

CHAPTER TWO

“We must find him!” demanded the Lady of the Light. She delivered her impassioned pleas in a firm but deferential manner. Connecting with each member of the council as they entered and exited her line of vision, the Lady locked her eyes to theirs without blinking. She had been given the most privileged of audiences and she knew this conference could end without explanation. She presented herself and her case with equal precision. The creators, assembled comfortably in the council chamber, sat quietly, listening to her pleas. “He gave up everything for us! He sacrificed his own life and that of his companion’s to fight as our Champion! He recovered the five keys of the creators *by himself* while we hid from the wrath of the evil ones! Without this accomplishment, we might not be here today conferring with each other. He did everything we asked of him. Will we turn our backs on him now?”

With a stiff upper lip and a stern look in her eye, the Lady paced purposefully in front of the Council of Seven, the supreme gathering of the creators emeritus. She argued her case aggressively while looking directly at each of her superiors. She paid particular attention to those she knew she could influence. She pushed the council to use all their available resources to search throughout the Crossworlds. Conor must be found, she submitted vehemently. To do anything less would be a disgrace to the integrity of the council.

“What of the thousands of worlds under our protection?” boomed the voice of the first councilor, his golden aura flaring about his shoulders. “Many worlds exist in a state

of chaos. Thanks to the Circle of Evil, more planets under our protection fall into disarray with each passing day.”

“Without our Champions to do battle for us,” he said, “we must summon our own magic to hold off the might of Seefra’s armies. Will we deny these other worlds the security they deserve, all for the sake of one young man from a planet at the very edge of our dominion?”

“And what of the five keys of the creators?” continued the first councilor, now standing to keep still so he could face the Lady of the Light. “We have no secure knowledge of their whereabouts. Conor Jameson’s companion cannot be found by any of our most accomplished seekers. We must assume she still possesses the keys. We must also assume she remains a prisoner of Seefra’s shadow warriors. How much longer will it be until he overcomes the spell you placed on the metallurgy of the keys? What will become of Conor’s companion the instant they decipher the components of your magic? Would you have us lift our protection over her and send those resources in search of your young earthling?”

The first councilor leaned forward, placing his large hands on the transparent table in front of him. “You conveniently forget, my Lady, that we currently operate without the Champions of the Crossworlds at our disposal. We fear that their location will forever be a mystery to us. Indeed, they might never honor us with their service again. Do you comprehend the meaning of this? For ten thousand centuries, first with the protection forces and then with Maya and his brother Champions, our cause has reigned supreme. With very little intermission, we have held the Crossworlds in a state of peace for all that time.”

The first councilor's golden aura flared again as he raised his voice to the Lady of the Light. The force of his speech seemed to surge from the entire chamber. "I remind you that it was *Conor Jameson* who summoned the chaos we now endure by revealing the nature of his association with us. After receiving explicit warnings from both Purugama and Maya never to speak of his amazing adventures to anyone, he chose to ignore the cautions. With everything he had learned, he chose to put not only his own life in jeopardy, but untold millions of others as well. And you find the nerve to stand here and make demands of us? You ask too much of this gathering, my Lady."

"I ask too much?" replied the Lady of the Light with a raised voice as she approached the inner curve of the council table. The silver coating around her body sparkled brightly as she felt the hold on her emotions slipping away. "This warrior helped defeat Drazian at the tender age of *ten years*. He overcame Gandron and Fumemos at twelve. He very nearly destroyed Seefra *in his own fortress* at the same age. Now, after vanquishing Loken at fourteen you will abandon him to the cell of shadows for the remainder of his life? I ask only for what he has earned – our undying love and limitless support in this supreme quest. How can you possibly grant him anything less?"

The Lady paced about the interior circle of the council table. She looked at each member in turn before returning to face the first councilor. "My Lord," she began, not with anger, but with love in her heart. "I cannot deny the truth of what you say. Conor erred grievously. Believe me when I tell you that no one knows this more than he. He sits somewhere now, alone and despondent. I assure you his thoughts are only for others, not for himself. This young man has proven himself beyond anyone's expectations. He has not only displayed an array of incredible physical abilities, but also the emotional and

spiritual capabilities of one not encountered by us in many centuries. I admit that I have grown extremely fond of Conor during my association with him. But I stand before you today requesting assistance for a young man who may even be more than we can presently comprehend. After all, did we not discover a great deal about Maya after we brought him to live among us?"

The Lady of the Light composed herself, clamping down on her emotions in preparation for her final statements. "Consider this, my Lord, and esteemed members of the Council of Seven. Conor may be our only hope. He may in fact be able to find and recover the Champions from whatever forbidden corridor they presently occupy. He may even locate and rescue his companion and return to us the five keys of the creators. Even without these assurances, I would strongly recommend that we use every force at our disposal to locate him. I beg you, for our sake and for the sake of the Crossworlds, find Conor and bring him to me."

The Council of Seven conferred silently for many moments, whispering to one another with heads bowed. They thought deeply about Conor Jameson, the newest and youngest Champion of the Crossworlds. He had indeed served the creators bravely while barely into his adolescence. He had accompanied Maya on perilous journeys to repair the corridors, facing dangerous opponents every step of the way. At any time during those challenges, he could easily have walked away, frustrated by their expectations of him. He had persevered, however, in the name of his mentor. Mighty Purugama had taught him extremely well, passing on everything he received from Maya to his young protégé. Besides, ridding the Crossworlds of the likes of Gandron and Fumemos certainly didn't hurt Conor's cause either.

Retrieving the five keys of the creators with little outside assistance also shed a warm light on Conor's case. The journey to repair the corridors held its own terrifying turns, but at least Maya had traveled alongside him. This young Champion captured the five keys virtually on his own, although his companion provided more than a small measure of assistance. The beginning of that quest had not been without challenges. The Champions had been taken captive and could not assist him. The creators had been openly attacked for the first time since the Crossworlds had come into existence. If not for the sincere affection the Lady of the Light held for Conor, perhaps no one would have fought to warn him, or given him license to use their powers so openly. Surely the young man deserved their deepest consideration.

With their silent deliberation complete, they began to argue loudly amongst themselves. Some members of the council reiterated every point the first councilor had brought forth in the gathering.

“Without his brash behavior, we might not be sitting here conferring at all. Does that not count for anything?”

“It certainly counts for far less than the bravery of his exploits. I say his freedom is of paramount concern. Can anyone on this council assure me that he will not play an important role in the future of the Crossworlds?”

“Yes, but what part will he play? Will he save us or destroy us?”

“If we cannot determine that, then we must go to him immediately. We cannot expose ourselves to the consequences of an incorrect choice.”

“I say leave him to his fate. If he is such a grand warrior, then why has he not freed himself? Let him prove his worth by coming back to us by his own initiative.”

“We are the Council of Seven! Have we not called for assistance from time to time? You make a valid point, my Lord, but there is no precedent for your argument. If we do not vote to locate this Champion at once, then I shall immediately resign my commission to this council.”

“Your threats will not influence this gathering.”

“Enough!” commanded the supreme councilor. All discussion ceased as the members awaited the final words of the meeting. “I will not allow this council to act in a manner that demeans its importance. This is a serious matter, one that deserves our most fervent attention. Let us choose our path and convey our decision to the one who fights for the young man’s freedom.”

Bowing their heads and closing their eyes, the creators transferred their thoughts to the supreme councilor, with the vote arriving at five to two. Judging his worth against all other considerations, the members had come to a swift conclusion. The supreme councilor motioned for the members to be seated before addressing the Lady of the Light.

“We admire your passion, my Lady,” assured the Lord of all Life. “Always remember, however, that what we do is for the good of the Crossworlds. Your young Champion may be all that you say he is, but to us he is just another instrument. As with the Champions of the Crossworlds and the protection forces, Conor Jameson exists only to serve us.”

The Lord of all Life showed the slightest hint of a smile before continuing. “Fear not, my Lady. One of our most capable seekers has been watching over your young Champion for years. We dispatched him many months ago with orders to locate and liberate him. Although we’ve had sparse communication for some time, we have every

faith that he will accomplish his mission. When he finds him, he will deliver him here for a period of rest and recuperation. You, my Lady, will serve as executor of his rehabilitation. Does this satisfy your pleadings, creator?"

The Lady of the Light bowed in deference to her superior. The silver sparkles disappeared and her aura cooled upon hearing their decision. "All that I ask has been granted, great one. I will prepare to receive our Champion without delay."

CHAPTER THREE

Conor lifted his eyelids again. He couldn't remember how many times he had opened his eyes in the gloomy cell. He lost count somewhere past the fifteen thousandth time. That occurred so long ago he couldn't even remember the days. He kept opening his eyes, hoping to see a source of light from somewhere inside his cell. He had lived in complete darkness for so long he wondered if his eyes would ever be able to stand the light of day again.

He kept opening them whenever he found himself awake. He would lie in the black, soulless cell, opening and closing his eyes. He played a game with himself, trying to convince his mind that the next time he opened his eyes he would see something other than darkness. It worked for some time, but now Conor opened his eyes merely to keep from going out of his mind.

He had lived in the bizarre cell for well over a year as far as he could tell. He knew the dimensions of the box precisely, sixteen feet long, twelve feet wide, and ten feet high. Having marked it off just to keep busy, he felt certain of his calculations.

The walls of the cell were a complete mystery to Conor. He could press his arm almost all the way through any of them. There was no solidity at all. If he tried to walk through one of them, however, the darkness collapsed all around him, forming an impenetrable barrier. It looked almost as if an army of shadows gathered around him any time he attempted to escape. After trying this a few times, Conor watched the other walls react as he tried to walk through one of them. The shadows from the other walls zoomed toward the battered area of the cell, fortifying the place where Conor hoped to push

through. It was either an incredibly sophisticated piece of equipment or a living being. Knowing the Crossworlds as Conor did, he guessed the latter. If organic, then it served its masters well. It never tired, never needed to replenish itself, and it understood its function perfectly.

After many attempts at the walls of his cell, Conor once tried to dig his way out. The floor of his cell, after all, remained as it had been all along, a loose collection of dirt and rock from the mesa. Clawing his hands bloody, Conor managed to dig the beginnings of a crude but serviceable tunnel under one of the corners of his cell. As he leaned back to rest, he could see the reinforcements sliding along the walls in his peripheral vision. The shadows raced over to the corner from every direction, forming a tightly packed wedge directly underneath his tunnel. He didn't even attempt to dig around it. He just stood up, nodded his head in admiration, and walked to the other side of the cell.

A few times he attempted to trick the shadows into making a mistake. Using a rock he found while digging one day, he carved out a tunnel in one corner of the cell. As he expected, the shadows flowed over to his position, concentrating their energies and blocking his path. At the instant he saw the shadows blending together, Conor jumped up and ran toward the opposite wall. He figured that the shadows had depleted themselves in order to cover the tunnel, and he might be able to get through one of the thinner walls. He felt he actually might have made it a couple of times. The wall had definitely thinned and as he pushed his way out he sensed a tiny membrane of light. The shadows quickly recovered, however. He felt them collecting around his body, reinforcing the wall, slowly pulling him back into the cell. He marveled at the organic quality of the cell structure. He actually felt the shadows gripping his arms and legs while they gathered together to

reclaim him. The cell performed its functions perfectly, even as a prisoner Conor had to admire it.

Not only did the cell of shadows keep Conor captive, it also kept him alive for months on end. In all the time he had resided within the shadowy walls, Conor had never seen a bite of food or a sip of water inside his cell. Yet, aside from the normal growth of a teenage boy, he hadn't lost or gained a pound during his long stay. By some form of powerful magic, the Circle of Evil had designed the cell with recuperative powers. Since he felt nothing while awake, Conor deduced that the cell fueled his body while he rested. Something in the structure of the cell walls must have infused his body with every nutrient needed for human survival.

Another surprising facet of his bodily functions lay in the fact that there didn't seem to be any. Conor had not relieved himself, nor had he felt the need to do so ever since he awoke in this bizarre cage. Apparently the designers had taken complete control of his biological functions. Having studied humans for eons, they must have determined exactly how to keep a young man prisoner indefinitely. He couldn't even remember producing a drop of sweat, even while exercising or attempting to escape. Astounding as it appeared, Conor always asked himself the same question. *Why would they keep me alive?* He had fought with the creators and Crossworlds Champions and destroyed many of their most potent warriors. He had pledged his life against their forces and worked diligently toward their ultimate ruin. Even so, they had successfully imprisoned him without injury or torture. If they had kept him locked within these walls for all this time, then certainly they planned to keep him indefinitely. But why keep him alive? Why

continue to nourish him? Why not destroy him and finish the creators? They must have the five keys since they had captured Janine.

Conor balled his fists in frustration again. His girlfriend could be anywhere. She could be undergoing the most painful torture imaginable. She could be gone already, disposed of after their quest for the secret to the keys had concluded. How could he have let her go so easily? How did he allow both of them to be fooled so completely?

Janine had no part in this except as an unwitting accomplice. She had been selected as the keeper of the keys and for that she paid the ultimate price. She fought bravely by Conor's side during their journeys together. She never complained once even though she had plenty of reason to do so. Even while witnessing sights no person should ever see, she continually walked forward to their next objective. He wondered if he could have collected the five keys without her assistance.

He would gladly remain here in the cell of shadows forever if it meant that she had safely found her way back home. Thinking of her safety had helped him come back from the brink in the early days of his imprisonment. He cried himself hoarse for a week worrying about her. For another month he admonished himself time and again. He couldn't rid himself of the terrible guilt he felt. Every time he closed his eyes the image of Janine's face morphing into Seefra's disgusting countenance resurfaced in his mind. When he recalled the image of her standing alone in the final corridor he would snap awake, screaming for his girlfriend while swinging his arms in an attempt to bring her back to him.

After months of imprisonment, he realized that the magic of the five keys was the main reason they kept him and Janine alive. They must not have found the source of the

Lady of the Light's spell on the keys. *When they did finally resolve the riddle, however...*

Conor closed his eyes, cringing at the thought. They would make him suffer by forcing her to an excruciating demise.

And, Conor wondered, *what of the Champions of the Crossworlds?* Had his blunder sealed the locks on the cage of fire forever? They had almost escaped as he and Janine collected the five keys. How frustrating it must have been to smell freedom and then have it snatched away at the last second. He remembered the sorrowful despair he saw on Eha's face as he lay within the bars of the cage. To a cat, they had all looked defeated. Purugama, with his mighty wingspan, suffered the entrapment more acutely than the others. Forced to keep his wings folded around his body, he endured the worst of the cage's energy when he could no longer hold them to his sides. Standing at the extreme edge of the cage, he would unfold one wing, gingerly stretching it out to the limits of the bars. Invariably, the tip or one of the ribs would brush against the barrier, sending a surge of fiery energy toward the offender. Even worse, the cage of fire sent bolts of punishment at different intervals, so at times the great cougar received a mildly painful sting. On other occasions, however, the pulse of energy blasted through his body so forcefully it nearly knocked him unconscious.

They had been imprisoned in the cage of fire for roughly the same amount of time Conor had lived in the cell of shadows. He wondered if the cage kept the Champions alive in the same way this cell nurtured Conor. Or if not, maybe the creators had found a way to care for them. He thought of Maya, the wise Lord of the Champions. *What must he be thinking while locked in a cage with his brothers for so long?* Knowing him as he did, Conor supposed he spent his time trying to communicate with the Lady of the Light,

hoping to find a way to defeat the cage. *Still, cats are passionate and curious creatures, and at times Maya must have felt tremendous frustration.*

Surely Ajur and Surmitang had roared their aggravation for weeks. He couldn't imagine Surmitang, the proud Sumatran tiger, held inside a cage with no hope of escape. The shame of his situation must have bled away his strength by the day. And Ajur, Conor could see him now, crouching in a corner of the cage, pecking away at different components, testing it for weaknesses. Ajur, the strong, bull-headed plodder, would try to find a way to escape the cage of fire long after the Crossworlds had slipped into oblivion. At times he would feel overwhelmed and defeated, but he would shake those feelings off and continue his work faithfully.

The only Champion left was Therion, and Conor hadn't a notion of where the giant lion might be. The creators had given him life, but a life of solitude for all time. Even though the majestic beast had tried to destroy him, Conor whispered a short appeal to the Lady for his health and happiness.

The young man paced at the far end of his cell, watching the shadows follow him every step of the way. He had built a mound of dirt at this end of his cubicle, sort of a crude cot for sleeping and resting. He had even built a small riser at the head of his bed, which served as a rigid but serviceable pillow. He lay back on the mattress of soil, interlocking his fingers and placing the backs of his hands against his eyes. He let the eyelids fall while trying to visualize the day he would walk out of his prison. He focused on the image of light, any source of light that helped diminish the darkness he existed in every day. He thought of the Lady, how the pure light of her aura burned so intensely at times. He thought of the sun, a star he hadn't seen in so long it almost couldn't appear in

his mind. He thought of the lights in his room, of flashlights, of headlights on cars, and of candles. He thought of every source of light he could imagine, trying desperately to ignore the stone darkness that existed beyond his closed eyes. In this way, he played his game again, the game that always ended the same way, with him opening his eyes to the black of night. He lay there with his eyes closed for the longest time, in no hurry to open them again.

On the wall farthest from where Conor lay, a pinprick of light silently pierced the infinite darkness of the cell of shadows. It receded, leaving no trace of its penetration behind. A few feet from the first incision, another miniscule beam of light bored through the cell wall. It, too, backed out of its path, blinking out as it exited the cell. One inch above the sandy floor, another penetration appeared, this time in the form of a flat beam of light roughly four inches across. As quickly as it appeared it dissolved into the cell wall.

Conor sensed the impression of light somewhere in his mind. He didn't open his eyes immediately, because he had imagined this very thing so many times before. He lay there on his sandy bed, his hands covering his eyes, swearing to himself that a source of light had entered the cell. Instead of succumbing to his desires, however, he held his position. He wanted desperately to open his eyes, but at the same time he wanted to wait as long as possible. He wanted to imagine his freedom for as long as he could stand it. Finally lifting his hands from his forehead, he swung his legs over the side of the sandy mound, placing them squarely on the ground. He opened his eyes and looked everywhere in the cell of shadows. Nothing. No light at all. He had really fooled himself this time.

Then he swore he saw something. He felt his mind might be playing tricks on him again, but as he crawled across the cell he saw it clearly, a tiny sliver of light running up the side of the cell wall. It seemed to be measuring the height of the structure as it passed up one side, disappeared, and then took another slice, moving down another section of shadowy tiles. Conor backed away as he heard a familiar humming whine coming from the other side of the wall. He watched excitedly as his last minutes in the cell of shadows finally ran out.

A blinding flash of light scarred the far wall of the cell. It lashed in a precise line, from floor to ceiling, across the top, and then down again to the floor. The sizzling path of light easily sliced through the cell of shadows. With the tracking completed, a blazing corridor of brilliant energy beamed in front of Conor. The intensity of the corridor wall fluctuated briefly, and then held its power perfectly. The framework of the portal, once a separate line cut into the wall, now joined together with the main corridor. Flashing brightly one final time, the doorway to Conor's freedom stood no more than a dozen feet away.

The shadows in the immediate area had been obliterated by the appearance of the corridor, but the remainder of the cell would not give up its prisoner so easily. As quickly as the light appeared, the shadows from the other three walls and the ceiling collapsed violently onto the corridor. It looked to Conor like millions of shadowy tiles racing across the walls, hoping to overcome the light by sheer numbers. The corridor flared, holding the brighter focus of its power in order to repel the attack.

The boundless energies of radiance and darkness converged on each other in an explosion of light and sound. Conor shut his eyes and covered his ears to protect them

from the intense battle. Thousands of shadowy tiles slammed into the bright corridor, only to be blasted into oblivion by the power of the creators. The corridor gained a manic strength as the battle wore on, determined to defeat any force in the struggle for Conor's safety. After what seemed like an eternity, the cell of shadows finally depleted itself. Every few seconds, a tile or two zoomed across the ceiling or along one of the walls, disintegrating into the beaming corridor. The portal burned stronger than ever, prompting Conor to lift his eyelids and look upon his savior. He fully expected the Lady of the Light to emerge. When he saw who entered what remained of the cell of shadows, he stood straight up with his mouth wide open.

“Well, Mr. Jameson,” said the harmless looking man standing in front of Conor.

“We've gotten ourselves into quite a predicament, haven't we?”