

\* CHAPTER FOURTEEN \*



Conor gripped the thick, jagged branch as he fell through the leaves of the *fingers of the forest*. He closed the distance between the trees and Drazian in seconds. He screamed as loudly and as horribly as any ten-year-old could under the circumstances. Although he shuddered at the thought of attacking the giant mutant, he could think of only one thing more frightening – not helping Purugama and living with that failure for the rest of his life.

He had concealed himself within the protective covering of the fingers, waiting for the outcome of the battle. When it looked as though Drazian might indeed destroy his mentor, Conor, without hesitation, grabbed the broken branch given to him by the *fingers of the forest* and launched himself from his hiding place. As he fell from the safety of the trees, he whispered a short summons to the creators. After asking for the courage to confront his enemy, he bellowed a battle cry worthy of a Crossworlds Champion.

When Drazian finally looked up to see exactly what hovered above his head, he couldn't believe his eyes. He had time only to blink once before Conor landed smack on his shoulders. Holding his stick high above his head, the boy wrapped his legs around the scaly neck with a grip born entirely out of fear and adrenaline. Before the mutant could do anything to thwart his actions, Conor drove the sharp end of the stick deep into Drazian's left eye.

The giant lizard-man shrieked with unspeakable pain. The sudden helplessness his enemy displayed supercharged Conor's attack. He flew into a manic frenzy, jabbing his stick repeatedly into the mutant's eye. He held his legs in a death grip around Drazian's neck; he felt too frightened to do anything else. As the mutant howled in agonizing pain, the boy concentrated on one thing only. He wanted to inflict as much damage as he could before his foe could get his hands on him. Understanding what would happen after Drazian reacted to the attack, Conor furiously stabbed at the mutant's face and eyes, damaging them beyond Drazian's ability to magically repair the wounds. His attack had

been so sudden, so brazen: it momentarily shocked his enemy beyond the ability to fight back.

Drazian didn't stay motionless very long. The mutant staggered around the mesa, flailing away at the pest on his neck. He cursed at the insect that dared interfere with his plans for Purugama. He frantically waved both of his arms and his tail trying to knock the boy from his shoulders. Now blind in one eye and carefully protecting the other, he had to spend the bulk of his efforts on defense should the boy decide to blind him completely with his stinger. He could not lose his vision entirely or the battle with Purugama would be lost. Finally, in a furious rage, he scraped the boy from his neck and flung him with all of his might across the mesa. He wheeled around, hissing at Conor, spitting all the curses of the shadow world in his direction. He advanced in the boy's direction with only one thought in mind. Everything else would have to wait until he dealt with this impetuous little creature.

Conor lay in a heap forty feet from Drazian. Without moving, he knew that at least one leg and one arm were broken, and his body felt strange on the inside as well. He could not move without experiencing a biting pain in his ribs. Even so, he was desperately trying to scamper away. He could see Drazian coming toward him with murder in the one good eye that remained. He felt sad that he might perish, but glad nonetheless that he had risked his life to aid his big friend. After all, did he not do the same for him? Fighting back a chilling fear as Drazian came closer, Conor stared defiantly at the massive mutant. He wanted his enemy to know that young boys from earth faced their fears courageously. But he winced as he heard Drazian's huge tail slamming against the ground as he approached.

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Purugama noticed the hard soil becoming more pliable after the pounding it took from the mutant's tail. With Drazian distracted by Conor's attack, the great cougar slowly and silently broke free from his brittle prison. When the mutant turned and headed in Conor's direction, Purugama stretched his massive muscles and flapped his leathery wings a few times. He looked over at the small boy lying in a heap at the far edge of the mesa. Conor had risked his life to save him. He held his emotions in check while he rose

up from the ground. He tugged at the air with his wings until he hovered high above his objective.

Drazian thought of nothing else as he marched toward Conor. Having defeated his mortal enemy, he would now claim his prize before returning to finish Purugama. This little boy, a “nobody” from a world far away, had scarred him for life, almost blinded him, in fact. He would pay with a horrible, excruciating death. He appeared to be seriously injured already, for he barely moved at all now. The mutant could see a cocky smile on the boy’s face, as if even now he lay there laughing at him. Drazian calculated that the boy would live no longer than a day in his present condition, five or six, maybe, if he took his time torturing him.

As he walked toward Conor, Drazian felt a strange breeze billowing over the top of his head. Before he could figure out what it was, he felt a tremor pass under his feet. Another tremor tickled his toes, and then the mesa erupted in a violent earthquake. The ground heaved, splitting apart in great fissures all around him. The entire mountain exploded underneath him, knocking him down and tossing him back and forth like a toy. As he tried desperately to rise, a gigantic hole burst open underneath him. In an instant it deepened to over a hundred yards, straight down into the bowels of the earth. As he fell into the abyss, Drazian strained to find a way out of his predicament. If only he could come up with an idea, if he could conjure up a spell or something – anything to counter what must be Purugama’s last, desperate move – he might still emerge victorious.

\* CHAPTER FIFTEEN \*



A roaring Champion soared into the chasm, crashing down on Drazian's chest and knocking the wind from his lungs. Purugama extended his powerful claws, holding Drazian tightly and pushing him to the bottom of the crevasse. His momentum would have carried them the entire distance, but Purugama pumped his wings with all his might anyway. He had seen what Drazian did to Conor, and wanted to drive this demon deep into the ground where he belonged – for all time. With the injuries he sustained in the battle, Purugama knew that this would be his last charge. For Conor, for the creators, and for the Crossworlds, he would destroy Drazian even if it meant his own life.

Before he could recover, Drazian felt himself being driven deep into the chasm. His ears pulsed with pain from Purugama's echoing roar. The walls of the cavern flew by on either side, growing darker the deeper they fell. The mutant tried desperately to rip away the great cougar's paws from his chest. His efforts proved futile, though. The arms of any being would never match up against the powerful legs and claws of a giant cat. The sharp claws held him fast as they sped toward the rocky bottom of the ravine.

Drazian saw a mixture of sunlight and the huge wings of his enemy, pumping hard to maintain their speed. Finally accepting his fate, he turned his head just enough to see that in seconds both of them would be pulverized on the chasm floor.

Purugama never slowed his pace for a second. As the floor of the crevasse raced up to meet them, the big cat adjusted his grip on his enemy. If the creators desired it, his opponent's body would break his fall just enough to prevent him from being mortally wounded as well. He recoiled his paws slightly before the moment of impact and then slammed Drazian against the ground with all the force he could summon. Both warriors felt the breath leave their bodies, and a great cloud of dust rose up from the impact point. The great cougar made certain of Drazian's immobile condition before jumping away. After securing his own breath, Purugama flapped his wings furiously. He knew he had to get back to daylight. He only had seconds to free himself.

The crevasse began closing around the big cat. Up, up, and farther up Purugama flew, pumping his powerful wings as the tips scraped the walls of the ever-shrinking crevasse. He could see the light at the top, calling him to escape the pit where he had buried his enemy. As he continued his ascent, he heard snarling sobs from the bottom as Drazian sang out his last angry protests. Apparently the mutant had awakened to his peril. Focusing only on the light, Purugama increased his already manic efforts.

Since he had been taken completely by surprise, Drazian found no time at all to prepare for or repel Purugama's attack. He lay crumpled in the dark depths of the fissure, moaning weakly as he saw the ground closing in around him. He cursed himself for taking Purugama for granted again. While he watched the light from above slowly diminish, he prayed to his deity that those who followed would not make the same mistake.

Purugama grunted in despair as he flew closer to the top of the crevasse. He saw the opening and realized that the walls might crush him as they drew closer together. He pushed his wings with all his might, struggling even harder over the last few yards to reach the light. He would not fail Conor; he had made such a pledge to the Lady of the Light.

He emerged from the crevasse in an explosion of rock and soil, in just enough time to clear himself before the great gap closed once again, burying Drazian forever. Purugama balanced himself with his mighty wings, soaring high into the air. He banked left and right, and then dipped down toward the ground before flying even higher into the sky. To any onlooker it might appear that the cat was celebrating a victory or a difficult kill. Finally, Purugama banked in a wide turn around the rim of the mesa. Looking down toward the trees, he spotted Conor, now sitting up but still hunched forward in pain. The big cat descended in a slow, sweeping arc aimed perfectly toward Conor, and then landed softly in front of the boy. He padded quietly over to where Conor sat and gave a soft, affectionate chuff to his fellow warrior.

Purugama let his huge head fall forward toward Conor's broken body. Sniffing around his bloodied and bruised limbs, the great cougar assessed the extent of Conor's injuries. He raised his golden cheek and brushed it lightly against his student's forehead. He purred steadily while showing Conor his appreciation. "You should not have come

forward, boy,” he said, purring as softly as a kitten. “What could you possibly have been thinking?” As his second comment sank in, the big cat watched as Conor began to cry.

The boy summoned his remaining strength, straightened himself and addressed Purugama. “Did you not teach me that defending a friend against his enemies, even if the price might be your own life, signaled the virtue of a strong man?” Conor winced and moaned in pain, both physical and emotional, but continued nonetheless. “Are you telling me now that I failed you, that I should have stayed hidden while that horrible monster destroyed you?”

Purugama composed himself quickly as he listened to the boy speak. In a span of only two days, he had grown to love Conor as one of his own. The boy showed uncanny physical and spiritual strength. He accepted painful visions but learned from them immediately. Then he risked his life for a creature he had known only a couple days. He silently praised the wisdom of the creators. Something about this boy gave him an immense feeling of hope.

He crouched low on his haunches and forepaws and looked Conor directly in the eyes. He purred a while to calm the boy and then spoke again. “Conor, my courageous boy, how can I say what is in my heart? You saved my life and helped me defeat a bitter enemy. If not for you, I might be dying here on this mesa right now. You have proven your valor, and you have proven your worth as a man and a friend. Truly, little one, you have listened well and heeded the lessons of your mentor. You honor me with your friendship.” The big cat brushed Conor’s face again with his soft, furry cheeks, purring and cooing as he did so.

Conor sat quietly and allowed the big cat to soothe his physical and emotional wounds. He felt amazed by the similarity of Purugama to Sunny, his parents’ cat back home. When he wished to correct a mistake he had made, ask for food or an escape outside, or simply express love for his mistress, Sunny’s behavior mimicked Purugama’s present conduct exactly. The soothing aspect of this type of interaction usually rewarded Sunny with whatever he desired. In this case, however, the great cougar simply wanted to relieve the boy of a bit of pain. Conor wondered how a trait seemingly restricted to a domestic cat could emerge from one so majestic and powerful. And yet, here he stood, the mighty Purugama acting as innocent and loving as a kitten.