip.

“What about our clothes?” Rolling her eyes, Jewl looked at Shaela, the corner of her mouth slightly curving upward.

“If you want to swim with a dress on, you can, but it will hinder your

movement. Shaela looked down into the water.

“It will get dark as we go,” Shaela said, then noticing an amulet Jewl wore, fashioned in the shaped of a nine pointed star. She pointed at it. “I can summon light. Would you mind if I made your amulet illuminate for us while we dive?” She hastily added, “It won't hurt it.” Jewl shook her head, slipped the amulet from about her neck and placed it in Shaela's hand. Looking at it, Shaela marveled at its craftsmanship. It looked to be crafted from white-gold. All points of the star were identical, with the exception of the descending point was slightly longer. At its center was set a small gem; a diamond.

“This is really beautiful Jewl.”

“Thank you. It was a gift.” Shaela looked at her and narrowed her eyes.

“Somebody likes you.” Jewl blushed and nodded, a very timid look crossing her face, then pointed at it, changing the subject quickly.

“Let's see you make it glow.” Shaela touched the center of the star.

“Thur.” She whispered as she envisioned the soft glow of a large candle. Instantly the diamond at the center of the star illuminated, shedding forth the glow of what she had envisioned. Folix hissed and submersed his head in the water as Jewl looked on in wonder, her eyes widening. Shaela looked down into the water. “I don't think our friend likes the light, but I made it small, so it would not irritate his vision too much. Jewl shrugged and gazed at Shaela in wonder.

“Where did you learn that?” Shaela reached up and put the amulet back around Jewl's neck.

“I learned it from a man named Chin.” Jewl gripped the star in silence for a minute, studying it.

“I am a caster also.” She said enthusiastically.

“Really. What path of magic do you follow?” Shaela was curious.

“I am a Healer.” She looked over at Shaela's dress. “And if I'm not mistaken, you wear the apprentice garments of a Mystic.” Shaela nodded.

“Well, a Mystic is a Healer, who has become a master Shaman. Only a master Shaman can tap into and study the ways of the Mystic. I know, because my

mother is a Mystic.” Shaela's mouth dropped open.

“Really? This all makes me wonder at the path of the Druid I follow. Why, if I wear the apprentice robes of Mother, am I only taught spells related to the Druid?” Jewl bit her lip, becoming serious.

“I don't know, but that was no Druid spell you just cast . . . that was of the order of the Light Weaver, which is magic of darkness and light. Shaela, do you know why you were brought here?” Shaela shook her head, all in wonder at the information Jewl had just given her.

“Hiska brought me.” Jewl smirked and looked down at the star.

“Shaela, the spell of light does not fall into the category and path of Druid. It is a spell from the path of Light Weaver, as I said. Apparently your mother saw more potential in you than you know. Shaela, let's go.” Jewl pointed down and winked at her. Confused and suddenly filled with many questions, Shaela hesitated, distracted by Jewl's words. Jewl noticed the hesitation and placed a gentle hand on Shaela's arm.

“When we come back, let's talk some more. Our ability to breath water is wasting.” She tilted her head, placing a gentle hand on Shaela's cheek. “Okay?” Shaela nodded and smiled, still distracted. After a moment, she shrugged.

“Okay, okay, I can wait . . . maybe.” Looking down at Folix, Shaela lowered her hand halfway into the water and snapped her fingers, just as Jewl had. Instantly, Folix raised from the water between them.

“We are ready Folix.” She whispered as she wrapped her arms about the eel's body a few feet below his neck. Jewl reached over and gripped the long body of the eel, holding on tight, not being able to contain an exclamation of excitement as Folix slowly turned and began to descend into the depths of the warm pool.

Shaela could feel the soothing water begin to steadily warm as they descended. At first, a feeling of panic begin to well up within her as she fought instinctively against inhaling the water. Her vision was blurred, and the warm water made her eyes itch, but she held on and hugged Folix tight, closing her eyes

tight as they vanished down into the depths of the pool in Jewl's private chamber.

As they descended, she recalled the last words Hiska had spoken to her, and it made her smile. She was glad she had the chance to spend some time here with Jewl. She was kind and very light hearted. She smiled as she felt the water become even warmer, then laughed as she felt a hand tickling her foot. She opened her eyes and looked back at her new friend who grinned at her enthusiastically. Shaela bared her teeth at Jewl playfully and slowly slid down the eel until she was next to her. She tried to say something but could not hear herself speak. The attempt caused Jewl to laugh and point at her, obviously mocking her.

Shaela noticed Jewl's hair in the water, and the thought occurred to her that it was strands of illuminated silver in the light of the amulet. All this was like in a dream which she felt she could happily live within forever. She reached out and caught a handful of Jewl's hair, admiring its beauty. Shaking her head, she let go and took her own hair and grimaced. Jewl laughed and reached up and took a handful of Shaela's hair and smiled, saying something she could not hear. Then she placed a gentle hand to Shaela's cheek and squinted her eyes. Shaela squinted back and embraced Jewl, feeling the beginnings of a strong bond between them. An unwelcome thought crossed her mind; she would have to leave this place in the near future. Still, she had made a friend, and this made her happy.

As they continued to descend, the water became hot, but not to the point of pain. She began to feel tired, and her strength began to drain. She looked at Jewl, who seemed vibrant and energetic. Jewl noticed something wrong, and began to watch Shaela now, concerned. She wrapped an arm about Shaela's waist to support her. Shaela thought to ask if Jewl would mind if she return, but didn't know how she could communicate it to her. She shut her eyes and held on, feeling Jewl's support, which helped immensely.

Within a few minutes, she felt the direction of their path change. Weakly, she opened her eyes, squinting into the heated water. Her vision was too blurry to see far ahead. She knew they were not descending, but moving sideways, swimming against a current. She could feel the body of Folix struggling more as

they moved along. Shaela weakly looked at Jewl, who appeared very concerned. She was frowning as she watched Shaela. Shaela winked at Jewl, then shut her eyes, fighting the effects of the heat. She felt as though she were floating, weightless and alone. Too exhausted to stay awake, she let herself fall into blessed sleep.

Slowly, she became conscious and blinked, straining to focus her vision, but it was no use. It was pitch black in every direction she looked. Placing her hands upon the ground, she felt a bed of pebbles. Steadily, carefully, Shaela moved into a kneeling position, fearing she would crack her head on something if she was not careful. Reaching out, she felt for any obstacles, but found none. She took in three deep breaths, holding the third, and listened, only hearing the beating of her heart and the lapping of water to her right. Feeling about the ground, Shaela found a small stone and raised it up before her.

“Thur,” she whispered quietly, and touched it with a finger. As the light from her spell illuminated the area, she found herself face to face with a dragon! She screamed and fell back, her breathing turning to short gasps as it tilted its head slightly to the side, watching her in open curiosity.

After a minute of gasping in terror, Shaela slowly got to her feet, her eyes darting here and there, desperately looking for any place to hide. To her dismay, there was nowhere to run; the cavern was smooth along both sides. Panic flooded her as she backed up against a wall of rock, horror nearly taking consciousness from her.

After a moment of curiosity, the dragon slowly stalked forward, eyeing Shaela as it closed in on her. She screamed and tried to run, but it quickly slammed an arm down, blocking the way. The only other way was into the water, and that was a fleeting hope. She changed directions, stumbled, and clumsily regained her feet. The dragon set another huge claw down, cutting off all routes of escape and blocking her into a small area with its body, as she turned this way and that, like a cornered mouse.

Feeling light headed and sick, she looked around, seeing the dragon, the ground and the rock wall behind her warp and bend. At that moment, she stopped, shuddering at the realization of what was about to happen. This realization caused her knees to buckle, and her heart to painfully race within her chest. The dragon narrowed its eyes at her and pulled its head slightly back, as if it was about to

strike. Raising her arms in fear, Shaela choked on a scream, coughing as if she had something caught in her throat. Growling, the dragon eyed her with slanted, malicious, eyes and moved its head close, sniffing her once.

Letting out her breath, she burst out, sobbing, and lowered herself to the surface of the cavern, thoughts of it chewing her alive causing her to cough and choke. Why had she come with Jewl? What had she been thinking? Now, now it was all too late. Slowly, Shaela lowered her shaking arms and looked up at it, trying to catch her breath.

“Please, I want to go home . . . please.” The dragon backed a step and lowered to the ground, spreading its massive wings, dripping with water, out to either side. It sighed heavily as it lowered to the ground, keeping a close eye on her.

Shaela wondered why it had not attacked. With trembling hands, she wiped her face and watched it settle down before her on the stone floor of the cavern. Gripping her chest, Shaela grimaced at the pain beating within her chest. Taking a few deep breathes, she tried in vain to calm herself.

“I just want to go home,” she wept. The dragon tilted its head for a moment, then shook its wings, snorting, looking at her in silence for a minute before stretching its head forward to sniff her again. As it smelled her, she closed her eyes and shuddered, placing her hands upon the rock surface of the cave behind her for support.

“I hope you are a fish eater’,” she whispered in a badly trembling voice, tears spilling freely down her face. Ever so slowly, Shaela reached up a trembling hand and placed it on the tip of the dragon's nose between its nostrils. As she made contact with it, the dragon flinched and bared its teeth, its eyes narrowing hatefully as it tensed. A deep rumble filled the air as she quickly removed her hand. In a quivering voice Shaela spoke to it as she fought to stay conscious.

“You don't like to be touched. Sorry.” It lifted its head slightly and snorted, sending her hair flying back, and, at the same moment, causing her to scream. Shaking its head, it glared at her, the end of its long tail twitching this way and

that, and slapping the ground. Not knowing much of anything about dragons, and their ways, Shaela froze, not daring to move.

In her youth, she overheard some men talking about dragons in a corner of common room at the inn their family owned. She heard that a dragon, if it was not hungry, would trap and keep its next meal alive until it was hungry. She thought of calmly, slowly walking away. Maybe if she was casual, it would not be aggressive. Ever so carefully, she stood and began to climb over its paw, but it shifted its leg so she could not get by. Quickly she abandoned the idea. To her, it was obvious it wanted to keep her right where she was.

Looking up, she noticed a long bone protruding from its mouth. Without a doubt, it was not the bone of a fish, and this disheartened her even the more. She stared at the bone for only a short moment before conceiving of an idea. Taking a deep breath, she tried her best to calm down.

“Well Shaela,” she whispered, talking to herself, “maybe a bit of kindness might save you.” She stepped up to the dragon's mouth and stopped, noticing it watching her with one eye. Fighting an almost unbearable instinct to run, Shaela slowly reached up and wrapped her fingers about the length of splintered bone. Disgusted beyond measure, she pulled. It was stuck tight but she could move it if she pulled up and down. The Dragon bared its teeth, raising its head a little. A deep rumble filled the cavern, causing her to freeze in fear.

“Open your mouth a little. I can get this out from between your teeth, if you let me.” She began to sob as she spoke, unable to control her fear. Stubbornly, she pulled harder, daring to hope this would work. Suddenly the shard of bone came loose. Shaela fell backwards to the ground, striking her head on the stone. Dropping the bone, she rolled over and grabbed her head, feeling a knot already rising beneath her hand. Getting a grip on her situation, she sat up, still holding her head in pain.

“Ouch!” she cried out, then removed her hand to look at it, half expecting to see blood. There was none, but it felt as though someone had hit her in the head with a staff. Standing up, she shook her head, trying to shake the pain out.

The dragon sniffed her, then curled its two great arms in under its chest and rested its head on the ground, eyeing her. After the pain subsided, she looked up into its eye and motioned to its mouth.

“Doesn't that feel better?” she wept. “When I get something out of my teeth, it feels better.” She tried to laugh, thinking how stupid she just sounded. But it was the best she could do at the moment. Rubbing her head, she slowly approached the dragon again, eyeing its mouth for any other bones, but found none. She placed a hand on the side of its mouth.

“That feel better?” It shifted slightly and opened its mouth, exposing a huge mouth full of arm-length teeth. It's breath was awful, causing her to inwardly shrink away disgust. As it opened its mouth, she noticed a few more bones trapped between a few of its teeth. Trembling, she bit her lip and swallowed hard. Looking into one of the dragon's large eyes, she sighed heavily.

“Okay, I'll get them out,” she stated, trying to be brave, “but,” she paused, shuddering, “just don't eat me.” She reached in and took hold of the large joint of a creature. She tried to work it free, keeping her other hand on its muzzle, too terrified to use more than one hand. It was no use, try as she might, Shaela could not work it free.

The dragon opened its mouth more, and shifted its head to the side, giving her a better view, yet try as she might, Shaela could not do it. Finally, she growled in emotional frustration. Becoming still, she peered into its throat and shuddered. After a moment, she hung her head and whispered, “Please, don't eat me.” Carefully she pulled herself into its mouth, feeling its course tongue against her back as she carefully positioned herself, placing two feet against both sides of its teeth. Gripping the bone tight, she began to work it back and forth, resisting the sudden urge to do more than gag. After a short contest of strength, the bone suddenly popped free.

The dragon groaned and swallowed carefully, not pulling Shaela down into its throat as she removed eight more bone fragments. After finishing, she carefully straddled its teeth, soaked from head to foot with dragon saliva, weeping with

despair. Back on the ground, she turned and rested her head against its mouth, her hair dripping with the moisture of its foul breath, and began dry heaving until her sides ached. After gaining control of herself, she looked up to see it eyeing her intensely.

“I need to wash myself.” Gaggling, she walked away, expecting the dragon to block her path again. She was surprised it did not, yet it followed her as she walked to the water's edge. Kneeling down, she began cupping water with her hands, washing dragon saliva from her body, beginning with her hair.

After cleaning up, she stood and turned, facing the massive reptile, which sniffed her, then abruptly snorted. Raising her arms up over her head, she screamed. Moving back a little, it tilted its head to the side, growled, then moved close, sniffing her again. Feeling hopeless, Shaela raised a trembling hand to its nose and took a few short breaths, staring at the dragon, not know what to think of this situation. With everything she had learned, she had never studied this type of creature. She contemplated on what to do now, suspecting a wrong move might prove disastrous. It had not killed her. It had actually let her pull the debris from its teeth, which was an experience she wished to avoid the rest of her life, as short as that might be. She suspected the dragon liked it.

“Well,” she whispered, “I suppose you are not going to eat me yet, seeming you had the chance.” She scratched its muzzle with her nails, and noticed it began to lean into her hand. With a sudden hope, she continued. “Like that, do you? Okay, let's give you a work over. Maybe I can earn some more trust with you,” she stated, her voice still shaking. Reaching up her other hand, Shaela began scratching it briskly, and then worked her nails across its muzzle to its neck. She noticed it enjoyed the scratching as it leaned into her nails and began grunting and squinting, its eyes closed as it arched its neck into her nails. Its behavior reminded her of the way a cat acted when scratched. Nervously, Shaela laughed, thinking of Hiska when she worked him at the base of his ears; how he would arch his neck in a similar fashion. She still feared this creature, yet it seemed to accept her now . . . when before it had growled at her, baring its teeth in dire warning.

As she worked her nails through each scale, Shaela noticed a glint in between two scales and worked her nails down to the area at its left shoulder. As she worked the scale up, a gem fell to the ground. As it did, the dragon reached down and took it up between two talons with a dexterity that surprised her. She didn't stop, but leaned heavily into its neck and shoulder, scratching it furiously and picking out debris from under its scales here and there. After a handful of small rocks, three more gems and a handful of gold coins, she stopped and walked around to the other side, repeating her efforts. After what seemed like the span of full day, she finished.

“Well, only your feet to go.” She looked down and whistled at the small pile of treasure the dragon hoarded now between its two great paws. She noticed it peering at the gems without blinking, as if mesmerized. Kneeling in front of the dragon, so the pile of treasure lay between them, she held out a hand.

“I wish you could understand me. You are not mean; the legends are false . . . well, with you that is.” She laughed softly, still very nervous, and watched the great beast greedily covet its gems. Looking over at the water's edge, she despaired if ever getting back the way she came. She wondered what was going to happen when the dragon became hungry. The thought made her shudder. Well, at least it will be quick, she thought, sighing, watching the dragon play with its treasure.

Looking up at it, she slowly shook her head, the pain in her chest slowly subsiding, leaving her weak and exhausted. She missed Hiska so much, and now would probably never see him again. The thought caused her to burst into tears as she rested a hand on one of the dragon's paws. Beyond hope, Shaela yearned for the miracle that she could impress this creature enough to cultivate some form of friendship with it. Shaela did not see one of mankind's greatest terrors observing her with great interest, its eyes no longer filled with suspicion and distrust. She did not see the change of its countenance, its eyes softening as it observed her weep.

As her thoughts began to once again threaten all the precious hope she ever

dared allow to flourish within her, something happened at that moment, something which forever changed her opinion of such terrible beasts. The dragon singled out the largest gem, and pushed it across the rocks with a single talon, then delicately took her hand and placed it over the gem. She could smell its breath washing over her steadily, very much disliking it. But this was nothing if, by some turn of fate, she had made a connection, and so soon.

Looking up, Shaela closed her fingers about the precious stone and swallowed her tears back, giving the creature a delicate and bewildered smile. In all the rumors, in all the stories, in all the tales, dragons never parted with their treasure, being far too selfish, greedy and black hearted. This dragon . . . shared. Shaela leaned forward, a sudden feeling washing over her as she reached up once again and rested a gentle, if not filthy, hand on its mouth.

“Thank you,” she whispered and held up the gem, admiring it. The dragon sent her hair flying with a soft snort and returned its attention to the other gems, eyeing them with an almost feverish gaze. Shaela noticed the gem it had given her was a diamond, and a rather large one at that. She whistled in admiration as she held it up, watching it glitter in the light of her spell. Her eyes shifted to the dragon.

“I’m hungry,” she stated slowly, patting her abdomen and pointing into her mouth. There seemed no food sources where she was, and this worried her immensely. She grimaced as it gave no response, so she made a smacking sound with her mouth, hoping it would understand. Setting the gem down, she stood, realizing all her belongings were back in Jewl's chamber.

Jewl! She panicked as she remembered her friend. Oh no, Jewl! She walked over to the water's edge, hearing the dragon shift as she passed it. Kneeling down, she washed her hands, dark thoughts invading her mind of Jewl's body rotting away somewhere in the deep.

“Where am I?” She whispered, glancing back to see the dragon carefully gathering up the gems and coins. “Lost, hungry, thirsty, alone. This is disturbing, dragon.” She moved down the water's edge a few paces and cupped the warm

water in her hand, tasting it. To her relief, it was good, though warm. She swallowed a few handfuls and then dunked her head in, soaking the entirety of her hair. Throwing her head back, Shaela reached up and smoothed her hair back. She stood and walked over to the diamond and picked it up, very aware it was watching her every move. Smiling slightly, she neared the large reptile and placed a hand on the cluster of small horns above its eye.

“I have to eat, or I will get sick. Hmmm, I need to give you a name, and, simply, dragon will not do.” She thought for a minute as she unconsciously began scratching the soft area about its eye, causing it to grunt with pleasure. Her eyes suddenly lit up. “Talon. I'll name you Talon.” She wrapped her arms about its neck as far as she could and squeezed. “Talon.” In turn, the dragon wrapped its large paw up behind Shaela, curling two of its talons gently over her shoulder as its eyes slowly closed. Its breathing deepened and relaxed. Shaela laughed. “I'm still hungry.” She looked about the area and got an idea. Pulling free, she found one of the bone shards she had pulled from Talon's teeth and picked it up, her face twisting in disgust. Turning, she put it up to her mouth, pretending to eat it, smacking her lips and resting a hand on her stomach.

“Talon, I'm hungry.” The dragon looked at the bone, then shifted its gaze to her. It looked at the water for a moment, then set down its small handful of treasure and leaped into the water with a tremendous splash, vanishing. Shaela hoped it understood and knelt down, throwing the bone away in disgust, feeling exhausted. She was grateful for the warmth of the stone, or this ordeal would have been unbearable. No decent clothes, no staff, no Hiska and no provisions; not an ideal situation.

She stood and, for the first time, peered back into the cave, seeing it fade into blackness, wondering where it led to. If she explored it, maybe she could find a way out; there was no other way unless she was a fish.

She made her way into the back of the cavern, weaving her way through a battalion of huge stalagmites, some of which were broken, no doubt due to the comings and goings of the dragon.

She had not traveled far when, through a bend in the cave, she entered another cavern chamber filled with a site that caused her to stop dead in her tracks, in all wonder. Before her lay the grand scene of a treasure hoard, the likes of which she could have only imagined would be recited in a grand bard's tale. She gasped, seeing piles of money and many items which glittered and sparkled in uncountable rays and points of multi-colored lights in the glow of the stone she held. Absolutely speechless, her eyes wandered throughout the mass bed of wealth, into which lay many weapons, armors and shields, mingled into thick beds of gold and silver coins. She stood in awe as the light of her spell caused a myriad of gems to reflect the light, creating the appearance of stars in the cave.

“Wow, Talon, you have been busy,” she whispered breathlessly. She wanted to go explore it all; touch everything. Maybe she could find something to wear. Even though there were no other people down here, she felt self-conscious merely wearing underclothes. She hesitated, recalling the stories she had heard of the greed of dragons. Thinking twice, Shaela backed up and found a rock to rest upon. Once seated, a weariness began to creep into her limbs, and her strength began to fade. Laying her head down, she closed her eyes and curled an arm up under her head. She felt weak. She needed rest.

Soon after laying down, Shaela fell into an uneasy sleep, trapped within in a dream where Talon was searching for her desperately as she hid in the crevice of a rock, aided by werewolves who were trying desperately to save her.

A dragon roar startled Shaela to consciousness with a jerk. Leaping to her feet, Shaela staggered, suddenly overcome by an intense head rush that caused her vision to blur. Staggering, she gripped the wall of the chamber and shook her head, trying to get over the unbalance attacking her. After regaining her senses, she quickly left the cavern, hearing her new friend calling. She began to fear, hoping Talon was not angry at her disappearance. As she hurried down the tunnel, back toward the water, she soon caught sight of Talon. As it caught sight of her, it snorted. She should never have left the immediate area. She trembled as she ran back to the dragon and stopped. Talon sniffed her and snorted again, digging its talons into the rock beneath it. Quickly, Shaela reached up and scratched its nose.

“Easy Talon, easy. I didn't run away. I'm right here,” she soothed, hoping the beast would calm down. Talon snorted a third time, as if complaining, then slowly relaxed. The beast turned back to the water's edge, gripped a rather large fish and turned back to her. Licking her lips hungrily, Shaela smiled.

“Thank you Talon. You just saved my life.” The dragon moved away from the water, turned and lowered itself to the ground. It crossed its front legs as it lowered itself down, and then plopped its head upon the surface of the rock, watching her. She looked at the large fish in her hands and smiled. “You know, you are pretty smart.” Walking up to the dragon, she set the fish down, then began scratching the dragon on the nose.

“No, I take that back, you are brilliant.” Talon grunted and sniffed the fish. Working her nails thoroughly about Talon's neck, she gave it a proper thank you. Talon quickly exposed its neck, enjoying the work over. After a while, Shaela picked up the fish hungrily and looked around. “I need a fire to cook it,” she mumbled. She thought of the treasure hoard and suspected there might be something there that would do the trick. She had never eaten raw fish, and she was not even tempted to try it.

Glancing at Talon, Shaela wondered if it would let her search through its treasure. She really needed something to wear besides underclothes, not that it

mattered down here in the dark with a dragon. Walking back toward the second cavern, Shaela began to feel intensely exhausted. Her stomach felt like a knot and was constantly growling at her. Talon fell in beside her, gating smoothly along, reminding her of the typical stride of a panther, its motion fluid and graceful. Its wings were tucked and folded neatly along both sides of its body, giving it an almost griffin-like look. As the lake water glistened off its scale coat in the light of her spell, she began to admire and appreciate Talon, relieved it had accepted her. Why it had not attacked her, she could only guess. Apparently not all dragons were ill tempered, and for this she was grateful.

As the dragon's lair slowly came into sight, Shaela reached over and gripped the horn on Talon's head.

“Talon,” she stated firmly. The dragon stopped, turning its head, exhaling. She smiled and scratched its mouth. “I need to cook this fish.” She set the fish down and wrapped her arms about the beast's mouth, facing it so her front leaned against its nose. “Please?” Talon began to breath in that deep rhythmic purr and grunted, obviously not understanding. Shaela bit her lip, not knowing what else to do.

“Well, here goes everything.” She hugged Talon tightly and turned, slowly making her way through the scattered treasure. The dragon instantly followed her, watching her every move, yet did not stop her. She searched for chests and travelers packs which might hold anything for fire starting, although she was careful not to touch anything. It wasn't hard to find what she was looking for, and eventually Shaela stopped before a pile of bodies, now drying husks which had rotted over time in the lair. Some of them still had backpacks attached to them. Shaela frowned, feeling an unnatural apprehension building as she gazed in horror at a pile of corpses before three large archways. Glancing over at Talon, she shivered.

“Why did you spare me?” Talon grunted and sniffed, watching her intensely. She needed to look through the packs of the victims, which might just contain what she needed. Reaching down, she reluctantly pulled on one of the

packs, but the corpse's arms were still through the not-completely-rotted-straps. With a trembling sigh, Shaela reached down and grabbed the skeletal arm and tried to push it through the strap, but it would not bend. She had to make the arm bend to get it through, and as she forced it, it snapped at the elbow. Dropping the arm, Shaela gritted her teeth and shivered uncontrollably. This was thoroughly sickening, but she had to continue, or eat raw fish. As the corpse shook, its head rolled off, landing on the rock surface at her feet, causing her to step back. She glanced down at its `fleshless gaze, meeting its eternal grin. Shaela closed her eyes tight.

“Hiska, where are you?” she mourned, then began to quietly weep. Tears streamed her face as she worked the pack from the broken corpse. Soon the pack was free. She turned away and set it on the ground and fumbled to open it. Soon she had the pack opened and was searching through its contents. To her dismay, she did not find anything to start a flame with, but she did find a bottle of kerosine, which was a start.

Reluctantly, she turned back to the large pile of bodies and removed another pack from yet another body which gave her more difficulty than the first. Talon curiously watched Shaela work the pack free. She didn't know for sure, but suspected the dragon was entertained by the scene. Stopping, she looked over at the beast, her eyes narrowing.

“Enjoying this, are you? Well, if you are, only one of us is.” She shook her head and opened the top of the backpack and looked in. Instantly a large gray spider leapt out directly into Shaela's hair and began struggling. She screamed and retreated, flailing away at it, desperately trying to get it out of her hair as another skittered out and down the side of the pack. Shaela knocked it to the ground and backed into Talon's side as it ran directly toward her. She screamed again and leapt up against the dragon, frantically climbing up onto the beast.

“Get away, get away!” She screamed as she managed to climb up onto Talon's back. She shuddered and watched the rather large spider vanish underneath the dragon. “Get it, get it!” She screamed, pointing down feverishly.

Talon carefully raised up and looked underneath, sniffing the spider. Shaela looked around, seeing the other run into the pile of corpses. The dragon lifted its head, looked at Shaela and snorted. She froze and pointed at Talon, gritting her teeth.

“It's not funny, Talon!” She raised a finger at the dragon, which was breathing strangely and grunting. “Talon, it's not funny! I hate spiders! They are disgusting!” Talon raised its head, drawing close to her and sniffed Shaela's face and hair. Then it backed away from the spider and flicked it, killing it instantly. She breathed a sigh of relief and patted one of Talon's wings.

“Thank you. You wouldn't care to open the rest of the packs for me, would you?” She shook her head as the dragon laid back down. “I didn't think so.” Shrugging, she slid back down Talon's side and nervously approached the pack again, the effects of her hunger winning over the urge to climb back upon the dragon's back and stay there.

Shaela opened six more packs, and only had to retreat up onto Talon one more time to escape an arm-length centipede, which Talon promptly ate. Finally she held a flint and steel in her hand, feeling triumphant. She had also gathered up a number of tools with wooden handles found within the packs, which she brought over to where she left the fish. Carefully she splintered the wooden handles of each tool with a rock and put the wood into a pile. Using the flint, she easily started a small fire, over which she proudly cooked the fish.

The dragon watched her start the fire. When the flames crackled in the wood, it backed away and laid down, staring at it. Shaela ate the fish, picking out the bones thoroughly before eating. When she had eaten her fill, she offered the rest of it to the dragon, which took it gladly, though, to Talon, it was only a scrap. As it swallowed, Shaela put out the fire, knowing she would need the wood for later use.

After the last of the smoke had ceased, she felt tired and looked for a place to lay down. She found the rock she had laid down on before, but as she lay down and closed her eyes, the image of that hand-sized spider wriggling in her hair came

to mind. At the thought, sleep suddenly fled from her, compelling her to stand. Looking around, she shuddered, then looked at Talon. Walking over to the dragon, she climbed up onto its back and curled up between its wings. It was a good spot; well, better than the floor of the cave. As she curled up, Talon sighed heavily, adjusting its wings so Shaela could not fall during her slumber. She smiled and thought this experience would make quite a story if she ever got back to tell Hiska and Mother. Reaching up, she began caress one of the dragon's wings, gently using her nails to work into the hollow around its bone structure.

“Talon,” she yawned, beginning to fade. “Your name is Talon.” The great reptile raised its head, turning an eye to her and made a sound, as if attempting to speak. Throwing Talon a weary smile, she shifted into the most comfortable position. Almost instantly, Shaela fell into a dream in which she was the princess of a kingdom of dragons, plagued with disgusting spiders which skittered across the palace floor, constantly touching her.

The hunt had taken nine days and was successful. Hiska earned an ever-increasing honor standing among the Mistwalkers. He was fiercely proud that he could aide his friend in bringing to justice eight humans who were responsible for the vicious attack on Jenthra's people.

As they entered back into the city, Hiska was met by one of the females, who was very anxious. As she stopped him, she took in a slow quivering breath, tears suddenly streaming her face. Hiska froze, narrowing his eyes at her.

“What is it?” he asked, sudden suspicion and fear gripping his heart. She dropped to her knees before him, lowering her face to the ground, causing Jenthra's eyes to widen.

“Hiska, forgive me; I can't find her,” she sobbed as Hiska's eye darted frantically to the borders of his Guardian Robes. To his relief, Shaela's name was yet upon the cloth in silver, rune-like, letters. He breathed a sigh of relief and then looked down at Jewl.

“Tell Hiska what happened.” The mancat picked Jewl up from the ground, glaring at her. Jenthra looked at Hiska, then at Jewl.

“Tell him Jewl,” Jenthra commanded. Jewl looked at Hiska with bloodshot eyes and nodded. It was obvious she had not slept in days. A look of remorse twisted into her delicate face as she sucked in a quivering breath.

“Shaela and I bathed in the hot pools of my home. We decided to swim down into the depth at the invitation of a Mistwater Eel we had befriended.” Jenthra shook his head in disbelief.

“An eel talked to you?” Jewl wiped her face and nodded.

“It understands me, but I cannot understand it. Shaela could both understand and talk to it. She told me the eel's name was Folix, and that it wanted to show us its nest. I'm so sorry. I so very sorry Hiska.” Hiska listened, waiting with growing impatience for more information.

“We drank a water breathing potion and were taken down by the eel. As we traveled, a current swept us both apart. I held to the eel as it returned me to the

surface, but Shaela was swept down into the deep.” She sobbed and averted her eyes from Hiska's, wringing her hands in anguish. Hiska looked at Jenthra, pointing to his robes.

“Shaela yet lives, or Shaela's name would vanish.” Hiska suddenly lowered his head, as if shamed. “Hiska was told never to leave her side. Jenthra, assured Hiska she would be safe here. Hiska thought the hunt might prove too much for Shaela, and thought he was protecting her and fulfilling her promise to Jenthra. Hiska is a fool!” A glint of hope hatched in Jewl's eyes. She eyed the borders of the Guardian Robes and pointed with a shaking hand.

“She's alive?” Hiska nodded and shut his eyes tight.

“Jenthra, Hiska was informed by the Mystic Queen of the Harritt Catur that Shaela can speak with her, for Shaela wears the apprentice robes given her by her mentor, and are enchanted. She can contact our Mystic, who can help. Shaela and my queen are bound to each other.” At Hiska’s words, a look of relief and hope filled Jenthra’s countenance.

“I will go to our Mystic, here in Mistwater Sanctuary, and see if there is anything she can do to speed you on your way. I will use all the resources which the power of my station can call upon, and beg all others for assistance. I and Jewl will go down into the deep and search for your Shaela. I swear an oath to you Hiska, that I will never return to my home until she is safe in your care once again.” Hiska took Jenthra’s oath with all seriousness, knowing Jenthra would now die before he stopped looking for Shaela.

“Jenthra is a loyal ally. Hiska would do anything for Jenthra and his people.” Jenthra held out a hand, which Hiska took without hesitation. Jewl shook her head and laid an unsteady hand upon Jenthra's arm in silence, causing him to freeze in sudden apprehension as he slowly shifted a stern gaze to her.

“What is it Jewl?” She shook her head nervously.

“We were submersed, leaving behind most of our belongings. Shaela does not have her robes with her.” Jenthra looked to Hiska, who was staring in disbelief at Jewl.

“We will find her Hiska, I swear it.” Jenthra said, a firm resolution in the tone of his voice. “Jewl, take us to your room of pools.” Jewl turned and ran to her personal chamber as Hiska and the Captain of the Guard pursued close behind. Soon they stood by the pool as Jewl retrieved Shaela's belongings and handed them to Hiska, who took them and turned to Jenthra.

“Hiska cannot leave Mistwalker Sanctuary now; it would do no good.” Jenthra looked down into the water for a moment, and then to Jewl.

“We are going after her Jewl, and you are coming with us. We need to prepare for this. I will go and get what provisions we will need for the journey. Jewl, gather together what you can . . . hurry.” He turned to leave and then stopped and turned back to her. “Pack for a long mission.” Jewl nodded, avoiding Hiska's eyes. Jenthra bolted out of the chamber and vanished, leaving a very nervous Jewl in company with Hiska. No sooner were they alone, Hiska took Jewl by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him.

“Hiska does not blame Jewl. Jewl, Hiska and Shaela are to be bound to each other. Please, Hiska must have Shaela back. If Hiska loses her . . .” His words trailed off into silence as he glanced down into the water. Jewl looked up, tears suddenly streaming her face.

“I will do my very best Hiska, I promise. I am so sorry.” Hiska released her, delicately nuzzled the side of her head and embraced her tenderly. She suddenly broke down, sobbing and wrapped her arms about his neck. “Hiska, if it were possible, I would trade places with her. Forgive me.” Hiska held her for a time, attempting to comfort the Mistwalker female. One thing he did understand about females; they were emotional creatures. At first he had supposed Shaela was exceptionally emotional and unique among females, even according to Human standards. Hiska was beginning to understand, and it crossed his mind that the Human society was more than just one culture. The males were much different than the females. In regards to the Humans, the Mistwalker race was no different in behavior, with the exception that they were more accepting of his own race. Gently he held the shaking, emotional female, not knowing what else could be

done. In all his life, he had never been exposed to such tender creatures . . . and he thought himself bettered for the experience.

After a few moments, she slowly released her grip from about his neck and gave Hiska a desperate smile. In return he nuzzled her affectionately and removed the fragment of a leaf from her hair.

“I'm going to get some things,” she said, trying to control herself. “I'll be quick.” With that, Jewl broke away from Hiska.

“Jewl, Hiska knows you are not to blame,” Shaela's Guardian called after her. After she had departed, Hiska turned his attention to the pool before him, staring into its depths in silence.

Shaela awoke, blinking and looking around, not quite sure where she was. The ground shifted beneath her slowly, drawing her attention to the surface she lay upon. Rolling over she stared up into blackness, the memory of where she was slowly coming back to her. Again the surface shifted slowly beneath her. There was a dragon . . . she remembered now! She closed her eyes, noticing no change in her vision. The spell of light must have gone out within the gem Talon had given her.

“Shaela,” a voice called to her, though it was no more than a whisper in the darkness, or maybe an echo in her mind. She opened her eyes again and froze, listening. As she bent all her attention on her surroundings, a feeling cascaded over her, making her aware she was not alone. Something was out in the darkness, and she felt a beckoning which she instinctively perceived as desirable . . . somehow pleasing. Slowly, she sat up, straining, listening, wanting to hear, or feel, that call again. The dragon stirred and lifted its head, staring at her, though she could not see it.

Sliding down the giant reptile's side, Shaela landed and crouched to the warm stone of the cavern's floor and felt around until she located a round hand-sized rock. Holding it up she touched it with a finger.

“Thur,” she whispered. Light radiated from the stone; illuminating the area, causing Talon to blink and grimace in annoyance at the sudden radiance. She put the rock down behind a larger rock jutting up from the floor and approached Talon, resting herself and wrapping her arms tightly about the end of its huge mouth. Laying the side of her head down, she closed her eyes, grateful for the dragon's company.

“Good morning Talon,” she said and kissed the dragon on the nose. The dragon closed its eyes and began breathing heavily. After a minute, Shaela looked at the back of the chamber where she had seen the three openings, yet in wonder at what she felt when she heard her name spoken.

She wondered where the tunnels led to, particularly the largest of the three

entrances, which was easily big enough for her new friend pass through. The other two entrances were not. Looking into the openings, she began to think. Talon had become agitated at her disappearance yesterday, and she feared the dragon's wrath. It seemed hopeless to venture out of the beast's sight, but she needed to get back if possible.

Looking around, she wondered at how this dragon had collected so much treasure. Her eyes fell to the rather large heap of corpses, and it reminded her that Talon had not been unchallenged. She decided quickly, this treasure stash would have to be kept a secret, should she manage to get out of this place. Talon had saved her life. The thought of telling others what riches lay here for the taking, should the dragon be slain, was no less than betrayal. No, Talon would never be spoken of.

She wondered if the dragon would let her go through the large trunks and chests dotting the piles of wealth. She needed clothes, and she was very reluctant to leave this place unless she could find something decent to wear. She walked over to the dragon's side and began working her nails through its scales, one at a time, removing anything which might prove a nuisance. As she worked through its scale coat, the dragon's breathing could be heard, thrumming throughout the cavern as it laid on its side. Shaela suddenly laughed and grabbed one of its talons and playfully wiggled it. The dragon raised its head and snorted loudly at her, its tail suddenly twitching. She climbed up onto its side and stood, raising her arms high into the air.

“I am the queen of this realm!” she shouted, pointing at Talon. “I am your queen . . . obey me!” Her eyes blazed fiercely as she stared down at Talon, who grunted and looked up at her, its tail twitching like a cat's. She leapt onto Talon's neck like a cat and growled at the dragon.

“I command you to yield up your precious commodities of fine silk and satin.” Talon made some more odd noises, which seemed as though it were amused, and carefully stood. As she retreated from the monster, it suddenly shook vigorously from its head to the tip of its tail. Shaela could hear a chorus of joints

cracking as the dragon shook.

“Ouch?” She stated playfully, closing one eye and squinting the other at Talon. After the dragon was finished with its wake up stretch, it sat up and looked around. Shaela walked up and began scratching its stomach vigorously.

“So, will you let me look through the trunks?” She smiled up at Talon, who looked down at her, then rested its nose lightly on the top of her head. She pushed on Talon and laughed.

“Well, I suppose it can't hurt to try.” She pointed a finger at the dragon, giving it a stern look. “Now behave yourself Talon. I'm just looking for something to wear.” A bit nervous, she slowly walked over to a large trunk and placed a hand on it to see what Talon's reaction would be. The dragon followed her, but didn't seem to care. She studied it for a bit and then began fumbling with the latches. After opening it, Shaela looked at the contents of the chest.

“Well, lucky me,” she laughed. Reaching up, she scratched Talon's chin. The dragon had positioned itself directly over Shaela so that she stood between its two great front legs. Reaching in, she took up one of many beautiful dresses laid neatly folded one on top of the other. She held it up by the shoulders, feeling the smoothness of the silken fabric. Matching the dress to herself, she turned and looked up at a dragon, who watched her with its head tilted to one side.

“Do you like it?” she asked, not expecting an answer. Slowly, almost warily, the beast sniffed the dress, then the contents of the trunk. Shaela neatly folded the dress and put it back. Going through them all, she ended up picking out a royal-blue dress and put it aside. She placed a finger to her lips, thinking aloud.

“I need something for my feet.” She made her way over to another trunk, the dragon in tow. “May I please look in this one? I'm not interested in your treasure. I just need clothing. My feet hurt from walking on this stone.” Turning, she checked the trunk's lock, which snapped open as she pulled on it. Pushing the heavy lid open, she set the lid back as gently to the ground as possible, then looked at its contents, which revealed the luxuries of her gender. Reaching in, she retrieved a hair brush, carved from solid ivory, and some bottles of perfume which

she carefully opened and smelled. She especially enjoyed one of them and held it to her, like a child who has gotten a desirable gift at her birthday party. As she opened the perfumes, the dragon snorted and shook its head, backing a step.

“Sorry Talon. We Humans like it.”

Shaela opened six more trunks before finding everything she needed. She also found a few traveling cloaks, from which she chose a black one. Placing all the items into the cloak, she took up all the corners, lifting the bundle of “necessities” over her shoulder, then turned to Talon.

“I really need a bath before I put these on.” She approached the dragon and scratched its chin as it reluctantly sniffed what she had picked out. Smiling, she nuzzled the dragon playfully, attempting to distract it from what she carried.

“Thank you Talon.” The dragon raised a paw and gently wrapped it about Shaela's back and shoulders. As it made contact with her, the thought of just how easy it would be to kill her came to mind. The remarkable thing about this huge beast was just how gentle it was. Placing her free hand on one of Talon's claws, she bit her lip and smiled, feeling suddenly sentimental.

“You really are a loveable beast, aren't you? Come on Talon, I'll need some company while I bathe. Who knows what lurks in those waters. Come on.” She pulled on the dragons front tooth, coaxing it to follow her as she walked over and retrieved the lighted stone. She then proceeded out of the treasure chamber and down to the water's edge.

Placing her belongings and the spellbound rock on the bank near the water, she let go of the dragon and ventured into the water, suddenly grateful the its warmth. Slipping into a deeper area, she stripped off her filthy underclothes and washed herself with some scented soap discovered in one of the chests, then submersed herself completely as the dragon watched on. It only took a moment to bathe, but the water was so relaxing, she stayed for a while more and enjoyed this rare moment of pleasure, feeling the tenseness in her muscles slowly relax.

After a time, she withdrew from the water, eyeing fresh clothes (well as fresh as she could find in a dragon's lair). First she took the perfume and

uncorked the bottle. The moment she did, Talon made a sound, as if complaining about the stench. She smiled like a child as she poured a few drops into the palm of her hand. Briskly she rubbed her hands together, raked her fingers through her lengthy black hair, then over her neck and shoulders. The scent of the perfume was wonderful, to her. Talon sneezed and backed up a step, making her laugh. She then took some underclothing and slipped them on. The soft fabric felt so welcomed after the ordeal of wearing filthy rags. She slipped the silk dress over her head and began to smooth it out. She realized the draw-strings in the back would go untied, which made her grimace. Then she got an idea and pulled her arms back through the sleeves and took it back off. Carefully, she laced up the dress and tied it. Putting it back on was a rather difficult task, but doable. It wasn't a perfect fit, but it was better than unlaced. After putting on some soft leather boots, she laced them up and stood, taking up the cloak, which she eagerly fastened about her shoulders.

“Don't forget this little treasure, Shaela,” she stated as she snatched up and slipped the perfume into a pocket within the cloak. She held out her hands and spun a circle before the dragon. “Well my friend, what do you think?” Talon snorted and neared her sniffing. It shook its head and sneezed violently, backing away, the sight of which caused Shaela to burst out laughing.

“Talon, I'm hungry. Would you go get me another fish?” She made an eating motion and then patted her abdomen. Seeming to understand, Talon side stepped around Shaela and dove into the water, vanishing. Shaela watched the dragon swim out of sight, leaving a large wake that spread in a V pattern until it vanished into the shadows beyond her eyesight. Raising an eyebrow, she quickly headed back to the second chamber.

As she entered the treasure chamber, she realized Talon was smart. The dragon remembered. While alone, she looked through all the trunks, enjoying herself . . . that was until she saw a man standing in the largest opening of the three caves.

Shaela was speechless. She dropped a few of the oddments she had fancied and backed away, her heart suddenly racing and going cold within her chest. She stumbled on something and fell backward into a large pile of coins. Quickly she scrambled to her feet as the man left the tunnel and walked casually toward her, a slight smile playing across his lips. As he approached, she panicked and pointed a trembling finger at him.

“No, no, no . . . go away!” Instantly he stopped and looked around at everything in the chamber.

“You have an impressive collection here . . . my lady.” He sat down on one of the chests and scanned the area. Shaela looked quickly about the ground, spotting a sheathed blade, strung with a jewl-adorned belt laying by itself, half buried in gold. She scrambled over to it and ripped it out of the scabbard, pointing it awkwardly at the man.

“Leave me alone! Go away!” The man stood slowly and shrugged.

“Do not fear me Shaela. I can take you back to the surface. I know you are lost.” Blinking in surprise, she hesitated, then slowly lowered the blade, but only halfway. It was at this point that Shaela felt a sudden and strange sensation in her hands as she watched the handsome stranger down the length of the blade. Suddenly, to her great alarm, the blade sent a pulse of energy into her arms, nearly causing her to drop it. But the fear of this stranger compelled her to keep a grip on the hilt. She shook her head, trying to shake off the feeling.

“Have you come to help me?” The dark haired man nodded and pointed at the sword she held.

“Yes, unless you are going to kill me with that.” He turned and began walking back to the tunnel he came from, seemingly resolved on leaving. Quickly, Shaela held up a hand.

“Hold on! Wait!” He turned and stood, patiently looking at her, as if he had all the time in the world. With trembling hands, she quickly secured the belt and scabbard it about her waist, still watching him suspiciously. She was ready after

she had retrieved two more dresses she liked very much.

“Okay, I'm ready to go. Who sent you?” The man began to walk to the opening of the large cave. Once in its mouth, he turned and held a hand out to her.

“Please, my lady, watch your step.” She slowly reached up and took his hand, allowing him to balance her as she climbed up onto the ledge at the opening. Once they had taken a few steps in, everything grew dark.

“Shaela, my name is Cyphis, and I am at your service.” Shaela thought a moment and then knelt, feeling for a stone. As she worked her hands about the floor, she felt his hand take hers. He then gently lifted her up.

“I have something you will like, my lady.” Shaela froze.

“Wait,” she whispered, suddenly aware of something. “You know my name – said my name. How do you know me?” In return, she felt him take one of the fingers on her hand and slip a ring onto it. As the ring slipped onto her finger, she could suddenly see him, as if it were no longer dark. He smiled down at her and brushed the hair out of her face.

“I know many things my lady.” As he smiled, she could not help but notice his fangs. Shaela's blood ran cold. Realizing her mistake, she paled. A wave of hopelessness engulfed her as she tried to back away, but his hand tightened about hers as she attempted to retreat. It was no use, he had her.

“Oh no,” she whispered in a quavering voice, her legs losing their strength. Collapsing to the cavern floor, she shook her head. “My dream, my dream, it's coming true.” The Vampire knelt before her, only concern written into his eyes. Gently he took her head between both his hands, guiding her to face him, a noticeable shudder running through his body.

“You will be safe with me,” he whispered. Shaela felt the tears begin to flow, half expecting him to feast upon her, half believing him. Trembling, she simply nodded. As she looked at the sharp features of his face, she noticed he was more handsome than any man she had ever laid eyes upon. She felt instantly compelled to be held by him as he gently smoothed her hair back and wiped away her tears with a cloth, produced from within the pocket of his trench coat.

“There now, my lady, I will take you away from this beast who has captured you; held you here against your will. Tell me, who do you belong to?” His words echoed within her mind over and over again as her vision began to blur. She swallowed and leaned into him, looking up into his eyes.

“You.” The Vampire nodded, smiling.

“You will become my queen. I will not extinguish the light in you. I will show you power and a fearless existence.” Gently, he kissed Shaela and embraced her. As he held her, his eyes fell upon the treasure hoard within the cavern. Hesitating, he shuddered, seeming to struggle with some inner turmoil, then pulled away, taking her by the shoulders.

“Before we go, I need you to go back and collect as many things as you can take with you. Bring them to me, and I will reward you with eternal life.” Shaela looked up at him, now filled with admiration.

“Cyphis, If I take anything, the dragon will hunt me down.” Shaela smiled shyly, desiring him to hold her once again. Cyphis pointed to the blade at her hip.

“That blade is ancient my lady. A king would send all his legions to retrieve such a prize . . . should it be discovered. And you, you my beautiful raven, wear it ignorantly about your waist. This dragon will come looking for you Shaela. It is amazing to me that not only did it spare you, but that you have made it an ally. Shaela, go and replace everything you have taken. When the dragon comes back, convince it to let you take whatever you can from its treasure. I’ve watched how it has attached to you. Do this thing for me, and then return. By doing this, it will not hunt you down for stealing.” She smiled up at him.

“I don’t speak dragon, but I will try my best.” As she turned to leave, he caught her by the hand, stopping her. Turning back, she saw him pull a hand-sized pouch from an inner pocket of his long overcoat. Quickly he opened it, and retrieved one small white pill from within the pouch, and handed it to her.

“Eat this now, then go back and wait for your dragon friend.” She did as he commanded, putting it in her mouth and chewing it. She quickly swallowed the fragments of the pill as he glanced at the treasure within the cavern, obvious greed

filling his eyes. His piercing gaze then fell upon her once more. “You will now know and understand the language of the dragon, and it will understand you. It will last but one day.” With a gleam set into his eyes, Cyphis waved a hand at the treasure hoard before him. “I am sure you will do all you can to fulfill my request.” Feeling quite intoxicated, she swallowed the remnants of the pill.

“I will,” she whispered, watching the motion of his hand, mesmerized by his voice. Slowly, Shaela turned away, and returned . . . missing him already.

She entered back into the cavern and removed the belt and scabbard, putting it back exactly where she got it as thoughts of Cyphis drifted like some intoxicating dream through her head. She was excited to go with him, and was very determined to bring him all the best items within Talon's treasure hoard. The dragon would not mind. They had become fast friends, and it trusted her. She replaced the two dresses and all the other trinkets back, setting them exactly as she had found them. As she finished, she looked to the tunnel and bit her lip, thinking about this man she had met . . . a Vampire.

Inadvertently her hands strayed to her neck as she heard a large splash, indicating the return of the dragon. At its approach, Shaela began to feel nervous. Her mind then set upon a thought. If the dragon found she could speak to it, it would wonder how. Talon was very smart. If it suspected she had taken the tablet from the treasure hoard, the dragon might be angry with her. If she told Talon the truth . . . well, that was not an option. Disappointed, Shaela realized she could not speak to Talon, but she could, at least, understand it now. She could say she had gained the power of a new spell. Yes, that would work; she would try that, but only if Talon became suspicious.

As she meditated upon her options, Talon appeared in the chamber and sniffed, becoming instantly rigid. Shaela froze in fear as the dragon's eyes darted about the cavern for a moment, prying into every shadowy corner. Glancing over at Shaela, the dragon neared her carrying a very large fish and dropped it on the bed of gold before her as she grinned happily up at him. The dragon then made its way through its treasure, sniffing here and there and then returned and laid down, crossed its paws and rested its head down. Biting her lip, she approached and hugged the dragon, feeling a reluctance to part ways.

“Talon, I never want to leave you.” She whispered. Instantly the dragon pulled away from her, its eyes widening. Shaking its head, like a dog that has gotten water in its ears, Talon stared at Shaela in silence. She realized she had made mistake, but there was no turning back now. Clearing her throat, she

scratched its nose and grinned nervously up at it.

“Talon, do you understand me?” The dragon took a deep breath, reached out and wrapped its talons about her, drawing her against its shoulder and snorted.

“Yes.” It replied in a deep suspicious voice. Shaela laughed happily and hugged Talon with all her might. Looking up at him, she grinned and rested her head against the side of its chest.

“I’ve been eager to say thank you for not eating me.” Talon snorted. “I do not eat Water Sylphs . . . only Humans,” the dragon growled as it shot a brief glance at the three entrances, sniffing. Shaela was speechless, flattered by the compliment. She was also very frightened. Raising a finger, she opened her mouth to say something, but Talon cut her off.

“I am glad you wish to stay with me. Never has any of the race of mankind treated me like you do.” Shaela laughed and began scratching the dragon on the neck. Talon instantly grunted and closed its eyes, stretching its neck out and into her nails.

“You are good at this.” She laughed and used her other hand, increasing the speed of her scratching, digging her nails into its scale coat as hard as she could. Talon received the best work-over yet. An hour later the dragon lay on its back as she finished under Talon’s chin.

Shaela got up and walked over to the flint, gathering up enough wood to cook the fish Talon had brought. As she carefully built the wood up, her eyes wandered over to the cave, wherein she knew Cyphis waited. She had the sudden urgency to go to him, but resisted; he had given her a task to complete. She glanced at the blade as she struck the flint together, remembering the words of Cyphis. Kings would send legions here to retrieve the sword, should they discover its location. A flame ignited, quickly spreading through the time-worn fragments of wood. Inside, for the first time ever, Shaela felt greed fill her. She wanted the blade, and she would have it . . . not Cyphis.

Soon, a small fire merrily danced beneath the fish. She cooked her meal in silent thought, brooding over the blade that danced within her mind. Talon

watched her intensely as she prepared the fish in the same fashion which she had seen Hiska do it. She thought about what the dragon had said; she knew the beast was merely jesting about only eating humans, or she hoped that was the case. Her eyes strayed over to the large pile of corpses at the back of the cavern; a silent witness that Talon disliked the taste of Human. Still, they were dead. She noticed the dragon watching her. Desperately, she wanted someone to talk to.

“Talon, do you hate humans?” Raising its large head, the beast bared its teeth viciously.

“No. I know your smell . . . Human. Is it true what you said, that you wish to stay with me?” Shaela broke off a good sized portion of the fish and began eating. After she finished her meal, she gave the rest to Talon, who ate it. As it swallowed the scraps, she placed a hand on the cluster of horns above its left eye, and leaned into its head, sighing.

“Yes, I meant it. You saved my life, and I am grateful . . . more than grateful Talon. I need to get back to the surface though. My fiance is probably searching for me. I do have a life elsewhere.” Talon gently brushed hair from her face in silence with a single claw.

“Then to the surface, I will take you . . . take you back to where the Humans live. I will miss you, but it is important for you to be happy with your own.” Shaela rested her head against the dragon's paw and sighed.

“I don't belong to the Humans anymore.” Talon looked startled.

“Tell me your story.” Shaela took in a deep breath and began from when she could remember her first years. She told the entire tale of her childhood, up until when she came to be in the dragon's lair. The story took quite some time, but she was glad to have a listener. During the long tale, her eyes often wandered to the large tunnel opening as Talon asked questions, curious to know more of her life. It became apparent to her that Talon did not often entertain visitors, and when visitors did show up on the dragon's doorstep, they ended up helping to build the pile of corpses at the back of the cave. Soon, Shaela finished the last of her tale as Talon held her on its powerful arm.

“So, you are Druid.” Talon exclaimed. Shaela nodded and beamed the dragon a charming smile. “I am sorry you lost your friends. I very much like the name Jewl. She sounds fascinating and delightful. Maybe she made it back. Do not give up hope.” Shaela was impressed with Talon's level of understanding and manner of speech. She had misjudged this dragon, even though she thought it to be of high intelligence, for there was a compassionate tone in its voice.

“Talon, I have to admit, I did not realize you to be so well spoken. I thought you were just a large reptile, pardon the expression.” Talon laughed thunderously and shook its head.

“I am!” Reaching up, the dragon thoroughly ruffled Shaela's hair, its eyes narrowing at her. She laughed and pushed its arm away, then gave the dragon a playful look.

“So why don't you come with me? I don't want to say goodbye . . . please?” Talon snorted loudly.

“I will take you to the surface. What happens after that - well, we shall see. What do they call you?” Shaela blushed.

“How rude of me. My name is Shaela. I gave you a name, but I suppose you already have one.”

“Talon is a good name, and one I will keep.” Getting more comfortable, Shaela leaned against the dragon.

“What do you do with all this wealth and treasure? If it would be okay with you, I could use some of it, unless I should not ask.” She hastily added, becoming nervous as the dragon's eyes narrowed. Talon gently put Shaela down and stretched.

“Come with me.” Talon strolled into the heart of its treasure hoard and turned to Shaela, who nervously followed.

“You, Shaela, may take anything from this cavern you wish.” She smiled, surprised, and hugged the dragon's mouth, resting herself against it as always.

“Then I choose you. You said I could take anything, so I choose you.” Talon's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

“I give you leave to adorn yourself with armors, weapons and the riches of my treasure, and you choose me? In all my long ages, I have never known a single dragon to offer its treasure freely to a Human. Humans would lunge at the chance for such a prize.” Talon looked over at the pile of silent corpses. “And they have tried,” the dragon growled. “This is, no doubt, the only time in the history of the world a dragon has ever offered its treasure to a Human . . . and that Human chose the dragon.” Talon moved close to Shaela and inhaled, smelling her deeply as Shaela looked around, her eyes falling upon the sword, which seemed to always draw her heart and eye. She pointed at Talon.

“Anything from this cavern . . . those were your words. Talon, in the time I have spent here, I have grown to adore you. Please, let's not say goodbye . . . I don't want to lose you, not now.” Talon looked around, seeming to struggle with some inner conflict. Its tail began twitching as it eyed the mounds of gold all about the cavern. Shaela watched the dragon, noticing its difficulty. Laying a gentle hand upon Talon's neck, she whispered.

“It is a lot, I see it also. Talon, I would not see you unhappy by leaving all this. If you need to stay, I understand. I take back my request; my choice to take you. It wasn't fair for me to ask such a thing.” Talon laughed suddenly, filling the cavern with a booming voice.

“I need to show you something . . . something you might like.” Curiosity filled her as she nodded.

“Talon, I need to tell you something first. I understand you, and you understand me because -” The dragon cut her off abruptly, lowering its voice so she could barely hear.

“I know. I know who you spoke to. I've smelled his scent a few times here, though it has been long years since he has come this way. I smell his scent upon you, and I guess he gave you something so we could talk.” Shaela felt her cheeks flush crimson.

“He said one full day; that is all the time I would have to speak with you.” The dragon snorted and listened intensely as she continued.

“I could ask him for more. I could tell him that I need more time.” Talon shook his head vigorously.

“More time for what?” The dragon's presence seemed to melt away the hold Cyphis had upon her heart and mind as they talked.

“He wanted me to ask you for as much treasure as I could carry. Then bring it to him, I suppose when you left to bring me more food.” She grinned at the dragon sheepishly and shrugged. Talon nuzzled Shaela and then sat up majestically, lifting its head high.

“Of course, you can take whatever you like. But the payment will be that you shall speak to me for three days, in which time, if you please me, you may take anything you like.” Talon's voice echoed through the cavern as it snorted loudly. Shaela hugged the dragon tight and tried to push it over onto its back, but failed.

“Remind me to never wrestle with you, Talon.” The dragon hissed and snatched her up off the ground and rolled backwards with a thunderous crash into a small hill of gold as Shaela screamed in surprise and delight. Once on top of him, Shaela jumped to the dragon's neck and pushed its head back so that the top of Talon's head was on the gold.

“Yield.” she commanded as the dragon feigned to struggle in vain. “Yield, or I shall turn you into a Human and keep you as my slave.” Talon growled out in laughter and went limp, surrendering to her will. Leaning over the bottom of Talon's jaw, she looked into one of its large eyes.

“Do you surrender to me?” The dragon nodded slightly. She pointed a finger at its eye.

“Good. You have made the right decision. I will spare your life.” She laughed and sat up on the underside of Talon's jaw and began scratching vigorously as the dragon's tail twitched. After she gave it another work over, Talon rose up and shook all the gold coins from its scales.

“Shaela, I need to teach you my language, but I fear you will not have what you need to understand me. The dragon pointed at its treasure and whispered

quietly.

“Trade him something for what you need,” the dragon barely whispered. “He can have anything, but not the relic, and not that blade,” the dragon stated in all secrecy, pointing to the sword she had replaced. Confused, Shaela nodded.

“Relic?”

“Yes, but we will not speak of that yet, Talon stated,” its eyes discovering the ring upon her finger. Squinting its eyes, the dragon lowered its head to the large opening and bared its teeth.

After a while, Shaela made her way carefully up into the tunnel, looking for the Vampire. “Apparently,” she thought to herself, “I seem to misjudge everyone.”

“Are you there Cyphis? Cyphis?” A shadow rose up behind her as she called into the shadows before her. Silently it took the form of Cyphis, his dark eyes narrowing down upon her viciously. Shaela called out again just as the Vampire wrapped his arms about her waist and head, pulling her in.

“You should have kept our agreement. You should have come with me . . . alone. I could have given you eternal life, yet you chose a beast over that which can give you power.” His breath was a cold darkened vapor upon her skin. She shut her eyes in terror, not daring to look.

“Cyphis, the dragon is willing to make a trade.” Cyphis hesitated.

“What trade?” Shaela struggled in vain to get away from him, but could not.

“Those pills. I need them . . . anything in the dragon's treasure, except for the blade and some relic is yours.” Cyphis sneered.

“Then I choose you,” he mocked. Shaela began to weep quietly and struggled again. It was no use; the Vampire was much stronger. Relaxing, she reached back, feeling the side of his face.

“Cyphis, please don't do this,” she whispered. In response, the vampire tightened his grip, brushing his cold lips across her cheek. A sudden feeling

cascaded through her mind and body, and it pleased her, transforming her terror to desire, revolting her. She struggled again, yet to no avail. Tears began to stream her face as she recalled her nightmare -- when she had killed her love.

“Please don't do this,” she wept as he forced her to turn and face him, gripping firmly so she could not escape. Undeniable passion overcame her as her lips met his. Sliding his mouth down her jaw-line, Cyphis stopped at the soft area under the back of her jaw. Shaela's vision blurred, and her will to fight him vanished. Tilting her head back, she reached up and gripped the back of his head, guiding him to where she knew he needed to feed. As she felt his fangs pierce deep into her neck, tears flowed down her face. She cried out in pain, mingled with intense pleasure, as he began to feed.

Abruptly, Cyphis and Shaela were knocked back, both striking the stone wall of the tunnel. Both lost their footing and fell forward to the floor. With incredible speed, Cyphis caught Shaela in a vice-like hold about the neck before she could gather her senses enough to retreat. Snarling hatefully, Cyphis squeezed, his fingers impaling her neck, as the dragon screamed in fury above them both. The vampire's grip was torn loose from her neck as Talon impaled it through the back, pinning the undead to the stone floor of the tunnel. Shaela could hear the sound of bones and flesh being shattered as she choked up her own blood. In shock, she desperately kicked and fought against Cyphis's last attempt to reach out for her just before he was crushed into the rock beneath the full weight of the dragon. The vampire gaped and twitched, still struggling to get to her, even as broken and torn as he was. It seemed it could not be killed; as if death had no power over such a being.

Talon scooped up Shaela and quickly retreated back to the treasure chamber and laid her down on a pile of gold. Shaela turned over and screamed in pain as she desperately tried to stop the blood from flowing. She cried out for Talon, not seeing the dragon directly over her.

Turning away, Talon raced back into the cavern and stopped, peering every which way for the crushed body of the vampire . . . but it was gone. Screaming

fury, the dragon began racing through the cave, searching for the undead. Within a few moments, the dragon found the vampire limping down a side passage, too small for a dragon of Talon's size to squeeze into. With incredible speed, Talon thrust in an arm and snatched at the retreating undead. Luck was with Talon as it seized Cyphis in its claws and wrenched the struggling undead out. Quickly, Talon raced back to the cavern. Once in the chamber, the dragon took up the blade Shaela had returned and severed the undead's head from its body without hesitation. Throwing the headless body down, Talon returned to Shaela's side as the undead's body began to wither and turn to dust. The cavern was filled with a dreadful cry, and then there was silence.

The chamber of the dragon began to darken at the edges as she struggled and writhed upon the golden bed of wealth. She tried in vain to stay conscious, terrified of never waking up again. But as the darkness closed in about her, she began to feel a tremor throughout her entire body. Groaning, she felt her strength ebb to nothing. After a brief struggle, Shaela slipped into chaotic dreams, where she felt as though she drifted within a deep, cold, ocean of black water, submersed within an unmeasurable depth. She tried to speak, but only gaped in helpless terror, a terror that lasted for eternity.

Shaela opened her eyes to see Talon laying next to her, watching her with its head resting upon its two great forearms. She felt her neck, hoping it had been a nightmare. To her dismay, she felt the wounds and half dried blood upon her torn neck.

“Oh no,” she lamented. “What have I done?” Talon shifted, raising its massive head and grunted. Shaela sat up and then fell back as her vision blurred and spun. Talon got up and stalked over to the remains of the dead Vampire and gathered up its items. It then returned and dropped them to the side of Shaela's head. She turned and looked at them, intense pain forcing her to groan in misery. She grit her teeth as Talon pushed the Vampire's belongings against her. Grabbing the trench coat, she fumbled through the inner pockets until she felt a small pouch. With hands badly trembling, she pulled it out and opened it. Looking in, she spotted a large handful of the same pills Cyphis had given her. With great effort, she managed to take one out and eat it. The powder of the tablet made her cough and gag, sending her into a fetal position as she forced herself to swallow. Slowly, Shaela regained control of herself. She tried to sit up, then gave up and fell back, weeping without tears.

“Talon, help me,” she begged. The dragon drew near to Shaela, gently placing a paw over her.

“Maybe there is something in all my riches that can heal you. I am afraid that is your only hope.” She nodded, then groaned, arching her back as an unnatural sensation ripped through her body.

“I'm drowning!” The dragon brushed Shaela's hair back and sniffed her, a sadness in its eyes.

“I will return,” the dragon's voice echoed in her ears. Desperately, she clutched the dragon's claws, sobbing.

“Forgive me . . . I didn't know, I didn't know!” Talon sighed and pulled away and began searching through its collection of treasure as Shaela's misery echoed through the cavern. After Taking a long look at her, the dragon turned and

vanished.

She could feel the effects of the undead's bite and knew she was changing. The sudden thought of Hiska caused her to cry out in despair. Twisting to the side, she clutched at her center as an unwelcome thought invaded her mind. She was now becoming that very monster from her nightmare. As this caught hold in her mind, she came to the realization that, to save Hiska from the same fate, she could never see him again. The thought caused her mind to nearly break. Gripping two handfuls of gold beneath her, she arched her back as intense waves of pain shot through her spine and legs, causing her to fill the cavern with her screams. Rolling onto her back, she gazed up at the roof of the cavern, eyes wide and bloodshot, her vision blurring.

“Hurry Talon, hurry!” she screamed. Time passed as she lay upon the bed of gold, clutching her abandoned, suffering, forgotten, feeling forsaken and utterly desolate. Desperate, she screamed for Talon, but he did not come.

After yet another eternity, her vision slowly focused to perfection; better than perfection, and the throes of agony which had tortured her ebbed, and then altogether ceased. This sudden change shocked her, flooded her with dread. She knew what was happening to her. The Vampire’s infection was changing her, making her something she did not wish to be.

As she lay, gazing up at the jagged stone of the cave, Talon returned holding an object in its claws. Quickly the dragon settled down beside her and held it out. It was an amulet with wide, lengthy, thin plates of silver that, when worn, would rest evenly upon her chest and back and shoulders. Shaela forced herself to sit, up, though it taxed her strength to the brink of failing, and took it. With great difficulty, she adjusted it and slipped it over her head, hoping beyond hope it would grant her healing. She waited in silence, no longer feeling the pains which had wracked and tormented her body, yet feeling what little strength remaining within her ebbing. She noticed no effects.

“What do I do now?”

“I do not know, but keep it on. It has power. What power lies within it, I am

ignorant of.” Talon nuzzled Shaela gently. “I am sorry Shaela. I should have stayed with you. Forgive me.” Resting against the side of the dragon’s mouth, she closed her eyes, trying to keep her strength.

“No, you could not have predicted this.” A sudden wave of nausea overcame her as she tried to catch her breath. Turning away, she violently retched until she could only dry heave. As soon as the dry heaving stopped, she weakly turned onto her back, gasping for air and sweating profusely. She felt a flash of heat flood her entire body, as though she was suddenly burning with an intense fever. Raising a hand to her forehead, a fit of coughing assailed her. After it subsided, she turned her head weakly to the dragon.

“I am becoming that thing. I can't do this - only one way out.” She reached over and gripped the dragon's wing. “My nightmare will come true Talon. I don't want to be a monster. I do not wish to hurt anyone.” She sucked in a breath, clawing at the air, suddenly gagging. In desperation, she glanced up at Talon. “Talon,” she sobbed, biting her tongue hard, trying to feel something, “kill me. Don't let me become that thing!” A spasm shot painfully through her body, and the dragon's lair abruptly began revolving about her. Clawing helplessly at the bed of coins beneath her, she watched the dragon's eyes widened in astonishment.

“No,” Talon bluntly stated.

“Please Talon, please. Use the blade on me!” In answer, the dragon instantly backed away, shaking its large head.

“You do not know what you are saying,” it growled. Suddenly, as quickly as it had begun, the torment and spinning sensation ceased. Upon the dragon's bed of gold, Shaela lay, suddenly still as stone in silence. A quiet settled within her mind as she stared at the roof of the cavern above, unaware that she was no longer breathing. Her mouth felt as though it was being stretched. In shock and despair, she raised her fingers to her teeth, only to feel two razor-sharp fangs slowly extending beyond the line of her upper teeth.

“Talon, you are my only hope. Please, I don't want this. Please, Talon, please, I beg you.” The dragon carefully gathered Shaela up into its arms, shaking

its head.

“I will not do this thing you ask.” The dragon bore her out of the chamber and down to the waters edge, where it lowered her into the lake. Shaela begged the dragon to end it as the warm waters rinsed the filth of drying blood from her. After a time, she was lifted out from the water and carried back into the treasure chamber, where the dragon gently set her down before an open trunk. Sitting up, Shaela noticed that her head no longer spun in circles, and strength was quickly returning to her body.

“It is finished,” she lamented. “I am the nightmare.” The dragon backed away and lowered, displacing the thick layer of gold beneath it. When she looked at Talon, he looked at the chest, then back at her. Silently, Shaela looked into the trunk and sighed, closing her eyes for a moment, even as a feeling of unparalleled energy welled up within her.

“Alright,” she whispered as the despair she felt washed away. “So be it. I am the nightmare.” Reaching into the trunk, she retrieved a few articles of clothing. Working her way out of the dress she was wearing, she took up a pair of fine woven cotton traveling pants and a long sleeve shirt of the same make. After, she struggled back into the dress and pulled her hair out through the back, relieved to feel the dress fit her perfectly now.

A thought came to her, and she pulled the ring Cyphis had given her free from its resting place. It was not surprising to notice her vision was no longer hindered by the dark of the dragon's lair.

“Talon, do I still have your permission to take what I need from your treasure?” Instantly, the dragon waved a paw in no certain direction.

“Take it all – I do not need it.” Rather surprised at not only his answer, but how quickly he gave it, she look around. Yesterday, she would have been excited at receiving such an offer. Now?

“Thank you Talon. I appreciate your kindness,” she whispered without emotion. Turning, she set her attention to the blade Talon had used to end the Vampire. She remembered how quickly Cyphis had been killed by it. The

thought crossed her mind to do it herself; end it.

“Shaela,” Talon whispered. The tone in its voice drew her attention from the blade laying unsheathed upon the thick bed of glittering wealth. Looking at the dragon, she waited in silence as Talon shifted and sighed.

“I wish to stay with you now, if you would have me as your guardian.” For a long while, they both stared unblinking at each other, neither speaking. There was something different about this beast she had chanced upon. Dragons were different than she had expected – well, this one was different. There was nowhere for her to go now. She did not know where she should begin. Talon would be safe; she could not harm this beast, even if she tried. She made up her mind.

“Yes,” she whispered, feeling relieved that she would not be alone. As she spoke, the sword drew her attention. Turning, she pointed at it.

“I want that blade, Talon.” Shaela waited for Talon's reaction, half expecting the dragon to become defensive . . . it did not.

“I was hoping you would choose it.” Shaela gave Talon an inquisitive look.

“Why would you say that?” Talon abruptly raised up, stretched and stalked out of the cavern.

“Anything you want, take it,” the dragon growled as it left her standing there alone. Confused, Shaela retrieved the belt and scabbard, again securing it to her left hip. She grabbed the intricate blade and raised it up before her, feeling that same power course into her hand and up her arm, bathing her in that same energy as before. The experience that had startled her before did not catch her off guard this time. She studied it in wonder, realizing why Cyphis had desired this blade; it was special. Why, when she had it in her possession, did he not take it from her when they first met? She could only come up with one conclusion: Cyphis was greedy, and he wanted more.

The slight curve of the blade, the perfect fit of the handle in her hand and its balance was astonishing. As she held it out before her, she did not realize Talon had returned, eyeing her as she tested the sword, swinging it this way and that. The dragon leaned forward without stepping, unblinking, unmoving, watching her

as if it expected something to happen.

As she held the blade high above her head, she felt something connect with her being; a living energy she could not explain, as if, as if the blade were another, somehow familiar . . . so familiar.

After a time, she noticed Talon watching her. Carefully, she slid the katana back into its resting place, noticing the dragon's posture; unmoving, as if entranced. As she caught Talon's eye, the dragon blinked, turning its attention here and there as if it was searching for something.

In her search, she found a set of fine linked armor within the golden bed of treasure. She pulled it free and shook all the gold and gems from it. It would set nicely over her clothes, if it fit. Pulling it up against her body, she studied it for a moment.

"This might just fit me," she stated. Quickly, she quickly donned the armor, which consisted of hundreds of links of tiny metal forming a strong skin-like coat of arms. Satisfied with the fit, she picked out a fine-spun red silk dress from a chest, and slipped into it, only having to adjust the ties of the dress slightly to accommodate for the armor, which remained well concealed beneath.

"Talon, this armor is incredible." Talon either did not hear her comment, or was ignoring her. After thoroughly searching the lair, she was delighted to discover a number of scrolls, three of which she could read and understand. Excitement welled up within her as she rolled up seventeen scrolls together and slid them into a deep pocket within the vampire's exquisite trench coat. Picking it up, she raised it up over her shoulders and slipped her arms through the sleeves. It was too long for her, which was disappointing, and so decided to take it off. Yet, before she began to remove it, to her astonishment, it was no longer dragging on the stone. She hesitated, and as she did, she felt the trench coat itself begin to shift and shrink to compliment every contour and bend of her body. Within moments, it fit her perfectly, as if tailored specifically for her dimensions. She looked up at Talon in wonder as the dragon snorted.

"Lucky Human," the dragon stated flatly as it neared, sniffing the trench

coat. Shaela grabbed one of Talon's fangs and pulled herself against the dragon's face.

“Talon, I am glad you are staying with me.” The dragon closed its eyes and brought an arm up around Shaela's back, hooking its razor-sharp talons about her shoulders like before.

“I find this . . . exciting. It will be good to adventure in the open air once again.” Shaela rested her head against the dragon's paw, suddenly curious.

“May I ask, what kind of dragon you are?” Talon let go of Shaela and proudly stated.

“I am Halon`Thur, or Shadow Dragon in your tongue.”

“Will you tell me about the Shadow Dragons? I would love to know more.” Pawing at the coins beneath it, the dragon snapped his jaws once.

“Yes, I will. I will show you something else as well, but not now, not here.” Shaela returned her attention to the three scrolls she had kept apart from the others. She unrolled one and smiled. Closing her eyes, she mumbled the words to the spell exactly as they appeared upon the paper.

“Snare.” Letting the now empty scroll paper drop to the stone floor, she unrolled the second one.

“Green Wisps.” She mouthed and dropped that one to the floor also. Taking out the last one, she looked at it, her eyes glittering like two obsidian shards in firelight. Her hands trembled slightly as she glanced over at Talon, who shifted, curious.

“What is it Shaela?” She looked at the dragon, then turned her attention back to the scroll.

“By all the powers of order, I should not have this spell. But, thanks to you, Talon, my training as a druid has advanced far beyond what it should. This spell is titled . . . Gargantuan.” As Shaela spoke the word of the spell, she was filled with an energy, unlike any she had ever experienced. The scroll withered into shreds of paper, as if suddenly devoured by an energy which consumed the scroll before it settled to the cavern floor. She felt light, so light, as if she were

weightless. Her feet lifted from the stone beneath her as she drew in a breath of wonder. She extended both arms out, letting her head tilt back as she closed her eyes, enjoying the most incredible sensation. After a few moments of bliss, the energy which held her subsided, releasing her. She felt the rock beneath her make contact with her feet as she touched back down, causing the entire cavern to tremble as if a brief earthquake had shaken Talon's lair. Talon crouched as Shaela lowered to her knees, exhaustion overtaking her. As the tremor subsided, she looked up, meeting Talon's eyes, then fell forward. Before she struck the ground, the dragon snatched Shaela up and tucked her within its sheltering arms, watching Shaela fade into exhausted slumber.

As she closed her eyes, she rested her head upon Talon's strong arm and sighed in fading wonder. Talon watched her fall into slumber, knowing full well she would need help once they reached the surface . . . if she was to survive.

The dragon found the surface quickly, bearing Shaela upon its back. It had not been a difficult journey as Talon knew the caves and tunnels which spanned far beneath the surface of the Ever`Shade Jungle. The stars shone clear in the heavens above as they emerged out into the night air. Shaela could hear the distant rumble of Mistwalker Falls, and knew they were not too far from Jewl's home. She was glad to be out in the fresh air again, which was where she felt most comfortable. She missed her staff and the dress Mother had given her, but she had to make do with what she had. Placing a hand on Talon's head, Shaela felt excited. This was the first time she had ever ridden a dragon, and it was an experience she would never forget.

Her thoughts went to Hiska; where was he? She missed him.

“Talon, I need to find Hiska, my fiancé.” Talon narrowed its eyes. Seeing the look, she pointed a finger at the dragon.

“Getting Jealous?” Talon snorted, then turned its head abruptly ahead, as if startled.

“Shhh,” the dragon hissed. “Something comes.” Shaela slid down onto the ground and placed a hand on the side of the dragon's neck.

“If it is a Harritt Catur, he is my fiancé. Please do not harm him.” Talon nodded once, eyeing the jungle border straight out from the cave's exit.

“You lead,” the dragon rumbled. They both waited as the sound of footsteps drew nearer and nearer. Within a short while, three humanoids emerged from the trees and froze in terror as the air filled with the low, rumbling growl of the dragon. Shaela recognized Hiska instantly and cried out for joy.

“Hiska, Hiska!” She ran forward as Hiska's eyes widened with surprise.

“Shaela!” Jumping into his arms, she furiously embraced him, laughing. Hiska embraced her in return as the dragon sat up and watched the reunion. Jenthra and Jewl were the other two with Hiska. They both relaxed and laughed for joy as Shaela kissed Hiska happily, tears of joy filling her eyes. She scratched up the back of his neck, and then worked his ears with her nails. Gripping the fur

on each side of his head, she pulled back laughing, then kissed him again, sliding her lips across the side of his face until she found the soft area just under the back of his jaw line . . . and sunk her fangs viciously into his neck in one fluid motion, forcing the blood to flow steadily as she freely drank her fill.

Shaela shot up out of Talon's arms, landing on the ground, screaming in horror. The sudden outburst caused Talon leapt to all fours and growl, its eyes quickly darting about the cavern in search of an attacker. Shaela froze. A nightmare . . . it was only a nightmare. Falling to her knees, she wrapped her arms about herself and knelt, feeling sick inside. She thought of Hiska, and knew she should never see him again.

“Talon, I should leave the jungle. I cannot stay here. Talon's breath cascaded over her as it sighed heavily.

“Because of what you are?” Shaela burst out in tears, nodding.

“Because of what I have become. My dreams come true. I fear I will destroy Hiska if I get near him. I love him with all my soul . . . what is left of it. That is why I must never see him again.” Slipping into silence, the dragon looked down upon Shaela, as if pondering something. After a time, the dragon's eyes shifted to the right as if it were contemplating . . . something.

“Did you know my kind are not susceptible to the bite of a Vampire?” Shaela shook her head, wiping her eyes.

“No.”

“There is a way to counter this curse you have, but it would mean giving up what you are.” Shaela looked confused, slowly stood and placed a hand upon the dragon's wing.

“What do you mean? What are you talking about?” Talon sighed. Lowering, the dragon smelled the trench coat she now wore.

“I will tell you when we reach the surface,” the Shadow Dragon whispered, then began to walk around Shaela. Leaping into the path of her only friend, Shaela caused the dragon to stop. Gazing up at him with a pleading, desperate

look, Shaela placed the fingers of her right hand to the center of her chest.

“Talon, I don't want to die. I want to live. I want to be happy. I need Hiska. Why do things keep happening to me?” Talon sighed and lowered his head, observing her. Desperately, Shaela embraced Talon, burying her face against the horns above the dragon's eye.

“Help,” she whispered. “If I lose you, I am desolate. My life will become meaningless, and I fear I will become that which heroes hunt.” Talon picked her up into strong arms and held her as if Shaela meant more to him than all the treasure of the earth.

“Shaela, the hard times we experience teach us how to recognize the good that inevitably follow. If not for adversity, you would never grow beyond what you are now. I believe you are destined for great things, and I can prove it.” Held safely in the arms of a dragon, Shaela groaned under the weight of her experience.

“Shaela, I swear I will do what I can to help you, but there is one thing I must tell you.” She looked up at Talon.

“What is that?” Shaking its massive head, Talon adjusted the hold he had on her, allowing her to get comfortable..

“You must never feed from another by force. You must resist the irresistible. If you can deny your hunger, and not partake of the blood of another, it will eventually become more bearable. I will aid you in this, your time of darkness. I will not leave you, I swear it.” Wiping her eyes, Shaela tried to smile.

“I want to be with you,” she stated emotionally, taking in a deep breath, fighting to control her emotions.

“I am ready for whatever you have in store for me, Talon. Thank you for everything you have done for me. I owe you so much.” Snorting, the dragon shook its head.

“This will be a time of discovery and learning. I will teach you what you will need to know. As I do, you will become either stronger and self sufficient, or you will shrink from your destiny and become that which forced this change upon you. Are you willing?” She had so many questions which she kept to herself . . .

for now.

“Yes.” The thought of confronting the Prima Catur crossed her mind suddenly, causing her to shudder. She could feed from them. Catching herself in such dark thoughts, she dismissed the temptation and climbed out of the dragon's arms. Once down, she turned on the dragon and waited on its next course of action.

“I am honored to be in company with you, Druidess. For your benefit, I forsake this cavern of riches. I have waited hundreds of years for this.” Talon lowered his head, almost touching Shaela. “I seem to have found a rare and yet familiar gem. So, you see, I yet retain my treasures by staying with you.” The dragon inhaled, smelling her again. Slowly turning a quarter circle, Talon laid down.

Shaela turned and set her back against Talon's side. Sitting down, she pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms about them. Resting her head back against Talon, she softly wept, her thoughts taking her back to a time when she was not so alone . . . a time when she had a bed and chores and friends. She felt grateful for a dragon who had saved her life, and for its generosity, but it seemed the Fates had taken notice of her existence.

After a long contemplation, she looked up to see tears welled up in the beast's eyes. The sight warmed her heart to know that a dragon - a vicious beast - could care so much for a Human stranger. Wiping her face, she raked her fingers through her hair, brushing it back as she wondered what 'giving up what you are' meant. Talon had spoken strange words to her . . . she would not ask. No doubt, all things would be revealed in time. What did it matter now? She was beyond the brink of humanity, and felt as though she stood at the edge of the Abyss itself. Scanning the large cavern from wall to wall, Shaela looked over everything in sight.

“Talon, there are some smaller chests over there. Would you mind if I looked in them? There is no sense in leaving behind anything that could possibly help.” Talon looked down upon her affectionately.

“As I told you, it is all yours.” Shaela shook her head, placing a hand on the horns above Talon's eye as it bent down to her.

“One day, I will repay you. All my life I’ve heard stories of how awful dragons are, how they are to be hunted in the name of glory. Talon, you are one of the best friends I have ever had. I do not have the words to express my feelings and gratitude for what you are doing for me.” The dragon snorted loudly and turned away.

“Go open your chests before you make me . . . go, go open them. Then, after you find what you need, we will depart.”

“Can I ask you a personal question?” The dragon nodded, but did not look at her. “Well, two questions. One: Are you male or female? Two: How old are you?”

“I am male, and I was brought into being during the Age of War.” Shaela had no idea how long ago the Age of War took place, but she knew it was long ago, that it was written in books as a time of dread and woe amidst all the inhabitants of the world. The Age of War even penetrated the dimensions and planes beyond.

“When was the Age of War?” Talon turned and pointed at the chests. Shaela knew that meant her inquiry was at an end. Quickly, she walked over and opened three small chests, one of which held seven scrolls. The other two held a number of small bottles, which contained various colored liquids. There were a total of twelve in each chest.

“Those potions may be useful,” the dragon growled in her ear. Jumping, Shaela spun about, startled.

“You scared me.” Talon ignored her comment, and glanced at the chest. Looking back to the potions, she pulled one out and looked at it. It was a unlabeled crystal bottle, filled with yellow liquid. She looked at a few others, noticing they were also unmarked.

“Well,” she stated bluntly, “it does no good. They are not labeled. But,” she put the potions away and turned her attention to the chest of scrolls, “these are my

favorite.” Pulling one scroll out, she unrolled it, reading it to herself in silence. Out of seven scrolls, she found two she could read. One was the spell, Familiar. She grew excited as she read that one.

“Familiar Kin.” She stated slowly, evenly, speaking the words perfectly. The other was a spell to heal organic life.

“Mend Organic,” she stated, careful to pronounce the title of the spell correctly. Through her studies, she had learned that the mispronunciation of a spell-scroll would result in losing the spell. Rolling up the remaining scrolls, she added them with the others within the pocket of her trench coat. Carefully she loaded the potions into a large chest, along with all the trinkets and items she could find. Gathering up all the various colored gems took quite a while, and reminded her of when she was a child collecting pretty rocks and crystals in her back yard. As she placed the last gem in the large chest, she gazed in catching her breath at seeing a small sea of glittering wealth.

“We could hide this until you return Talon. That way, you will have a good supply of treasure to come back to.” Talon shook his head and picked up the chest with a single paw, then set it down.

“I will carry this for you. You may need it all to help you on your course.” Shaela picked up as many black-gold pieces as she could carry, and placed them in the chest as well. She saved out a handful of coins and dropped them in an outer pocket.

“Well, that should do it. I'm ready to go.” The dragon grunted.

“It's about time.” Talon pointed to the large cave at the back of the lair. “That way.” The dragon led the way slowly, not willing to leave her behind more than a few paces. The climb was not difficult, for when Shaela began to struggle, Talon put her up on his back and continued, being very careful not to climb too vigorously. Most of the ascent she spent riding the dragon as it carried the large chest carefully in its teeth.

After ascending up through the winding, branching, twisting tunnels, Shaela spotted the exit that led up into the jungle. As they moved out of into the night air,

she noticed the area was exactly as in her nightmare.

“Oh no,” she whispered, catching the dragon's attention.

She half expected Hiska to appear from the trees, but nothing happened. For a long while she stood there, frightened, hoping to see him . . . dreading it. Talon waited for her with stone like patience, unmoving, watching her. After a time, Shaela sighed and looked slowly up at the dragon.

“I think maybe not all my dreams come true, or that some of them happen by coincidence. Talon, you were going to tell me something?” The dragon placed the chest carefully on the ground and eyed the trees without blinking, letting out a heavy sigh.

“Yes, of course. Shaela, you are worried about what you have become. I need to tell you something, and you need to listen and believe me. It is not what you are that is wrong or bad; it is what has affected you. Don't ever forget that.” Shaela blew a strand of hair from her face and stared at Talon, only half believing his words.

“I am Halon`Thur, the Shadow Dragon. Apparently you know nothing of my species, and so I will tell you, but you must trust me.” She leaned against Talon.

“Of course I trust you. You saved my life, and more than once.” Talon snorted and shook its head.

“There is much prejudice against my kind on this, the Earthen Plane.” Shaela laughed.

“You mean fear; you are a dragon, Talon.” Talon thumped a paw on the ground and looked up at the stars which shone unhindered by the near denseness of the jungle.

“No, Shaela, I am dragon only because of an enchantment placed on me ages ago. Yes, I have existed in this form for many years, but I am not only a dragon, Druidess.” Shaela brows furrowed together in confusion.

“What do you mean? I see you Talon.” The dragon nodded, riveting his attention upon her.

“Yes, you do, and I see you.” Now Shaela was thoroughly confused.

“Then if you are not . . . Talon, please do not make me guess.” A deep rumbling laughter filled the air.

“So young and inexperienced . . . and yet not. For you, I will speak more plainly, but only because of what you did for me when we first met.” Shaela smiled and rolled her eyes, distracted at the memory.

“Oh, yes, I will never forget being in your mouth.” Talon grunted and shrugged.

“A long time ago, I traveled in this land. Things did not go so well for me, than they did for you Shaela. Needless to say, I was taken in by an ancient Shadow Dragon, who saved my life. In the process of healing me, I was transformed into the dragon that stands before you now. I need to show you who and what I really am. I must tell you now, I need to alter my physical body, back to its natural state.” Shaela reached up and placed a hand on the side of Talon's face, biting her lip.

“Show me.” Talon looked uneasy and backed away.

“I will.” The dragon looked about the area. “There is little concealment here. There is a ledge up there which would conceal this from prying eyes. Come.” Talon turned and lowered himself to the ground, allowing her to climb onto his back. Carefully, the dragon made its way up to the ledge, grabbing the chest on the way. Holding tight, Shaela found herself wondering if animal blood was delicious. Catching herself in such thoughts, she shuddered, feeling suddenly half drugged by the notion. As she gripped Talon, she suddenly felt hungry, as if she had not eaten in a year. Once upon the ledge, Talon lowered, allowing her to climb down.

“Curious creature, you are, Human. Before I show you, I must tell you I am not here to harm anyone. There is such a fierce bias against my kind, that I would never consider this unless I trusted you. There is one other reason I feel the need to show you . . . Talon's words faded away into sudden thought. Shaela grit her teeth and growled.

“Show me, or I will -” Talon instantly began to shift, shrinking and forming into the appearance of a man before her eyes. Highly startled, she took a step

back, watching, amazed at what she was seeing. Within a moment, an onyx-black humanoid with dragon-like wings stood before her. Upon his head there rose hand length horns, slightly curved back, mingled amidst wavy hair, which grew no longer than the tips of his slightly pointed ears. His eyes were slanted like that of an elf, giving away what he was.

Shaela knew full well what she stood in the presence of, and it caused her blood to chill. Gasping, she took another step back, raising both hands to her chest. Talon held his hands out to each side and calmly stated, “Shaela, if it was my design, did I not have plenty of opportunity to harm you before? Indeed I would not hurt you. Maybe this was a mistake.” Turning, he made as though to leave. Sucking in a deep breath, she nervously, laughed.

“Talon, wait, you took me off guard that's all.” Stopping at the edge, overlooking the jungle below, he turned, throwing her a pleasant smile.

“Wait? For you, Shaela, anything . . . to wait would be my pleasure, if it meant I could remain in company with you.” Slowly, she approached Talon, suddenly very curious, and once again confused at his words.

“The way you speak to me, Talon, it reminds me strongly of loyalty. I never thought I would meet a Vahkrin of the Underworld.” Without hesitation, Shaela walked to him and stopped, throwing him a sheepish grin. Talon's eyes displayed a deep, open, fondness for her as she neared. Shaela sighed and relaxed, looking to Talon in all wonder. Reaching up, she gently laid her fingers upon one of his wings. Running them along the membrane of the wing, she grinned, as if suddenly satisfied. She was intensely fascinated by the spines at the elbows of the wing, noting how sharp they were.

“You are beautiful.” Talon laughed.

“Thank you Shaela, but my beauty is nothing in comparison to yours. I must admit, I am quite flattered, and even taken by you.” She smirked.

“Thank you sir.” Talon nodded and turned.

“Shaela, you look pale.” She shrugged and sat down, closing her eyes for a few moments, not believing what she had just experienced. As she thought about

all of the events which had driven her to this point, it weighed heavily upon her mind. How could this, all of this, have happened? She wanted to learn power. She remembered Jewl, and longed to go to her and be taught in the path of Healer. But Jewl was, no doubt, dead, drowned in the depths below. Shaela's heart ached at the thought.

To be in the presence of the Ancient Willow, to be taught by it, was something she craved. All she wanted was to . . . all she wanted . . . Shaela suddenly caught hold on an idea which disturbed her badly. She realized just how selfish she had been since Hiska had saved her life . . . and more times than she could count on her fingers. Letting go all her personal expectations and selfish wants, she saw herself for who she truly was, and the realization of it tore her up inside, like the icy talons of some fiend.

“Talon, I'm a monster, a monster.”

“No more than I. Shaela, do not be so hard on yourself. You bring joy to those privileged enough to make your acquaintance.” She coughed, disregarded the compliment. She reflected on the judgements and conceptions of her true people, who lived in fear born of ignorance, all the while pointing the finger of prejudice and blame at any others who were different. Her eyes were beginning to open, and her understanding increase, even as she seemed to diminish in her state of humanity. She looked up at Talon and stood. He smiled, gazing into her pitch-black eyes and ran a hand through her hair.

“You, Shaela, are the most curious creature I have ever been privileged to encounter.” Shaela tried to smile.

“Talon, thank you for everything you have done for me. What can I ever do to repay the debt?” Talon grinned and dropped his hand.

“Didn't you know, you are not supposed to offer such to a Vahkrin of the Underworld?” She drew close to him, embracing him, the seed of despair germinating within her heart. Gently he wrapped his arms about her and returned her affection. Shaela held onto Talon, thinking of Hiska and the pain and damage she could easily wound him with in the future. It was a heart wrenching pain that

accompanied her next thought . . . she should leave for a time; go away. By leaving, she would save Hiska from the pain of the effects she would no doubt force upon him.

She shuddered as the thought of what she now was; forever changed to live a life in the darkness of shadow and night, amidst the regrets of what could have been. When once the road was clear, she now found herself upon another, and of a sudden.

She felt suddenly light headed, and a pain began to burn within her mind . . . dawn was approaching. She sadly reflected the thought from earlier contemplation . . . she was a monster.

“Talon.”

“Yes milady?”

“Can you take me away? I wish to see your world . . . for a time.” Talon's eyes widened at her request. Seeing her growing discomfort, Talon slowly folded his wings about her, embracing her firmly with one arm, and with the other reached down, laying a hand upon the chest of gems and gold.

“Of course,” he whispered in a deep, unearthly tone. She heard him begin to chant, and as he did, her thoughts fell upon Hiska, causing her to weep.

“Goodbye Hiska,” she sobbed, and held tight to Talon as she felt the sudden sensation of falling.