

REALM OF THE ELDERLINGS



ROBIN HOBB

THE FARSEER TRILOGY:

ASSASSIN'S APPRENTICE (1995)

ROYAL ASSASSIN (1996)

ASSASSIN'S QUEST (1997)

THE LIVESHIP TRADERS TRILOGY:

SHIP OF MAGIC (1998)

MAD SHIP (1999)

SHIP OF DESTINY (2000)

THE TAWNY MAN TRILOGY:

FOOL'S ERRAND (2002)

GOLDEN FOOL (2003)

FOOL'S END (2004)

The first Robin Hobb trilogy, *The Farseer Trilogy*, took place in the Six Duchies. It is the tale of Fitz Chivalry Farseer. The discovery that this bastard son exists is enough to topple Prince Chivalry's ambition for the throne. He abdicates, ceding the title of heir to the throne to his younger brother Verity and abandoning the child to the care of the stablemaster Burrich. The youngest prince, Regal, has

ambitions of his own, and wishes to do away with the bastard. But old King Shrewd sees the value of taking the lad and training him as an assassin. For a bastard can be sent into dangers where a trueborn son could not be risked, and may be given tasks that would soil an heir's hands.

And so FitzChivalry is trained in the secret arts of being a royal assassin. He shows a predilection for the Wit, a beast magic much despised in the Six Duchies. This secret vice in the young assassin is tolerated, for a partnership with an animal may be a useful trait in an assassin. When it is discovered that he may possess the hereditary magic of the Farseers, the Skill, he becomes both the King's weapon and an obstacle to Prince Regal's ambitions for the throne. At a time when the rivalry for the throne is intense, and the Outislanders and their Red Ship raiders are bringing war to the Six Duchies, FitzChivalry discovers that the fate of the kingdom may very well rest on the actions of a young bastard and the King's Fool. Armed with little more than loyalty and his sporadic talent for the old magic, Fitz follows the fading trail of King Verity, who has traveled beyond the Mountain Kingdom and into the realm of the legendary Elderlings, in what may be a vain hope to renew an old alliance.

The Liveship Traders Trilogy takes place in Jamaillia, Bingtown, and the Pirate Isles, on the coast far to the south of the Six Duchies. The war in the north has interrupted the trade that is the lifeblood of Bingtown, and the Liveship Traders have fallen on hard times despite their magic sentient ships. At one time, possession of a Liveship, constructed of magical wizardwood, guaranteed a Trader's family prosperity. Only a Liveship can brave the dangers of the Rain Wild River and trade with the legendary Rain Wild Traders and their mysterious magical goods, plundered from the enigmatic Elderling ruins. Althea Vestrit expects her families to adhere to tradition and pass the family Liveship on to her when it quickens at the death of her father. Instead, the *Vivacia* goes to her sister Keffria and her scheming Chalcedean husband, Kyle. The proud Liveship becomes a transport vessel for the despised but highly profitable slave trade.

Althea, cast out on her own, resolves to make her own way in the world and somehow regain control of her family's living ship. Her old shipmate Brashen Trell, the mysterious woodcarver Amber, and the *Paragon*, the notorious mad Liveship, are the only allies she can rally to her cause. Pirates, a slave rebellion, migrating sea serpents, and a newly hatched dragon are but a few of the obstacles she must face on her way to discovering that Liveships are not, perhaps, what they seem to be, and may have dreams of their own to follow.

The Tawny Man Trilogy, a work still in progress at this writing, picks up the tale of Fitz and the Fool some fifteen years after the Red Ship wars. Queen Kettricken is determined to secure her son's throne by arranging a marriage between Prince Dutiful and Elliana, the daughter of their old enemies in the Outislands. But the Six Duchies themselves are restless. The Witted are weary of persecution, and may choose to topple the throne of the Farseers by revealing that young Prince Dutiful carries an old taint in his blood. The Narcheska Elliana sets a high price on her hand: Dutiful must present her with the head of Icefyre, the legendary dragon of Aslevjal Island.

Meanwhile, to the south, the Bingtown Traders continue to wage war against the Chalcedeans, and seek

to enlist the Six Duchies into the effort to obliterate Chalced. Bingtown's temperamental ally, the dragon Tintaglia, has her own reasons for supporting them in this, reasons that may lead not only to the restoration of the race of dragons but also to the return of Elderling magic to the Cursed Shores.

HOME COMING



ROBIN HOBB

Day the 7th of the Fish Moon Year the 14th of the reign of the Most Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

Confiscated from me this day, without cause or justice, were five crates and three trunks. This occurred during the loading of the ship *Venture*, setting forth upon Satrap Esclepius' noble endeavor to colonize the Cursed Shores. Contents of the crates are as follows: One block fine white marble, of a size suitable for a bust, two blocks Aarthian jade, sizes suitable for busts, one large fine soapstone, as tall as a man and as wide as a man, seven large copper ingots, of excellent quality, three silver ingots, of acceptable quality, and three kegs of wax. One crate contained scales, tools for the working of metal and stone, and measuring equipment. Contents of trunks are as follows: Two silk gowns, one blue, one pink, tailored by Seamstress Wista and bearing her mark. A dress-length of mille-cloth, green. Two shawls, one white wool, one blue linen. Several pairs hose, in winter and summer weights. Three pairs of slippers, one silk and worked with rosebuds. Seven petticoats, three silk, one linen and three wool. One bodice frame, of light bone and silk. Three volumes of poetry, written in my own hand. A miniature by Soiji, of myself, Lady Carillion Carrock, née Waljin, commissioned by my mother, Lady Arston Waljin, on the occasion of my fourteenth birthday. Also included were clothing and bedding for a baby, a girl of four years, and two boys, of six and ten years, including both winter and summer garb for formal occasions.

I record this confiscation so that the thieves can be brought to justice upon my return to Jamaillia City. The theft was in this manner: As our ship was being loaded for departure, cargo belonging to various nobles aboard the vessels was detained upon the docks. Captain Triops informed us that our possessions would be held, indefinitely, in the Satrap's custody. I do not trust the man, for he shows neither my husband nor myself proper deference. So I make this record, and when I return this coming spring to Jamaillia City, my father, Lord Crion Waljin, will bring my complaint before the Satrap's Court of Justice, as my husband seems little inclined to do so. This do I swear.

Lady Carillion Waljin Carrock

Day the 10th of the Fish Moon

Year the 14th of the reign of the Most Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

Conditions aboard the ship are intolerable. Once more, I take pen to my journal to record the hardship and injustice to preserve a record so that those responsible may be punished. Although I am nobly born, of the house of Waljin, and although my lord husband is not only noble, but heir to the title of Lord Carrock, the quarters given us are no better than those allotted to the common emigrants and speculators, that is, a smelly space in the ship's hold. Only the common criminals, chained in the deepest holds, suffer more than we do.

The floor is a splintery wooden deck, the walls are the bare planks of the ship's hull. There is much evidence that rats were the last inhabitants of this compartment. We are treated no better than cattle. There are no separate quarters for my maid, so I must suffer her to bed almost alongside us! To preserve my children from the common brats of the emigrants, I have sacrificed three damask hangings to curtain off a space. Those people accord me no respect. I believe that they are surreptitiously plundering our stores of food. When they mock me, my husband bids me ignore them. This has had a dreadful effect on my servant's behavior. This morning, my maid, who also serves as a nanny in our reduced household, spoke almost harshly to young Petrus, bidding him be quiet and cease his questions. When I rebuked her for it, she dared to raise her brows at me.

My visit to the open deck was a waste of time. It is cluttered with ropes, canvas, and crude men, with no provisions for ladies and children to take the air. The sea was boring, the view only distant foggy islands. I found nothing there to cheer me as this detestable vessel bears me ever farther away from the lofty white spires of Blessed Jamaillia City, sacred to Sa.

I have no friends aboard the ship to amuse or comfort me in my heaviness. Lady Duparge has called on me once, and I was civil, but the differences in our station make conversation difficult. Lord Duparge is heir to little more than his title, two ships, and one estate that borders on Gerfen Swamp. Ladies Crifton and Anxory appear content with one another's company and have not called upon me at all. They are both too young to have any accomplishments to share, yet their mothers should have instructed them in their social responsibility to their betters. Both might have profited from my friendship upon our return to Jamaillia City. That they choose not to court my favor does not speak well of their intellect. Doubtless they would bore me.

I am miserable in these disgusting surroundings. Why my husband has chosen to invest his time and finances in this venture eludes me. Surely men of a more adventurous nature would better serve our Illustrious Satrap in this exploration. Nor can I understand why our children and myself must accompany him, especially in my condition. I do not think my husband gave any thought to the difficulties this voyage would pose for a woman gravid with child. As ever, he has not seen fit to discuss his decisions with me, no more than I would consult him on my artistic pursuits. Yet my ambitions must suffer to allow him to pursue his! My absence will substantially delay the completion of my *Suspended Chimes of Stone and Metal*. The Satrap's brother will be most disappointed, for the installation was to

have honored his thirtieth birthday.

Day the 15th of the Fish Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Exalted Satrap Esclepius

I have been foolish. No. I have been deceived. It is not foolishness to trust where one has every right to expect trustworthiness. When my father entrusted my hand and my fate to Lord Jathan Carrock, he believed he was a man of wealth, substance, and reputation. My father blessed Sa's name that my artistic accomplishments had attracted a suitor of such lofty stature. When I bewailed the fate that wed me to a man so much my senior, my mother counseled me to accept it and to pursue my art and establish my reputation in the shelter of his influence. I honored their wisdom. For these last ten years, as my youth and beauty faded in his shadow, I have borne him three children, and bear beneath my heart the burgeoning seed of yet another. I have been an ornament and a blessing to him, and yet he has deceived me. When I think of the hours spent managing his household, hours I could have devoted to my art, my blood seethes with bitterness.

Today, I first entreated, and then, in the throes of my duty to provide for my children, demanded that he force the Captain to give us better quarters. Sending our three children out onto the deck with their nanny, he confessed that we were not willing investors in the Satrap's colonization plan but exiles given a chance to flee our disgrace. All we left behind, estates, homes, precious possessions, horses, cattle . . . all are forfeit to the Satrap, as are the items seized from us as we embarked. My genteel respectable husband is a traitor to our gentle and beloved Satrap and a plotter against the Throne Blessed by Sa.

I won this admission from him, bit by bit. He kept saying I should not bother about the politics, that it was solely his concern. He said a wife should trust her husband to manage their lives. He said that by the time the ships resupply our settlement next spring, he would have redeemed our fortune and we would return to Jamaillian society. But I kept pressing my silly woman's questions. All your holdings seized? I asked him. All? And he said it was done to save the Carrock name, so that his parents and younger brother can live with dignity, untarnished by the scandal. A small estate remains for his brother to inherit. The Satrap's Court will believe that Jathan Carrock chose to invest his entire fortune in the Satrap's venture. Only those in the Satrap's innermost circle know it was a confiscation. To win this concession, Jathan begged many hours on his knees, humbling himself and pleading forgiveness.

He went on at great length about that, as if I should be impressed. But I cared nothing for his knees. "What of Thistlebend?" I asked. "What of the cottage by the ford there, and the moneys from it?" This I brought to him as my marriage portion, and humble though it is, I thought to see it passed to Narissa when she wed.

"Gone," he said, "all gone."

"But why?" I demanded. "I have not plotted against the Satrap. Why am I punished?"

Angrily, he said I was his wife and of course I would share his fate. I did not see why, he could not explain it, and finally told me that such a foolish woman could never understand, and bid me hold my tongue, not flap it and show my ignorance. When I protested that I am not a fool, but a well-known artist, he told me that I am now a colonist's wife, and to put my artistic pretenses out of my head.

I bit my tongue to keep from shrieking at him. But within me, my heart screams in fury against this injustice. Thistlebend, where my little sisters and I waded in the water and plucked lilies to pretend we were goddesses and those our white and gold scepters . . . gone for Jathan Carrock's treacherous idiocy.

I had heard rumors of a discovered conspiracy against the Satrap. I paid no attention. I thought it had nothing to do with me. I would say that the punishment was just, if I and my innocent babes were not ensnared in the same net that has trapped the plotters. All the confiscated wealth has financed this expedition. The disgraced nobles were forced to join a Company composed of speculators and explorers. Worse, the banished criminals in the hold, the thieves and whores and ruffians, will be released to join our Company when we disembark. Such will be the society around my tender children.

Our Blessed Satrap has generously granted us a chance to redeem ourselves. Our Magnificent and Most Merciful Satrap has granted each man of the company two hundred leffers of land, to be claimed anywhere along the banks of the Rain Wild River that is our boundary with barbarous Chalced, or along the Cursed Shores. He directs us to establish our first settlement on the Rain Wild River. He chose this site for us because of the ancient legends of the Elder Kings and their Harlot Queens. Long ago, it is said, their wondrous cities lined the river. They dusted their skin with gold and wore jewels above their eyes. So the tales say. Jathan said that an ancient scroll, showing their settlements, has recently been translated. I am skeptical.

In return for this chance to carve out new fortunes for ourselves and redeem our reputations, Our Glorious Satrap Esclepius asks only that we cede to him half of all that we find or produce there. In return, the Satrap will shelter us under his protective hand, prayers will be offered for our well-being, and twice yearly his revenue ships will visit our settlement to be sure we prosper. A Charter for our Company, signed by the Satrap's own hand, promises this.

Lords Anxory, Crifton, and Duparge share in our disgrace, though as lesser Lords, they had less far to fall. There are other nobles aboard the other two ships of our fleet, but no one I know well. I rejoice that my dear friends do not share my fate yet I mourn that I enter exile alone. I will not count upon my husband for comfort in the disaster he has brought upon us. Few secrets are kept long at court. Is that why none of my friends came to the docks to bid me farewell?

My own mother and sister had little time to devote to my packing and farewells. They wept as they bade me farewell from my father's home, not even accompanying me to the filthy docks where this ship of banishment awaited me. Why, O Sa, did they not tell me the truth of my fate?

At that, though, a hysteria fell upon me, so that I trembled and wept, with occasional shrieks bursting

from me whether I would or no. Even now, my hands tremble so violently that this desperate scrawl wanders the page. All is lost to me, home, loving parents, and, most crushing, the art that gave me joy in life. The half-finished works I left behind will never be completed, and that pains me as much as a child stillborn. I live only for the day that I can return to gracious Jamaillia by the sea. At this moment—forgive me, Sa—I long to do so as a widow. Never will I forgive Jathan Carrock. Bile rises in my throat at the thought that my children must wear this traitor's name.

Day the 24th of the Fish Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

Darkness fills my soul; this voyage to exile has lasted an eternity. The man I must call husband orders me to better manage our household, but I scarcely have the spirit to take up my pen. The children weep, quarrel, and complain endlessly, and my maid makes no effort to amuse them. Daily her contempt grows. I would slap her disrespectful scowl from her face if I had the strength. Despite my pregnancy, she lets the children tug at me and demand my attention. All know a woman in my condition should experience a serene existence. Yesterday afternoon, when I tried to rest, she left the children napping beside me while she went out to dally with a common sailor. I awoke to Narissa crying and had to arise and sing to her until she calmed. She complains of a painful belly and a sore throat. No sooner was she settled than both Petrus and Carlmin awoke and started some boyish tussling that completely frayed my spirit. I was exhausted and at the edge of hysteria before she returned. When I chided her for neglecting her duties, she saucily replied that her own mother reared nine children with no servants to aid her. As if such common drudgery were something I should aspire to! Were there anyone else to fulfill her duties, I would send her packing.

And where is Lord Carrock through all of this? Why, out on deck, consulting with the very nobles who led him into disgrace.

The food grows ever worse and the water tastes foul, but our cowardly Captain will not put into shore to seek better. My maid says that her sailor has told her that the Cursed Shore is well named, and that evil befalls those who land there as surely as it befell those who once lived there. Can even Captain Triops believe such superstitious nonsense?

Day the 27th of the Fish Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

We are battered by storm. The ship reeks of the vomit of the miserable inhabitants of its bowels. The constant lurching stirs the foul waters of the bilge, so that we must breathe their stench. The Captain will not allow us out on the deck at all. The air down here is damp and thick, and the beams drip water on us. Surely, I have died and entered some heathen afterlife of punishment.

Yet in all this wet, there is scarcely enough water for drinking, and none for washing. Clothing and bedding soiled with sickness must be rinsed out in seawater that leaves it stiff and stained with salt. Little Narissa has been most miserable of the children. She has ceased vomiting but has scarcely stirred from her pallet today, poor little creature. Please, Sa, let this horrid rocking and sloshing end soon.

Day the 29th of the Fish Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

My child is dead. Narissa, my only daughter, is gone. Sa, have mercy upon me, and visit your justice upon treacherous Lord Jathan Carrock, for his evil has been the cause of all my woe! They wrapped my little girl in canvas and sent her and two others into the waters, and the sailors scarce paused in their labors to notice their passing. I think I went a little mad then. Lord Carrock seized me in his arms when I tried to follow her into the sea. I fought him, but he was too strong for me. I remain trapped in this life his treachery has condemned me to endure.

Day the 7th of the Plow Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

My child is still dead. Ah, such a foolish thought to write, and yet still it seems impossible to me. Narissa, Narissa, you cannot be gone forever. Surely this is some monstrous dream from which I will awake!

Today, because I sat weeping, my husband pushed this book at me and said, "Write a poem to comfort yourself. Hide in your art until you feel better. Do anything, but stop weeping!" As if he offered a squalling baby a sugar teat. As if art took you away from life rather than plunging you headlong into it! Jathan reproached me for my grief, saying that my reckless mourning frightens our sons and threatens the babe in my womb. As if he truly cared! Had he cared for us as a husband and a father, never would he have betrayed our dear Satrap and condemned us to this fate.

But, to stop his scowl, I will sit here and write for a time, like a good wife.

A full dozen of the passengers and two crewmen have died of the flux. Of one hundred sixteen who began this voyage, ninety-two now remain. The weather has calmed but the warm sunlight on the deck only mocks my sorrow. A haze hangs over the sea and to the west the distant mountains smoke.

Day the 18th of the Plow Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

I have no spirit to write, yet there is nothing else to occupy my weary mind. I, who once composed the

wittiest prose and most soaring poetry, now plod word by word down a page.

Some days ago we reached the river mouth; I did not note the date, such has been my gloom. All the men cheered when we sighted it. Some spoke of gold, others of legendary cities to plunder, and still others of virgin timber and farmland awaiting us. I thought it marked an end to our voyage, but still it drags on.

At first the rising tide aided our upriver progress. Now the crew must labor at their oars for every ship-length we gain. The prisoners have been taken from their chains and utilized as rowers in tiny boats. They row upriver and set anchors and drag us against the current. By night, we anchor and listen to the rush of the water and the shrieks of unseen creatures from the jungle on the shore. Daily the scenery grows both more fantastic and threatening. The trees on the banks stand twice as tall as our mast, and the ones behind them are taller still. When the river narrows, they cast deep shadows over us. Our view is a near-impenetrable wall of greenery. Our search for a kindly shore seems folly. I see no sign that any people have ever lived here. The only creatures are bright birds, large lizards that sun themselves on the tree roots at the water's edge, and something that whoops and scuttles in the treetops. There are no gentle meadows or firm shores, only marshy banks and rank vegetation. Immense trees root stiltlike in the water and dangling vines festoon them, trailing in the chalky water. Some have flowers that gleam white even in the night. They hang, fleshy and thick, and the wind carries their sweet, carnal breath. Stinging insects torment us and the oarsmen are subject to painful rashes. The river water is not potable; worse, it eats at both flesh and wood, softening oars and ulcerating flesh. If left to stand in vessels, the top layer of the water becomes drinkable, but the residue swiftly eats leaks in the bucket. Those who drink it complain of headaches and wild dreams. One criminal raved of "lovely serpents" and then threw himself overboard. Two crewmen have been confined in chains because of their wild talk.

I see no end to this horrid journeying. We have lost sight of our two companion vessels. Captain Triops is supposed to put us off at a safe landing that offers opportunity for a settlement and farming. The Company's hope of open sunny meadows and gentle hills fades with every passing day. The Captain says that this fresh water is bad for his ship's hull. He wishes to put us ashore in the swamp, saying that the trees on the shore may be concealing higher land and open forest. Our men argue against this, and often unroll the Charter the Satrap has given us and point out what was promised to us. He counters by showing the orders the Satrap gave him. It speaks of landmarks that don't exist, navigable channels that are shallow and rocky, and cities where only jungle crawls. Sa's priests made this translation and they cannot lie. But something is very wrong.

The entire ship broods. Quarrels are frequent, the crew mutters against the Captain. A terrible nervousness afflicts me, so that tears are never far away. Petrus suffers from nightmares and Carlmin, always a reclusive child, has become near mute.

Oh, Fair Jamaillia, city of my birth, will I ever again see your rolling hills and graceful spires? Mother, Father, do you mourn me as lost to you forever?

And this great splotch is Petrus jostling me as he climbs upon my lap, saying he is bored. My maid is next to useless. She does little to earn all the food she devours, and then she is off, to slink about the ship like a cat in heat. Yesterday, I told her that if she got with child from her immoral passions, I would immediately turn her out. She dared to say she did not care, for her days in my service were numbered. Does the foolish slat forget that she is indentured to us for another five years?

Day the 22nd of the Plow Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

It has happened as I feared. I crouch on a great knee of root, my writing desk a chest of my meager possessions. The tree at my back is as big around as a tower. Strands and tangle of roots, some as big around as barrels, anchor it in the swampy ground. I perch on one to save my skirts from the damp and tussocky earth. At least on the ship, in the middle of the river, we were blessed with sunlight from above. Here, the foliage overshadows us, an eternal twilight.

Captain Triops has marooned us here in the swamp. He claimed that his ship was taking on water, and his only choice was to lighten his load and flee this corrosive river. When we refused to disembark, there was violence as the crew forced us from the ship. After one of our men was thrown overboard and swept away, our will to resist vanished. The stock that was to sustain us they kept. One of our men frantically seized the cage of messenger birds and fought for it. In the tussle, the cage broke, and all our birds rose in a flock to disappear. The crew threw off the crates of tools, seed, and provisions that were supposed to aid us in establishing our colony. They did it to lighten the ship, not to help us. Many fell in deep water, out of reach. The men have salvaged what they could of those that fell on the soft riverside. The muck has sucked the rest down. Now we are seventy-two souls in this forsaken place, of which forty are able-bodied men.

Great trees tower over us. The land trembles under our feet like a crust on a pudding, and where the men marched over it to gather our possessions, water now seeps, filling their footprints.

The current swept the ship and our faithless Captain swiftly from our sight. Some say we must stay where we are, beside the river, and watch for the other two ships. Surely, they say, they will help us. I think we must move deeper into the forest, seeking firmer land and relief from the biting insects. But I am a woman, with no say in this. The men hold council now, to decide leadership of our company. Jathan Carrock put himself forward, as being of the noblest birth, but he was shouted down by others, former prisoners, tradesmen, and speculators who said that his father's name had no value here. They mocked him, for all seem to know the "secret" that we are disgraced in Jamaillia. I walked away from watching them, feeling bitter.

My own situation is a desperate one. My feckless maid did not leave the ship with us, but stayed aboard, a sailor's whore. I wish her all she deserves! And now Petrus and Carlmin cling to me, complaining that the water has soaked their shoes and their feet sting from the damp. When I shall have a moment to

myself again, I do not know. I curse the artist in me, for as I look up at the slanting beam of sunlight slicing through the intervening layers of branch and leaf, I see a wild and dangerous beauty to this place. Did I give in to it, I fear it could be as seductive as the raw glance of a rough man.

I do not know where such thoughts come from. I simply want to go home.

Somewhere on the leaves above us, it is raining.

Day the 24th of the Plow Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

I was jolted from sleep before dawn, thrown out of a vivid dream of a foreign street festival. It was as if the earth leapt sideways beneath us. Then, when the sun was fairly up in the unseen sky, we again felt the land tremble. The earthquake passed through the Rain Wild about us like a wave. I have experienced earthquakes before, but in this gelid region, the tremor seemed stronger and more threatening. It is easy to imagine this marshy ground gulping us down like a yellow carp swallowing a breadcrumb.

Despite our inland trek, the land remains swampy and treacherous beneath our feet. Today, I came face to face with a snake hanging down from a tangle of green. My heart was seized by both his beauty and my terror. How effortlessly he lifted himself from his perusal of me to continue his journey along the intertwining branches overhead. Would that I could cross this land as effortlessly!

Day the 27th of the Plow Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

I write while perched in a tree like one of the bright parrots that share the branch with me. I feel both ridiculous and exhilarated, despite hunger, thirst, and great weariness. Perhaps my headiness is a side effect of starvation.

For five days, we have trekked ponderously through soft ground and thick brush, away from the river, seeking drier ground. Some of our party protest this, saying that when our promised ship comes in spring, it will not be able to find us. I hold my tongue, but I doubt that any ship will come up this river again.

Moving inland did not improve our lot. The ground remains tremulous and boggy. By the time our entire party has passed over it, we leave a track of mud and standing water behind us. The damp inflames our feet and rots the fabric of my skirt. All the women go draggle-hemmed now.

We have abandoned whatever we could not carry. Every one of us, man, woman, and child, carries as much as possible. The little ones grow weary. I feel the child inside me grow heavier with each sucking

step.

The men have formed a Council to rule us. Each man is to have one vote in it. I regard this ignoring of the natural order as perilous, yet there is no way for the outcast nobles to assert their right to rule. Jathan told me privately that we do best to let this happen, for soon enough the Company will see that common farmers, pickpockets, and adventurers are not suited to rule. For now, we heed their rules. The Council has gathered the dwindling food supplies into a common hoard. We are parceled out a pittance each day. The Council says that all men will share the work equally. Thus Jathan must stand a night watch with his fellows as if he were a common soldier. The men stand watch in pairs, for a sole watchman is more prone to the strange madness that lurks in this place. We speak little of it, but all have had strange dreams, and some of our Company seem to be wandering in their minds. The men blame the water. There is talk of sending out exploring parties to find a good dry site for our settlement.

I have no faith in their brave plans. This wild place does not care for our rules or Council.

We have found little here to sustain us. The vegetation is strange, and the only animal life we have seen moves in the higher reaches of the trees. Yet amidst this wild and tangled sprawl, there is still beauty, if one has an eye for it. The sunlight that reaches us through the canopy of the trees is gentle and dappled, illuminating the feathery mosses that drape from the vines. One moment I curse it as we struggle through its clinging nets, and in the next, I see it as dusky green lace. Yesterday, despite my weariness and Jathan's impatience, I paused to enjoy the beauty of a flowering vine. In examining it, I noticed that each trumpetlike flower cupped a small quantity of rainwater, sweetened by the flower's nectar. So forgive me that I and my children drank well from many of the blossoms before I told the others of my find. We have also found mushrooms that grow like shelves on the tree trunks, and a vine that has red berries. It is not enough.

It is to my credit that we sleep dry tonight. I dreaded another night of sleeping on the damp ground, awakening wet and itching, or huddled atop our possessions as they slowly sink into the marshy ground. This evening, as the shadows began to deepen, I noticed bird nests dangling like swinging purses from some of the tree limbs. Well do I know how cleverly Petrus can climb furniture and even drapes. Selecting a tree with several stout branches almost at a level, I challenged my son to see if he could reach them. He clung to the vines that draped the tree while his little feet found purchase on the rough bark. Soon he sat high above us on a very thick limb, swinging his feet and laughing to see us stare.

I bade Jathan follow his son, and take with him the damask drapes that I have carried so far. Others soon saw my plan. Slings of all kinds now hang like bright fruit in these dense trees. Some sleep on the wider branches or in the crotches of the trees, others in hammocks. It is precarious rest, but dry.

All praised me. "My wife has always been clever," Jathan declared, as if to take the credit from me, and so I reminded him, "I have a name of my own. I was Carillion Waljin long before I was Lady Carrock! Some of my best-known pieces as an artist, *Suspended Basins* and *Floating Lanterns*, required just such a knowledge of balance and support! The difference is one of scale, not property." At this, several of the

women in our party gasped, deeming me a braggart, but Lady Duparge exclaimed, "She is right! I have always admired Lady Carrock's work."

Then one rough fellow was so bold as to add, "She will be just as clever as Trader Carrock's wife, for we will have no lords and ladies here."

It was a sobering thought to me and yet I fear he has the right of it. Birth and breeding count for little here. Already they have given a vote to common men, less educated than Lady Duparge or I. A farmer has more say in our plans than I do.

And what did my husband mutter to me? "You shamed me by calling attention to yourself. Such vanity to boast of your 'art accomplishments.' Occupy yourself with your children's needs, not bragging of yourself." And so he put me in my place.

What is to become of us? What good to sleep dry if our bellies are empty and our throats dry? I pity so the child inside me. All the men cried "Caution!" to one another as they used a hoist and sling to lift me to this perch. Yet all the caution in the world cannot save this babe from the wilderness being his birthplace. I miss my Narissa still, and yet I think her end was kinder than what this strange forest may visit upon us.

Day the 29th of the Plow Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

I ate another lizard tonight. It shames me to admit it. The first time, I did it with no more thought than a cat pouncing on a bird. During a rest time, I noticed the tiny creature on a fern frond. It was green as a jewel and so still. Only the glitter of its bright eye and the tiny pulse of life at its throat betrayed it to me. Swift as a snake, I struck. I caught it in my hand, and in an instant I cupped its soft belly against my mouth. I bit into it, and it was bitter, rank, and sweet all at once. I crunched it down, bones and all, as if it were a steamed lark from the Satrap's banquet table. Afterward, I could not believe I had done it. I expected to feel ill, but I did not. Nevertheless, I felt too shamed to tell anyone what I had done. Such food seems unfit for a civilized human, let alone the manner in which I devoured it. I told myself it was the demands of the child growing in me, a momentary aberration brought on by gnawing hunger. I resolved never to do it again, and I put it out of my mind.

But tonight, I did. He was a slender gray fellow, the color of the tree. He saw my darting hand and hid in a crack of the bark, but I dragged him out by his tail. I held him pinched between my finger and thumb. He struggled wildly and then grew still, knowing it was useless. I looked at him closely, thinking that if I did so, then I could let him go. He was beautiful, his gleaming eyes, his tiny claws and lashing tail. His back was gray and rough as the tree bark, but his soft little belly was the color of cream. There was a blush of blue on the soft curve of his throat and a pale stripe of it down his belly. The scales of his belly were tiny and smooth when I pressed my tongue against them. I felt the pattering of his tiny heart and

smelled the stench of his fear as his little claws scrabbled against my chapped lips. It was all so familiar somehow. Then I closed my eyes and bit into him, holding both my hands over my mouth to be sure no morsel escaped. There was a tiny smear of blood on my palm afterward. I licked it off. No one saw.

Sa, sweet Lord of all, what am I becoming? What prompts me to behave this way? The privation of hunger or the contagious wildness of this place? I hardly know myself. The dreams that plague my sleep are not those of a Jamaillian Lady. The waters of the earth scald my hands and sear my feet, until they heal rough as cobs. I fear what my face and hair must look like.

Day the 2nd of the Greening Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

A boy died last night. We were all shocked. He simply did not wake up this morning. He was a healthy lad of about twelve. Durgan was his name, and though he was only a tradesman's son, I share his parents' grief quite strongly. Petrus had followed him about, and seems very shaken by his death. He whispered to me that he dreamed last night that the land remembered him. When I asked what he meant by that, he could not explain, but said that perhaps Durgan had died because this place didn't want him. He made no sense to me, but he repeated himself insistently until I nodded and said perhaps he was right. Sweet Sa, do not let the madness be taking my boy. It frightens me so. Perhaps it is good that my boy will no longer seek the companionship of such a common lad, yet Durgan had a wide smile and a ready laugh that we will miss.

As fast as the men dug a grave, it welled full of murky water. At last his mother had to be taken away while his father condemned his son's body to the water and muck. As we asked Sa's peace on him, the child inside me kicked angrily. It frightened me.

Day the 8th of the Greening Moon (I think. Marthi Duparge says it is the 9th.) Year the 14th of the
reign of the Most Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

We have found a patch of drier ground and most of us will rest here for a few days while a chosen party of men scouts for a better place. Our refuge is little more than a firmer island amidst the swamp. We have learned that a certain type of needled bush indicates firmer ground, and here it is quite dense. It is resinous enough to burn even when green. It produces a dense and choking smoke, but it keeps the biting insects at bay.

Jathan is one of our scouts. With our child soon to be born, I thought he should stay here to help me care for our boys. He said he must go, to establish himself as a leader among the Company. Lord Duparge is also to go as a scout. As Lady Marthi Duparge is also with child, Jathan said we could help one another. Such a young wife as she cannot be of much use at a birthing, and yet her company will be preferable to none at all. All of us women have drawn closer as privation has forced us to share our paltry resources for the good of our children.

Another of the women, a weaver's wife, has devised a way to make mats from the abundant vines. I have begun to learn this, for there is little else I can do, so heavy have I become. The mats can be used as bed-pallets and also laced together into screens for shelter. All the nearby trees are smooth-barked, with the branches beginning very high, so we must contrive what shelter we can on the ground. Several women joined us and it was pleasant and almost homey to sit together and talk and work with our hands. The men laughed at us as we raised our woven walls, asking what such frail barriers can keep out. I felt foolish, yet as dark fell, we took comfort in our flimsy cottage. Sewet the weaver has a fine singing voice, and brought tears to my eyes as she sang her youngest to sleep with the old song of "Praise to Sa in Tribulation." It seems a lifetime since last I heard music. How long must my children live with no culture and no tutors save the merciless judgment of this wild place?

As much as I disdain Jathan Carrock for bringing about our exile, I miss him this evening.

Day the 12th or 13th of the Greening Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

A madness came upon our camp last night. It began with a woman starting up in the darkness, shouting, "Hark! Hark! Does no one else hear their singing?" Her husband tried to quiet her, but then a young boy exclaimed that he had heard the singing for several nights now. Then he plunged off into the darkness as if he knew where he was going. His mother ran after him. Then the woman broke free of her husband, and raced off into the swamp. Three others went after her, not to bring her back but crying, "Wait, wait, we will go with you!"

I rose and held on to both my sons, lest the madness take them. A peculiar undark suffuses this jungle by night. The fireflies are familiar, but not an odd spider that leaves a glob of glowing spittle in the middle of its web. Tiny insects fly right into it, just as moths will seek a lantern's fire. There is also a dangling moss that gleams pale and cold. I dare not let my lads know how gruesome I find it. I told them I shivered because of the chill, and in concern for those poor benighted wretches lost in the swamp. Yet it chilled me even more to hear little Carlmin speak of how lovely the jungle was by night, and how sweet the scent of the night-blooming flowers. He said he remembered when I used to make cakes flavored with those flowers. We never had such flowers in Jamailia City, yet as he said it, I almost recalled little brown cakes, soft in the middle and crispy brown at the edges. Even as I write the words, I almost recall how I shaped them into blossoms before I cooked them in hot bubbling fat.

Never have I done such cooking, I swear.

As of midday, there is no sign of those the night-madness took. Searchers went after them, but the search party returned wet and insect-bitten and disconsolate. The jungle has swallowed them. The woman left behind a small boy who has been wailing for her most of the day.

I have told no one of the music that haunts my dreams.

Day the 14th or 15th of the Greening Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

Our scouts still have not returned. By day, we put a fine face on it for the children, but by night Marthi Duparge and I share our fears while my boys sleep. Surely our men should have returned by now, if only to say that they found no better place than this boggy island.

Last night Marthi wept and said that the Satrap deliberately sent us to our deaths. I was shocked. Sa's priests translated the ancient scrolls that told of cities on this river. Men dedicated to Sa cannot lie. But perhaps they erred, and grievously enough to cost our lives.

There is no plenty here, only strangeness that lurks by day and prowls amongst our huts by night. Almost every night, one or two folk awake shrieking from nightmares they cannot recall. A young woman of easy virtue has gone missing for two days now. She was a whore for coin in Jamaillia's streets, and continued her trade here, asking food from the men who used her. We do not know if she wandered off or was killed by one of our own party. We do not know if we harbor a murderer in our midst, or if this terrible land has claimed another victim.

We mothers suffer the most, for our children beg us for more than the meager rations allotted us. The supplies from the ship are gone. I forage daily, my sons at my side. I found a heaped mound of loosened earth a few days ago and, poking through it, discovered eggs with brown speckled shells. There were almost fifty of them, and though some of the men refused them, saying they would not eat snake or lizard eggs, none of the mothers did. One lilylike plant is difficult to pull from the shallows, for inevitably I am splashed with stinging water and the roots are long and fibrous. There are nodules on the roots, no bigger than large pearls, and these have a pleasantly peppery flavor. Sewet has been working with the roots themselves, making baskets and recently a coarse cloth. That will be welcome. Our skirts are in tatters up to our calves, and our shoes grow thin as paper. All were surprised when I found the lily pearls. Several people asked how I knew they were edible.

I had no answer to that. The flowers looked familiar somehow. I cannot say what made me pull up the roots nor what prompted me to pick the pearly nodules and put them in my mouth.

The men who stayed here constantly complain of standing watches by night and keeping our fires alight, but in truth I think we women work as hard. It is taxing to keep our youngsters safe and fed and clean in these circumstances. I confess I have learned much of managing my boys from Chellia. She was a laundress in Jamaillia, and yet here she has become my friend, and we share a little hut we have built for the five children and ourselves. Her man, one Ethe, is also amongst the explorers. Yet she keeps a cheerful face and insists that her three youngsters help with the daily tasks. Our older boys we send out together to gather dry dead wood for the fire. We caution them never to go beyond the sounds of the camp, but both Petrus and Olpey complain that no dry wood remains nearby. Her daughters Piet and

Likea watch Carlmin while Chellia and I harvest the water from the trumpet flowers and scavenge whatever mushrooms we can find. We have found a bark that makes a spicy tea; it helps to stave off hunger as well.

I am grateful for her company; both Marthi and I will welcome her help when birth comes upon us. Yet her boy Olpey is older than my Petrus and leading him into bold and reckless ways. Yesterday the two were gone until dusk, and then returned with only an armful of firewood each. They told of hearing distant music and following it. I am sure they ventured deeper into this swampy forest than is wise. I scolded them both, and Petrus was daunted but Olpey snidely asked his mother what else should he do, stay here in the mud and grow roots? I was shocked to hear him speak so to his mother. I am sure that he is the influence behind Petrus' nightmares, for Olpey loves telling wild tales full of parasitic specters that float as night fogs and lizards that suck blood. I do not want Petrus influenced by such superstitious nonsense, and yet what can I do? The boys must fetch wood for us, and I cannot send him alone. All the older boys of our Company are given such chores. It grieves me to see Petrus, the descendant of two illustrious bloodlines, put to such work alongside common boys. I fear he will be ruined long before we return to Jamaillia.

And why has Jathan not returned to us? What has become of our men?

Day the 19th or 20th of the Greening Moon

Year the 14th of the reign of the Most

Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

Today three muddy men and a woman walked into our campsite. When I heard the hubbub, my heart leapt in excitement, for I thought our men had returned. Instead, I was shocked to discover that this party was from one of the other ships.

Captain, crew, and passengers were flung into the river one evening when the ship simply came apart. They had little opportunity to salvage supplies from the foundering vessel. They lost more than half the souls aboard it. Of those that made it to shore, many took the madness, and in the days following the shipwreck ended their own lives or vanished into the wilds.

Many of them died in the first few nights, for they could find no solid ground at all. I covered my ears when they spoke of people falling and literally drowning in the mud. Some woke witless and raving after experiencing strange dreams. Some recovered, but others wandered off into the swamp, never to be seen again. These three were the vanguard of those who remained alive. Minutes later, others began to arrive. They came in threes and fours, bedraggled and bug-bitten, and horribly scalded from prolonged contact with the river water. There are sixty-two of them. A few are disgraced nobles, and others are commoners who thought to find a new life. The speculators who invested wealth in this expedition in the hope of making fortunes seem the most bitter.

The Captain did not survive the first night. Those sailors who did are distressed and bewildered by their

sudden plunge into exile. Some of them hold themselves apart from the “colonists,” as they call us. Others seem to understand they must claim a place amongst us or perish.

Some of our party drew apart and muttered that we had little enough shelter and victuals for ourselves, but most of us shared readily. I had never thought to see people more desperate than we were. I feel that all profited from it, and Marthi and I perhaps most of all. Ser, an experienced midwife, was of their party. They also had a thatcher, their ship’s carpenter, and men with hunting skills. The sailors are fit and hearty creatures and may adapt enough to be useful.

Still no sign of our own men.

Day the 26th of the Greening Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

My time came. The child was born. I did not even see her before the midwife took her away. Marthi and Chellia and Ser the midwife all say she was born dead, yet I am sure I heard her wail once. I was weary and close to fainting, but surely I recall what I heard. My babe cried out for me before she died.

Chellia says it is not so, that the babe was born blue and still. I have asked why I could not have held her once before they gave her to the earth? The midwife said I would grieve less that way. But her face goes pale whenever I ask about it. Marthi does not speak of it. Does she fear her own time, or do they keep something from me? Why, Sa, have you taken both my daughters from me so cruelly?

Jathan will hear of it when he returns. Perhaps if he had been here, to help me in my last heavy days, I would not have had to toil so hard. Perhaps my little girl could have lived. But he was not with me then and he is not with me now. And who will watch my boys, find food for them and make sure they return safe each night while I must lie here and bleed for a babe that did not live?

Day the 1st of the Grain Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

I have risen from my lying-in. I feel that my heart is buried with my child. Did I carry her so far and through such hardship for nothing?

Our camp is now so crowded with newcomers that one can scarce thread a path through the makeshift shelters. Little Carlmin, separated from me for my lying-in, now follows me like a thin little shadow. Petrus has made fast his friendship with Olpey and pays no mind to my words at all. When I bid him stay close to camp, he defies me to venture ever deeper into the swamps. Chellia tells me, let him go. The boys are the darlings of the camp for discovering dangling bunches of sour little berries. The tiny fruits are bright yellow and sour as bile, but even such foul food is welcome to folk as hungry as we are.

Still, it infuriates me that all encourage my son to disobey me. Do not they listen to the wild tales the boys tell, of strange music, distantly heard? The boys brag they will find the source of it, and my mother's heart knows it is nothing natural and good that lures them ever deeper into this pestilential jungle.

The camp grows worse every day. Paths are churned to muck, and grow wider and more muddy. Too many people do nothing to better our lot. They live as best they can today, making no provision for tomorrow, relying on the rest of us for food. Some sit and stare, some pray and weep. Do they expect Sa himself to swoop down and save them? Last night a family was found dead, all five of them, huddled around the base of a tree under a pitiful drape of mats. There is no sign of what killed them. No one speaks of what we all fear: that there is an insidious madness in the water, or perhaps it comes up from the ground itself, creeping into our dreams as unearthly music. I awaken from dreams of a strange city, thinking I am someone else, somewhere else. And when I open my eyes to mud and insects and hunger, sometimes I long to close them again and simply go back to my dream. Is that what befell that hapless family? All their eyes were wide open and staring when we discovered them. We let their bodies go into the river. The Council took what little goods they had and divided them, but many grumble that the Council only distributed the salvage to their own friends and not to those most in need. Discontent grows with this Council of few who impose rule on all of us.

Our doubtful refuge is starting to fail us. Even the paltry weight of our woven huts turns the fragile sod to mud. I used to speak disdainfully of those who lived in squalor, saying, "They live like animals." But in truth, the beasts of this jungle live more graciously than we do. I envy the spiders their webs suspended in the shafts of sunlight overhead. I envy the birds whose woven nests dangle over our heads, out of reach of mud and snakes. I envy even the splay-footed marsh-rabbits, as our hunters call the little game animals that scamper so elusively over the matted reeds and floating leaves of the shallows. By day, the earth sucks at my feet with every step I take. By night, our sleeping pallets sink into the earth, and we wake wet. A solution must be found, but all the others say, "Wait. Our explorers will return and lead us to a better place."

I think the only better place they have found is the bosom of Sa. So may we all go. Will I ever see balmy Jamailia again, ever walk in a garden of kindly plants, ever again be free to eat to satiation and drink without regard for the morrow? I understand the temptation to evade my life by dozing away the hours in dreams of a better place. Only my sons keep me anchored in this world.

Day the 16th of the Grain Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

What the waking mind does not perceive, the heart already knows. In a dream, I moved like the wind through these Rain Wilds, skimming over the soft ground and then sweeping through the swaying branches of the trees. Unhindered by muck and caustic water, I could suddenly see the many-layered beauty of our surroundings. I balanced, teetering like a bird, on a frond of fern. Some spirit of the Rain

Wilds whispered to me, “Try to master it and it will engulf you. Become a part of it, and live.”

I do not know that my waking mind believes any of that. My heart cries out for the white spires of Jamaillia, for the gentle blue waters of her harbor, for her shady walks and sunny squares. I hunger for music and art, for wine and poetry, for food that I did not scavenge from the crawl and tangle of this forbidding jungle. I hunger for beauty in place of squalor.

I did not gather food or water today. Instead, I sacrificed two pages of this journal to sketch dwellings suitable for this unforgiving place. I also designed floating walkways to link our homes. It will require some cutting of trees and shaping of lumber. When I showed them, some people mocked me, saying the work is too great for such a small group of people. Some pointed out that our tools have rapidly corroded here. I retorted that we must use our tools now to create shelters that will not fail us when our tools are gone.

Some willingly looked at my sketches, but then shrugged, saying what sense to work so hard when our scouts may return any day to lead us to a better location? We cannot, they said, live in this swamp forever. I retorted they were right, that if we did not bestir ourselves, we would die here. I did not, for fear of provoking fate, utter my darkest fear: that there is nothing but swamp for leagues under these trees, and that our explorers will never return.

Most people stalked away from my scorn, but two men stood and berated me, asking me what decent Jamaillian woman would raise her voice in anger before men. They were only commoners, as were the wives that stood and nodded behind them. Still, I could not restrain my tears, nor how my voice shook as I demanded what sort of men were they, to send my boys into the jungle to forage food for them while they sat on their heels and waited for someone else to solve their problems? They lifted their hands and made the sign for a shamed woman at me, as if I were a street girl. Then all walked away from me.

I do not care. I will prove them wrong.

Day the 24th of the Grain Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

I am torn between elation and grief. My baby is dead, Jathan is still missing, and yet today I feel more triumph than I did at any blessing of my artwork. Chellia, Marthi, and little Carlmin have toiled alongside me. Sewet the weaver woman has offered refinements to my experiments. Piet and Likea have gathered food in my stead. Carlmin’s small hands have amazed me with their agility and warmed my heart with his determination to help. In this effort, Carlmin has shown himself the son of my soul.

We have floored a large hut with a crosshatching of mats atop a bed of reeds and thin branches. This spreads the weight, so that we float atop the spongy ground as gently as the matted reeds float upon the neighboring waters. While other shelters sink daily and must be moved, ours has gone four days without

settling. Today, satisfied that our home will last, we began further improvements. Without tools, we have broken down small saplings and torn their branches from them. Pieces of their trunks, woven with lily root into a horizontal ladder, form the basis for the walkways around our hut. Layers of woven matting to be added tomorrow will further strengthen our flimsy walkways. The trick, I am convinced, is to spread the weight of the traffic out over the greatest possible area, much as the marsh-rabbits do with their splayed feet. Over the wettest section, behind our hut, we have suspended the walkway, anchoring it like a spiderweb from one tree to its neighbors as best we can. It is difficult, for the girth of the trees is great and the bark smooth. Twice it gave way as we struggled to secure it, and some of those watching jeered, but on our third effort, it held. Not only did we cross over it several times in safety, but we were able to stand upon our swaying bridge and look out over the rest of the settlement. It was no lofty view, for we were no more than waist-high above the ground, but even so, it gave me a perspective on our misery. Space is wasted with wandering paths and haphazard placement of huts. One of the sailors came over to inspect our effort, with much rocking on his heels and chewing on a twig. Then he had the effrontery to change half our knots. "That'll hold, madam," he told me. "But not for long and not under heavy use. We need better rigging to fasten to. Look up. That's where we need to be, rigging onto all those branches up there."

I looked up to the dizzying heights where the branches begin and told him that, without wings, none of us could reach those heights. He grinned and said, "I know a man might could do it. If anyone thought it worth his trying." Then he made one of those ridiculous sailor bows and wandered off.

We must soon take action, for this shivering island diminishes daily. The ground is overtrodden and water stands in our paths. I must be mad to try; I am an artist, not an engineer or a builder. And yet if no one else steps forward, I am driven to the attempt. If I fail, I will fail having tried.

Day the 5th or 6th of the Prayer Moon
Year the 14th of the reign of the Most
Noble and Magnificent Satrap Esclepius

Today one of my bridges fell. Three men were plunged into the swamp, and one broke a leg. He blamed his mishap upon me and declared that this is what happens when women try their knitting skills as construction. His wife joined in his accusations. But I did not shrink before them. I told them that I did not demand that he use my walkways, and that any who had not contributed to them and yet dared to walk upon them deserved whatever fate Sa sent them for laziness and ingratitude.

Someone shouted "blasphemy" but someone else shouted "truth is Sa's sword." I felt vindicated. My workforce has grown enough to be split into two parties. I shall put Sewet in charge of the second one, and woe betide any man who derides my choice. Her weaving skills have proven themselves.

Tomorrow we hope to start raising the first supports for my Great Platforms into the trees. I could fail most spectacularly. The logs are heavier, and we have no true rope for the hoisting, but only lines of braided root. The sailor has devised several crude block and tackles for us. He and my Petrus were the

ones who scaled the smooth trunk of a tree to where the immense limbs branch overhead. They tapped in pegs as they went, but even so, my heart shook to see them venture so high. Retyo the sailor says that his tackles will make our strength sufficient for any task. I wait to see that. I fear they will only lead to our woven lines fraying all the more. I should be sleeping and yet I lie here, wondering if we have sufficient line to hoist our beams. Will our rope ladders stand up to the daily use of workers? What have I undertaken? If any fall from such a height, they will surely die. Yet summer must end, and when winter rains come, we must have a dry retreat.

Day the 12th or 13th of the Prayer Moon
Year the 14th of Satrap Esclepius

Failure upon failure upon failure. I scarce have the spirit to write of it. Retyo the sailor says we must count as a success that no one has been injured. When our first platform fell, it sank itself into the soft earth rather than breaking into pieces. He cheerfully said that proved the platform's strength. He is a resourceful young man, intelligent despite his lack of education. I asked him today if he felt bitter that Fate had trapped him into building a colony in the Rain Wilds instead of sailing. He shrugged and grinned. He had been a tinker and a share-farmer before he was a sailor, so he says he has no idea what fate is rightfully his. He feels entitled to take any of them and turn it to his advantage. I wish I had his spirit.

Idlers in our Company gawk and mock us. Their skepticism corrodes my strength much as the chalky water sears the skin. Those who complain most about our situation do the least to better it. "Wait," they say, "wait for our explorers to return and lead us to a better place." Yet daily our situation worsens. We go almost in rags now, though Sewet experiments daily with what fibers she can pull from the vines or rub from the pith of reeds. We find barely enough food to sustain us daily, and have no reserves for the winter. The idlers eat as much as those who work daily. My boys toil alongside us each day and yet receive the same ration as those who lie about and bemoan our fate. Petrus has a spreading rash at the base of his neck. I am sure it is due to poor diet and the constant damp.

Chellia must feel the same. Her little daughters Piet and Likea are no more than bones, for unlike our boys who eat as they gather, they must be content with what is handed to them at the end of the day. Olpey has become a strange boy of late, so much so that he frightens even Petrus. Petrus still sets out with him each day, but often comes home long before Olpey. Last night, I awoke to hear Olpey softly singing in his sleep. It was a tune and a tongue that I swear I have never heard, and yet it was haunting in its familiarity.

Heavy rains today. Our huts shed the most of it. I pity those who have not made any effort to provide shelter for themselves, even as I wonder at their lack of intelligence. Two women came to our hut with three little children. Marthi and Chellia and I did not want to let them crowd in with us, yet we could not abide the pitiful shivering of the babes. So we let them in, but warned them sternly that they must help with the construction tomorrow. If they do, we will help them build a hut of their own. If not, out they must go. Perhaps we must force folk to act for their own benefit.

Day the 17th or 18th of the Prayer Moon

Year the 14th of Satrap Esclepius

We have raised and secured the first Great Platform. Sewet and Retyo have woven net ladders that dangle to the ground. It was a moment of great triumph for me to stand below and look up at the platform solidly fixed amongst the tree limbs. The intervening branches almost cloaked it from sight. This is my doing, I thought to myself. Retyo, Crorin, Finsk, and Tremartin are the men who have done most of the hoisting and tying, but the design of the platform, how it balances lightly on the branches, putting weight only where it can be borne, and the selection of the location were my doing. I felt so proud.

It did not last long, however. Ascending a ladder made of vines that gives to each step and sways more the higher one goes is not for the faint of heart nor for a woman's meager strength. Halfway up, my strength gave out. I clung, half swooning, and Retyo was forced to come to my rescue. It shames me that I, a married woman, wrapped my arms about his neck as if I were a little child. To my dismay, he did not take me down, but insisted on climbing up with me, so that I could see the new vista from our platform.

It was both exhilarating and disappointing. We stood far above the swampy land that has sucked at our feet for so long, yet still below the umbrella of leaves that screens out all but the strongest sunlight. I looked down on a deceptively solid-appearing floor of leaves, branches, and vines. Although other immense trunks and branches impeded our view, I could suddenly see a distance into the forest in some directions. It appears to go on forever. And yet, seeing the branches of adjacent trees nearly touching ours filled me with ambition. Our next platform will be based in three adjacent trees. A catwalk will stretch from Platform One to Platform Two. Chellia and Sewet are already weaving the safety nets that will prevent our younger children from tumbling off Platform One. When they are finished with that, I will put them to stringing our catwalks and the netting that will wall them.

The older children are swiftest to ascend and the quickest to adapt to our tree-dwelling. Already, they are horribly careless as they walk out from the platform along the huge branches that support it. After I had warned them often to be careful, Retyo gently rebuked me. "This is their world," he said. "They cannot fear it. They will become as surefooted as sailors running rigging. The branches are wider than the walkways of some towns I've visited. The only thing that prevents you from walking out along that branch is your knowledge of how far you may fall. Think instead of the wood beneath your feet."

Under his tutelage, and gripping his arm, I did walk out along one of the branches. When we had gone some way and it began to sway under our weight, I lost my courage and fled back to the platform. Looking down, I could only glimpse the huts of our muddy little settlement below. We had ascended to a different world. The light is greater here, though still diffuse, and we are closer to both fruit and flowers. Bright-colored birds squawk at us, as if disputing our right to be here. Their nests dangle like baskets hung in the trees. I look at their suspended homes and wonder if I cannot adapt that example to make a safe "nest" for myself. Already I feel this new territory is mine by right of ambition and art, as if

I inhabit one of my suspended sculptures. Can I imagine a town comprised of hanging cottages? Even this platform, bare as it is right now, has balance and grace.

Tomorrow I shall sit down with Retyo the sailor and Sewet the weaver. I recall the cargo nets that lifted heavy loads from the dock onto the deck of the ship. Could not a platform be placed inside such a net, the net thatched for privacy, and the whole hung from a sturdy branch, to become a lofty and private chamber here? How, then, would we provide access to the Great Platforms from such dwellings? I smile as I write this, knowing that I do not wonder if it can be done, but only how.

Both Olpey and Petrus have a rash on their scalps and down their necks. They scratch and complain and the skin is rough as scales to the touch. I can find no way to ease it for either of them, and fear that it is spreading to others. I've seen a number of the children scratching miserably.

Day the 6th or 7th of the Gold Moon

Year the 14th of Satrap Esclepius

Two events of great significance. Yet I am so weary and heartsick I scarce can write of either of them. Last night, as I fell asleep in this swinging birdcage of a home, I felt safe and almost serene. Tonight, all that is taken from me.

The first: Last night Petrus woke me. Trembling, he crept under my mats beside me as if he were my little boy again. He whispered to me that Olpey was frightening him, singing songs from the city, and that he must tell me even though he had promised he would not.

Petrus and Olpey, in their ranging for food, discovered an unnaturally square mound in the forest. Petrus felt uneasy and did not wish to approach it. He could not tell me why. Olpey was drawn to it. Day after day, he insisted that they return to it. On the days when Petrus returned alone, it was because he had left Olpey exploring the mound. At some point in his poking and digging, he found a way into it. The boys have entered it several times now. Petrus described it as a buried tower, though that made no sense to me. He said the walls are cracked and damp seeps in, but it is mostly solid. There are tapestries and old furniture, some sound, some rotted, and other signs that once people lived in it. Yet Petrus trembled as he spoke, saying that he did not think they were people like us. He says the music comes from it.

Petrus had only descended one level into it, but Olpey told him it went much deeper. Petrus was afraid to go down into the dark, but then by some magic, Olpey caused the tower to blossom with light. Olpey mocked Petrus for being fearful, and told tales of immense riches and strange objects in the depths of the tower. He claimed that ghosts spoke to him and told him its secrets, including where to find treasure. Then Olpey began to say that he had once lived in the tower, a long time ago when he was an old man.

I did not wait for morning. I woke Chellia, and after hearing my tale she woke Olpey. The boy was furious, hissing that he would never trust Petrus again and that the tower was his secret and the treasures all his, and he did not have to share it. While the night was still dark, Olpey fled, running off along one

of the tree branches that have become footpaths for the children, and thence we knew not where.

When morning finally sifted through the sheltering branches, Chellia and I followed Petrus through the forest to his tower-mound. Retyo and Tremartin went with us, and little Carlmin refused to stay behind with Chellia's girls. When I saw the squared mound thrusting up from the swamp, my courage quailed inside me. Yet I did not wish Retyo to see me as a coward and so I forced myself on.

The top of the tower was heavily mossed and draped with vinery, yet it was too regular a shape to blend with the jungle. On one side, the boys had pulled away vines and moss to bare a window in a stone wall. Retyo kindled the torch he had brought, and then, one after another, we cautiously clambered inside. Vegetation had penetrated the room as tendrils and roots. On the grimy floor were the muddy tracks of the boys' feet. I suspect they have both been exploring that place for far longer than Petrus admits. A bedframe festooned with rags of fabric was in one corner of the room. Insects and mice had reduced the draperies to dangling rags.

Despite the dimness and decay, there were echoes of loveliness in the room. I seized a handful of rotted curtain and scrubbed a swath across a frieze, raising a cloud of dust. Amazement stilled my coughing. My artist's soul soared at the finely shaped and painted tiles and the delicate colors I had uncovered. But my mother's heart stood still at what was revealed. The figures were tall and thin, humans rendered as stick insects. Yet I did not think it was a conceit of the artist. Some held what might have been musical instruments or weaponry. We could not decide. In the background workers tended a reed-bed by a river like farmers harvesting a field. A woman in a great chair of gold overlooked all and seemed pleased with it. Her face was stern and yet kind; I felt I had seen her before. I would have stared longer, but Chellia demanded we search for her son.

With a sternness I did not feel, I bade Petrus show us where they had been playing. He blanched to see that I had guessed the truth, but he led us on. We left the bedchamber by a short flight of downward stairs. On the landing, there was heavy glass in two windows, but when Retyo held our torch close to one, it illuminated long white worms working in the wet soil pressed against it. How the glass has withstood the force of earth, I do not know. We entered a wide hall. Rugs crumbled into damp thread under our tread. We passed doorways, some closed, others open archways gaping with dark maws, but Petrus led us on. We came at last to the top of a stair, much grander than the first. As we descended this open staircase into a pool of darkness, I was grateful to have Retyo at my side. His calmness fostered my poor courage. The ancient cold of the stone penetrated my worn shoes and crept up my legs to my spine as if it reached for my heart. Our torch illuminated little more than our frightened faces and our whispers faded, waking ghostly echoes. We passed one landing, and then a second, but Petrus neither spoke nor faltered as he led us down. I felt as if I had walked into the throat of some great beast and was descending to its belly.

When at last we reached the bottom, our single torch could not penetrate the blackness around us. The flame fluttered in the moving air of a much larger chamber. Even in the dimness, I knew this room would have dwarfed the great ballroom of the Satrap's palace. I slowly groped my way forward, but

Carlmin suddenly strode fearlessly beyond the reach of both my hand and the torchlight. I called after him, but his pattering footsteps as he hurried away were my only answer. "Oh, follow him!" I beseeched Retyo, but as he started to, the room suddenly lit around us as if a horde of spirits had unhooded their lanterns. I gave one shriek of terror and then was struck dumb.

In the center of the room, a great green dragon was upreared on its hind legs. Its hind claws were sunk deep in the stone and its lashing tail stretched halfway across the room. Its emerald wings were unfurled wide and supported the ceiling high overhead. Atop its sinuous neck was a head the size of an oxcart. Intelligence glittered in its shining silver eyes. Its smaller forelimbs clutched the handle of a large basket. The basket itself was elaborately beribboned with bows of jade and streamers of ivory. And within the basket, reclining serenely, was a woman of preternatural authority. She was not beautiful; the power expressed in her made beauty irrelevant. Nor was she young and desirable. She was a woman past her middle years; yet the lines the sculptor had graved in her face seemed wisdom-furrows on her brow, and thought-lines at the corners of her eyes. Jewels had been set above her brow-lines and along the tops of her cheeks to mimic the scaling of the dragon. This was no expressionless representation of Sa's female aspect. I knew, without doubt, that this statue had been fashioned to honor a real woman and it shocked me to my bones. The dragon's supple neck was carved so that he twisted to regard her, and even his reptilian countenance showed respect for her that he carried.

I had never seen such a representation of a woman. I had heard foreign tales of Harlot Queens and woman rulers, but always they had seemed fabrications of some barbarous and backward country, seductive women of evil intent. She made such legends lies. For a time, she was all I could see. Then my mind came back to me, and with it my duty.

Little Carlmin, all his teeth showing in a wide smile, stood some distance from us, his hand pressed against a panel attached to a column. His flesh looked like ice in the unnatural light. His smallness put the huge chamber into perspective, and I suddenly saw all that the dragon and woman had obscured.

The light flowed in pale stars and flying dragons across the ceiling. It crawled in vines across the walls, framing four distant doorways to darkened corridors. Dry fountains and statuary broke up the huge expanse of dusty floor. This was a great indoor plaza, a place for people to gather and talk or idly stroll amongst the fountains and statuary. Lesser columns supported twining vines with leaves of jade and carnelian blossoms. A sculpture of a leaping fish denied the dry fountain basin below it. Moldering heaps of ruin scattered throughout the chamber indicated the remains of wooden structures, booths or stages. Yet neither dust nor decay could choke the chilling beauty of the place. The scale and the grace of the room left me breathless and woke a wary awe in me. Folk who created such a chamber would not perish easily. What fate had overtaken a people whose magic could still light a room years after their passing? Did the danger that destroyed them threaten us? What had it been? Where had they gone?

Were they truly gone?

As in the chamber above, it felt as if the people had simply departed, leaving all their goods behind.

Again, the boys' muddy tracks on the floor betrayed that they had been here before. Most led toward a single door.

"I did not realize this place was so big." Petrus' small voice seemed shrill in the vastness as he stared up at the lady and her dragon. He turned round in a slow circle, staring at the ceiling. "We had to use torches here. How did you light it, Carlmin?" Petrus sounded uneasy at his small brother's knowledge.

But Carlmin didn't answer. My little one was trotting eagerly across the vast chamber, as if called to some amusement. "Carlmin!" I cried, and my voice woke a hundred echoing ghosts. As I gawked, he vanished through one of the archways. It lit in a murky, uncertain way. I ran after him, and the others followed. I was breathless by the time I had crossed the plaza. I chased him down a dusty corridor.

As I followed him into a dim chamber, light flickered around me. My son sat at the head of a long table of guests in exotic dress. There was laughter and music. Then I blinked and empty chairs lined both sides of the table. The feast had dwindled to crusty stains in the crystal goblets and plates, but the music played on, choked and strained. I knew it from my dreams.

Carlmin spoke hollowly as he lofted a goblet in a toast, "To my lady!" He smiled fondly as his childish gaze met unseen eyes. As he started to put it to his lips, I reached him, seized his wrist, and shook the glass from his grasp. It fell to shatter in the dust.

He stared at me with eyes that did not know me. Despite how he has grown of late, I snatched him up and held him to me. His head sagged onto my shoulder and he closed his eyes, trembling. The music sagged into silence. Retyo took him from me, saying sternly, "We should not have allowed the boy to come. The sooner we leave this place and its dying magic, the better." He glanced about uneasily. "Thoughts not mine tug at me, and I hear voices. I feel I have been here before, when I know I have not. We should leave this city to the spirits that haunt it." He seemed shamed to admit his fear, but I was relieved to hear one of us speak it aloud.

Then Chellia cried that we could not leave Olpey here, to fall under whatever enchantment had seized Carlmin. Sa forgive me, all I wanted to do was seize my own children and flee. But Retyo, carrying both our torch and my son, led us on. His friend Tremartin smashed a chair against the stone floor and took up one of the legs for a club. No one asked him what use a club could be against the spiderwebs of alien memory that snagged at us. Petrus moved up to take the lead. When I glanced back, the lights in the chamber had winked out.

Through a hall and then down another flight of stairs that wound down to a smaller hall we went. Statues in niches lined the walls, with the dwindled remnants of dust-grimed candle stubs before them. Many were women, crowned and glorified like kings. Their sculpted robes glittered with tiny inset jewels, and pearls roped their hair.

The unnatural light was blue and uncertain, flickering with the threat of utter darkness. It made me oddly

sleepy. I thought I heard whispering and once, as I brushed through a doorway, I heard two women singing in the distance. I shuddered with fear, and Retyo glanced back as if he, too, had heard them. Neither of us spoke. We went on. Some passages blossomed into light around us as we entered. Others remained stubbornly dark and made our failing torch seem a lie. I do not know which was more daunting to me.

We found Olpey at last. He was sitting in a little room on an opulently carved chair before a gentleman's dressing table. The gilt had fallen from the wood to scatter in flakes all round it. He looked into a mirror clouded with age; black spots had blossomed in it. Shell combs and the handle of a brush littered the table before him. A small chest was open on his lap, and looped around his neck were many pendants. His head drooped to one side but his eyes were open and staring. He was muttering to himself. As we drew near, he reached for a scent bottle and mimed dabbing himself with its long-dried perfume as he turned his face from side to side before his hazy reflection. His motions were the preening of a lordly and conceited man.

"Stop it!" his mother hissed in horror. He did not startle and almost I felt that we were the ghosts there. She seized him and shook him. At that he woke, but he woke in a terror. He cried out as he recognized her, glanced wildly about himself, and then fell into a faint. "Oh, help me get him out of here," poor Chellia begged.

Tremartin put Olpey's arm across his shoulders and mostly dragged the lad as we fled. The lights quenched as we left each area, as if the pursuing darkness were only a step behind us. Once music swelled loudly around us, subsiding as we fled. When we finally clambered out of the window into open air, the swamp seemed a healthful place of light and freshness. I was shocked to see that most of the day had passed while we were below.

Carlmin recovered quickly in the fresh air. Tremartin spoke sharply to Olpey and shook him, at which he angrily came back to his senses. He jerked free of Tremartin, and would not speak sensibly to us. By turns sullen or defiant, he refused to explain why he had fled to the city or what he had been doing. He denied fainting. He was coldly furious with Petrus and extremely possessive of the jeweled necklaces he wore. They glittered with bright gemstones of every color, and yet I would no more put one around my neck than I would submit to a snake's embrace. "They are mine," he kept exclaiming. "My lover gave them to me, a long time ago. No one will take them from me now!"

It took all of Chellia's patience and motherly wiles to convince Olpey to return with us. Even so, he dawdled grudgingly along. By the time we reached the outskirts of camp, the dwindling light was nearly gone and insects feasted on us.

The platforms high above were humming with excited voices like a disturbed beehive. We climbed the ladders, and I was so exhausted I thought only of my own shelter and bed. But the moment we reached the Great Platform, cries of excitement greeted us. The explorers had returned. At the sight of my husband, thin, bearded, and ragged, but alive, my heart leapt. Little Carlmin stood gawking as if at a

stranger, but Petrus rushed to greet him. And Retyo gravely bid me farewell and vanished from my side into the crowd.

Jathan did not recognize his son at first. When he did, he lifted his eyes and looked over the crowd. When his eyes had passed me twice, I stepped forward, leading Carlmin by the hand. I think he knew me by the look on my face rather than by my appearance. He came to me slowly, saying, "Sa's mercy, Carillion, is that you? Have pity on us all." By which I judged that my appearance did not please him. And why that should hurt so much is something I do not know, nor why I felt shamed that he took my hand but did not embrace me. Little Carlmin stood beside me, staring blankly at his father.

And now I shall leave this wallowing in self-pity and sum up their report. They found only more swamp. The Rain Wild River is the main drainage of a vast network of water that straggles in threads through a wide valley on its way to the sea. The water runs under the land as much as over it. They found no sound ground, only bogs, marshes, and sloughs. They never had clear sight of a horizon since they had left us. Of the twelve men who set out, seven returned. One drowned in quicksand, one vanished during a night, and the other three were overtaken by a fever. Ethe, Chellia's husband, did not return.

They could not tell how far inland they had traveled. The tree cover hampered their efforts to follow the stars and eventually they must have made a great circle, for they found themselves standing at the riverside again.

On their journey back to us, they encountered the remnants of those who had been on the third ship. They were marooned downriver from where we were abandoned. Their Captain gave up on his mission when he saw wreckage from a ship float past them. Their Captain was more merciful than ours, for he saw that all their cargo was landed with them, and even left them one of the ship's boats. Still, their lives were hard and many wished to go home. The jewel of good news was that they still had four messenger birds. One had been dispatched when they were first put ashore. Another was sent back with news of their hardship after the first month.

Our explorers dashed all their hopes. They decided to abandon their effort at a settlement. Seven of their young men came back with our explorers to help us evacuate as well. When we join them, they will send a message bird to Jamaillia, begging for a rescue ship. Then we will journey down the river and to the coast, in the hope of rescue.

When Chellia, Retyo, and I returned, our Company was sourly predicting that no ship would be sent. Nonetheless, all were packing to leave. Then Chellia arrived with her jewel-draped son. As she tried to tell her story to a crowd of folk too large to hear it, a riot nearly broke out. Some men wanted to go immediately to the buried tower, despite the growing dark. Others demanded a chance to handle the jewels, and as young Olpey refused to let anyone touch them, this set off a scuffle. The boy broke free, and, leaping from the edge of the platform, he sprang from one branch to another like a monkey until his shape was lost in the darkness. I pray he is safe tonight, but fear the madness has taken him.

A different sort of madness has taken our folk. I huddle in my shelter with my two sons. Outside, on the platforms, the night is full of shouting. I hear women pleading to leave, and men saying, yes, yes, we will, but first we will see what treasure the city will offer us. A messenger bird with a jewel attached to its leg would bring a ship swiftly, they laugh. Their eyes are bright, their voices loud.

My husband is not with me. Despite our long separation, he is in the thick of these arguments rather than with his wife and sons. Did he even notice that my pregnancy had passed, yet my arms were empty? I doubt it.

I do not know where Chellia and her daughters have gone. When she discovered that Ethe had not returned, it broke her. Her husband is dead and Olpey may be lost, or worse. I fear for her, and mourn with her. I thought the return of the explorers would fill me with joy. Now I do not know what I feel. But I know it is not joy or even relief.

Day the 7th or 8th of the Gold Moon Year the 14th of Satrap Esclepius

He came to me in the dark of the night, and despite the soreness of my heart and our two sons sleeping nearby, I let him have what he sought. Part of me hungered only for a gentle touch; part of me mocked myself for that, for he came to me only when his more pressing business was done. He spoke little and took his satisfaction in darkness. Can I blame him? I know I have gone to skin and bones, my complexion rough and my hair dry as straw. The rash that has afflicted the children now crawls like a snake up my spine. I dreaded that he would touch it, mostly because it would remind me that it was there, but he did not. He wasted no caresses. I stared past his shoulder into the darkness and thought not of my husband, but of Retyo, and he a common sailor who speaks with the accents of the waterfront.

What have I become here?

Afternoon

And so I am Lord Jathan Carrock's wife again, and my life is his to command. He has settled our fate. As Olpey has vanished, and neither Retyo nor Tremartin can be found, Jathan has declared that his son's discovery of the hidden city gives him prime claim to all treasure in it. Petrus will lead him and the other men back to the buried tower. They will search it systematically for treasure that will buy our way back into the Satrap's graces. He is quite proud to claim that Petrus discovered the tower and thus the Carrocks merit a larger share of the treasure. It does not disturb him that Olpey is still missing, and that Chellia and her daughters are distraught with worry. He talks only of how the treasure will secure our glorious return to society. He seems to forget the leagues of swamp and sea between Jamailia City and us.

I told him that the city was a dangerous place and he should not venture into it thinking only of spoils. I warned him of its unhealthy magic, of lights that brighten and fade, of voices and music heard in the

distance, but he disdains it as a “woman’s overwrought fancy.” He tells me to stay out of danger here in my “little monkey nest” until he returns. Then I spoke bluntly. The Company does not have reserves of food or the strength to make a trek to the coast. Unless we better prepare, we will die along the way, treasure or not. I think we should remain here until we are better prepared, or until a ship comes here for us. We need not admit defeat. We might prosper if we put all our men to gathering food and found a way to trap rainwater for our needs. Our tree-city could be a thing of grace and beauty. He shook his head as if I were a child prating of pixies in flowery bowers. “Ever immersed in your art,” he said. “Even in rags and starving, you cannot see what is real.” Then he said he admired how I had occupied myself in his absence, but that he had returned now and would take charge of his family.

I wanted to spit at him.

Petrus did not wish to lead the men. He believes the tower took Olpey and we shall never see him again. He speaks of the underground with deep dread. Carlmin told his father he had never been to a buried city, and then sat and sucked his thumb, as he has not since he was two.

When Petrus tried to warn Jathan, he laughed and said, “I’m a different man than the soft noble who left Jamaillia. Your silly mama’s goblins don’t worry me.” When I told him sharply that I, too, was a different woman than the one he had left alone to cope in the wilds, he stiffly replied that he saw that too clearly, and only hoped that a return to civilization would restore me to propriety. Then he forced Petrus to lead them to the ruins.

No amount of treasure could persuade me to return there, not if there were diamonds scattered on the floor and strands of pearls dangling from the ceiling. I did not imagine the danger, and I hate Jathan for dragging Petrus back to it.

I shall spend the day with Marthi. Her husband returned safely, only to leave her again to hunt treasure. Unlike me, she is overjoyed with his plans, and says that he will return them to society and wealth again. It is hard for me to listen to such nonsense. “My baby will grow up in Sa’s blessed city,” she says. The woman is thin as a string, with her belly like a knot tied in it.

Day the 8th or 9th of the Gold Moon

Year the 14th of Satrap Esclepius

A ridiculous date for us. Here there will be no golden harvest moon, nor does the Satrap mean anything to me any more.

Yesterday Petrus showed them to the tower window, but ran away when the men entered, leaving his father shouting angrily after him. He came back to me, pale and shaking. He says the singing from the tower has become so loud that he cannot think his own thoughts when he is near it. Sometimes, in the corridors of black stone, he has glimpsed strange people. They come and go in flashes, he says, like their flickering light.

I hushed him, for his words were upsetting Marthi. Despite Jathan's plans, I spent yesterday preparing for winter. I put a second thatch on both our hanging huts, using broad leaves laced down with vines. I think our shelters, especially the smaller hanging cottages and the little footbridges that connect them to the Great Platform, will require reinforcement against winter winds and rain. Marthi was little help to me. Her pregnancy has made her ungainly and listless, but the real problem was that she believes we will soon go home to Jamaillia. Most of the women are now only waiting to leave.

Some of the treasure hunters returned last night, with reports of a vast buried city. It is very different from Jamaillia, all interconnected like a maze. Perhaps some parts of it were always underground, for there are no windows or doors in the lowest chambers. The upper reaches of the buildings were homes and private areas and the lower seemed to have been shops and warehouses and markets. Toward the river, a portion of the city has collapsed. In some chambers, the walls are damp and rot is well at work on the furnishings, but others have withstood time, preserving rugs and tapestries and garments. Those who returned brought back dishes and chairs, rugs and jewelry, statues and tools. One man wore a cloak that shimmered like running water, soft and supple. They had discovered amphorae of wine, still sealed and intact in one warehouse. The wine is golden and so potent that the men were almost instantly drunk. They returned laughing and spirit-breathed, bidding us all come to the city and celebrate with wine the wealth that had come to us. There was a wild glitter in their eyes that I did not like.

Others returned haunted and cringing, not wishing to speak of what they had experienced. Those ones began immediately to plan to leave tomorrow at dawn, to travel downriver and join the other folk there.

Jathan did not return at all.

Those obsessed with plunder talk loudly, drunk with old wine and mad dreams. Already they gather hoards. Two men came back bruised, having come to blows over a vase. Where will greed take us? I feel alone in my dismal imaginings.

That city is not a conquered territory to be sacked, but more like a deserted temple, to be treated with the respect one should accord any unknown god. Are not all gods but facets of Sa's presence? But these words come to me too late to utter. I would not be heeded. I feel a terrible premonition, that there will be a consequence to this orgy of plundering.

My tree-settlement was almost deserted earlier today. Most of our folk had been infected with a treasure fever and gone underground. Only the infirm and the women with the smallest children remain in our village. I look around me and I am suffused with sorrow, for I am seeing the death of my dreams. Shall I wax more eloquent, more dramatic, more poetic as I once would have thought it? No. I shall simply say I am engulfed in disappointment. And shocked to feel it.

It is hard for me to confront what I mourn. I hesitate to commit it to paper, for the words will remain here, to accuse me later. Yet art, above all, is honesty, and I am an artist before I am a wife, a mother, or

even a woman. So I will write. It is not that there is now a man that I would prefer over my husband. I admit that freely. I care not that Retyo is a common sailor, seven years my junior, without education or bloodlines to recommend him. It is not what he is but who he is that turns my heart and eyes to him. I would take him into my bed tonight, if I could do so without risking my sons' future. That I will write in a clear hand. Can there be shame in saying I would value his regard above my husband's, when my husband has so clearly shown that he values the regard of the other men in this Company over his wife's love?

No. What turns my heart to rust this day is that my husband's return, and the discovery of treasure in the buried city and the talk of returning to Jamaillia, dismantles the life I have built here. That grieves me. It is a hard thing to contemplate. When did I change so completely? This life is harsh and hard. This country's beauty is the beauty of the sunning snake. It threatens as it beckons. I fancy that I can master it by giving it my earnest respect. Without realizing it, I had begun to take pride in my ability to survive and to tame some small part of its savagery. And I have shown others how to do that. I did things here, and they were significant.

Now that will be lost to me. I become again Lord Jathan Carrock's wife. My caution will be discarded as a woman's foolish fear, and my ambitions for a beautiful abode built amongst the trees will be dismissed as a woman's silly fancy.

Perhaps he would be right. Nay, I know he is right. But somehow, I no longer care for what is right and wise. I have left behind the life where I created art for people to admire. Now my art is how I live and it daily sustains me.

I do not think I can set that aside. To be told I must abandon all that I have begun here is more than I can bear. And for what? To return to his world, where I am of no more consequence than an amusing songbird in a filigreed cage.

Marthi was with me today when Chellia came to ask Petrus to help her look for Olpey. Petrus would not look at her. Chellia began to plead, and Petrus covered his ears. She nagged him until he began to weep, frightening Carlmin. Chellia shrieked as if mad, accusing Petrus of not caring anything for his friend, but only for the riches of the city. She lifted a hand as if to strike my boy, and I rushed in and pushed her. She fell, and her girls dragged her to her feet and then pulled her away, begging her simply to "come home, Mother, come home." When I turned around, Marthi had fled.

I sit by myself on the limb above my cottage while my boys sleep within tonight. I am ashamed. But my sons are all I have. Is it wrong for me to keep them safe? What good would it do to sacrifice my sons to save hers? We might only lose them all.

Fifth Day of the City Year One of the Rain Wilds

I fear we have come through many trials and tribulations, only to perish from our own greed. Last night, three men died in the city. No one will say how; they brought the unmarked bodies back. Some say it was the madness, others speak of evil magic. In the wake of the gruesome development, seventeen people banded together and bid the rest of us farewell. We gave them ropes and woven mats and whatever else we could spare and wished them well as they left. I hope they reach the other settlement safely, and that someday, someone in Jamaillia may hear the tale of what befell us here. Marthi pleaded with them to tell the other folk to wait a day or two longer before they depart for the coast, that soon her husband will be bringing her to join them.

I have not seen Retyo since my husband returned. I did not think he would go to hunt treasure in the city, but it must be so. I had grown accustomed to being without Jathan. I have no claim to Retyo, and yet miss him the more keenly of the two.

I visited Marthi again. She has grown paler and is now afflicted with the rash. Her skin is as dry as a lizard's. She is miserable with her heaviness. She speaks wildly of her husband finding immense wealth and how she will flaunt it to those who banished us. She fantasizes that as soon as the message bird reaches Jamaillia, the Satrap will send a swift ship to fetch us all back to Jamaillia, where her child will be born into plenty and safety. Her husband returned briefly from the city, to bring her a little casket of jewelry. Her dull hair is netted with chained jewels, and gleaming bracelets dangle from her thin wrists. I avoid her lest I tell her that she is a fool. She is not, truly, save that she hopes beyond hope. I hate this wealth that we can neither eat nor drink, for all have focused upon it, and willingly starve while they seek to gather ever more.

Our remaining Company is divided into factions now. Men have formed alliances and divided the city into claimed territories. It began with quarrels over the heaps and hoards, with men accusing each other of pilfering. Soon it fostered partnerships, some to guard the hoard while the others strip the city of wealth. Now it extends to men arming themselves with clubs and knives and setting sentries to guard the corridors they have claimed. But the city is a maze, and there are many routes through it. The men fight one another for plunder.

My sons and I remain with the infirm, the elderly, the very young, and the pregnant here at the Great Platform. We form alliances of our own, for while the men are engrossed in stealing from each other, the gathering of food goes undone. The archers who hunted meat for us now hunt treasure. The men who had set snares for marsh-rabbits now set traps for one another. Jathan came back to the hut, ate all that remained of our supplies, and then left again. He laughed at my anger, telling me that I worry about roots and seeds while there are gems and coins to be gathered. I was glad when he went back to the city. May he be devoured by it! Any food I find now, I immediately give to the boys or eat myself. If I can think of a secret place to cache it, I'll begin to do so.

Petrus, forbidden the city, has resumed his gathering duties, to good end. This day he returned with reeds like the ones we saw peasants cultivating in that mosaic in the city. He told me that the city people would not have grown them if they did not have some use, and that we should discover what it was. It

was more disturbing to me when he told me that he remembered that this was the season for harvesting them. When I told him that he could not possibly remember any such thing, he shook his head at me, and muttered something about his “city memories.”

I hope that the influence of that strange place will fade with time.

The rash has worsened on Carlmin, spreading onto his cheeks and brows. I slathered a poultice onto it in the hope of easing it. My younger son has scarcely spoken a word to me this day, and I fear what occupies his mind.

My life has become only waiting. At any time, my husband may return from the city and announce that it is time for us to begin our trek down the river. Nothing I build now can be of any consequence, when I know that soon we will abandon it.

Olpey has not been found. Petrus blames himself. Chellia is near mad with grief. I watch her from a distance, for she no longer speaks to me. She confronts any man returning from the city, demanding word of her son. Most of them shrug her off; some become angry. I know what she fears, for I fear it, too. I think Olpey returned to the city. He felt entitled to his treasures, but fatherless as he is and of common birth, who would respect his claim? Would they kill the boy? I would give much not to feel so guilty about Olpey. What can I do? Nothing. Why, then, do I feel so bad? What would it benefit any of us to risk Petrus in another visit to the city? Is not one vanished boy tragedy enough?

Eighth Day of the City

Year One of the Rain Wilds

Jathan returned at noon today. He was laden with a basket of treasure, jewelry and odd ornaments, small tools of a strange metal, and a purse woven of metal links and full of oddly minted gold coins. His face was badly bruised. He abruptly said that this was enough, there was no sense to the greed in the city. He announced that we would catch up with the others who had already left. He declared that the city holds no good for us and that we are wiser to flee with what he has than to strive for more and die there.

He had not eaten since he last left us. I made him spice bark tea and lily-root mush and encouraged him to speak of what is happening underground. At first he spoke only of our own Company there and what they did. Bitterly he accused them of treachery and betrayal. Men have come to bloodshed over the treasure. I suspect Jathan was driven off with what he could carry. But there is worse news. Parts of the city are collapsing. Closed doors have been forced open, with disastrous results. Some were not locked, but were held shut by the force of earth behind them. Now slow muck oozes forth from them, gradually flooding the corridors. Some are already nearly impassable, but men ignore the danger as they try to salvage wealth before it is buried forever. The flowing muck seems to weaken the city’s ancient magic. Many chambers are subsiding into darkness. Lights flash brightly, then dim. Music blares forth and then fades to a whisper.

When I asked him if that had frightened him, he angrily told me to be quiet and recall my respect for him. He scoffed at my notion that he would flee. He said it was obvious that the ancient city would soon collapse under the weight of the swamp, and he had no wish to die there. I do not believe that was all of it, but I suppose I am glad he was intelligent enough to leave. He bade me get the children ready to travel and gather whatever food we had.

Reluctantly, I began to obey him. Petrus, looking relieved, sprang to the meager packing. Carlmin sat silently scratching the poultice off his rash. I hastily covered it afresh. I did not want Jathan to see the coppery scaling on his son's skin. Earlier I had tried picking the scab loose, but when I scrape it off, he cries and the flesh beneath is bloody. It looks as if he is growing fish scales. I try not to think of the rash down my spine. I make this entry hastily, and then I will wrap this small book well and add it to my carry basket. There is precious little else to put in it.

I hate to leave what I have built, but I cannot ignore the relief in Petrus' eyes when his father said we would go. I wish we had never ventured into the city. But for that haunted place, perhaps we could have stayed here and made it a home. I dread our journey, but there is no help for it. Perhaps if we take Carlmin away from here, he will begin to speak again.

Later

I will write in haste and then take this book with me into the city. If ever my body is found, perhaps some kind soul will carry this volume back to Jamaillia and let my parents know what became of Carillion Waljin and where she ended her days. Likely it and I will be buried forever in the muck inside the hidden city.

I had finished our packing when Chellia came to me with Tremartin. The man was gaunt and his clothing caked with mud. He has finally found Olpey, but the lad is out of his wits. He has barricaded a door against them, and will not come out. Retyo and Tremartin had been searching the city for Olpey all this time. Retyo has remained outside the door, striving to keep it clear of the relentlessly creeping muck filling the passageway. Tremartin does not know how long he can keep up with it. Retyo thinks that Petrus could convince Olpey to open the door. Together, Tremartin and Chellia came to us to beg this favor.

I could no longer ignore the desperation in my friend's eyes, and felt shamed that I had so long. I appealed to Jathan, saying that we could go directly to where the boy is, persuade him to come out, and then we could all leave together. I even tried to be persuasive, saying that such a larger party would do better in facing the Rain Wilds than if we and our sons went alone.

He did not even call me apart or lower his voice as he demanded why he should risk his son and his heir for the sake of a laundress' boy, one we would not even employ as a servant were we still in Jamaillia. He berated me for letting Petrus become attached to such a common lad and then, in a clear voice, said I was very much mistaken if I thought him such a fool that he did not know about Retyo. Many a foul

thing he said then, of what a harlot I was to take a common man into a bed by right a Lord's, and treacherously support a low sailor as he made his bid to claim leadership of the Company.

I will not record any more of his shameful accusations. In truth, I do not know why he still has the power to make me weep. In the end, I defied him. When he said I must follow him now or not at all, I told him, "Not at all. I will stay and aid my friend, for I care not what work she used to do, here she is my friend."

My decision was not without cost to me. Jathan took Petrus with him. I saw that my elder son was torn, and yet wished to flee with his father. I do not blame him. Jathan left Carlmin behind, saying that my poor judgment had turned his son into a moron and a freak. Carlmin had scratched the poultice from his face, baring the scales that now outline his brows and upper cheeks. My little boy did not even wince to his father's words. He showed no reaction at all. I kissed Petrus goodbye and promised him that I would follow as soon as I could. I hope I can keep that promise. Jathan and Petrus took with them as much as they could carry of our goods. When Carlmin and I follow, we will not have much for supplies until we catch up to them.

And now I shall wrap this little book and slip it, pen, and inkpot into the little carry basket they left to me, along with materials for torches and fire starting. Who knows when I shall write in it again? If you read this, my parents, know that I loved you until I died.

Ninth Day of the City, I think Year One of the Rain Wilds

How foolish and melodramatic my last entry now looks to me.

I pen this hastily before the light fails. My friends wait for me patiently, though Chellia finds it foolish that I insist on writing before we go on.

Less than ten days have passed since I first saw this city, but it has aged years. The passage of many muddy feet was evident when we entered, and everywhere I saw the depredations of the treasure seekers. Like angry boys, they had destroyed what they could not take, prying tiles out of mosaics, breaking limbs off statues too big to carry, and using fine old furniture for firewood. As much as the city frightens me, still I grieve to see it plundered and ravaged. It has prevailed against the swamp for years, only to fall prey to our greed in days.

Its magic is failing. Only portions of the chamber were lit. The dragons on the ceiling had dimmed. The great woman-and-dragon statue bears marks from errant hammers. The jade and ivory of the woman's basket remain out of the reach of the treasure hunters. The rest of the pavilion had not fared so well. The fish fountain was being used as a great dish to hold someone's hoard. A man stood atop the heap of plunder, knife in one hand and club in the other, and shouted at us that he would kill any thieves who came near. His appearance was so wild, we believed him. I felt shamed for him, and looked aside as we hurried past. Fires burn in the room, with treasure and a guard by each one. In the distance we could hear

voices, and sometimes challenging shouts and hammering. I caught a glimpse of four men ascending the steps with heavy sacks of loot.

Tremartin kindled one of our torches at an abandoned fire. We left that chamber by the same passage we had used before. Carlmin, mute since morning, began to hum a strange and wandering tune that stood up the hair on the back of my neck. I led him on, while Chellia's two girls wept silently in the dimness as they followed us, holding hands.

We passed the shattered door of a chamber. Thick mud-water oozed from the room. I glanced inside the chamber; a wide crack in its back wall had allowed mud to half fill the room. Still, someone had entered and sought treasure. Moldy paintings had been pulled loose from the walls and discarded in the rising muck. We hastened on.

At an intersection of corridors, we saw a slowly advancing flow of mud, and heard a deep groaning in the distance, as of timbers slowly giving way. Nonetheless, a guard stood at that juncture, warning us that all behind him belonged to him and his friends. His eyes gleamed like a wild animal's. We assured him that we were only seeking a lost boy and hurried on. Behind him, we heard hammers begin and surmised that his friends were breaking down another door.

"We should hurry," Tremartin said. "Who knows what will be behind the next door they break? They won't leave off until they've let in the river. I left Retyo outside Olpey's door. We both feared others might come and think he guarded treasure."

"I just want my boy. Then I shall gladly leave this place," Chellia said. So we still hope to do.

I can write little of what else we saw, for the light flickers. We saw men dragging treasure they could never carry through the swamp. We were briefly attacked by a wild-eyed woman shrieking, "Thieves, thieves!" I pushed her down, and we fled. As we ran, there was first damp, then water, then oozing mud on the floor. The mud sucked at our feet as we passed the little dressing chamber where we had found Olpey the first time. It is wrecked now, the fine dressing table hacked to pieces. Tremartin took us down a side corridor I would not have noticed, and down a narrow flight of stairs. I smelled stagnant water. I tried not to think of the sodden earth ever pressing in, as we descended another, shorter flight of steps and turned down a wide hall. The doors we passed now were metal. A few showed hammer marks, but they had withstood the siege of the treasure seekers.

As we passed an intersection, we heard a distant crack like lightning, and then men shouting in terror. The unnatural veins of light on the walls flickered and then went out. An instant later, men rushed past us, fleeing back the way we had come. A gush of water that damped us to the ankles followed them, spending itself as it spread. Then came a deep and ominous rumbling. "Come on!" Tremartin ordered us, and we followed, though I think we all knew we were running deeper into danger, not away from it.

We turned two more corners. The stone of the walls suddenly changed from immense gray blocks to a

smooth black stone with occasional veins of silver in it. We went down a long flight of shallow steps, and abruptly the corridor was wider and the ceiling higher, as if we had left behind the servants' area and entered the territory of the privileged. The wall niches had been plundered of their statues. I slipped in the damp on the floor. As I put my hand on a wall to catch myself, I suddenly glimpsed people swarming all around us. Their garb and demeanor were strange. It was a market day, rich with light and noise of conversation and the rich smells of baking. The life of a city swirled around me. In the next moment, Tremartin seized my arm and jerked me away from the wall. "Do not touch the black stone," he warned us. "It puts you in the ghosts' world. Come on. Follow me." In the distance, we saw the brighter flare of a fire gleaming, shaming the uneasily flickering light.

The fire was Retyo's torch. He was grimed from head to foot. Even when he saw us, he continued to scoop mud away from a door with a crude wooden paddle. The watery ooze was a constant flow down the hall; not even a dozen men could hope to keep up with it. If Olpey did not open the door soon, he would be trapped inside as the mud filled the corridor.

I stepped down into the shallow pit Retyo had been keeping clear. Heedless of the mud on him, heedless that my son and friend watched me, I embraced him. If I had had the time, I would have become what my husband had accused me of being. Perhaps, in spirit, I am already a faithless wife. I care little for that now. I have kept faith with my friends.

Our embrace was brief. We had little time. We called to Olpey through the doors, but he kept silent until he heard his little sisters weeping. Then he angrily bade us to go away. His mother begged him to come out, saying that the city was giving way and that the flowing mud would soon trap him. He retorted that he belonged here, that he had always lived here and here he would die. And all the while that we shouted and begged, Retyo grimly worked, scraping the advancing muck away from the doorsill. When our pleas did not work, Retyo and Tremartin attacked the door, but the stout wood would not give to boots or fists, and we had no tools. In a dull whisper, Tremartin said we must leave him. He wept as he spoke. The mud was flowing faster than both men could contain, and we had three other children to think of.

Chellia's voice rose in a shriek of denial, but was drowned by an echoing rumble behind us. Something big gave way. The flow of the muck doubled, for now it came from both directions. Tremartin lifted his torch. In both directions, the corridor ended in blackness. "Open the door, Olpey!" I begged him. "Or we all perish here, drowned in muck. Let us in, in Sa's name!"

I do not think he heeded my words. Rather it was Carlmin's voice, raised in a command in a language I've never heard, that finally won a reaction. We heard latches being worked, and then the door grated grudgingly outward through the muck. The lit chamber dazzled our eyes as we tumbled into it. Water and flowing muck tried to follow us onto the richly tiled floor, but Tremartin and Retyo dragged the door shut, though Retyo had to drop to his knees and push mud out of the way to do so. Mud-tinged water crept determinedly under the closed door.

The chamber was the best preserved that I had seen. We were all dazzled by the richness of the

chambers and the brief illusion of safety amidst the strangeness. Shelves of gleaming wood supported exquisite vases and small stone statues, intricate carvings and silver ornaments gone black with time. A little winding staircase led up and out of sight. Each step of it was lined with light. The contents of the room could have ransomed our entire company back into the Satrap's goodwill, for the objects were both fine and strange. Olpey stooped down protectively to roll back a carpet in danger of being overtaken by the ooze. It was supple in his hands, and as he disturbed the dust, bright colors peeped out. For a few moments, none of us spoke. As Olpey came to his feet and stood before us, I gasped. He wore a robe that rippled with colors when he moved. About his forehead he had bound a band of linked metal disks, and they seemed to glow with their own light. Chellia dared not embrace him. He blinked owlishly, and Chellia hesitantly asked her son if he knew her.

His reply came slowly. "I dreamed you once." Then, looking about the room, he said worriedly, "Or perhaps I have stepped into a dream. It is so hard to tell."

"He's been touching that black wall too much," Tremartin growled. "It wakes the ghosts and steals your mind. I saw a man two days ago. He was sitting with his back to the wall, his head leaned against it, smiling and gesturing and talking to people who weren't there."

Retyo nodded grimly. "Even without touching them, it takes a man's full will to keep the ghosts at bay after a time down here in the dark." Then, reluctantly, he added, "It may be too late to bring Olpey all the way back to us. But we can try. And we must all guard our minds as best we can, by talking to one another. And get the little ones out of here as quickly as we can."

I saw what he meant. Olpey had gone to a small table in a corner. A silver pot awaited beside a tiny silver cup. As we watched in silence, he poured nothing from the pot to the cup, and then quickly quaffed it. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and made a face, as if he had just drunk liquor too strong for him.

"If we're going to go, we must go now," Retyo added. He did not need to say, before it's too late. We were all thinking it.

But it was already too late. There was a steady seepage of water under the door, and when the men tried to open it, they could not budge it. Even when all the adults put our shoulders to it, it would not move. And then the lights began to flicker dimly.

Now the press of muck against the door grows heavier, so that the wood groans with it. I must be short. The staircase leads up into absolute darkness and the torches we have contrived from the articles in the room will not last long. Olpey has gone into a daze, and Carlmin is not much better. He barely responds to us with a mutter. The men will carry the boys, and Chellia will lead her two girls. I will carry our supply of torches. We will go as far as we can, hoping to discover a different way back to the dragon-woman chamber.

Day—I do not know

Year One of the Rain Wilds

So I head this account, for we have no concept of how much time has passed. For me, it seems years. I quiver, but I am not certain if it is from cold, or from striving to remain who I am. Who I was. My mind swims with the differences, and I could drown in them, if I let go. Yet if this account is to be of any use to others, I must find my discipline and put my thoughts into order.

As we ascended the stairs, the last breath of light in the chamber sighed out. Tremartin lifted our torch bravely but it barely illuminated his head and shoulders in the engulfing blackness. Never have I experienced darkness so absolute. Tremartin gripped Olpey's wrist and compelled the boy to follow him. Behind him went Retyo, carrying Carlmin, then Chellia leading her trembling daughters. I came last, burdened with the crude torches created from the furniture and hangings in the chamber. This last act had infuriated Olpey. He attacked Retyo and would not stop until Retyo struck him a hard open-handed blow to the face. It dazed the boy and horrified his mother and sisters, but he became compliant, if not cooperative.

The stair led to a servant's room. Doubtless the privileged noble in the comfortable chamber below would ring a bell, and his servants would spring to satisfy the master's wish. I saw wooden tubs, perhaps for washing, and glimpsed a worktable before Tremartin hurried us on. There was only one exit. Once outside, the corridor offered blackness in both directions.

The noise of the burning torch seemed almost loud; the only other sound was the dripping of water. I feared that silence. Music and ghostly voices lingered at the edge of it.

"The flame burns steadily," Chellia observed. "No drafts."

I had not thought of that, but she was right. "All that means is that there is a door between us and the outside." Even I doubted my words. "One we must find and open."

"Which way shall we go?" Tremartin asked all of us. I had long ago lost my bearings, so I kept silent.

"That way," Chellia answered. "I think it goes back the direction we came. Perhaps we will see something we recognize, or perhaps the light will come back."

I had no better suggestion to offer. They led and I followed. Each of them had someone to hold tight, to keep the ghosts of the city at bay. I had only the bundled torches in my arms. My friends became shadows between me and the unsteady torch light. If I looked up, the torch blinded me. Looking down, I saw a goblin's dance of shadows around my feet. Our hoarse breathing, the scuff of our feet on the damp stone, and the crackling of the torch were the only sounds I perceived at first. Then I began to hear other things, or to think that I did: the uneven drip of water and, once, a sliding sound as something in the distance gave way.

And music. It was music thin as watered ink, music muffled by thick stone and time, but it reached out to me. I was determined to take the men's advice and ignore it. To keep my thoughts my own, I began to hum an old Jamaillian lullaby. It was only when Chellia hissed, "Carillion!" at me that I realized my humming had become the haunting song from the stone. I stopped, biting my lip.

"Pass me another torch. We'd best light a fresh one before this one dies completely." When Tremartin spoke the words, I realized he'd spoken to me twice before. Dumbly I stepped forward, presenting my armload of makeshift torches. The first two he chose were scarves wrapped around table legs. They would not kindle at all. Whatever the scarves were woven from, they would not take the flame. The third was a cushion tied crudely to a chair leg. It burned smokily and with a terrible stench. Still, we could not be fussy, and, holding aloft the burning cushion and the dwindling torch, we moved slowly on. When the torch had burned so close to Tremartin's fingers that he had to let it fall, we had only the smoldering glow of the cushion to light our way. The darkness pressed closer than ever and the foul smell of the thing gave me a headache. I trudged along, remembering the annoying way the long coarse hair tangled on my rough-skinned fingers when I bundled the coiled hair in amongst the pith to make the cushion more springy and longer lasting.

Retyo shook me, hard, and then Carlmin came into my arms, sniffing. "Perhaps you should carry your son for a while," the sailor told me, without rebuke, as he stooped to gather the spare torches that I had dropped. Ahead of us in the dark, the rest of our party was shadows in shadow, with a red smear for our torch. I had just stopped in my tracks. If Retyo had not noted my absence, I wonder what would have happened to me. Even after we spoke, I felt as if I were two people.

"Thank you," I told him ashamedly.

"It's all right. Just stay close," he told me.

We went on. The punishing weight of Carlmin in my arms kept me focused. After a time, I set him down and made him walk beside me, but I think that was better for him. Having once been snared by the ghosts, I resolved to be more wary. Even so, odd bits of dreams, fancies, and voices talking in the distance drifted through my mind as I walked, eyes open, through the dark. We trudged on endlessly. Hunger and thirst made themselves known to us. The seeping runnels of water tasted bitter, but we drank sparingly from them anyway.

"I hate this city," I said to Carlmin. His little hand in mine was becoming chill as the buried city stole our body warmth from us. "It's full of traps and snares. Rooms full of mud waiting to crush us, and ghosts trying to steal our minds."

I had been speaking as much to myself as him. I didn't expect a response. But then he said slowly, "It wasn't built to be dark and empty."

“Perhaps not, but that is how it is now. And the ghosts of those who built it try to steal our minds from us.”

I heard more than saw his scowl. “Ghosts? Not ghosts. Not thieves.”

“What are they, then?” I asked him, mostly to keep him talking.

He was silent for a time. I listened to our footsteps and breathing. Then he said, “It’s not anyone. It’s their art.”

Art seemed a far and useless thing to me now. Once I had used it to justify my existence. Now it seemed an idleness and a ploy, something I did to conceal the insignificance of my daily life. The word almost shamed me.

“Art,” he repeated. He did not sound like a little boy as he went on, “Art is how we define and explain ourselves to ourselves. In this city, we decided that the daily life of the people was the art of the city. From year to year, the shaking of the earth increased, and the storms of dust and ash. We hid from it, closing our cities in and burrowing under the earth. And yet we knew that a time would come when we could not prevail against the earth itself. Some wished to leave, and we let them. No one was forced to stay. Our cities that had burgeoned with life faded to a trickle of souls. For a time, the earth calmed, with only a shiver now and then to remind us that our lives were daily granted to us and could be taken in a moment. But many of us decided that this was where we had lived, for generations. So this would be where we perished. Our individual lives, long as they were, would end here. But not our cities. No. Our cities would live on and recall us. Recall us . . . would call us home again, whenever anyone woke the echoes of us that we stored here. We’re all here, all our richness and complexity, all our joys and sorrows . . .” His voice drifted away in contemplation once more.

I felt chilled. “A magic that calls the ghosts back.”

“Not magic. Art.” He sounded annoyed.

Suddenly Retyo said unsteadily, “I keep hearing voices. Someone, talk to me.”

I put my hand on his arm. “I hear them, too. But they sound Jamaillian.”

With pounding hearts our little party hastened toward them. At the next juncture of corridors, we turned right and the voices came clearer. We shouted, and they shouted a reply. Through the dark, we heard their hurrying feet. They blessed our smoky red torch; theirs had burned out. There were four young men and two women from our Company. Frightened as they were, they still clutched armloads of plunder. We were overjoyed to find them, until they dashed our relief into despair. The passage to the outside world was blocked. They had been in the dragon-and-woman chamber when they heard heavy pounding from the rooms above. A great crash was followed by the slow groan of timbers giving way. As a

grinding noise grew in volume, the lights in the big chamber flickered and watery mud began to trickle down the grand staircase. They had immediately tried to escape, only to find the stairway blocked by collapsed masonry oozing mud.

Perhaps fifty folk had gathered in the dragon-and-woman chamber, drawn back there by the ominous sound. As the lights dimmed and then went out, some had gone one way and some another, seeking for escape. Even in this danger, their suspicion of one another as thieves had prevented them from joining forces. I was disgusted with them, and said as much. To my surprise, they sheepishly agreed. Then, for a time, we stood uselessly in the dark, listening to our torch burn away and wondering what to do.

When no one else spoke, I asked, "Do you know the way back to the dragon chamber?" I fought to speak steadily.

One man said he did.

"Then we must go back there. And gather all the people we can, and pool what we know of this maze. It is our only hope of finding a way out before our torches are gone. Otherwise, we may wander until we die."

Grim silence was their assent. The young man led our way back. As we passed plundered rooms, we gathered anything that might burn. Soon those who had joined us must abandon their plunder to carry more wood. I thought they would part from us before surrendering their treasure, but they decided to leave it in one of the rooms. They marked their claim upon the door, with threats against any thieves. I thought this foolishness, for I would have traded every jewel in the city simply to see honest daylight again. Then we went on.

We reached at last the dragon-woman chamber. We knew it more by its echoes than by the view that our failing torch offered. A small fire still smoldered there, with a few hapless folk gathered around it. We added fuel to wake it to flames. It drew others to join us, and we then raised a shout to summon any who might hear us. Soon our little bonfire lit a circle of some thirty muddy and weary people. The flames showed me frightened white faces like masks. Many of them still clutched bundles of plunder, and eyed one another suspiciously. That was almost more frightening than the slow creep of thick mud spreading from the staircase. Heavy and thick, it trickled inexorably down, and I knew that our gathering place would not long be a refuge from it.

We were a pitiful company. Some of these folk had been lords and ladies, and others pickpockets and whores, but in that place, we finally became equals and recognized one another for what we were: desperate people, dependent on each other. We had convened at the foot of the dragon statue. Now Retyo stepped up onto the dragon's tail and commanded us, "Hush! Listen!"

Voices ebbed away. We heard the crackling of our fire, and then the distant groans of wood and stone, and the drip and trickle of watery muck. They were terrifying sounds and I wondered why he had made

us listen to them. When he spoke, his human voice was welcome as it drowned out the threats of the straining walls.

“We have no time to waste in worrying about treasure or theft. Our lives are the only things we can hope to carry out of here, and only if we pool what we know, so we don’t waste time exploring corridors that lead nowhere. Are we together on that?”

A silence followed his words. Then a grimy, bearded man spoke. “My partners and I claimed the corridors from the west arch. We’ve been exploring them for days now. There are no stairs going up and the main corridor ends in collapse.”

It was dismal news but Retyo didn’t let us dwell on it.

“Well. Any others?”

There was some restless shifting.

Retyo’s voice was stern. “You’re still thinking of plunder and secrets. Let them go, or stay here with them. All I want is a way out. Now. We’re only interested in stairways leading up. Anyone know of any?”

Finally, a man spoke up reluctantly. “There were two from the east arch. But . . . well, a wall gave way when we opened a door. We can’t get to them any more.”

A deeper silence fell on us and the light from the fire seemed to dwindle.

When Retyo spoke again, his voice was impassive. “Well, that makes it simpler for us. There’s less to search. We’ll need two large search parties, one that can divide at each intersection. As each group goes, you’ll mark your path. On your way, enter every open chamber, and seek always for stairs leading up, for doubtless that is our only way out. Mark every path that you go by, so that you may return to us.” He cleared his throat. “I don’t need to warn you. If a door won’t open, leave it alone.

“This is a pact we must make: that whoever finds a way out will risk their lives again to return and guide the rest of us out. To those who go out, the pact we make is that we who stay here will try to keep this fire burning, so that if you do not find a way out, you can return here, to light and another attempt.” He looked around carefully at all the upturned faces. “To that end, every one of us will leave here whatever treasure we have found. To encourage any that find a way out to come back, for gain if not to keep faith with us.”

I would not have dared to test them that way. I saw what he did. The mounded hoard would give hope to those who must stay here and tend the fire, as well as encourage any who found an escape to return for the rest of us. To those who insisted they would take their treasure with them, Retyo simply said, “Do it.

But remember well what you choose. No one who stays here will owe you any help. Should you return and find the fire out and the rest of us gone, do not hope that we will return for you.”

Three men, heavily burdened, went aside to heatedly argue amongst themselves. Other people began to trickle back to the dragon pavilion, and were quickly informed of the pact. These folk, having already tried to find a way out, quickly agreed to the terms. Someone said that perhaps the rest of our Company might dig down to free us. A general silence greeted that thought as we all considered the many steps we had descended to reach this place, and all the mud and earth that stood between us and outside air. Then no one spoke of it again. When finally all agreed to abide by Retyo’s plan, we counted ourselves and found that we numbered fifty-two bedraggled and weary men, women, and children.

Two parties set out. Most of our firewood went with them, converted to torches. Before they left, we prayed together, but I doubted Sa could hear us, so deep beneath the ground and so far from sacred Jamaillia. I remained with my son, tending the fire. We took turns making short trips to nearby rooms, to drag back whatever might burn. Treasure seekers had already burned most of the close fuel, but still we found items ranging from massive tables it took eight of us to lift to broken bits of rotted chairs and tatters of curtain.

Most of the children had remained by the fire. In addition to my son and Chellia’s children, there were four other youngsters. We took it in turns to tell stories or sing songs to them, trying to keep their minds free of the ghosts that clustered closer as our small fire burned lower. We begrudged every stick of wood we fed to it.

Despite our efforts, the children fell silent one by one and slipped into the dreams of the buried city. I shook Carlmin and pinched him, but could not find the will to be cruel enough to rouse him. In truth, the ghosts plucked at my mind as well, until the distant conversations in an unknown language seemed more intelligible than the desperate mutterings of the other women. I dozed off, then snapped awake as the needs of the dying fire recalled me to my duty.

“Perhaps it’s kinder to let them dream themselves to death,” one of the women said as she helped me push one end of a heavy table into the fire. She took a deeper breath and added, “Perhaps we should all just go to the black wall and lean against it.”

The idea was more tempting than I liked to admit. Chellia returned from a wood-foraging effort. “I think we burn more in torch than we bring back as fuel,” she pointed out. “I’ll sit with the children for a while. See what you can find to burn.”

So I took her stub of torch and went off seeking firewood. By the time I returned with my pitiful scraps, a splinter group of one of the search parties had returned. They had swiftly exhausted their possibilities and their torches and returned hoping that others had had better luck.

When a second party returned shortly afterward, I felt more discouragement. They brought with them a

group of seventeen others whom they had discovered wandering in the labyrinth. The seventeen were the “owners” of that section of the city, and said that days ago they had discovered that the upper stories in that section were collapsed. In all the days they had explored it, always the paths had led outward and downward. Any further explorations in that direction would demand more torches than we presently had.

Our supply of wood for the bonfire was already dwindling, and we weren't finding much in the pillaged rooms that we could use for torches. Hunger and thirst were already pressing many of us. Too soon we would have to confront an even-more-daunting shortage. Once our fire failed, we would be plunged into total darkness. If I dared to think of it, my heart thundered and I felt faint. It was hard enough to hold myself aloof from the city's lingering “art.” Immersed in blackness, I knew I would give way to it.

I was not the only one who realized this. Tacitly, we let the fire die down and maintained it at a smaller size. The flow of mud down the grand stair brought damp that chilled the air. People huddled together for warmth as much as companionship. I dreaded the first touch of water against my feet. I wondered which would overtake me first: total darkness or rising muck.

I don't know how much time passed before the third party returned to us. They had found three staircases that led up. All were blocked before they reached the surface. Their corridor had become increasingly ruined the farther they had gone. Soon they had been splashing through shallow puddles and the smell of earth had grown strong. When their torches were nearly exhausted and the water was growing deeper and colder about their knees, they had returned. Retyo and Tremartin had been members of that party. I was selfishly glad to have him at my side again, even though it meant that our hope was now whittled to a single search party.

Retyo wished to shake Carlmin out of his daze, but I asked him, “To what end? That he might stare into the darkness and know despair? Let him dream, Retyo. He does not seem to be having bad dreams. If I can carry him out of here into daylight once more, than I will wake him and try to call him back to me. Until then, I will leave him in peace.” I sat, Retyo's arm around me, and thought silently of Petrus and my erstwhile husband Jathan. Well, he had made one wise decision. I felt oddly grateful to him that he had not allowed me to squander both our sons' lives. I hoped he and Petrus reached the coast safely and eventually returned to Jamaillia. At least one of my children might grow to adulthood.

And so we waited, our hopes dwindling as swiftly as our firewood. Our men had to venture farther and farther into the darkness in search of fuel. Finally Retyo lifted his voice. “Either they are still exploring, in the hope of finding a way out, or they have found a way out and are too fearful to return for us. In either way, we gain nothing more by sitting here. Let us go where they went, following their marks, while we still have light to see them. Either we will find the same escape route they did, or die together.”

We took every splinter of firewood. The more foolish among us gathered treasure to carry out. No one remonstrated with them, though many laughed bitterly at their hopeful greed. Retyo picked up Carlmin without a word; it moved me that my son was treasure to him. In truth, weakened as I was by hunger, I do not know if I could have carried my son. I do know that I would not have left him there. Tremartin

took Olpey slung across his shoulders. The boy was limp as a drowned thing. Drowned in art, I thought to myself. Drowned in memories of the city.

Of Chellia's two daughters, Piet still clung to wakefulness. She stumbled piteously along beside her mother. A young man named Sterren offered to carry Likea for Chellia. She was so grateful, she wept.

And so we trudged off. We had one torch to lead us, and one at the tail of our procession, so that no one would fall victim to the city's allure and be left behind. I walked in the middle of the company, and the darkness seemed to pluck and snag at my senses. There is little to say of that endless walk. We took no rest, for our fire ate our torches at an alarming rate. There was dark, and wet, the mutter of hungry and thirsty and weary folk all around me, and more darkness. I could not really see the halls we walked through, only the smudge of light that we followed. Bit by bit, I gave up my burden of wood to our light-bearers. The last time I moved forward to offer a new torch, I saw that the walls were of shining black stone veined with silver. They were elaborately decorated with silhouettes of people, done in some shining metal. Curious, I reached out a hand to touch one. I had not even realized that Retyo was at my side. He caught my wrist before I could touch the silhouette. "Don't," he warned me. "I brushed against one once. They leap into your mind if you touch them. Don't."

We followed the marks of the missing search party. They had marked off the dead ends and drawn arrows as they progressed, and so we trudged on, hoping. Then, to our horror, we caught up with them.

They were huddled in the middle of the corridor. Torches exhausted, they had halted there, paralyzed by the complete blackness, unable to either go on or to come back to us. Some were insensible. Others whimpered with joy at the sight of us and clustered around our torch as if light were life itself flowing back into them.

"Did you find a way out?" they asked us, as if they had forgotten that they were the searchers. When they finally understood that they had been our last hope, the life seemed to go out of them. "The corridor goes on and on," they said. "But we have not yet found one place where it leads upward. The chambers we have been able to enter are windowless. We think this part of the city has always been underground."

Grim words. Useless to dwell on them.

And so, we moved on together. We encountered few intersections, and when we did, we made our choice almost randomly. We no longer had torches to explore every possibility. At each intersection, the men in the lead debated and then chose. And we followed, but at each one we had to wonder if we had made a fatal error. Were we walking away from the passage that would have led to light and air? We gave up having a torch at the end of our procession, instead having folk hold hands and come behind us. Even so, too swiftly we had but three torches, and then two. A woman keened as the final torch was kindled. It did not burn well, or perhaps the dread of the dark was so strong in us that no light would have seemed sufficient. I know we crowded closer around our torch-bearer. The corridor had widened and the ceiling retreated. Every now and then, the torchlight would catch a silver silhouette or a vein of

silvery mineral in the polished black wall and it would blink beckoningly at me. Still we marched hopelessly on, hungry, thirsty, and ever more weary. We did not travel fast, but then, we did not know if we had any destination save death.

The lost spirits of the city plucked at me. Ever stronger grew the temptation to simply let go of my puny life and immerse myself in the beckoning remembrance of the city. Snatches of their music, conversation heard in a distant mutter, even, it seemed to me, whiffs of strange fragrances assailed me and tempted me. Well, was not that what Jathan had always warned me? That if I did not take a firmer grip on my life, my art would immerse and then devour me? But it was so hard to resist; it tugged at me like a hook in a fish's lip. It knew that it had me; it but waited for darkness to pull me in.

The torch burned lower with every step we took. Every step we took might be one more step in the wrong direction. The passage had widened around us into a hall; I could no longer see the gleaming black walls, but I could feel them commanding my attention. We passed a still fountain flanked by stone benches. We watched in vain for anything that might fuel our fire. Here, these elder folk had built for eternity, from stone and metal and fired clay. I knew that these rooms now were the repository of all they had been. They had believed they would always live here, that the waters of the fountains and the swirling beams of light would always dance at their touch. I knew that as clearly as I knew my own name. Like me, they had foolishly thought to live forever through their art. Now it was the only part of them that lingered still.

And in that moment, I knew my decision. It came to me so clearly that I am not sure it was solely my own. Did some long-dead artist reach out and tug at my sleeve, begging to be heard and seen one last time before we tumbled into the dark and silence that had consumed her city?

I put my hand on Retyo's arm. "I'm going to the wall now," I said simply. To his credit, he immediately knew what I meant.

"You would leave us?" he asked me piteously. "Not just me, but little Carlmin? You would drown yourself in dreams and leave me to face death alone?"

I stood on tiptoe to kiss his whiskery cheek and to press my lips briefly against my son's downy head. "I won't drown," I promised him. It suddenly seemed so simple. "I know how to swim in those waters. I have swum in them since my birth, and like a fish, I will follow them upstream to their source. And you will follow me. All of you."

"Carillion, I don't understand. Are you mad?"

"No. But I cannot explain. Only follow me, and trust, as I followed you when I walked out on the tree limb. I will feel the path surely; I won't let you fall."

Then I did the most scandalous thing I've ever done in my life. I took hold of my weary skirts, long

tattered halfway up my calf, and tore them free of my stained waistband, leaving only my pantaloons. I bundled them up and pushed them into his shocked hands. Around us, others had halted in their shadowy trudging to watch my strange performance. “Feed these to the torch, a bit at a time, to keep it alive. And follow me.”

“You will walk near naked before all of us?” he asked me in horror, as if it were of great concern.

I had to smile. “While my skirts burn, no one will notice the nakedness of her who stripped to give them light. And after they have burned, we will all be hidden in the darkness. Much like the art of these people.”

Then I walked away from him, into the engulfing darkness that framed us. I heard him shout to our torch bearer to halt, and I heard others say that I had gone mad. But I felt as if I had finally plunged myself into the river that all my life had tantalized my thirst. I went to the city’s wall willingly, opening my mind and heart to their art as I approached it, so that by the time I touched the cold stone, I was already walking among them, hearing their gossip and corner musicians and haggling.

It was a market square. As I touched the stone, it roared to life around me. Suddenly my mind perceived light where my closed eyes did not, and I smelled the cooking river fish on the smoky little braziers, and saw the skewers of dripping honeyed-fruit on the tray of a street hawker. Glazed lizards smoked on a low brazier. Children chased one another past me. People paraded the streets, dressed in gleaming fabrics that rippled color at their every step. And such people, people that befitted such a grand city! Some might have been Jamaillian, but amongst them moved others, tall and narrow, scaled like fish or with skin as bronzed as polished metal. Their eyes gleamed, too, silver and copper and gold. The ordinary folk made way for these exalted ones with joy rather than cold respect. Merchants stepped out from their stalls to offer them their best, and gawking children peeped from around their mothers’ trousered legs to glimpse their royalty passing. For such I was sure they were.

With an effort, I turned my eyes and my thoughts from this rich pageantry. I groped to recall whom and where I truly was. I dragged Carlmin and Retyo back into my awareness. Then, I deliberately looked around myself. Up and sky, I told myself. Up and sky, into the air. Blue sky. Trees.

Fingers lightly touching the wall, I moved forward.

Art is immersion, and good art is total immersion. Retyo was right. It sought to drown me. But Carlmin was right, too. There was no malice in the drowning, only the engulfing that art seeks. And I was an artist, and as a practitioner of that magic, I was accustomed to keeping my head even when the current ran strongest and swiftest.

Even so, it was all I could do to cling to my two words. Up and sky. I could not tell if my companions followed me or if they had abandoned me to my madness. Surely, Retyo would not. Surely, he would come behind me, bringing my son with him. Then, a moment later, the struggle to remember their names

became too great. Such names and such people had never existed in this city, and I was a citizen of the city now.

I strode through its busy market time. Around me people bought and sold exotic and fascinating merchandise. The colors, the sounds, even the smells tempted me to linger, but Up and Sky were what I clung to.

They were not a folk who cherished the outside world. Here they had built a hive, much of it underground, lit and warm, clean and immune to wind and storm and rain. They had brought inside it such creatures as appealed to them, flowering trees and caged songbirds and little glittering lizards tethered to potted bushes. Fish leapt and flashed in the fountains, but no dogs ran and barked, no birds flew overhead. Nothing was allowed that might make a mess. All was orderly and controlled, save for the flamboyant people who shouted and laughed and whistled in their precisely arranged streets.

Up and Sky, I told them. They did not hear me, of course. Their conversations buzzed uselessly around me, and even once I began to understand them, the things they spoke of did not concern me. What could I care about the politics of a queen a thousand years gone, for society weddings and clandestine affairs noisily gossiped about? Up and Sky, I breathed to myself, and slowly, slowly, the memories I sought began to flow to me. For there were others in this city for whom art was Up and Sky. There was a tower, an observatory. It rose above the river mists on foggy nights, and there learned men and women could study the stars and predict what effect they might have on mortals. I focused my mind on it, and soon “remembered” where it was. Sa blessed us all, in that it was not far from their marketplace.

I was halted once, for though my eyes told me that the way ahead of me was well lit and smoothly paved, my groping hands found a cold tumble of fallen stone and earth seeping water. A man shouted by my ear and restrained my hands. Dimly I recalled my other life. How strange to open my eyes to blackness and Retyo gripping my hands in his. Around me in the darkness, I heard people weeping or muttering despairingly that they followed a dreamer to their deaths. I could see nothing at all. The darkness was absolute. I had no idea how much time had passed, but I was suddenly aware of thirst that nearly choked me. Retyo’s hand still clutched at mine, and I knew then of the long chain of people, hands clasped, that trustingly followed me.

I croaked at them. “Don’t give up. I know the way. I do. Follow me.”

Later, Retyo would tell me that the words I uttered were in no tongue he had ever known, but my emphatic shout swayed him. I closed my eyes, and once more the city surged to life around me. Another way, there had to be another way to the observatory. I turned back to the populous corridors, but now as I passed the leaping fountains, they taunted me with their remembered water. The tantalizing memories of food smells lingered in the air and I felt my belly clench on itself in longing. But Up and Sky were my words, and I walked on, even as I became aware that moving my body was becoming more and more taxing to me. In another place, my tongue was leather in my mouth, my belly a cramped ball of pain. But here, I moved with the city, immersed in it. I understood now the words that flowed past me, I smelled

familiar foods, even knew all the words to the songs the corner minstrels were singing. I was home, and as the city as art flowed through me, I was home in a deeper way than ever Jamaillia had been home to me.

I found the other stairs that led to the observatory, the back stairs for the servants and cleaners. Up these stairs, humble folk carried couches and trays of wineglasses for nobles who wished to recline and gaze up at the stars. It was a humble wooden door. It swung open at my push. I heard a murmured gasp behind me, and then words of shouted praise that opened my eyes.

Daylight, thin and feeble, crept down to us. The winding stair was wooden, and rickety, but I decided we would trust it. "Up and Sky," I told my company as I set my foot to the first creaking step. It was a struggle to recall my precious words and speak them aloud. "Up and Sky." And they followed me.

As we ascended, the light came stronger, and we blinked like moles in that sweet dimness. When at last I reached the stone-floored upper chamber, I smiled so that my dry lips split.

The thick glass panels of the observatory windows had given way to cracks, followed by questing vines that faded to pale writhing things as they left the daylight behind. The light through the windows was greenish and thick, but it was light. The vines became our ladder to freedom. Many of us were weeping dry tears as we made that last painful climb. Unconscious children and dazed people were passed up and out to us. I took a limp Carlmin in my arms and held him in the light and fresh air.

There were rain flowers awaiting us, as if Sa wished us to know it was her will we survive here, enough rain flowers for each of us to wet our mouths and gather our senses. The wind seemed chill and we laughed joyfully to shiver in it. We stood on top of what had been the observatory, and I looked out with love over a land I had once known. My beautiful wide river valley was a swamp now, but it was still mine. The tower that had stood so high above all was only a mound now, but around us were the hunched and mossy remains of other structures, making the land firm and dry beneath our feet. There was not much dry land, less than a leffer, and yet after our months in the swamp, it seemed a grand estate. From atop it, we could look out over the slowly moving river where slanting sunlight fell on the chalky waters. My home had changed, but it was still mine.

Every one of us who left the dragon chamber emerged alive and intact. The city had swallowed us, taken us down and made us hers, and then released us, changed, in this kindlier place. Here, by virtue of the city buried beneath us, the ground is firmer. There are great, strong branched trees nearby, in which we can build a new Great Platform. There is even food here, a plentitude by Rain Wild standards. A sort of climbing vine festoons the trunks of the trees, and is heavy with pulpy fruit. I recall the same fruit sold in the vendor stalls of my city. It will sustain us. For now, we have all we need to survive this night. Tomorrow will be soon enough to think on the rest of it.

Day the 7th of Light and Air Year One of the Rain Wilds

It took us a full six days to hike downriver to our original settlement. Time in the light and air have restored most of us to our ordinary senses, though all of the children have a more detached air than they used to have. Nor do I think I am alone in my vivid dreams of life in the city. I welcome them now. The land here has changed vastly since the days of the city; once all was solid ground, and the river a silver shining thread. The land was restless in those days, too, and sometimes the river ran milky and acid. Now the trees have taken back the meadows and croplands, but still, I recognize some features of the land. I recognize, too, which trees are good for timber, which leaves make a pleasantly stimulating tea, which reeds can yield both paper and fabric when beaten to thread and pulp, and oh, so many other things. We will survive here. It will not be lush or easy living, but if we accept what the land offers us, it may be enough.

And that is well. I found my tree-city mostly deserted. After the disaster that sealed us in the city, most of the folk here gave up all for lost and fled. Of the treasure they collected and mounded on the Great Platform, they took only a pittance. Only a few people remained. Marthi and her husband and her son are among them. Marthi wept with joy at my return.

When I expressed my anger that the others could go on without her, she told me, quite seriously, that they had promised to send back help, and she was quite sure that they would keep their word, as their treasure is still here.

As for me, I found my own treasure. Petrus had remained here, after all. Jathan, stony-hearted man that he is, went on without the boy when Petrus had a last-moment change of heart and declared that he would wait here for his mother to return. I am glad that he did not wait for me in vain.

I was shocked that Marthi and her husband had remained, until she put in my arms her reason. Her child was born, and for his sake, they will dwell here. He is a lithe and lively little thing, but he is as scaled as a snake. In Jamaillia, he would be a freak. The Rain Wilds are where he belongs.

As we all do, now.

I think I was as shocked at the changes in Marthi as she was in the change in me. Around her neck and wrists where she had worn the jewelry from the city, tiny growths have erupted. When she stared at me, I thought it was because she could see how much the city memories had changed my soul. In reality, it was the beginning of feathery scales on my eyelids and around my lips that caught her eye. I have no looking glass, so I cannot say how pronounced they are. And I have only Retyo's word that the line of scarlet scaling down my spine is more attractive than repellent.

I see the scaling that has begun to show on the children, and in truth, I do not find it abhorrent. Almost all of us who went down into the city bear some sign of it, either a look behind the eyes, or a delicate tracing of scales, or perhaps a line of pebbled flesh along the jaw. The Rain Wilds have marked us as their own, and welcome us home.

