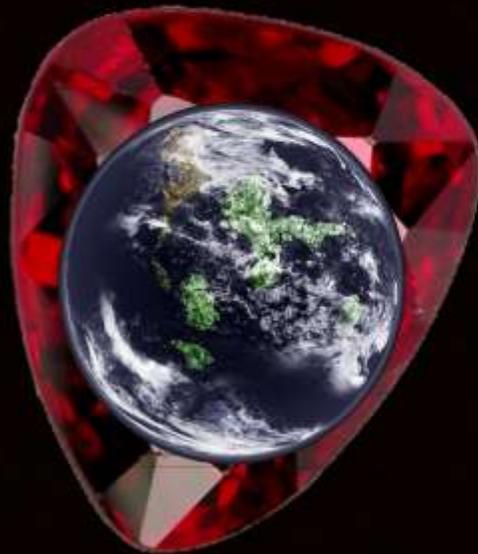


The Jewel of Andar



The Jewel of Andar

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Contents

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We must try again," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The same world," Mer-Vetang answered.

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello, Outworlder."

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

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

"I am Vornur. You are on Andar."

"Andar? Where is that?"

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

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

"What is this?" Robert asked.

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

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

"Eat," the person repeated.

"Not until I get some answers."

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

A large Pozeran in the front slid forward.

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

"What in the world..."

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

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

"Where the hell am I?" Robert asked.

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

"Where's Andar?"

"Many stars from your world."

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

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

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

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

"You are on Andar."

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

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

"And you are who?"

"I am Vornur."

"Vornur. On Andar. Who am I?"

The thing cocked its head at him.

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

"I am Vornur. I am Roduran."

The last word was barely decipherable for Robert.

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

Vornur looked at Robert momentarily, then shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

"We fight," Vornur stated simply.

"Huh?"

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

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

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

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

"You must learn, or you will die."

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

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

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

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

"Why? You speak mine okay."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vornur paused and looked at Robert with his blank face.

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

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

"You achieved peace?" Robert asked, surprised.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vornur did not answer.

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

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

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

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

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

There was a long moment of silence.

"And you?" Robert finally asked.

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

"Too late for what?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The Skellians?"

"There are others."

"Kor-Etath, the ruler of Andar?"

Vornur waited a long time before answering.

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

"But he won't be there."

"He will have many watching for him."

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

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

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

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

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

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