

Robin Hobb

## Renegade's Magic



ONE

Soldier's End

I never spoke up for myself at my court martial.

I stood in the box where they put me, and tried not to think of the agonizing bite of the leg irons around my calves. They were too small for a man of my flesh, and the cold iron bit deep into the meat of my legs, burning and numbing at the same time. At the moment, the pain mattered to me more than the outcome of the hearing. I already knew how it would end.

That pain is chiefly what I remember of my trial. It hazes my memories in red. A number of witnesses spoke against me. I recall their righteous voices as they detailed my crimes to the assembled judges. Rape. Murder. Necrophilia. Desecration of a graveyard. My outrage and horror at being accused of such things had been eroded by the utter hopelessness of my situation. Witness after witness spoke against me. Threads of rumour, hearsay from a dead man's lips, suspicions and circumstantial evidence were twisted together into a rope of evidence stout enough to hang me.

I think I know why Spink never addressed any questions directly to me. Lieutenant Spinrek, my friend since our Cavalla Academy days, was supposed to be defending me. I'd told him that I simply

wanted to plead guilty and get it over with. That had angered him. Perhaps that was why he didn't ask me to testify on my own behalf. He didn't trust me to tell the truth and deny all the charges. He feared I'd take the easy way out.

I would have.

I didn't fear the hangman's gibbet. It would be a quick end to a life corrupted by a foreign magic. Walk up the steps, put my head into the noose and step off into darkness. The weight of my falling body would probably have jerked my head right off. No dangle and strangle for me. Just a quick exit from an existence that was too tangled and spoiled to repair.

Whatever I might have said in my own defence would have made no difference. Wrongs had been done, ugly, evil things, and the citizens of Gettys were determined that someone had to pay for them. Gettys was a rough place to live, a settlement half military outpost and half penal colony on the easternmost boundary of the Kingdom of Gernia. Its citizens were no strangers to rape and murder. But the crimes I was accused of went beyond the spectrum of passion and violence into something darker, too dark even for Gettys to tolerate. Someone had to wear the villain's black cape and pay the toll for such transgressions, and who better than the solitary fat man who lived in the graveyard and was rumoured to have doings with the Specks?

So I was convicted. The cavalla officers who sat in judgment on me sentenced me to hang, and I accepted that. I had shamed my regiment. At that moment, my execution seemed the simplest escape from a life that had become the antithesis of every dream I'd ever had. I'd die and be done with disappointment and failure. Hearing my sentence was almost a relief.

But the magic that had poisoned my life was not about to let me go so easily.

Killing me was not enough for my accusers. Evil would be punished with as cruel and vicious a vengeance as they could imagine. Darkness would be balanced with darkness. When the second half of my sentence was pronounced, horror froze me. Before I ascended the gallows to make that final drop, I'd receive one thousand lashes.

I will always recall that stunned moment. The sentence went beyond execution, beyond punishment, to total destruction. As it stripped the flesh from my bones, it would strip away all dignity as well. No man, no matter what his courage, could grit his teeth and keep silent through a thousand lashes. They would mock and cheer me as I shrieked and begged. I would go to my death hating them and myself.

I'd been born to be a soldier. As the second son of a nobleman, the good god had decreed that I should be a soldier. Despite all that had befallen me, despite the foreign magic that had infected and poisoned me, despite my ejection from the King's Cavalla Academy, despite my father's disowning of me and the scorn of my fellows, I had done my best to serve my king as a soldier. This was what it had earned me. I would scream and weep and plead for mercy before folk who saw me only as a monster. The lash would strip my body naked of both clothing and flesh, exposing the sagging layers of fat that had been their first excuse to hate me. I would faint and be revived with a dash of vinegar on my back. I'd piss myself and dangle helplessly from my manacled wrists. I'd be a

corpse long before they hanged my remains. They knew it and so did I.

Even my corrupted and maimed life seemed a better choice than that death. The magic had sought to take me from my own people and use me as a tool against them. I'd fought it. But that final night in my cell, I knew the magic of the Speck folk offered me my only opportunity to save myself. When the magic tore down the walls of my prison, I took the opportunity. I escaped.

But neither the magic nor the good folk of Gettys were done with me. I think the magic knew that I'd given only lip service to my surrender to it. But it demanded all of me, my entire life, with no ties left to bind me to this place and this people, and what I had never given willingly, it now took from me.

As I fled from the fort, I encountered a troop of returning cavalla soldiers. I knew it was not my bad luck that put Captain Thayer in charge of the troop. It was the magic that put me in the hands of the man whose dead wife I had apparently despoiled. It had ended predictably. The tired frustrated men he led had rapidly degenerated into a mob. They had killed me in the streets, his soldiers holding me for him while he beat me to death. Justice and vengeance were sated on that dusty street in the small hours of the morning. Then, slaked with violence, they had dispersed to their homes and beds. They did not speak to one another of what they had done.

And in the hour before dawn broke over Gettys, a dead man fled the town.

TWO

Flight

The huge hooves of my big horse made a steady drumming as we fled. As we passed the last outlying farms of the scattered town that surrounded the King's fort at Gettys, I glanced back over my shoulder. The town was silent and still. The flames on the burning walls of the prison had subsided, but a dark smear of smoke still smudged the greying sky. The men who had fought Epiny's sabotage all night would be trudging home to their beds now. I kept my gaze fixed on the road before me and rode grimly on. Gettys had never been my home, but it was hard to leave it.

Ahead of me, light began to spill over the mountaintops. The sun would soon be up. I had to reach the shelter of the forest before men began to stir. There would be some early risers today, people anxious to secure good vantage points to watch my flogging and execution. My mouth twisted, imagining their disappointment when they heard of my death.

The King's Road, that ambitious undertaking of King Troven of Gernia, unfurled before me, dusty, rutted, pot-holed but arrow straight. I followed it. It led east, ever east. In the King's vision, it threaded through and over the Barrier Mountains and on, until it reached the far sea. In my king's dreams, the road would be a life-line of trade for land-locked Gernia. In reality, his road ended only a few miles past Gettys, its growth foundered at the edge of the vale where the Specks' ancestor trees grew. For years, the indigenous Specks had used their magic to incite fear and desolation in the road workers and halt the road's march. The spell the Specks cast varied from a deep terror that made men crawling cowards to a deep despair that sapped them of all will to work. Beyond the

end of the road, the forest awaited me.

On the road ahead of me, I saw what I'd been dreading. A horseman was coming towards me at a weary walk. The rider sat tall in his saddle, and that as much as the brave green of his jacket labelled him a cavalla soldier. I wondered where he was coming from and why he rode alone and if I'd have to kill him. As I drew closer, the rakish angle of his hat and the bright yellow scarf at his throat betrayed what he was; one of our scouts. My heart lifted a trifle. There was a chance he'd know nothing about the charges against me and my trial. The scouts were often out for weeks at a time. He showed no interest in me as our horses approached one another, and as I passed him, he did not even lift a hand in greeting.

I felt a pang of sharp regret as I went by. But for the magic, that could have been me. I recognized Tiber from the Cavalla Academy, but he did not know me. The magic had changed me from the slim and fit cadet I'd been. The fat, dishevelled trooper lolloping along on his ungainly mount was beneath the lieutenant's notice. At his current pace, it would be hours before he got to the town and heard of the mob that had killed me in the streets. I wondered if he'd think he had seen a ghost.

. Clove cantered laboriously on. The cross-breed draught horse was no one's idea of a mount built for either speed or endurance. But he was big, and for a man of my height and bulk, he was the only possible steed that could carry me comfortably. It came to me that this would be the last time I'd ride him; I couldn't take him ! into the forest with me. Pain gouged me again; he'd be one more beloved thing that I'd have to leave behind. He was running heavily now, nearly spent by our mad flight from Gettys.

Well outside Gettys, a wagon trail diverged from the King's Road and led up to the cemetery. Clove slowed as we approached it, and I abruptly changed my plans. The cabin I had called home for the past year was up that trail. Was there anything left there that I'd want to carry forward into my new life? Spink had removed my soldier-son journal and taken it to his home. I was grateful for that. My journal held the full tale of how the magic had entered my life and slowly taken it away from me. There might still be letters in my cabin, papers that could connect me to a past and a family that I needed to abandon. I would let nothing tie me to either Lord Burvelle; let my death shame no one except myself.

Clove slipped into his ponderous trot as he laboured up the hill. It had only been a couple of weeks since I'd last been here, but it felt like years. Grass was already sprouting on the many graves we had dug for the summer victims of the plague. The trench graves were still bare soil; they had been the last graves to be covered, when the plague was at its height and we grave-diggers could no longer keep up with the steady influx of bodies. They would be the last scars to heal.

I pulled Clove in outside my cabin. I dismounted cautiously, but felt a mere twinge of pain. Only yesterday the leg irons had cut into my tendons; the magic was healing me at a prodigious rate. My horse blew at me, shuddered his coat and then walked a few steps before dropping his head to graze. I hurried to my door. I'd quickly destroy any evidence of my former identity and then be on my way.

The window shutters were closed. I shut the door behind me as I stepped into the cabin. Then I recoiled in dismay as Kesey sat up

in my bed. My fellow grave-digger had been sleeping with a stocking cap on his bald head to keep the night chill away. He knuckled his eyes and gaped at me, his hanging jaw revealing gaps in his teeth. 'Nevare?' he protested. 'I thought you were going to—'

His words fumbled to a halt as he realized exactly how wrong it was for me to be standing in my cabin.

'Hang today,' I finished the sentence for him. 'Yes. A lot of people thought that.'

He stared at me, puzzled, but continued to sit in the bed. I decided he was no threat to me. We'd been friends for most of a year before everything went wrong. I hoped he would not judge it his duty to interfere with my escape. Casually, I walked past him to the shelf where I'd kept my personal possessions. As Spink had promised, my soldier-son journal was gone. A wave of relief washed through me. Epiny and Spink would know best how to dispose of those incriminating and accusatory pages. I felt along the shelf to be sure that no letter or scrap of paper had been missed. No. But my sling was there, the leather straps wrapped around the cup. I put it in my pocket. It might be useful.

The disreputable long gun I'd been issued when I first arrived

at Gettys still rested on its rack. The rattley weapon with the pitted barrel had never been reliable. Even if it had been sound, it would soon have been useless when I'd expended the small supply of powder and ball I had. Leave it. But my sword was another matter. The sheathed blade still hung from its hook. I was reaching for it when Kesey demanded, 'What happened?'

'It's a long story. Are you sure you want to know?'

'Well, of course I do! I thought you were going to be lashed to pieces and then hanged today!'

I found myself grinning. 'And you couldn't even get out of bed to come to my hanging. A fine friend you are!'

He smiled back uncertainly. It wasn't a pretty sight, but I welcomed it. 'I didn't want to see it, Nevare. Couldn't face it. Bad enough that the new commander ordered me to live out here and .keep an eye on the cemetery because you were in prison. Worse to watch a friend die, and know that I'd probably meet my own end out here. Every cemetery sentry we've ever had has met a bad end. But how'd you get out of it? I don't understand.'

'I escaped, Kesey. Speck magic freed me. The roots of a tree tore the stone walls of my dungeon apart, and I crawled out through the opening. I nearly made it out of Gettys. I made it past the gates of the fort. I thought I was a free man. But then I met a troop of soldiers coming back from the road's end. And who should be in charge of them but Captain Thayer himself.'

Kesey was spellbound, his eyes as round as bowls. 'But it was his wife—' he began, and I nodded.

'They found Carsina's body in my bed. You know, if not for that, I think the judges might have realized there was very little to link me to Fala's death. But Carsina's body in my bed was just too

much for them. I doubt that even one ever considered that I might have been trying to save her.

'You do know I didn't do any of those things, don't you, Kesey?'

The older man licked his lips. He looked uncertain. 'I didn't want to believe any of that about you, Nevare. None of it fit with anything Ebrooks and I had ever seen of you. You were fat and a loner and hardly ever had a drink with us, and Ebrooks and I could see you were sliding towards the Speck way. You wouldn't have been the first to go native.

'But we never saw nothing mean in you. You weren't vicious. When you talked soldiering with us, seemed like you meant it. And no one ever worked harder out here than you did. But someone did those things, and there you were, right where they happened. Everybody else seemed so certain. They made me feel a fool for not believing you done it. And at the trial, when I tried to say that you'd always been a stand-up fellow to me, well, Ebrooks shoved me and told me to shut up. Told me I'd only get myself a beating trying to speak up for you, and do you no good at all. So, I kept quiet. I'm sorry, Nevare. You deserved better.'

I gritted my teeth, and then let my anger go with a sigh. 'It's all right, Kesey. Ebrooks was right. You couldn't have helped me.'

I reached for my sword. But as my hand came close to the hilt, I felt an odd tingling. It was an unpleasant warning, as if I'd just set my hand on a hive of bees and felt the buzzing of the warriors inside. I drew my hand back and wiped it roughly down the front of my shirt, puzzled.

'But you escaped, right? So me keeping quiet, it didn't do you no harm, right? And I'm not going to try to stop you now. I'm not even going to tell anyone that you come this way.'

There was a note of fear in his voice that wrung my heart. I met his eyes. 'I told you, Kesey. It's all right. And no one will be asking you if I came this way, because I met Captain Thayer and his men as I was leaving town. And they killed me.'

He stared at me. 'What? But you—'

I stepped forward quickly. He flinched from my touch, but I set my hand to his forehead as he cringed away. I put my heart in my words. I wanted to protect him, and this was the only way to do it. 'You're having a dream, Kesey. It's just a dream. You'll hear about my death next time you go to town. Captain Thayer caught me escaping and beat me to death with his own hands. His wife is avenged. There were a dozen witnesses. It's over. Ebrooks was there. He might even tell you about it. He took my body and secretly buried it. He did the best by me he could. And you, you had a dream of me escaping. It comforted you. Because you knew that if you could have helped me, you would have. And you bear no guilt for my death. All of this was just a dream. You're asleep and dreaming.'

As I'd been speaking, I'd gently pushed Kesey supine. His eyelids shut and his mouth sagged open. The deep breathing of sleep sighed

from his lungs and in again. He slept. I heaved a sigh. He'd share the same false memories I'd left with the mob that had surrounded me. Even my best friend Spink would recall that I'd been beaten to death in the streets and he'd been powerless to stop it. Amzil, the only woman who'd ever looked past my fat and unlovely body to love me, would believe the same. They'd bear that tale home to

my cousin Epiny, and she would believe it. I hoped that they would not mourn me too sharply or for too long. I wondered briefly how they would break the news to my sister, and if my father would care when he heard it. Then I resolutely turned away from that life. It was gone, over, finished.

Once I'd been tall and strong and golden, a new noble's soldier son, with a future full of promise. It has all seemed so clearly mapped for me. I'd attend the Academy, enter the cavalla as an officer, distinguish myself in the King's service, marry the lovely Carsina, have a fulfilling career full of adventure and valour, and eventually retire to my brother's estate to live out my declining years. If only I'd never been infected with the Speck magic, it would all have come true.

Kesey snorted and rolled over. I sighed. I'd best be gone. As soon as the news of my death spread, someone would ride out to tell him. I didn't want to expend any more magic; I already felt the aching pangs of hunger that using magic brought on. As soon as I had the thought, my stomach growled furiously. I rummaged hastily through the food cupboard but all the food looked unappetizing, dry and old. I longed for sweet berries warmed by the sun, earthy rich mushrooms, the spicy water plant leaves that Olikea had fed me the last time I'd seen her, and tender crisp roots. My mouth ran at the thought of such foods. Instead, I glumly took two rounds of hardtack from the shelf. I took a large bite and, still chewing the loathsome stuff, reached for my sword. It was time to be gone from here.

The sword burned me. It all but jumped from my hand when I let go of the hilt, as if magnetically repelled from me, and clattered to the floor. I choked on the mouthful of dry crumbs and sank to the floor, gasping and gripping the wrist of my offended hand. When I looked at my palm, it was as red as if I'd gripped a nettle. I shook my hand and wiped it against my trouser leg, trying to be free of the sensation. It didn't pass. The truth came to me. I had given myself to the magic. Cold iron was mine no longer.

I stood slowly, backing away from my fallen sword and a truth I was reluctant to face. My heart was hammering in my chest. I'd go weaponless into the forest. Iron and the technology that it made possible was mine no longer. I shook my head like a dog shaking off water. I wouldn't think about it just now. I couldn't quite grasp all it would mean, and at that moment I didn't want to.

I gave a final glance around the cabin, realizing belatedly that I'd enjoyed living here, on my own, having things my own way. It was the only time in my life I'd had such freedom. I'd gone from my father's house straight to the Academy, and then returned to his domain. Only here had I ever lived as my own master. When I left here, I'd begin a life not as a free man, but as a servant to a foreign magic that I neither understood nor wanted.

But I'd still be alive. And the people I loved would go on with their lives. I'd had a glimpse, when the mob seized me, of a far worse future, a future in which Amzil's best hope was that the gang rape would leave her alive and Spink's that he would survive having his troops turn on him. My own death paled in comparison. No. I'd made the best choice, for all of us. Now it was up to me to move on, keeping whatever shreds of my integrity remained. I wished I wasn't going into my new life so empty-handed. I looked longingly at my knife and my axe. No. Iron was not my friend any more. But my winter blanket, folded on the shelf, I would take. One final glance around the cabin, and then I left, shutting the

door firmly behind me on Kesey's rattling snore.

As I came out Clove lifted his head and gave me a rebuking stare. Why hadn't I freed him from his harness to graze? I glanced at the sun. I'd leave him here, I decided. It was believable that if the big horse had got loose in Gettys, he'd come back to his stall. I couldn't take off his tack; someone would wonder who had done that for him. I hoped whoever took him over would treat him well. 'Stay here, old chum. Kesey will look after you. Or someone will.' I gave him a pat on the shoulder and left him there.

I walked across the cemetery grounds that I knew so well. I passed the butchered remains of my hedge. I shuddered as I recalled it as I'd last seen it, with the bodies jerking and twitching as the rootlets thrust into them seeking nutrients and for a moment I was plunged back into that torchlit night.

It was rare but not unknown for a person who died of Speck plague to be a 'walker'. One of the doctors at Gettys believed that such persons fell into a deep coma that mimicked death, to rouse hours later for a final attempt at life. Few survived. The other doctor, an aficionado of the superstitions and psychic phenomena that so fascinated our Queen, believed that such 'walkers' were not truly the folk who had died, but only bodies reanimated by magic to bring messages to the living from the beyond. Having been a 'walker' myself, I had my own opinions. In my year at the King's Cavalla Academy, I'd contracted the Speck plague just as my fellow cadets had. Once I'd 'died', I'd found myself in the Speck's spirit world. There I'd done battle with my 'Speck self and Tree Woman, only returning to life after I had defeated them.

My erstwhile fiancée Carsina had also been a 'walker'. In my final night as cemetery guard she had left her coffin and come to beg my forgiveness before she could rest in death. I'd wanted to save her. I'd left my cabin, intending to ride to town and get help. Instead, I'd seen an unimaginable sight. Other plague victims had risen and sought out the trees I'd inadvertently planted. I'd known they were kaembra trees, the same sort of trees that the Specks claimed as their ancestor trees. I'd known that when I'd seen the poles leaf out. How could I not have realized the danger? Had the magic blinded me to it?

Each 'walker' had sought out a tree, had sat down, backs to the trunks, and then cried out in agony as the hungry little trees had sent rootlets thrusting into flesh. I'd never forget what I'd seen that night. A boy had cried out wildly, his head and arms and legs jerking spasmodically as the tree claimed his flesh and bound his body tightly to its trunk. I'd been unable to do anything for him. But the worst had been the woman who cried out for help and held her hands out beseechingly. I had clasped those hands and tried with all my might to pull her back, not from death, but from an extended life that made no sense to a Gernian soul.

I'd failed.

I remembered well which tree had seized her so irrevocably, thrusting roots into her back, roots that would burst into a network of spreading filaments inside her, sucking into the young trees not just the nutrients in her body but her spirit as well. That was how the Specks created their ancestor trees. Those the magic found worthy were rewarded with such trees.

As I passed the hacked stump of the woman's tree, I noticed that



it had already sent up a questing new sprout. On the stump next to hers, a red-wattled croaker bird perched, watching me intently. It opened its wings and thrust its ugly head at me. Its wattles shook as it croaked accusingly at me. I shuddered. Croaker birds were the emblem of Orandula, the old god of death and of balances. I did not wish another encounter with him. As I fled from it, I realized that Clove was following me. Well, he'd soon turn back. I entered the forest and felt it take me in. It was like a curtain swishing closed behind me, signalling that the first act of my life was over.

This part of the forest was young, a regrowth after a fire. Occasionally, I passed a blackened stump overgrown with moss and ferns, or strode through the shade of a scorched giant who had survived that blaze. Bushes and wildflowers grew here in the sunlight that filtered down between the trees. Birds sang and darted from branch to branch in the early morning light. The sweet scents of the forest rose up to surround me. Tension drained from me. For a time I walked without thought, listening to Clove's hooves thud dully on the deep forest soil as he trailed after me.

It was a pleasant summer day. I passed two white butterflies dancing together above a small patch of wildflowers. Beyond them, I came to a mounded tangle of blackberry vines competing for light tea small clearing. I stopped and gathered a double handful of the bash, black summer fruit. They burst in my fingers and stained my hands as I picked them. I filled my mouth with them, rejoicing in the sweetness that was both taste and aroma. I ground the tiny seeds between my back teeth, savouring them. Fruit such as this could take the edge off my hunger, but it could not satisfy me. No. As the magic had come to dominate my flesh and blood, I had learned to crave the foods that fed it. That was what I wanted now. I left the berry patch, hastening uphill.

The burnt-over forest gave way to ancient forest with shocking suddenness. I paused at the edge, standing in the dappling sunlight among the younger trees and looked into a dark cavern. The roof was a thick mass of intertwining branches. Ranks and columns of immense trunks marched off into the dimness. The dense overhead canopy absorbed and defeated the summer sunlight. There was very little underbrush. Thick moss floored the world, indented with a seemingly random pattern of animal trails.

I sighed and glanced back at the big horse. This is where we part company, my friend,' I told Clove. 'Go back to the graveyard.'

He regarded me with a mixture of curiosity and annoyance. 'Go home,' I told him. He flicked his ears and swished his badly bobbed tail. I sighed. Soon enough, he'd figure it out for himself. I turned and walked away from him.

He followed me for a short way. I didn't look back at him or speak to him. That was harder than I thought it would be. I tried not to listen for the dull thud of his hooves. He'd go back to where the grazing was good. Kesey would take him in and use him to pull the corpse cart. He'd be fine. Better off than me. At least he'd know what the world expected of him.

There were no human pathways in this part of the forest. I felt as if I walked through an alien abode, richly carpeted in thick green, beneath an elaborate ceiling of translucent green mosaic, all supported by towering columns of rich wood. I was a tiny figurine set down in a giant's home. I was too small to matter here; the quiet alone was enough to muffle me out of existence.

But as I hiked on, the quiet reinterpreted itself to me. The noises of men were not here, but it was not silent. I became more aware of the birds that flitted and sang challenges to one another over my head. I heard the sharp warning thud of his hind feet and the muffled scamper of a startled hare. A deer regarded me with wide eyes and spread ears as I passed its resting place. I heard its soft snuff as I passed it.

The day was warm and humid beneath the trees. I paused to unbutton my jacket and the top two buttons of my shirt. It was not too long before I was carrying my uniform jacket slung over my shoulder. Amzil had pieced the cavalla-green coat together for me from several old uniforms to fit my enlarged body. One of the tribulations of my magic-induced weight was that I was constantly uncomfortable in my clothing. Trousers had to be fastened under my gut rather than round my waist. Collars, cuffs and sleeves chafed me. Socks stretched out and puddled around my ankles, and wore out swiftly at the heel from my excessive weight. Even boots and shoes were a difficulty. I'd gained size all over my body, even down to my feet. Right now, my clothing hung slightly loose on me. I'd

used a lot of magic last night, and lost bulk proportionately. For a moment I considered disrobing and simply going naked as a Speck, but I had not left civilization quite that far behind.

My way led me ever upwards, over the gently rising foothills. Ahead loomed the densely-forested Barrier Mountains and the elusive Speck people who roamed them. I'd been told that the Specks had decided to retreat early to their winter grounds high in the mountains. I'd seek them there. They were not just my last possible refuge. That was also what the magic commanded me to do. I'd resisted it to no avail. Now I would go to it, and try to discover what it wanted of me. Was there any way to satisfy it, any way to win free of it and resume a life of my own choosing? I doubted it, but I would find out.

The magic had infected me when I was fifteen. I had, I thought, been a good son, obedient, hard-working, courteous and respectful. But my father, unbeknownst to me, had been looking for that spark of defiance, that insistence on following my own path that he believed was the hallmark of a good officer. He'd decided to place me in a position where ultimately I must rebel against the authority over me. He had given me over to a Kidona plainsman, a 'respected enemy' from the days when the King's cavalla had battled the former occupants of the Midlands. He told me that Dewara would instruct me in Kidona survival and fighting tactics. Instead, he had terrorized me, starved me, notched my ear and then, just when I'd found the will to defy both him and my father, endeavoured to befriend me. I could never look back on those days without wondering what he had done to my thinking. Only recently had I begun to see the parallels between how Dewara had broken me and brought me into his world and the way the Academy harassed and overburdened the new cadets to press them into a military mould. At the end of my time with Dewara, he had tried to induct me into the Kidona magic. He had both succeeded and failed.

I had crossed into the Kidona spirit world to do battle with their ancient enemy. Instead, Tree Woman had captured me and claimed me. From that day forth, the magic had taken over my life. It had dragged, spurred and coerced me to the frontier. In Gettys, I'd made one last attempt to claim my life as my own. I'd signed my enlistment papers as Nevare Burv, and taken up the only position the regiment offered, guarding the cemetery. Even so, I'd put my heart

into my task, doing all I could to see that our dead were buried respectfully and left undisturbed. I'd begun to have a life again;

Ebrooks and Kesey had become my friends, and Spink, my cousin's husband and my best friend from our Academy days had renewed our friendship. Amzil had come to live in Gettys; I'd dared to hope she felt something for me. I had begun to make something of myself, even believing I could provide a refuge for my sister from my father's tyranny.

That life did not serve the magic's purpose for me, and as Scout Hitch had once warned me, the magic would not tolerate anything that ran counter to its plan for me. It had destroyed Hitch's life to make him its servant. I knew I had to choose death or serve the magic. Before Hitch died, he'd confessed all to me. Under the magic's influence, he'd killed Fala, one of Sarla Moggam's working girls, and left the evidence that would implicate me. He'd done that, despite being my friend, despite being an otherwise upright man. I still could not imagine Hitch strangling poor Fala, let alone betraying me so treacherously. But he had.

I didn't want to discover what the magic could make me do if I continued to defy it.

THREE

Lisana

My path led me ever upward. Somewhere, I knew, the sun shone and the wind stirred lightly in a soft summer day. But here, beneath the trees, a soft green twilight reigned and the air was still. My footfalls were deadened by decades of leaf mould. Great trees, roots braced and humped against the rise of the hills, surrounded and shaded me, making the forest a many-pillared palace. Sweat ran down my face and my back. The calves of my legs ached from the steady climb.

And I was still hungry.

I'd had little to eat for the last ten days. My jail rations had been bread and water and a disgusting greyish pudding that was supposed to be porridge. Epiny had smuggled a tiny fruit tart to me, precious because it contained berries picked in this forest. When Tree Woman had sent her roots to break the walls of my cell, she had brought me the mushrooms that had given me strength for my magic. Those, and the hard tack and the handful of berries I'd picked in the morning were all I'd had. Belatedly, I recalled that Amzil had told me she'd packed food in my panniers. Well, that last act of affection was gone now, carried off by Clove with my saddle. Strange to tell, the loss of that food did not distress me. I was hungry for the foods that would feed my magic rather than the ones that sustained my flesh.

I had early realized that restricting my food and even fasting wrought little noticeable change in me. The only thing that consumed my fat was using the magic. In the last day and night, I'd used the magic more than I ever had before, and my appetite for the foods that would feed the magic now raged proportionately.

'I'm hungry,' I said aloud to the forest. I half-expected some sort of response: that mushrooms would spring up underfoot or a bush of berries would sprout nearby. But there was nothing. I heaved a sigh of disappointment, then paused and took a deeper lungful of air, breathing in through my nose. There. The faintest scent hung in the still forest air - I followed it, snuffing like a hound on a trail and came to a bank of deep blue flowers nestled against the under-

side of a fallen log. I could not recall that Olikea had ever fed me anything like them, but the fragrance from them enflamed my appetite. I lowered myself to the forest floor to sit beside them. What was I doing, thinking of eating something I'd never even seen before? I could poison myself. I picked one, smelled it, and then tasted it. It was like eating perfume, and the flavour was too strong to be appetizing. I chose a leaf instead. It was fat-stemmed and fuzzy-edged. Cautiously, I put it to my tongue. There was a tang to the foliage that counteracted the sweetness of the flowers. I picked and ate a handful of the leaves, and then abruptly felt that although I was still hungry, I'd had enough of them. Was this the magic finally speaking clearly to me, as Tree Woman had told me it would? I couldn't decide if that were true or if I were deceiving myself. With a grunt, I heaved myself to my feet and walked on. I reached the rounded top of a hill and the walking became easier.

I found and ate a cluster of bright yellow mushrooms growing in the moss on top of a tree root. I came to a place where parasitic vines had attacked on older tree. The tree was losing its leaves and patches of its bark had fallen away, revealing the holes and tracks of insects intent on rendering it down into soil. But the vine that cloaked the dying tree was lush with thick foliage and large teardrop-shaped fruit, so purple they shone black in the filtered sunlight. Some of the fruit was so ripe that it had cracked and lightly fermented. Purple juice dripped from them. Bees and other insects hummed ecstatically round the vine, while over my head I could hear the competitive twittering of small birds. Some of the fruit had fallen to the forest floor. There was a busy trail of large black ants carrying off gobbets of fruit.

The other happy feasters convinced me that the fruit was edible. I picked one, sniffed it and tried a small bite. It was so ripe that juice and soft flesh gushed into my mouth as my teeth pierced the skin. It was far sweeter than a sun-ripened plum, almost sickeningly so. Then the flavour of it flooded my mouth and I nearly swooned with delight. I discarded the large round seed and reached for another.

I don't know how many I ate. When I finally stopped, the skin of my belly was tight against the waistband of my trousers, and my arms were sticky to the elbow with juice. I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand and came back a little to myself. The pile of seeds at my feet numbered at least a score. Instead of feeling queasy, I felt only blissful satiation.

As I walked slowly away, I tingled with well-being. I became aware of the music of the forest, a symphony made by the subtle buzzing of insects, the calls of birds, the flutter of leaves in an unseen breeze over head. Even my deadened footfalls were a part of the whole. It was not a symphony of sound alone. The scents of loam and moss, leaf and fruit, meshed with the sounds I heard, and the physical sensations of walking, of brushing past a low branch or sinking deep into moss. The muted colours in the gentled light were a part of it. It was all an amazing whole, an experience that involved me more completely than anything I'd ever felt in my life.

'I'm drunk,' I said aloud, and even those words intertwined with the sudden spiralling fall of a leaf and the soft snag of a cobweb across my face at the same moment. 'No. Not drunk. But intoxicated.'

I liked speaking aloud in the forest, for it made me more intimately a part of it. I walked on, marvelling at everything, and after a time, I began to sing wordlessly, letting my voice be guided by

all my senses. I spread wide my arms, heedless that my coat fell to the forest floor. I walked away from it, singing with my whole heart, with every bit of breath I could draw into my lungs. I was transported with joy simply to be me travelling into the depths of the forest.

Simply to be who I was.

Who was I?

The question was like recalling a forgotten errand. I was someone, going somewhere, on my way to do something. My steps slowed, and for a long moment I was intrigued with the idea. I was centred and certain, confident of myself, but I could not quite define with a name who I was.

Nevare. Soldier's Boy. Like a slow waltz of two halves that have

joined to be a whole and then spin apart again, I felt that sundering. And with Soldier's Boy's departure from my awareness, I suddenly felt the gap he left in me. I had been a whole creature, peacefully content in that wholeness. And now I was less than whole, and I thought I could understand how an amputee felt. My keen pleasure in the forest dwindled to my ordinary awareness of its pleasant smells and gentle light. The communion I had felt with it became a handful of threads rather than a complex network. I could not recall the song I had been singing. I'd lost track of my place in this world. I was diminished.

I blinked slowly and looked around me, gradually becoming aware that this part of the forest was familiar. If I climbed the ridge before me and veered to the east, I'd come to Tree Woman's stump. I suddenly knew that was the destination I'd been walking towards all day. Home, I thought, and that was like an echo of someone else's thought. Soldier's Boy considered her his home. I wasn't sure what Nevare considered her.

When I'd first encountered Tree Woman in Dewara's spirit world I saw a fat old woman with grey hair leaning up against a tree instead of the warrior-guardian I'd expected to battle. Challenging her would have gone against everything my father had ever taught his soldier son about chivalry. And so I had hesitated, and spoken to her, and before I recognized her power, she had defeated me and made me hers.

I became her apprentice mage. And then her lover.

My heart remembered those days with her. My head did not. My head had gone to the Cavalla Academy, taken courses, made friends and done all that a loyal soldier son should. And when the opportunity came for me to challenge Tree Woman as an adversary, I had not hesitated. I'd destroyed that other self who had been her acolyte, taking him back inside me. And then I'd done my best to kill her as well.

Yet at both those tasks, I'd failed. The Speck self I'd taken back inside me lurked there still, like a speckled trout in the deep shade under a grassy riverbank. From time to time I glimpsed him, but never could I seize and hold him. And the Tree Woman I'd slain? I'd only partially severed her trunk with a cavalla sword. That deed, impossible in what I considered the real world, had left its evidence here. Upon the ridge ahead of me was the stump of her tree. The rusting blade of my sword was still embedded in it. I'd toppled her. But I had not severed her trunk completely. The ruin of her tree

sprawled on the mossy hillside, in the swathe of sunlight that now broke through the canopy of the forest there.

But she was not dead. From the fallen trunk, a new young tree was rising. And near her stump, I'd encountered her ghostly form. My adversary was still as alive as I was and the hidden Speck self inside me loved her still.

As Tree Woman, she was an enemy to my people. She was frank in her hope that something I would do would turn back the tide of 'intruders' and send the Gernians away forever from the forest and mountain world of the Specks. At her behest, Speck plague had been spread throughout Gernia and still continued to afflict my country. Thousands had sickened and died. The King's great project, his road to the east, had come to a standstill. By all I had ever been taught, I should hate her as my enemy.

But I loved her. And I knew that I loved her with a fierce tenderness unlike anything I'd ever felt for any other woman. I had no conscious reason to feel that passion toward her, but feel it I did.

I toiled up the last steep stretch and reached the ridge. I hurried towards her, the anticipation of my hidden self rising with every step I took. But as I approached her stump, I halted, dismayed.

The stump of her tree had silvered and deadened. Even the unsevered piece that had bent with her falling trunk and kept the branches of it alive had gone grey and dull. I could not see her; I could not feel her. The young tree, a branch that had begun to grow upright after her trunk had fallen, still stood, but barely.

I waded through her fallen and dead branches to reach the supine trunk and the small tree that grew from it. When Tree Woman had crashed to the earth, her passing had torn a rent in the canopy overhead. Light poured down in straight yellow shafts piercing the usual dimness of the forest and illuminating the small tree. When I fingered the little tree's green leaves, they were flaccid and limp. A few leaves at the ends of the branches had begun to brown at the edges. The little tree was dying. I put my hands on her trunk. My two hands could just span its diameter. Once before, in a dream, I had touched this little tree and felt how it surged with her life and being. Now I felt only dry, sun-warmed bark under my hands.

'Lisana,' I prayed softly. I called her by her true name and held my breath waiting for some response. I felt nothing.

A wandering breeze ventured in through the hole in the forest's roof. It stirred my hair and made pollen dance in the shaft of light where I stood.

'Lisana, please,' I begged. 'What happened? Why is your tree dying?'

The answer came to me as clearly as if she had spoken. Last night, I'd been able to escape my cell because the roots of a tree had broken through the mortar and stones. As I'd climbed those roots to escape, I'd felt Lisana's presence there. Had the roots of her tree grown all that way, from here to Gettys, and then torn down the walls to free me? It was impossible.

All magic was impossible.

And all magic had a price. Only a few days ago, Epiny had stood

here by Lisana's stump, and they had summoned me in a dream to join them. In hindsight, Lisana had been more ephemeral than usual. And more irritable. She'd been spiteful towards Epiny and merciless towards me. I tried to recall how her little tree had looked then. The leaves had been drooping, but not alarmingly so. It had been a hot day.

Even then, her roots must have been working their way, through clay and sand, rock and soil, to reach Gettys and the prison where I was held. Even then, she had been employing all the magic at her command and all her physical resources to reach me. I should have guessed that something of that sort was happening when I could barely perceive her in my cell. Why had she done it? Had the magic forced her to sacrifice her life to save mine? Or had that offering been her own?

I pressed my brow against the slender trunk. I could not feel her at all and suspected that the amount of life remaining in this little tree was not enough to sustain her being. She was gone, and it tormented me that I could remember we had shared a love but could recall no specific memory, no detail of how it had begun. I had dreamed of our trysts together, but like most dreams, I awoke grasping only bright fragments of memory. Such gossamer glimpses were too frail to survive harsh daylight. They did not feel like true memories to me, yet the emotions I felt were unequivocally mine. I closed my eyes and tried to will those memories to the forefront of my mind. I wanted at least to recall the love we had shared. It had cost her dearly.

In that focused contact, I felt a wisp of her being brush mine. She was feeble, a moon waning away to nothing. She gestured weakly at me, warning me back. Instead, I pressed closer. 'Lisana? Is there no way I can help you? Without your intervention, I would have died.'

Her bark was rough against my forehead. I clasped the trunk of the small tree so tightly that it stung the palms of my hands. Abruptly, her image came more clearly to me. 'Go away, Soldier's Boy! While you can. I gave my being to this tree. It consumed me and became me. That does not mean I can control its appetite. All things desire to live, and my tree desires life fiercely. Get away!'

'Lisana, please, I-' And then a red pain pierced my palm and shot up into my wrist.

'Get back!' she shrieked at me, and with a sudden burst of strength, she pushed me away.

I did not fall. The tree already gripped me too strongly for that. My forehead ripped free of the questing rootlets that had penetrated my brow. Blood ran bright red before my opened eyes. I bellowed in terror and with inhuman strength pulled my hands free. Dangling rootlets, red with my blood, pulled from my palms as I jerked my hands back. The tendrils dripped and twitched after me like hungrily seeking worms. I staggered back from the tree. With the back of my sleeve, I wiped blood away from my brow and eyes and then stared in horror at my wounded hands. Blood trickled from half a dozen holes in my flesh and dripped from my palms. As the drops fell to the forest floor, the moss at my feet hummocked and quivered. Tiny tree roots wormed up from the soil and moss, squirming towards the red drops that glistened like red berries. I pressed my bleeding palms to my shirtfront and staggered backwards.

I felt dizzy with horror or perhaps blood loss. Lisana's tree had tried to eat me. My pierced hands ached all the way into my wrists. I wondered how deeply the roots had wormed into me, and then tried not to think of that as a wave of vertigo swept over me. I focused on taking another couple of steps backwards. I felt sickened and weak; I wondered if the roots had done more to me than pierce my flesh and absorb my blood.

'Move back, Nevare. Keep moving. There. That's better.'

Tree Woman was a misty embodiment of herself. I could see through her, but my sense of her was stronger. My head was still spinning, but I obeyed her, staggering away from the young tree.

'Sit down on the moss. Breathe. You'll feel better in a little while. Kaembra trees sometimes take live creatures as nourishment. When they do, they sedate them so they do not struggle. What you did was foolish. I warned you that the tree was desperate.'

'Isn't the tree you? Why would you do this to me?' I felt woozy and betrayed.

'The tree is not me. I live within the tree's life, but I am not the tree and the tree is not me.'

'It tried to eat me.'

'It tried to live. All things try to live. And it will, now. In a way, it is almost fitting. I took from it to rescue you. And it took from you to save itself.'

'Then - you'll live now?' My mind seized on that most important fact.

She nodded. It was hard to see her against the bright sunlight, but I could still make out the sadness in her eyes that contradicted her soft smile. 'I'll live, yes. For as long as the tree does. I spent a lot of what I had regained to reach for you in that cell. It will take me a long time to rebuild my reserves. But what you have given me today has restored me for now. I have the strength to reach for sunlight and water now. For now, I'll be fine.'

'What is it, Lisana? What aren't you telling me?'

She laughed then, a sound I felt in my mind rather than heard. 'Soldier's Boy, how can you know so many things and nothing at all? Why do you persist in being divided against yourself? How can you look at something and not see it? No one understands this about you. You use the magic with a reckless power that in all my time I have never witnessed. Yet when the truth is right before you, you cannot see it.'

'What truth?'

'Nevare, go to the end of the ridge and look out towards your King's Road. See where it will go as they push it onward. Then come back, and tell me if I will live.'

The pain in my hands was already lessening. I wiped my sleeve over my forehead and felt the roughness of scabbing. The magic was again healing me with an unnatural swiftness. I was grateful, and also a bit surprised, not that the magic could heal me but at how easily I accepted it now.



I was full of trepidation as I walked to the end of the ridge. The soil there was stony and as I approached the end, the trees became more stunted until I stood on an out-thrust of stone where only brush grew. From that rocky crag I could look out over the valley below me. The vale cupped a lining of trees, but intruding into that green bowl, straight as an arrow, was the chaos of the King's Road. Like a pointing finger, it lanced into the forest. To either side of it, trees with yellowing leaves leaned drunkenly, their side roots cut by the road's progress. Smoke still rose from an equipment shed, or rather, from the ashes of one. Epiny had been thorough. She'd set off three explosions down there in an attempt to distract the town from my escape. Wagons and scrapers were a jumble of broken wood and wheels in one area under the scattered roof of a shed. Another collapsed building still smouldered and stank in the sweet summer air. And it looked to me as if she had exploded one culvert. The road had collapsed and the stream that had once been channelled under it now seethed through the rocks and muck. Men and teams were already at work there, digging the muck away and preparing to lay a new conduit for the stream. They'd have to repair that section of road before they could push the construction any deeper into the forest.

My delicately raised girl cousin had struck in a way that I, a trained soldier son, had never even imagined. And she succeeded, at least for now, in halting the progress of the King's road builders.

But as I was smiling at her success, my grin suddenly stiffened into a sort of rictus. This road, cutting through the mountains and to the sea beyond them, was my king's great project. With that road, my king hoped to restore Gernia to greatness.

And I looked on its delay and destruction with pleasure. Who was I?

I gazed down on the aborted road again. It pointed straight towards me. Well, not precisely straight. It would cross the valley and then climb the hill I was standing on... Slowly I turned my head to the left, to look back the way I had come. Tree Woman. Lisana. Her stump and fallen trunk were exactly in the path of the road. If the tree cutting continued, she would fall to the axe. I

looked back at the road, cold flowing through my veins. At the end of the construction, two freshly fallen giants sprawled in a welter of broken limbs. They'd taken other, smaller trees down with them as they fell. From my vantage point, the new rent in the forest canopy looked like a disease eroding the green flesh of the living forest below me. And the gash was heading directly towards my lover's tree.

I watched the men toiling below. The sounds of their cursing and shouted commands could not reach me here. But I could smell the smoke of last night's fire and see the steady procession of wagons and teams and road crews as they toiled like ants mending a nest. How long would it take them to fix the broken culvert and patch the road? A few days, if they were industrious. How long to build new wagons and scrapers, how long to build new sheds? A few weeks at most. And then the work would press on. The magical fear that the Specks had created still oozed down from the forest to deter the workers and sap their wills. But, fool that I was, I'd given the commander the means to overcome even that. I'd been the one to suggest that men half drunk on liquor or drugged with laudanum would not feel the fear as keenly and could work despite it. I'd even heard that some of the penal workers now craved the intoxicants so much that they clamoured to be on the work details

at the road's end. The drugged and desensitized men would push the road on into the forest. I'd enabled that. It had almost earned me a promotion.

I recognized uncomfortably that my heart was turning more and more towards a forest way of thinking. The divide in me ran deep now. I was still a German, but that was no longer sufficient reason to believe that the King's Road must be pushed through at all costs. I glanced back towards Tree Woman's stump. No. The cost to me alone was too high. It had to be stopped.

How?

I stood for a long time as the afternoon waned, watching the men and teams flailing away at their tasks. Even at this distance, I could see that the workers were impaired. No one moved briskly and mishaps abounded. A wagon trying to turn too tightly with a load of rock turned over and dumped its cargo. An hour later, another wagon mired, and a third driver, trying to get past the mired wagon, drove his team into the ditch and upset his load there. Yet for all that, the work was progressing. It might be tomorrow before they had replaced the culverts, and perhaps even another day before they had a drivable surface on the road there. But eventually, like patient insects, they would get it done. And then they would push on once more, cutting inexorably into the forest. Did it matter to me if they cut down her tree next week or three years from now? I needed to stop them.

Yet no matter how I wracked my brain, I could not come up with a plan. I'd gone to the Colonel before the plague descended on us and begged him to stop the road. I'd explained to him that the kaembra trees were sacred to the Specks, and that if we cut them, we could expect an all-out war with the forest people. He'd dismissed me and my concerns. Silly superstitions, he'd told me. Once the trees were cut and the Specks discovered that no great calamity befell them, he believed they could more readily adapt to the civilization we offered them. Not even for an instant did he pause to wonder if there might be a grain of truth in what the Specks believed about their trees.

When I asked if the road could not go around the kaembra trees, he pointed out that engineers had mapped out the best route, and it went past Gettys and through the mountain pass that traders had once used. For years, the resources of Gernia had been committed to building the road on that route. An alternate path had once been considered, one that would have gone past Mendy and the Fort to cut through the Barrier Mountains there. But to redirect the road-building effort to that route would mean adding years to the King's project, not to mention absorbing the waste of all that had gone into pushing the road as far as Gettys and beyond it. No. Nothing so trivial as a stand of ancestral trees would halt the King of Gernia's grand vision.

The Colonel was dead now, a victim of the Speck plague. The Specks had struck back at the tree cutters in the only way they had. They'd done the Dust Dance for the visiting officials from Old Thares and the inspection team, and in the process had infected everyone with the plague. I'd warned him of that, too. If the Colonel had ever reconsidered my words, he'd taken all such thoughts to the grave with him. Even if I'd been able to go into Gettys and talk to the new commander, my words would make no impression on him. The two realities, Gernian and Speck, simply did not meet.

The Colonel had not even been able to grasp that the Specks were

at war with us. He had thought that because they came yearly to trade with us, we'd reached an accord of sorts, and that they would slowly adopt our ways. I knew better. Each year, in the course of that 'trading' time, they attacked us, deliberately spreading Speck plague among us.

Our peoples couldn't even agree on what constituted a war.

I doubted the Specks knew of the magnitude of the blow they'd dealt us with the latest outbreak of plague. The Speck plague had struck down every visiting officer on the reviewing stand. General Brodg, our Commander in the East had fallen, as well as his predecessor, the venerable General Prode. Those losses would echo throughout all of Gernia. And within the fort at Gettys most of our resident officers had fallen sick, drastically reducing the ratio of officers to enlisted men. The command at Gettys had been passed down three times in the space of a month. The man who had it now, Major Belford, had never commanded a post before. I wondered if the King would bother to replace him, and who would assume the position of Commander in the East. I wondered who would want it. Then I decided that such decisions no longer concerned me. I was a soldier no more. I wasn't even sure I was a Gernian.

A resolve formed in me slowly. I needed to stop the road, not just to preserve Tree Woman, but for the sake of both peoples. I needed to make building the road an impossible task so that King Troven would either give up the idea, or would completely reroute his road far to the north, through Mendy and the Fort. Once the King had diverted his energies to that route and pass, Gettys as a military encampment would lose much of its value. It might be abandoned altogether. And that might be the end of the clash between Germans and Specks. Perhaps we could go back to peaceful and sporadic trading; or perhaps it would be even better if all interaction between my peoples ceased.

I felt like a curtain was rising in my mind. The time for trying to reason with either people was gone; it was time for me to simply destroy the road. It was a very rudimentary strategy, but I still felt a lift in my spirits to have devised it. I felt a bit foolish as well. Why had I not found this determination before now? The answer to that was easy. Even if I now knew what I wished to do, I had very few ideas of how to implement my plans. There was small sense in planning to do a task that seemed impossible. Impossible for any ordinary man with ordinary means. But I was no longer an ordinary man, was I? I'd given way to the magic and accepted this task. I, Nevare Burvelle, was going to destroy the King's Road.

It was why I'd been given the magic. Lisana and Jodoli, the Speck Great Man I'd met, had both insisted that my task was to turn back the intruders, the Gernians. They had told me that the magic had chosen me, had made me a Great One for that very task. The conclusion was inescapable. I was to use the magic to stop the road.

The only thing I still didn't know was how.

The magic had been growing in me, like a fungus overtaking a piece of fruit, since I was fifteen years old. For several years, it had skulked beneath my awareness. Only when I left home to go to the Academy had I become aware that something strange lurked within me. And only after I'd contracted Speck plague and survived it did the magic begin to change my body so radically. It had cloaked me in the fat that had made me an object of ridicule and disdain

and hampered not just my physical life but my military career. Yet in all the years that it had possessed me and changed me, I'd only managed to use it for my own ends a few times. For the most part, it used me.

It had used me to spy on my people, to better understand 'the intruders' and how they might be fought. It had used me to spread the Speck plague in our capital city and all through our Cavalla Academy, destroying a whole generation of young officers. It had used me again to know when best to strike in Gettys, so that the entire inspection team of officers and nobles from the West might be wiped out.

Every time I had managed to use the magic, even with the best of intentions, the magic had found a way to turn it back on me. Both Lisana and Scout Hitch had warned me against trying to use the magic for my own ends. About the only thing I'd learned about how the magic was actually wielded was that it flamed in response to my emotions. Logic could not wield it, nor could wishful thinking ignite it. It only boiled through my blood when my heart was completely involved. When I was angry, or frightened or seething with hate, then the magic came to me without effort, and the urge

to use it became well nigh irresistible. At any other time, attempting to bend it to my will was impossible. It bothered me, and not a little, that logic rather than emotion was prompting me to turn the magic against the road itself. Was not that a very Gernian reaction to a Speck problem? But perhaps that was why the magic had chosen me. Still, if I was going to use magic to stop the road being built, I would first have to find the heart to do it.

I turned my head and looked towards Lisana's stump. I thought of how I had nearly killed her, and what it had meant to me to discover that she was still alive. I thought of the sapling that had once been a branch, and how it rose from the fallen trunk of her tree. I'd seen that happen before. Nursery logs, they were called, when a row of branches on a fallen tree took to growing as if they were trees. But in Lisana's case, only one tree was rising from her fallen trunk. And if the road came through here, there would soon be none at all.

I held that thought as I walked down the hill towards the end of the road. It was steep going until I found the deer trail that cut across the face of the hill. I followed it down and the canopy of the forest closed over me once more, creating an early twilight. I walked in that gentle dimness, smelling the sweetness of the living earth. Life surrounded me. I had slowly come to understand that in my months of living by the eaves of the forest, but only today did the thought form itself clearly in my mind. All my life, I'd been accustomed to thinking of life as things that moved; rabbits, dogs, fish, other people. Life that mattered had been life like me, life that breathed and bled, life that ate and slept. I'd been aware of that other layer of life, of the still but living things that supported it all, but I'd thought of it as the lower layer, as the less important stratum of life.

Empty prairie was for ploughing or grazing; land that was too poor for farming or cattle was wasteland. I'd never lived near a forest like this, but when I'd come to one, I'd understood why it existed. The trees were to be taken for lumber. The land had to be cleared to become useful. The idea that forest or prairie or even wasteland should be left as it was had never occurred to me. What good was land until it was tamed? What good was a piece of earth that did not grow wheat or fruit trees or grass for cattle? The value

^of every bit of land I'd ever trodden, I'd reckoned in terms of how it could benefit a man. Now I saw it with the eyes of a forest mage. Here life balanced as it had for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. Sunlight and water were all that was required for the trees to grow. The trees made the food that fed whatever moving creatures might venture through this territory, and became the food that replenished the soil when their leaves fell to rot back into earth. This working system was as refined and precise as any piece of clockwork ever engineered by man. It worked perfectly.

But the road would break the clockwork of the forest system just as surely as an axe blow could shatter a fine watch. I'd seen the damage from the ridge and I'd seen it up close when I'd visited the road's end. It wasn't just the trees they cut to make a clear path. It was how the road builders made all the same in their path. Every dip in the earth was filled level, every rise cut to grade. The different layers of rock and gravel that made up the roadbed were inimical to the flow of the forest life. The road was a barrier of deadness bisecting the forest heart.

The swathe of death was wider than the road itself. Streams were diverted into culverts or blocked off. Brooks pooled and swamped land they had once drained and fed. The cut of the road severed roots beneath the earth, crippling the trees to either side of it. The construction slashed a great gash in the forest roof, admitting light where all had lived in gentle dimness for generations. The edges of the road were a crusty scab, and the road itself was like blood poisoning creeping up a man's veins towards his heart. Once the road had cut its way through the forest and across the mountains, the forest would never be the same. It would be an entity divided, and from that division, other roads and trails and byways would spread out into the forest as if the road had its own anti-life network of roots and tendrils.

Men would make more paths, with trails and byways branching out from them. Beneath that ever-spreading network of roads and paths and trails, nothing lived. Could death grow? I suddenly perceived that it could. Its spreading network could cut the living world into smaller and smaller sections, until no section was large enough to survive.

I'd reached the bottom of the hill. There was a stream there, and I paused to drink long of its cool, sweet water. The last time I'd been here, I'd come only in spirit, and Epiny had been with me.

Epiny. For a moment, I thought of her, and for the moment, I was Nevare again. I hoped she would not mourn me too deeply or too long. I hoped her sorrow over my supposed death would not affect her pregnancy. And then I blinked, and those feelings and thoughts receded from the forefront of my mind. I became once more the forest mage, intent on my task.

I had to stop the road. I had to be ruthless. I had the power if first I could bring it up to strength.

It seemed weeks, no, months ago that I had hovered by this stream as a disembodied entity and Epiny had picked and sampled some of the scarlet drupes. In real time, it had been but a few days, and the heavily laden berry bush still offered me a plenitude of fruit. After I had slaked my thirst, I sat down beside it and methodically began to strip it of berries. They were potent food for the magic, and as I ate them, I felt my reserves filling. I replenished the magic I had burned to escape the Gernian prison and the sustenance that Lisana's tree had drawn from me. The wounds in my

hands healed and the ache in the wrists quieted and then faded to nothing. I felt the sagging skin of my belly tighten as I consumed it. I filled myself with magic more than I did with food.

Large and heavy as I was, the magic leant me stealth. I moved through the woods with the same lumbering grace that bear and elk possess. In the lost sky above me, the sun was foundering to the west. The dimness in the forest deepened towards full darkness. I felt no weariness, even though I could not recall the last time I had slept a full and comfortable night. I was charged with both magic and purpose. Like a heavy shadow, I slipped through the forest towards the road's end.

I reached it as the crews were finishing their day's labour. Epiny's sabotage had been effective in its limited way. Today, the crews had not cut into any new trees or finished hauling away the bodies of the trees they had felled. Instead, all their time had been taken up with salvaging wagons and equipment and repairing the destroyed culverts to make the road passable once more. I stood in the gloomy shelter of the forest and watched them leave. Prisoners did the heavy labour of the road building, the backbreaking shovel, axe and saw work. The prisoners had their overseers, and in turn, the overseers were backed up by the soldiers. Now, as the day ended, the last load of ragged, sweating prisoners shuffled to the remaining wagons. Some of the crew wore leg irons and were shackled into teams. Others enjoyed relative freedom in manacles. A manacled man can still use a shovel or an axe. Their chains clanked loudly as they climbed awkwardly into the heavy wagons that would carry them back to Gettys and their confinement for the night.

I waited until night was full before I moved. I ghosted along in the shelter of the trees, surveying the work that had been done today. I was not pleased to see that they had set a guard. Epiny's sabotage had alarmed them, I supposed. A lantern burned in one of the surviving equipment sheds. I slunk closer, and perceived that four men had been left on watch there. They sat sullenly around the tail of a wagon, their lantern in the middle of it, and passed round a bottle of rum. I did not envy them their lonely vigil. If I opened my awareness, I could feel the insistent itching of the fear, the prickling sensation that evil watched them and waited its opportunity to pick them off, one by one. Their loaded long guns leaned upright against the wagon's open bed, one beside each man. I frowned at that. Drunken fearful men would be quick to lunge for their weapons. The magic could heal me very quickly, but did not make me proof against instantaneous death.

I resolved I would give them no cause for alarm. Not yet.

I took in a deep breath of night and held it. I turned my eyes away from the yellow lantern light of the watchmen. I breathed out slowly, expelling the darkness I had held within me. The blackness of night hovered round me in a cloud. Cloaked in darkness, I stepped softly forward. Deep moss cushioned my footfalls as I moved away from the watchmen. Tree branches drew aside from me, bushes swayed from my path silently lest they betray me with a rustle. I had no light but I did not need it. I was a part of the forest around me and I came into full awareness of it.

For a brief time, it overwhelmed me. I became aware of the deep carpet of life that extended around me in all directions. I was a mote in that intertwining net of living things. Life extended deep beneath my feet in the rich earth with the questing roots and the burrowing worms and the scuttling beetles. Trees surrounded me and reached far above my head. Rabbits, deer and foxes moved in

the darkness just as I did, while overhead, birds both sleeping and wakeful perched on the branches.

As I began to comprehend that interconnectedness I became aware

of a stabbing pain. I gritted my teeth against it and clutched at my belly, almost expecting to find a mortal wound there. But I was fine. It was not my body that hurt; the injury I sensed was to the larger organism through which I moved and in which I existed.

The road was the wound. It was a deep gash with a virulent infection, one that the forest could not heal by itself. The road builders had cut deep into the forest's green and living flesh, and filled that gap with gravel and sand and stone. Every time the forest tried to knit the wound closed with healing foliage, the road builders cut it back again. They were not like maggots in a wound, for maggots eat only dead flesh. These intruders maintained the slice of deadness they had placed in the forest, and cut back any attempt the forest made to heal itself. They had to go. Until the road builders were driven away, the forest could not heal.

It was a night of awakenings for me. I accepted that the forest was a living entity, almost godlike in its sprawling being. I accepted that if it was to survive, the intruders had to be banished. The road had already cut deep into the forest; the deeper it was pushed, the more the forest was divided from itself. If the road went all the way up into the mountains, the forest knew it was doomed.

But I still did not know what the magic wished me to do.

I drew back into myself, dizzied by my new awareness. It was hard to find my small human mind, and harder still to apply it to the task the magic had given me. Impatiently, I decided that there was no time to wait for the magic to discern the solution and convey it to me. The magic was so organic, so interwoven with the problem that it could present no simple solution to it. And yet that, I felt sure, was what was needed. Something as direct and sudden as a hammer's blow. I suspected that the magic saw no solution, and that was why it had taken me. A very old strategic premise was that the best way to find an enemy's weakness was to become the enemy. The forest magic had passed beyond that; it had made the enemy one of its own, precisely for this reason. The hammer of Gernian logic and engineering would be wielded with the power the magic had given me.

I tried to find stillness within me, tried to feel the magic agree with that supposition. I felt nothing. But the logic of it was so clear that I brushed aside all doubt. This was why the magic had created me. In me, the power of the magic would be wielded with Gernian logic by a trained soldier. The time for subtlety was past. It was time for me to act.

I moved like darkness itself, flowing effortlessly, encountering no resistance. I paid no mind to the guards keeping their watch. They were irrelevant to me. I had seen what the magic had not perceived. Fear without foundation would sway men only to a point.

I would give their fear roots.

FOUR

Mage Work

At the edge of the road, I hesitated. Then I left life behind and

stepped out into the silence of the soulless road. I felt I tore myself free of my roots to do so. With every step I took on the roadbed, I felt my awareness of the forest net of life stretch and tear. By the time I stood in the centre of the road, I felt small and exposed. Overhead, there was no friendly canopy of leaves and branches, only a terrible rift that bared me to the endless night sky. I felt my Speck self retreat and Nevare came to the fore. I blinked my eyes as if I were waking from a dream. I looked around at all that must be done in the space of a night. Then I took a breath and began.

I felt like a commander on high ground, overlooking his massed forces just before the assault begins. I felt within myself for the magic. It was not an easy thing for me to do. I groped for something I could not feel or sense in any ordinary way. And once I thought I had found it, I had to find, not the will nor the intellect, but the emotion to apply it.

It was harder than I'd expected it to be. I was, I discovered, tired of feeling. I'd had enough of hurt and betrayal and despair. I didn't want to open my heart to emotions strong enough to send the magic streaming through my blood. But I had promised. I closed my eyes for a moment and then opened them to the night. No colour was left in the day, save what the pallid moon would wring from the landscape. The road all around me was a flat, grey stripe of desert. . . No, not desert. No matter how barren a desert might appear to be, it had structure and life and connections. This road had none of those things. Dry, forsaken, it had no life of its own and severed the connections in all the lives it divided. I had thought that when I toiled in the graveyard, I dealt in death. In reality, there I had been part of the turning cycle of life and death and life. Here was true death; here all life ceased.

Anger at what had been done warred with sorrow over the loss. With an effort of will, I turned my fury aside. Instead of hatred, I let my sorrow fill me. This dead stripe of earth had once been rich, seething with life in all its stages. I grieved for its bereavement. I let go of all self restraint and became my grief.

Then I used the power of the magic guided by my German logic.

Hitch was right. I knew exactly what to do and I wanted to do it above all else. I lifted my arms and spread wide my hands, and then I lowered them, beckoning. I was confident of it. The magic had to come. Nonetheless, I felt a resistance from it, almost as if it questioned what I was doing. The magic was not accustomed to being used in such a way. What I contemplated was not the forest way nor the Speck way. But I knew what I was doing, and I was certain it would work. 'It's a Gernian way,' I said softly to the night wind. 'A Gernian tactic to turn back the Gernians. Isn't that why you wanted me? To use me as a tool against my own kind? Then trust me to know how I am sharpest!'

The magic relented. I felt it well up from inside me and flow outward. It strengthened my arms and then filled my hands. They grew heavy with it. I kept them closed in fists, containing it until I was sure my focus was clear and my purpose strong. Then I opened my fingers and let the magic shoot forth.

I began where it was easiest. Water always summons life. Epiny had blown up the culvert and the pooling water had washed out part of the road and soaked even more. The work crews had gone far to repair it today, but the moist earth still beckoned. It was ready to receive what I had to give.



I reached to the smallest plants, the tiny single-leaved cresses, the strands of algae that waited in the stagnant ponds at the side of the road. Given time and no disturbances, they would, in the course of a month, repopulate the damp soil and the standing puddles. From the sun and the earth, they would draw sustenance in minute daily quantities. They would edge into the available space, slowly repopulating it as their resources allowed them.

I opened myself. I surrendered to them the energy that the magic had given to me. In a matter of moments, I fed them the resources it would have taken them a year to gather. And they responded. Like an unfurling green carpet, the massed plants surged forward, enveloping the forsaken roadbed. They sank pale roots into the packed gravel, seeking the scant moisture of the settling dew, absorbing the dust of nutrients trapped among the pebbles. They were like new skin covering a gaping wound.

I choked the newly set culvert with greenery. I beckoned the lush, fat-stemmed, flat-leaved plants to fill it. I heard the rustle of their growth, and the muddy water that had flowed freely through it suddenly gagged, backed and swelled. I waited. A crystalline trickle emerged from the filtering plant life and a pond began to back up on the high side of the road. By morning, I calculated, a new stream would be cutting its way across the road's surface. I turned away.

I strode down the road, naked to the moonlight and the distant stars. I spoke to the trees that lined the road. I was as heartless as a herder culling cattle. Most of the trees that lined the road had had their side roots cut. They would linger for years, but they were already dying. To the weak, I commanded, 'Let go your grip and fall!' The strong I bade, 'Send out your roots. Buckle and break the road.'

And as I strode along, I heard it happen behind me. I did not turn back to look at my destruction. I felt what happened. Dying trees crashed across the road. I felt the breeze they created as they fell, and bits of bark flew up and showered down again. Other trees stirred suddenly, and sent roots questing through packed earth and bedded gravel. They did not grow slowly seeking nourishment. They tunneled like gophers, thrusting and rucking the surface of the road like a crumpled rug. I walked towards the end of the King's Road and destruction followed me like a giant trampling the earth.

I drew abreast of the equipment shed where the guards kept their watch. They had heard the falling trees and the shifting earth of the buckling road. Long guns gripped in their hands they had come to the open end of the shed. I saw them silhouetted against their fire. They could not see me. I was darkness against darkness, and their paltry light could not reach out to touch me.

They were shouting questions at one another. 'What is it? What's happening?' but none of them were venturing out from the feeble shelter of the shed to see for themselves. I walked past them, the small sounds of my passage cloaked in the falling trees and shifting stone that followed me. I heard them arguing that someone should ride back to town and raise the alarm. No one wanted to go, and one man shrilly but sensibly demanded, 'Alarm against who? Alarm against what? Trees falling? I'm not going out there.'

I thought of bringing their shed down around their ears. I could do it. I could have commanded the trees to topple it with their roots. I did not. I told myself it was not because they were my erst-

while countrymen, but because it suited the purpose of the magic better to leave them alive and unscathed. Let them give witness tomorrow to how the forest itself had turned on the road and attacked it. I strode past them unseen, and in my wake the road surface burst upward with questing roots, only to be concealed moments later by falling trees. The terrified shouts of the guards were drowned in the groans and crashes of the falling timber. Their firelight and sounds faded behind me as I moved on.

I left the finished road behind, travelling over the roadbed that was still under construction. Here the soil had not been packed and the roadbed was not yet levelled. It was easier for the trees to hummock their roots across it. There were still plenty of dying trees lining the clearings. As each one fell, I felt slightly diminished. Did I have the right to tell them to surrender what remained of their lives? I steeled my heart and decided that I did. It was not the individual trees but the forest itself that I was trying to save. Yet the magic that made them topple was the most demanding of what I was doing, as if the magic itself were appalled by my ruthlessness. With a wave of my hand, I ordered a vine to crawl from the ditch and shroud the fallen tree in greenery. It did, sinking its roots into the fallen trunk and limbs and reaching up to unfurl leaves to sunlight that wasn't there. But I was. I fed them the energy that they needed, and felt the vines grow thick and tough as dried leather. Encouraged, I spoke to the brambles. It was harder to bring them forth; there was little in the soil to sustain them and they were reluctant green troops quailing under fire. I gritted my teeth and by my will drove them out to where I needed them. The rising sun tomorrow would bake them brown. It would not matter. The thorny mat they left behind would be one more obstacle to the road builders. Cannon fodder, I thought to myself, closed my heart to my doubts, and strode on.

My body diminished as I used the magic. My hated fat, the reservoir of my power, was dwindling away. It felt very strange. My trousers sagged on my hips. I could not hold them up; I needed my hands to do the summoning. Growling at the delay, I paused and tightened my belt. It pinched my loosened skin. Ignore it. I was nearly at the end of the road. I had to go on; I had to finish my barricade against the road builders. I summoned my will and my emotion once more, and threw wide the reserves I had stored. For a brief moment, the magic fought my will, and then the power came under my dominion again. The magic sang through my blood, intoxicating me with command. I brought the trees down more swiftly, laughed aloud as the road buckled in my wake. I spoke to the weeds and scrub brush that had survived in the ditches, and they burst into rampant growth, running up the banks and crawling across the road. My parade of destruction had become a charge. Nothing could stop me.

The end of the King's Road was a tangled darkness before me. I looked with the eyes of night and my heart sank at what I saw. The singing of the magic in my blood became a dirge. The loggers had brought down another kaembra tree. The massive trunk had been severed, and the fallen giant had crashed down onto the cleared apron that would eventually be part of the road.

I stood for a moment, my nearly depleted magic simmering in me, and stared at the tragedy. Until I had come east to Gettys, I had never imagined such trees existed. I had been raised in the Midlands, on the plains and plateaus where it might take a tree a score of years to increase its girth by an inch. We had ancient trees, but they were twisted, battered things with trunks as hard as metal.

The giants of the Speck forest still awed me. The fallen trunk that blocked my path was far too tall for me to climb over; I would have had better luck scaling the palisade that surrounded the fort at Gettys. I walked around its severed base, suddenly exhausted and staggering. While I had wielded the magic, I had not felt tired. Now my weariness hit me with full force.

Beneath my loosened clothing, my emptied skin sagged around me. The excess skin on my arms, legs, belly and buttocks all but flapped around me as I walked. I groped at my body, finding the jut of a hipbone and the ripple of my ribs as if greeting old friends. The warning of Jodoli, a Great Man of the Specks far more experienced with magic than I was, came back to me.

'You can die from loss of magic, just as you can die from loss of blood. But it seldom happens to us without the mage knowing exactly what he is doing. It takes a great deal of will to burn every bit of magic out of yourself. A mage would have to push past pain and exhaustion to do it. Ordinarily, the mage would lose consciousness before he was completely dead. Then his feeder could revive him, if she were nearby. If not, the Great One might still perish.'

I smiled grimly to myself as I tottered on towards the standing stump of the fallen tree. I had no feeder to come and tend me. Olikea, a woman of the Specks, had served for a time as my feeder. The last time I had seen Olikea we had quarrelled because I had refused to turn against the Gernians and come live among the Specks. She had reviled me before she left; I'd been a great disappointment to her. She competed hard with her sister Firada, Jodoli's feeder. I wondered, almost sadly, if I had ever been someone that she cared about, or only a powerful but ignorant mage who she could manipulate? The question should have meant more to me but I was too tired to care any more.

But I had done it. My blockade of the road builders would slow them for months. For a fleeting instant, pleasure warmed me as I thought how proud of me Epiny would be. But a chill thought followed it. Epiny would never know it was my work. She would hear of the dog's death I had died, and mourn me fiercely. If she heard of what had transpired at the road's end, she would put it down to Speck magic. I was dead to her. Dead to her, dead to Spink, dead to Amzil and her children. Dead to my sister Yaril, as soon as word reached her. Dead to old Sergeant Duril, the mentor of my youth. My exuberance drained and darkness swirled around me. Dead to everyone I loved. Might as well really be dead.

I fell to my knees in my weariness. That was a mistake. The instant I settled into stillness, hunger woke in me and clawed at my guts and throat. It was beyond hunger pangs; it felt as if my guts were devouring themselves and I groaned with it. If Olikea were here, I thought hazily, she would bring me the berries and roots and leaves that sustained my magic. And afterwards, she would have roused my passions and then sated them. Some desperate sentry in my brain realized that my thoughts were circling uselessly.

The sky was greying. I'd spent the night as recklessly as I'd spent my magic. Daylight was coming. Time to flee.

It took me some little time to rise. I staggered on, my ears ringing. I felt as if I could hear a great crowd of people talking at a distance. There was that uneven rise and fall of vocalization, rather like water lapping against a shore. I lifted my eyes, but no one was there. Then my knees folded under me again. I had not gone even a dozen paces. I crumpled to the earth beside the massive

stump of the fallen kaembra tree. I caught myself before I went face down in the wood chips and sawdust that littered the forest floor. With a groan I twisted my body to lean my back against the stump. I had never felt such weariness and hunger, not even in my worst days of starvation in my father's house. 'Am I dying?' I asked the implacable night.

'Probably not,' a dusky voice behind me said. 'But I am.'

I did not turn my head nor even startle. Despite my own distress, I felt shamed to have forgotten that others suffered more keenly than I did. 'I'm sorry,' I said to the tree. 'I'm sorry. I tried, but I was too late to save you. I should have tried harder.'

'You said you would speak to them!' he cried out. 'You said you would do your best to put an end to this.' His outrage and pain rang, not in my ears, but in my heart.

I closed my eyes to sense him better. 'I thought you would be dead,' I said thoughtlessly. My own deep weariness and stabbing hunger eroded my manners. My magic was at its lowest ebb. I could barely sense the old Speck in the tree. Once his hair had been dark, but now it was long and grey, with the streaks of white barely showing against it. His pale blue eyes were almost white, and his speckled markings had faded against his skin to a dapple of freckles. He'd been old when he went into his tree, I suddenly knew. Once he had been fat, a Great One, a forest mage like myself, but now he was bleeding to death. As his magic ran out of his tree, his flesh hung flaccid around him. I stared at him, wondering if that was how I looked, and if our fates would be the same.

'I am dead,' he told me bitterly. 'Swift or slow as the end may come, it certainly comes now. They cut me with cold iron, with many, many blows of cold, sharp iron.'

I shuddered, imagining the pain. Could it have been worse than a thousand lashes? He had been unable to flee his fate as I had done. His life had depended on me, and my paltry efforts to save him had failed.

'I'm sorry/ I said with great sincerity. 'I did try. I was too late for you. But what I have done tonight should frighten the road builders. If they find the courage to try again, I have created a chaos they will not quickly undo. Even if they start tomorrow, it will be months before they undo my destruction. Winter is coming and work will stop when the snow flies. I have bought us some time in which we can seek a permanent solution.'

'Months,' he said with scorn. 'Part of a year? What is that to me? Nothing, now! I am dead, Jhernian. My death will be a slow fading to you, but I will be gone before the spring comes. And to me, it will seem but a wink of the eye. Once we have our trees, we do not count time in hours or days or even seasons as you do. I am dead. But while there is still enough of me left to speak, I will tell you again. Delaying them is not enough. You must drive these intruders out, so that they never come back. Kill them all, if you must. For years now we have refrained from that, but perhaps it is the only thing that will stop them. Kill them all. A delay? What good does that do? You have been just like any other Jhernian, bidding living things die to please your ends, and then claiming you have benefited us all! What a fool you have been, throwing magic like dust, wasting a hoard such as not been seen for many years!'

I had scarcely the strength to answer him, but so stung was I that I rallied what little remained to me. 'As the magic wished me to do, I have done.'

He laughed bitterly. 'I did not feel the magic speak at your act. Instead, I witnessed you bending your will to force trees to their deaths, to push plants to spread where they cannot sustain themselves, to push life just as unnaturally as the intruders have pushed death. Any of us could have told you that it would not work. Tomorrow, half your magic will be undone by the rising sun as the plants wither and fade. What a waste!'

I felt childish and everything seemed unfair. The magic had never told me clearly what it wanted of me. The ancestor trees had never offered me advice. 'I did not know I could seek your advice,' I said stiffly. I was so tired. It was hard to make the words form in my mind.

'Why do you think we exist, if not to answer questions and give advice? What other value could the ancestor trees have? A silly, selfish continuation of life and pride? No. We exist to guide the People. We exist to protect the People.'

'And the People are failing to protect you.' I felt a deep sadness and shame.

'The magic is given to you to protect us. Use it as you are supposed to use it, and we will not fall.'

'But - the magic showed me the forest, alive and complete. The road is the death that cuts through it. If I can remove the death, if I can stitch the halves of the forest back together . . .'

'You are like a little child, who sees the nut but does not comprehend that it came from a tree, let alone that it holds another tree. Look larger. See it all.'

He lifted me or perhaps he released me to rise. What he showed me is hard to put into words. I saw the forest again, as the magic had shown it to me, as a perfectly balanced dance of lives. And the road still intruded into it, a skewer of death. But the forest elder lifted me higher still, and I saw the road not as a single stripe of death, but as a feeler reaching out from a foreign organism. The road was to that system, not a stripe of death but a root, securing it in new soil. And just as I had imagined the pathways and byways that would spread out from it as small rootlets, so they were. And if I followed that root back to its source, I saw the Kingdom of Gernia, growing and spreading just as organically as a vine crawling up a tree. The vine that used a tree to reach the sunlight did not intend evil to the tree; it was incidental that it sucked all life from the tree as it climbed and spread, shading the tree's leaves with its own tendrils and foliage. The roads fed Gernia, and were focused only on sustaining their own organism. For Gernia to live, the road must grow. It could not survive without its growing, spreading roots. My civilization and the forest were two organisms, competing for resources. One would shade out the other.

Then, just as quickly as I had risen over all, I was in my own flesh again, leaning against the severed tree, bereft of strength and hope.

Defeat soured even my brief memory of the triumph Pd felt. I spoke softly. 'Magic can't change it, Tree Man. It isn't the road or the fortification at Gettys. It isn't even the people who have come

here. It's so big, it can't be stopped. You know that even if I could kill all the intruders, I would not. But if I did, if we killed every last man, woman and child in Gettys, it would be only like clipping off the end of a tree's branch. Other branches grow. Next summer would see more people here, and the road building would start again. For the Gernians to come here is as inevitable as water flowing downhill. Now that some have come, others will follow, seeking land to farm or routes to trade and wealth. Killing them will not stop them coming nor from building this road.'

I drew a breath. It took so much effort. I thought again of the vine, climbing and choking and overshadowing the tree. 'I see only one possible path. What we must do is find a way to persuade the intruders to take their road elsewhere. Show them a route that does not come through the groves of the ancestor trees. Then both our peoples can live alongside one another in peace.'

It was getting harder and harder to organize my thoughts. Speaking seemed a great effort. My words were slurring but I couldn't find the energy to sit up and speak clearly. I closed my eyes. A final thought jabbed at me and I made a vast effort to voice it. 'If I can stop the road builders, if I can divert them, cannot you send up a new sprout and live? Tree Woman has.'

'Lisana' trunk was not completely severed. Although her crown and trunk fell, enough of a connection was left that her leaves could go on making food and one of her branches was positioned well to become a new sapling. But I am cut off short, and have no leaves left. Even if I could, I would have to send up a sapling from my roots, beginning as no more than a sprout. I would be greatly diminished for scores of years.'

'But you would be alive. You would not be lost to us.'

He was silent.

All my exhilaration at spending my magic was suddenly gone. We had come full circle back to my great failure. Everyone insisted that the magic had given me the task of making all the Gernians leave and putting an end to their road building. It was impossible. I'd told them that, endlessly, but no one listened. Even the tree elders know that the intruders could not be stopped. Not even with magic.

I managed to lift my hand and placed it against his bark. Something was very wrong with me. I could not feel my legs and

my vision suddenly faded. Had I closed my eyes? I could not tell. I forced out sluggish words. 'I have used too much magic. I do not have a feeder to revive me. If you wish, take whatever nourishment you can from my body. Use me up. Perhaps you can live that way. Perhaps someone else will find a way to stop the road and let the Germans and Specks live in peace. It is beyond me.5

Silence greeted my offer. Perhaps I had offended him. As strength fled my body, I decided it no longer mattered. I pushed my fingers into a fissure in his bark; my hand would stay in place even if I lost consciousness. My whole body was clamouring for sustenance and rest. I suspected it was too late. I'd passed the redemption point. 'Use me up,' I offered him again and let go.

'You have no feeder? You are a Great One and no one attends you? This is intolerable!' His words reached me from a great distance. I sensed he felt insulted more on his own behalf than

concerned for me. 'This is not how a Great One dies, untended and treeless. What have the People come to, to allow such a thing to happen?'

My hearing was fading. I was distant from his dismay and alarm. I wondered, dispassionately, what the penal workers would think when they found my deflated body here. It would certainly be a mystery for them. A great mystery.

Everything stopped.

FIVE

The Other Side

'Lisana,' I said.

She did not hear me. I saw her more clearly than I had in many days; she was as she had been in my dreams when I was at the Cavalla Academy in Old Thares. The tree woman was sitting with her back to her tree trunk. Her glossy hair was tangled on the bark. She was naked, a fleshy woman of indeterminate years. The day's early sunlight dappled her flesh as it streamed through the canopy foliage, and I could not tell the real dappling of her skin from that which the sunlight created. Her eyelids were half-closed, her breathing heavy and slow. I smiled down at her, my gaze fondly tracing the lines of her plump lips, the small furrow in her brow that deepened when she was annoyed at me. I came closer to her, and whispered by her ear, 'Lisana! I'm here.'

Her eyes opened slowly, sleepily, without alarm. The little line on her forehead deepened in puzzlement. Her eyes moved past me and looked through me. Her rounded shoulder twitched in a small shrug. She started to close her eyes again.

'Lisana!' I said, more urgently.

She caught her breath, sat up and looked around. 'Soldier's Boy?' she asked in confusion.

'Yes. I've come back to you. I've done my best to stop the road building. I failed. But I'm finished. Finished with all of it. So here I am, come to be with you.'

She scanned the forest all around her twice before her eyes settled on me. Then she reached out a plump hand to me. Her fingers passed through me, a sensation rather like sparkling wine spilling

on my flesh. Tears welled in her eyes. 'Oh, no. No! What has happened? This cannot be. This cannot be!'

'It's all right,' I reassured her. 'I used up all the magic in me to try to stop the road. My body is dying, but I'm here with you. So that's not so bad, is it? I'm content.'

'Soldier's Boy, no! No, it's not bad, it's terrible. You are a Great One! The magic made you a Great One. And now you are dying, treeless and untended. You are already fading in my eyes. And soon you will be gone, gone forever.'

'I know. But once that body is gone, I will be here with you. And I do not think that is a bad thing.'

'No. No, you fool! You are vanishing. You have no tree. And you have fallen-' She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she did, tears spilled from them. She opened them wide and her gaze was full of anguish. 'You have fallen far from any sapling. You are untended and unprepared and still divided against yourself. Oh, Soldier's Boy, how did this happen? You will fade away. And when you do, I will never see you again. Never.'

The wind blew softly through me. I felt oddly diminished. 'I didn't know that,' I said lamely. Stupidly. 'I'm sorry.' As I apologized to her, a flicker of panic raced through me and then faded away. There wasn't enough life left in me to panic. I'd made a mistake and I was dying. Apparently not even a Speck afterlife was available to me. I'd simply stop being. Apparently, I hadn't died correctly. Oops.

I knew I should be devastated. An emotion washed through me, too pale for me to recognize. 'I'm sorry,' I said again, as much to myself as to her.

She stretched her arms wide and gathered in to her bosom what was left of me. I felt her embrace only as a faint warmth. It was not even a skin-to-skin sensation, but was perhaps my memory of warmth. My awareness was trickling away. Soon there would not even be enough left to be concerned. I'd be nothing. No. Nothing would be me. That was a better way to express it. I vaguely remembered how I would have smiled.

The water was sweet. Not just sweet as fresh water is sweet, but sweet as in flavoured with honey or nectar. I choked on the gush of it into my mouth, coughed and felt the coolness spatter down my chest. Then I drew a breath through my nose, closed my lips around the mouth of the waterskin and sucked it in. I drank in long gulping draughts, pulling in as much liquid as my mouth would hold, swallowing it down and then sucking in more. I sucked the waterskin flat. Nonetheless, I kept my mouth firmly clamped to it, sucking fruitlessly at it. Someone pinched my nose shut, and when I had to open my mouth to breathe, the waterskin was snatched away. I moaned a protest.

Another one was offered to me. This one was even better; it was not just sweet water. The liquid was thicker. Meat and salt and garlic were blended in a thick broth with other flavours I did not know. I didn't really care. I sucked it down.

The disorganized sounds around me suddenly evolved into language. 'Be careful. Don't let him have that much that fast/ A man's voice.

'Would you like to be his feeder, Jodoli?' That was a voice I recognized. Olikea sounded just as angry as she had been when last we parted. She was a powerful woman, as tall as I was and well muscled. Her anger was not a thing to dismiss. I suddenly felt exposed. I tried to draw my arms and legs up to protect myself, but felt them only twitch in response to me.

'Look. He's trying to move!' Jodoli sounded both surprised and relieved.

Olikea muttered some sour response. I did not make out her words, but someone else did. A woman spoke. I did not know her voice.

'Well, that is what it means to be a feeder of a Great One. If



you did not wish to have the work of it, you should not have taken it on, little sister. It is not a task to take up lightly. Nor should it be seized merely as an opportunity to advance yourself. If you are weary of the honour of tending to him, say so plainly. I am sure there are other women of our kin who would be glad to take him on. And they, perhaps, would not have let him fall into such a state. What if he had died? Think of the shame you would have brought down on our kin-clan! Such a thing has never befallen one of our Great Ones.'

'Jodoli has extended himself into such a state! I have heard you complain of it. He often tells the story of nearly dying from using too much magic.'

Olikea's sister stiffened with fury. I became aware I'd opened my eyes to slits. I recognized her. Oh. Yes. Firada looked very like her younger sister, yet their features bore very different expressions at that moment. Firada's hazel eyes were narrowed with displeasure. She had crossed her arms on her chest and stared at her younger sister contemptuously.

Olikea was crouched over me. She held an empty leather skin in her hands and her lips were drawn tight with fury. Her eyes were green. She had a dark streak from her brow to the tip of her nose and the speckles on her face were more generous than her sister's. On the rest of her body, her specks were a dappling that became streaks on her ribs and legs, almost like the striping on a cat. The striping was repeated in her hair. I had thought she was about my age but now she seemed younger. Her skin blushed a hot pink today around her dapples. She wore the most clothing I'd ever seen her don. It consisted of a leather belt slung on her hips, with several pouches attached to it, and some loops that held simple tools. Although it was decorated with beads, feathers and small charms made from fired pottery or beaten copper, its function was to allow her to carry her supplies with ease rather than to cover her body.

Jodoli stood well back from both of the sisters. My fellow Great Man and sometime rival was not nearly as large as I was, but his size would have turned heads in any Gernian setting. He wore his black hair in plaits. His blue eyes were surprising in the dark mask of pigment on his face. 'Stop your quarrelling. He's awake. He needs food now, if he can stomach it.'

'Likari! Give me that basket of berries and then go and get more. Don't stand about staring. Be useful.'

For the first time, I noticed a small boy just behind Olikea. He had green eyes like hers and the same stripe down his nose. Probably their younger brother. In response to her words, he jerked as if poked with a stick. He thrust a heavily laden basket at her. The moment she took it, he turned and scampered off. His reddened bare buttocks were dappled like a horse's; I almost smiled to see him run.

But Olikea's scowl bored into me. 'Well, Soldier's Boy. Are you going to eat, or just stare about you like a frog on a lily leaf?'

'I'll eat,' I said. Her offer of food drove all else from my mind.

I would do nothing to offend her, lest she change her mind about feeding me.

Slowly it broke through my foggy brain that I was going to live. I felt a pang of regret at that, strange to say. I had not planned to die nor especially enjoyed the prospect, but it had been invitingly simple. All my worries would have been over: no more wondering if I was doing the right thing. Now I was back in a world where people had expectations of me.

I reclined in a natural shelter formed by a vine that had climbed up a sagging branch of great tree. Its drapery made a thicker shade for me in the muted light of the forest. The moss beneath me was deep and soft. I suspected that Jodoli had used his magic to form such a comfortable couch for me. In the same moment that I knew I should thank him, Olikea dropped the basket of berries beside me. My attention was riveted upon it. It took all the strength I had to command my wasted hand and arm to move. The emptied flesh hung from my bones in a flaccid curtain of skin. I dug a handful of berries from the basket, heedless of how I crushed the ripe fruit and shoved it into my mouth. The flavour blossomed in my mouth, life-giving, sweet, tangy, redolent of flowers. I chewed it twice, swallowed, licked the dripping juice from my hand and scooped up another handful. I pushed them into my mouth, as much as my mouth could hold. I chewed with my lips pursed tight, afraid some morsel would escape them.

Around me, a storm raged. Jodoli and Firada scolded Olikea and she responded angrily. I had not an instant's attention for it until the basket was emptied of berries. It was not a small basket. It should have filled me, but with every bit of replenished energy, my body only grew stronger in clamouring for more. I wanted to demand more, but some underlying craftiness told me that if I angered Olikea, she might not help me. I forced myself to hear what she was saying.

' . . . in the light where the Great One's tree had fallen. As a result, I am burned. Even Likari was burned, though the little wretch did almost nothing to help me. It will be days before I can move without pain, or even sleep comfortably!'

Jodoli looked embarrassed for me. Firada had pursed her lips in the Speck gesture of denial and looked stubbornly righteous. 'What did you think it meant to be the feeder of a Great One? Did you

think all you had to do was bring him food and then bask in his reflected status? If that was all there was to it, a Great One would not need a feeder. All the People would simply feed him. No. A Great One needs a feeder precisely because he will not fix his mind on the ordinary concerns of life. He will listen to the magic instead. Managing the ordinary part of his life is your task. You are supposed to seek out the proper foods for him and be sure he has them in full variety. You are supposed to keep the nits out of his hair, and aid him in his washing so that his skin stays healthy. When he dream-walks, you should stand watch over his body until his soul comes back to it. And you are supposed to see that his line continues. That is what it means to be the feeder of a Great One. You seized that duty for yourself as soon as you discovered him. Do not pretend he chose you. You found him; he did not come seeking you. If you are tired of the duty, then say so and set it aside. He is not uncomely, even for a plain-skin. And all have heard of the gifts he gave you! There are other women who would gladly take up the tasks of being his feeder, in the sole hope of getting his child. You have not even been successful at that, have you?'

My gaze travelled to Olikea's face. Firada's words were like rain-fall on dry ground. They pattered against my senses and only slowly

soaked into my brain. The Gernian in me pushed his way to the front of my mind, commanding me to pay attention to what was going on. Olikea had rescued me. I'd lain where I'd fallen, in the sunlight. She'd been burned when she had to emerge from the forest to drag me back into its shelters. Speck skin was notoriously sensitive to light and heat. She'd risked herself. For me.

And she wasn't sure I was worth it. Nevare the Gernian was inclined to bow his head to that and watch her walk away, without too many regrets. I had once believed that Olikea was genuinely infatuated with me, to the point of feeling guilty that her feelings were so much deeper than my own. To hear that Firada believed Olikea only cared for me as a way to gain power put everything in a very different light. I was not a prize bull to be groomed and exhibited as a possession. I still had my pride.

But the Speck part of me perceived things from a very different angle. A Great Man not only needed a feeder, he was entitled to one. I was a Great Man of the Specks, and Olikea's kin clan should have felt honoured that I had chosen to live among them. For Olikea to decide that she did not relish her duty was a grave insult to me as well as a threat to my well-being. Anger up-welled in me, an anger founded deep in a Speck awareness of the affront to me. Was I not a Great One? Had not I given up everything to become a vessel for the magic? What right had she to begrudge me the assistance that most would have found an honour?

A peculiar tingling ran over me from head to foot, not unlike the pins-and-needles sensation of a limb that has been still too long. From somewhere in me, Soldier's Boy summoned strength and sat me up. My Speck self, so long subjugated by my Gernian identity, looked around with disdain. Then, as if he were pulling off a sweaty shirt, he peeled himself free of me. In that instant, he separated us and I, Nevare the German, abruptly became a bystander observing my own life. He looked down at his wasted body, at the empty folds of skin where once a wealth of magic had been stored. I felt his disgust with me. Nevare had wasted his magic, wasted it in a temporary solution that saved no one and nothing. He lifted the empty ripples of belly skin and then let them fall with a small groan of dismay. All the magic he had stolen from the plainsfolk at the Dancing Spindle, all the magic he had acquired since then and painstakingly hoarded, gone! All of it foolishly squandered in a vain show of power. A fortune had been traded for trinkets. He lifted the folds of his depleted belly and then let them fall again. Tears of rage stung his eyes, followed by a flush of shame. He had been immense with magic, full of power, and stupidity had wasted it all. He gritted his teeth at his diminished status. He looked like a starved man, a weakling who could not even provide for himself, let alone shelter his kin-clan. That wastrel Nevare knew nothing of being a Great Man, nothing of magic. He had not even chosen his feeder well, but had simply accepted the first woman who offered herself. That, at least, could be quickly mended. He lifted his eyes to stare sternly at Olikea.

'You are not my feeder.'

Olikea, Jodoli and Firada were staring at him in amazement, the sort of amazement that would be roused by a stone speaking. Olikea's mouth opened in shock and a parade of emotions passed over her face. Insult, shock, regret and anger all vied to dominate her features.

As Nevare, I watched the drama unfold before me as an audience rather than a participant. I could hear and see, but I could

not speak or control the body I inhabited. I was aware of his thoughts. Could I influence them? I could not find in myself the ambition to try. My Speck self's devastation at how I had wasted our magic drained me of purpose. Let him deal with the unreasonable demands of the magic and see if he could do any better!

I watched with sour amusement as Olikea tried to master her face. She strained to look concerned rather than insulted. Olikea had never heard this man speak to her in such tones before. It angered her, but she tried for a calm voice. 'But, Soldier's Boy, you are weak. You need—'

'I need food!' he snapped. 'Not useless talk and whining complaints. Food. A true feeder would have seen to my needs first and saved rebukes and complaints for later.' Within the wasted body, I moved like a shadow behind Soldier's Boy. My Speck self submerged me in his interpretation of the world. I surrendered and became still. Olikea glanced sideways at her sister and Jodoli. She hated being humiliated before them. She squared her shoulders and tried a firm and motherly approach. 'You are hungry and weak. Look at what you have done to yourself. Now is no time to be difficult, Soldier's Boy. Stop saying silly things and let me tend to you. You are not yourself right now.'

I smiled in harmony with Soldier's Boy. She had no idea how correct she was.

At that moment, I became aware of a scent on the air, the smell of something essential. He turned towards it, forgetting Olikea. The small sunburned boy was returning with a basket full of berries. He was hurrying, his round cheeks joggling as he trotted up to me. 'I've brought you the berries,' he called as he hastened up. His eyes met mine. I think he suddenly realized that it was unexpected for me to be awake. His blue eyes reflected a child's horror at how wasted my body was. Then, as quickly, horror was replaced with sympathy. He thrust the basket at me. 'Eat them! Eat them quickly!' In his haste, the basket tipped and a few berries bounded out of it to rest on the moss like scattered jewels.

'Clumsy boy! Give those to me! They are for the Great One,' Olikea told him sharply.

The youngster simultaneously cringed and pushed the basket towards her. As Olikea dropped her hand to take the basket. Jodoli looked away; Firada scowled. 'No,' Soldier's Boy said firmly.

'But you must eat these. Soldier's Boy.' Olikea's manner had changed in an instant. From being stern with the boy she went to cajoling me. 'They are what you need to regain your strength. Once you have strength back, we can begin to replenish your magic. But first, you must eat these.'

The smell of the berries reached his nostrils, piquant and tempting. He shivered with want. He clasped his hands together to keep from snatching at them. 'No. I take nothing from you. The boy brought the gift to me. Let him present it to me. The honour of serving a Great Man is his.'

Nevare would have blushed to say such words. Nevare would never have claimed such importance for himself. But this was not Nevare, no matter how I might think of him in terms of 'I' and 'me'. This was someone else, and I was only his silent shadow.

Olikea caught her breath. Her eyes narrowed and I thought she

would challenge his words. Instead, she stood abruptly, turned on her heel and stalked away. Jodoli and Firada stared after her, but the boy's full attention was on me. Awed by the honour, he dropped to his knees, the basket cradled in both his hands, and then walked on his knees towards me. The closer he came, the more compelling the smell of the food became. Soldier^ Boy did not take the basket from him, but dipped both hands in to fill them with berries and then raised the cupped berries to his mouth. In a very short time, the basket was empty. As Soldier's Boy heaved a sigh of satisfaction, the boy's face shone. He leapt to his feet, then seemed to recall he was in my presence and dropped back to his knees. On his knees, he again backed away from the forest mage and then once more rocketed onto his feet. 'I know where there are yellow mushrooms,' he exclaimed, and before Soldier's Boy could respond, he spun about and dashed off.

My Speck self looked around. I had expected to find myself in a Speck village, but there were no shelters, no cook-fires, nothing to indicate that we were anywhere except in the wild heart of the mountain forest. 'Where is everyone?' I heard Soldier's Boy ask, and realized the stupidity of his question. He took a breath. 'Jodoli. How did I come to be here?'

He looked uncomfortable, but spoke bluntly. 'You overspent your magic and fell, dying, near the end of the intruders' road. One of the ancestor trees was shamed to see a Great Man perish so, untended and without a tree to take him in. He used what life was left to him to start the whispering. And Lisana, your sponsor, added her strength to make it a command. I was summoned, as was Olikea. Firada came with me to tend me. And Olikea brought Likari to run and fetch for her.

'It was Olikea's duty to bring you back into the shade for you had fallen in full sunlight. She and Likari were burned bringing you to safety, for even depleted, you were a heavy load for them to shift, and there was no time for them to weave shade-cloaks for themselves. Once you were beneath the shelter of the trees, Firada was able to help them. We brought you here, well away from the brightness. And Olikea set about doing what she could to revive you. I am surprised that you are restored even this much. Never have I seen a Great One so depleted.'

'It was a foolish waste,' Soldierly Boy growled. He leaned back on the moss and looked up at the fragments of sky that showed through the dense canopy overhead. 'All that magic consumed by futility. What I did may delay their cutting of the trees, but it will not stop it. And while it may frighten them, or puzzle them, I fear that it will only set their minds to working on how they can overcome it rather than make them give up their plan. I know the task of ridding our land of the intruders is mine; but I do not know how I am to accomplish it. That still eludes me.'

'The magic does not give a man a task unless there is a way to do it,' Jodoli said comfortingly. The words had the rhythm of an old saw.

'Perhaps. But always I have been told that when you are on the right path, the magic lights the way and makes all clear. That has not happened with me, Jodoli. I am blind in the darkness, feeling niy way through a task that does not seem to have a solution.' It was strange to hear my voice without consciously deciding to speak. Very strange, and a tingle of dread ran along my nerves.

Jodoli looked acutely uncomfortable that Soldier's Boy had

confided his deficiency to him. I knew that Great Men seldom became close friends; they might be allies or more likely rivals. Power was to be shepherded for one's own use, for the good of one's kin clan. To admit to him that all my vast magic had been

spent to no avail embarrassed Jodoli on my behalf. Soldier's Boy knew there was no point in withholding that information from him. Perhaps he had some inkling of a solution to our woes.

But if he had, he did not share it then. 'In time, the magic will reveal your task, I am sure,' he said. He gave a sideways glance at Firada, and for the first time I noticed how shocked she was. The Great Ones did not admit ignorance, I suddenly knew. That Soldier's Boy had done so frightened her; the Specks looked to their Great Ones for leadership and guidance. Was not the magic of the forest in them, showing them what they must do? For him to admit that he felt no such inspiration from the magic frightened her. What if not even the magic could halt the flow of the intruders? What if even the Great Ones of the Specks could not save them? He regretted his words.

'I am sure it will. I am only tired and discouraged, and thus spoke as I did.'

'Of course. Eat and restore yourself and all will be well.'

Soldier's Boy shook my head ruefully. 'It will be days before I have restored even a third of my bulk, and months before I can amass that much magic again. It was a terrible waste.'

'Why did you do it?' Jodoli asked.

Soldier's Boy shook his head mutely. It was already a mistake to have confided in Jodoli as much as he had. If he told Firada and Jodoli that the ignorant Gernian part of him had done it, it would only confuse them. Possibly it would turn them against him. He could not let that happen. I was beginning to suspect that if he were to accomplish his task, it would require all the support he could muster. And all the strength.

A wave of hunger washed through him again, and he was suddenly aware of a terrible thirst. 'Is there more water?' he asked.

'In that skin there, perhaps,' Jodoli said stiffly. He gestured at it, but did not move to pass it to me. I sensed another misstep on Soldier's Boy's part. Jodoli was not his feeder, to see to his basic needs. Firada stood motionless at his side, well aware that it was not her place to offer him anything. He heaved our body to a sitting position and managed to reach the waterskin. It was not full but there was some in it. He drank it down and then asked plaintively, 'Where is that boy? What is his name again?'

'Likari,' Firada said. 'My nephew's name is Likari.'

The water had helped but it was still difficult to keep his thoughts fixed on anything but his hunger. 'Your nephew. I thought perhaps he was a younger brother.'

'No. He is my nephew. Olikea's son.'

I tried to keep the dismay from my face. 'I did not know she was married.' I had to slip into Gernian to find the word I needed.

Firada looked puzzled. There was no such concept in Speck

society. Nevare's guilt as sharing sex with a married woman had briefly spilled over into my Speck self. 'What is this "married"?' Firada asked. She spoke the word as if it might indicate a disease.

'A word from another place and time,' Soldier's Boy said airily. I sensed his discomfort that Pd been able to influence his thoughts and words. 'It means that she is devoted to a man. Dedicated enough to bear his child.'

Firada wrinkled her brow. 'I do not remember who fathered Likari. Olikea probably knows. She was barely a woman when she decided to have him, and quickly wearied of caring for him. She only pays attention to him when he can be useful to her.'

Nevare's outrage at such a thing collided with Soldier's Boy's sense that it did not matter that much. The child belonged to his kin-clan. He would be cared for even if his own mother did not assume a major role in his life. It took a few moments for my inner turmoil to subside. Had Soldier's Boy felt the same frustration that I now felt when I had been in charge of my life? I suspected it was so. The Gernian part of me was suspended now, able to think and judge but not to take action. I now knew I could influence Soldier's Boy's thoughts, but not control his actions. The best I could do was make that other self thoughtful and force him to compare the two different worlds that had created this duality.

He had been silent too long. Both Olikea and Jodoli were looking at him oddly. 'I suppose that I acted hastily in sending Olikea away. Perhaps the boy will tend me now until I can select someone who is better qualified.'

Jodoli glanced aside from me and puffed out his lips in the Speck gesture for 'no'. Still not looking at me, he suggested, 'Perhaps you are braver than I would be, taking on such a young feeder who is mitramed. He will know some of the foods you must have, and Ltkan is clever enough to quickly learn his duties. But there will be some ways in which your comforts will be lacking. Unless you seek comfort of a different sort.'

His words were oblique but I took his meaning. Nevare was affronted. Soldier's Boy answered bluntly. 'I have sent Olikea away. If she does not care for this child, why would I give her another one? And depleted as I am, I think it will be some time before I desire a woman. Chiefly what I need now is food, drink and rest. The first two the boy can provide for me, and the last I will take on my own.'

'But you cannot rest. Not yet.' Jodoli was emphatic.

'Why not?'

'Because it is time to journey. Our kin-clan was well on our way up into the mountains when the summons reached me that we must return to save you. It is the time of the travelling. You cannot linger here. The snows will catch you long before you reach the Wintering Place if you do.'

Firada spoke up, stating plainly what Jodoli had skirted. 'It is only by Jodoli's magic that you are alive. He used much of his reserves to bring us here to you swiftly. But for his intervention, you would still be baking in the sun while Olikea and Likari journeyed back to the Vale of the Ancestor Trees.'

'I owe a debt of food and thanks to Jodoli.' Soldier's Boy acknowledged the obligation.

Firada pursed her lips in disapproval. 'And with such a young and inexperienced feeder, I do not see how you are going to pay it. Likari will be strained to provide enough for you. He is a good boy, but young. How will he gather enough to pay back to Jodoli what was spent on your behalf?'

Jodoli looked aside. It was beneath a Great Man to fuss over such trifles. If he had demanded to be paid back, it might seem that he was not powerful enough to shrug off such an expenditure of magic. But it was the duty of his feeder to keep track of such things and be sure that other folk not only recognized their debts to the Great One in their midst, but paid back such debts with appropriate foods. Firada stood her ground squarely, even though it was awkward for her to confront a Great One in such a way. The foolish expenditure of my magic had cost me much in status as well as power. My size had been sufficient reason for folk to respect me. Diminishing and stupidly endangering myself had under-

mined my standing with Olikea's kin-clan. My position, I suddenly saw, was precarious. The kin-clan already had a Great One. Supporting him and gathering the foods requisite to keep his power fed was already their burden. Having seen my poor judgment, they might think supporting a second Great One a poor bargain.

Soldier^ Boy drew in breath, well aware that puffing his lungs with air was a poor substitute for a good show of fat. I probably looked ridiculous, a bony man covered in sagging skin trying to invoke the dignity and power of a properly fed Great One. Nevertheless, he maintained his bluff. 'It will be paid back. Be assured of that. I am not a man to be chary of paying his debts. It will be paid back and when I regain my size, if Jodoli is ever in need in any way, he will know that he can count on me to return the favour.'

That raised her brows. Great Ones were usually rivals and often bitter ones. To offer a favour and possibly an alliance was unheard of among the Specks. I could almost see her weighing the benefits. What power could be controlled by one kin-clan that supported an alliance of two Great Ones? Had such a thing ever been?

She turned to look at Jodoli. Something passed between them in that long look. Jodoli inclined his head slowly towards me. 'I will take you at your word. You need not trouble to pay back what I expended just yet. For now, Likari will have to do his utmost to keep you fed enough to travel swiftly. After you reach the Wintering Place will be soon enough for you to redeem your debts to us.'

His use of the plural did not escape me. A wash of weariness swept over me suddenly. If my body could not have food immediately, it demanded sleep. If it could not replenish flesh, then it would rest until it could. Where was that boy? He'd spoken of yellow mushrooms. My mouth ran at the thought of them. It was difficult for Soldier's Boy to rein his thoughts back to the matter at hand.

'Debts? Then you will accept my offer of aid, I believe.'

He nodded gravely. 'I had not considered it before now, but perhaps it is the only thing that would work. An alliance of Great Ones might convince Kinrove that he can no longer act alone. He



must talk to us of his plans, and he must hear us when we speak. He may be the largest of us, and perhaps his dance has kept the intruders away for all these years. But he must be made to see that the power of such magic is fading, and the cost to the People is high; some say too high to be borne. Two winters ago, I spoke of this to him. He laughed at me. Last winter I again raised my concerns. He would not hear me. He said that I should be ashamed to criticize his dance when I had done nothing to protect the Vale of the Ancestor Trees. As our kin-clan summers closest to the Vale, he said I should consider it my duty to be more watchful. Yet is it a matter of being watchful? I do not think so! And while our kin-group may have the summering grounds closest to the Vale of the Ancestor Trees, the trees house the ancestors of us all! Yet he behaved as if he had taken on a duty that I should have borne alone, as if I should consider myself and our kin-clan in debt to his! For a dance that has not ever made the intruders draw back, and has scarcely kept them at bay!

His words were important. Soldier's Boy knew that. And yet weariness struggled to close his eyes. He could stay awake only by thinking of the mushrooms the boy had promised me. With a sudden pang, he recalled the heaped baskets of food that Olikea had used to bring me, and how skilfully she had prepared and balanced the feasts. Perhaps he had been too hasty and too proud when he had dismissed her. He suddenly wished he could call her back even as he gritted my back teeth together at the thought. No. He'd lost standing enough. He would not risk looking as if he could not make up his mind.

He looked around anxiously. Hunger was making him frantic. He could no longer focus on anything Jodoli was saying. To his great relief, I saw Likari toiling through the trees. The basket was so heavily laden that he was carrying it in his arms instead of by the handle. Soldier's Boy sat up taller and tried to see what he was bringing.

The boy's eyes were bright and he began shouting long before he reached us. 'I'm sorry I was so long, Great One. On my way to the mushrooms, I found a patch of clingfruit, so I brought those as well. There were many of them, the red growing right alongside the yellow ones. And I brought all the mushrooms, from both sides of the trees. I know you are hungry, so I hurried. Did I do well?'

His sun-flushed face had gone even redder with his exertion, so that his specks were almost eclipsed in it. Soldier's Boy smiled and nodded, reaching eagerly for the basket. He was suddenly so

famished that he could not speak. Likari knelt as he lowered the basket. He began to take the food out of it but Soldier's Boy could not wait. He reached in and took handfuls of the clingfruit. I was not familiar with it, and the gelid feel of it was shocking. 'Watch out for the pits!' the boy exclaimed as Soldier's Boy put one in my mouth. He nodded, already immersed in the soft pulp and sweet tang.

But Firada scowled and said, 'Is that how you address a Great One, Likari! With no title, no bow of the head? Do you presume to tell him how he should eat his food? What sort of a feeder are you? Oh, this boy is much too young! He will bring shame on our kin-clan. Someone else must be found for this task.'

The boy shrank in on himself, crestfallen. He looked up at Soldier's Boy with wide eyes. They looked hazel now. His specks were shaped like teardrops and dappled his face almost evenly

except for the streak down his nose. The rest of his little body was more striped than spotted. The backs of his hands and the tops of his feet were a solid, sooty black. It reminded me of a horse's markings. Soldier's Boy spat out a rough pit. As he lifted another fruit from the basket, the boy's eyes suddenly swam with tears. I couldn't stand it. I pushed at Soldier's Boy's thoughts.

'He has brought me food, and given it to me quickly. That, right now, is my chief requirement in a feeder. I am sure Likari and I will get along well enough for now, and perhaps even better as we get to know one another.'

The boy's face brightened as if he'd been given a handful of gold coins. He peered up at his aunt through his lashes and struggled not to grin. He was trying to be respectful of her. Good. Soldier's Boy pulled the basket closer. The clingfruit was wonderful but he suddenly wanted the mushrooms. He dumped the basket out on the clean moss beside me. The food made a substantial heap. He grinned at it and picked up a cluster of mushrooms.

'Can you find me more food while I eat this?'

Likari glanced at Firada. Conscientiously, he made a grave bow. 'Certainly, Great One. As you wish, Great One. I will see what I can find.'

Firada had looked disapproving when I had praised the boy. Now, at this sign of deference from him, she relented. She spoke briskly. 'Go to the bend of the stream where the three big rocks are. Dig in the sandy spot there. You may find blue molluscs. They are excellent for rebuilding a Great One's strength. On the muddy bank, you will find fat grass growing. It will not be sweet any more; spring is long gone. But the roots will be thick and nourishing. Fetch those as well. See that you wash them well before you bring them to him. When a Great One is as famished as this one is, he is sometimes too hasty in his eating. He may take in dirt or bones if the food is not prepared correctly before it is offered. And dirt and bones may clog his bowels or put him into a fever.'

'Yes, Aunt.5 He looked at the ground. Thus did I fear that he would swallow the pit of the fruit as well.' When Firada looked grim at this bit of cheek, he added quickly, 'But I should have phrased my caution more respectfully. Thank you for your instruction, and for sharing your gathering places with me. Well do I know that often such places are guarded secrets.'

Firada was mollified. She sounded almost motherly as she said, 'I wish you to do well at this, if you must attempt it, Likari.' Then, in a sharper voice, she added, 'But you must not linger here talking while your Great One waits for food. Go. Hurry. Be back before he has finished what you have brought him!'

The boy nodded violently and scuttled away. Soldier's Boy was only peripherally aware of his leaving for the food still claimed most of his attention. I think Jodoli understood this. He waited until the mushrooms were gone and most of the clingfruit before he spoke again. 'It is good that your feeder found mushrooms for you. They will help, and if he can find the blue molluscs, that will be even better. You will need your strength tonight if we are to travel swiftly.'

My mouth was full of fruit. Soldier's Boy could not speak, so he raised my eyebrows at him.

'We cannot linger here. We must travel tonight. I spent magic to quick-walk here and to bring Firada, Likari and Olikea with me, all in a single night! Tonight, we must begin our journey back. We will not make it with as much haste. Still, the season is too late for you and your feeder to travel in an ordinary fashion. You will have to spend magic to quick-walk yourself and Likari to the Wintering Place.'

Questions popped into my mind. Why were we going up into the mountains as winter was coming on? Surely it would make

more sense to winter in the foothills than to travel to where the cold would be most extreme and the snow deepest? I was not sure Soldier's Boy knew how to quick-walk, let alone how to take someone with him when he did it. Quick-walking was a Speck magic, a way to traverse a long distance very swiftly. Soldier's Boy shared my doubts. He hastily crammed the last of the clingfruit into my mouth. As he chewed them, I felt suddenly steadier, more anchored in the world and in the day. He swallowed gratefully, but before he could ask Jodoli any questions, Firada asked one of her own.

'What of Olikea?' she asked gravely. 'Will you quick-walk her back to the People?'

I saw Jodoli's hesitation. 'I wished to be full of magic when I spoke to Kinrove. I have already spent more than I intended in coming here and bringing all of you with me. Nevare intends to pay us back, but—'

Before he could say anything more, Soldier's Boy interrupted. 'Olikea came here on my behalf. And I suspect that she did not come willingly. I feel a debt to her. I will quick-walk her back.' He did not wish to be any deeper in Jodoli's debt.

He looked doubtful. 'Will you be strong enough to quick-walk yourself, Olikea and Likari?'

'If I am not tonight, then I will have to stay here and rest and eat and try again.'

Olikea had not gone far. I suspected that she had lingered quite close by, listening to the conversation and watching how I interacted with her son. Now she emerged from behind one of the immense trees. She strolled towards us in a desultory way, but the glances she gave me were still full of both anger and injured pride. She would not look at me directly but instead addressed Jodoli. 'I would prefer that you were the one to quick-walk me back to the People. Once we are there, I will bring food to you to pay you back. Or, I will go now, to find food so that you will be strong when we travel tonight.'

A spark kindled in Firada's eyes at her sister's words. She moved, placing her body as a barrier between Olikea and Jodoli. She narrowed her eyes and her voice sounded like an angry cat's snarl as she said, 'I know what you are trying to do. It will not work! You angered your own Great One and he has rejected you. Do not think you can ingratiate yourself with mine! Jodoli has been mine since he passed through his trial! I have fed him, I have groomed him, and countless times I have rescued him from his own foolishness. Now that he stands ready to make challenge to Kinrove, do you think you will come wheedling with sweet words and tasty titbits to steal him from me? No. Step back from him, sister. You had your chance and you wasted it. You will not take mine from me.'

I stared in horrified fascination as Firada set her weight as if she were a man preparing for a wrestling match. Her knees were flexed slightly, her arms held away from her body, ready to grip her opponent if Olikea decided to charge. She gave her head a toss and a shake to clear her streaky hair from her face. I blinked my eyes and saw her as Soldier's Boy did. My German manners had kept me from staring frankly at their near nakedness. Now with admiration I noted the muscles beneath the ample weight that Firada carried. She was formidable. Her younger sister was taller, and in no way dainty, but if I had been placing a wager I would have bet on Firada to win.

I am not certain that Olikea had been challenging her sister over Jodoli. She looked a trifle surprised and daunted at Firada's angry defence of her territory. Her mouth worked and then she puffed her lips disparagingly. 'I do not want him. I want only to be conveyed back to the People. That is all. Everywhere and always, Firada, you think other women want what you have. You are foolish. You value him too much. He has been slow to grow, placid, almost stupid in how he lets you herd him about and pasture him as if he were a Gernian's sheep. You may keep him, and we shall see how much good comes to you from him.'

She shook her hair back, lifted her chin in defiance and turned her back on both of them. Jodoli, I noted, showed little interest in the exchange. I wondered if he were truly as passive as Olikea named him, or if it was beneath the interest of a Great One to take affront at such an exchange. Firada bared her teeth at her sister. It could have been amusement or satisfaction at having vanquished a potential rival. I had no time to ponder it further, for Olikea strode up to me and stood over me in a manner that was almost threatening. I had never had the experience of looking up at a naked woman who was bristling with fury. It was both daunting and strangely arousing.

'You are right. It was your foolishness that demanded I come here. You owe me transport back to the People.'

Soldier's Boy said nothing. I was inclined to be a gentleman and see that she was safely returned to her family. But the Great Man was a bit weary of her exploitation and demands. She still seethed before me. He compromised and spoke firmly. 'If you wish me to quick-walk you back to the People, I will need the strength to do so. I will attempt it if you aid Likari in finding food for me today. That seems fair to me.'

He would have been wiser not to add the last comment. It was like spark to powder. She exploded with righteous indignation. 'Fair? Fair? You know nothing of fair. For months, I have brought you food, taught you even what foods you should be eating. I have lain with you for your comfort and release. I have nagged you, to no avail, to allow me to feed and tend you as a Great Man should be attended. I have struggled to make you behave as you should and to teach you your duties to the People. And what has been my thanks from you? Have I been lifted in honour by my people? No! Have you done great deeds for them? No! Instead, you have spoken of the intruders as "my people" and said that there is nothing that will turn them back! Treachery and ingratitude. That is what I have received from you! Insults and disobedience! How is one to be the feeder of such an insufferable Great One? And now look at you! All the work I did for you is wasted. You are thin as a starving man, thin as a man no one respects, thin as a man cursed by the forest, thin as a man too stupid to find food for himself. You will do no great deeds.'

It will take months, perhaps a year or more before you become as fat as you were. And every day that you struggle to regain the power you wasted, Jodoli will eat and hoard his strength and grow. You will never be greater than he is. And when all the kin-clans gather at the Wintering Place, you will be mocked, and the people who bring you will be mocked. All my work, all my fetching and gathering and tending of you, you have wasted. What good did it do me? What good did it do any of my kin-clan?'

It was like watching a geyser erupt. Every time I thought she would pause for thought, she only gulped down a deep breath and blasted me again. Jodoli and Firada were mute witnesses, horrified in that fascinated way of people who watch an unthinkable event take place. I think Soldier's Boy took it calmly only because within

myself I was so divided as to how to react. The German wished to acknowledge that she had not received what she had expected. The Great Man resented the burden of abuse.

Soldier's Boy crossed my arms on my chest, only too aware of how the skin hung limp and empty on my forearms and breast. Even my fingers looked odd to me, their plumpness lost. I shared his sudden wave of mourning for all my hoarded magic lost. Olikea was right. I looked like a man without power, unhonoured and thin. I would be mocked at the gathering of the kin-clans. Disappointment flooded me and it turned into anger. He pointed a finger at her. 'Olikea,5 he said into her tirade. I do not think he used any magic, but she was silenced as suddenly as if he had.

'If you wish me to quick-walk you back to the People tonight, go find food for me now. Otherwise, I will be too weak. If you do not wish to help feed me, that is fine. Beg passage of Jodoli. But those are your only two options. Choose, and do it quietly.'

She narrowed her eyes and their green made it a cat's stare. 'Perhaps I have choices you know nothing about, Jhernian!' She turned on her heel and strode off into the forest. I stared after her, wondering how I could ever have imagined that she felt love or even affection towards me. It had been a transaction. Sex and food given to me in the expectations that I would acquire status and power, and that she would share in those things.

Firada puffed breath out of her pursed lips, dismissing Olikea's show disdainfully. 'She has no other options. She will return, with sweet food and sweet words, to wriggle into your favour again. My little sister has always been thus. My father spoiled her after my mother was taken.'

Jodoli came and ponderously lowered his bulk beside me. Soldier's Boy suppressed a wave of envy. Jodoli looked very fine, his skin smooth and oiled, his belly sleek and rounded as a gorged forest cat. His hair was glossy, sleeked back from his face and then braided into a fat tail. I looked away from him, unable to bear the sharp contrast with my saggy skin and protruding bones. 'We must speak, Nevare, of Olikea's accusations. I know you have been a divided man, unwilling to concede that the intruders must be killed or driven back. But now they have cast you out, perhaps you will feel differently about them. Perhaps you will admit that they do not belong here.'

Soldier's Boy rubbed my hands together, looking at my fingers. A divided man. Little did he know how accurately he spoke. 'How do you know they cast me out?' he asked Jodoli.

'The magic whispered it to me. You would not come to the forest of your free will, so it had to turn your people against you. Now they have disowned you. When you say "my people" today, to whom do you refer?'

It was not a question just for Soldier's Boy, a Great Man of the Specks. It was for Nevare to answer as well. Soldier's Boy spoke for both of us.

'I do not think I will say "my people" for a very long time.'

#### SIX

#### Confrontations

As Nevare, I did little the rest of that day. I retreated to the back of my mind and became an onlooker in my life. Soldier's Boy ate the food that Likari brought him, drank deeply of clean water, and then slept. He woke to the wonderful aroma of hot food. Olikea brought it. A hastily woven net held leaf-wrapped packets the size of my fist and roasted tubers. The packets held chunks of fish cooked with a sour root. The leaves that held them were edible and added their own piquant touch of flavour. He ate the food and commented on it favourably. That was the only conversation between them. Neither apologized or explained where the situation now stood. It seemed far simpler a resolution than could ever have occurred between Gernians.

When Likari brought food, he ate that as well. I do not think that pleased Olikea but she didn't talk about it. Instead, she took a wooden comb from her shoulder pouch and painstakingly combed out my hair. She spent far longer on the task than it deserved; I had never realized how good such a simple thing could feel. I do not think Firada approved of Soldier's Boy's easy acceptance of Olikea's return. She announced that she was taking Jodoli down to the stream to wash him and to rest there. She stalked away and he stolidly followed her, a placid bullock of a man.

Olikea ignored their leaving. Likari had gone off to look for more mushrooms. She continued to work her comb through my hair. There wasn't much of it. I had given up keeping it in a cavalla soldier's short cut some time ago, but there was still not enough to plait or dress in any fashion. Still, it felt good, and the Great

Man allowed her gentle touch and his full belly to lull him. He fell asleep.

Strange to say, I did not sleep. I remained awake and aware of all the sensations a man may feel with his eyes closed. I wondered if this was how it had been for my Speck self in the days when I had been so firmly in charge of my life - or thought I had been. In a way, it was pleasant. I felt that I had let go of the reins; surely no one could hold me responsible now for the chaos that my life had become. The early afternoon was warm, summer stealing one of autumn's days, but here, deep in the shade of the forest, there was a pleasant chill that tickled the surface of my skin. If I lay very still, my body warmth lingered around me, but the slightest breeze stole it away. It did not much bother me. The moss I rested on was deep and my body had warmed it. I was comfortable. I was naked, I realized belatedly. Olikea must have taken my clothing when she rescued me. She had never approved of how much clothing I wore. Her discarding it struck me as foolish. Naked, others would more quickly see how wasted and thin I was. However strange my clothing might have seemed, at least it might have kept some of the disdain and mockery at bay. Among the Speck, few things were more pitied and

despised than a skinny man. What kind of a fool could not provide for himself, or earn enough regard from his fellows to have them help him in a time of injury or sickness? I looked such a fool right now. Well, Soldier's Boy was in command of the body now; he would have to deal with it. I let my mind drift to more pleasant thoughts.

I heard birdsong, the sound of the breeze in the needled trees, and the very light rattle of falling leaves whenever a gust of breeze was strong enough to dislodge them. I could hear them cascading down, ricocheting through the twigs and branches until they finally reached the forest floor. The Speck were right. Summer was over, autumn was strong and winter would be on its heels. Real cold would descend, followed by the snows and harsh winds of winter. Last winter I'd had a snug little cabin to shelter me. This winter, I would face that weather with not even the clothes on my back. A tide of dread started to rise in me, but again I turned it back with the simple demurrals: it was not my problem. Specks seemed to have survived well through the ages. Whatever their tactic was, even it was simply the stoic endurance of cold and privation, Soldier's Boy would learn it and last the winter. A bird sang again, loudly, a warning, and then I heard the crack of its wings as it took hasty flight. A moment later I heard something heavy settle into the branches overhead. A shower of broken twigs rattled against my face, followed by the slower fall of leaves. I looked up in annoyance. A huge croaker bird had settled in the tree above me. I grimaced in distaste. Fleshy orange-red wattles hung about his beak, reminding me both of dangling meat and cancerous growths. His feathers rattled when he shook them and it seemed as if I could smell the stench of carrion on them. His long black toes gripped the branch tightly as he leaned down to peer at me. His eyes were very bright.

'Nevare! You owe me a death.'

The croaked words shot ice down my spine. I arched as if I'd been hit by an arrow, and then peered up at the creature in the branches overhead. He was no longer a bird. He wasn't a man either. Orandula, the god of balances, teetered on the branch over my head. His long black feet gripped the branch with horny toenails. His nose was a carrion bird's hooked beak, and the red wattles dangled from his throat now. His hair was a thicket of unruly feathers, and feathers cloaked his body and dangled from his arms. Unchanged were his piercing bird-bright eyes. He cocked his head and stared down at me. He smiled, his beak stretching horribly as he did so. As I stared, fixed with terror, his little black tongue came out of his mouth, dabbing at the edges of his beak and then retreated again.

It wasn't real. It was too horrible to be real. Every prayer I knew to the good god bubbled to the top of my mind. I tried to form the words, but Soldier's Boy slept on, his mouth closed, oblivious to my terror. I tried to close my eyes, to block out the sight of the old god, to make him a dream. I could not. My eyes were not open. I did not know how I was seeing him. I struggled desperately to lift an arm and put it across my eyes, but my body did not belong to Nevare. Soldier's Boy slumbered on. I could not look away from the old god's piercing gaze. It was horrid to experience such terror, and to feel at the same time the slow and steady breathing of deep sleep and the calm heartbeat of a man contentedly at rest. Soldier's Boy could sleep but Nevare could not flee from the god in the tree above me. A whimper tried to escape me; it could not. I tried to look away; I could not.

'Why do they always do that?' Orandula asked rhetorically. 'Why

do men think that if they cannot see a thing, it goes away or stops existing? I should think any sane creature would want to keep its eyes fixed on something as dangerous as me!' He opened his arm-wings and rattled the pinions at me menacingly, and the whimper inside me tried to be a scream. His smile grew broader. 'Yet, without exception, when I pay a visit such as this, men try to avert their eyes from me. It's useless, Nevare. Look on me. You are mine, you know. Neither your good god nor your forest magic will dispute my claim. You took that which was intended for me. Your life is forfeit. You owe me a death in payment. Look at me, Nevare Burvelle!' When he commanded me to look on him, a strange thing happened. A chill calm welled up in me, just like the cool air over the water within a deep well. I recognized something in him, or perhaps something in my situation. Inevitability. I still feared him with a heart-stopping intensity but I knew I could not escape him. Struggle was pointless. The calm of despair filled me. I could look on the god I had cheated. I found a voice to speak to him, one that did not use my lips or tongue or lungs. I met his gaze, even though it was like pressing my palm against the tip of a sword.

'A death? You demand a death? You had a hundred deaths, a glut of deaths. How many did I bury at the end of the summer? Strong soldiers, little children. Strangers. Enemies of mine. Friends. Buel Hitch. Carsina.' My voice broke on the name of my former fiancée.

Orandula laughed like a crow cawing. 'You tell me what I took, not what you gave me. You gave me nothing! You stole from me, Nevare Burvelle.'

'All I did was free a suffering bird from its impalement on a sacrificial carousel. I lifted it from the hook and released it. How is that so great a trespass that I must pay for it with my life? Or my death.'

'You wronged me, man. The bird was mine, both its life and its death. Who were you to say it should not suffer? Who were you

to pick it free and put life back into it and let it fly away?'  
"I put life back into it?"

'Hah!' His exclamation was a harsh croak. 'There speaks a man! First, you will pretend you did not know how grave a thing you did. Then you will deny you did it. Then you will say—'  
'It's not fair!'

'Of course. Exactly that. And then finally, each and every one will claim—'

If I had had lungs, I would have drawn a breath. I invoked the strength of the words with the full force of my fear. 'I am a follower of the good god. I was dedicated to him as a soldier son when I was born, and I was raised in his teachings. You have no power over me!' The last I uttered with conviction. Or attempted to. My words were drowned in the caws of his laughter.

'Oh, yes, the final denial. I can't be your god; you already have a god. You keep him in your pouch and let him out on occasions such as this. Calling on your good god is so much more effective than, say, pissing yourself in terror. Or, at least, it has a bit more dignity.' He spread his tail feathers and leaned back, rocking so hard with laughter that the big branch shook. I looked up at him, unable to avert my eyes. He took his time getting his hilarity under control. Finally, he stopped laughing, and wiped his feathered arm across his eyes. He leaned forward, turning his bird's head side-



ways to look at me more closely. 'Call him,' he suggested to me. 'Shout for the good god to come and rescue you. I want to see what happens. Go ahead. Yell for help, man. It's the only thing you haven't done yet.'

I couldn't do it. I wanted to. I wanted desperately to be able to cry out to some benign presence that would sweep in and rescue me. It wasn't a lack of faith in the good god's existence. I think I feared to call on my god lest he come to me, and find me lacking and unworthy. I knew in my heart, as most men do, that I'd never really given myself fully to his service. I do not speak of the way that a priest resigns his life to the service of a god, but rather to how a man suspends his own judgment and desires and relies on what he has been told the good god desires of him. Always, I had held back from that commitment. I had always believed, I discovered, that when I was an old man I could become devout and make up for my heedless youth. Age would be a good time to practice self-discipline and charity and patience. When I was old, I would give generous alms and spend hours in meditation while watching the sweet smoke of my daily offerings rise to the good god. When I was old, and my blood no longer bubbled with ambition and lust and wild curiosity, then I could settle down and be content in my good god.

Foolishly, I had believed that I would always have the opportunity to be a better man, later. Obviously, a man's life could end at any time. A fall down the stairs, a chill or a fever, a stray bullet;

youth was no armour against such fates. A man could lose his life by accident, at any moment. Some part of me, perhaps, had known that, but I'd never believed it at a gut level.

And I'd certainly never considered that at any moment, an old god could materialize and demand my life of me.

I didn't merit the good god's intervention and worse, I feared his judgment. The old gods, I knew, had been able to plunge men into endless torment or perpetual labour, and often did solely for their own amusement. Such anguish on a whim suddenly seemed preferable to facing a just banishment.

My cry of supplication died in me unuttered. I looked up at Orandula, the old god of balances and felt myself quiver with resignation and then grow still. The feathers on his head quirked up in surprise.

'What? No shrieks for rescue? No pleas for mercy? Eh. Not very amusing for me. You're a bad bargain, Nevare. Looks like half of you is the most I can get, and it isn't even the interesting half. Yet, being as I am the god of balances, something in that appeals to me.'

'Do what you will to me!' I hissed at him, weary already of teetering on that brink.

He fluttered his feathers up, gaining almost a third in size as he did so. 'Oh, I shall,' he muttered as he eased them down. He leisurely groomed two wing plumes, pulling them through his beak and then settling them into order. For a moment, he seemed to have forgotten me. Then he pierced me with his stare again. 'At my leisure. When I decide to take what you owe me, then I'll come for it, and you'll pay me.'

'Which do I owe you?' I was suddenly moved to ask him. 'My death? Or my life?'

He yawned, his pointed tongue wagging in his mouth as he did so. 'Whichever I please, of course. I am the god of balances, you know. I can choose from either end of the scales.' He cocked a head at me. 'Tell me, Nevare. Which do you think an old god such as me would find most pleasing? To demand your death of you? Or insist that you pay me with your life?'

I didn't know the answer and I didn't wish to give him any ideas. My fears toiled and rumbled inside me. Which did I most fear? What did he mean when he said those words? That he would kill me and I'd become nothing? Or that he'd take me in death and keep me as his plaything? What if he demanded my life from me, and I became a puppet of the old god? All paths seemed dark. I stared up at him hopelessly.

He fluttered his feathers again, then suddenly opened his wings. He lifted from the branch as effortlessly as if he weighed nothing. Then he was gone. Literally gone. I didn't see him fly away. Only the swaying of the relieved branch testified that he had been there.

'Do not wake him!'

Olikea's warning hissed at Likari did precisely what she had told the boy not to do. Soldier Son stirred, grunted and opened his eyes. He drew a deeper breath, and then rubbed his face. 'Water,' he requested, and both his feeders reached for the waterskin that lay beside him. Olikea was a shade faster and a bit stronger. She had her hands on it first, with the better grip and snatched it from Likari. The boy's eyes widened with disappointment and outrage.

'But I was the one who went and refilled it!' he protested.

'He needs help to drink from it. You don't know how. You'll get it all over him.'

They sounded for all the world like squabbling siblings rather than a mother and her son. Soldier's Boy ignored both of them, but took the waterskin away from Olikea to drink from it. He nearly drained it before he handed it back to the boy with a nod of thanks. He yawned and then carefully stretched, noting with displeasure how the limp skin dangled from his arms. He lowered them back to his side. 'I feel better. But I need to eat more before we quick-walk tonight. I would like cooked food to warm me; the world will cool as night comes on.'

He groaned as he sat up, but it was the groan of a man who has eaten well, slept heavily, and looked forward to doing the same again. How could he be so unaware of all that had befallen me while he slept? Did he even sense that I still existed within him? How could he have been so blithely unaware of Orandula's visit to me and how it had terrified me? Yet so he seemed. How had it been for him, submerged within me for the better part of a year? I recalled the moments when he had broken through and into my

awareness, and the times when he had forced me to take actions. What had it taken, there at the Dancing Spindle, for him to push me aside while he both stole and then destroyed the magic of the plainspeople? Had it been a burst of passion, or had he simply gathered his strength and waited for a moment when he desired to use it? I needed to learn how he had manipulated me and to discover why he was now ascendant over me if I were to survive and ever re-capture control of the life we shared. I was not certain that I wished to be the one in command of our life, but I did know that I was reluctant to cede full control to my Speck self. I refused the

notion that I might never again control my own body. The strangeness of the situation suspended my judgment of it. The terror I should have felt hovered, unacknowledged.

Likari had anticipated Soldier's Boy's appetite. In his basket, there were several fat roots from a water plant and two bright yellow fish that were just now gasping their last breaths. The boy presented the basket expectantly. Soldier's Boy nodded at it, pleased, but Olikea scowled.

'I will cook these things for you. The boy does not know how.' Likari opened his mouth to protest, and then shut it with a snap. Evidently his mother had spoken true. Nonetheless, his lower jaw and lip quivered with disappointment. Soldier's Son looked at him dispassionately, but I felt for the boy. 'Give him something!' I urged my other self. 'At least acknowledge what he has done for you.'

I could sense his awareness of me, just as I had once been the one to feel his hidden influences on my thoughts and actions. He scowled to himself, and then looked at the boy again. His shoulders had fallen and he was withdrawing. Soldier's Son lifted the waterskin. 'My young feeder will fill this again for me. The cool water was very good to have when I awoke.'

The boy halted. My words transformed him. He lifted his head, squared his shoulders and his eyes sparkled as he smiled up at me. 'I am honoured to serve you, Great One,' he replied, taking the waterskin. The words were a standard courtesy among the Speck when they addressed a Great One, but the boy uttered them with absolute sincerity.

Olikea folded her lips tightly, and then briskly added, 'Bring firewood, too, when you come back with the water. And see that it is dry, so that it will burn hot to cook the fish quickly.' If she meant her words to sting, she failed. The boy scarcely noticed that it was her giving the command. He bobbed acquiescence and raced off to his task.

Soldier's Boy watched Olikea as she scoured the area for kindling and twigs to get the fire started. She pushed the newly fallen leaves away to bare a place on the forest's mossy floor, and then peeled the moss away to reveal damp black earth. There she arranged her kindling. She untied one of the pouches from her belt and took out her fire-making supplies. When she did so, I felt a tingly itch spread over my skin. Soldier's Boy shifted uncomfortably. Idly, I noted that the steel she used to strike sparks from the flint was of Gernian make. She had set to one side a handful of sulphur matches. For all her professed hatred of the intruders, she did not despise the technology and conveniences they had brought. I smiled cynically but Soldier's Boy's lips did not move. He seemed to be thinking something else, wondering how many other Specks now carried steel so casually, even knowing the iron in it was dangerous to magic. He ignored my thoughts. Was I a small voice in the back of his mind, a vague sensation of unease, or nothing at all to him? All I could do was wonder.

Olikea built the fire efficiently. I considered her as she moved about the area, gathering twigs to feed the tiny flame, stooping down to blow on the fire and then as she began to cut up the roots and clean the fish from Likari's basket. I could not compare her to Gernian women at all, I realized. She moved with ease and confidence, as completely unaware of her nudity as Soldier's Boy was. That was odd to consider. He felt no surge of lust for her. Perhaps it was that I'd spent so much of his magic he felt as if he could barely stand, let alone mate with a woman. I stood at the edge of

his flowing thoughts; he was not thinking of sex, but of the food she was preparing. He was gauging how much he could rebuild his strength by nightfall and how much of his magic he would have to burn to quick-walk all three of them back to the People.

Quick-walk. One could travel that way, seeming to stride along at an ordinary pace, but covering the ground much more swiftly. A mage could carry others along with him, one or two or even three if he was powerfully fat with magic. But it took an effort to get the magic started, and stamina to sustain it. It would not be easy for him, and he was reluctant to burn what little reserves he

had restored. Nevertheless, he would have to do it. He had said that he would, in front of Jodoli. A Great Man never backed away from a feat of magic he claimed he would do. He would lose all status with the People if he did.

Likari came back with an armful of firewood. Olikea thanked him brusquely and sent him for more water. I suspected she was trying to keep him at a distance from Soldier's Boy while she carried out the more obvious tasks of a feeder. She seemed to feel my gaze on her and turned to look at me. As our eyes met, I felt as if she could still see me, the Gernian, buried inside Soldier's Boy. Did she notice that he had changed in his demeanour towards her? She dropped her eyes and appraised me as if she were looking at a horse she might buy. Then she shook her head.

'Fish and roots will help but what you need is grease if we are to rebuild you quickly. Likari will not find that in this part of the forest at this time of year. Even if he could, he is too small to kill anything. Once we have rejoined the People, you will have to do the hunter's dance for us, and summon a bear before it goes to its winter rest. Slabs of bear meat thick with fat will build you quickly. I will cook it with mushrooms and leeks and red salt. It will take time, Nevare, but I will restore you to your power.'

Her mere description of the food made my mouth run with saliva. She was right. The body craved fat. The fish and roots suddenly seemed meagre and unsatisfying. Soldier's Boy sat up and rubbed the loose folds of his belly. Moving slowly and cautiously, he got to his feet. The whole body felt peculiar. It was strange to be so light. I had built muscle to carry the fat that was now gone. My skin sagged all around me, wrinkling in unexpected places. He held my arms out from my body, looked down on my wasted form and shook my head in disgust. He'd have to begin all over again.

'I can restore you,' Olikea promised me as if she'd heard his thoughts. 'I can be a very good feeder to you.'

'If I allow it,' he reminded her.

'What choice do you have?' she asked me reasonably. 'Likari cannot even cook for you. He certainly cannot give you children to help care for you when you are old. You are angry with me now. I was angry with you before. Perhaps I am still angry with YOU, but I am smart enough to know this: Anger will not get me what I want, so I will set it aside. Anger will not get you what you want and need. You should be wise enough to set it aside and let things go back to the way they were. The People will have enough reasons to mock you and doubt you. Do not give them any more by having a mere boy tending you. Let me be by your side when we return. I can explain that you spent all your magic in making a great tangle of forest that will protect our ancestor trees through the winter. I can make them see you as a hero who spent all he had in an effort

to protect that which is most important to all of us, rather than as a fool who depleted himself yet found no glory or power in doing it.'

I was beginning to perceive the Specks in an entirely different way. I'd always been told they were child-like and naive, a primitive folk with simple ways, and so I had treated Olikea. I'd imagined she was passionately in love with me, and actually flogged myself with guilt over taking advantage of the infatuated young maiden. Plying me with food and sex had been her tactic to win me, and to enjoy the effects of bringing a man of power and girth into her kin-clan. She competed with her sister far more savagely than I'd ever striven to outdo either of my brothers. But, far from being enthralled by me, she had seen me as a tool for her ambition and used me accordingly. She spoke now, not out of love or affection, but only that anger was keeping both of us from what we wanted. Even our potential children were not the fruit of our affections for one another, but my insurance against feeble old age. She was hard, hard as whipcord, hard as tempered steel and Soldier's Boy had known that about her all the time. He finally smiled at her.

'I can set my anger aside, Olikea. But it does not mean that I set aside my memory of what caused my anger. It is very clear to both of us how my power may benefit you. Less clear to me is why I need you, or indeed why your kin-clan is the only one I should consider for my own. While you cook for me, perhaps you could explain to me why you are the best choice to be my feeder, and why your kin-clan, folk who already have a Great One in their midst, would be my best home among the People. There are kin-clans that have no Great Ones, where a feeder would have all the gathering skills of a kin-clan to aid her in caring for me. Why should I choose you?'

She narrowed her eyes and folded her lips. She had wrapped the fish and roots in well-moistened leaves and put them to steam in her fire. She poked vindictively at them with her cooking stick; I was sure she would rather have jabbed me with it. Soldier's Boy watched her coolly, and I could feel him speculating on which would win out, her anger or her ambition. She kept her gaze on her cooking and spoke to the fire.

'You know that I can prepare food well, and that I gather food efficiently. You know that my son Likari is an energetic gatherer. Name me as your feeder, and I will put him in your service as well. You will have the benefits of two of us bringing you food and seeing to your needs. And I will continue to give you pleasure and seek to become pregnant with your child. That is not an easy task, you know. It is hard to catch the seed of a Great Man and harder still to carry his child to term. Few of the Great have children of their own. But I already have a son that I can put in service to you.

'If you wish to have two of us serving you, before you have become fat and worthy again, then this is the only way it can be so. If you choose Likari over me, then I will have nothing more to do with either of you. And if you choose to leave my kin-clan when we reach the Wintering Place to find a feeder among some other clan, well, I will see to it that all hear of how faithless you are, how clumsy with your magic and how you wasted a wealth of it to very little success. Do you think that every woman wants to be a feeder? You will find, perhaps, that there are not that many of us willing to give up our lives to serve one such as you.'

Soldier's Boy had let her have her say without interruption. When he held his silence after she had finished, she glanced up at him once, her annoyance plain. He made her wait, but I noticed she did not prod him. Finally he said, 'I do not like your threats, Olikea. And I believe that yes, actually there will be many women at the Wintering Place who would want to become my feeder and share in my glory and power, without making threats or sour faces at me. You still have not given me a powerful reason to choose your kin-clan. Do Jodoli and Firada support the notion of another Great Man sustained by your kin-clan?'

She didn't answer directly, but the way she lowered her head and scowled told me much. At that very moment we heard their voices through the trees, and in a moment more they came into sight. Jodoli looked clean and well rested. His hair was freshly plaited, and his skin had been rubbed with fragrant oil. 'Like a piece of prize livestock/ the Nevare portion of me thought wryly, but I felt Soldier's Boy's keen jealousy cut through me. In contrast to Jodoli, he felt grubby, unkempt and skinny. He glanced at Olikea;

she likewise burned with frustration. She spoke louder than necessary.

The boy has done well at finding food for me to prepare for you. After you have eaten, I think I will help you bathe. And then perhaps you should sleep again.'

Jodoli gave a huge, contented yawn. 'That sounds a good plan, Nevare, if we are to quick-walk tonight. Ah. That food smells good.'

A remarkable thing happened. Firada bristled at his compliment to Olikea. Olikea looked at her sister and said almost sharply, 'I have prepared all this for Nevare. He will need his strength.' Then, with a sideways glance at me, she added to Jodoli, 'But perhaps we can spare enough for you to have a taste.'

'We will share it with Jodoli and Firada,' Soldier's Boy suddenly decreed. 'I owe them thanks for bringing you here. Sharing food to replace the magic the Jodoli spent on me is called for, I think.'

He took command of the situation that easily, and presided over the meal that ensued. I was pleased that he did not forget Likari. The boy had made trip after trip at Olikea's request, bringing firewood, cooking water, the wide flat leaves of a water plant to wrap the fish, and so on. He sat at a respectful distance from the adults, looking as if he could barely keep his eyes open, but eyeing the food all the same. Soldier's Boy's announcement that he would share food had brought out hospitality in Jodoli as well. He asked Firada what supplies she had brought with her. She had meal cakes seasoned with a peppery herb and little balls made of suet, dried berries and honey. These combined with the food Olikea had prepared to make a delicious and generous meal for all of us. Likari seemed very conscious of the honour of being given Great Man's food to eat. He ate it slowly, in tiny nibbles that reminded me of my days locked in my room under my father's jurisdiction and he seemed to savour each morsel as carefully as I had then.

There was little talk. Jodoli and Soldier's Boy concentrated on their food as only Great Ones knew how to do, while Firada and

Olikea regarded one another in wary rivalry. Soldier's Boy did more than eat; he considered each mouthful as he chewed it, enjoying

flavour and texture, but also calculating how much of it his body could store for later use as magic and how much he must keep ready for the simple business of living. He was not pleased with his results. What he ate today he would almost certainly have to use tonight to quick-walk them back to the People. He couldn't begin to rebuild his resources until they reached the Wintering Place. The fat and easy days of summer were past; he wondered if the People would be generous with their winter supplies when it came to feeding an unproven Great One.

After the meal, Jodoli announced that he planned to visit the Vale of the Ancestor Trees until the cool of the evening. 'Magic is always easier when the sun no longer beats down on us,' he observed, and I knew it was so without knowing how I knew it. 'We will meet again at the Wintering Place?' he asked me, and Soldier's Boy nodded gravely and thanked him once more for his aid. I watched them depart, Jodoli moving unhurriedly while Firada gently chivvied him along.

Olikea was as good as her word. She even made a show of helping Soldier's Boy to stand and then guiding him down to the stream's edge. Likari came with us, and she put him to work, bringing fine sand to scrub my feet and handfuls of horsetail ferns to scrub my back. Nevare would have felt embarrassed to have a young boy and a lovely woman wash his body while he sat idly in the shallows and let them. Soldier's Boy not only allowed it, he accepted it as his due.

Olikea tsk'ed over the sagging folds of skin, but served me well. I had never known that having someone scrub my feet and then massage them could feel so delightful. I think she realized that she nearly paralysed me with pleasure, for after I was washed, she had me rest on the clean moss beside the stream while she rubbed my back, my shoulders, my hands and my neck. It felt so good Soldier's Boy did not want to fall asleep and miss the sensations, but of course he did.

I slept when Soldier's Boy did that time. The physical weariness and needs of the body were his to bear, but I think there is a soul weanness that one can feel, and I felt it. Less than two days had passed since my life had profoundly changed. I'd been a condemned man, escaping execution one night, and a mage who had spent all his magic the next. Those were two giant strides away from the boy who had been a second son, raised to be a cavalla soldier. I think my awareness needed to retreat, and it did.

When next I noticed the world, I was looking up through Soldier's Boy's blinking eyes at the interlacing tree branches overhead. The leaves were shivering, rustling so hard against one another that many of those loosened by autumn's bite were breaking loose from their weakened grips on twigs and falling. A few falling leaves became a flurry of yellow and orange, and then a blizzard. I stared up at them, befuddled. The sound of their falling was unearthly;

there was a rhythm to the trembling of the leaves that sounded like people whispering in the distance, a rhythm that had nothing to do with the wind.

There was no wind.

And the voices were there, whispering.

There were dozens of voices, all whispering. Soldier's Boy strained to pick out a single thread of sound.

'Lisana says—'

Tell him, tell him to come now!'

'Hurry. She's mad with grief, she's threatening—'

Tire fears no magic. Hurry.'

'Soldier's Boy, Nevare, tell him, wake him, tell him to hurry—'

The air was thick with falling leaves. The rustling whispering filled the air. Soldier's Boy rolled to his belly and scabbled to his feet. He swayed and then steadied himself against the trunk of a nearby tree. His stirring had awakened Olikea. She had been sleeping against his back. He spoke to her. 'I have to go to Lisana right now. She's in danger. The mad Gernian woman is threatening her.'

SEVEN

Epiny's Ultimatum

Soldier's Boy led the way. Olikea followed unwillingly and Likari, laden with the supplies, trailed after them. 'What does she need of you?' Olikea had demanded angrily as she sat up.

'She's in danger,' Soldier's Boy replied. 'I have to help her.'

He did not wait for her to respond to that, but set off immediately. He was stiff and his body seemed unfamiliar after so many months as a very fat man. He ached, but he forced his legs to bend and he hurried. The trees whispered to him, urging him on in a flurry of leaves and a susurrus of voices.

'He'll be too late—'

'All of us, not just Lisana—'

'—her own fault for dividing him—'

'Why didn't the fear stop her? How did she get that far?'

'Stolen magic. She burns with it.'

'Drop a branch on her. It might kill her.'

Sweat broke out on Soldier's Boy's back and trickled over his body, finding new wrinkles to settle in and new places to chafe. He laboured on. His body was lighter and his muscles strong, but every part of him felt strained and old and creaky. His heart flopped wildly in his chest. His half-digested meal seemed to slosh inside him miserably. Nonetheless, he forced himself to hurry.

Behind him, Olikea kept up a string of reminders and warnings that made it hard for him to listen to the whispering. She did not seem to hear it, or perhaps she just dismissed it as wind in the trees. 'You are being foolish. Why do you need to go to Lisana? What can she need from you? You will use up all your strength, and then what will happen to us tonight? Must we spend another full day here while you rest and eat before we can rejoin the people? Most of the kin-clans have already reached their winter settlements and will soon go on to the trading beaches. I want to be with them when they reach the Trading Place. Always, there is much talk, feasting, dancing, music and trade when all the kin-clans come



together for the winter. We will want to enjoy it, not arrive there exhausted. And I do not wish to first show you there as a skeletal man with no energy. As it is, we must spend a few days at my lodge before we go on to the Trading Place. I must prepare you so that you command respect. Nevare! You are not listening to me! Slow down.'

Despite his weakened condition, she was having a hard time keeping up with him. I realized he was doing a quick-walk, making the distance between himself and Lisana contract. He was not using a great deal of magic, but it made the trees blur slightly and the ground seemed less solid under his feet. Olikea and Likari were pulled along in his wake. When he caught the first whiff of smoke, he suddenly redoubled his efforts, consuming the magic as if he had infinite reserves. In two strides, we stood beside Tree Woman's stump.

Epiny had heaped leaves, some dry and some freshly fallen, in a large mound against the stump. My cousin stood, her teeth bared with satisfaction, watching thick white smoke rising from the tiny fire she had kindled at the base of Lisana's stump. She had a ready supply of dry branches next to her, to feed the fire once she had it established.

Epiny herself looked a fright. Her hair was pulling out of braids that looked as if they'd been plaited days ago. She wore a shapeless green dress, cut to allow for her growing pregnancy and round her middle, above her growing belly, a battered leather belt with tool loops on it. A canteen hung from one side of it. She'd snagged her dress on something; there was a long rent in the skirt, and it was obvious she'd simply let it drag behind her as she trekked through the forest to get here. Brambles and dead leaves clung to it like a dirty train. She'd unbuttoned the cuffs of her sleeves and turned them up to bare her forearms. Her face gleamed with sweat, and the throat and back of her dress were damp with it. Her hands were smudged with dirt and soot from her fire-making efforts. As

I approached, she drew the back of her forearm across her brow, wiping sweat and leaving a streak of dirt in its wake. An open leather pack rested on the earth behind her. Despite her dishevelled appearance, she seemed to seethe with energy.

'Burn!' she cried in a low, mad voice. She gritted her teeth and I heard them grind together. 'Burn, you cheat, you whore of magic. Burn, and be dead forever. As dead as Nevare. I did what you asked! I did all you asked; you promised you'd save him if I did! But you didn't! You let Nevare die! You lying, cheating bitch!' The words poured out of her like thick acid. She stooped awkwardly over her belly to snatch up an armload of the firewood and flung it onto the smouldering leaves. They compacted under the weight of the fuel. For a moment, I thought she had smothered the fire. Then the smoke thickened and a tiny tongue of flame wavered up among the heaped wood. It licked the bark of Lisana's tree stump longingly.

And all the while, Lisana herself manifested as a fat old woman with grey-streaked hair standing with her back against her stump and her arms spread protectively behind her. Her incorporeal presence could do nothing. Her bare feet and her long dress of bark fabric and moss lace dangled down into the lapping flames. I do not think she felt the fire but she still screamed as the flames ran up the trunk.

It had been weeks since it had last rained. The forest was dry. I suddenly understood what the whispered words had meant. Fire

fears no magic. Tiny sparks whirled aloft on an updraught of heat, floating on bits of blackened leaves. It was not just Lisana that was in danger. If this fire spread, it could engulf the entire mountain-side and the Vale of the Ancestor Trees below.

Soldier's Boy had my memories. He knew her name and our language. 'Epiny! Stop! Stop that! You'll kill us all.' He rushed forward and kicked barefoot at the fire. He scattered it, letting air into the smouldering mass, and the flames gushed up, crackling like laughter. Epiny, startled, made no move to stop him. She stared at him, her mouth hanging open.

'Put it out, put it out!' Lisana shrieked.

I do not think Olikea and Likari heard her, but they recognized the danger all the same. Heedless of burns, Soldier's Boy was stamping at the edges of the burning fire. Olikea had taken the food pouch from her belt and was using it to beat the flames down. But it was Likari who unshouldered the heavy waterskin he had been carrying it. Opening it, he squeezed the bag, directing the stream into the heart of the fire. Epiny had retreated when the three had rushed up on her. Now she stood transfixed, watching as they tore her fire apart and poured water onto it and then stamped and smothered the remaining flames. In a few moments, the danger was past. Olikea was near sobbing with terror, but Likari was capering with joy. Soldier's Boy sank down. He saw another glowing ember, and lifted a handful of the wet leaves and quenched it. All three of them were streaked with smoke and soot.

'I told you!' Lisana shouted angrily at Epiny. 'I told you I'd kept my word. Even if I hadn't, the magic would have. The magic doesn't lie and cheat. There, you see him? You see? Nevare is alive. What you bargained for, you got. Nevare lives!'

Soldier's Boy turned towards her. Epiny stared at him. Her eyes ran over his dwindled body, but I think his nakedness was just as shocking to her. To her, he was a piebald thing, tanned face and hands, skin pale white and sagging where it was not sun-burned scarlet. She blushed, then deliberately fixed her eyes on my face. I burned with shame but Soldier's Boy scarcely noticed his nakedness before her. With great hesitancy Epiny asked, 'Nevare? Can that be you?'

'It's me,' he lied. And for the first time, I fully realized my position. This other entity was controlling my body. Completely. Using it as he willed without regard for me at all. I flung myself against his walls, and battled hard to take back control of my body. I could feel his contempt for Epiny, and recalled that she had been instrumental in defeating him the first time we had battled. He looked at her and saw his old enemy, come back to give him more trouble. I saw my cousin, ravaged by grief, dirty, tired, thirsty and miles from where she should be. She was heavy with her first pregnancy, and I knew that it was a difficult one. She should have been home, safe in her house, with Spink and Amzil and her children. I thought I had arranged all that. When I'd changed the memory of every witness to the mob, when I'd sent Spink and Amzil home relatively unscathed, I thought I'd bought that for her. I knew that if I'd tried to stay, if I'd even planned to make some sort of a return to the people I knew and loved, the magic would have found a way to take them all away from me.

Two nights ago, it had nearly done it. If I hadn't surrendered to it, if I hadn't used it and allowed it to make me its own, Amzil would have been gang-raped on the streets of Gettys. Spink, I knew,

would have died fighting to save her and to protect me from the mob. What would have become of Epiny, her unborn child and Amzil's little children then? Unchanging grief for Epiny, loss and poverty for Amzil's children. That was why I'd made that sacrifice. Everything I'd done, I'd done to save them.

Yet here she was, wild-eyed and dishevelled, miles from home in a hostile forest. And a man wearing my flesh was pretending to be me. She goggled at me, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. 'You're naked,' she pointed out in distress. 'And you're . . . you're not fat any more. What happened to you? How could that happen in one night? How can you be alive? Spink and Amzil saw you killed. Spink saw you beaten to death on the streets, by his own fellows, his own regiment. Do you know what that's done to him? Do you know how that's made him hate everything he was once so proud of? Amzil saw the end of everything that she had just begun to hope for. But here you are. Alive. I don't understand, Nevare! I don't understand anything!'

She took two hesitant steps towards me. If I had opened my arms, she would have rushed into them. But Soldier's Boy did not. He stood before her, naked and unlovely, my arms folded on my chest and asked her solemnly, 'Why did you come here? What do you want?'

'Why did I— what? I came to avenge you, you great idiot! To make her suffer for your death as we were all suffering. I came to make her sorry for betraying you, to punish the magic for not keeping its word! And what do I want? I want my life back! I want my husband to see me when he looks at me instead of looking through me. I want Amzil to stop scowling and snapping at the children. I want her to stop weeping at night. I want my baby to be born healthy and happy, not into a house where daily we endure floods of desolation or tides of panic. That's what I want. That's what I came for. I knew I wouldn't get it, but I thought I could at least kill one of those who had taken it from me.'

I felt as if I was dying. I threw myself against Soldier's Boy's awareness, trying to break through. I wanted to take her in my arms and comfort her; I wanted something for Epiny. It seemed that everything I'd thought I'd purchased for her by turning my back on Gettys was hollow and sordid by the light of day. I hadn't solved anything when I'd given way to the magic. I'd only left them to muddle through grief burdened by guilt that none of them deserved.

'I won't let you kill her.' He spoke flatly to Epiny. 'You should just go home. Pretend you never saw me here. Accept that I'm dead. Then leave Gettys. Go back west where you and your kind belong.' He lifted his eyes to Lisana as he spoke, but I had the oddest sensation that he could not see her. The strangest part was that I felt Lisana definitely could see me. I stared through his eyes at her, begging her for some kind of mercy, for some splinter of kindness for my cousin. What had she ever done to them save try to protect me and stand by me? Why did she have to suffer so for the magic?

Lisana spoke softly to Epiny. 'As you see, Gernian, I spoke truth to you. The magic keeps its word. Nevare isn't dead.'

Epiny swung her head back to look at me. Her lips were parted and she swayed slightly. The whites showed all round her eyes. I'd once seen a horse that had been ridden near to death. She reminded me of that poor beast, as if she stayed on her feet more by sheer will power than by physical strength. She stared at me for a long

time, then looked back at Lisana. Her voice was flat. 'Don't try to deceive me. That's not Nevare. I know Nevare and that's not him. You forget that the magic touches me? You forget that I can look at his aura, and see that something is very wrong? You can't cheat me again, Tree Woman. I intend to kill you or die trying.' She stooped down. For the first time, I saw the small hatchet she had used to cut her firewood. Against Tree Woman's thick stump, it looked ridiculous, a child's toy. But it was a toy made of iron. Its presence burned against my skin. When Epiny raised it over her head, her teeth bared in a grimace of hatred, Soldier's Boy acted, springing between her and the stump and catching her falling wrist. He squeezed hard and the hatchet fell from her grip. He caught her other wrist when she tried to rake his eyes with her nails. Despite his wasted condition, he held her easily. Epiny snarled and shrieked at him wordlessly. She kicked out at him; he accepted the blows.

'Her mind is gone,' Olikea opined. She sounded appalled, as if Epiny's loss of dignity was shameful to her as well. 'It would be a

kindness to kill her.' She spoke in Speck, her words directed to Soldier's Boy. The lack of malice in her voice chilled me. She meant it. She thought Soldier's Boy should put Epiny down as one would a diseased dog. She ventured closer to pick up the hatchet. I feared she would do the deed herself, just sink the shining blade into Epiny's spine.

'No!' I bellowed. 'Lisana, help me! Please! Don't let Epiny be killed! It will be too much for me to bear!'

I made no sound. I had no command of lips or lungs or tongue. I spoke not in words, but in a flow of thought that dismissed the need for words, just as Epiny and Lisana spoke to one another. They were the words of my heart, voiceless in the world. All I could do was to plead and threaten. I was helpless to stop what was happening. My hands held my cousin helpless and waiting to be slaughtered.

Lisana looked at the scene before her. Epiny's struggles against Soldier's Boy had become increasingly feeble. His big hand trapped her thin wrists. She all but dangled in his grip. Behind Epiny's back, Olikea had raised the hatchet. Likari watched the drama with the rapt attention of a small boy staring at the unintelligible behaviour of adults. The hatchet began to fall.

'Epiny!' I cried out mutely. A stray beam of sunlight moved on the blade as it travelled.

My impotent threats had not moved Lisana. Soldier's Boy looked at her stump; again, I had the feeling that I was seeing Lisana in a different way from him.

'If I help kill my own cousin, I'll go mad! My hatred for him will be unending. Can Soldier's Boy serve the magic while a mad man gibbers in the back of his mind?'

When Tree Woman slowly shook her head at me, my heart sank. She spoke.

'Stop.'

Now that I knew what such magic cost, I saw the effort go out of her. Tree Woman's presence dwindled when she spoke, but for me, it had the desired effect. Olikea's resolve failed. She lost her

grip on the hatchet. It tumbled to the ground behind Epiny. Soldier's Boy did not release his grip on my cousin, but he set her back on her feet. She twisted one wrist free and folded that arm across her belly, in a gesture that was both supportive and protective. When he released her other wrist, she staggered a few steps away from him and then burst into tears. With both arms, she cradled her pregnancy. She didn't look at him, but past him at Tree Woman's stump. 'Why?' she demanded of Lisana. 'Why did you do this to Nevare? Why my cousin, why me? We were innocent of any crime against your people. Why did you reach all those miles to take him hostage to this fate? Why?'

Lisana stiffened. Her presence wavered for a moment, then seemed to grow stronger as she gathered her reserves and retorted, 'Blame the Kidona, not me! He is the one who took your cousin and tried to make him a warrior to use against me. I, I was the one who had mercy. I could have just stripped his soul from his body and he would have died in all worlds. If I had not thought to offer him to the magic, he would have been dead all these years. The magic chose to keep him. Not I. I didn't know its reasons. But the magic chose him and now it has taken him. You'd best accept that, Gernian woman. Just as he must accept and become whole to the magic. Nothing is going to change it. What the magic takes, it keeps.' Perhaps only I could hear the old resignation in her words. She, too, had been chosen and kept by the magic. She, too, had never lived the life she had imagined for herself.

'Please,' I thought to Lisana, hoping she still had some influence with Soldier's Boy. 'Please. Let me talk to Epiny. Let me send her home. Let me have that small comfort before I must bend to the magic's will.'

Soldier's Boy was staring intently at the stump. 'Lisana?' he asked. There was a world of longing in his voice. He ignored the sobbing woman, and Olikea scowling in puzzlement at them. He stepped up to the stump and put his hands on it. 'Lisana?' he said again. He glanced back at Epiny angrily. I felt the indignation in his heart that the Gernian woman could obviously see and speak to his beloved when all he could behold was the stump of her fallen tree.

Lisana sighed heavily. 'I'm a fool,' she said. 'I know I'll regret this. Speak to her, then. I'll help you.'

I had hoped she would do something to Soldier's Boy, to give me control once more of the body. Either she could not, or she did not trust me that far. I felt the most peculiar sensation, a cold peeling as if I were being skinned away from my life. A moment later, I could see Lisana much more distinctly, and I once more

had the disembodied sensation I'd felt when she'd called me from my cell. Speaking to Epiny had been my errand then. Now I looked at my cousin and suddenly didn't know what to say to her. I could see Soldier's Boy as Epiny saw him. It was a shock. He wore my naked, sun-burned body differently. I would never have stood in that posture; I would never have been so completely unselfconscious of my nakedness before my cousin. Yet, with the fat stripped from my flesh, I saw my face almost as it had been when I had set out for the Academy. Despite the sagging of the emptied jowls, I looked more youthful than I had in the last year. My blond hair was an untidy tousle but with a sickening wrench I could recall that I had been a handsome young man once. The sudden mourning I felt for that lost attractiveness shocked me with its intensity. I had never thought myself vain, but I had enjoyed being a man that girls smiled at. It was a distorted glimpse

of the tall, golden cadet that I'd been. It was like a knife in my heart.

Epiny had lifted her eyes to Lisana, and when her gaze fell on my ephemeral self, she gasped. She lifted a seeking hand towards me, as if she would strive to touch me. 'Nevare?' she asked.

Soldier's Boy glared at her, and then leaned close to the tree stump. 'Lisana?' he pleaded. We all ignored him.

I found my words. I suddenly knew that only the truth could satisfy her, and I gave it to her. 'Epiny. Epiny, my dear. Yes, it's me. I'm here. I'm sorry. I did what I had to do. I used the magic to make Spink and Amzil believe I was dead. I made the entire mob in the street there believe that they'd achieved their goal and beaten me to death. Then I left. It was the only way for me to escape cleanly, the only way to break my life off from yours.'

'But—' Her eyes were wide with shock. She looked from me to Soldier's Boy in my body and back again.

I spoke hastily, talking through her attempted interruption. I knew Epiny well. Once she started talking, I'd never get a word in edgeways. 'The magic wouldn't let me stay. Don't you see? It boxed me in and gave me no choice. If I'd tried to stay, the mob would have beaten me to death. Amzil might have survived being raped by them, but I doubt it. And we both know that Spink would have forced them to kill him, too, before he would submit to simply witnessing something like that. The magic wanted to make it impossible for me to go back to Gettys, to force me to flee to the forest and do its will. The magic won.'

Epiny was panting, both from the warmth of the day and her exertions. Her shoulders rose and fell with it. As I'd spoken, fresh tears had begun to stream down her dirty face. I thought they were for me. They were not.

'We both know that Spink would never have allowed them to beat you to death without throwing himself into the fray. It runs counter to all that he is. And yet, Nevare, you have left him believing that somehow he allowed it to happen and emerged from it with only a few bruises. Amzil must believe that as well; she insists that he sacrificed you to save her. They are both miserable. Last night, for the first time, Spink decided that he needed Gettys Tonic. Rum and laudanum. It let him sleep, but when he awoke, he looked no better. So he took a half-dose and went off to his duties. He left in a haze. Amzil dosed both herself and the children into oblivion;

they were still sleeping when I left. I do not know what is to become of any of them.

'Spink resisted both the gloom and the terror of the magic for so long. Now that he has crumbled twice, I fear his walls are breached. I do not think—'

Her words ran out as if her private fear was too terrible to utter aloud. She gave a half-sob and before I could speak, asked me angrily, 'Do not you see, Nevare? What you have chosen for all of us saves none of us! The magic will still destroy us; it will just take longer to do it.' She swung her gaze to Lisana. 'And so I will say it again. The "bargain" you offered me was a cheat and a sham. I did as you asked, I did as the magic asked, and in return, all will be taken from me.'

'I do not control the magic,' Lisana replied stiffly. 'It does as befits the People.' Her words were cold but I suspected that she had been moved by what Epiny had said.

'Can you see her? Can you speak to her?' Soldier's Boy asked wildly.

Epiny glared at him. 'She's right there. Cannot you see her?'

Lisana answered her question. 'As I told you. I cannot control the will of the magic. Soldier's Boy does not see me, and I can speak only to the facet of him that is Nevare. Perhaps it is our punishment for failure. Perhaps it is simply the effect of dividing

the soul. One half often acquires an ability at the expense of the other half.' She hesitated and added in a low voice, 'I never foresaw that he would remain divided this long. Whole, I think he would succeed.'

'I cannot see her. I cannot hear her. I cannot touch her.' The frustration in Soldier's Boy's voice was apparent. Olikea, behind him, looked affronted.

I knew what it was, without understanding it. 'I kept that part. I kept the part that lets me see and speak with Tree Woman in this world. Because—' I fumbled towards knowledge and guessed, 'Because that part had always belonged mostly to me. When Soldier's Boy was with you, he was in your world. I had to reach to speak to you from mine.'

'Do you think so?' Lisana asked me, and it was a genuine question.

Epiny sank down exhausted on the moss. She pushed her tumbled hair back from her sweaty face. 'What does it matter? It's all destroyed. There is nothing in this life left for any of us. It does not matter who you love, Nevare, in what world. Neither you nor the one who wears your body will have joy and peace. And I must go home to the slow destruction of mine.'

'Epiny.' I spoke quickly, before I could change my mind, before Lisana could silence me. 'Go home to Spink. Tell him the truth. That I used magic on him. That he did nothing cowardly. I used him to get Amzil safely away.'

'And of course he will believe me,' Epiny replied, sarcasm cutting through the grief in her voice. 'He will not think me mad, oh no.5

'He will believe you if you give him proof.' I wracked my brain for an instant. 'Tell him to go to the graveyard and talk to Kesey. Ask Kesey if he had a strange dream the morning I died. Ask Kesey if my sword was on the floor when he woke. If he tells the truth, Spink will have his proof.' I hesitated. 'And if you must, tell him to ask Scout Tiber. He had a glimpse of me as I fled that morning. I'd just as soon he wasn't reminded of it, but if Spink doubts still, have him ask Tiber.'

Epiny was still breathing hard, her shoulders rising and falling with it. 'And Amzil,' she demanded. 'What about Amzil?'

'I think it is better that she continues to believe that I am dead.'

'Why?' she demanded.

I hesitated. My reason sounded vain, even to myself. 'Because

she is a stubborn woman. I think she might attempt to come after me and rescue me, if she thought I had given up everything to save her. If she knew how I loved her, she might risk herself.'

Epiny rubbed her hands over her eyes. The soot and tears combined to smear a mask across her face. 'Perhaps I know her better than you, in some ways. She is also a pragmatic woman. She puts her children first in her life.'

She paused, and I bowed my head. She had said enough. I understood. Then she added, 'But I think it would mean a great deal to her to know that she had been loved that way by a man, at least once in her life.'

I thought about that. I thought about how much Amzil's whispered words in Gettys the night she had helped me escape meant to me. Epiny was right. It was good to know such things, even if they could have no consummation.

'You may tell her, also, then,' I conceded. 'And you can tell her that I loved her. Love her still, even though I must leave her.'

Epiny gave a strangled laugh. 'I not only "may", I can, and therefore I shall, Nevare. I have not forgotten how shamed and foolish I felt to discover how long you and Spink had kept a secret from me. I will not do that to Amzil!'

'I'm sorry,' I said, and meant it.

She glanced away from me to Soldier's Boy. He was glaring, a flat-eyed intimidating stare. He wanted to blame someone for his inability to see Tree Woman but could not decide whom. It startled me to realize that my face could look so mean. The expression deepened the lines in his face; that made me wonder if it was a look I had often worn without being aware of it. Epiny looked from him to Lisana. 'Does he know what's going on? That you're letting me talk to the real Nevare?'

'He has never been stupid,' Lisana said, with some pride in her voice. 'But like Nevare, he has suffered from being incomplete. That can happen when a soul is divided; part becomes impulsive, and the other half indecisive. Half can be given to dramatic shows while the other half expresses next to no emotion at all. One acts without thinking; the other thinks without acting.'

Epiny looked from one to the other of us. 'That makes sense/ she said calmly.

Soldier's Boy spoke. 'I know what is happening here. I do not know why she is permitting it. Make the most of it, Gernian woman. It will not happen again.' He crossed his arms on his chest.

'What are you waiting for? We've put out the fire. You should kill that woman and leave. Look at her. She's sickly. She looks like a string with a knot tied in it; how can any woman that skinny be pregnant? Do it and be done with it. Soldier's Boy. You are wasting strength that you will need if you are to quick-walk us to the People tonight.' Olikea spoke in Speck. I do not think Epiny understood her words but her disdain was unmistakable. Epiny smoothed her hair back from her face and turned aside from Olikea without making any response or even seeming to notice her. I wondered if Olikea even recognized that Gernian snub.

'He is right,' Lisana said. 'Your time is short. Nevare, you begged



this from me. You said you could send her home. Speak whatever final words you have to say to her, and then you must be on your way.'

'Send me home!' Epiny said, sparks of anger kindling in her sunken eyes. 'Send me home? Am I a dog then, to be told, "Get home!" and I obediently trot along?'

'No!' I said hastily. 'No. That's not it at all. Epiny, you have to listen to me now. You can do no good here. Go home to Spink and Amzil and her children. Do what you can for them, comfort them with the truth, if you think it will be comfort, and above all, have a care for yourself and your baby. Do whatever you can for my little sister. Yaril is beyond my reach now.'

'What? What are you going to do? And why are you speaking to me like this, instead of— Why does he have your body?'

'I don't really know. I think that his part of me is the stronger half now, and so he gets his way. I am where he was after I first defeated him.'

Lisana was nodding silently.

'Nevare, you must try to be stronger! You must fight him and take control of your body again. Come back to Gettys. Look at you. You've lost the fat. You could be a real soldier now.'

'Epiny, think! I could also be hanged for escaping from my cell, once they realized that they hadn't killed me the first time. There is nothing left for me back in Gettys.'

'He can not prevail against Soldier's Boy,' Lisana said quietly. 'His time is past. He had his chance and he failed. His solutions have not solved anything. It is time for him to let go, to become a part of Soldier's Boy and time for Soldier's Boy to try his way. They need to unite their strengths.'

Epiny's face changed. Her expression hardened and something very like hatred shone in her eyes. 'I will not let you destroy him/ she said. 'He will fight you and I will fight you. We are stronger than you know. He will take back his body, and he will come back to us. I know he will.'

Lisana shook her head. She spoke calmly, patiently. 'No. He will not. You would be wiser to listen to him. Go home. Take care of what is yours. When your child is born, leave this place and go back to your own lands.'

Epiny stared at Lisana levelly. 'I won't give up on Nevare. If you want me to leave, you will have to give me back my cousin.'

Lisana didn't smile nor snarl. Her face was impassive. 'I believe that when they are one, they will succeed where both failed before. I believe that then he will accept whatever magical task he must do, and that when he does it, the intruders will leave our land. What I am offering you is a chance to save yourself and your child. Go now, before you are driven out. I do not know how the magic will rid our lands of the intruders, but I do not think it will be gentle. Gentleness and persuasion have been tried without success. The time for that is past.'

'I won't give up on Nevare,' Epiny repeated. She said it as if perhaps Lisana had not heard her or had not been paying atten-

tion. 'I don't believe he will give up. He will keep trying, and when he is strong enough, he will take back his life from Soldier's Boy, and he will come back to us.'

I tried to think of some response.

She smiled at me and added, 'And if he does not, then come next summer, when the days are long and hot and the forest is dry, I will burn your forest. All of it.' She was suddenly calm. She folded her hands together and held them in front of her. She did not look at me at all. Her face and hands were dirty, her dress smudged and torn and her hair was falling down all around her face. But it was as if all her sorrow and pain had drained out of her, as if nothing were left but the determination; she was like a shining steel blade drawn from its worn scabbard.

'This is the gratitude of a German,' Lisana observed coldly. 'The magic kept its word to you. I have shown you your cousin, alive as promised, and even interceded that you might say farewell to him. I have offered you a chance to escape to the west with your baby. And in return, you threaten to destroy us.'

I knew that Soldier's Boy could not hear Lisana's words, and yet he seemed to reply to them. 'I will kill her now,' Soldier's Boy announced, and Olikea, grim-faced, nodded.

Epiny probably did not understand the words he spoke in Speck, but she recognized the threat. It did not move her. 'You can kill me,' Epiny said. 'I doubt it would be difficult for you.' She lifted her chin, as if baring her throat to him. Her eyes remained locked with Lisana's. Epiny didn't say anything else. Yet danger hovered in the air, unspoken and all the more worrisome that it was undefined.

'Kill her,' Olikea said quietly. There was fear and desire in her voice. 'Use this.' She drew a knife from a sheath on her belt and offered it to him. It had a black, glittering blade; obsidian. A memory stirred. It was as sharp as a razor, a knife fit for a mage who must not touch iron.

Soldier's Boy took it from her, then looked about helplessly, as if seeking guidance. He could not hear Lisana. He could not seek her guidance and Epiny's fearless acceptance of her position clearly bothered him. I saw him decide there was something he didn't know. I wondered if there were, or if Epiny was bluffing. I longed to ask her and knew I could not even look as if I wondered. I tried for a small smile to match hers. I probably failed.

Soldier^ Boy decided. He struck with the knife.

I felt his decision a split moment before he acted. Two things happened in the next instant. I stopped him. I didn't know how I did it, but I stopped him in mid-lunge. It startled him, and worse, it burned more of his small reserve of magic. I'd actually used his magic against him, to prevent him injuring Epiny. I was as surprised as he was.

And Epiny, despite her ungainly pregnancy, ducked down abruptly and then lunged towards the hatchet that Olikea had dropped. She hit the ground harder than she had planned; I heard her grunt of pain. But she came up gripping the hatchet, her teeth bared in triumph. 'Let's see what happens when you get hit with cold iron!' she threatened him, and she threw it, as hard as she could, at Soldier's Boy's head. It made a nasty solid noise as the

butt of it hit his forehead. He dropped. I do not know if it was the force of the impact or the iron hitting his body, but he shuddered, twitched, and his eyes rolled back in his head. Likari's mouth hung open in an 'O' of shock. Olikea screamed like a scalded cat and rushed Epiny.

And I watched, helpless. Not only was I disembodied, but the only body I could have hoped to affect was unconscious. Olikea was taller than Epiny, heavier, accustomed to more physical activity and unencumbered by clothes or pregnancy. She flung herself on Epiny as a cat leaps on prey. Epiny dodged to one side but still went down beneath her onslaught. Both women were shrieking, the most unhallowed sound that I had ever heard. Epiny used language I would not have suspected her of knowing, and fought with a strength and ferocity that astounded me. She fought to defend her unborn child as much as herself. Olikea was on top but Epiny writhed in her grip to face her and drew first blood, raking her nails down Olikea's face and breast. For all that Epiny's clothing encumbered her, it also protected her from casual damage, and when Epiny rolled to one side, drew her leg up and then managed to kick Olikea in the belly, her boots became a definite advantage.

As Olikea gasped, Epiny crawled frantically away. I thought she was trying to escape, but as Olikea recovered and went after Epiny, my cousin once more snatched up the fallen hatchet. Olikea, thinking herself threatened, grabbed the flint knife that still rested in Soldier's Boy's slack hand. But Epiny did not come at her; instead, she pressed the blade of her weapon to Soldier's Boy's throat. 'Back off!' she snarled. 'Back off, or neither of us gets him. He'll be dead.' They did not share a language, but the threat was as obvious as the blade held to his throat.

In that moment, I suddenly realized that it was me they were fighting over. I was astounded.

Olikea froze. Epiny remained as she was, crouching over Soldier's Boy, the cold iron of the hatchet not quite touching his throat. She looked feral and predatory, hunkered over my body. Then she caught her breath, gave a small grunt of pain and put her hand on her belly and rubbed it softly, almost reassuringly.

'You won't kill him,' Olikea asserted after a moment. 'He is your cousin.'

Epiny stared at her, and then looked at me. I translated for her. 'She says you won't kill me because I'm your cousin.'

'No,' Epiny retorted bluntly. 'Right now, he isn't. My cousin is over there.' With her empty hand, she pointed to my disembodied essence hovering near Lisana. 'This, this creature in his body is something that Tree Woman and the magic made. It might have been part of my cousin once, but she twisted it into something completely foreign to what Nevare is. And rather than see that creature masquerading as Nevare, I will kill him. Without compunction. I will not let this beast pretend he is Nevare Burvelle.'

I watched Olikea listen to the flood of foreign words. None of them were needed; she knew all she needed to know by the blade that hovered over my throat.

Lisana spoke. 'Soldier's Boy is as much your cousin as Nevare Burvelle is. When he came to me, sent by that old Kidona to be his warrior champion, I captured him and divided his soul. Deny

it as you wish, but Soldier's Boy is not a separate creature from your cousin. Both parts of him are needed to be a whole. You cannot cast him out of the body. Kill him, and you kill your cousin, the Nevare you know, just as surely. Have you the will to kill Nevare to keep Soldier's Boy from using the body?'

Olikea could not hear Lisana's words. She had risen and was slowly circling Epiny, her knife low and ready. 'Now, what will you do, you skinny Gernian wretch? Kill him and I'll kill you. I'm bigger than you, and stronger. You know I'll win. How long can you crouch over him, threatening him? What will you do when he wakes up?'

'I don't know,' Epiny replied, but she answered Lisana, not Olikea. 'It seems we are at an impasse.' After a moment, she added, 'If my cousin Nevare is never to regain his body and his life, and I am to be attacked and killed anyway, then neither of us have anything to lose if I kill him now. Do you agree with that?'

I was silent, considering the question. I didn't know what would become of me if Epiny killed my body. Did I care? Just the fact that I had no immediate answer to that question made me mute. For most of my life, I'd had goals that had driven me. What did I have now? Perhaps, like Epiny, I'd reached a dead end. Briefly, my cousin's gaze met mine. I saw love in her eyes, but also resolution and resignation.

It did not look good for my body. Slowly, I nodded at her. She shifted her gaze to Lisana. 'You see?'

Lisana was quiet for a time. Then she asked abruptly, 'What do you want, Gernian? What will it take to make you leave this place and never return?'

Epiny was silent for a moment. I could see her hand trembling. I think the hatchet was getting heavy in her grip. 'I assume you mean without killing him,' she said after a pause.

'Yes.' Lisana bit off the word.

'Talk to ME!' Olikea abruptly demanded. 'I am the one who is here. I am the one who can kill you!' She made a menacing motion with her knife.

'Shut up!' Epiny barked at her, and touched the hatchet blade to Soldier's Boy's throat. He made a small sound in his throat. Olikea took a step back, glowering at her.

'She's dangerous, Epiny. Be very careful. She'll kill you if she can.'

'I know that,' Epiny said hoarsely. 'I may have to kill your body.' Tears filled her eyes and spilled but only anger showed on her face. 'How can it be any worse, Nevare? Shall I go down whimpering and begging for mercy? I doubt any would be shown. If I must lose it all, then at least I'll extract a price from them. They'll know I was here; I won't be stepped on like an ant.'

The desperate courage in her words moved me. 'You should have been your father's soldier son,' I told her quietly.

'He's waking up!' Likari cried aloud. I'd almost forgotten the boy was there. He'd hovered at the outskirts, watching everything but saying and doing little. Now he pointed at my body. My eyelids

fluttered and Soldier's Boy's hands twitched against the mossy ground.

Epiny might not have understood Likari's words, but the tone alerted her. She lowered the hatchet until its blade rested against Soldier's Boy's throat. He made an incoherent sound. I did not know if he protested the bite of the sharp edge or the burn of cold iron against his throat. Epiny leaned forward over him, so close that all he could see was her face. I watched his eyes blink bewilderedly and then focus on her. She spoke in a low growl.

'Don't move. Listen to me. Tell that woman with the knife and the boy with the waterskin to go away. Tell them that you don't want them to hurt me. Send them down to wait by the stream. Tell them to stay there until you come to them. Say only those words. I will know what you say. If you say any more than that, or any less than that, I'll kill you. Do you understand me?'

He licked his lips and rolled his eyes to look at Olikea. Epiny didn't hesitate. She pressed the blade more firmly to his throat. Distantly, I felt it slice my skin and more intensely, I felt the hot/cold kiss of iron against my flesh. It made my magic bleed, and that was more painful than the fine cut it scored on my skin. 'Please, don't Soldier's Boy croaked. Epiny eased up but didn't move the blade.

'Tell them,' she said quietly.

'Olikea. Likari. Go down the ridge to the stream. Wait for me there. Don't do anything else right now, just wait down there until I come.'

Epiny's glance flickered to me. I confirmed that she'd been obeyed. 'He did as you told him. He's ordered them to go down to the stream and wait.'

Olikea looked rebellious. Likari wriggled in an agony of curiosity, but then obediently turned and started away. 'Shall I leave you here, at her mercy?' Olikea began in protest, but Soldier's Boy broke in on her words with, 'Go. Just go now, or she'll kill me. I can manage this situation better if you are not here, Olikea. Go down to the stream. Wait for me there.'

'Oh, you look so much in control of the situation!' Olikea snarled. She glared at Epiny and kept the obsidian blade at the ready as she backed away. 'Some day, Gernian woman. Some day it will be just you and me.' Then she turned angrily on Likari. 'Why are you still standing there? He told us to go wait by the stream. And that is what we must do.'

'He told her to go away, and she and the boy are leaving.' I hastily interpreted before Epiny could look at me. I wanted her to keep her wary gaze on Olikea. 'But she threatened that some day she'd get back at you.'

'That's fine,' Epiny said, almost absently. There was strain in her voice. She kept her gaze fixed on Olikea and Likari, watching them until they were out of sight. Crouching over me, pressing the knife

to my throat was uncomfortable for her. Her pregnant belly got in her way. I could see that it was hard for her to remain still, the hatchet blade pressed lightly to my throat, and all her weight on

her bent knees.

'And now what?' Lisana asked in a low voice. 'What will you do now? Do you think this is over? That Soldier's Boy will let you just walk away after you have threatened the forest?'

Epiny blew the hair away from her eyes and then looked up at Lisana. 'And do you think it's a good idea to ask me that question while I'm in this position? The simplest way for me to resolve it would be to cut his throat and go my way. By the time they realize he's not coming, I'll be long gone.'

'Do you think the forest would allow you to escape that easily?' Lisana countered.

Epiny sighed. 'No. I don't think the forest or the magic will allow any of us to escape. It wants the impossible. It wants to reverse the flow of the years, it wants to go back to when Gernians came here only to trade for furs and then to leave. It won't happen. It can't happen. And as long as the magic demands that, there will never be a resolution. Not for any of us.'

I looked from Epiny's bowed head to the sweat drops rolling slowly down my own face and then up at Lisana. Epiny was right. As the thought came to me, I felt as if my existence wavered. The magic was weakening. Lisana was weary and there was little magic left in my own body for me to draw on.

'Epiny! I'm fading. I'm sorry. I did what I thought was wise, but it helped no one. Not even me. Farewell. I loved all of you the best that I could. Get away if you can. Get all of you away.'

Suddenly I was in my body, looking up at Epiny. I think she saw me in Soldier's Boy's eyes, because she said softly, 'You stopped him from killing me. Remember that you could do that. Believe you'll eventually find that strength again, that you'll master him again. Until then, I'm sorry, Nevare. I'm sure you'd do the same thing in my place. And you know, you really deserve this.'

She lifted the hatchet from my throat, but before I could stir, she reversed her grip on it. The blunt end of it hit me squarely between the eyes, and I knew nothing more.

EIGHT

Quick-walk

When I became aware again, Epiny was gone. I didn't immediately realize that. With Soldier's Boy, I felt woozy and disoriented and unable to focus my eyes. My gut heaved with nausea. Being struck on the head hard enough to cause unconsciousness is never a joke, and my body had endured two such assaults in rapid succession. I could barely breathe past the thickness in my mouth, and I could not stir my limbs. I felt Soldier's Boy's frustration as he used yet more of his rapidly dwindling magic to speed the body's healing. Even so, we lay motionless and queasy for a good hour before he felt well enough to sit up.

That was when he discovered that Epiny had taken a few precautions before she left. The leather strap of her bag was tied securely in my mouth as a gag, and strips torn from the draggled hem of her dress were knotted about my wrists and ankles. Soldier's Boy rolled onto his side and began working against his bonds. Tree Woman spoke to me as he did so.

'Your cousin is more resourceful than I thought. Truly, she would have made a better servant to the magic.'

Little as I wanted to serve the magic, the comparison still stung. 'Maybe if my self hadn't been divided, I would have been a better tool for the magic. Or a better soldier.'

'That's likely,' she admitted easily. Soldier's Boy didn't hear her. He wasn't looking at her tree stump, so I couldn't see her. But I could imagine her gentle, rueful smile. I hated what she had done to me, I hated how the magic had twisted my life away from my boyish dreams of a glorious career of a cavalla officer, of a gentle well-bred wife and a home of my own. I'd forfeited it all when I'd battled Lisana and lost. She had been the engineer of my downfall. Yet I still felt tenderness towards Lisana, my Tree Woman. It was no longer based entirely on Soldier's Boy's love for her. I sensed in her a kindred spirit, someone who had come unwilling to the magic's service but, like me, saw a need for it.

'So. What will happen now?'

She sighed, light as wind in the leaves. 'Eventually, Olikea or Likari will come back and help you. Or you'll wriggle free on your own. And then you must eat heartily, and quick-walk to join the People at the Wintering Place.'

'I didn't mean it that way. I meant, what will become of Epiny and Spink? What will happen to them?'

She sighed again. 'Let go of that life, Nevare. Embrace the one you are in now. Join the sundered halves of your soul and become one.'

That hadn't been what I was asking her. 'Will you try to harm Epiny?' I asked her directly.

'Hmf. Did she try to harm me? A few more minutes of that fire, and we would not be having this conversation now. I've told you before, I cannot control the magic or what it does.' A pause. Then her voice was gentler. 'But for whatever peace it gives you, I'll tell you that I will not be attempting any revenge on her.' She made an odd sound that might almost have been a laugh. 'The less I have to do with your cousin, the better for both of us, I think.'

'Thank you.'

Olikea did not come to find me. Jodoli did, stumping up the ridge with a scolding Firada in his wake. He, too, had heard the summons of the whispering leaves, but he had been farther away and Firada had not wanted him to quick-walk them to Lisana, thinking it better that Soldier's Boy handle whatever the difficulty was with the Gernian madwoman on his own. Firada was not pleased with Jodoli consuming energy to rescue me yet again. She grumbled about it the whole time that he was untying me.

'What happened here?' Jodoli asked as soon as the gag was removed from my mouth. -

'Nevare's cousin Epiny attacked Lisana. But do not concern yourself with it. The threat has been dealt with. I'm sorry that I used | more of your time.'

'You call this dealing with a threat?' Firada asked tartly. 'We find you bound and gagged, and your feeders nowhere in sight!'

'I sent them away, to keep them safe. It is dealt with. Let it go.'

Soldier's Boy spoke in a commanding way that I expected her to find offensive. Instead she just puffed her cheeks and then settled in abrupt silence. Soldier's Boy turned to Jodoli. His face was equally disapproving, but I suspected that some sign from him had quieted Firada.

'Jodoli, I thank you for coming yet again to my aid. Please, do not delay your journey to rejoin the People any longer. I will need another day here to gather strength before I am able to do any magic. But do not linger here on my account.'

'We have no intention of doing so,' Firada responded quickly.

Jodoli's words were more measured. 'Indeed, we must depart tonight. But I wanted to let you know that I went to look at what you did to the intruders' road. I think you bought us a season of respite, and perhaps more. It is not a permanent solution. Nonetheless, I do not think you used your magic in vain. Firada is correct that I must rejoin our kin-clan tonight; they are unprotected when I am not with them. I hope you will hurry to rejoin us as quickly as you can.' He glanced about, his eyes lingering on Tree Woman's scorched trunk.

Soldier's Boy got slowly to his feet. His head still pounded with pain and hunger squeezed him again. All the magic he'd acquired, he'd used in healing the worst of his injury. He sighed. 'I go to regain my feeders. We will see you soon, at the Wintering Place. Travel well.'

'At the Wintering Place,' Jodoli confirmed. He reached out and took Firada's hand. They walked away. I did not 'see' the quick-walk magic, but in less than two blinks of my eye, they had vanished from my sight. When they were gone, Soldier's Boy turned back to Lisana's stump.

He walked over to it, knelt in the deep moss, and gravely examined the damage. There was not much; the fire had licked the outer bark, scorching it, but not penetrated it. He nodded, satisfied. He gripped the hilt of the rusty cavalla sword that was still thrust deep into the stump. Heedless of the unpleasant buzzing that the proximity of the metal blade woke in his hands, he tried to work it loose. To no avail. A nasty recognition stirred in my own thoughts. As a mage, I'd now experienced how unpleasant the touch of iron felt. Yet Lisana had never once reproached me for the blade I'd felled her with and then left sticking in her trunk. I felt shamed.

But Soldier's Boy continued unaware of my thoughts or feelings. He pushed through growing underbrush to reach the young tree that reared up from Lisana's fallen trunk. He set his hands to its smooth bark and leaned his head back to smile up at its branches. 'We must thank our luck that she did not know this is where you are truly most vulnerable. This little one would not have survived such a scorching as your trunk took. Look how she seeks the sun, look how straight she stands.' He leaned forward, to rest his brow briefly against the young tree's bark. 'I really, really miss your guidance,' he said softly.

Behind us, Lisana spoke. 'I miss you, too, Soldier's Boy.'



I knew he could not hear her. She knew it, too, and I heard the isolation in her voice, that her words to him must go unheard. It was for her rather than for him that I said, 'She misses you, too.'

Soldier's Boy caught a breath. 'Tell her that I love her still. Tell her I miss her every day. There is not a moment that goes by when I do not remember all that she taught me. I will be true to what she taught me when I go to the Wintering Place. This I promise. Tell her that. Please, tell her that for me!'

He was looking at her little tree. I wanted him to turn and look at the cut trunk, where Lisana still manifested most strongly for me. But it was not easy to make him hear me, and I did not want to waste the effort. 'She hears you when you speak. She cannot make you hear her replies, but what you say aloud, she hears.'

Again, he halted, turning his head like a dog that hears a far-off whistle. Then he slowly reached out to the little tree and drew a finger down its trunk. 'I'm glad you can hear me,' he said softly. 'I'm glad we at least have that.'

I heard Lisana sob. I wished I could have met her eyes. 'She's by the trunk,' I said, but my strength was fading.

Lisana spoke to me again. 'Please. Tell him to walk down the line of my fallen trunk. Near the end, another small tree has begun. Tell him that it is for him, when the time comes. I'm preparing a tree for him. Please tell him.'

'Look for another little tree, near the end of her fallen trunk/ I said. I pushed the words as hard as I could. But he did not hear

me. After a pause, he spoke aloud to her. 'I'm tired, Lisana. Tired and hungry and empty of magic. I need to find sustenance. And as soon as I can, I must leave for the Wintering Place. I haven't forgotten what you told me. Believe me. What you taught me, I will live.' He was very still, as if listening for me or for Lisana, but after a time he closed his eyes, puffed his cheeks and turned away from the little tree.

He started to follow the fading trail that led back down the ridge and eventually into a valley where a small stream flowed. Weariness dragged at us. He muttered as we walked and after a time, I realized he was speaking to me. I listened more closely to his rambling words. 'You used it all. Did you hate us that much or were you just stupid? I saved that magic, hoarded it all thinking that I might get one chance. And now it's all gone. Gone. You always complained to everyone who would listen that I'd stolen your beautiful wonderful future. Is that why you destroyed mine? Was it vengeance? Or stupidity?'

I had no way of responding. I was little more than a spark inside him now, clinging desperately to my self-awareness. The idea of letting go came to me. I shook myself free of it. What would happen to me if I did? Would I cease to be entirely, or would all my ideas, thoughts, and knowledge suddenly be merged with Soldier's Boy? Would he consume me as I had tried to consume him? If he integrated me into his being, would I have any awareness of it? Would I live on only as odd bits of dreams that sometimes haunted the Speck Mage I would become?

The thought of merging my awareness with Soldier's Boy and becoming merely a part of him held no appeal for me. Instead it filled me with loathing, and I struggled against it. 'I am Nevare

Burvelle,' I told myself. 'Soldier son of a New Noble lord. Destined to be a cavalla officer, to serve my king with courage, to distinguish myself on a field of battle. I will prevail. I will keep faith with Epiny and I will prevail.' I would not become a set of disconnected memories inside some hulking forest mage. I would not.

And so I wearily clung to my identity and did little more than that for the next two days. I was an observer as Soldier's Boy hiked wearily down to the stream. He found Likari dozing on the shady bank while Olikea scavenged in the shallows for a greyish-brown leggy creature that looked more like an insect than a fish to me. As she caught each one, she popped its head off with her thumbnail and then added it to the catch heaped on a lily leaf on the stream bank. The animals were small; two would fill her palm. She already had a small fire burning. As Soldier's Boy approached, he greeted her with, 'It is good that you are already finding food for me.

She didn't look up from her hunting. 'I already know what you are going to say. That you have used up what magic you had, and we must stay another night here. Did you kill her?'

'No. I let her go. She is no threat to us. And you are right that we must stay here, not one night, but three. I have decided that before I travel, I will rebuild some of my reserves. I will not be the Great Man I was when we rejoin the People, but I will not be this skeleton either. I will eat for three days. And then we will quick-walk to the people.'

'By then, almost everyone will have returned to the Wintering Place! The best trading will be done, and all that will be left there are the things that are not quite perfect or have no newness to them!'

'There will be other trading days in years to come. You will have to miss this one.'

Olikea filled her cheeks and then puffed the air out explosively. She had caught two more of the creatures, and she flung them down on those already heaped on the stream bank so hard that I heard the crack of their small shells as they hit. She was not pleased, and I was dimly surprised by how easily Soldier's Boy dismissed her feelings on the matter.

She looked at him at last and surprise almost overcame her sullen glance. 'What happened to your forehead?'

'Never mind that,' he said brusquely. 'We need food. Busy yourself with that.' With his foot, he stirred the sleeping Likari. 'Up, boy. Gather food. Lots of it. I need to fill myself.'

Likari sat up, blinking, and knuckled his eyes. 'What sort of food, Great One?'

'Any food that you can get in quantity. Go now.'

The boy scuttled off. Olikea spoke from behind me. 'Do not blame him if he cannot find much that is good. The time for the best harvesting is past. That is why we go to the Wintering Place'

'I know that.' Soldier's Boy turned and walked to the stream's edge, upstream of Olikea. With a grunt and a sigh, he hunkered down and then sat on the ground. He reached over, pulled up a

handful of water-grass, rinsed the muddy roots off in the flowing stream and then peeled the slimy outer skin off them. He bit off the thick white roots and as he chewed them, uprooted another handful of the stuff. The flavour was vaguely like onions.

By the time Likari returned with an armload of shrivelled plums, Soldier's Boy had cleared a substantial patch of water-grass. He ate as methodically as a grazing cow. Olikea was busy with her own task; she had steamed the leggy creatures in layers of leaves and was now stripping them of legs and carapaces. The curl of meat from each one was scarcely the size of my little finger, but they smelled wonderful.

They ate together, with Soldier's Boy taking the lion's share of the food. The plums had dried in the sun's heat; their flesh was thick and chewy and sweet, and contrasted pleasantly with the little crustaceans. When the food was gone. Soldier's Boy commanded them both to find more, and then lay down to sleep. When they woke him, they had roasted a pile of yellow roots that had little flavour other than starch, and a porcupine was cooking on the fire. Likari had killed the creature with a club. Divested of its fur and quills, it showed a thick layer of fat. 'You can see the kind of weather that soon will come!' Olikea warned him.

'Let me worry about such things,' Soldier's Boy dismissed her.

Night was deepening when that meal was gone. They slept in a huddle, Olikea against his belly and Likari cuddled against his back. Soldier's Boy used a tiny bit of magic to hummock the moss into a nest around them while Likari had gathered armloads of fallen leaves to cover them. Over the leaves, he spread the winter blanket from my cemetery hut, even though both Olikea and Likari complained that it smelled odd. He had discovered that they had disposed of the clothing he had worn when they found him. Olikea had cut the shining brass buttons from his uniform and kept them, but the rest of it was gone, dropped somewhere in the forest when they were moving him. So all that he carried forward from my life was a winter blanket and a handful of buttons. It seemed fitting.

As they settled together in their bed with Olikea's warm back to his chest and her firm buttocks resting on his thighs. Soldier's Boy felt an insistent stirring of lust for the woman, but set it firmly aside. Later, after he had regained some of his flesh, he could enjoy her. For now, he must not expend any effort save to gather and eat food. As for Olikea, she showed no such interest in him at all, and Likari seemed blissfully unaware of any tension between the adults.

For the next two days, that was the pattern. As long as there was enough light to see, Olikea and Likari gathered food and Soldier's Boy consumed it. They moved twice, following the stream, as Soldier's Boy systematically harvested and ate every edible item that it could provide for him.

There was a freeze on the third night. There had been twinges of frost before, enough to hasten the turning of the leaves, but that night, the cold reached beneath the forest eaves. Despite the mossy nest and deep blanket of leaves, they all shivered through the night. Soldier's Boy awoke aching, and Olikea and Likari were both grumpy. In response to Olikea's complaints. Soldier's Boy told her, 'We will travel tonight. I have regained enough reserves that we will go swiftly. For now, go about your gathering. I will return shortly.'

'Where are you going?'

'I go to the road's end. I will not stay there long; have food ready for me when I return.'

'This is a foolish risk you take. There will be workers there; they may attack you.'

'They will not see me,' Soldier's Boy said firmly. And with that as his farewell, he set out.

As Soldier's Boy had recovered his reserves and strength, so had I. He was still not as immense as he had been, but he had regained flesh and energy. He moved purposefully through the forest. The fallen leaves carpeted the moss. They rustled as he strode through them. As he approached the road's end. Soldier's Boy slowed and went more cautiously. For a large man, he moved very quietly, and he paused often to listen.

He heard only birdcalls and once, the thump and rustle of a disturbed rabbit. Emboldened, he ventured closer to what had been the road. Stillness reigned.

By this hour of the day, workers should have arrived, but there were no signs of them. He moved cautiously along the edge of the road. The greenery I had sent out across it had browned, but the

vines and crawling brambles had survived and looked undisturbed. Where I had sent plants to block the culverts, swamps had formed on either side of the road. Insects buzzed and hummed near them.

He came to the shed where the men had been keeping watch that night. It was deserted. He walked through it and found the dice still out on the rough table just as the man had abandoned them. No one had been back here since that night.

'Perhaps it was not a total waste of magic,' he conceded reluctantly. 'It looks as if the intruders are discouraged. I do not think they will come back before spring.'

He had turned back into the forest before I realized that he had deliberately spoken to me.

'I thought I was doing what the magic wanted me to do.' I could not decide if I wanted to apologize to him or not. It seemed strange to apologize to myself, and even more so to have to apologize for an action I'd been pushed into taking. I wasn't even certain that he was aware of what I'd tried to say to him. I thought of the times when I'd thought I'd felt Soldier's Boy stir inside me, the moments when my thoughts had seemed more Speckish than Gernian. Always, I'd felt that he deliberately concealed himself from me. Now I wondered if he had tried to share his views, only to feel as smothered as I did.

He spoke again, almost grudgingly, as if reluctant to acknowledge me. 'The magic was mine, not yours to spend. And the magic speaks to me, not you. You should not have tampered with it.'

He seemed to resent me as much as I did him. It scarcely seemed fair. He was the one who had invaded my life. I reined in my resentment and asked my most pressing question.

'Do you know what the magic wants you to do?'

He grinned hard. I sensed him weighing whether or not to reply.

When he did, I felt it was because he could not resist the urge to brag. 'Several times, I have acted on what the magic wished me to do.'

'When? What did you do?'

'You don't remember the Dancing Spindle?'

'Of course I do.' At the Dancing Spindle, actions I had taken had ended the Spindle's dance forever, and dispersed the magic of the plainspeople. I knew now that Soldier's Boy had taken into himself as much of their magic as he could hold and had hoarded it. 'But what else? When else did you obey the magic?' His grin grew wider. 'You don't know, do you? That amuses me. Because at the time, I thought I felt you resisting me. And even now, I do not think I would be wise to tell you the things the magic prompted me to do. There were small things that I did, things that made no sense to me. But I did them. And I kept them from you, lest you try to undo them. You thought you had pushed me down; you thought you had absorbed me and made me a part of you. But I won then. And I've won now, Gernian. I will prevail.'

I nearly warned him not to be too certain of that. Then I decided not to provoke him to keep his guard up against me. He spoke no more to me but found and followed the stream to rejoin Likari and Olikea. She was sitting close by the fire, her arms wrapped around her naked body. The day had warmed, but not much.

'Finding food would keep you warmer,' he told her. 'This is the last day we shall spend here. We'll eat, and then sleep until night-fall.'

'There isn't much left to find here!' Olikea protested, but just then Likari made a lie of her words.

He ran up to me, proudly displaying six silver fish hung from a willow wand through their gills. 'I caught them all myself!' he exclaimed. His hands and forearms were bright red from exposure to the icy waters.

'Wonderful!' Soldier's Boy praised him and ruffled the boy's hair. The child wriggled like a happy puppy. Olikea took the fish with a sour expression on her face and went to work cleaning them of guts and scales. Soldier's Boy went back to the stream and began eating water-grass stems. He would have preferred to eat the foods richest in magic potential, but lacking those, he would fill my belly with anything that was edible.

When Olikea returned from her gathering, a hastily-woven carry sack held big mushrooms and a quantity of prickly cones. She gave the cones to Likari, and he pounded them on a rock by the stream to shake loose the fat seeds inside them. The mushrooms were thick and dense, with ranks of tubes rather than gills on the undersides of their orange caps. Olikea cut them into fat slices to toast over the fire with the fish.

After everyone had eaten, they all arranged themselves in the moss-and-leaves nest to sleep for the rest of the day. I felt no need for such rest. Instead, trapped behind the darkness of Soldier's Boy's closed eyes, my thoughts chased their own tails in endless circles. What had he done for the magic that I hadn't even known about, and when had he done it? In dread, I thought of the times I had awakened from sleep-walking to find myself outside my cabin. Had it happened then? Or had it occurred when I was home in Widevale, or even while I was still at the Academy? I recalled how the Speck dancers had come to Old Thares with the travelling carnival. When

I had seen them, I had lifted my hand and given them the sign to release the dreaded Speck plague on our capital city. Yes. I could see now that that had been the work of Soldier's Boy. But what else had he done that I'd scarcely been aware of? Had he influenced my thoughts about my father? Had he precipitated my quarrel with Carsina?

When I decided that wondering about it was futile, my thoughts turned to Epiny, Spink and Amzil. I wondered if Epiny had reached her home safely, and if she had been able to convince both Spink and Amzil that I was still alive and that they had not failed me. I wondered about the rest of Gettys as well. I was fairly certain that my death would be dismissed easily. I doubted that there would be any serious inquiry into it. Gettys was a town composed of soldiers, convict workers and released convicts and their families. The Speck magic flooded the town with alternating tides of fear and despair. It was a place where violence and crime were as common as the dust blowing through the streets. A man beaten to death by a mob would only briefly shock the inhabitants, and no one else would ever know of it. I imagined that the official report, if there were one, would say that a condemned prisoner, Nevare Burv, had been shot to death while attempting to escape.

The knowledge that I was actually the son of Lord Burvelle of the East would have died with Colonel Haren. I was fairly certain that he would not have confided it to anyone else. So there would be no formal notification of my father. I wondered how Spink and Epiny would explain my death to my sister, and if she would pass the news on to my father and Sergeant Duril, my old mentor. I hoped that Yaril would have the strength of will to keep the news to herself. My father had disowned me; to hear that I had died while escaping a death sentence would only vindicate his poor opinion of me. As for Sergeant Duril, he knew how easy it was for soldiers to lose contact with families and friends. Let me simply fade out of his life and his memories, without any knowledge of my shame. I didn't want the old soldier to think that somehow his teaching had failed me or that I had turned my back on all I had learned from him. Let me be forgotten by them.

And what did I hope for myself? Hope. It seemed a bitter word now. What hope could I have, imprisoned in my own flesh and about to be borne off to the Speck Wintering place? I had no idea where that was, nor could I begin to guess what Soldier's Boy planned for the future. Obviously he was committed to the magic. He would do whatever he thought he must to drive the Gernians back west into our own lands. How far would he go?

I'd heard rumours of another Speck Great Man, the most powerful one of all. I wracked my memory for his name and then had it. Kinrove. Olikea had mentioned him as someone she hoped I would surpass; I imagined that she hoped Soldier's Boy would supplant him as the most powerful Great One. Lisana had mentioned him in another way, as had Jodoli. Kinrove was the source of the Dance, whatever that was. For years, he had maintained a magic with it, a magic that was supposed to hold the intruders at bay, maybe even drive the Gernians away completely. But it had not, and now the younger men were becoming restless, and talking of bringing war to the Gernians in a way they would understand. No, I corrected myself. In a way 'we' would understand. I was still a Gernian, wasn't I?

It was hard to pin down what I was any more. I could not even decide whether to think of myself as 'I' or 'he'.

My other self was a frightening mystery to me. I didn't know what he had already done in obedience to the magic or what he was capable of doing. Well, that wasn't exactly true, I abruptly realized. He had been capable of turning the Speck plague loose on the Gernian capital city. He'd deliberately infected my fellow cadets of the King's Cavalla Academy, successfully wiping out half of a future generation of officers. If he could do that, what would he not do? Was this ruthless creature truly a part of myself, an aspect of Nevare Burvelle that Tree Woman had peeled away and infected with the magic? If he had stayed a part of me, would I have been capable of such deadly, traitorous acts? Or would the self that I was now have ameliorated him, balanced his warlike nature with more ethics and philosophy? Was he a better soldier

than I was in that he was burdened only with loyalty to 'his' people and cause?

Was he the sort of soldier my father had wished me to be?

Such thoughts were not cheering, especially confined as I was to the sleeping body of my enemy. For a short time, I tried to pretend that I had options. I'd stopped him from killing Epiny, hadn't I? That meant I had some control over him. And I'd been successful in making him hear my thoughts. Did that mean I could influence him? Or, as Epiny had believed, eventually master him again?

I tried to feel my body as I had once felt it, to be aware of tickling leaves against my skin, of Olikea's hair tangled across my face, of the ball of warmth that was Likari curled against my back. I could sense those things, but when I tried to move a hand or lift my foot, nothing happened. My only achievement in that long afternoon of their nap was to focus my attention on Olikea's hair on my face. It tickled. It itched. I wanted to move my face away from it. It annoyed me. I nattered and nagged at the sleeping Soldier's Boy with such thoughts until, with a grunt and a sigh, he lifted a hand to brush her hair away from his face. I had done it!

Or had he, of his own will, simply moved an annoyance away?

I had no way of knowing.

As night descended, they stirred, first the boy, and then Soldier's Boy and Olikea. They had little to do to prepare to travel. Olikea and Likari had left the migrating People in a hurry, rushing to rescue me. She had her hip belt of tools and pouches. The boy filled his waterskin for us. We had my winter blanket from my hut. Olikea had saved some cooked fish and water-grass roots in a carrynet. Soldier's Boy yawned, stretched, and rubbed his face, scratching irritably at his unshaven cheeks. Then he told them, 'It's time to go. Come with me.'

He took the boy's hand, but seemed to judge that Olikea could follow on her own. I wondered how he determined who would quick-walk with him. How did he extend the magic to include them; how did he do the magic at all? I sensed nothing, only his desire to travel swiftly now. Perhaps that was all it took. For a time, they walked in what seemed a very ordinary fashion, threading their way quietly through the dusky forest. They came to a faint path through the trees, and Soldier's Boy grunted and nodded as if pleased at finding something.

After that, we travelled swiftly. His pace didn't quicken. It seemed to me that he walked as he had before, and the sensations I experienced with him were little different from any walk I'd ever taken. Occasionally I felt a dizzying lurch, or stumbled as if the

path had suddenly risen under my feet. That was disconcerting. The trees and brush did not rush past us, yet it only took three steps to climb a steep hill, half a dozen to follow a long ridge, and then in a few strides we dipped down into a valley, crossed a river, and climbed the opposite side. After that, our path led us ever upward. Despite the deepening night, we walked in a brief grey twilight that extended only a few steps ahead of us.

We climbed the flank of a mountain, traversing the steep side, followed a pass, and then crossed yet another mountainside. And always we went higher.

As we climbed, the night grew colder around us. The others hugged themselves and their breath showed white in the moonlight. We were above the tree line now. The ground was hard and cold underfoot. I winced for my unshod feet tramping along such harsh terrain but Soldier's Boy appeared not to notice.

We came to the mouth of a pass. To either side of us, towering mountains gave us no other option. There was a campsite at the mouth of the pass, an area where many small fires had burned. There was plenty of evidence that a large group or several large groups of people had passed through the area recently. 'Are we stopping here until tomorrow?' Olikea asked.

Soldier's Boy simply walked on. We followed the pass as it wound its way between two steep-sided mountains. The air was dry and cold and we were soon glad that Likari had filled the waterskin. As we trekked on, I became aware of how Soldier's Boy used the magic in a steady stream. Olikea and Likari kept pace with him. I could sense their weariness. The magic might mean that they covered ground much faster, but hours of walking in the cold at a swift and steady pace were telling on them. 'How much farther are we going tonight?' Olikea almost wailed at one point.

'We'll stop and rest at dawn,' Soldier's Boy deigned to tell her.

'But we've passed the best stopping place,' she complained. 'I did not prepare for Stone Passage. I thought I would have a chance to gather firewood and more food before we entered it.'

'Wherever we are at dawn is where we will rest,' he ended the discussion.

Soldier's Boy pushed ruthlessly on. Scowling, Olikea began to salvage items left behind by other migrants. She darted from side to side, picking up ends of torches and bits of firewood that had not completely burned to ash. Soldier's Boy appeared not to notice, but slowed the pace slightly. When Likari began to lag behind, he gruffly ordered the child to keep up. I felt pity for the boy; he could not have been more than six or seven, and to compel him on this forced march on such a long cold night seemed cruel to me. If Soldier's Boy thought about it at all, I could not sense it. The pass grew narrower and narrower and the mountains ever steeper and more sheer. It seemed to me that this path might simply come to a dead end, but they all pushed on as if following a familiar way.

By the time dawn began to grey the sky, it was only a stripe of light over our heads. The way we traversed was more like a cavern with a crack in the roof than a pass. I had never even imagined such a place. The filtered light showed me that many folk had passed this way and recently. To either side of us was the detritus of a busy trail: discarded rags, a frayed basket, scraps of food waste



and other litter. Olikea seized the basket and put her wood into it without losing the pace. The light grew stronger, but still Soldier's Boy walked on. Jodoli had been correct when he said that the magic was harder to summon in the light of day than at night. Soldier's Boy began to weary and to feel queasy from the way the landscape lurched and jumped as he passed it. Quite abruptly, he came to a halt. 'We'll rest here,' he announced.

'Here?' Likari asked in surprise. 'This isn't a stopping place.'

'It is now,' Soldier's Boy replied grumpily. Olikea didn't say anything. At a gesture from Soldier's Boy, the waterskin was passed around. Olikea dumped her trove of salvaged fuel on the ground in a heap. She stared pointedly at Soldier's Boy. He puffed his cheeks in refusal.

'Making fire uses too much magic. You light it.'

For an instant, her lip curled up to bare her teeth. Then she turned her back on him, took out a Gernian made flint-and-steel set, and set to work. Soldier's Boy gritted his teeth to the unpleasant buzz of the exposed metal. She used part of the basket as tinder to catch the sparks, and the charred wood caught swiftly. It was not a large fire, but it pushed back the shadows and offered a little warmth. They shared the food Olikea had brought. On this rocky trail, there was no moss for Soldier's Boy to command and no leaves to blanket them. Soldier's Boy chose a spot along the edge of the trail wall and lay down. The ground was hard and cold. Olikea circled him, looking unhappy, and then took her place at his side. Likari lay along his back. The one blanket did not cover all their bodies. The dwindling warmth from the dying fire was almost meaningless in such a cold and stony place.

'I'm cold,' the boy whimpered once. Soldier's Boy made no response but I felt him release some of his stored magic. My body warmed, and the two of them pressed closer. After a short time, I heard the boy sigh heavily and felt him go lax.

Olikea had put her back to my belly. She pressed in closer against me and yawned. Silence fell and I thought she slept. Then she asked, 'Do you have a plan? For when we get to the Wintering Place?'

Soldier's Boy was quiet for a long time, but I knew he did not sleep. With him, I stared wearily at the stony walls of the chasm. When he blinked, I felt the grittiness of his eyelids. The magic was like a small campfire burning in him, consuming the reserves he'd gathered. When he spoke to the dimness, I wondered if Olikea were still awake. 'I'll have to wait until I'm there. I've never been there before, you know.'

'But you know the way. How?' Olikea suddenly seemed uncertain.

'Lisana. Lisana shared many of her memories with me. She made this journey scores of times, first as a young girl and then as a Great One. I rely on her memories.'

They were quiet again and I felt Olikea relaxing against the warmth of his body. His arms were around her, holding her close to me. I felt sorry for her. Behind Soldier's Boy's closed eyelids, he was thinking of Lisana. My thoughts drifted toward Amzil. If only she were the woman in my arms now. Olikea exploded that fantasy.

She spoke softly. 'You are not one of us. To some, that will be

a problem. They may even be angry that you have come there.'

'I know. It will not make my task easier.'

'You will have to prove yourself to them before they will accept you as part of our kin-clan, let alone as a Great One.'

'I was thinking of that.'

She drew a deeper breath and let it out slowly, a prelude to sleep.

'How long will it take us to reach the Wintering Place?'

'We could be there tomorrow. But I do not wish to move that swiftly and arrive there depleted of power. We will move more slowly and stop sooner.'

'That makes sense,' she agreed, and then said, 'I need to sleep now.'

'Yes,' Soldier's Boy agreed. But it was some time before he closed his eyes. I sensed he was weighing his options and planning a strategy. But I could not find a way into those thoughts and suspected he deliberately kept them from me.

NINE

### Journey in Darkness

Soldier's Boy was the first to waken. I'd been aware for hours, alone in his darkened skull and feeling oddly helpless. I knew that he was planning something, something that would affect both of us forever, but had no idea what it was or how I could influence him. I'd again attempted to move the body, to 'sleep walk' it while he was unconscious and succeeded not at all. All I could do was to wait.

He stretched slowly, mindful of the two sleepers who flanked him. Awkwardly, he disengaged his body from theirs. They both burrowed into the warm space he left, now sharing the blanket more comfortably. He walked a short distance away from them before he relieved himself. Overhead, a narrow stripe of blue sky showed. I tried to decide if the mountains were leaning closer to one another overhead, or if distance only made it seem that way.

When he went back to Olikea and Likari, the two had cuddled together. In the semi-darkness, Olikea embraced her son, and both their faces looked peaceful. I wondered who the boy's father was and where he was. Soldier's Boy understood far more of Speck customs than I did. I found my answer in his mind. Only rarely did Specks select a mate and remain with one person for life. The kin-clan was the family who would raise the children born to the women. Usually, mates came from outside the kin-clan, and often the journey to the Wintering Place or the Trading Place was when young women met males from other clans for those liaisons. It was not necessary for a boy to know who his father was, though they usually did. Often fathers had little to do with sons until they were

old enough to be taught the hunting rites. Then a boy might choose to leave his kin-clan to join that of his father, or he might decide to remain with his mother's people. Women almost never left their kin-clans. It was not the Speck way.

'It's time to travel again,' Soldier's Boy said. His voice sounded odd.

Olikea stirred and beside her, Likari grumbled, stretched and then recurled in a tighter ball. He scowled in his sleep. Olikea

opened her eyes and then sighed. 'It's not night yet.'

'No. It's not. But I wish to travel now. The nights grow colder. I don't want to be caught here when winter bites hard.'

'Now he worries about it,' she muttered to herself, and then seized Likari's shoulder and shook it. 'Wake up. It's time to travel again.'

We did not quick-walk. The light from above reached down to us. It was the strangest natural setting that I had ever experienced. What had seemed like a pass between two mountains had narrowed to a crevasse. We walked in the bottom of it, looking up at a sky that seemed to grow more distant with every step of our journey. The sides of the rift were slaty, the rock layered at an angle to the floor. Rubble that had tumbled down into the rift over the years floored it, but a well-trodden path threaded through it. Moss and little plants grew in the cracks of the walls.

By late afternoon, the crack that showed the sky had narrowed to a distant band of deep blue. We came to a place where water trickled down the stony walls. It pooled into a chiselled basin, overflowed it, and ran alongside our path for some distance before it vanished into a crack. We re-filled the waterskin there and everyone drank of the sweet, very cold water. Plants grew along the stream, but not luxuriantly. It was evident that they had recently been picked down to the roots. Olikea muttered angrily that nothing had been left; tradition demanded that some leaves must always be left for whoever came behind. Soldier's Boy, his stomach grumbling loudly, lowered himself to his knees. He put his hands in the cold water, touching the matted roots of the plants lightly.

I felt the magic flare up in him and then ebb. Then he took his hands away and slowly stood up. He shook icy water from his hands. For a distance of six feet or so, the plants had pushed forth new foliage. Olikea exclaimed with delight and hurriedly began to harvest the fat leaves.

'Remember to leave some,' Soldier's Boy cautioned her.

'Of course.'

They nibbled on the leaves as they walked. The food was not enough to satisfy Soldier Boy's hunger, but it kept him from focusing on it. They did not talk much. The crack of light above us continued to narrow. The cold was a constant, and I think they all suffered from it, but no one spoke of it. It was simply a condition they had to endure.

My eyes had adjusted to the dimness. As she had the day before, Olikea began to gather the stub ends of torches and bits of firewood. Soldier's Boy said nothing about this but kept the pace slower so that she could manage it without being left behind. We came to another trickling wall stream. This time, the catch basin was obviously man-made. It was the size of a bath tub, and the sides were furry with a pale moss. The water that overflowed it ran off into the dimness in a groove that had probably been originally cut by people and smoothed by the passage of the water. Again Likari filled his waterskin and we all drank. 'We should have brought torches,' Olikea fretted as we left the water.

In a very short time, I saw why. The crack overhead that had admitted a bit of indirect light vanished. I looked up. I could not

tell if it was overgrown with foliage or if the rock had actually closed up above us. I suddenly felt a squirm of great uneasiness. I did not want to go any deeper into this crack that had now become a cavern. If Soldier's Boy or any of the others shared my discomfort, they gave no sign of it. I felt Soldier's Boy kindle the magic within him to make a stingy pool of light around us. We walked on, Likari and Olikea close beside him.

At first, I assumed that the darkness was temporary. I kept hoping that the overhead crack would reappear. It did not. The stream that paralleled our path added an element of sound and humidity to our passage. The cold became danker, with an organic smell of water and plant life. Our luminescence briefly touched white mosses and clinging lichen on the walls. When Olikea saw a cluster of pale yellow mushrooms leaning out from a mossy crevice, she cowered with satisfaction and hastily harvested them. She shared them out and we ate them as we walked. I felt Soldier's Boy heightened

awareness of the cavern after he had eaten them. His energy seemed renewed and the light that he gave off became more certain. Both Olikea and Likari seemed renewed by the mushrooms as well, and for a time we travelled more swiftly.

Occasionally, I heard splashes from the stream, as if small startled frogs or fishes were taking alarm at our light. The sheen on the rocky wall on that side of the cave showed more water sliding down to feed the stream. It flowed merrily beside us, and this, more than any sensation of descending, told me that our trail was leading us downward.

When Soldier's Boy finally decided to stop, the others were foot-sore, cold and weary. Olikea seemed grateful that he had chosen a regular stopping site. Here the cavern widened out substantially and there was a large blackened fire circle. Olikea was able to salvage quite a bit of partially burned wood. While she kindled it, Likari went off to investigate an odd structure built into the stream. He came back with three pale fish. 'There wasn't much in the trap. These ones were barely big enough to get caught in it.'

'Usually, it teems with fish and there is plenty and to spare.' Olikea shot Soldier's Boy a meaningful glance.

'We are the last, most likely, to make the passage this year. When we come in the wake of so many people, it is not surprising that others have harvested and hunted before us. Three fish are enough for us, for tonight.'

'Enough?' she asked him, shocked.

'None of us will starve,' he clarified.

'But you will not look like a Great One when we arrive.'

'That is my concern, not yours,' he rebuked her.

'It is not my concern if others mock me that I have tended my Great One so poorly that he looks like a rack of bones? Not my concern if we reach the Wintering Place and you have not even enough magic to kindle a fire for yourself? I shall be completely humiliated, and you will be mocked and disregarded. This does not concern you?'

'Other things concern me more,' he told her. Then he turned away from her in a way that suggested the conversation was over.

Muttering, she went about the task of preparing the fish for cooking. Likari wandered at the edges of the firelight, exploring the abandoned trash. He came back to his mother's fire with a tattered piece of fabric. 'Can we make shoes from this?' he asked her, and they were soon both involved in that task.

Soldier's Boy walked away from them. His personal light went with him. He walked towards the wall of the cavern. There the ceiling dropped low, but he ducked down and walked hunched for a time. The dim circle of light around us showed me little more than the stony floor in front of his feet. His back began to ache and I wondered where he was going and why. When the ceiling of the cavern retreated, he straightened up and stood tall again. He closed his eyes, then breathed out hard and suddenly light burst into being all around me. It was no longer his personal light that shone. We were in a different chamber, separate from the long rift we had been following. The cavern we were in was as large as a ballroom, and everywhere I looked, the walls sparkled with crystals. Somehow Soldier's Boy had woken light from them, and it illuminated the cave.

The crystals glittered brightly as he drew closer to them. They were wet and gleaming and appeared to be growing from the walls of the cavern. Some were quite large, their facets easy to see and other were tiny, little more than a sparkle against the cavern's dark wall. Soldier's Boy seemed to consider them for a long time; then he chose a protruding crystal structure and broke it from the wall. I was surprised at how easily it came away, and also at how sharp it was. Blood stung and dripped from his fingers as he carried it away from the wall and back to the centre of this cavern.

There was a pool there, as dark as the crystals were brilliant. Soldier's Boy lowered himself down to sit beside it. He dipped his fingers in it and they came up inky with a thick, slimy liquid. He nodded to himself. Then he began to systematically prick himself with the point of the crystal and then dab some of the noxious liquid onto each tiny cut. The cuts stung, but the slime itself did not add to the pain. In fact, it seemed to seal each tiny wound as he dabbed it on.

He worked systematically, doing both his arms from the shoulders down and then the backs of his hands. He was working on his left leg, jabbing and dabbing when I became aware that a new light had joined us in the cavern. It was yellow and flickering. Olikea had wedged two burnt torch ends together to make one that was barely long enough for her to hold without scorching her

hand. As she drew near to us, she exclaimed in sudden pain and then dropped it. She no longer needed it. The light of the crystals glittered all around us still.

'I didn't know where you had gone. It worried me. Then I saw the light coming from here. What are you doing?' she demanded.

'What you suggested. Becoming a Speck, so the People will accept me,' he replied.

'This is only done to babies,' she pointed out to him. 'During their first passage.'

'I am not a child, but this is my first passage. And so I have determined that it will be done to me, even if I must do it myself.'

That silenced her. For a time, she stood watching him prick my

flesh with the broken crystal and then dab the wound with the black slime. Her feet were wrapped now in clumsy shoes made from the old fabric that Likari had found. Her failing torch added a flickering yellow to the light around us and was reflected in the glittering crystals that surrounded us. As it began to die away, Olikea asked quietly, 'Do you want me to do your back?'

'Yes.'

'Do you . . . how do you wish it to be? Like a cat? Like a deer? Rippled like a fish?'

'You may decide,' he said, and then bowed his head forward on his chest to present his full back to her. She took the broken crystal from him. She worked swiftly as if this were something she had done before. She made a series of punctures, then daubed them all with a handful of the thick, soft muck. The pain seemed more intense when someone else did the jabbing.

I heard a sound behind us and became aware that Likari had joined us. 'The fish is cooked. I took it away from the fire,' he said. Uncertainty filled his voice.

'This won't take long. You may eat your share,' Olikea told him. But the boy didn't leave. Instead he hunkered down carefully on the shard-strewn floor and watched.

When Soldier's Boy's back was finished, Olikea had him stand, and did his buttocks and the backs of his legs. Then she came around in front of him and regarded him critically. 'You haven't done your face yet.'

'Leave it as it is,' he said quietly.

'But—'

'Leave it. I am of the People, but I do not wish any of them to ever forget that I came to them from outside the People. Leave my face as it is.'

She puffed her cheeks, her disapproval very evident. Then she handed him back the crystal. 'The food will be cold, and our fire dying,' she observed, and turned and left him there. He stood by the muck-filled pond, turning the crystal slowly in his hands. He remembered something then, something of mine. When I was just a boy and Sergeant Duril was training me to be a soldier, he always carried a sling and a pouch of small rocks. Whenever he caught me unwary, I could expect the thud of a rock against my ribs or back or even my head. 'And you're dead,' he'd always tell me afterwards. 'Because you weren't paying attention.'

After a time, I'd begun to save the different rocks he used to 'kill' me. I'd had a box full of them before I'd left home.

He held up the crystal for Likari to see. 'I want to keep this. Do you have room in your pouch for it?'

'I can put it with your sling.'

There was a small surprise. 'You have my sling.'

'I found it in your old clothes. I thought you might want it again.'

'You were right. Good boy. Put the crystal with it.'

The boy nodded, pleased at the praise, and reached to take it from me. 'Careful. It's sharp,' Soldier's Boy warned him, and he took it gingerly. He stowed it away in one of the pouches on his belt, and then looked up, a serious question in his eyes. 'Let's go eat,' Soldier's Boy told him, forestalling it, and led the way back to the dwindling fire and the food.

The fish was very good, but there wasn't enough of it. I could feel that Soldier's Boy had used too much magic making light and warmth. He was wearied. At this stopping place, there were alcoves hollowed into the lower walls of the chamber. He chose a large one and clambered into it, and was unsurprised when Olikea and then Likari joined him there. The moisture in the air made the chill more noticeable, as if the cold were settling on us like dew. Our combined body heat warmed the alcove, but the single blanket did little to confine our warmth. It leaked away and cold crept in. He decided that he could not afford to use anymore magic that night;

we'd simply have to get by.

Soldier's Boy fell asleep. I did not. I hovered inside him in the darkness and pondered everything I'd witnessed. I am not a fool. I immediately connected the many tiny injuries he'd dealt himself and the inky slime he'd rubbed into them to the dapples on any Speck's skin. Was it some sort of a tattoo that they inflicted even on the smallest child? Olikea's specks had never seemed like tattoos to me. They'd even seemed to have a slightly different texture from the rest of her skin. I'd always assumed that all Speck babies were born with, well, specks on them. Was it possible that the Specks were not Specks when they were born?

Because I was aware, I think I was more conscious of Soldier's Boy's rising temperature. His flesh flushed warm and the tiny stinging wounds that he had dealt himself began to itch. He muttered in his sleep and shifted uncomfortably. Without waking, he scratched first one arm and then the other. He shifted again, causing the others to murmur in protest, and then dropped into a deeper sleep. Almost as soon as he did, I felt his fever rise higher.

He was ill. Very ill. He'd sickened my body and I was trapped inside it, voiceless and helpless. Every place where the crystal had pierced his skin now itched abominably, far worse than any insect bite or sting that Pd ever endured. When he sleepily scratched at the sores, I could feel how puffy and swollen each one was. I felt something pop like a blister and then the wetness of blood or pus on my skin. I longed to get up and go to the water, to wash myself and clean the injuries, but I could not rouse him at all.

He was deep into dreams now, and as his fever climbed, his dreams became brighter and sharper edged and harder to ignore. He dreamed of a forest that was impossibly green, and a wind that swept through it like the waves on an ocean, and somehow there were ships on those waves, ships with brightly coloured sails that floated and spun through the forest treetops. It was a bizarre dream of bright colours and giddy shapes, and it completely fascinated me. I wondered if my rationality would give way to his fever.

Then I felt him leave his body.

It was a strange sensation. For a moment, I felt I was alone in the fever-wracked shell. Desperately I reached out to try to regain control of my physical being. Then, as if the current of a river had seized me, I felt myself pulled away from my body and out into

an otherness. It was like being dropped down a shaft. I felt shapeless and unanchored; then I became aware of the part of me that was Soldier's Boy and held tight to him. It was like gripping the mane of a runaway horse.

He was dream-walking. I knew that right away, but it was as unlike my experience of dream-walking as a rushing river is unlike a quiet pool. It was a wandering fever dream, energized by the heat that tormented his body. He snapped from one awareness to the next, without pause or purpose, like a captured fish darting about in a bucket of water. We brushed wildly against Olikea's dreams, a memory of shared lust, and then rushed towards Lisana. He beat furiously about her, like a bird trying to break through a window, but could not sense, as I did, how she reached towards him, trying to catch and hold the connection. She gave a lonely cry as he darted away again.

I was disconcerted that the next dreamer I glimpsed was my father. Why would Soldier's Boy seek him out, I wondered, and then knew that he was Soldier's Boy's father just as much as he was mine. My father was sleeping the shallow sleep of an old man. The Speck plague and his stroke had aged him beyond his years. He dreamed of being clad once more in brave green and leading a flanking movement that would close off the enemy's retreat. In his dream, he battled plainsmen who rode leggy white horses and brandished battle axes at him, but I saw him as an ailing old man, his age-dappled hands twitching against the blankets of his bed. We burst into his dream, and I rode by his side, as brave as he was, astride Sirlofty once again. My father looked over at me, and for one wild instant, he was glad and proud of me. I knew I had broken into a cherished dream, then, one in which I had fulfilled all his plans for me. But just as my heart warmed towards him, I grew fat, bursting my buttons and spilling out of my shirt, my flesh obscenely pale and jiggling.

'Why, Nevare? Why? You were supposed to be me, all over again! Why couldn't you be a good soldier for me? If I was only allowed one son to follow after me, why couldn't you have fulfilled the task? Why? Why?'

The old man's muffled dream shouts woke him, and he broke free of our dream touch. For a second, I saw his room at Widevale, glimpsed the fireplace and his bedstead and a bedside tray laden with all sorts of medicine bottles and thick heavy spoons.

'Yaril! Yaril, where are you? Have you abandoned me, too?'

Yaril!' He shouted for my sister like a frightened baby calling for his nursemaid. We left him there, sitting up in his bed and calling. It tore at my heart and that surprised me. I'd been able to be angry with my father, even hate him so long as he seemed like a man and my equal. To see him frail and afraid stole my anger from me. Guilt wracked me suddenly, that I'd caused him so much pain and then left him alone. For that moment, it mattered not at all that he'd disowned me and cast me out. When I had been a child, I had always felt protected by his sternness. Now he wailed for the sole child fate had left him, alone and forlorn, sonless in a world that valued only sons.

Even as my awareness reached towards him, longing to protect him from the doom he had brought down on himself, Soldier's Boy swept on, snatching me away from him. I caught glimpses of other people's dreams, splashes of colour against the fantastic canvas of Soldier's Boy's own dreaming mind. I could not focus on any one



sensation: it was like trying to read the riffled pages of a book. I saw a word here, a paragraph there. He had no memories of his own; the connections that called him were mine. Trist dreamed of a girl in a yellow velvet dress. Gord was not asleep. He looked up from the thick book he was studying, startled, saying 'Nevare?'

Sergeant Duril was sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, dreamless. No images floated in his mind, only the gratitude that for a time, his aching body could be still, his painful back flat on his mattress. My presence in his mind was like a drop of oil falling on a calm pool. 'Watch your back, boy,' he muttered, and sighed heavily. Soldier's Boy swept on.

I do not think he was aware of his burning body, but I was. Someone trickled cool water past his lips. His mouth moved ineffectually. I sensed how tight and hot his skin felt. Distance and fever distorted Olikea's words. They seemed sharp, yet I could hardly hear them. 'He makes a fever journey,' I thought I heard her say, and Likari piped up with a question that ended in the word, 'name?'

Olikea's response faded in and out of my hearing. 'Not a baby,' she said disdainfully, but I wasn't sure I had heard her correctly. My attention was caught by a fantastic landscape. Never had I seen colours so intense. Very large objects came into my view, things so big that I could not see what they were until we had swept past them. Then, I wondered if the butterfly had seemed so large because we were close to it, or if it truly had been so immense that it covered half the sky and it only seemed small as we retreated from it.

'Fever dream/ I told myself, but it was hard to believe that it was only a dream and that I had not been transported into some other world.

Then, most tantalizing of all, we crashed into Epiny's dream. Her dream was sweet and simple; she was sitting by the fireside in the sitting room in her father's house in Old Thares. Next to her was a beautiful carved wooden cradle mounted on a rocking stand. A curtain of fine lace, all worked with pink rosebuds, draped the cradle. She sat next to it, reading a book and gently rocking the cradle. She looked up as I crashed into the room.

'Nevare? What have you done to yourself?'

I looked down. I was immensely fat again, and mottled with specks. I wore a garment like a wide belt, and from it hung a number of pouches. My neck was ringed with necklaces of leather strung through beads of polished stone. My wrists were likewise decorated. Soldier's Boy opened his mouth to speak. With frantic energy, I fought him for control of the mouth and words. Here, I suddenly discovered, we were much more equally matched. I could not force out the words I wanted to say, but neither could he. We stood before Epiny, two battling spirits in one body, voiceless as the mouth worked and only nonsense sounds came out.

Epiny's image of herself suddenly brightened and firmed, as if she had come closer to me without moving. 'Nevare. You are here, aren't you? This is that "dream-walking" you wrote about in your journal! Why have you come to me? Is there something important I must know? Are you in danger? Are you hurt? Where are you, Nevare? What do you need of me?'

Epiny in the flesh could be overwhelming. Epiny on this dream

plane exceeded that. As she focused herself at me, she seemed to grow larger. The room disappeared; only the cradle remained at her side and despite her frantic questions, she continued to rock it in a calm and calming manner. I thought I finally understood what the 'aura' she told me about was. Epiny radiated her self like a fire

radiates heat. In this place, nothing was concealed. Her intensity her curiosity, her burning sense of justice and her equally hot indignation at injustice; it all flowed out of her, a corona of Epiny-ness. It was humbling to stand there and feel the waves of her love for me beat against me.

I wanted so badly to stay and speak with her. Soldier's Boy's desire to stay mute and flee was equally strong. Caught in that tug of war, we were a silent presence full of conflict.

'If you cannot speak to me here, at least hear what news I have. It may comfort you to know that both Spink and Amzil believed me when I told them that you lived. It was such a relief to them. Neither had wanted to admit to the other that the memories of that night were truncated and contradictory. Still, there have been repercussions. Spink can go about his daily tasks, knowing that he did not fail you. But it has still changed his heart towards the men he rode with that night. He cannot abide the sight of them. He knows how capable of evil they are. He avoids Captain Thayer, Carsina's husband, but the man knows that Spink despises him. I fear he will take umbrage against Spink some day.

'I fear for him, Nevare. He cannot hide what he knows about those men; it shows in his face and his eyes whenever we encounter any of them. And they, I think they feel they must be rid of him;

perhaps it is the only way in which they will be able to forget that night. They believe they beat you to death, or at the least, witnessed their comrades doing so. But their memories are not clear on exactly how it happened. So when Spink looks at them with disgust, well, I do not think they know what to believe about themselves.

'And Amzil does not make it better. I do not know what you said to her that night, but it has made her fearless. And when I gave her your message, that you loved her but had to leave her, it hardened something in her. Now she is worse than fearless whenever she encounters one of those men. She torments them. When she sees one of them on the streets or in the mercantile, she does not turn her eyes away or avoid him. Instead, she stalks him like a cat, meeting his gaze, walking up on him and staring him straight in the face. They flinch from her, Nevare. They look away, they try to avoid her, but she is making them hate her. The one that tried to stand up to her, who would not leave the store when she glared at him? When he looked at her with disdain, she returned his gaze and said aloud, loud enough for other customers to hear her, "Perhaps he has forgotten what happened the night a mob beat the grave-digger to death. I have not. You think you know what I am; I've heard you call me the Deadtown Whore. But I know what you are. I remember every detail. And I had far rather be a whore than a snivelling coward." He fled from her then, convinced that what she recalls is what others recall of him as well.

'Winter will close around us soon, Nevare, and winter is not a good season here in Gettys. It is a time when every injury festers, and the cold and the dark promise to hide every evil thing that is done. I am afraid. I bar the door at night, and Spink sleeps with his pistol cocked and ready on the bedside table. He has talked of resigning his commission; he no longer wishes to serve with these

men. I think that if winter were not so close, he would do it, and we would flee, for the sake of the baby. Such cowardice would scald him and leave a scar that would never heal. Yet, when spring comes, if nothing has improved here, what else can he do? Better that he take us away from here than that he is shot in the back and I am left at the mercy of these wolves. So he has told me himself.'

Her words cut me like razors. I had thought I had been saving them all when I cut myself adrift. Instead I had not only plunged them into danger and torment, but then abandoned them all to take care of themselves. I did not deceive myself that I could have been of great use to them, but it seemed cowardly that I was not there at all. Most troubling to me was Amzil's anger and the behaviour it prompted. I could not blame her for it. How must it be for her, to see walking on the streets the men that would have raped her, even to death? I wished she would flee to a safer place, but not if it meant leaving Epiny pregnant and without the comfort of another woman near. It was all too horrible to contemplate. I tried to reach my hands towards Epiny, but they were not mine to control, not even in a dream. I focused all my will on trying to say even one word to her.

That was a mistake. For while I devoted my strength to that, Soldier's Boy tore us free of Epiny's dream and fled with me. I looked back as we took flight, and saw Epiny looking up after us. She dwindled in the distance until she was gone.

They should just go away.' Soldier's Boy was speaking to me, but the words echoed and I knew that in the other world, he raved in his fever. If I reached, I could be aware of that body, burning

inside and yet shivering with cold in the dank cave. I heard people whispering. Perhaps it was Olikea and Likari. Their voices sounded wavery and frightening.

'A death. Or a life. Which do you owe me, Nevare? Which will you give me, Nevare?'

An immense croaker bird confronted us. The carrion bird was black and white, with brilliant red wattles around his beak. The wattles were thick and fat and somehow disgusting and threatening at the same time. He opened his beak wide and I saw how strangely his tongue was fastened into it, and how sharp his tongue looked.

'I am not Nevare! I am Soldier's Boy of the People. I owe you nothing.'

The bird opened his beak wide with amusement. He rattled his wing plumes, resettling them, and a sickening wave of carrion stench wafted against me. 'Neither debts nor names are so easily shed, Nevare. You are who you are and you owe me what you owe me. Denying it does not change it.'

'Nevare is not my name.'

Could a bird grin? 'Nevare is a soldier's boy, a soldier's son. The name that you use was given to you only because you are Nevare, and the son of a soldier. And a soldier son. And that is as true as that you owe me a death. Or a life. However you wish to name it, it is what you owe to me.'

'I owe you nothing!' Soldier's Boy shouted at him and his words echoed in a distant cave. He was braver than I was. His hands

darted out to seize two great handfuls of the croaker bird's plumage. He gripped the bird and shook him, shouting, 'I owe you nothing! Not a life, not a death! I owe you nothing!'

Far away, someone shrieked and then the croaker bird took flight, laughing like a mad thing.

Cold water splashed Soldier's Boy's face. It was a shock, and with a shudder he opened our shared eyes. He blinked, trying to focus, and lifted a shaky hand to wipe at his eyes. Olikea was angrily untangling her hair from his fingers. A waterskin on the ground beside him gurgled out its contents. It took a moment for him to make sense of it, and then the unjustness of it broke his heart. 'You threw water on me,' he wailed accusingly, and he sounded like a weepy child. His voice shook with weakness.

'You ripped out my hair when I was trying to give you a drink! And if you think you owe me nothing, then consider that I owe you less than nothing!'

I could barely make out her features. The fire had subsided to a dim red glow. The body was cold and ached badly. Olikea looked tired and haggard. I became aware that strands of her hair were still tangled in my fingers. I'd ripped them out of her head. 'I'm sorry,' I said, aghast, and then was shocked when the words actually came out of my mouth.

'Olikea!' I began, but abruptly lost the power to speak. I could feel Soldier's Boy's anger at me thrumming through his body. He was weak and ill and tired. His strength was barely enough to confine me. I stopped struggling against him. I was listening to Olikea's words.

'We are out of food, and there is scarcely any firewood to be found. We must go on to the Wintering Place. Can you walk?'

It was hard for him even to think about it, his head ached so. 'I can't quick-walk. Give me water.'

She picked up the slack waterskin and held it for him. He drank, and was surprised at how thirsty he was. It cleared the thickness from his mouth and throat. He felt more alive. 'You are right,' he said when she took the water away. 'We need to move on from here. Even if I cannot quick-walk, we should try to move on.'

She nodded grimly.

Likari suddenly loomed up out of the darkness behind her. He carried an armful of salvaged wood. 'It's hard to find anything in the dark - is he awake now? Are you better?' He leaned unpleasantly close. Soldier's Boy involuntarily drew back from the boy's looming face and closed his eyes. 'Did you find a name? When babies make this journey, it is often their naming journey. Did you find your name?'

'Nevare,' he croaked out, then angrily shook his head. Once. Shaking his head made the world spin. He lifted his hands to his face. The skin of it was hot and dry and tight. He rubbed his eyes;

they were crusty.

'Nevare is the name you had before,' Olikea observed tartly. 'And I do not think you were wise to do this. We are ill prepared to spend time here waiting for you to recover.'

'I am not interested in whether you think I am wise or not.' He placed his hands flat on the cavern floor. He turned onto his belly, got his knees under him and finally tottered to his feet. He tried not to let her see the effort it cost him, but when she took his arm and put it across her shoulders, he didn't have the will to resist her.

'Likari, bring our things and whatever you have scavenged that might be useful.' Olikea sounded sceptical that we would get far but eager to try. Plainly she wished to be out of the dank cave. She and the boy had to be at least as hungry as Soldier's Boy but neither complained.

'I do not have the strength to make a light for you,' Soldier's Boy grudgingly admitted. 'We will have to travel in the dark.'

'There will be light enough for us to make our way, once we are away from the fire,' Olikea asserted.

That puzzled me, but Soldier's Boy seemed to accept her statement. Likari had gone to fill the waterskin and retrieve our blanket. He returned with it slung over his shoulder. He had also bundled together the bits of firewood he had scavenged and tied them with a leather thong so that he could carry them easily. He came to Soldier's Boy's other side and took his hand. Without ceremony, he set my hand to his shoulder, as if confident he could take some of my weight. With no more ado, we set forth.

The dim red glow of the fire quickly faded behind us and we walked forward in darkness. Soldier's Boy was content to let Olikea lead him, and she seemed confident of the way. So many others had trodden this path for so many years that it was flat and smooth. Soldier's Boy did not think of such things. He focused simply on moving his body along. Fever ran over his skin like licking flames. The places where he had pierced his skin with the crystal itched. He scratched the heads of the scabs off and fluid leaked from the swollen cuts. He decided that he had been foolish to use the crystal, yet in the same thought, doggedly determined that his act and the pain and fever that followed it were necessary. His joints ached, and his head pounded with pain. The desire to lie down and sleep soon became a pressing need, one that was even stronger than the hunger that assailed him. Yet both had to be ignored as he pressed on towards his journey's end. All thought became a narrow focus on walking. Ghost light crawled and danced at the edges of his fevered vision. He squeezed his eyes shut, opened them, and then blinked again, but could not banish the dots of sickly luminescence. He tottered on. Gradually I became aware that the ghostly light was not an illusion. It occurred in patches and in tiny moving dots. It was a pale, creamy green and sometimes a white-blue. The blue lights were the ones that moved. When one hummed up to us, hovered near my face and then flittered away, I recognized that it was some sort of underground lightning bug. That knowledge helped me to resolve what I was seeing. The greenish patches became a glowing slime or moss on the cavern walls. The blue insects frequented such patches, eating or drinking perhaps, and adding their light to it until they were sated enough to take flight again. The softly lit patches of gentle green seemed to occur at almost regular intervals. I decided that whatever it was, moss or plant or slime, the Specks had deliberately marked their trail with it as a dim light to show the way for travellers. I admired their innovation at using such a natural material even as I wondered at their lack of planning in other regards. I thought of my own beloved cavalla, and knew that

if this were a path we used frequently, there would have been caches of firewood and food. I wondered if the Specks did not care for one another in that way or if they had simply never thought of such things.

I became aware of something far more important to me. In his weariness and pain. Soldier's Boy was focusing all of his resources on staying upright and walking.

He was not guarding against me.

My first impulse was to attempt a coup against my oppressor and regain control of the body. Luckily, I swiftly realized that it would leave me in the position he was now occupying: feverish, full of pain and battling hunger. But if I remained quiescent for now, it might be that he would lose even more of his wariness of me, and that when next he slept, I could at least dream-walk on my own. And so I curled small within the prison of my own body and awaited my opportunity.

TEN

Dream-walker

Soldier's Boy did not last long. I do not know how far we had travelled in the darkness before he gave a sudden groan and sank down. Both Olikea and Likari did what they could to ease him gently to the stony floor of the cavern. Once there, he curled into a large miserable ball. For a time, it seemed all he could do was breathe. His eyes were closed tight.

Olikea speaking to Likari and the soft sounds they made were my only clues to what was transpiring. The boy set a small fire and Olikea kindled it. The tiny warmth was more a taunt than a comfort. They tucked the blanket around him.

'Drink. Open your mouth. Your body burns with fever. You must drink.'

Soldier's Boy obeyed her. The liquid in his mouth and running down his dry throat was a comfort, but the small amount that splashed him seemed horribly cold. Olikea wet her hands and wiped them over his eyes, rubbing gently at his sticky eyelids. Soldier's Boy turned away from her ministrations but nevertheless felt the comfort of them. He sighed once, heavily, and then sank into a very deep sleep.

I worried at how wracked with fever my body was. That it weakened him and distracted him was an advantage to me, but I did not want to regain command of a body that was hopelessly crippled or dying. I was tempted to try to ask Olikea for more water. I was certain it would be good for me, but decided that such a bold act might call Soldier's Boy's attention to me. I would attempt a dream-walk first.

I felt almost a thief as I did so. His bodily resources were low. Consuming what little of his magic remained seemed a cruel trick. Even so, I gathered my strength and ventured out.

It is difficult to describe that experience. I had dream-walked before, but not deliberately and often at someone else's summoning. It was the first time I had attempted to master the magic in such a way, and I soon discovered that I faced a challenge. While Olikea and Soldier's Boy had tottered along, the sun had risen and the day begun. All the people I had hoped to visit via their dreams were

up and about their lives. I could find them easily enough; it was not a distance I traversed. The thought of a beloved friend seemed to bring me to them, but their conscious minds were busy with other things and refused to see me.

Just as I had not been able to gain a real link with Gord the night before, so it was today with Spink and Epiny and Amzil. I was like a little buzzing fly. I could hover round their thoughts but not penetrate them. Their experience of their waking world was too strong to permit me entrance. Frustrated at trying to contact those three, I tried to think whom else I might find dozing. Yaryl came to mind, and before I could decide if it were a wise course or not, I found myself inside her bedchamber at Widevale. She was napping after a hectic morning. I ventured into a dream that seemed not restful at all, for it was cluttered with things that she must do. Shimmering folds of a pale blue fabric vied with supervising the day's washing. Something about cattle was troubling her, but most pressing of all was an image of Caulder Stiet staring at her as hopefully as an urchin staring at a store window full of sweets.

'Tell him no,' I suggested immediately. 'Tell him to go away.'

'He's not that bad,' she said wearily. 'He can be demanding as a child, it's true. But he is also so desperate that someone see him as manly and competent that I can steer him simply by suggesting things he must do for me to praise him in those lights. It is his uncle who wearies me the most. Rocks, rocks, rocks. They are all that man can think about. He pesters the help and asks a thousand questions a day, yet seems strangely secretive as to what it is that he is seeking. And he is most presumptuous. Yesterday, I discovered he had taken workers from repairing the drive and had them digging holes along the riverbank and bringing him buckets of rocks taken from the holes. As if he has the right to give orders on our

land simply because I am betrothed to his nephew! Oh, how that man maddens me!'

I said nothing though I felt great concern. I could almost feel the press of her words, the tremendous need she had to speak of her problems to someone.

'Duril brought the problem to me because he says the work on the drive must be finished before winter, or erosion will have its way with the carriageway. So I went to father, and he told me that women who worried about such things were usually much older and uglier than I was, and had no prospects. So I had to go to Caulder and fret and fuss about the road and how bumpy it made my carriage rides until he went to his uncle and said that he thought it best if they did not take Duril's workforce off his project before it was finished. And his uncle said he would only need the workers for a few more days and then they could go back to working on the driveway. As if he had the right to decide what is most important for the estate!

'I am beginning to hate that man. He is insidious, Nevare, absolutely insidious. He manipulates Caulder with such ease, and flatters Father into thinking that Professor Stiet is a very wise man, and someone to trust. I think not. I think he sees Caulder's marriage to me as an opportunity for him to come into a nice lifestyle. It seems that every time I think I have control of my own life or at least some control, someone comes along to muck it up! If his uncle would only go away, I am perfectly confident that I could manage Caulder to my satisfaction. And to his, I might add. He asks little of me. All I have to do is be pretty and tell him flattering things

about himself. But his uncle! I am convinced that the man plans that after I am wed to Caulder, he will settle in here and run things to his liking.

'It makes me furious, Nevare. Furious. At you. Because it is entirely your fault that this has fallen on me. I should not be dealing with any of this. If you had not let Father chase you away, if you had sent for me or come back, then, then—'

'Then everything would be all right?' I asked her gently.

'No,' she said grudgingly. 'But at least I would not be alone. Nevare, it meant so much to me to hear that you are alive. I was so shocked when your note fell out of Carsina's letter, and then I had to laugh at what a reversal that was. How many times did a note for her come concealed in a letter to me? And what an amazing twist of fate that she would be in Gettys and would renew her friendship with you, even to helping you conceal a letter to me. I wrote back to her immediately, thanking her and reminding her of our wonderful days before we so stupidly ended our friendship over a man! What fools we were! Though, in my heart, I still have not forgiven her for her ill treatment of you, even if I was a party to it. I've told myself that if you have forgiven her enough to entrust her with a letter to me, then I have little reason to hold a grudge. It was such a relief to know you were alive, and that you had actually become a soldier, as you always dreamed you'd be. I long to tell Father, but I have not yet. I dream that some day you will come riding back up to the door, tall and brave in your uniform, to show him that he completely misjudged you. Oh, I miss you so much! When can you come home for a visit?'

I cursed myself for how unthinkingly I had wandered into her dream. She was not aware that she was asleep and dreaming me there, nor had she realized, as Epiny had immediately, that I had intruded into her dream in a very magical way. Epiny had been prepared to understand what was happening by reading my soldier-son journal. Yaril had only the most basic idea of what had befallen me. And with a lurch, I suddenly realized that, when the days were counted up, I had 'died' less than ten days ago. Neither news of my shameful conviction for rape, murder and unnatural acts nor news that I had been killed trying to escape would have reached her yet. The last word she would have had from me was the note I had hidden inside a letter I'd blackmailed Carsina into sending her. She had no idea that Carsina was dead of the plague, let alone that I'd been found guilty of taking liberties with her dead body. Had anyone written anything to her since I'd sent her that note? Had there been time for Spink or Epiny to send her a letter about what had become of me? I wished I'd asked Epiny, but I hadn't, and she hadn't mentioned it to me. A colder thought came to me. Yaril had replied to Carsina's letter. Would Carsina's husband think that he must respond to that note, to let his wife's correspondent know of her sad end? I felt sickened at the thought of how he would paint me for her. I had to prepare her in case the worst happened.

'Yaril. You're asleep and dreaming. You know I'm not really

here. But this is more than an idle dream. I'm using magic to travel to your dreams and talk to you. What I am telling you is real. I'm alive, but I can't come to you or send for you. And, for now, you must not speak a word about me to Father. Or anyone else.'

'What?' A frown wrinkled her brow. The room suddenly wavered around us. Streaks of light broke through my image of it, as if



someone had suddenly opened a curtain a crack. Or fluttered her eyelashes as she dreamed. My words had been too sudden, too startling. I was waking her up.

'Yaril! Don't wake up yet. Please. Keep your eyes closed. Stay calm and listen to me. You might receive word that I've disgraced myself, that I died for vicious crimes I'd committed. You might get a letter from Carsina's husband. Don't believe anything he says about me. It's not true. I'm still alive. And eventually I'll find a way to come home to you some day. Yaril? Yaril!'

The world disappeared around me, washed away in a sudden flood of light. I'd wakened her. And I had no way of knowing how much credence she'd give to the dream or even how much she would remember on awakening.

'Yaril?' I asked desperately of the empty light. There was no reply. Doubtless her waking thoughts filled her mind and excluded any touch I might make upon her senses. I hoped I had not given her too great a fright. Would she dismiss my visit as a bizarrely vivid dream?

I had nowhere to retreat from the light and it seemed painful to me. Magic, I reminded myself, worked best in the night. It was time to go back to my body.

I had used Soldier's Boy's magic; he would know that when he awakened, and I suspected he'd keep a tighter watch on me after this. I'd had one opportunity to use the power of dream-walking and I'd made a mare's nest of it. I could feel my flesh pulling me back towards it and I let myself be drawn back into my body. Soldier's Boy slumbered on, his eyes closed. I used my ears and nose to deduce what was happening around me. I could smell smoke and hear the tiny crackling of a small fire nearby. Olikea and Likari were speaking softly to one another. Some distance ahead of us on our path, there was another fish trap in the cavern stream. The traps were woven like a basket and set in the stream's current. Fish could swim in, but finding a way out was more difficult, especially

for large fish. There might be fish in it. They were both desperately hungry. They debated softly as to whether one of them should travel ahead to check the trap and then return with fish from it, and then argued as to which of them should go. It was a wearying thing to listen to, a battle between hunger and fear of the darkness.

At the last it was decided that Olikea would go. She warned Likari not to stray too far from me, and to be sure to feed the fire, but only slowly. She would be relying on its light to find us again.

'Give him water if he asks for it, and do not leave him.'

'What else should I do for him?'

'There is nothing you can do for him except to stay near him and give him water when he thirsts. He chose this journey of his own will; he knew what the crystal and the black water would do to him. I do not think he gave any thought as to how it might affect us. But this is what it is to be the feeder of a Great One, Likari. Great Ones do not think of their feeders, but feeders must think only of the Great Ones we serve.'

With that last admonition, she turned and left the little boy sitting beside the tiny fire in the immense darkness. After a short time, he

drew close and sat with his back braced against mine, a faithful little guardian. I was impressed with both his obedience and his courage, and touched by his loyalty. He was such a young child to be left alone in the dark, charged to take care of a sick man.

Soldier's Boy slumbered on in his aching fever-sleep. The not-silence of the cavern settled around us. The little fire made the tiny noises of flames devouring wood. I could hear, if I strained, the distant rush of the stream in its stone channel, and the occasional buzz of one of the lightning bugs as it whispered past us. Likari gave a shiver, sighed, and settled closer against me. His breathing deepened and steadied, and then became the open-mouthed snore of a small boy. Tedium set in.

It seemed all my frustrated mind could do was chew over past events and rebuke myself with my foolish mistakes. I tried to make plans for the future and could not. There was too much I didn't know. Even if I could seize control of the body right now, it was too sickly for me to go back the way I had come. Go back to what? I asked myself dully.

When I had left Gettys, I had said that I was giving myself up

to the magic and would do its will. I thought I had, when I'd attempted to block the road builders from cutting any more of the ancestor trees. Now, bereft of any other distraction, I began to wonder why Soldier's Boy had been hoarding the magic and what he had hoped to do with it. Plainly my squandering of it had set back his plan. But what had that plan been?

Did he truly know a way to send all the Gernians fleeing from the Barrier Mountains and the adjoining lands? What could he bring down on us that would be so terrible that the military and the settlers would withdraw and the King give up his cherished road? How ruthless was he?

With a lurch, I knew the answer to that. More ruthless than I was. He'd taken my ruthlessness. That was frightening.

I tried to recall who I had been before Tree Woman and the magic had divided me. What would I have considered too extreme a solution to the clash between the Gernians and the Specks? It was hard to think in those terms. His loyalty to the Specks seemed absolute. With such loyalty as his sole criteria, could anything be too extreme? I made my heart cold and stopped thinking of the Gernians as my people; stopped thinking of them as people at all. If they were vermin, how would I drive them away?

The answer came to me, instantly and clearly. The fear and the disease that the Speck had already unleashed on them were merely discouragement. If I were Soldier's Boy, and I wished to destroy Gettys and make it uninhabitable, I would set fire to it. In winter, when the inhabitants had no place to take refuge. Drive them out of their homes and then pick them off. For an aching instant, I could picture Amzil and her children fleeing through snow, Epiny heavily pregnant or carrying a newborn. They could not outrun an arrow. If the Specks struck with stealth, late at night, they could pick off the fleeing victims at their leisure.

The moment the plan came into my mind, I shuddered away from it. I locked my thoughts tight, praying he had not sensed them. I was already traitor to one folk, showing the Gernians how to drug themselves against the Speck magic to cut down the trees. I would not betray both of them to one another.

I did not think it likely Soldier's Boy would come up with such a plan. He was more Speck than Gernian. The Speck did not winter near Gettys. It was possible, I hoped, that they did not see constructed shelter in the same way that I did. To discover what he might be planning, I would have to think as he would. I would have to become him. That thought would have made me grin, if I'd had a mouth to call my own. I'd have to become myself to understand myself.

Slowly the truth of that sank into me. Perhaps it was my only strategy. To stop Soldier's Boy from doing whatever he was planning to do, I'd have to merge with him. I'd have to become him, force him to share my sensibilities, make him see that he could not destroy my people without destroying a part of himself.

The moment I realized the fullness of what I was considering, I rejected it. This scrap of 'self was all that was left of me. If I surrendered it to him, if I lost my self-awareness to become part of him, how could I know if I influenced him or not? I suspected it was an irrevocable act. I feared that in the final analysis, he remained stronger than I was. I'd vanish into him. And I'd never know if I'd saved the people I loved or not.

I determined that I would surrender and become a part of him only if there were no other options. Until then, I would fight to take back the life that was mine.

Likari's snoring had ceased. He pressed closer to me and spoke very quietly. 'I'm cold. And I'm tired of the dark. How long has she been gone? What if something happens to her?' He shivered suddenly and something like a sob shook him. 'I'm scared,' he said, even more quietly.

I had not thought he could press closer but he plastered himself against me. I could feel his heart race and heard his breath quicken as he peopled the darkness around us with every bogey-tale creature that his young imagination could summon. I wondered what night terrors inhabited the dark corners of a Speck's mind. I could recall, only too well, how I had been able to bring myself to the shaking edge of terror simply by staring up into the darkness of my room and letting my imagination run wild.

When I was very small, I would let the terror progress to the point at which I would shriek from the nursery for my mother or nurse to come running to rescue me from my self-induced panic. The terror was almost worth the coddling and the warmed mug of milk.

By the time my father took over my upbringing I was too big

to shriek from my nursery. I would on occasion flee my bed to seek out the nanny I shared with my sisters. But I only did that once after my father had declared himself in charge of me. I was tapping anxiously at the nanny's bedchamber door when my father caught me. To this day, I do not know what alerted him. He was still dressed in his smoking jacket and trousers. In one hand, he carried a book, his finger trapped to mark his place. He looked down at me severely and demanded, 'What are you doing out of your bed?'

'I thought I saw something. In the curtains by my window.'

'You did, did you? Well, what was it?' His tone was brisk and

severe.

I stood up a little straighter in my nightshirt, my bare feet cold on the floor. 'I don't know, sir.'

'And why is that, Nevare?'

'I was afraid to look, sir.' I looked down at my bare feet, shamed. I doubted that my father had ever been afraid of anything.

'I see. Well, it is what you will go and do now.'

I glanced hopefully up at him. 'Will you come with me?'

'No. Of course not. You are to be a soldier, Nevare. A soldier does not retreat from what he imagines might be an enemy. In an uncertain situation, a soldier gathers information and, if the information is sufficiently important, he reports it to command. Imagine what would happen if a sentry came back to his commander and said, "I left my post because I thought I saw something. Would you come back with me and see what it was?" What would happen, Nevare?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'Well, but think. What would you do, were you the commander? Would you leave your post to go see what had frightened your sentry?'

I answered truthfully with a sinking heart. 'No, sir. I would tell my sentry to go back and find out what it was. Because that is his task. My task is to command.'

'Exactly. Go back to your room, Nevare. Face your fear. If there is something in your room that requires action from me, come to me and I will help you.'

'But—'

'Go, son. Face your fear like a real soldier.'

He stood there while I turned and walked away from him. Only

a few months ago, my room had been close to the nursery and to my sisters' nanny. My new room seemed very far from those safe and familiar places. The hall that led to my bedchamber seemed long and very dim. The wick in the lamp on the wall bracket had been turned low for the night. My heart hammered when I reached my own door. I had slammed it shut behind me when I fled so that whatever monster was lurking there could not follow me. I slowly turned the knob. The door swung into the darkness.

I stood in the hall, peering into my room. It was dark. I could see the rumpled white sheet on my bed. As my eyes adjusted, I saw more detail. The bedclothes hung to the floor, and anything could be concealed behind them and under my bed. The only other pieces of furniture in my room were a desk and chair. It was possible something lurked in the chair alcove under the desk. As I watched, the long curtains stirred. The window was opened, as it was every night, that I might enjoy the benefits of healthful fresh air. It might be only the wind. But it might not.

I wished I had a weapon of some sort. But my wooden practice sword and stave were both inside the wardrobe and that was on

the other side of the room. I'd have to face my fears unarmed.

To an adult, the situation might have seemed laughable, but I was a victim of my own imagination. I had no idea what might be lurking in those slowly stirring curtains. Even if it was the wind, could the being previously hiding behind them now be concealed under my bed? My heart was thundering in my ears at the thought;

I'd have to get down on my hands and knees to look under the bed. Once I'd lifted the bedclothes, anything that was under there would most likely spring for my face. It would scratch out my eyes. I was certain of it.

I didn't want to look. I thought of racing across the room and jumping up on my bed and simply forcing myself to stay there. Perhaps there was nothing at all under my bed. Perhaps I was being foolish. I could stay awake all night. If anything did emerge to attack me, I could shout for help then. I didn't have to confront it

now.

Except that I did. My father had ordered me to do so. It was what a soldier would do. And I was a second son, born to be a soldier. I could be nothing else. And I could do no less than my duty.

But it did not mean that I had to be a fool in doing it.

I slipped quietly away from my room and hurried through the deserted corridors down to a parlour. My home was quiet and almost unfamiliar at that late hour. There was no bustle of servants, no opening and closing of doors or snatches of voices. I heard only the padding of my own bare feet and my panting breath. When I entered the parlour, it was deserted, lit only by the dying flames in the fireplace. Spooky. I went to the rack of fire irons and selected the poker. It was heavy, much heavier than my practice sword. I hefted it in both my hands and decided it would have to do.

It was awkward to carry it back to my room. The end of it seemed magnetically drawn to the floor, but I gritted my teeth, gripped it firmly with both hands and marched back to my room with it.

The door was ajar as I had left it. I did not give myself time to think or hesitate. I charged into the room, dropped to one knee, and swept the heavy poker under my bed. It encountered no resistance. Emboldened, I used the log hook to flip up the bedclothes. Poker at the ready, I ducked down for a quick glance. The dim light from the hallway showed me nothing was there.

I staggered back to my feet, the heavy poker at the ready and stalked over to the blowing curtains. Again, I swung the heavy poker, hooking the thick fabric and pulling it out from the wall. Nothing there.

But my imagination had already discerned my diabolic opponent's likely strategy. The creature would be in my wardrobe by now. Heart hammering, I gripped the poker in one hand and with the other jerked the wardrobe door open. I gave an incoherent gasp of terror as the motion caused the clothing inside it to stir. Then I struck, jabbing the poker so firmly into the closet that the heavy tip of it struck and scored the wooden backing.

A shadow loomed suddenly over me from behind. I spun, my

poker at the ready. My father caught the end of it in a firm grasp and with a quick twist, disarmed me. I stood, looking up at him in dread.

He smiled down on me. 'Well, what is your report, soldier?'

'There's nothing there, sir.' My voice shook. I'd made a fool of myself before my father. He'd seen how scared I was.

He nodded at me. 'I agree. Nothing to be frightened of. And I'm proud of you, son. Very proud. If there had been anything there for you to fear, you would have vanquished it. And now you know that you can face what scares you. You don't have to run wailing for your mother or nanny or even me. You're a brave boy, Nevare. Some day you'll make a fine soldier.'

He leaned the heavy poker against the wall near the head of my bed. 'I think I'll just leave that here for the night. In case you should think you need it again. Now. Into bed with you and go to sleep. We've a busy day tomorrow.'

I climbed up onto my bed, and he spread over me the covers that I'd half dragged onto the floor. He leaned down and set his palm on my brow for a moment. 'Good night, son,' he'd said, and then gone out of the room, leaving the door ajar so that a slice of dim light fell on my trusty poker.

The memory had come back to me in a wild rush, triggered by the boy's trembling body pressed up against my back. It was a child's memory and now, as a man, I reordered it. My father had waited and watched to see what I would do. He hadn't interfered, but he had been watching over me. And he'd been proud of me, his soldier son. Proud of my courage, and he'd told me so. I don't remember how many nights the poker had remained in my room by my bed. But I don't recall that I ever felt a night terror after that.

Whatever might have happened in the years that followed, regardless of how we had parted, my father had given me something then. Given me something far more important than if he had carried me back to my bed and checked my room for imaginary threats himself. When had I lost that father?

When had he lost his soldier son?

I tried to lift my hand. I could not. Soldier's Boy's control of the body was complete. I could not even open my eyes. Instead, I poked at his awareness. It burned low. He was physically exhausted from battling his self-induced fever. It took all the focus I could muster to break through his stupor. I offered him my memory of my father and my current awareness of Likari's fear. He received it but did not rouse from his torpor.

'Do something.' I pushed at him relentlessly. 'Do something for the boy. Now.'

'Go away. Let me rest.'

I would not. I was a thorn in his legging, a pebble in his bed. He finally gave in.

'Water?' he croaked. 'Likari?'

'I'm here,' the boy instantly replied in a shaky voice. 'I have the

waterskin.'

'Help me drink.'

The darkness pressed close around us. Likari fed the fire a small bit of wood, and as a flame licked at it, he used the brief bit of light to offer me water. He was not adept at it. The skin fountained water, and wet my chin and chest before Soldier's Boy was able to catch it in my mouth. Then it was wonderful, cool and sweet and soothing. He had not realized how thirsty he was. Likari stoppered the skin. Soldier's Boy rubbed his hand over my wet chin and scrubbed at my crusty eyes with it. Even the dim light of the fire seemed too bright for his fever-stricken eyes.

'Where's Olikea?' Soldier's Boy asked Likari.

'She went ahead, to see if there was any fish caught in the next fish trap.' The boy hesitated and then added, 'She's been gone a long time.'

'I'm sure she'll be back soon.' It was hard to talk. Soldier's Boy's head hurt so badly. To press my ideas on Soldier's Boy, I had to share his sensations. I steeled my will and pushed at him. He spoke grudgingly. The act took effort and hurt his head. 'But you've stayed here by my side in the darkness. To watch over me.'

'Yes.'

'Thank you for the water, Likari. It's good to know you are here.'

The boy had stopped shaking. His voice was steady when he said, 'Olikea said it was part of being a feeder. I'm proud to be a feeder for you, Nevare.'

'I'm glad you are here,' and for that brief instant, I was truly the one who spoke. Soldier's Boy was sinking back into his stupor. His weariness dragged at me. I'd tangled my awareness too completely with his, and now as he sank into sleep, I went with him. But dimly I was aware that the boy re-settled against my back, and that he trembled no longer. I let myself sink into the darkness with Soldier's Boy.