

INVITATION

CHAPTER ONE

The young man was sleeping deeply when he heard the voice. It came not from a dream, for Conor understood the mystery of dream voices. No, this voice came from a place Conor recognized, but had not felt in his soul for many months. He stirred in his sleep, anxious to place the voice and understand why it called out to him.

“Conor,” queried the Lady of the Light. “Can you hear me, Conor?”

Now drifting to the point of a dreamy sleepless state, the lanky 12 year old peered through barely cracked eyelids, half expecting to see his mother standing over his bed. After he had slaved away all week in school, Conor’s mother would invariably stroll through his bedroom door before nine o’clock on Saturday mornings, uttering some gibberish about the garage or the yard or helping his father with this project or that task. Conor loved his mother with all of his heart, but he wished that just once she would allow him reprieve to sleep until noon on a weekend day like so many of his friends. He creased his eyes and then opened them wide, preparing to plead with her for some respite. And why did she have to turn on the bedroom light? It was so bright, so very bright.

“Conor,” asked the Lady again. “Do you recognize my voice, Conor?”

He sat up in bed as if shocked by a cattle prod. He fastened his hands over the sides of the mattress, gripping the coils like the bar on an amusement park roller coaster. The light he had imagined coming from his own bedroom was coming from behind a figure dressed like an angel. The light was so intensely bright that Conor could barely see anything, even while shielding his eyes. He couldn’t begin to make out the features of this woman who had invaded his family’s home and entered his bedroom. Shocked as he

felt, however, Conor made no move to escape. He sat in his bed listening to the voice he had first heard two years prior while on his adventure with Purugama, the magical Crossworlds beast and the greatest friend he had ever known. Conor continued to stare straight at the apparition floating by the foot of his bed.

Slowly the light began to collapse around the Lady until a soft, comforting glow surrounded her. As she leaned forward toward Conor, the beautiful aura spread around Conor's bed, surrounding it and enveloping him as well. Conor basked in the pure, sweet simplicity of the sensation. Nothing he had ever felt before soothed him like this soft, magical light.

"Conor," spoke the Lady again. "Is it you, Conor? Are you the young master who fought so bravely to save our champion Purugama from the destroyer, Drazian?"

"Yes," responded the young man. "I am he. Are you the Lady who spoke to us as we flew through the mists?"

"Yes," said the glorious creator. "It is I."

Conor swallowed hard. He had no idea how to receive such a presence, or what to say to a creator of the Crossworlds. "How, my Lady, may I serve you?"

"It is well you spent your young years with Purugama," beamed the Lady. "Certainly he taught you to be a gracious recipient of our presence. We are pleased, young man, that Purugama stood his ground when asking to mentor you."

The Lady settled herself at the foot of Conor's bed. Her shimmering presence seemed to soothe the entire room. Everything, organic or synthetic, appeared to accept the warmth of the Lady's glowing eminence.

Conor, too, felt mesmerized. The Lady was without exception the most stunning human being he had ever seen. Her flawless features demanded unbroken attention, and Conor obeyed, for he simply could not direct himself to do otherwise. Her elegant bearing spoke of a regal history and of a comparable expectation from those in her presence to adhere to her wishes. This was someone who was used to having her orders followed, thought Conor, yet he wondered if anyone could ever feel the slightest resignation about obeying her commands. Conor certainly felt ready to fight a thousand Drazians if the Lady so commanded, that was how overwhelming her presence felt to him. And here she was, complimenting Conor, a twelve year old, more than a boy but not quite a man. He sat there dumbstruck at the thought, not knowing whether to thank the Lady or sit there quietly. After a lengthy silence the Lady spoke again.

“I am afraid we require your service again, young champion,” she said. “The Crossworlds are in peril and only one as inconspicuous as you can aid us in our time of need. You proved yourself by defeating Purugama’s mortal enemy, Drazian. You spent a good amount time in the service of the great cat, where he introduced you to the magic of the mists. From all corners of earth, you alone have the experience and the courage to accompany us in a quest to order the corridors of the Crossworlds toward stability again.”

The Lady ceased her speech while looking silently at Conor for many moments. The young man stared right through her, through the door, and down to the kitchen where his mother was fixing breakfast. The Lady reached out to stroke Conor’s hair. She cupped her hand around Conor’s chin and smiled at him.

“Certainly this is much for us to ask of one so attached to his own world. Also of one who has already served magnificently in the defense of our place in the order of the

Crossworlds, and in defense of our champion, Purugama. We ask this of you, Conor, because we know from our experience that you will serve us readily in this cause.”

The Lady removed her hand from Conor’s face. “And do not worry, for you will not be missed here in your home. However long you might be away, your absence from this room will only be the length of a human breath. When you return you will descend the stairs and join your family for breakfast, and then help your parents with their tasks.

Conor felt the aura of the Lady washing over his head and body as he listened to the glistening purity of her voice. How could he refuse such a request from any being who commanded the Crossworlds, and with that in mind, how could he do anything but bow down and inquire as to his worthiness to serve this Lady who stood before him?

There was, however, a side of Conor that hadn’t existed two years ago. When his uncle had passed away he had hungrily agreed to accompany Purugama on his mentoring journey because he needed to be restored to health, spiritually and emotionally. Aside from that, he also reveled in the fantasy of his exciting and dangerous adventure with the great beast. Two years had passed, however, and the pain of his uncle’s passing had diminished. He still missed his uncle Jake, but he had moved on, made new friends, entered middle school, and for all intents and purposes, was enjoying life as a pre-teenager. Even though he felt immediate reverence for the Lady, part of him simply wanted to be a boy. He wanted to tease girls, harass teachers, play music and computer games, and just have fun. One of the things his uncle always told him was to have as much fun as he could while he was a boy, for the world was waiting, and after a certain age uninhibited fun would disappear as surely as the sun setting on the horizon.

The young man looked around his room slowly, taking in every object he could see – the comfortable bed, its head resting by a frosted panel window that allowed the soft light of the morning to gently wake him. The media center, with a CD player, television, computer, and a game console. His desk, fronted by a larger window that Conor used to come and go as he pleased after his parents turned in for the night. A closet full of everything he needed, so many articles of clothing and shoes that they spilled out onto the floor with the doors permanently raked back. Then he looked at the posters on the wall, at the musicians, actors and movies he felt so strongly about. Conor looked at all of these material blessings and shook his head, knowing already what he must do for the Lady and her companions. Conor juggled these emotions and came to a quick conclusion.

Two years ago he had been granted an amazing gift by these beings, whoever they were. They had answered his cries for understanding and sent Purugama of the Crossworlds, a most unexpected and appreciated teacher, to guide him on his journey. Conor knew he would repay their kindness by giving his service to them. He knew that somewhere, the big cougar must have been smiling because of his decision.

As requested by Purugama, Conor had never breathed a word to anyone about their adventure. Well, not to any other human, that is. He had told his family's cats, Sunny, Lenny, and Little Man all about Purugama, and they either didn't care at all or they were in fact listening intently to the stories of a long distant cousin. Conor couldn't tell either way, but it eased some of his discomfort to tell someone.

He looked back toward the foot of his bed and caught the Lady's eyes, those eyes that never seemed to blink while taking in everything so peacefully.

“Tell me your story, my Lady,” Conor said. “Why do you visit me today?”

CHAPTER TWO

The Lady lowered herself gracefully, sitting motionless as she stared at Conor. The slightest semblance of a smile crept into her expression. Although she would never express the feeling to him, she loved this young man because of his great courage. Presented with a problem, he had assessed both spheres of thought and had come to the correct moral conclusion. As Purugama would have done, Conor chose to assist those in their time of need. How predictable might a person's actions be if mentored by the proper guardian, thought the Lady. After a long while, she spoke.

“Conor, do you remember when you first heard my voice, and the voices of the other creators?”

“Sure I do,” responded Conor. “I heard it when Purugama and I flew into the mists in between journeys. He flew all over the place acting like a little kitten, and then when he heard the first voice call out, he immediately settled down and coasted in an unswerving pattern.”

“That is correct,” replied the Lady. “When you entered the mists you and he encountered a corridor of transmission, a door you might say, between worlds. It was by using one of these corridors that Purugama entered and exited the different worlds where your lessons occurred. Indeed, one of these corridors carried the evil Drazian to where he confronted Purugama and almost destroyed him and you, my son.”

The Lady paused briefly and then questioned the young man. “Do you understand me, Conor?”

“I think so,” Conor responded. “It sounds like a science fiction movie.”

“I am not familiar with what you describe,” said the Lady. “Let us agree that we who inhabit the Crossworlds use these corridors as easily as someone in your world uses a doorway. By simply walking through a door, you enter another room. We simply pass through our corridors and enter another world, any world we wish.”

The Lady let Conor digest this last comment before she continued. “You must understand, however, that the corridors also serve as a vital fabric which binds the energy of the Crossworlds together. Just as your sun provides essential energy and warmth to all life on earth, the energy of the corridors supplies an indispensable element for the survival of the Crossworlds. Without a continuous and uninterrupted flow of nutrients to the corridors, the Crossworlds and all its inhabitants would perish.”

Conor squished a few pillows behind his head and sat up a little straighter. “There is something threatening the corridors?”

The Lady placed her hand on Conor’s. “We do not yet know, young man, but we have measured the depletion of energies for quite some time. There is no mistake; the corridors are under siege.”

Conor leaned back on his elbows and gazed at the wall just to the right of the Lady. He couldn’t help but wonder how a boy his age could provide the difference between life and death for the Crossworlds and for the earth as well. Certainly there had to be a Crossworlds army of magical warriors, with the insurmountable powers of good on their side, who could defeat any force set before them and replenish the energies of the corridors. Or perhaps this Lady who sat before him, who obviously possessed considerable power, could snap her fingers and repair the corridors and defeat whatever beings were attempting to destroy the Crossworlds.

He sat and stared for a long while. He wanted to walk right past the Lady, out his bedroom door and down the stairs to have breakfast with his family. He wanted to ride his bike to the lake and skip rocks and play with his dog. He wanted to go to a friend's house and play video games all day. He wanted to do anything but follow the Lady on an adventure to some far away world where he might be killed by another horrible creature like Drazian. He wanted, more than anything, to have Purugama here to tell him what to do.

The Lady sat quietly in perfect repose, her hands resting in her lap. She waited patiently for Conor to complete his musings, for she knew better than he what was playing out in his mind. And she knew perfectly well what the young man would decide after he flirted with his selfish side. After all, was it not completely normal for earthlings of this age to wish only for fun and enjoyment in life? She stared at him lovingly, knowing without fail what he would say next.

Conor hopped out of bed and began fingering a large pile of clothing on the floor. As he grabbed a t-shirt, he looked up at the Lady and smiled. "Should I dress for warm weather or cold," he asked.

As the last word fell from his tongue, Conor felt rather than saw that he was instantly groomed and dressed, with warm socks and shoes and a heavy coat. A wool cap tightly shrouded his head, and a pair of lined mittens hung on his beltline. He straightened and looked at the Lady of the Light, who still sat unmoving at the foot of his bed.

“May I ask why I am bundled up like this?” Conor inquired. “If I remember correctly, during all of my adventures with Purugama, I scarcely wore more than a t-shirt and a light pair of pajamas.”

The Lady stood up so gracefully Conor would have sworn not a single muscle had been used in the effort. She padded over to where Conor stood, grabbed both sides of the wool cap and tucked it a little tighter over Conor’s ears. She nicked his nose with the knuckle of her right hand and then crouched down a little so they stared at each other at eye level.

“During your voyage with our champion, Purugama, young man, no possibility of corridor infection existed. Therefore, you were in no danger from the elements. During this journey, however, with the unstable nature of the corridor energies, there may be times when the cold will be unbearable.” She paused and scanned Conor’s facial features for a sign of fear. “Although the cold may last no more than a moment, we must be certain that you are well protected in case of longer exposure. After all, would we serve our champion by allowing harm to come to the one who risked his life to save him?” She smiled beautifully to highlight this last comment.

The Lady grabbed Conor’s wrist and led him over to his desk, where a sculpture of a powerful cat in a crouched position guarded the various papers and writing instruments. She drew her hand across Conor’s face and then down toward the stoic cat, directing his vision toward the statue. As the young lad’s eyes took in the solid feline shape, the Lady lightly stroked its neck and shoulders. A silver shower of sparkling crystals blossomed from the Lady’s hand, completely enveloping the statue. After shimmering brightly, the crystals disappeared, and in place of the statue a magnificent cat

crouched quietly. The cat was stunning, very domestic in its coloring, but quite majestic in its bearing.

Conor stood transfixed at the sight of a living creature where before there had been only a sculpture. He watched as the small cat surveyed the area of his bedroom directly in front of and below the desk. It seemed to be looking at nothing in his room, but by its intensity he saw that this cat was either searching for something or guarding a great treasure. He wanted desperately to reach out and touch the animal, but something inside of him restrained his hand from following its impulse. Instead, he put his hands on his knees, crouched down for a good look and stared directly into the cat's eyes.

Although wilder looking than any of his own cats, the coloring of the beast was not unlike Conor's oldest cat, Sunny, a black and white tabby who, at sixteen, could easily scale an eight foot fence without a soul being aware of it. This cat also retained black and white markings, but where Sunny's were mottled and coincidental, the markings of this animal had been purposeful, almost by design. The white around its mouth rose to the crown of his forehead in a perfect pyramid. From there, the white coloring abruptly disappeared, giving way to a coal black mask that cut the eyes in two and covered the ears completely. Even the fine hairs that occupied its ear canals were midnight black.

The mask continued along the back of an extremely powerful neck and shoulder area, and then yielded to a white collar that encompassed the front paws completely. Then the black fur again took over at the middle of the backbone and covered the rear flank. The tail shone brilliantly, black as a starless night.

The white fur was perfectly white; the black fur was also without flaw. Only one small imperfection existed in the coloring. At the very tip of its pink nose, a tiny blot of dark coloring existed. It seemed as though the creators of this animal deemed their work too flawless, so they marred it in the slightest respect. Even with the blemish, though, the remarkable strength and coloring caused you to move aside out of a healthy sense of respect whenever the cat looked directly at you.

The Lady enjoyed watching Conor's fascination with the small replication of the Crossworlds' greatest champion. She marveled at how respectfully he treated the beast, how he wished to touch and stroke the strong muscles, and yet held himself at bay, resigned to only a visual inspection. After a while, she spoke of the strange cat.

"Conor, you must travel with me to a place where all Crossworlds beasts such as Purugama congregate." The Lady gestured toward the cat on the desk. "There you will meet Maya, the Lord and Leader of the Champions of the Crossworlds. Maya has either sired or counseled each champion for countless generations, for tens of thousands of earth years. He is by far the wisest and most courageous in the long line of mentors sent out to assist creatures in need of counsel and protection."

The Lady extended her graceful hand over to where Maya crouched on the desk. The stunning cat sparked and arched his back to meet the Lady's touch. Yet even while in supplication to one of the creators, Maya was in command of everything around him. Never flinching, always aware, the powerful cat accepted the Lady's consideration and never once allowed his senses to weaken. The Lady stroked his strong back and smiled at Conor.

“Indeed, it was Maya who took a very young Purugama into his care and molded him into the remarkable creature that befriended you. The champion who mentored you was not always the proud and dignified beast you came to know two years ago.”

The Lady of the Light actually giggled, briefly holding a graceful hand over her mouth. “Maya had quite a struggle with Purugama in the beginning. As you had noticed during your time with him, Purugama, from time to time, exhibited some characteristics of the domestic cats that you and your family keep as pets. When he was still young, he would sometimes lie in wait for Maya and pounce on him with all the ferocity a young cougar could muster. The scuffles usually lasted as long as Maya wished, and sometimes Maya would use the play time as a learning tool for Purugama, teaching him the intricacies of battle while allowing him a victory here and there. At other times, like all guardians, Maya was simply not in the mood, and he would swat Purugama aside and watch him tumble and crash into a bush, all paws and whiskers and a cross-eyed look of misunderstanding.”

After a pause, the Lady regained her regal countenance and addressed Conor directly. “Come, my young champion, let us away to the realm of the great cats. Maya awaits us, and he will tell us what needs to be done. Just stand your ground, look directly into my eyes, and don’t move a muscle. I will transport us to the glade of champions.”

CHAPTER THREE

Before Conor could button his coat or slip on his gloves, he felt a strange sensation overtaking him. It seemed his head was swimming or his bedroom had begun to spin. He couldn't be certain which. He tried very hard to be brave and not be too concerned. He much preferred traveling with Purugama, abrupt as it was at times. At least he could relate to flying. This, he decided, was altogether different and a little disconcerting. Nevertheless, he held the Lady's eyes fast to his own, as she had requested, and found comfort in the beautiful serenity that lay within her gaze.

In his peripheral vision, he saw that the familiar items in his bedroom were stretching and melting, as if something or some force was peeling them away from a central point near the door of his room. Then the Lady let one of her hands slowly fall as she extended her finger to a point behind and to the left of her body. She signaled to a spot in mid-air, and then brought her hand back to her face, drawing Conor's line of sight back up to her eyes. She smiled at Conor, soothing his anxious nerves.

It was then that Conor began to see the corridor taking shape. At the precise spot where the Lady had touched the air, a keyhole opened, allowing an intensely bright light into the room. The miniature Maya, still standing guard on Conor's desk, began to growl and gruffle at the sight of a corridor becoming active. It seemed that he, too, became apprehensive at the sight of the creator's passageways.

Conor could not focus on the Lady's eyes any longer. He simply had to watch the scene unfolding before him in his bedroom. The light from the keyhole began to slowly enlarge. Conor stared, fascinated by the precision of the movement. It looked as though the Lady had used her finger to draw a perfect box out of thin air.

As the light expanded, it shifted in direction and began to devour everything in the bedroom, streaming in unison across every wall as it hungrily swallowed each square foot of space. Every article of clothing, every book or statue or picture in Conor's room became part of the growing rectangle of light. Each object shuddered momentarily as the edges of the corridor touched it. After passing over and consuming it, the light moved on, leaving it in its original location. Conor squinted his eyes but could not make out anything on the other side of the corridor membrane. The light blinded him. Try as he might, the young man could not find form or substance in its dominion.

Another of Conor's senses signaled a change to him, however. As the door grew in size, so did the sensation of cold coming from within the corridor. When it finally reached its maximum dimension, the temperature in Conor's bedroom had dropped at least forty degrees, and the young man silently thanked the Lady for providing him with warm clothing for the journey. He turned around and glanced at Maya, who crouched in a ball with his paws covering his nose. The cat suddenly shifted his ever-watchful eyes and looked directly at Conor, and slowly winked. If he had ever lacked the courage to follow through with this adventure, that simple gesture filled Conor with renewed fortitude. He smiled at Maya, spun around, faced forward and returned his attention to the Lady of the Light.

The Lady seemed to suffer no ill effects from the drastic temperature change. She turned boldly toward the doorway of the corridor and held out both hands, as if to receive the energy from the interface within the Crossworlds. Slowly, she began to move toward the light, and as she advanced, she allowed her right hand to grasp Conor's left hand. She moved forward, guiding Conor toward the light at the same time. Her left hand penetrated

the light field and instantly she and Conor were encased in a cloak of energy. Conor almost jumped back when the wide beam swallowed him, for he felt a brief electric shock, but he held his ground and advanced with the Lady leading the way. It was painfully cold, but Conor was so astonished by what he saw, he felt nothing but awe and fascination. Just before entering the light he felt something small and strong land on his left shoulder. He turned his head and saw the small Maya crouched around his neck, looking intently into the light. Conor glanced one last time at the Lady, swallowed his uncertainty, and stepped across the threshold of the corridor.

For the briefest of moments, Conor felt the most profound sense of cold he could have ever believed possible. As soon as he stepped completely into the portal, his face felt as if it would freeze and break away from his skull. He had forgotten to put on his gloves, and his right hand became completely numb. His left hand, still embraced by the Lady, felt warm and protected. That simple sensation, being connected physically to the Lady, was the only thing that prevented Conor from being frightened out of his wits.

Conor noticed that Maya had disappeared, obviously comfortable with the transition between worlds. He also noticed that even though there was nothing concrete to see inside the corridor, he was hearing some familiar sounds. He remembered hearing the identical noises during his travels with Purugama, and even with the Lady providing escort, they unnerved the young man just as they had before while flying through the mists with the big cougar. The sounds: human voices, animal cries, shouts and laughter of all kinds seemed to come from everywhere. Above and below, and from all directions around him, Conor listened to the echoes of many different worlds. He tried to block out the clatter and focus on passing through the corridor. He felt the Lady squeeze his hand,

and he experienced the feeling of electric shock again, this time followed by a blast of intense heat. An instant later, they passed through the corridor and into Maya's world.

Conor's breath left him while he stared in disbelief. He forgot that this place was the realm of Maya and the great Champions of the Crossworlds. He was so astonished by what he saw he didn't even remember how he came to be there, or that the Lady was standing next to him after safely guiding him through the corridor. He stood there like a statue, mouth agape, clearly stunned by his surroundings. If there ever was a perfect place, a warrior's haven, Conor knew instantly that it must look identical to this world.

He and the Lady stood at the perimeter of a dense, beautifully canopied forest. Every hue of green was represented in the trees, bushes, moss, grass, and ground-blanketing ferns. The features of the forest fit together perfectly; every filament of flora seemed to reside in the precise position relative to its neighbor. A light wind, which never ceased nor changed in intensity, rustled through the leaves and branches, giving life to the brush.

In front and to the right of the two newcomers lay an exquisite body of water, a glassy lake so crystalline in its composition that Conor almost believed he could walk across the surface. The water at the edge of the lake lapped up against a fine, white coral sand belt, undisturbed by footprints or debris. The breeze that tickled the forest ran out to meet the water in the lake and appeared to dance lightly across its surface.

To the left of the lake Conor saw a mountain of rocks rising majestically toward the sky and eventually disappearing into the clouds. A soft, noiseless waterfall trickled down the entire expanse of rock, silently dipping into the lake water at the base of the

rock wall. The waterfall moved so delicately that the water dripping into the lake failed to disturb its pristine perfection.

Conor raised his eyes. There was no experience, no picture, no description from anyone he knew that might have matched the beauty of the sky he saw before him. The horizon glowed with a light purple haze, with clouds as blue as the lake water. The red sun's reflection against these hues sent Conor's head spinning. As the sun began to fall in the sky, the forest, the lake water, even the rocks from the mountain seemed to stretch out toward the light, hoping to jealously grasp one last bit of nourishment before having to do without until the next morning.

The Lady tousled Conor's hair and began walking toward the trees. As with the sun, the forest seemed to stretch out toward the Lady, as if she possessed energy that the flora hungered for, or, was it something else, wondered Conor. The trees and bushes appeared to want to caress and embrace her, almost as if there was some sort of symbiotic relationship between her and the natural surroundings. Every section of forest she strolled by reached out for her like a child demanding its parents' attention. She moved without a glance toward the trees, preferring instead to extend a few fingers and lightly touch a few leaves here and there. The fortunate branches and trunks straightened with the sensation of her touch, trying to put forth the best impression they could. It all seemed like a truly magical place, thought Conor, as he watched the interplay between goddess and nature.

After stopping to inspect a piece of coral on the shoreline, Conor followed the Lady of the Light as she walked alongside the forest. The young lad ran over to where the Lady had taken a seat, plopping himself down next to her.

“Are we going to rest for a while?” he asked the Lady.

She continued gazing into the forest, answering him while directing her gaze into the trees. “Yes, we will rest here for a short while. I think this might be a good time for you to meet a few of Purugama’s friends.”

She smiled down at him. “Would you like that, Conor?”

“As long as you are here with me, Lady,” he answered. “Hopefully the cats won’t be as playful as Purugama was when he was he young.”

“Fear not, Conor,” replied the Lady, softly chuckling. “All of Maya’s charges have heard the story of your battle against Drazian, and they have long awaited the day when they could meet the defender of their much-revered brother. I should think you will be surprised at the way they watch themselves around *you*.”

With that final stunning comment, the Lady turned from Conor and focused her energy on the wall of trees directly in front of them. She seemed to be sending some form of mental communication deep into the forest. In no time at all Conor heard stomping and rustling and saw great stands of trees and bushes pressing side to side in the wake of something huge. He could see a path forming through the forest, cut into the dense trees by something immense and powerful. He could not deny the fear he felt, anticipating the arrival of not one but many beasts as imposing as Purugama. He recalled the first time he ever laid eyes on the great cougar, and a nervous chill ran down his small spine. Nevertheless, he wanted the Lady to be proud of him so he held firm to his seat and awaited the arrival of whatever moved in the trees. He also knew, from watching nature shows on television that animals who smell fear often times react to it.



INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER FOUR

The first cat to emerge from the forest did so from a densely shrouded branch of a tall tree, far to the left of Conor and the Lady. While listening to the thrashing from the forest, Conor had completely missed the cat's hiding place. So silent was its descent from the foliage, it seemed to appear out of thin air. Using a succession of large branches and trunks as its own personal escalator, it exited the tree line, pacing calmly out into the clearing. Conor sat there gawking at an enormous black jaguar, nearly the size of his family's SUV. Tracking toward Conor and the Lady with eerily silent footsteps, the sleek and stunning cat growled a low, thunderous greeting as he paced off the yards between the forest and his guests. Conor marveled at how the jaguar never walked directly toward them, but seemed to tack like a sailboat coming upwind. It appeared to be giving itself a strategic edge as it closed in on them, an instinctive movement bred into feline creatures thousands of millennia ago.

As it reached the two visitors, the powerful and regal jaguar dipped its massive head in reverence, allowing the Lady of the Light to scratch him behind his ears. It never once glanced at Conor or showed any sign of recognition that the young lad even existed. This, Conor knew, must be out of the tremendous respect and awe all of these cats held for this queen of the Crossworlds. He took no offense to it, and was actually quite happy that an animal this capable had decided to address the Lady of the Light before turning to him.

Conor couldn't help but stare, though. Similar to his first meeting with Purugama, he was astounded by the size and strength of this animal. And to think, he thought to himself; there are more of these hunched down in the forest, waiting their turn to come

out and greet the Lady. When the jaguar spoke, Conor wasn't prepared for it, and he felt the shock of surprise zoom down his spine.

"My Lady, I greet you with jubilant happiness," spoke the cat in a deep, resonant voice. "It is ever our privilege to welcome you to this place of recuperation."

"Ajur, Ajur," the Lady cooed as she stroked the huge ears. The jaguar finally succumbed to her touch and dropped his head completely into her grasp. "No kingdom could consider itself complete without one such as you within its midst. We thank you for your methodical nature, your strength, and mostly for your incredible beauty. You are inquired about more often than any of our other champions. I shall inform those within the Light that you are well, Ajur, and that you seek their counsel always."

The huge jaguar chuffed quietly, pushing his great head ever so slightly against the Lady's nose. Then he shook himself, stretched, and walked in an indirect path around the two of them and curled up behind them as if to guard their rear. The jaguar did this without ever saying a word to Conor or even acknowledging his presence.

Before he could begin to decipher Ajur's behavior, Conor snapped his head back as the forest parted directly in front of them and a Sumatran tiger the size of an elephant padded straight toward them. Conor was shocked into silence and frozen solid at the sight of the magnificent cat. The coloring was impeccable, right down to the extra pair of eyes atop his ears. The animal's coat looked as though an army of stylists had worked on the beast for hours before he made his entrance into the glade. The golden eyes blazed with an acute awareness of everything around him, the Lady, the young man, and every square foot of scenery. This cat, thought Conor, would have destroyed Drazian in seconds. The

width of one of its paws stood almost half as tall as Conor. The fangs were longer than the young man's hands. Unbelievable, thought Conor, and *very* intimidating.

The tiger approached the Lady and growled a powerful greeting that sounded as menacing as anything Conor had ever heard. The young man began to step back, moving away from his position. He felt too frightened to do anything else.

“Surmitang!” said the Lady as she stomped her foot. “You impudent rascal, do you wish to scare the young lad to death with your playful tricks?” The Lady of the Light continued admonishing him, chiding the huge tiger for frightening his guest.

To Conor's amazement, the behemoth feline fell immediately to the ground, covering his eyes and nose with his forepaws. He did not look up for many moments, but finally, the great paws separated and the mammoth tiger looked up sheepishly.

The Sumatran tiger spoke cautiously, reverently. Conor stared, stunned at the attitude of this incredibly powerful beast. How could he do anything but whatever he wanted, in any situation? The young man stood still with his mouth agape and listened.

“We praise you, Lady, and seek with all of our hearts your forgiveness. Our intention was not to frighten, but to entertain only. For how rarely do you grant us a visit, and how few and far between are our opportunities to greet you. If for no other reason, keeper of the Light, this was my chance to see how Purugama's apprentice reacted to the approach of a beast as magnificent as Surmitang.”

The Lady advanced and threw herself at Surmitang. With no regard to the necessary decorum befitting her station, she jumped on Surmitang's flank and hugged him with all of her strength.

“Surmitang, there is no one, no one even in the Light with your proud sense of self. How can the Crossworlds exist except by your example,” asked the Lady.

“It surely would not,” replied the immense tiger. “I would no more change my ways than lessen the amount of love I hold for you, Lady.”

“And I you,” responded the Lady of the Light. “And I you. There will never be another such as you, Surmitang, never.”

Conor had stumbled over his own feet and sat dumbfounded while he stared at the Lady and her interaction with this humorous but dangerous animal. He thought about his past trips to the zoo with his parents, and the long walks they had taken through the tiger exhibits. He stared at Surmitang while remembering one particular day. He had run ahead of his mother and father, eager to arrive at the viewing area where the great tigers often napped close to the plexiglass windows. On this day, one of the tigers in the exhibit had been napping peacefully, until he sensed another tiger encroaching on his sleeping area.

As Conor watched, the intruder stopped as he saw that the resting area was occupied. However, after only a second’s consideration, he continued, past the waterfall, across the log, finally stopping directly in front of his sleeping brother, focusing on his decision to fight for the prime napping location. Before Conor could turn and tell anyone about the coming confrontation, the sleeping cat had awakened, assessed the danger, and attacked. The battle lasted only ten seconds, a flurry of striking paws and fang-filled mouths snarling wildly with rage, and then the two cats settled on a decision. The intruder backed away, beaten, but retaining a few more notes about his opponent for another battle some day in the future. Conor looked at Surmitang as he recalled this memory, awed by the giant tiger’s capabilities.

Jolted from his reverie, the young man gathered himself and stood in the place where he had fallen. He straightened his clothing and put his toes together. He grabbed the bottom of his coat and tugged on it, hoping to present as fine an image as he could to the great tiger, Surmitang. He inhaled deeply, holding his breath and his stance, looking straight ahead and all the while keeping the immense cat in his peripheral vision.

Surmitang, for his part, had broken away from the Lady and had begun pacing back and forth in front of Conor in a broad, relaxed pattern. Never taking his eyes from the young man in front of him, whether he panned left or right, the mammoth tiger eyeballed Conor with a piercing look that gave away nothing, sending cold spikes down Conor's spine.

"He will do," spoke the tiger to the Lady. "He shivers, but he will adapt." Surmitang paced for a few more seconds, staring at the frightened young lad. Then the great tiger separated himself from his pattern, stopping immediately in front of Conor for an instant only, and then vaulting over the youngster with a movement as lithe as a feather blowing in the wind. He landed almost on top of Ajur, who by his own leave didn't move a muscle. Then Surmitang bounced away and sat himself down directly to the right of a frightened but determined young man.

"Conor," the Lady whispered. "Don't let that rascal unnerve you. He is a mighty champion, but his head is big enough to become stuck in the canyon of lost voices."

Conor smiled as he looked over at Surmitang. He swore he saw a smile beginning to appear on the big tiger's face, when a deafening roar thundered across the lake from shoreline to shoreline.

The Lady of the Light straightened and composed herself. She let loose of Conor's hand and joined her own two hands together. Seeing nothing yet, she called out to the water in excited anticipation.

"Therion, come show yourself to the one who saved your cousin," called the Lady. "Come away from the lake and share yourself with us."

Conor watched as a stream of bubbles appeared at the far shore of the lake. Had they not been so huge, Conor might not have noticed them from so far a distance. These bubbles were as big as basketballs, however, and their eruptions could easily be seen by the naked eye. After seeing Ajur and Surmitang, Conor understood why the air bubbles popped like firecrackers. Surely this Therion, whatever type of cat he was, must literally be as big as a house.

The bubbles finally reached the side of the lake closest to Conor and the Lady. The young man expected the water to broil and churn and explode in a crescendo of power announcing Therion to the world. He was surprised to see the bubbles diminish and then disappear altogether, leaving, once again, a calm watery surface. He looked up at the Lady of the Light, and upon receiving no guidance, looked back at the water.

Conor's hair almost stood straight up on his head when he saw a massive wall of water shaped like a drawbridge rise up from the shoreline. A tunnel of air peeled back into the depths off the lake. Out from this misty darkness strode the king of beasts himself, golden fur over rippling muscles, crowned by a majestic mane of chocolate brown hair. Even though this lion, no doubt as powerful as a tank and almost as large, emerged from the depths of a lake of water, his mane and body stayed as dry as the savannah that claimed his birthplace.

The huge lion strode confidently up the shoreline and promptly burrowed into the sand, head first and then with his whole body. He rolled around a bit, scratching his ears and his great back. Back and forth, over and over he went, until he finally rolled over, licking his forepaws for a bit, and then stood up. He shook himself from nose to tail, making sure every last particle of dust was removed before presenting himself to the Lady.

And present himself he did. With as dignified a display as any being could achieve, the immense and confident lion crouched down in front of where the young man and the Lady of the Light waited, his forepaws stretched out to their full length.

“My Lady,” chuffed the huge cat.

“Therion,” said the Lady of the Light, greeting the lion with a broad smile. “The fiercest and noblest of the four-footed beasts,” she said, speaking to Conor and Therion both. “And obviously, the most impressed with himself,” chided the Lady of the Light as she watched the huge lion flex his great muscles as he sat in front of the Lady. Indeed, the lion appeared to be slowly appraising his physique. Every muscle and tendon was individually flexed from shoulder to hindquarter. Therion wrinkled his nose and raised his eyebrows at the sight of each.

Again, as Ajur and Surmitang had done before him, this champion paid no direct heed to Conor. The lion appeared to embrace the Lady’s presence and gave the young man only a cursory glance once or twice. Therion inspected himself thoroughly, shook his immense mane from time to time, and swiped a tail that could knock down a telephone pole across his body periodically to evict any small creatures enjoying a free

ride on his flank. Finally satisfied with his evaluation, the huge cat blinked his bronze eyes at the Lady and fixed a stare upon her face.

He was clearly enjoying himself, thought Conor. He knows that the Lady of the Light commands his obedience absolutely, and yet he acts indifferently toward her, almost fielding a challenge to her authority. Or was it something else entirely, pondered the young man. Could it be, thought Conor, that these Champions of the Crossworlds were chosen precisely because they were so sure of themselves, so cocky, and so narcissistically self-possessed? Certainly, to protect the creators, the corridors, and the creatures of all worlds, one cannot only be huge and powerful. One must also be self-confident to the extreme, thought Conor. These three beasts, and Purugama as well, Conor remembered, were defenders of the Crossworlds because they believed in their hearts that they were meant to serve the creators in that capacity. They believed wholeheartedly that no other creatures from any world could possibly perform the duty as well as them. They were perfectly suited to the task, they knew it, and they made sure everyone else understood it as well. That was why Therion acted this way toward the Lady. Better still, mused Conor, it was why the Lady of the Light condoned it.

Then Therion, satisfied with himself and his presentation, stood and stretched and chuffed and shook his mane, finally sauntering over to the left of the Lady and Conor. Instead of relaxing, however, the big cat stood erect and at attention, seemingly aware of something around the lake that others might have taken for granted.

The lion must have indeed sensed something, for before Conor could even raise an eyelid, a flash of fur bolted out of the trees and across the glade. The cat exploded from the forest and blew by the group so rapidly that all Conor felt was a heavy blast of

air as it raced by him. Even the glade hadn't had a chance to react. It appeared as though nothing had been disturbed when the animal emerged from the brush. Trees, bushes, leaves and grass stood still, seemingly surprised by the stealth and light-footed gait of this animal.

Conor tried and tried to keep an eye on the amazingly quick beast. He turned and spun so many times that he would have fallen down had the Lady not steadied him with a strong and sure hand. All the young man could see was a blur of spots, color, and fur. The beast rushed about in a planned, orderly fashion; around the lake, through the palms, up and down the small hills that circled the mesa. Just when Conor thought he might be gaining a visual hold on the creature, the beast would instantly bolt off in a different direction, leaving a wall of dirt and dust in its wake. Whatever it was, Conor thought, it reminded him of his cat, Little Man, in the morning. His youngest cat would tear around the house for ten to fifteen minutes every morning, chasing nothing and having the time of his life. Conor watched the giant animal enjoying himself in a similar fashion.

“Eha!” shouted the Lady suddenly, frightening Conor out of his wits.

The animal stopped mid-step on its way up a small hill just to the left of the forest. When the cloud of dust finally settled, Conor realized he was right in guessing that this creature had to be a cheetah. It stood there, tongue hanging out, chest heaving, and eyes fully aware of everything within a thousand yards in every direction. The cheetah must have weighed in at close to a ton, and at the shoulder stood over a dozen feet tall, enormous for a feline of his type. Its tail was at least twenty feet long, and its hind legs looked fit enough to drag a large truck a city block with ease.

After a moment's thought, the cheetah calmly turned and walked down the hill toward the Lady of the Light. He strolled directly up to her, and after what seemed like a bow of supplication, began to lick the Lady's face generously. First her ears, then her forehead, then from her chin to the crown of her head. Conor watched in fascination as the huge cat conveyed his love to her.

"Eha, stop," cooed the Lady, as she unsuccessfully attempted to divert the great cheetah's kisses. "Contain yourself. You know how much I miss you, do you not?"

The cheetah finally allowed himself to be subdued. "No, my Lady," he said quietly, "I do not. The pain of your absence drains my heart. I speak for every champion here on the mesa when I say how deeply we miss you when you are away and how excited and happy we become when we hear news of a visit."

Conor marveled at the way each of these cats spoke to the Lady of the Light. Indeed, their general mannerisms confirmed a long, loving relationship between each of these magnificent beasts and the creators, especially with the Lady, to whom they all appeared to claim first rights of affection. He stood there next to the Lady as she interacted with Eha, the cheetah who moments before could have raced miles away and back again in an instant.

The huge, sleek animal was a predator, as were all the Champions of the Crossworlds. He looked at all four of the cats, immense, powerful and confident, gathered together around one of their favorite creators. Conor shook his head in awe and thought to himself, what purpose could I have here? With all of this feline firepower at the Lady's disposal, what could she possibly want with a twelve year old boy from earth?

Eha crouched as he finished his recital to the Lady. “For all present, my Lady, we welcome you with glad hearts.” After speaking this final phrase, the massive cheetah stood and walked around Conor and the Lady, taking a protective stance directly in front of the pair. For a moment, everyone remained in their respective positions, the Lady and Conor in the middle, Ajur to their rear, Surmitang on the right and Therion on the left, and Eha sweeping his tail toward the quiet, dark forest in front of them.

Conor took the Lady’s hand and looked up at her eyes. “Who am I to expect next, my Lady,” asked Conor. “After these four magnificent creatures, who will appear from the forest now?”

“Now, Conor,” answered the Lady of the Light. “Now you will meet Maya, the Lord of the Champions of the Crossworlds.”