

The End of the Game

Jinian Footseer

Dervish Daughter

Jinian Star-eye

Sheri S. Tepper

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CONTENTS

[Jinian Footseer](#)5

FOREWORD..6

1.7

2.10

3.21

4.22

5.35

6.40

7.44

8.48

9.54

10.57

11.60

12.64

13.67

14.71

15.80

16.84

17.96

18.109

19.121

[Dervish Daughter](#).125

CHAPTER ONE.126

CHAPTER TWO..133

CHAPTER THREE.141

CHAPTER FOUR..148

CHAPTER FIVE.157

CHAPTER SIX..169

CHAPTER SEVEN..185

CHAPTER EIGHT..195

CHAPTER NINE.216

CHAPTER TEN..227

CHAPTER ELEVEN..239

[Jinian Star-eye](#).246

1 THE GREAT MAZE.247

2 MEMORY..257

3 THE DAYLIGHT BELL.270

4 PETER'S STORY: THE FLITCHHAWK..276

5 JINIAN'S STORY: THE FIRST LESSON..285

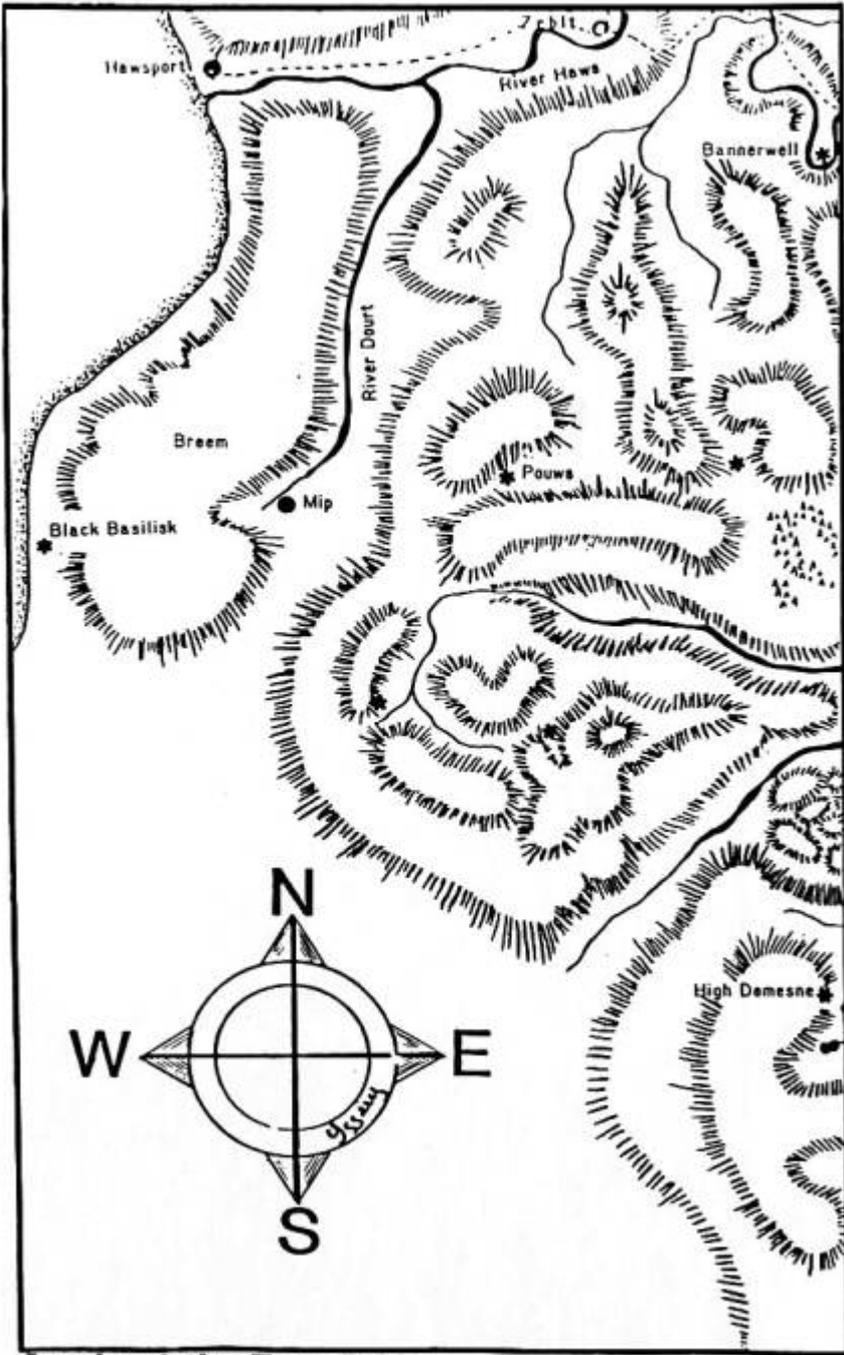
6 PETER'S STORY: THE BRIGHT DEMESNE.295

7 JINIAN'S STORY: FURTHER LESSONS.305

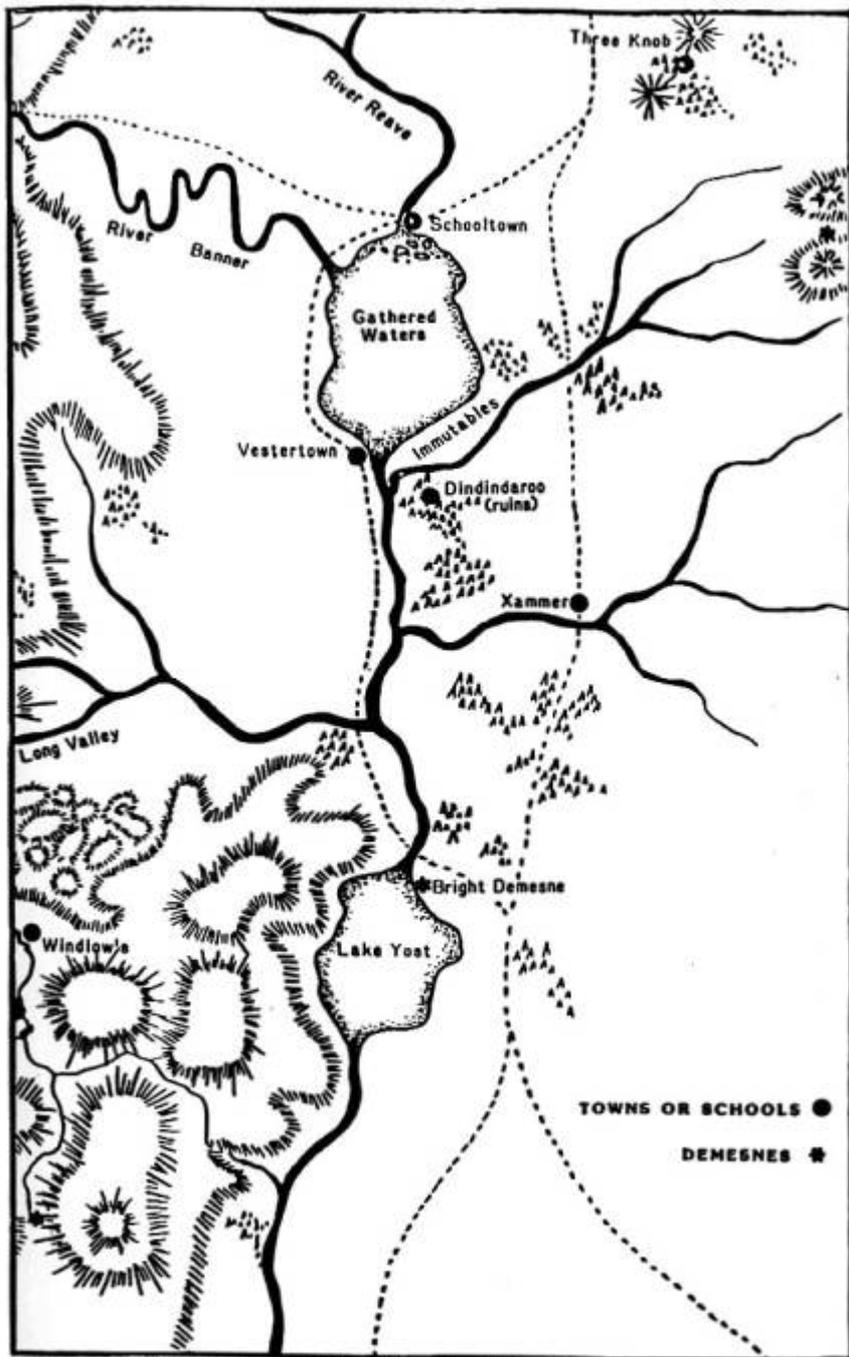
8 PETER'S STORY: THE SPY..312

9 JINIAN'S STORY: THE SEVEN..319

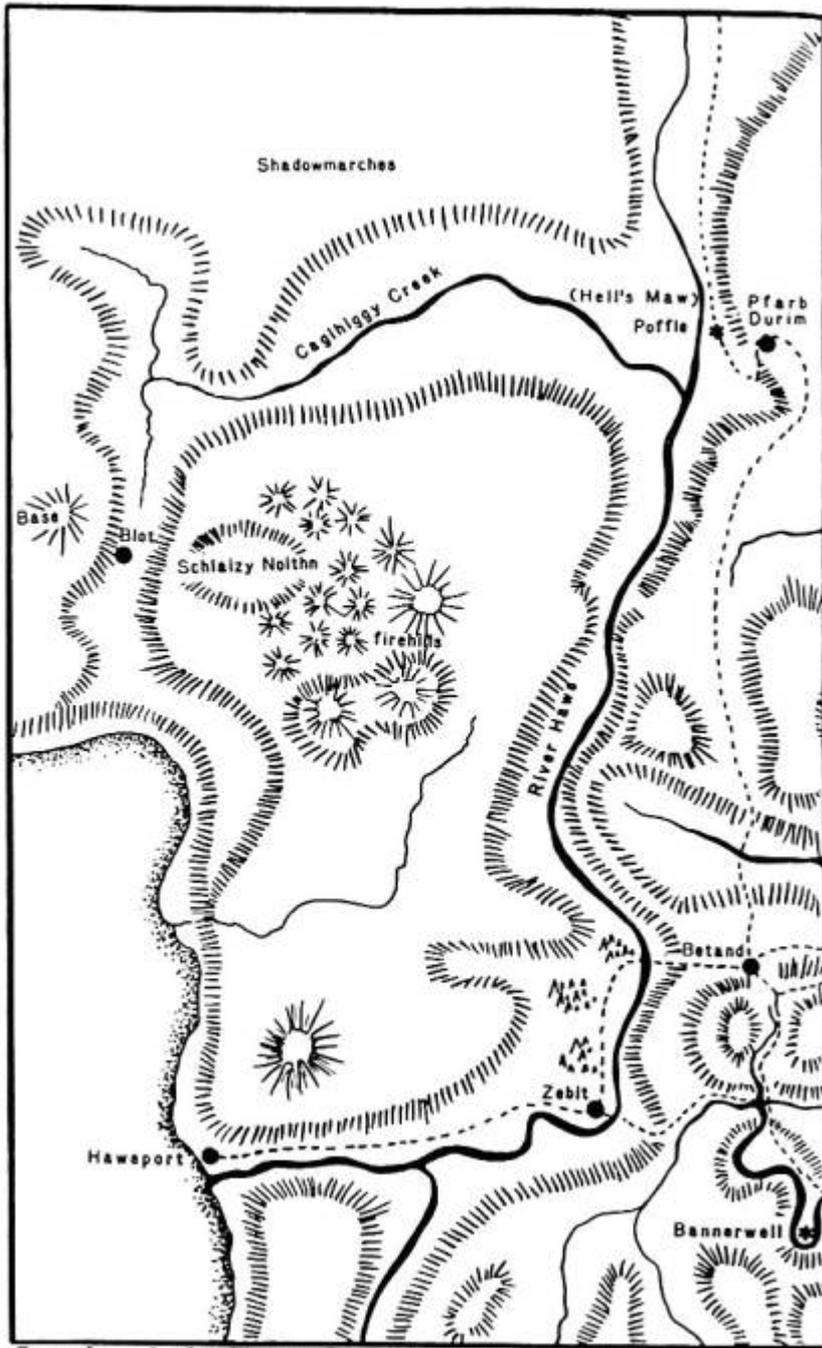
- 10 PETER'S STORY: HULDRA..330
- 11 JINIAN'S STORY: THE CAVERNS.334
- 12 PETER'S STORY: A SHIFT IN TIME.338
- 13 JINIAN'S STORY: WITCH AND BASILISK..341
- 14 OLD SOUTH ROAD CITY..346
- 15 THE DAGGER OF DAGGERHAWK..360
- 16 END AND BEGINNING..368



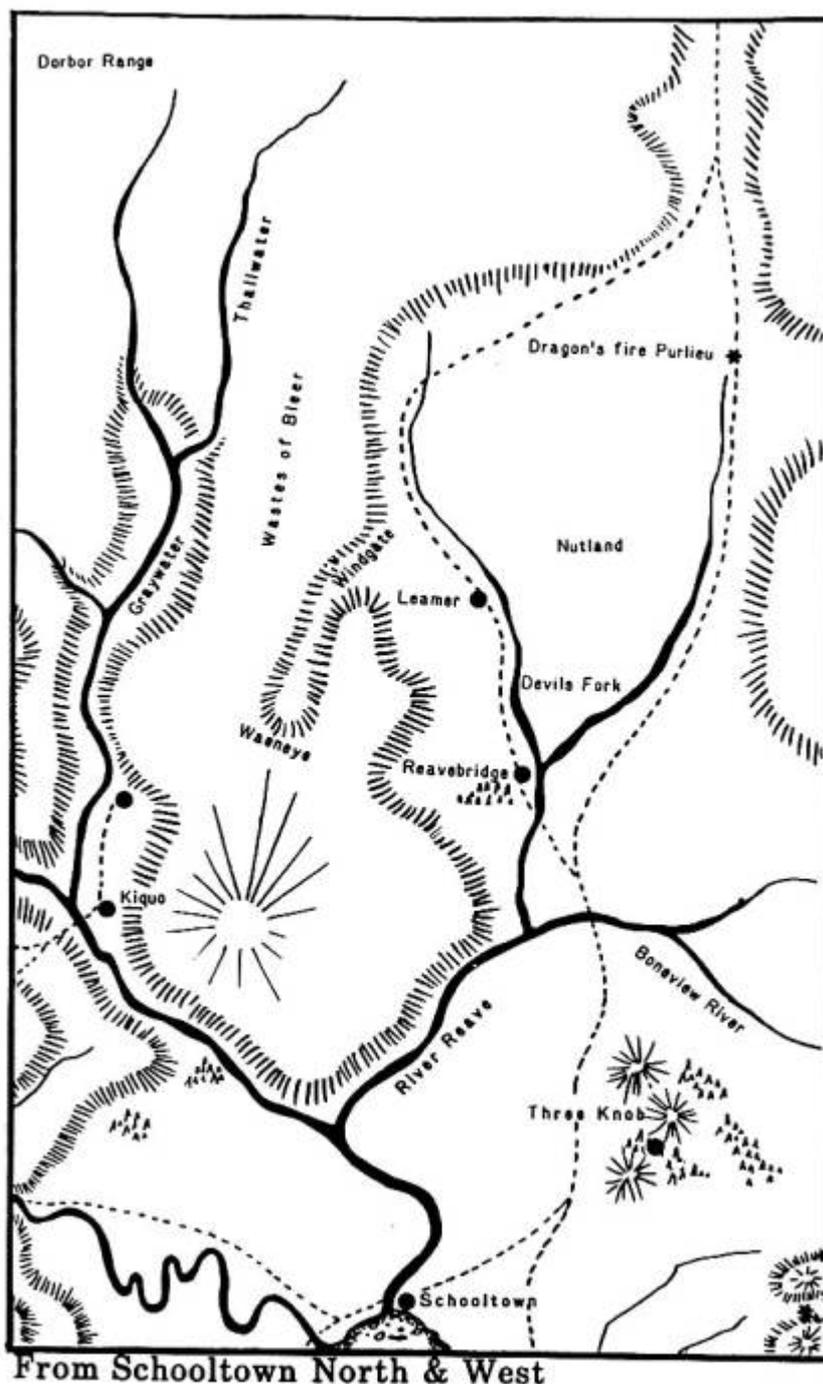
Lands of the True Game-----



From Schooltown South & West



Lands of the True Game



Jinian Footseer

FOREWORD

I began to write this account upon the Wastes of Bleer, by firelight as others slept, sure I would die upon the morning. I was there because of love, and my own youthful foolhardiness. Even now, thinking back on it, I would not have wanted to be anywhere else.

I had come to that place with Peter—and with Silkhands and King Kelper of the Dragon's Fire Demesne, with Chance and Vitor Vulpas Queynt. Six of us. Upon that barren height Peter had raised up the Gamesmen of Barish—he had carried them in his pocket for several years—embodying them once more in their own flesh. Eleven of them, plus Barish himself. We were eighteen.

And against us was coming a horde, a multitude, a vast army of living and dead, live flesh and dead bone, which none among us thought we could withstand. Seeing our fear, Queen Trandilar had beguiled us with tales of glory so that our apprehension was allayed. All had fallen asleep except me.

It wasn't my battle. I had not sought it except that I had sought Peter, determined to be with him no matter what should come. It would be fair to say I didn't care much about the battle. Huld, the monster, was nothing to me. I had not been harassed and tortured by him as Peter had. Hell's Maw was nothing in me. I had not seen it. I was sixteen and in love and about to die. The one I loved was asleep, snoring gently, his face like a child's in the dim light of the fire. So—I took pen and paper and began to write, thinking perhaps that someone might find the pages, long afterward, and remember me for a moment. A tenuous kind of immortality, but the best I could hope for then.

No.

That is not entirely true.

There was more to it than that. I know the story of my life up until then was no stirring account of battles and quests as Peter's was. I had not sought adventure; I had merely fallen into adventure of a dirty, laborious kind with little glory in it. Still, when my labor was done and my taskmistresses satisfied with the result, I had more than calluses on my hands to show for it. I had a great, world-terrifying mystery by the tail, a mystery I thought not many others had any inkling of. It was more important than I was. Someone had to know. I knew Peter's family would come after the battle and search for our remains. His mother was Mavin Manyshaped. She would come. Or the Wizard Himaggery, his father. And my account would be there for them to find. One of them, I thought, would go on where I had left off. They were that kind of people.

So, I wrote, almost until dawn. And later, when we did not die in that battle (as you know, if you have read Peter's account of it), I went on writing, adding to the account as time went by.

I am called Jinian Footseer by some. By some, Jinian Star-eye. And by some, the Wizard Jinian. One or two call me Dervish daughter. But I think of myself most often still as merely Jinian, an unloved daughter of Stoneflight Demesne, who found love later in a strange way. It is that Jinian I wrote of first, there in that horrid night, and that Jinian I must write of at last.

1

When I was quite young, not more than five or six, my older brother Mendost used to amuse himself by making me wet my pants. He had come into his Talent of Levitation—Flying, as we say—some years before, and he thought it fun to pick me up by whatever appendage offered itself and haul me a few manheights into the air before threatening to drop me. He was, I suppose, twenty or so at the time: a big, brutishly handsome man with red, wet lips. His—our—father, Garz, sometimes observed these occasions with bellowed laughter and loud advice as to which cobble-stones Mendost might best drop me on. Garz and Mendost were not unlike in nature.

One afternoon—I will never forget it, not the smell of the air or the way the wind curled down the low hills to rise about us or the crazy spinning of the courtyard below where the cobbles waited to splatter me—as I was about to faint from combined fear and fury, something snapped. Something cold and old sat up inside my head and remarked, It may be better to die than to live like this. I went limp, then. No more screaming, struggling, grabbing at him. I simply went limp with my eyes wide open as I waited to die. My treacherous sphincters stayed shut. Mendost jounced and hollered as he always did, but I simply hung there, waiting for the end. After a time he tired of it and put me down. There were only a few

attempts after that, each ending in sulky yelling on his part, "Dead body Jinian, dead ass, dead ass." Soon he gave it up and let me alone.

All Demesnes have some pensioned-off oldsters about, Gamesmen or pawns useful for running errands or watching babies. There was one old woman—Murzemire Hornloss, her name was—who had come to Stoneflight Demesne from someplace to the north when I was a babe. She pulled me over to her after Mendost put me down that first time, wiping my hot face with a bit of rag and patting my hand. "Th'art a Wize-ard, chile" she said. It was the first time I had heard the word, the first time anyone had said anything to me indicating I was more than an unnecessary impediment to the business of the Demesne. I never forgot it.

Mendost was the oldest of us children, all of the same mother but with varying inheritance from male progenitors. Mother, Eller of Stoneflight, was scarce more than a child, fifteen or so when she bore him. One father begat Mendost and me—first and last, as Mother used to say (and I had my doubts about it, even then)—but Garz had been absent for many years in between and at least two other men begat my three brothers, Jeruval, Poremy, and Flot. I don't believe we ever knew which man begat which brother, and since both Gamesmen had gone elsewhere in the lands of the True Game, it didn't much matter. Mendost's father, who was also supposed to be mine, was an Armiger, a Flyer, as Mendost was. The other two had been an Afrit and a Pursuivant. Mother, though of Gamesman caste, seemed to have no Talent of any kind. She was so beautiful she did not need to be anything else. I hid sometimes behind hangings or in the orchard when she was sunning there, just to look at her. I thought I would look like that when I grew up, and did not much consider that she had no Talent else. I fully expected to become an Armiger in my time, like Garz. It seemed a logical expectation. Though I was the only girl in the family, it never occurred to me that the matter of sex would make any difference, and I made no separate prognostication on that account.

There were many other children in the Demesne. Bram Ironneck, Mother's oldest brother, and her other brothers had fathered a number of them. Their mothers occupied various apartments in and around the place, and I had plenty of opportunity to observe them and the children. I formed the conclusion that while most mothers behaved with remarkable similarity toward their offspring, that is, with a certain baffled forbearance masking a persistent affection, this rule simply did not apply to my own mother.

Mother had very limited forbearance and seemed to have no affection for me at all, though her attitude toward Mendost bordered upon idolatry. As younger siblings sometimes do, I attributed this to the fact he was oldest. Oldest, and a son, and Garz's child to boot. Though I was supposed to be Garz's child as well, and that fact earned me no rides on the Festival Horse. Even Garz seemed unaware of it, never calling me "chile" or "Jinian". I was always "her" or "thingy" to him. "Send thingy down to the stables with a message for Flicht."

"Tell her to get out of here with that mess." On the few occasions he addressed me directly, it was likely to be with a kick and a pointed finger. "Out."

As a result of this treatment, I learned early to escape the Demesne whenever things looked to get stormy among the inhabitants. I had a pony, Misquick, so called for her habit of stumbling when she tried to hurry, and a long-legged, neutered fustigar named Grompuzzle, Grommy for short. Both of these creatures were mine by virtue of the fact that no one else wanted them, and looking back upon their propensities, I can quite see why. It was our habit when the day's schooling was done—Bram insisted we know written language and calculating in addition to cartography and the Index, one of the few sensible things he insisted upon—and when not otherwise occupied or forced into uncongenial labors by older relatives, to take ourselves as far from Mendost and Jeruval as possible.

Poremy and Flot were never as pernicious as the older boys, but at that time I never sought their company, though much later we were to become fairly good friends. If departure seemed prudent and there wasn't time to ride away into the hills, there were other places where one could hide successfully.

If I wasn't going off somewhere by myself, someone else might take me. It was almost a season after Mendost stopped tormenting me that the same old woman, Murzemire, came to me one evening as I was hiding in a rainhat bush along the stream, listening to the water and throwing windfall berries to hear them splash. She asked if I would come with her on an errand to the village. I recall going along happily enough. There was a sweet-shop in the village, and also the house of a wood carver who made toys for children. Even if it were not a Festival day, one could watch him carving the toys and think about receiving one, perhaps, when a Festival day came along, though that had never happened to me in the past.

The village was part of the family Demesne, of course, but quite outside the walls of the family place. It was not a fortress. It was a strong Demesne, since mother's three brothers were all in residence and Garz lived there as well. Bram Ironneck, an Elator, had recruited still others to our banner, making the place secure and well founded. We had plenty of pawns on the land and in the village and had never felt the need for walls. Anyway, old Murzy took me along with her into the village, and we went a twisty way. I don't remember ever seeing before the house we came to. It was a simple cottage, with a paling fence in front and a garden full of herbs. The door was painted blue, as many doors are in our part of the world. It is supposed to be a color favored by the old gods and much avoided by ghost pieces.

Inside the house were three or four old women not unlike Murzy herself. They gave me cookies, and honey-sweetened tea, and talked to me about many things. They asked me odd questions, too, which were exciting to think about, and I was sorry when Murzy told me we must go back to the family place. As we left, one old dam, Tess Tinder-my-hand, handed me a silvery trinket on a bit of thong and told me to keep it by me. I have it still. It is a pendant in the shape of a star with an eye in its middle, the pupil and cornea of the eye set in black and green stones, the whole polished flat. I heard the old woman telling Murzy to keep an eye on me (at the time I supposed the eye that was to be kept on me was the one they had given me) and bring me back from time to time to see whether the wize-art would come to me. I overheard this and asked Murzy about it, "Will it come to me, will it?" not knowing what it was that was to come.

She told me to be patient, that it was a slow gift, long in the coming. I escaped to that cottage hundreds of times over the succeeding years, but after the first few times tried to put the whole business of the gift out of mind, resolved not to ask again whether it would come for fear the asking might queer the gift, slow or not.

2

Once I had decided I would rather die than care what Mendost did to me any longer, it was not long before he stopped bothering me much. It was no fun for him if I did not scream or beg. Thus, once I had stopped fighting him, he soon stopped lofting me high above our Demesne, and it was only two or three times more I got to see the world from above. I suppose Armigers get used to it and no longer see the wonder of flight. I know that the day I realized I would not be an Armiger was bitterly sad for me, for I had hoped to see the world often as a bird sees it.

That isn't the thing I meant to speak of, however. On one of those last times Mendost had me dangling by one foot high above the Demesne, with me simply hanging, refusing to be frightened, I looked away northeast and saw a city there, upside down, hanging against the ceiling of the world like candle drippings. When I had been put down again and had time to do so, I went to old Murzy and asked her

what I had seen.

“A city, chile?” she asked. “Not off there. Nothing there but roones.”

It was a short forever before I learned what “roones” were. That happened thiswise.

One of my favorite rides was to go down through the sammit fields to the much eroded badlands at the northwestern edge of the Demesne where the flood-chucks were at work. Long in the past, according to Murzy, there had been no flood-chucks at all, but there had been two totally different creatures, one a dam builder and the other a dry-land digger. The great ancestors had somehow bred them together—don’t ask me how. What the great ancestors had the power to do is quite beyond my power to explain—to come up with flood-chucks, great fluffy brown beasts who love to cut trees and brush and build dams across gullies where water might one day run destructively. I liked to watch them work. If one bowed to them, they would line up to return the bow, the head-chuck first in line, each one in the line bending a bit more deeply than the one before. Very ceremonious beasties they were, and they liked me, which won me to them completely. They liked me and horses liked me. Sometimes the stablemen would ask me about the horses. “What ails the mare, Jinian? D’ya think she had a gutache, or what?” And I would say, “She’s been into the startle-flower, Roggle. Give her some charcoal and she’ll be fine.” Like as not, she would turn out to be just that. Horses were funny. No other animal we used had so many little sicknesses, almost as though they found the world not totally to their liking.

Anyway, on this particular afternoon, after a day particularly filled with Garz’s bluster and Mother’s screaming—Mother was a screamer; Garz would tease her about it sometimes, calling her Eller the Yeller—Misquick, Grommy, and I set off down along the flood-chuck works, pausing there only long enough for a long, mutually satisfying bowing session, then turned away into the hills north of the Demesne. I had taken my camp kit and the usual provisions, enough for half a day’s wandering, and had not figured on being late to return.

However, a storm came up; Misquick, frightened by the thunder, tried to gallop back to her comfortable stable and ended sliding down a muddy slope into knee-deep water and thence into a kind of twisty canyon which no one of us could find our way out of again. Grommy at once went foraging, the one thing he was good at, and brought us three fresh bunwits. I found table roots growing along the stream, and Misquick made up for losing us by locating a sizable patch of giant wheat. A little bashing with a stone, a little chopping with a knife, and we had a stew to share between Grommy and me and plenty of grain for Misquick. Night came on, and we sheltered in a half-cave, feeding the fire through the night and setting out at first light to find our way home.

We followed the twisty canyon so far as it would lake us, then climbed up a crumbly path to a low saddle of the mountain which I thought might give us some sense of direction. If nothing else, we could wait there until dark and get some sense from the stars. As it was, however, we had no sooner come upon the saddle than we were set upon by a tribe of half-naked, leather-lean creatures I did not at first take for human, so hairy they were, and so given to showing their teeth. They took us off, Grommy by a rope, Misquick by her bridle, and me over the shoulder of one of them to the very city I had seen from the air. There were crumbling walls and domes with great holes fallen through, a line of street half-observed beneath fallen stone, and other buildings reduced to fang-sharp protrusions of metal. The doors that went through the ancient walls were a strange shape, narrow at the bottom and wide at the top, and the walls themselves were great, thick things. Inside a few of the most ancient buildings were statues; idols, I suppose could be said, though it was hard to tell what the stones might have been carved to represent, so worn with weather they were and polished by the hands of the hairy people. There was one all lumpy that looked rather like a mole, and one with wings, and one that looked like a tangled pile of rope. A d’bor, probably. Several were star-shaped, like my star-eye, and I made the star sign

reverently. One never knew what might be looking.

I guessed they might have something to do with the old gods. In our part of the world, Murzy said, the evidence of them was often found, here and there, though mostly among ruins. Then I realized that “roones” were “ruins”, and that this was the ancient city I had often heard of but never seen before, Old South Road City.

If this were Old South Road City, then the people in it were the blind runners, and this brought a new kind of fear. The blind runners were said to eat children. That virtue was claimed for them by every nursemaid who ever was, and every harassed mother as well. “Be still, now, or I’ll have the blind runners come eat you up!” I’d heard it over and over until I was old enough to leave the nursery. I think children hear it still, all over the world, whether their minders have ever seen a blind runner or not. As I was only about nine years old, it occurred to me that I might still be of an appetizing age.

They did not immediately offer to eat me, however, and by the time I thought of it again, it was obvious they ate mostly fungus and roots and giant wheat. They did not even gesture a sharp stone toward Misquick, and she was fat and juicy as any animal ever was.

They sat me down among them, Misquick beside me and Grommy at my feet, while they garbled and howled as though they had been wranglebats. It was some time before I perceived the howling to be melodic and the garbling intelligible, but once it came to me that they were singing, I recognized the intent well enough. They were singing “On the Road, The Old Road,” which is a children’s jumprope song, or a song to go with playing jax, or even a much-tag song. One of the younger ones fingered the amulet I had been given by Murzy’s oldsters, crying out some “looky here” or other, and then they were all staring at my front, where the little star hung, its green-and-black eye peering back at them.

“Footseer?” one asked of another, and the next thing I knew they were blindfolding me and taking off my shoes. Then I was whirled and whirled, as in a game of blind man’s grab, and set down in a sudden silence. I felt a tingle in one toe and reached tentatively toward it, setting my foot down on something hard that tingled more—not in pain, you understand, but a tickly, pleasurable feeling.

I went toward it, until both feet were on it, and found that by continuing to move, the tingling would go on, though if I simply stood still, it stopped after a moment. So I wandered myself, quite happily, humming as I went, until a great cry went up from the assembled crowd, “Footseer!” and they took the blind-fold away. I had been following a line of half-buried stones, part of an ancient roadway, and had done it without seeing it at all.

After that we had some food and drink with much garbling and good cheer, and one of them took me back to a road I knew. I went to find Murzy to ask her about them, and she said they were the blind runners—blindfolded runners—indeed, those who looped through all the lands of the True Game on the Old Road. Old South Road City was the place they began from, and while not all the runners lived there year round, it was there they gathered to begin the journey.

“Chile,” she said in the comfortable nursery dialect she always used with me then, “it’s as well tha came on them when tha did, for they are more or less sane this time of year. When the time of storms comes, then looky out. They begin to foam and fulminate on the road, blind as gobblemoles, stopping for no man nor his master.”

“Why do they do that, Murzy?” I asked her. The ones I had seen had been sane enough, certainly, and not bad hosts, either. They had a kind of seed cake made with honey that was as good as anything from our kitchens.

“Story is, chile, they’ll run the road until they find the tower. Tower, if tha sees it, sucks tha up by the eyes. Tower, if tha sees it, eats tha up. So, they go running, running, thinking they’ll run into it full tilt, blind and safe, and rescue the bell from the shadows.”

“What bell is that, Murzy?”

“The only bell, chile. D’tha grow big and get the wize-art and tha’ll maybe find what bell. ‘Tis the one bell, the two bell, that cannot ring alone. The old gods’ bell.” And that was all she would say, no matter how I begged.

“Why did they look at my star and call me a footseer?” I asked, dangling it before her on its string.

“It’s a seer dangle, sure enough, and no secret about that, with the eye on it plain as plain. But don’t flourish it out for the world to see.” So I tucked it into the neck of my shirt, abashed, not knowing why. She had not understood my question.

After that, I would often go off into the woodland to the line of stones that marked the Old Road, shut my eyes, and walk along the roadway, feeling it in my toes. After a time, I was able to run full tilt along the way, never losing it for a moment, rejoicing in the thrumming tingle, a kind of wild, exhilarating feeling which grew wilder and better the faster I ran. When the Season of Storms approached, however, Murzy told me to stay away from the road. “They care not who they trample, chile, or what. Tha or tha pets or tha kin Mendost would all be the same to them.” So I took to hiding in the trees and watching. Sure enough, they began to come running by, bunches and hundreds of them, all running with their hooded heads up, as though in answer to a summons no one but they could hear. If one crept close to the Old South Road City, one could hear them howling—singing, as it were—through the dark. “On the road, the Old Road, a tower made of stone. In the tower hangs a bell which cannot ring alone.” When we jumped rope to that, two would come in at the “cannot ring alone” and jump, counting together, hands on waists. “Shadow bell rings in the dark, Daylight Bell the dawn. In the tower hung the bells, now the tower’s gone.” At “gone” one would run out of the rope, leaving it slapping behind, and then to and fro through it, on the swing, as many counts as one could do. That’s only one rope tune, of course. There’s one about the first Eleven, and one about Larby Lanooly and a dozen more. Now that I am grown, wherever I go in the world, I hear children winging jax tunes or bounce-ball tunes or jumprope tunes, and they are the same in a dozen different tongues, the same all over the world.

Stories, too. They used to tell me stories, the old dams. Especially Murzy. The one about Little Star and the Daylight Bell. She learned it when she was a girl from an old dam in Betand, but that story is told everywhere. How Little Star went wandering? You remember? And he came to the gobblermole, draggling in the earth. And he asks the gobblermole what he’s druggling for, and the mole says, “I’m druggling for the Daylight Bell.” Then when Little Star starts to druggle, too, Mole catches him and binds him up. And Little Star tricks him into getting loose, and binds him up, and demands a boon to let him go again. Remember the story? After the mole, he meets a d’bor wife grodgeling the water, and then a fritchhawk grimbling and grambling the air, and each of them is tricked into a boon. I loved that story. All children do.

It was soon after the visit to the blind runners that I got sick. Cat Candleshy, one of the dams, said later it was probably some disease the runners had among them that our people had no resistance to. After a day or two of it, with me no better, and the fever burning hotter with each passing hour, old Murzy demanded a Healer be sent for. Through the haze of fever and pain, I remember Mother standing at the foot of my cot, her hair wild and lovely in the light from the window, saying impatiently, “There’s no need, Murzemire. She’ll get better or she won’t, and that’s all anyone can expect.” When they had shut the

door behind her, Murzy cuddled me tight and said to hold on, she herself was going to Mip for the Healer. It seems she did, going completely on her own and sneaking the Healer back with her. She, the Healer, said she'd been fetched just in time. My lungs wheezed and sucked, and I couldn't get air into them. She put her hands on me and reached down inside—I could feel it—to twist something or untwist it, whichever. It hurt. I remember yelling, partly from the pain, partly from the relief at being able to breathe again.

She had to do it again, the day after, and it hurt again, but then I began to improve and the Healer merely sat by my bed, telling me stories about bodies. She told me of bones, and how the heart pumps the blood 'round, and of the network of nerves from toetop to headtop, with tiny Elators flicking on the network to deliver messages. "Electrical," she said, shaking her head in wonder at it all, "and chemical. Like lightning."

I remember sleepily asking her what they were called, the little Elators. She shook her head, laughing.

"I call them nerve transmitters," she said. "You might call them nerve Elators, if you like." After that, I often thought of the little Elators in me, swift as storm, carrying their messages between my head and my fingers or toes.

During my slow recovery, I remembered what Mother had said to Murzy. "She'll get better or she won't, and that's all anyone can expect." There was nothing unusual in her attitude or tone, neither more nor less interest about me than might have been there at any time previously. It was just then, every sense sharpened by the fever and the pain, that I understood the meaning of it. The meaning was, "Jinian will die or she won't, and who cares?"

I think I cried over this. There's a vague memory of Murzy holding me on her lap in the rocking chair—me, a big girl of nine or ten—as though I were an infant. Later it didn't seem so important. It was just the way things were, as thunder is loud or lightning unselective. No point arguing with the thunder or threatening the lightning. Just seek cover and wait. That's probably how many young ones survive childhood. Seek cover and wait.

The next thing I remember especially is when Murzy look me on an expedition. All the old dams were going out to pick herbs and fungi, bitty here, bitty there, to last us the cold season when nothing would be growing. Our teacher was off on a trip to visit his relatives up near Harbin. The boys were off into the hills, and when Murzy suggested to Mother I be let go with them, she said, "Oh, take her, Dam Murzy. Take her for heaven's sake. Now if Garz and Bram would get themselves off, we'd have some peace around here." Considering Mother was the one who usually disturbed whatever peace anyone else might have, I thought this was a bit overstated and started to say so. I hadn't been disrupting anything and was in a mood for considerable self-justification toward this woman who had not even cared whether I died. Murzy, however, caught me by the back of my jerkin and bore me out of the room on a flood of "Thank you, ma'am's". Next thing I knew I was in the wagon with six dams and the horses clattering us off down the road to the forest.

It's a bit difficult to tell just what happened next, because it was and it wasn't much. We went on for a bit on the road, with the old ones singing the funny song about two lovers in a briar patch and all the odd rhymes to the last line, "And he scratched it!" Then we turned into the forest road and they fell quiet. Three of them got down from the wagon. We came to the forest bridge.

Forest bridge is a small high wooden one, curving up from one rocky mossy wall to another rocky mossy wall over the tinkly torrents of Stonybrook. There are ferns in the walls, and a cool, wet smell even on hot afternoons. So ...

One old woman, I think it was Tess Tinder-my-hand, whispered something into the air, then set foot on the bridge, stamping her foot, so, just a little. Bridge drummed, bowom. Second old woman whispered, set her foot, bom bom bowom. Third old woman set foot on the bridge, bom bom bowom wommmmm. And then quiet. Horses quiet. Wagon quiet. All the old women quiet, waiting. I crept down from the wagon, bunwit still, sneaky, crept out onto that bridge. Old women set their feet, bom bom bowom wommmmm, and just when the echo was starting to come up from below I set my foot down quick, and the echo came wom wom bawom bom bom with a sound of laughter in it. I kept right still then, listening while the laughter went on. There was something living down there, under the bridge. Then the old women began singing about Larby Lanooly, and old Murzy shook up the horses to come over the bridge, in a rum-a-rum-a-rum of hooves, and we got back in the wagon and that was that.

When we came to the groves, though, old Murzy look me by the hand to each of the old women, putting my hand in each one's old hand, saying, "Welcome our sister, our child, for today she begins upon the Way." When I'd done it with all six of them, she took me aside, speaking to me for the first time without the baby-talk "tha's, as she would to a grown-up person. "Jinian, girl," she said, "you've the wize-art. In part, at least, and none know whether the whole will come until it comes. Now you must promise me something or the sisters and I'll be gone come night and come not nigh you again."

"Where will you go?" I remember I asked this, more curious about that than about what she might say next.

"Away," she said flatly, and I believed her. "Now listen. What we tell you is secret. What we teach you is secret. What you learn from us is secret. You do not talk about it. Not to your mother, not to any in the Demesne. Not to your lover, come that time, or your husband or child, come that time as well. To one of us, yes, if you see the star-eye and hear the proper words. Otherwise, never."

Well, I had no lover, that was sure. And I wasn't inclined to tell anyone at the Demesne anything important, nor Mother anything at all, important or not. So I gave her my hand and promised, she putting the little star into it as I did so.

"Always keep this safe, Jinian. It is a sign to tell any Wize-ard anywhere that you are one of us, a sister in the Way, but most times you don't go dangling it out where the world can see it and ask questions. Long time ago it was called the Eesty sign, and some still call it that. So, if one of us asks are you Wize-ard, or are you star-eye, or do you carry the Eesty sign, it all means the same thing. Do you hear me, Jinian?"

I said I did. It made Tess's gift more precious than ever, and I took to polishing it every night on my nightgown when I went to bed. However, just then I wanted to know about what had just happened.

"What was it, there at the bridge?" I asked.

"Bridge magic, child. Calling up the deep dwellers. One of the ten thousand magics, and not the simplest. We learn a simpler one today, herbary, and see you pay attention."

I did my best. I certainly never forgot what they taught me that afternoon. Rainhat root, pounded with the seeds of shivery-green, when the seeds are still in the pod and the root taken on the same day, will bring a sleep no power is proof against—no, not even Healing. "A day, a drop," said old Tinder-my-hand. "Two days, two drops. Drink a flagon of it, and a man will sleep a year and starve while asleep, for in this sleep he will not swallow nor shit nor pee nor aught but barely breathe, girl."

“It sounds ... dangerous,” I said.

“It sounds useful,” she corrected me. “May come a time you’d like Mendost to be asleep for a few days? Well? But never for anything small, girl. We don’t use the wize-art for small things.”

So I learned the formula for sleep, and another very complicated one for making people or creatures fall in love—that one had sixteen ingredients that had to be mixed in the right order and the right quantities—and yet another for reducing temper. Murzy caught my eye and reminded me, “Not for anything small, Jinian. Put that thought right out of your head,” so I stopped thinking of putting it in Mother’s tea. Still, it would have been an improvement.

Herbary isn’t really secret. There are books, often not even hidden away, where you can find out about it. So it doesn’t matter if I say some things about it. You’ll notice I don’t tell what the sixteen ingredients are. Murzy says it wouldn’t be wize at all. But I can tell the story without telling the truly secret things. Besides, some of them aren’t truly secret anymore since the changes.

After that, I spent a great deal of time with the sisters. Murzy. Tess Tinder-my-hand. Margaret Fox-mitten. Bets Battereye. Cat Candleshy. And Sarah Shadowsox. And Jinian Footseer. Seven of us, which is the usual number. I have talked of them as though they were all equally old, but Tinder-my-hand was oldest, white-haired and frail, forgetful a bit at times and at others so quick it surprised you. Murzy and Bets were next oldest, alike enough to be sisters, both full of bustle and no-nonsense. Cat was dignified and knife sharp, dark hair drawn up in a braid crown. Sarah had wild red-brown hair and eyes like a mountain zeller, all soft caution. They were about middle-aged, I suppose, thirty or so. Margaret Foxmitten was tall and thin as a whip and not much older than Mendost, and she could be more beautiful than Eller when she chose, but there was something forbiddingly elderly about her, for all her soft skin and shining hair. When she sat in the dust of the courtyard, husking fruit or chopping grain, no one would have looked at her twice. It was a kind of disappearing, of invisibility, and Murzy suggested I would do well to learn it. I seemed to be disturbingly visible whenever I was present, and I decided I was just too young to bring it off.

Time went on. Jeruval got his Talent—I’ve honestly forgotten what it was. Pursuivant, I think. He went off, then, to Game with some Demesne or other until he got tired of it or got killed. Poremy still had a year or so to go before he could expect to get his Talent, if any, and Flot perhaps two years. It comes, usually, around the fifteenth or sixteenth year, though I’ve been told Witchery comes earlier than that and Sorcery much later. I was about thirteen years old, just getting my breasts and woman-times. That’s when Murzy told me to get myself ready for a trip.

I heard her talking to Mother.

Overheard.

Well, listened. It was on a teetery branch of a tall tree outside the tower window, so I guess you couldn’t say “overheard”. I just happened to be there. Looking for birds’ eggs.

Murzy was saying, “My oldest sister, ma’am. Not much longer in this life, I shouldn’t think, and it would be nice to spend Festival together. So, a couple of the dams and I decided—with your permission, of course, ma’am—we’d go on up to Schooltown and spend a few days with her. I’d be happy to take young Jinian with us, too. Get her off your hands. The girl’s got a good heart, but heaven save us, she’s always into mischief ...”

Mischief! I was into no such thing, and started to say so, but the branch cracked under me and I

decided to be still.

Mother fingered the crystal she had on a chain around her neck. Mendost had given it to her, and she always wore it. "Children are a trial," she said. That was nothing new. She often said it, especially to me.

"They are that, ma'am." That was new. Murzy always said to me that children are one of life's great joys, so I knew she was up to something. "I think any conscientious mother needs a rest from time to time."

"You're right." Mother sighed. You would have thought from that sigh she didn't have two hundred pawns around to do whatever they were told, plus all the kinfolk, plus Garz and Bram. From that sigh, you'd have thought the whole weight of the Demesne was on her head. "They wanted me to make a Dervish of her, you know, Dam Murzy. I wouldn't do it to a child of mine, but I've wondered since if it wouldn't have been best for her. With her nature and all."

"A Dervish? My, my. What a thing that would have been to be sure." Murzy's voice was all choked. She shook her head, and I tried to think what Mother could possibly have meant by that. "Well, taking the child away may relieve your burdens just a little."

And, of course, Mother said yes. I so admired the way old Murzy did it, I didn't even fuss at her about saying I got up to mischief. I hardly ever did. Mischief, I mean. I didn't remember to ask about the Dervish business, either.

"So why are we really going?" I asked her. "Not just to visit your old sister, I'll warrant."

"I'm very fond of Kate," she said, somewhat stiffly. "And we will visit her, you may be sure."

"But," I begged her. "But?"

"But we're going, at least partly, to continue tha education. And to amuse ourselves. Now, don't ask any more questions. Trust old Murzemire. She hasn't done you wrong yet, has she?"

She hadn't. Not once. Besides, I wasn't sure I wanted to know why we were going anywhere. Some of the things I already knew were very heavy in my mind from time to time. Having something else in there even heavier didn't attract me. Learning more was merely ordinary to me, but traveling—that was a wonderful treat.

At least so I thought until we had done some of it. Then it turned out that traveling was doing everything one had to do at home with none of the conveniences for doing it. I was kept very busy gathering wood for the cookfire, and checking the horses' hooves for stones, and rubbing them down and watering them, and arranging the wagon, and washing our clothes in the streams. It is a long way from our Demesne to Schooltown, a long slow way when one travels so as to avoid getting involved in Game on the way. There was nothing interesting on the way but scenery, and by the time we arrived I was heartily surfeited with scenery and very glad to see walls once more. We stayed at an inn, thank the Hundred Devils, one owned by sister Kate. She looked nowhere near to dying to me, and she had her own servants to fetch wood and water. As a child of Gamecaste, I thought I would not have to do anything at all. In which I was mistaken. The day after we arrived, all seven of us were back in the wagon going off through Schooltown and into the countryside to an old, tumbly building with moss all over its rocks and its walls gaping up at the sky like teeth. There was a broken tower and steps that wound up and around onto old roofs and down and around into old dungeons. I looked about me doubtfully while the others unloaded their picnic lunch and their work-baskets and then traipsed up the stairs to a comfortable room in the

tower. It had a fire, cushions to sit on, translucent shutters over the windows, and the six of them sat down there like brood hens, Murzy waving me off. "Explore, Jinian. The whole place. Come back when tha feels hungry."

So I did. Up to the roofs and down to the cellars, then below the cellars to the dungeons, old and slimy and full of things that squeaked. It wasn't fearsome, that place, just old. So I wandered it and wandered it, and got tired and went back for a bite of lunch, then wandered it again. Come dark we got in the wagon and went back to the inn. Next day, back to the place again. Murzy and the dams had been teaching me to use my senses, and I used them as best I knew how, but about the third day, I began to be bored with it. "All right," I said to them all, hands on my hips. "What's it all about?"

Murzy put down her needle and pointed to the window in the tower. "There's bridge magic, Jinian. And window magic."

I couldn't think what she was talking about. I stood there, staring at the window. Then I walked out into the corridor and stared at another window. Then back into the tower room, where the six of them chatted and clucked like hens. And then, quite suddenly, I began to get a glimmer.

A stone wall: which implied a builder, which implied a closed space, which implied protection from an outer world, or retreat from that world, or hiding from that world. And a window cut through: wide, with a welcoming sill, on which one might curl up on pillows to dream away a morning or long evening, looking out at the light making patterns beneath the trees. A window was a kind of joining, then. A kind of linkage between worlds. And a wind would come in, and light could come in, with tough, translucent shutters standing wide but ready to shut against bitter blast or hard rain. Gray of stone, blue of sky, with the bright green of new leaf blowing against it. Hardness of stone, softness of air. Shadows moving across the window. A memory of firelight, with soft breezes moving from the window to the fire. And in this room, welcome. Murzy nodded to me, picking up her needle again.

Breathless with what I thought I knew, I left the room and ran away down the stone corridor, finding the hidden entrance to the stair that twisted down inside the tower. At the third curve was a window, a narrow slit cut through the wall to peer down at the castle gate from an unsuspected angle, high and secret, hidden in the shadow of the tower. Suspicion. Fear. Stone within and without, the broken gravel of the hard road making an obdurate angle at the edge of the wall, edged with more stone, the spears of the raised portcullis making fangs at the top of the gate. Not joining, but separation.

I nodded to myself, fleeing downward once more, through the hidden door at the bottom and then down ancient ways to the empty dungeons at the bottom of the keep. There was one where a slit window at the ceiling fed a narrow beam of pale light reflected from a slimy pond outside. The wall sweated moisture, a dank smell of deep earth and old mold lay in the place, and a green ooze covered the wall. Here the light lay upon the ceiling, reflected upward, wavering, a ghost light, gray and uncertain, lighting only the stone in a ceaseless, agitated motion, without peace.

I looked at that watery light for a long time before climbing back up to the room where they waited. Murzy nodded to me once more, not failing to notice the stains of slime on my hands, falling into the common folk nursery talk they often used when it suited them.

"Tha's been adown the deeps? Nasty down there."

"I've been discovering window magics, Murzy. It came to me all at once."

"Well, if it comes at all, it comes all at once."

I sat down at Murzy's feet, suddenly adrift from the possession of knowing, the certainty of action. I knew, yes, but what was it I knew? "Different," I said to her, feeling my way. "Different windows. Magic, because they have an out and an in, because they are linkages of different kinds. Because they are built. Because they are dreamed through and looked through. But—something more, I guess ..."

"Well, there's actually going through a window, isn't there? Or calling someone through a window. Or summoning."

"Summoning?" I thought about that. Summoning. Through windows. Of course. "If one summoned through a window—if one did—what answered the summons would be different, depending on the window, wouldn't it?" I wasn't sure about this, and yet it made a certain kind of sense. I might have summoned something into the dungeon very different from a thing I could summon into this room now.

"Think of calling to a lover," said Margaret Foxmitten dreamily, her needle flashing in the sun. "Calling from this room. Think of calling something from the dungeon. Think of summoning a presence. Into this room. Into the dungeon."

"Ah," I said, getting some misty idea of what they were getting at. "If I ... if I wanted to summon something frightening or horrid, I'd call something out of the dungeon through that high, watery window. And I would lead it in again through the open portcullis."

"You could do that," said Bets. "Or you could find the tiny, square window which looks out through an iron grille over the pit where ancient bones were dropped. You might call something in through that window more dreadful still."

"But," said Murzy, "suppose you wanted to summon Where Old Gods Are?" Where Old Gods Are was the name of a very powerful spell they had taught me.

"I would summon through this window, here," I said, opening the shutters and looking out on the peaceful pastures and the blowing green of leaves.

"Good," said Murzy, packing up her work. "Think about that."

I thought about it for some time, putting bits and pieces of it in place in my head. Not all of it connected to other things I knew, but some of it did. By that time it was dark, so we returned to Schooltown and the Festival.

So, came Festival morning and they decked me out like the Festival Horse, all ribbons. Murzy had given me a new blue tunic with a cape to match, and Bets Battereye spent most of the previous evening braiding my hair wet so it would wave. "We want you to be a credit to us," she said, yanking bits of hair into place. I thought it unlikely I'd be much credit to them bald, which is what it felt like, but I'd learned that uncomplaining silence was best in dealing with the dams. Come morning, the hair was brushed out into a wavy cloud, then they dressed me up and told me to stay in the room and stay clean until they came for me. So I pulled a chair over to the sill, and opened the casements wide. I could see people going by, and it put me in a fever of anticipation, but nothing would hurry them so I spent the time practicing summons and distraints.

It was a good window for summoning, broad and low, with a wide sill overhanging a fountain-splashed courtyard. Smell of water on the stones—that's important for some summons. You know the smell? That first smell of water on dry earth or dry stone? That's the grow smell. Water, earth, and grow smell make

one of the major triads of the Primary Extension of the Arcanum. That's not secret. Everyone knows that. Gardeners use it all the time. Beneath the window was a herb garden with the shatter-grass, bergamot, lady's bell triad. There were five other triads within sight or smell, too, including two other majors, making seven all together. Not bad for a mere learner, and more than enough to call up something fairly powerful if I'd liked.

Sarah brought me a hot nutpie. "I know you're starving, but patience a bit longer, chile. We've called the Healer for Tess. Poor thing, she's no younger than she was yesterday, and it tells upon her. Still, give us a bit and we'll be ready to go festivate with the rest of the town."

At which I fidgeted, sighed, cut a slice of my pie, and laid out the summoning tools once more. Murzy said there was no such thing as practicing too much.

What would I practice this time? Lovers Come Calling, that's what. The window was perfect for Lovers Come Calling, so I would have window magic and the summons reinforcing one another. First the Pattern. Two hairs from my head. Mirror. Bell. Coal from the fire. Spidersilk for winding, binding. Spidersilk? Murzy's sister Kate kept her place entirely too clean.

Finally I found some at the corner of the chimney. Then lay it all out in proper form. Whisper the words . . . Pause. Ring the bell. Pause. The words again. Pause.

There was a brown, round little man in a clean cook's apron passing below the window, herding half a dozen boys before him. He looked up just then and called, "Happy Festival to you, lassy." And the boys stopped, looking up. Stocky boys. Jeruval and Flot boys. Ordinary boys. Meaning nothing to me at all. They paused and went on incuriously, while one of them remained behind, mouth open, staring up at me. He was small, smaller than I, one of those boys who get their growth late, with his shoulders just beginning to widen. His face was serious and quiet with ruddy hair in one thick wave across his forehead. His eyes dug deep at me, as though he would understand everything they saw by sheer determination. The last of the words of Lovers Come Calling was. still on my lips.

Only then I realized what I had done. I had called. He had come. There was something else necessary, some final thing. I struggled with it. The spell was not complete until something was given between the two. A token. Something given as a token. Without thinking, I leaned out the window to put the warm slice of nutpie in his hand. He took it, bit it, smiled a small, rather puzzled smile, and then was dragged away by the little brown man.

And I sat as one lost forever, betrayed by what I had done.

Margaret Foxmitten came in behind me, stood there. I could feel her eyes examining the Pattern on the sill. "Did I see someone leave?" she asked. "Just now?"

I nodded, unable to speak.

"Who was it?"

"I don't know," I croaked. "I don't know, Margaret."

"The more fool you," she said. "Now you're trapped and no way out of it. You've done Lovers' Call and someone's come in answer. Think of that." She went out into the corridor, calling for Sarah to come hear what Jinian had done. I was too sunk in misery to listen. Misery and delight, of course. I was in love. Only thirteen, but in love. I wondered who he was.

I wondered if I would ever see him again. For if I did not, likely this love would haunt me until I died. No one could break the call unless we were both present and consenting.

“Now what’ve you done!” demanded Murzy, bustling into the room. “What’s this?”

“I was practicing,” I said lamely. “And I practiced Lovers Come Calling. And he came.”

She just stood there looking at me, a very curious expression on her face, almost as though she had known already what I had done, or perhaps what I was likely to do. “Well,” she said at last. “We’ll go out into the town. If you see him again, tell one of us right away. At least we can find out who he is.”

But, of course, I didn’t see him again. I don’t remember much about Festival. We had some good food, I do remember, and there were fireworks. Most of the time I spent thinking about the boy, reconsidering his appearance and his smile, wondering what his name was and where he might be found. The morning after, we were in the wagon headed home once more, and I said to Murzy—trying hard to sound plaintive, though I was really put out that so little had been made of the whole thing—“Murzy, why did I do such a silly thing?”

“Well, chile. You’ve made some difficulty for yourself, truly. Which is something we all do, so no sense fretting overmuch about it. Take it as a lesson and profit therefrom, as Grandma used to say.” She sounded so righteous and solid. It made me angry.

I fumed about that for a time, deciding at last that it wasn’t worth getting huffy about. As one of Gamesman caste, I ranked the lot of them and could have made their lives miserable when we returned home. I considered doing this, but I knew it would end making mine worse. So, in the end I only asked, “What do I do now?”

Murzy considered this seriously. “Well, for a few years, nothing much. Keep close to us, Jinian. You’ll go on with your schooling from us this next few years. By the time you’re grown, we’ll know more. We’ll find something out ...”

And that was the total I could get out of them on that subject, however much I tried.

Later, however, as I considered the matter, I realized that when one practices the wize-art, one should stop somewhere short of the last word or phrase. Or something should be mimed rather than done. Or one must use an inert ingredient rather than an active one. It was not the very worst way to learn such a lesson—death would have been that. But it was not a comfortable way, for now I was haunted by the boy, the small, serious boy with the narrow, searching face. When I lay down to sleep, I thought of him. When I woke, I reached for the cool space in the bed as though he should be sleeping there. In the night he touched me, making me flame and start awake. When I looked into the mirror, I saw his face behind my own. We might have been brother and sister, both fair and ruddy-haired, as unlike Mendost and dark-lovely Mother as could be. As time went by, I felt more and more akin to him, to this stranger, this unknown boy, this mysterious, lost boy. Oh, he was my true love, no question about that, but it would have been better not to have known it for some years yet—until I was old enough to do something about it.

3

Margaret and I got to talking on the way home. She wasn’t that much older than I, and she seemed more sympathetic than the others, so I had someone to talk to about him. We rode along, me talking,

sighing, she nodding. The thing that worried me most was that it would be a love unreturned, for such is the power of Lovers Come Calling that it will summon one who is loved but who has no feeling at all in the matter.

When Margaret had taught me the spell, she told me she had seen it happen. An Armiger came to a Wize-ard woman in the Northern Marshes—it was Margaret's kinswoman, and Margaret was there at the time—saying he had found no maid to suit him in all his flights and wanderings, for none was so bright and pure and kind as his dream told him maids should be. So he paid well, in gold, and the Wize-ard laid out the Pattern on the doorstep of her place and summoned up who should come.

And there were noises in the wood of a horse, crippled and dragging a foot, and came from the wood a maid leading her mount, pure and pale and kindly as the sun. And it was the true love the Armiger had longed for, so that his heart started out of him and he turned blue as ice in the heat of the day.

But she was betrothed to King Froggmott of the Marshes, so said Margaret, and cared no whit for the Armiger's pleas. And so he could do nothing but serve forever in sight of her and suffer; or go elsewhere in the wide world and suffer; or take his life and love to the world beyond, which he did, falling to his death from a great height upon her doorstep. "At which," said Margaret, "she cared not at all except for the mess it caused the servants."

Oh, she had used to tell me that story and we had giggled together at the foolishness of that Armiger. I did not now. I understood how the Armiger felt, and how evil a thing it would be to love in that way one who loved not at all in return. And yet, one would have to accept it at the end and do what one could to go on living.

Except, I vowed to myself as we jogged along, one could make a potion. A potion to guarantee he would love me, truly and forever. I vowed to do it if necessary, chanting to myself the list of ingredients of the love potion Murzy had taught me to make until I knew them as well as my tongue knew my teeth.

4

My thoughts on that trip home made me wonder why it was that Murzy and Margaret and the others were all pawns. When I asked Margaret, she said, "Jinian, Gamesmen are all panoplied up with their banners and helms, fringes flying and Heralds announcing them to all and his cousins. They attract a lot of attention and they die by the dozens. Stupid pawns stumble in where they're not wanted or worse, where they are, and they die by the hundreds. But pawns who are never around when you're looking for someone to do something dangerous; pawns who seem gray and dull and quite a bit boring, why, Jinian, no one even sees them and they live practically forever."

I began to understand. Though I was Gamesman caste in the Demesne, there would come a time I could leave it and perhaps could become as hard to see as Murzy herself.

By the time we reached home, I had resolved to be a good student, to be invisible as the wind, and to get away from the Demesne as soon as possible. All these good resolutions merited me a great, joyous surprise. Mendost had gone away! He had gone Armigering for some Demesne north—Dragon's Fire, Mother said—and was likely not to be back again for many long seasons. It was like Festival all over again. Without Mendost to put them to deviltry, both Poremy and Flot were fairly decent. Without Mendost to upset her, Mother was, if not exactly reasonable, at least unlikely to fly into screaming fits without any reason at all. She wandered about a lot, not seeming to see anything, and drank far more wine at table, passing into sodden sleep instead of into her rages. Garz left for some reason or other. Bram Ironneck was, as always, remote, and often simply gone. Elators have that habit, I'm told. If I

could flick from one place to another, any place I had ever been or could see in my head, I would not stay in one place, either.

It was the best time I could remember in the Demesne. Everyone let me alone. I spent most of the days with one of the dams learning one or more of the magics or stories of the old gods or songs or verses or matters of practical value. At the end of a few seasons I had only dipped the tip of my tongue in the brew, as Murzy said, but it made me thirsty for great gulps of it. There seemed no end to the wize-art, and yet it went on all around us, all the time, as everywhere as air, and as little regarded.

Naturally, just when I was beginning to be really happy, something had to happen to spoil it all. Mendost came home. He came home, not alone, bringing with him a Negotiator from the Dragon's Fire Demesne, seeking to ally our Demesnes through marriage between King Kolver and Jinian, the only sister Mendost had to offer. It did not seem to matter to him at all that I was barely fourteen years old.

Naturally, I said no.

Predictably, Mendost threatened to kill me painfully if I didn't do what he and Garz and Mother were agreed was a good idea. Mother had a fit at what she called my "intransigent stubbornness" and hit me hard across the face in front of the whole family and assorted hangers-on.

Murzy found me in my tower room, half-melted in tears, staring at the fancy dress I had been told to put on for the betrothal feast. Mendost must have brought it with him, for I had no such garments. Since I had no Talent yet and was a virgin girl, it was a pale ivory dress trimmed with green and purple ribbons at the waist and wrists. "Do not Game against" colors.

"I'd like to know what colors mean "Do not marry"," I sobbed, wadding the dress into a bundle and throwing it under the bed.

Murzy dragged it out, brushed it off, and hung it neatly on a hook in my guardarobe. "Marrying tomorrow, are you?"

"Nooo," I bellowed, sounding like a waterfox cow. "Nooo. Never would be too soon."

Margaret Foxmitten came in behind Murzy, an expression of pain on her face. "Do be still, Jinian. You're behaving pawnishly."

Well, that set me up. "Pawnishly," I said dangerously. "Well, you ought to know."

"Stop it," demanded Murzy. "You're upset. Don't compound the difficulty by insulting Margaret. You are behaving pawnishly, just when you need the wize art. Now hush. Breathe deep. Consider fire."

Considering fire—or water—was something they often had me do when I was in a state. It didn't mean anything, but it was very quieting. So I considered it for a while. "I'm sorry," I said to Margaret. "But hardly anyone gets married except pawns. Why does this stupid King want to get married? And why me!"

"That's all right, Jinian. I would probably be very upset, too, but you really haven't time for a tantrum just now. I don't know why the King chooses to marry, but he seems to prefer it. In fact, he has a wife now!"

"Now? Can he have more than one? I didn't know that was ever done." I found the idea very surprising.

It wasn't done, at least not often, and not by Gamesmen of good repute, Margaret told me at great length. "And not without some overriding purpose. So, in order to find out what all this is about ..."

"We've been cossetting the Negotiator's servants with drink and baked goods," said Murzy.

"Nutpies." Sarah giggled, most unlike her shy self. (I think she'd been drinking as part of the cossetting.)

"It seems King Kelter already has a wife," continued Margaret. "Queen somebody or other. A Seer, however, has told the King she will not have a long life. She sought to keep her children by her rather than send them to a School somewhere, but the King was in one Game after another and all his children were lost but the youngest. It's true, says one of the grooms, that she isn't well and the Healer has told the King it is her mind that is ill, not her body. Which, since no one knows where Mind Healer Talley is, means nothing much can be done to help her. So perhaps the King looks far ahead. Far ahead, Jinian. Years, perhaps."

"It doesn't explain why he would want me," I snarled.

"That's true," said Tess Tinder-my-hand, who had come in while I was having my tantrum. "I wonder what lies Mendost told him about you?"

Now that was a thought, one that opened my mouth and put no words in it. Murzy laughed, and Cat Candleshy actually snickered, rare for her. She was usually humorless as an owl. What had the King been told about me?

"Now that we have your attention," said Murzy, "let's think this out a bit while tha dress thaself."

"We have learned the details of the contract," said Cat. "Mendost offered you in return for ten years' alliance. One thing we may be sure of, Mendost believes he can continue to dominate you no matter where you are ..."

"Dominate me," I sputtered. "He can not!"

"He thinks he does," Cat went on calmly. "Mendost is not long on thinking, but he has a clear picture of himself as he believes he is. He believes he dominates you, and your mother, and Garz. He intends to continue doing what he believes he already does. We understand why Mendost might want an alliance -any alliance. He fears King Prionde of the High Demesne, as who does not ..."

The High Demesne was southeast of us, a goodly distance by foot, but no distance at all for an Armiger or Elator. King Prionde was known as a suspicious, narrow man, who went so fearful through life he would attack first and determine enmity later. Worse, so it was said, was his sister-wife, Queen Valearn. Some years before, she had lost her eldest son, Valdon, a boy she much doted on, and this loss drove her to become an Ogress, a strange, reclusive creature from whom no child in all the southlands was safe, a beast more raging than the King himself. Oh, the nursery tales told about Valearn made the blood stop in your veins. Yes, Mendost's desire for an alliance could be understood.

Cat was still explaining. "But the Dragon's Fire Demesne is far to the north. Why it should want an alliance this far south and west, we do not know. Perhaps it is some Great Game King Kelter has planned—in fact, we think it likely. Nonetheless, he is willing to take you, but he already has a wife. So, you have a bit of bargaining room if you are wise ..."

“Bargaining room?” I asked doubtfully. I had never had much luck bargaining with Mendost, and as for Mother ...

“With the Negotiator,” said Cat in her firm, seldom used scholar’s voice. “We all know it would do no good to talk to Mendost or Garz. We believe ...” She gestured at the gathered dams, all of whom were in my room by now, having sneaked in invisibly, by ones and twos. “We believe the King does not want you, not now. We believe he does want the alliance, and takes this way of getting it. We believe he would consider allowing you to do something else for the next few years. Perhaps School? In Xammer?”

“Xammer! It would cost a fortune!” Everyone knew that Xammer was terribly expensive. Most Schools were, of course, but Xammer!

“Not only Xammer,” Cat continued calmly, “but Vorbold’s House.”

“You’re crazy,” I said, forgetting to be respectful. Cat glared at me, and Murzy moved in with a quieting gesture.

“Now, now. Cat’s right. If tha think to ask for some thing, always ask for the best. Tha may not get it, but tha never will if tha don’t ask. And tha’ll have to be firm about it, Jinian.”

“I don’t know anything about Vorbold’s House,” I said sulkily. “It’s probably awful.”

“Well, for one thing,” said Bets, “Mendost would not be allowed to get at you there. Not ever. Which would neatly eliminate that part of his scheme, whatever it is. And Eller wouldn’t be likely to make the trip, as you well know.”

It was true. I didn’t think Mother would bother. “Neither would you,” I argued. “And my Schooling’s being done by you dams, by us seven.”

“Wait a bit, wait a bit. We’ve talked that over. No reason we have to stay here. An old pawnish dam is an old pawnish dam. Not much value, not much missed, isn’t that what they say? I figure two of us could go with you. Even Eller wouldn’t be so silly as to send you off to Xammer without servants. Most of the students have two or three housed in the town. Margaret could go, and Sarah. They’re the youngest. That’s two.”

“I would sneak away soon after,” said Tinder-my-hand, “with Cat. We’ll not be missed.” She sounded almost wistful, and I thought how boring it must be for her in the Demesne. Invisibility was all very well, but sometimes it must become wearing. “Since Murzy has been most useful around here and might be sought for, she might have to delay a bit. Perhaps she could take to her bed with a fever, down in town.

“Which will go on and on,” said Bets. “I would be needed to nurse her, of course. It’d be a season before anyone would come looking for us, wondering if we lived or died.”

“So,” I said, considering it. “Still, the time would come my Schooling would be done. Then the King might expect me to be ... available.”

“That’s later,” said Margaret Foxmitten. “Later we can worry about it. Now’s time to figure out how you’re going to get the King’s Negotiator to agree.” And they began a long session of quite specific instructions about that. Finally Murzy sighed and shoed all of them away.

“One way or another, chile. One way or another. Now, wash tha face, put on this pale dress, and let me

comb that hair. Tha'll never be a beauty, and that's all to the good. Invisibility's hard for beauties. In this case, though, tha're on show, so we have to make the best of what's there." Which she did, with rouge pots and dark stuff on my lashes to make my eyes look greener, and a pumice stone to rub the brown calluses off my hands. My hair had never been so clean, and she brushed it until it gleamed like polished, ruddy wood. She was right: I was not beautiful, but on that occasion I was not difficult to look at.

She did a small spell casting, too. Inward Is Quiet was the spell, something very calming. Enough that I went down to dinner in full command of myself, intent on being graceful and quiet and well mannered. I sat beside the Negotiator, determined to be charming. Of course, Mother drank too much, got into a violent whispered argument with Mendost, and threw a tantrum you could have heard in Schooltown halfway through the soup, but Garz and Poremy covered it up and I pretended not to notice. The Negotiator's name was Joramal Trandle, and he gave me several boring gifts and one nice one and some well-thought-out compliments. Margaret and Murzy had thought up a couple for me to return, and by the time they brought in the cakes, we were getting along very well. I told him then that I must speak with him privately, after the meal, in the gardens, and he agreed, though he did look puzzled.

So, later in the evening he insisted on talking to me privately in the garden—which Mendost did not like at all. After I thanked him for the third time for the scent bottle carved out of greenstone in the shape of a frog, I remarked that it would have been nice if Mendost had cared enough about me to ever be kind to me. It would have made me feel more secure in the current situation—more sure that I would be treated well in future. This was said rather wistfully while batting my eyelashes the way Margaret had showed me. Joramal turned a little pink, then white, and I knew he was trying to figure out how he was going to tell King Kolver that Mendost's sister certainly wasn't Mendost's friend. Though if the King had any sense, he would already have figured out that Mendost didn't have any friends.

"I am sure King Kolver will not want an unwilling wife?" I asked, smiling. "Unwilling allies are so dangerous to one during Game." I had practiced this line twelve times in front of the mirror with Cat sitting beside me, coaching me.

"The, umm, King," he ummed, "desires willing and, umm, enthusiastic allies. Umm. Of course."

"As you have noticed, I am very young." This was demure. It is not easy being demure. I had wanted to say, "I'm too damn young to get married, and I don't want to," but older heads had prevailed. Instead, I looked down, twined my fingers together, and tried to evoke pallor.

"Ah," Joramal said. "Yes."

"I do not feel that marriage—or even guest status within the King's Demesne while he has yet a living wife—would be appropriate. It would be beneath the King's honor. I am a mere child, after all. Without Talent. Or Schooling. No. It would not be honorable."

"Ah, no," he said.

I looked up. Now was time for the firm, friendly look. "However, if I were to attend School in Xammer for a few years—Vorbold's House would do—then the King's honor would not be questioned. Nor could I question his ... friendship."

He smiled at me, really smiled, with a definite twinkle behind it. "Young woman, I would be happy to accede to this request on the King's behalf. It would, quite frankly, ameliorate certain aspects of this alliance which neither the King nor his Negotiator have found ... becoming." He gave me a long, level look, and I knew we understood one another. The King was playing some Game or other, and Mendost

was an unsuspecting part of it, but the King did not wish to Game against me. Good. The dams had, as usual, been right.

I gave Joramal Trandle my hand, and we agreed. I told him I could not possibly go to Xammer without my two servants and my pony, Misquick—even though the pony was not a mount that lent me much dignity. He was very grave about this, agreeing only after an appropriate amount of consideration to show he took the matter seriously. I told him my servants were Margaret and Sarah, stressing that Mother some times forgot the proprieties. He made a note of their names, right there in the garden, so I thought we would have no difficulty about that.

And when Mendost came up to me afterward with a bloody word in his mouth, ready to smack me if things hadn't gone his way, I smiled sweetly at him and told him I thought traveling with Joramal Trandle would be immensely enjoyable. Joramal was beside me, ears quivering as Negotiators' always are. They must see and hear everything and use it for the benefit of their patrons. Mendost didn't dare say anything at all, much less haul me heavenward by my left foot. I caught the Negotiator looking at me out of the corner of his eye, watching me and Mendost together, as though he wanted to know a great deal more about that particular relationship.

I continued to be charming throughout the evening, though I had begun to feel a little odd because of the wine. It had begun by making me warm and relaxed, but as the evening waned it gave me a sad, weepy feeling. Murzy's spell was wearing off, and I felt a little sick. When the party ended, Mother went up the stairs just ahead of me, and I followed her as she turned along the corridor leading to her own suite, not out of any plan—after all, everything was said and done except the contract itself—but more out of that sadness, as though I were about to lose something ephemeral and wonderful that I could never have again. So I went after her, slipping into the room behind her, saying, "Mother ..."

I'm sure it was a whiny little voice. She turned on me, her hair billowed out around her head like a cloud, her favorite jewel held against her lips, her eyes lit up with a kind of bleary impatience.

"Well, and what is it now, girl! Have you some other complaint?"

"No," I said. "It's just that I'll be gone. And we may not see one another again ..."

"No great loss," she told me very cheerfully.

I could not let it rest. "I ... I think it is. I mean ... I know you haven't been very satisfied with me. I know you like the boys better. But still and all, you're my mother, and I want—"

"Out," she said in a flat, toneless voice, as though she were ordering the fustigars from the kennels. "I've had enough of your maundering. Do you think I haven't seen you all evening, playing up to that fool Joramal, trying to get out of it? Well, you'll not get out of it. You'll get in it and do as you're told. Now out. The contract will be done after breakfast tomorrow, and you're to be there. After which you'll be no trouble of mine and I'll need listen to no more whine of Mother this and Mother that. I would as soon have mothered a kitchen pawn."

She shoved me out, not gently, and shut the door in my face.

I went up to my room, waking Murzy where she sat by my fire ready to undo my laces, and I said not a word to her about it. It came only as a confirmation, not as hurtful as one might think—at least not where I could feel it, though I had a sense something deep had been mortally wounded. No matter. The deep things stay buried unless one stirs them up. I had been feeling a little guilty about maneuvering Joramal the

way we had, but there was no more guilt. There was only a kind of cold, hurt calm at the center of things which lasted me all night and on the following day throughout the reading of the contract. It let me enjoy the faces on Mendost and Mother when the matter of Xammer was read out. There was anger there, some large, private anger, and I knew covert plans of theirs had indeed been upset by my personal negotiations. It was too late for them to do anything about it, however, and the ceremony proceeded during which Mother—white-lipped and angry-looking—formally turned me over to Joramal Trandle as surrogate for the King. From that time on, by Game law, I belonged to King Kolver for at least the period of the alliance. My family no longer had any claim on me whatsoever. Then I went up to my room and cried for an hour. It was very refreshing. After which I considered fire for a while, then went to sleep wondering if travel with the Negotiator would be like traveling with the dams. In which case I would get very little rest.

We were making ready to leave the following day when someone realized I had no clothes. There was then a delay while the seamstresses outfitted me. I had been wearing some cast-off things of Poremy's and had only the one gown. I think Murzy may have said something in Mendost's hearing about Jinian being a laughing stock in Xammer because she had no clothes. At any rate, Mendost and Mother had a screaming match over it, but I did get some clothing. Except for the betrothal gown, they were the first things I had ever had made for me. I was amazed to learn that girls' underdrawers are made differently, though when I stopped to think about it, it did make sense.

"What happens when I outgrow them?" I asked Cat. She was watching Sarah take the bastings out of my favorite suit. Red leather riding trousers and a gray-and-red-striped tunic top with a red half cape. "The way I'm going, I won't be able to wear this more than three or four seasons."

"I understand that Vorbold's House provides," Sarah said, rolling up bits of threads. "When the King pays your way there, he pays for everything, and they see that you're properly clothed for any occasion. It isn't just a School, Jinian. It's—well, it's a special place. Only for girls, you know."

I hadn't known. I wished I didn't know. Something that was only for girls had a sound to it I didn't like. "Why?" I asked. "Why only for girls?"

"Because it's for young women of families who seek alliances," Cat said in her tart fashion. "To get them out of Games' way, for heaven's sake. This Demesne could get involved in some Great Game tomorrow—and knowing your brother Mendost, that's likely. It's only we're so remote from anything or anyone has kept us peaceful so long. If you were here during Game, you could be taken hostage, or killed, or set up in the Game some way. Xammer is neutral territory. No one Games in Xammer. Girls can grow up there, find their Talent—if any—and make some decent or useful choices when they're old enough to do so."

I didn't know she was speaking prophetically, or I might have paid more attention. As it was, I only nodded and humphed. I still didn't like the "girls only" aspect, but I had to admit it sounded sensible. Murzy had gone to some pains to describe Game to me in terms that were anything but attractive or exciting. Many Gamesmen—and women—seemed to end up dead very young, or worse.

"Besides," Murzy interjected, "you'll learn a good deal. Not the kind of thing we've been teaching you, but useful stuff nonetheless." She held up the cape with satisfaction. "We'll need to put a student's knot on this." She meant the green and purple ribbons that students or pregnant women or scholars wear to show they are on neutral business and should not be involved in Game.

"Don't," I begged. "We can put it on later, just before we leave. It will clash with the red, and I want to wear it to ride Misquick today." I had it in mind that Grompozzle and Misquick had never seen me in

new clothes, proud and Gamesmanlike, and it would be fun to ride out in something besides the tattered trews and leather shirt I always wore. I was far too big to ride Misquick at all. However, though our Demesne raised horses that were sold all over the world, I had never been given a mount other than the pony. I was allowed to work with the horses, but not to ride them. I think Mother and Mendost made that rule just to be annoying. At any rate, I would have a last ride on the poor pony, just to say good-bye. Joramal, after seeing Misquick, had carefully hidden a smile and promised me a more fitting mount. "When I get back," I urged Murzy. She agreed. Well. How could she have known? How could I?

So, just before noon I packed a lunch, whistled up Grompozzle, saddled Misquick, and made off for the hills, waving to Murzy as I clattered through the courtyard. I didn't intend to go far. There wasn't time, and I didn't really have the heart for visiting favorite places much. This was more in the nature of a nostalgic farewell, full of bitter-sweet memories, very self-dramatized and all. I had a mental picture of me in the new clothes that probably looked as little like the real me as Grompozzle looked like a real hunting fustigar. I noticed a horseman on the line of western hills as we set out, but I thought nothing of it. The forest east belonged to Stoneflight, or so we say, as far as the ridge line. North is the Old South Road City of the blind runners, and south is only badlands. But the forest west of the Demesne is open country and full of game, so riders are seen there often enough. I headed north. The Season of Storms was notime near, and if I encountered a runner, he would only give me honey cake and send me home. They and I had become fairly friendly over the past several years. Once I asked a runner how they got started on the road. He gargled at me for a long time, and I gathered some great-great-ancestor far back had been summoned to run the road, particularly the bad spots where it was all broken. That's why they valued the footseeing so, to find the broken places between the stretches anyone could see. They were a very strange people.

Several times as I rode, I saw the same rider on the western ridge. After a time, it began to make me nervous, so I left the open trail and reined Misquick into the trees where we couldn't be seen. Where we couldn't have been seen if I'd been wearing my old clothes. I'd forgotten the bright red cape, the red leather trews. Well. Nothing to do about that. The three of us wended our way around a little hill and down into a little valley beyond.

There was a rider east of me, on the skyline.

I didn't know whether he'd seen me or not, nor could I tell what Talent he might have. If he were a Demon or some of that line who could Read minds, he could tell where I was easy enough. Though why anyone should want to know was beyond me. It seemed prudent to head for the Demesne, so Misquick and I turned about and made for home. I kept it slow, remembering times when Misquick had tried to hurry and ended up in trouble.

There were two mounted men waiting at either side of the trail, just inside the hollow. Two ahead of me, plus one to the west and one to the east. All of them were on tall, fast-looking horses, and it was silly to think of outrunning them. I pulled Misquick up and sat, waiting. They didn't leave me in any doubt at all.

One of the men was larger than the others with him. He had a long face with a heavy jaw; wide, sneering lips; eyes that brooded at me from under heavy lids as though they did not see me directly but through some veil. They were not quite focused on me. I had an uneasy feeling that I was someone else to him, some different image he had already seen and dismissed.

"You'd be Jinian," he said, getting the name right first try as he took hold of Misquick's bridle. "Mendost's sister."

I thought of lying about it, but it was obvious they knew. “Yes,” I said. One thing Murzy had drummed into me was to say no more than necessary.

“Good enough,” he snorted. “Then you’ll come along with us, girl. You won’t be hurt if you don’t try anything silly.”

I had no intention of trying anything, silly or not, so I whistled to Grompozzle, who came slaving up, offering to lick the hands of my captors in his usual indiscriminating style. Then we went off to the northwest, over the ridge and away, moving a good deal faster than Misquick was accustomed to moving under the best of conditions. As we pushed under a webwillow tree, I caught a handful of twigs and then dropped all but three. The three I stuffed into the saddlebag, in the bag with my lunch. Then Misquick did just what I’d thought she would, stumble, slid halfway down a bank, and ended up mired in a mudhole. “She can’t go that fast,” I said apologetically. “She’s not very surefooted.”

“I’ll take the girl,” the large man said, the only one who had done any talking at all. “Leave the pony here.”

I objected, to which they paid no attention at all, but leaving Misquick was what I wanted to do. She would head for home as soon as she settled down, carrying the saddlebag, which the men didn’t think of taking. When Murzy saw the twigs in the pocket, she would know I was in trouble—that’s what three of anything put where it doesn’t belong means. Three stones in a shoe, three twigs in a pocket, three feathers under a saddle. Then the dams would know as much as I did. That is, if Murzy or one of the dams saw the saddlebag first. Well, I’d done all I could, so I put it out of my mind.

“Would you mind telling me who you are, or what this is all about?” I asked.

“My name is Porvius Bloster,” he said. “Tragamor. This is about Game. We announce Game against Mendost of Stoneflight Demesne.”

“But, but ...” I sputtered, “I’m a student. I’m going off to Xammer tomorrow. I’m Game exempt.”

“You’re not wearing exempt colors,” he snorted. “Which I was careful to determine before accosting you. You should have worn the dress you wore that night you were wandering around the garden talking foolishness with that friend of your brother’s.”

I didn’t want to talk about clothes. This whole thing was too silly for words. “What kind of Game is this?” I pursued the subject. The kind of Game could be very important.

“This is Death Game,” he snarled. “For I am weary of your brother’s perfidy. Twice I’ve had him challenged, and twice he’s slipped by me. He’s a dishonorable Gamesman ...” Which wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t know. “We have taken this step to guarantee he stands to Game.”

“You’re expecting Mendost to stand Death Game with you in order to save my life!” My honest amazement must have come through to him, however slightly.

“Of course. For the honor of the Demesne.” He was very much the mature Gamesman enlightening the child. The man took me for an utter fool.

I pleaded with him. “You’ve said yourself that Mendost is dishonorable. Worse than that, I’m not even Mendost’s concern anymore. I was betrothed to King Kelder of Dragon’s Fire Demesne three days ago!”

“You?” He burst out laughing, which didn’t make me feel any better about the whole thing. “You’re a child!”

I had never felt more the child. For a blinding moment, I wanted a Talent, any Talent, so long as it was strong and destructive and could get back at this muscle and little-wit holding on to me who did not seem to see me as a person at all. He was like a man reciting a role, uttering speeches he had rehearsed. I tried to get his attention, explain to him. “I know I’m very young. King Kolver is having me Schooled at Xammer. As part of an alliance ...” The more I tried to explain the circumstances, the more he smiled into the air, not seeing me, disbelieving me.

“You’ve a good imagination, girly,” he said at last. “A very good imagination. If you live to get older, maybe they’ll put you to work making dream crystals. Or being a Seer. Most of what they tell you they make up out of their heads. I don’t believe them, either. So, we’ll take you along to the place we’ve got ready, then we’ll send our message and wait ‘til Mendost shows up.”

“He won’t show up,” I said hopelessly.

“For your sake, girly, he’d better.”

“Would you ask ransom?” I suggested, hoping that King Kolver might see fit to increase his investment. He had already gone to considerable expense and might not mind a little extra.

“The Game is between Mendost and me,” he said offhandedly. “Why should I want ransom? Ransom will not avenge my honor. Mendost struck me without warning. He did not announce Game before striking me.”

“If he’d been drinking,” I said, “it wasn’t Game at all. It was just bad temper.”

“If it wasn’t Game for Mendost then, he must learn it is Game now,” he said, turning the horse through a screen of trees and down into a hidden hollow where a camp had been set up. “The Herald has delivered my demands by now. He was on his way to your gate when we picked you up.” Porvius Bloster sounded so self-satisfied, so pompous, I knew there would be no reasoning with him. Which is probably why Mendost hit him in the first place. If you are ever captured by someone, pray it is not a stupid, pompous man who sees the whole world through a haze of his own preconceptions. As I analyzed the situation, it seemed fairly hopeless that he would ever believe me. He was not living in the same world I was. He was simply too sure he was right.

There was a tall, greasy-looking post at one side of the camp, and I saw with alarm it had been fitted up with a tether and harness. Sure enough, they put the harness on me, hooked up behind where I couldn’t reach it, and the tether went to the top of the post where I couldn’t reach that end, either. There was a small tent nearby where I could sleep. I could get into the thicket if I needed to go. They weren’t going to torture me or anything. In fact, as they went about their business, it was obvious they weren’t very interested in me at all. I sat in the entrance of the tent, getting familiar with the camp, thinking. It seemed to me the best thing to do was to become invisible.

Now the first rule of invisibility is that you have to be where you can be seen. You sort of blend into the scenery. Never hide. If you hide, people wonder where you are and what you’re doing, so you don’t hide. You do whatever you’re doing right out in front of everyone, but it’s what you do all the time. So I began to wander around, into the thicket and out. Among the trees and out. Into the tent and out. Over near the fire to get warm, then away. Down to the little pool to get a drink. Pick up a few sticks and put

them down near the fire. Pick a rainhat berry and eat it. Rainhat berry. Still walking aimlessly around, I set myself to search for shivery-green. It wasn't common. Not nearly as common as the rainhat bush. Thinking of that, I picked a couple of leaves and put them beside the tent. If it rained, I could use them to replace the rain cape in the saddlebag Misquick had taken home.

I didn't find any shivery-green that day. Night came. They gave me some food, not very good. They sat in the light of their fire, mumbling to one another. Porvius Bloster had a chain about his neck with a pendant on it. I had noticed it during the day several times and now it was even more noticeable in the light of the fire. He fingered it now, turning it in his fingers. When the others lay down to sleep he sat there, turning it, turning it, at last laying it upon his tongue and sucking upon it as a baby does a sugar tit.

I knew what it was then. I'd never seen one before that I knew of, though there was talk of them in the Demesne, as there is always talk of things exotic and strange. It was a dream crystal. If what I had heard about them was true, it was no wonder he could not deal with the reality around him. He had already dreamed this occasion, dreamed its progress and conclusion. Nothing I could say would disrupt the dream. Too much confusion between the dream and the reality would unbalance him completely, and who knew what he might do then.

I waited, scarcely breathing until he let the thing fall from his mouth and wandered toward the tent. The tent the men slept in was out of reach of my tether, so I couldn't sneak in on them in the night. I could get up very, very early, however, and start my wander once more. It took until noon to find a plant of shivery-green. Only one plant of it, trembling like a little emerald fountain between the buttress roots of a great tree, with three little seed clusters nodding at the tips of the stems. So. Now the location of it was known, if one could only figure out what to do about it.

I began to be ubiquitous around the fire. When and if the rainhat roots and the shivery-green seeds were put together, the juice would have to get into their food somehow. Once they were asleep for some little time, the tether could be pounded on a rock until it frayed through. Then I could get a knife off one of them and cut the harness. King Kolver's gift was in my pocket, the scent bottle in the shape of a frog. That would hold a lot more of the juices than was needed.

Invisible. I began bashing up some bark into strips to make a basket. Right away Porvius sent one of the men over to see what was going on, and I ignored him while threading webwillow twigs and bark pieces together. It wouldn't have fooled a dam for a minute. Any child knows you can't make basket of webwillow bark, for it breaks as it dries. Wet, however, it looked all right, and he went mumbling back to the fire, while I went on bashing, interrupting it from time to time to wander about and dig roots. In the late afternoon when it began to get dark, I picked the shivery-green seeds and bashed them up with the rainhat root on the same hollow rock I'd been bashing things on all day. A piece of rainhat leaf made a spoon and a funnel, all in one, and the juice went in the scent bottle, which had been previously emptied in the thicket. It made the thicket smell better, which by that time it needed.

Now there was enough juice to put them to sleep for a season, about. Well, for ten days at least, I thought, not realizing how much webwillow pulp and fragments had remained on the rock to adulterate my brew. My own ignorance saved me. An experienced herbalist might not have tried it without better equipment.

I was just getting ready to go over to the fire once more, this time to put the juice in their stew—I'd have to go without eating anything tonight myself—when there was a hail from the mountain and I looked up to see a Herald in full panoply and two people with blindfolds on. It was Joramal Trandle and Murzy, but not Mendost. Bloster was swearing in a tight, ugly voice.

Another thing Murzy had told me about invisibility. If you do what you always do when other people are distracted, they simply won't see you. So I kept right on moving toward the fire, scent bottle in hand, reached for the stew spoon, and took a bite—burning my mouth—then dumped the juice in it as the spoon went back. All the men were watching the Herald. None of them was watching me.

“Let all in sound of my voice give heed,” cried the Herald. “Mendost of Stoneflight Demesne, Armiger, against whom Game has been called by Porvius Bloster, Tragamor, denies any interest in the person of Jinian, sister, person of Stoneflight Demesne—”

“I told you so,” I muttered.

“—and denies challenge to Game, saying let Porvius do to the person Jinian what Porvius will, for he cares not. However, on hearing of the abduction of Jinian of Stoneflight Demesne, did one Joramal Trandle, Negotiator for King Kelver of the Dragon's Flight Demesne, assert right of interest in the dispute. I bring here Joramal Trandle and one Murzy, servant to the person Jinian.”

“That coward!” yelled one of the men. Porvius didn't say anything. He had a confused look on his face, as though he couldn't track what was happening. Well, I'd tried to tell him. It occurred to me then that the dams and I might have outwitted ourselves. Perhaps my private negotiations with Joramal had ruined any value I might have had to Mendost. Certainly he had wanted to use me for something, some bargaining point. Well, now it was up to Joramal.

Joramal called, a little uncertainly, “If we may have the blindfolds removed, we would Negotiate for the person Jinian.”

“It's a bluff,” snarled Porvius, turning to glare at me.

“Truly, Gamesman, it is not,” I said, trying to look meek and inconspicuous and not worth killing. “Mendost simply doesn't care what you do to me. He wouldn't care if you killed the whole family.” He hadn't sucked on the dream crystal since the night before, not that I'd seen. Perhaps the effect had weakened enough to let him deal with reality. I crossed my fingers and prayed to several newly invented deities.

He snarled and swore, but after a few minutes he allowed the blindfolds to come off. Joramal went with Porvius into his tent, and Murzy was allowed to come about a manheight from me. Not close enough to give me anything, though she'd brought a bundle. Looking at her face, I was mightily distressed. I had never seen Murzy this upset before, but she was really frightened. I couldn't tell whether it was because of my predicament or something else, but whatever it was, it made me pay very close attention to what she said.

“Jinian,” she began softly, fixing me with her eyes. “This is a dreadful thing to have happened.”

The man who was listening yawned and took a step or two away, never taking his eyes off her.

“I've brought you some warmer clothes,” she said, pointing to the bundle. “More suitable.” There was a long pause. Then, “You know how important it is for you to go to Xammer, don't you?”

“Yes, Murzy,” I said. There was a message there. I didn't understand it, but I jotted it down in memory.

“What have you been doing to pass the time?” she asked in a grandmotherly voice.

“Oh,” I said, “I found some rainhat twigs and some bark of shivery-green, and I’ve been making a basket,” pointing at the half-finished webwillow basket next to the hollow stone.

She gave me a look that said she understood what I’d been up to. “It’s good to keep busy,” she said. “Your task should be finished as soon as possible, Jinian. You should keep in practice.”

Then there was yelling from the tent and Joramal stumbled out, very white and with his mouth narrowed to a tight line. “Tell Mendost he has until dawn!” screamed Porvius. “Until dawn. Then this one dies, and her head will be carried to Stoneflight Demesne as challenge of Great Game upon all who dwell there!”

“You understand that King Kelper may bring Game against you,” Joramal was saying. “Against you and yours. This is his betrothed...”

Murzy was saying quietly, under the other noise, “The Demesne is not a healthy place just now, not for me or mine, tha or thine. The east is safer than the south.”

“No King of honor would betroth a child!” Porvius screamed, making little stones leap around under Joramal’s feet. “This is another of Mendost’s dishonorable, craven tricks. Put the blindfolds back on them and get them out of here.” Well, he was back in his own dream of events again.

Murzy, however, was not distracted. She tapped her chest several times, mysteriously, then was blindfolded and led away. Grommy went with her, treacherously abandoning me, and I wasn’t sad to see him go. That was one less thing to worry about. I sat down quietly before my own tent and waited for the men to eat their dinner.

They did everything else. They talked, argued, stamped around. Porvius made a small earthquake, just to illustrate his displeasure, during which I lay down and whimpered. If I’d appeared poised, it would have made him angrier, I figured. At last they filled their bowls, giving me none; since Porvius said someone being beheaded in the morning didn’t need dinner. Then they ate. Then they sat, and drank, and talked, and talked, and talked. I was wondering what I’d done wrong. Were the seeds not ripe? Had I dug up the wrong roots by mistake? Had I ... Not for the first time, I longed for a Talent. For the first time I began to wonder if I would ever get one. Not an early one, certainly. I was already past that age.

At last there were snores from the campfire, and I sighed, only then realizing how impure the mixture must have been, which meant, of course, there was no telling how much time I had before they woke.

I did a spell, Mothwings Go Spinning, picking a rainhat berry out of the bush and sending it circling, wider and wider, tilting and tumbling. “Touch all,” I muttered under my breath, keeping it up until it banged Porvius Bloster on the head where he lay, him and then his henchmen. Any Tragamor could have done the same with his Talent, but this was a movement spell and according to Sarah I could do it very well, better than most Wize-ards. I liked the spell because it took no paraphernalia, only certain words and a few small, precise gestures to pick up any smallish thing and send it flying. So I banged upon Bloster and his men enough to be sure they were soundly asleep, then picked up a rock and began bashing at the leather tether.

It seemed to take hours. The leather was tough. All it wanted to do was crush, not cut. Finally it came apart. I took a knife from Porvius’s belt, considered killing all four of them but couldn’t quite get up the gumption to do it, picked up the bundle Murzy had brought for me, and made for the horses. I had never ridden anything that size before, but I wasn’t about to take off on foot and have them following me. I tied all four horses together, then led the first one over to a tall stump and climbed on top. He was well schooled, thank the old gods, and didn’t act up. It was a cloudy night; I had no idea which way was

home; the important thing seemed to be to get gone.

So, I got.

5

It was dark and very misty when I left. There was a long, straight canyon which appeared to be the shortest way out of the place. It seemed to go generally east, though I couldn't see beyond the first gentle curve. The horses and I went that way and kept going until light, during most of which time it rained. I hoped the rain would wash away the hoofprints. When it got a little bit light, I took one horse over a ridge and turned him loose. He went off into the slush very nicely. Horses and I had always understood each other very well, and he was probably thinking about hay and a warm stable. The other three of us went a bit farther, then another one went loose, and the last one just before noon. It may have been noon. There was a sort of general lightness at the top of the sky which might have meant that. Or it might have meant the clouds were thinner there, who knows. If anyone were following me—if they weren't Seers or Pursuivants or some other finder kind of Gamesman—they might follow one of the loose horses instead of the one I was on.

The last horse and I went on together a bit more, but by that time it was really difficult to stay on. No sleep to speak of for two nights was more than I could manage. The rain was letting up, and it seemed a good opportunity to rest. I slid off the horse, walked back a way, and found that the hoofprints were disappearing in the muck. So, we were lost but not trackable. That was hopeful. It left only one major worry—that we'd been traveling in a circle and would come trotting back into Porvius's camp just as he woke up. There wasn't any point in considering that, really. I'd done my best to hold a straight line, and that's all anyone can do.

We found a dry place under a great needly tree. Horse stood on one side of the tree, and I lay down on the other. Murzy had packed some food, a rain cape, and some warm clothes, still dry inside the oilskin pack. Almost, I said to myself, as though she knew I'd be off on my own in the rain. That set me to thinking about that strange interview we'd had. Whatever else her mysterious talk had implied, it had certainly meant I was not to try and get back to Stoneflight. She had said to hurry, which I had. She had tapped her chest over and over. I tapped mine, something beneath my fingers biting into my skin. The star-eye. Tap, tap. She wanted me to remember the star-eye? What did that mean? I gave up, my mouth full of bread and cheese. When I woke in the night, there were still bits of bread and cheese between my teeth, so no time had been lost in wakefulness.

The sky had cleared and was full of stars. It was easy to tell which direction was south, and I sleepily marked the trunk of the tree with the knife before rolling over and going back to sleep. When I woke again, it was half-light. Thinking time.

The fact was, I did not know where I was. Stoneflight Demesne might have been east, or south, or west of me. The Tragamor's camp had probably been northwest of the Demesne, but the canyon I had followed when I left had curved back and forth, and I could have been almost anywhere.

During the night, Murzy's message had come clear, however. She had meant, "Get the hell out of here; try to get to Xammer as quickly as possible; stay away from the south—the High Demesne and the Ogress Valearn—use the wize-arts and be sensible." That sounded like Murzy, though she had not exactly sounded like herself during that last conversation. It might be that Mendost had threatened her or one of the other dams. It would have been like him. Not healthy for me or mine, she had said, and Mendost often made places unhealthy for people. So—on to Xammer.

Which lay far, far to the east. That was the one direction of which I was certain.

The town of Mip lay northwest of our Demesne, down the canyon and across the mountains and down into the valley of the Dourt. If I had gone in Joramal's wagon, we would have gone from Mip, up the river to its confluence with the Haws, then up the mountain road to the Banner, down the Banner to the Gathered Waters, and down the Gathered Waters to River Reave, to Gaywater, and thence east to Xammer. That's more or less the way we had gone to Schooltown long before, and it would have taken a long time to get there.

Or one could put a canoe in Stonybrook, follow it down to the falls, carry it down the old stone stairs into the canyon below, thence into Long Valley and the great open fields above Lake Yost. Then, if one didn't wish to paddle upstream on the Reave and the Gaywater, one would walk to Xammer, the whole business taking twenty days or less.

So I had two perfectly logical routes to Xammer, east or west. If I kept going west, I couldn't fail to run into River Dourt. If I went east, I couldn't fail to encounter Stonybrook—which became Stonywater lower down—or the walls of the great canyon. According to Cat Candleshy, once past the falls, Stonywater was calm and easy enough in contemplation, though I had never done it.

Despite Murzy's warnings about the High Demesne, I had no real fear of coming upon it. There was all of Long Valley between our mountains and Tarnost—the Demesne of King Prionde and Valearn the Ogress. I was far enough north not to fear from the Ogress of Tarnost. I thought. It did not occur to me then that she might go elsewhere.

Well, tic-tac, front or back, dark or bright, left or right, fast or slow, here we go. I picked east. It seemed shorter.

So warmed, rested, fed, we set out. Though I had never been allowed to have a real horse before, I could mark definite advantages over Misquick. This one didn't stumble, didn't fall down, and didn't stand with his head down refusing to move the way Misquick often did. He looked intelligently at the way we were headed and picked a simple, sure-footed way along it. I thanked him for this, which seemed to please him, and we went sedately along. Which left me free to think about other things.

I chose to think about the old gods. Prompted by Murzy's chest tapping, probably. The star-eye was a symbol of one of the old gods, one of the elder people of the world. Not the True Game world, the whole world, which went on beyond the boundaries of the True Game in all directions, to the Southern Sea, the Glistening Sea, the jungles of the north, and even beyond those. Tess Tinder-my-hand had an old, old rhyme:

Bright the Sun Burning,

Night Will Come Turning,

Warm Fire Is Sparkening,

Sleep Brings a Darkening,

Bitter Tears Falling,

Lovers Come Calling,

Egg in the Hollow,
Hatching to Follow,
Mothwings Go Spinning,
End and Beginning,
Inward Is Quiet,
Dream Chains to Tie It,
Silence and Shadow,
Music and Meadow,
Eye of the Star,
Where Old Gods Are.

Each line of the verse was a spell. Egg in the Hollow was a hiding spell. Music and Meadow was a summoning of the deep dwellers used in bridge or tree magic sometimes. There were hundreds of couplets if one knew them all. Some weren't used often. Hatching to Follow was a pregnancy spell, for instance, and it wasn't often used. Though each line is a spell, there's more to it than that. It has meaning in groups of lines—if you look at different groups, you can see how they fit together—and as a whole, too. Taken as a whole, Tess said it meant the old gods held it all together, in balance, so that everything had a place: fire, water, life, death, earth, and sky—everything. And everyone. I used to comfort myself with that sometimes at night when everyone had been after me all day and it didn't seem there was any place for me at all. Then I'd sing, "Silence and Shadow, Music and Meadow, Eye of the Star" to myself until I went to sleep.

So, I had said, if it had all been so nicely balanced when the old gods were around, where were they now?

"Lost," said Sarah, sadly.

"Betrayed," said Margaret.

"Imprisoned," said Cat. "The deep lookers and far studiers say that. Imprisoned. Locked up. No one knows where."

"If I were a god," I had said to Cat Candleshy, "I would not allow myself to be locked up."

"Perhaps they didn't know what was happening until it was too late," said Cat. "Perhaps they were great, slow beings who did not imagine that any creature would do such a thing. And perhaps those who did it didn't know it was gods they were shutting up. Each time they may have thought it was something else, like a hurricane or a thunderstorm or even a plague of gobblemoles. I rather think things like that were the ... the vocabulary of the old gods. As well as being their identity."

Cat talked like that sometimes. Margaret said something once about Cat having been a Gamesmistress in a School, though she could not have meant exactly that. One would have to be Gamesman caste to be

a Gamesmistress. Perhaps Margaret meant another kind of teacher. When I asked her, though, she refused to discuss it. I did ask Cat about something that confused me, however. "Cat, I've never heard anyone speak about old gods except the dams. I never heard anyone in the Demesne speak of it, nor anyone in Schooltown when we went there."

She puckered her mouth as though she wouldn't answer me at all, but then said, "It's part of the wize-art, Jinian. We hear certain things and draw certain inferences from that. Often inferences are all we have. We hesitate to pass them on lest they acquire an unmerited currency, but among ourselves we speak of it. Now, ask no more. You'll learn in time."

Don't you hate it when people tell you you'll learn in time? Obviously, the time to learn is when you're interested! There was no use arguing with Cat, though, so I had to let it go. Now, on the mountainside, going east with the sun on my forehead and my stomach saying it was time for lunch, it would have been nice if she'd told me more. Perhaps she was thinking the same thing!

Lunchtime came and went. Sometime about mid-afternoon it began to occur to me that Stonybrook or the edge of the canyon should have appeared some time ago. We went from Stoneflight to Stonybrook every summer to get rushes for baskets, sometimes several times during the summer. It wasn't a long trip even in a slow, bumpy wagon. Even if I had been at the extreme western edge of the table-mountain, right above the valley of the River Dourt, I should still have come upon Stonybrook by now. Which meant ... what?

Which meant I'd crossed it? No. Couldn't have. Crossed no stream. Which meant I was so far north, I'd missed it completely, as well as the great east-west canyon it fell into.

Possible. Probable! If so, horse and I were on the north side of Longbow Mountain and would shortly arrive at Pouws! We climbed the slope to the right, looking for a place with a view east and north. If Pouws were anywhere near, there'd be smoke. And I knew people from Pouws. There was a girl a little older than I, Lunette. She had an older brother. I'd forgotten his name. They had guested with us at Stoneflight after being caught on the road by storm, oh, five or six years ago at least. I had been only eight or nine at the time. The older brother had ended up challenging Mendost to Game of Two, and Bram had had to put a stop to it by forcing Mendost to apologize for breaking guest privilege. Mendost and Dorto—that was his name!—had been unfriends ever since, though neither of them had taken it further ...

There was smoke! High, curling over a frowning ridge of stone, black, roiling smoke. No cookfire smoke, that. Horse cocked his ears forward, made a little uneasy sound in his nose, then he and I went farther up the mountain. When we came to the foot of a tall, sentinel stone, I left him there and clambered up the back of it like a tree rat, lying on top ratrug flat the way they do. Below me in the valley lay the Demesne of Pouws with Pouwstown on beyond it and a few farms scattered beyond that. What was burning was quite a large grain storage barn, and who was burning it was a Sentinel I knew very well because he was Mendost's man. There was a Herald down there, too, and two or three others who were quite familiar to me. The situation was easy to read. Mendost, having made an alliance with King Kelver, was now setting out to even old scores. Which for Mendost meant declaring Game against everyone within six days' ride of us in any direction. Including Dorto of Pouws.

Not precisely the time for me to ride into Pouws Demesne and ask for help. Sister of an attacker, betrothed to his ally. Lovely! Thus far I had kept my spirits up, planning each step ahead, but now I wanted to cry. With Mendost on a rampage, there would be no friends within reach. Behind me somewhere was Porvius Bloster, who was just stupid and prideful enough to declare Game against me personally because I'd outwitted him. Below me were Mendost's men, dangerous as vipers. All I could

do was keep riding east, staying well away from the conflict. I tried to recall what I knew about the country east of here. All I could remember was that there were no traveled roads.

No roads.

No roads because at the east end of Longbow Mountain is the Forest of Chimmerdong, where nobody goes.

I remembered the chant:

Tearful the music, full of woe,

In the stone deep, fern steep woods of Zoe.

But a stranger voice sings a sadder song In the sorrow-wild Forest of Chimmerdong.

“By all the old gods,” I said to horse when I had come back down the rock, “this is the dirtiest trick Mendost has played me yet.” Knowing even as I said it that Mendost had not thought of me at all—never had, much.

When we had passed all but one of the outlying farms, I rode up to the last farmhouse and traded with the little farmwife there. My suit of red clothing—which I had worn only once, I assured her—for whatever food she could spare that would travel well. She looked over the wet red treads and the striped tunic, brushing it off, admiring it. There was a youngster playing out back who would look well in it in a year or two, and I told her so. She asked if I’d stolen it, and I said I’d be glad to put it on to prove it had been made for me, but she smiled and said no. She said I seemed young to be out on such a large horse, and I said the horse was younger than I. At which she laughed. We ended making a bargain, and I took enough dried meat, roadbread, and dried fruit away to last me for several days, as well as a leather-covered flask full of beer. The beer wouldn’t last long, but the bottle could be filled at any stream. I told her someone might come looking for me, in which case I would be mightily thankful if she said I’d gone northward. She frowned, not at me, nodded, and said she would indeed. She had done well by me, so as I left I turned and offered to sign the place friendly to the wize-art. I don’t know what made me offer it. When it came from my mouth, I expected her not to understand what I was saying, but instead she came up to me, knelt down, and took my hand, clutching it tightly.

“Art Wize-ard?” she begged me.

“Learning,” I answered her honestly. “I’m learning.”

“Bless this house, then,” she said, and I did, taking the star-eye out of my blouse and turning it so that it saw every part of the house and the land about it. “Under the Eye of the Star,” I cried, “whether forest or meadow, under sunlight or shadow. Woman or man, elder or child. Bless all here.” Then nothing would do but she run back in the house and bring me out a sweet cake to eat on my way.

I did not need to worry about the forest for two days, for that was how long it took to come to the end of Longbow Mountain, through the pass between it and the Tits—two huge, rounded protruberances to the north—and stand at last at the top of that pass looking downward on the endless black fur of the forest. Looking at it, I felt like a tick, like a flea about to burrow onto a very large fustigar. Looking at it, I knew time had come for me and horse to separate. There were no trails. Branches grew low over the ground. I could walk under those trees fairly well. I could not ride.

So I unsaddled the good creature, smacked him upon his rump, and sent him back the way we had come. I hoped he would come to the farmhouse and stay with the farmwife. I hoped Mendost wouldn't find him. I hoped Porvius wouldn't, either, for I could sense that Tragamor's anger still behind me and coming after me. Perhaps only fantasy, but I thought not.

The truth was far worse than I imagined.

6

Even with the food I'd traded for, my pack wasn't heavy. I had no gear at all except a knife and firelighter. Not even extra boots. I don't know how many times Murzy had told me never to go anywhere without extra boots. And underwear. Well, it was her doing. If she'd wanted me to have them, she should have packed them.

So thinking, I strolled down the rock-strewn slope to the trees. The edge of the forest seemed a little misty, but it didn't worry me much. Ponds, I thought, giving off a veil of vapor. Then, as I got closer, I saw it wasn't mist at all but something else. A grayness. A vagueness. The trees looked not quite solid, rather like the reflection you see in a pane of glass looked at sideways. Odd. When I came beneath the nearest tree, I reached out to feel it.

My hand went into it. Not far. Not like into soup or mud, but more like into—oh, really punky wood. The kind you can squash between your fingers. A harder push, and my fingers went in farther. When they came out, a great hunk of the tree came with them. The tree creaked and gulped. Like someone does who's been crying for a long time and tries to catch his breath. Sad. Then I forgot the sorrowful forest, for my hand began to burn like fire, and then my lungs, as though they were full of smoke. I coughed, hacked, turned about, finally ran from the forest to recover myself after some time lying flat on the grassy slope. Not good, Jinian. Not a good place to be. There had to be some other way in, even if one had to go all around the outside of it.

But something was calling, in that sad, sad voice. Wanting. Begging. I could hear it, not with ears, but inside. As a loving mother might hear a child in trouble when it was too far away to really hear. Or so I told myself.

I tried again, and was driven out again. Then I began to think and plan sensibly. The gray area wasn't deep. There was darker, healthy-looking forest beyond it. The burning sensation was strongest beneath the punky trees, so they should be avoided. All up and down the edge I went, hearing that sad pleading, finally finding a place where there were no trees at all, merely a long, flat waste of deadly gray. I rinsed out my kerchief in a nearby stream, tied it around my face, and ran for it.

It seemed endless. For a time I was sure I'd die there, in the middle of the gray, lungs burned out by whatever it was, but in what was actually a very short time, I fell onto the grass at the other side, heaving, eyes flooding, telling myself I would live, looking back the way I had come.

The grass and bushes were slimy gray. Only the rocks were hard, and the soil. Up to the place my toes touched the earth, everything was this pale, soft, almost fungus kind of forest, and then quite suddenly, as though to a line drawn by a great pen, the trees were all right again.

I did not understand it; there was nothing I could do about it. I put it out of my head and started walking east.

I'd been in forests before. For the first half-dozen breaths walking under the healthy trees, I still believed

that. Then it was clear I had never been in a forest before, not until Chimmerdong.

It's not that it was dark. It wasn't as dark, for example, as the woods down the north-south canyon behind Stoneflight where the sun only reaches for an hour a day. It's not that it was silent. It was much quieter on the back side of Longbow Mountain. The thing was that the forest seemed to be aware of itself. That sounds silly. It sounded silly to me, too, when I first thought it, but this is what happened.

There was a bunch of blue flowers, little bells, almost like lady bells with silver centers. They stood in a shaft of sunlight, against a mossy stone. And the tree above them moved a branch, just a little, so that the sun would go on shining on that bunch of flowers. No wind. No. It wasn't wind. And it wasn't a tree rat or some other small dweller pushing or pulling. The tree simply did it. It liked the feel of the flowers in the sun, so it moved.

Well, I had been standing there, watching the flowers, and I noticed all at once that the shadow of the rest of the tree had moved, but that one branch's shadow had stayed quite still. So, being sensible, as Murzy had suggested, I marked that down in my mind and went on my way, being very careful where I stepped.

Then there was the waterfall. I heard it long before I saw it, gurgling to itself in a melody that repeated, over and over, five notes in different order but that five over and over in a melancholy, satisfied little gurgle. As I came to the fall, a cone dropped from a tree right into it, wedging itself tightly on a stone. The music changed, a sixth, gargly note added. And all at once a wave came down the stream—now this is a tiny brooklet I'm talking about, no wider than my arm is long—and this wave came down and dislodged the cone and the little fall went back to singing its tune. One wave. Like a horse, twitching its hide when it has a troublesome fly. Twitch—well, that fixes that—then back to whatever it was doing. That particular brook sang that particular sorrowful song, and it didn't wish to be interrupted.

Things went on in this way generally, as I walked deeper and deeper in, the sun gradually moving up overhead and then falling behind me. There was no attempt whatsoever to interfere with me. I munched some roadbread as I went, sharing the crumbs with a tree rat and a bunwit that came begging, then went on walking, talking to the animals in a soft voice, amazed that they came along even after the food was gone. There were ups and downs, none of them very steep or long. There were streamlets and small clearings. There were leaping bunches of small horned animals with bright golden behinds, perhaps a kind of forest zeller, and flocks of mournful birds which followed me for half the afternoon. Nothing threatening at all. Except that the forest was quite aware I was in it and would decide what to do about me.

Well, think about it. Trees that can move their branches, and streams that can make waves. If such things decided they didn't want me where I was, there were twenty ways they could get rid of me quickly and quietly without so much as a bloody splash. I should have been frightened to death but wasn't. The star-eye was hanging on its thong, visibly bobbing against my chest. That, I was sure, was what Murzy had meant.

Eventually, it began to get dark. There was a mossy stretch of ground surrounded by small trees, edged by bunches of the blue, silver-centered bells and with a tiny clear pool in a rock basin. No point looking further. The place might have been made for me.

There was dried fruit and bread to eat, water to drink. There was the rain cape to lie down and roll up in. Sleep came at once, as though someone had given me shivery-green, then there was a complicated dream about the old gods and I wakened up to find that my bed was taking me somewhere.

The small trees around the moss bed had raised up the mosses, stepped out on their roots, and were going somewhere. In the starlight, the little pool tilted silver into my eyes. The flower bells swung. We moved along under branches, among big trees, the moss bed rocking gently as we went. Wize-ard, I cautioned myself. Either the thing knew I was there or it didn't. If it did, my making a fuss would not improve matters. If it didn't, remaining quiet might keep it in ignorance of my presence. As Murzy and Tinder-my-hand had so often counseled, I remained invisible. We rolled on through the forest, a curiously hypnotic movement, not at all threatening. I may have fallen asleep for a while. When I noticed the motion next we were climbing down into a deep round hollow. The trees around us were larger than any I have ever seen, like huge castle towers. Down we went, and down again, and at last came to rest in the very bottom of the hollow, the little pool quivering then becoming still to reflect one star at me as in a mirror. I stayed right where I was without moving. It was warm, dry, and still dark. No sense roaming around in the night.

"Person," said a voice, whispering. "Person?"

"Child?" asked the—another?—voice, also whispering.

"Child person?" said the first. "Star-eye?"

It would have been impolite not to answer. "I am here," I said, leaving it at that. Least said, Murzy often told me. Least said, least promised.

All this time, I was looking about for the source of the voice or voices, up and down, peering into the shadows. The starlight was very bright, the shadows very dark. When I saw the face at last, I didn't believe I was seeing it. Then the lips moved, and I heard the whisper.

"Are you there?"

"Yes," I breathed, open-mouthed, staring at the face. It was made up of leafy branches against the sky. Each eye had a star reflecting in it. The lips were two twisty branches. It was all there, even a cascade of leafy hair above and to the sides. Each time it spoke, the mouth moved, the eyes blinked. "Can you tell me what you are? If it's not impolite to ask?" I whispered.

"I ..." whispered the voice.

"We ..." whispered another one. I looked over my shoulder to confront another face, then saw that I was surrounded by them. There were at least a dozen. "It!" asserted a third. "All," said a fourth. "Forest."

"This forest?" I asked. "I ..."

"We ..."

"Every ..."

"All forest," the first repeated. "Broken. All, all forest." The stars that reflected its eyes glittered in dark, leafy hollows. It was through these eye hollows I saw the shadow come like some great sea creature, all tentacles and flow, reaching out of the dark, covering the stars, covering the light. Suddenly the face was obscured, the stars of its eyes put out. The face vanished. Its component parts were still there, but it was like a cloud face which vanishes when you look away, all the subtle modelings changed, deranged, lost.

“Help ...” I heard a whisper, so softly I could hardly hear it, the forest vanishing in shadow.

“Hellllp ...” A last, faint hiss of the leaves, crying such sorrow that I wanted to weep.

The shadow flowed, coiled, sent its tentacles down searching for something. At which point I lay down, rolled up in my rain cape once more, and pretended to be any tiny, furry thing that came to mind. The small trees picked up my moss bed and slithered it between the giant trunks, up the slope, and into the more ordinary forest. Behind us in the hollow, I could feel the shadow gathering, darker than dark, filling the hollow, looking for something. For me? For whatever had spoken from the forest?

The forest had wanted to talk to me. Something else had prevented it.

Now what would a Wize-ard do about that? The very young Wize-ard, me, did nothing at all until morning. I fretted a bit, but only a bit, because the shadow kept lurking about and it seemed safer not to think at all. Considering water instead of thinking put me to sleep. When morning came, the shadow was gone, but so was any sense of the forest presence that had been there the night before. I ate my boring breakfast and thought very hard.

Something here. Something I’d never heard of. Something vast and ... well, helpless. Helpless. Unable to help itself. Well now.

If I were unable to help myself, needing someone else to do something for me, it would be to do something I could not do myself. Self-evident. Right? Right, I assured myself. Now, what could one young person—child person—do that a forest could not? A forest that could move its own branches and make waves in its own streams. I thought about that, lying there on my back, staring up at the sun dapple. All around me was growth and green. All around me was birdsong and rustle as little things moved here and there. The tree rat sat on my foot to beg crumbs. Seeing this, a gray bird wafted over on silent wings and demanded a share, which the bunwit disputed. He and tree rat owned me. No mistake about that. Crumb sources were not that easy to come by. All about me was bright, growing, green—and sad. Overlaid with a terrible melancholy that was almost more than one could bear.

What could I do?

I could leave. I could move out of the forest and go elsewhere. I could go away, taking the knowledge with me that something here needed help. After lengthy consideration, that was all I could come up with.

I said, moderately loudly, “I’ll do what I can to help, but you have to realize, I’m not sure what’s needed, and it may take a long time.” I waited.

The hush was unbroken. Sighing, I got up, put on my pack, and turned eastward once more.

7

A brown bird gave the warning, erupting from their path before I heard them myself. First a bird scream, then feathers diving past me to make me stop right where I was, hardly breathing, then the sound of voices and something large blundering about in the woods.

“Fine tracker you are,” growled a voice. Porvius Bloster.

“I am not a tracker,” hissed the other. Oh, what a cold hiss. “As you know. No Pursuivant was available.”

“Basilisk, then,” Porvius said unwillingly. “Fine Basilisk you are. Here we are, lost in this wilderness, and you keep saying the girl is here. Where? We’ve been wandering for a day!”

Another voice, this one recognizable. One of the three men who had been with Porvius when he’d captured me. “No trail down that way, Bloster. Want me to try up the stream?”

“Well, Basilisk?” Porvius sneered. “Shall he try up the stream?”

They were separated from me by a screen of trees, close set, their branches tangled together with briar. I stayed frozen in place, not thinking, only listening, letting myself be as silent and invisible as possible. Basilisks have the Talents of Reading, Beguilement, and Shifting. I have heard the Reading and Beguilement are strongest when the creature is in its lizard shape, and strongest of all if it can fix you with its eyes, but that did not mean it could not Read me now if it stopped arguing with Porvius and scanned the area around. Away past the men several tree rats started a violent quarrel, throwing nuts and chittering at each other. Under cover of that noise, I slipped to the ground and lay there imagining I was vegetation. “Yes, try up the stream,” the Basilisk hissed. “And you, Kinsman Porvius, put sweeter words in your mouth or I’m back to the Demesne to have a few words with your sister while letting you hunt your quarry on your own.”

“So far I might have done as well,” said Bloster. “‘Twas you said the girl was not with her brother Mendost. I still think we’ll find her there.”

“The farmwife had seen someone like her,” the Basilisk hissed. “Seen her not long before. And in the child’s mind the picture was clear of the girl riding east toward this forest. And in the woodman’s mind the memory of a loose horse, coming from this direction. What more would you, Porvius Bloster? A map? A chart? The creature is here.”

“Then why haven’t we found her?”

“Because all around is a confusion of thought, small things, animals, birds, a constant commotion. Once we find a quiet glade, once night comes and the small creatures sleep—why, then we will find her. Then I will enjoy the hunt.” I could imagine the thing licking its lips.

By Towering Tamor, I could not help thinking, but they must have been on my trail only hours after I had gone if Bloster had had to get himself to some Demesne to find this Basilisk, then backtrack the way I had come. They had not dallied! He must want me very badly to have ridden so hard, I thought. While I was ambling along the side of Longbow Mountain, he must have been lathering his horses to get somewhere. “Why bother with her?” one of the men asked, echoing my thought. “It’s Mendost you’re after.”

“Mendost was my Game,” he growled. “Mine and no others. But when I returned to the Demesne, I found a message awaiting me there concerning this Jinian. It seems she has become larger Game than I knew. There are those—we will not mention names—who want her dead. They want her gone. They want her head sent up to them to verify I tell them no tales. There are those—still nameless—to whom I have sworn certain allegiances, let us say.

“Even if this were not so, I would have sufficient cause for personal enmity. If you are asked why, say because she poisoned me!”

He lied. I had done no such thing, though I could have killed him while he lay there. Had he thought of

that? Certainly not! I heard the Basilisk draw a hissing breath and realized I had been thinking—clearly, angrily.

Consider water, I told myself desperately. Limpid, cool, gently sloshing to and fro in a pool, slosh, ripple, slosh, cool, sliding, slosh.

“I thought for a moment I sensed her,” the creature said, “but it was only some fish ...” And then they moved away, up the stream, where I knew the forest had opened a path for them. Lovely forest, trying to protect me. How far could it go in doing things without drawing the shadow to investigate? Little as I wanted to fall to that Basilisk, still less did I like the idea of that shadow.

I learned how far the forest would go when the voices retreated past hearing. There was suddenly a daft bunwit at my side tugging at me, whumping off a few paces, then turning to tug at me again. As clear a game of follow-me as had ever been played. This was my own, crumb-fed bunwit; I had no fear of him nor any now of the forest, but much fear of that creature which had gone hissing off up the rivulet, so I followed. We went back toward that same deep, hidden hollow of huge trees, this time me on my own two feet struggling down the slope. “Murzy,” I mumbled, “I wish you were here.” She would have some commonsensical thing to tell me that would make things go more smoothly. Tess Tinder-my-hand would give me a little lecture, possibly irrelevant. Cat would be silent and urge me to be the same. Bets and Sarah would argue about what to do next. And Margaret Foxmitten would smile a secret smile. It was my own style to grumble, so I grumbled. I can admit it now. The grumbling covered fear. Even when Mendost used to threaten to drop me from great heights, I had been no more afraid than of that Basilisk.

The hollow bottom was no less mysterious by day. The trees were great towers, lunging upward until all their tops drew to one point, a tiny circle of distant sky. Giant rocks stood among them, tilted centerward like heads of listeners, and dark lay deep and gentle among them all.

Tug, went bunwit. Tug, tug, hop. We went between two of the large rocks, turned left, and found ourselves confronted with a ladder. Very neat it was, sides straight as string, little steps all in a row, fading upward into invisibility, becoming no more than a spider’s web against the great trunk far above. Bump, went bunwit against my bottom. Up, it was saying. I couldn’t believe it.

Resolving to be unafraid when hauled aloft by Mendost and one can do nothing about it is one thing. Resolving to climb a ladder that looks like spidersilk into a height so monstrous even an Armiger might take fright is something else again. I stood where I was, unmoving. Bump, went the bunwit again, impatiently. I stood, mouth open.

Far back in the forest a noise was building, loud shouts and calls, rather the sound of men on a hunt. I knew the Basilisk had caught scent of me somehow. Perhaps some mental trace I’d been unable to cover. Perhaps they had blundered across a place I had actually been, and from there it would be like a fustigar trailing prey. Part of me knew this. The other part stood at the foot of the ladder, paralyzed. Bump, went bunwit yet again, frantic.

Far up the trunk a speck emerged from the foliage and began to run down the trunk toward me. When it came very close, I saw it was a tree rat, running head downward as they do, all its teeth exposed as it chattered at me. It bit at my hair, tugged upward, growling angrily between its teeth. The bunwit pushed once more from below, desperately, and near in the forest came the sound of a horn.

The paralysis broke. I scrambled for the ladder, realizing it would be far better to fall to a splattery death than into the hands of the Basilisk—or of Porvius Bloster. Below me the bunwit leapt into the circling trees, and I heard him blundering away, thrashing about, making a great deal of noise. Above me the tree

rat chittered and growled, tugging from time to time, moving below me to nip my behind when I seemed to lag. We approached the first limb, and I foolishly looked down, only to lean into the ladder, clasping it like a lover, mouth open and dry. The tree rat would have none of this. It bit me, quite hard, and cursed at me in an almost recognizable language. In another moment we came to a hollow in the trunk, and I was urged within. There was a slithery, scraping noise, and the ladder moved in front of the hollow, going up. When the bottom of it reached the level of my feet, it stopped.

It was no mechanical thing, that ladder, but something grown by the forest itself. Even while I lay in the tree hollow, panting, heart thubbing away like a drum, I knew the forest had grown the ladder for some purpose of its own. Then the sound of shouts came up from below, and I risked a peek over the edge, half-masked by a leafy spray. Setting his mighty claws into the bark of the tree was the Basilisk. Even from this distance I could see his long tongue dart out to taste the air. He tasted me. Those red, burning eyes were looking up, here, there, wanting me to look into them so he could Read me, Beguile me, bring me into his jaws ... I started to go out and climb down.

The tree rat bit me again. It was getting to be a game with him, or he had acquired a taste for me. Chittering, he threatened me onto the ladder and we climbed once more, this time the ladder moving up with us on it, a slow, easy glide into the heights. After a time I merely clung, too tired to climb, the tree rat deciding it, too, preferred to ride. We ascended together, branches and leaf clusters passing us by: great, pale bunches of flowers circled by flimsy green-winged flying things, rising into view and then dropping below. From far, far down the trunk shouts rose up, then a great howling hiss. "Zzzt," said the tree rat, beginning to climb again. Evidently the Basilisk had gained the bottom branches.

At last we came to the end, a place where the ladder curved over and disappeared into a hollow in the tree, presumably dropping its incredible length down inside. We moved onto a branch that zigged, and another that zagged, climbing upward always, toward the sun. The wind was making gusty noises. I realized this for some time before noticing that the gusts did not move the leaves. The tree rat prudently fell behind, nipping at me to show I was to go on. There was no earth any longer, only this cloud of leaves with the sky above. A gust came again, loudly, and I thrust my head above the leaves to be buffeted over the head by a feather.

It knocked me down. There was a great "Keeraw!" and the wing the feather belonged to moved aside. Golden eyes the size of washtubs looked down at me, and one great talon moved to hold me tightly to the branch. It was not necessary. I was holding quite tightly on my own.

The thing—the thing was a flitchhawk, really. One the size of a small keep or a large barn, with wings like roofs flapping. The thing reached out with its left foot and grabbed at a passing cloud, then the same with its right foot. Then again. Remember the old story I told you of, the one Tinder-my-hand had learned from a woman in Betand, many years ago, and told to me? The one about Little Star and the flitchhawk? I couldn't help it. I had to say, "What are you doing, flitchhawk, grimbling and grambling that way?"

And the flitchhawk said, "Grimbling and grambling to find the Daylight Bell, Little Star."

Well, what could I do? I mean, the story was what the story was. The next line was what it was, and so I said it. "Well then, let me help you, flitchhawk, and I'll grumble and gramble, too." So I stood up on that branch and grabbed for the clouds that went by, left hand, right hand, and as soon as I was standing up, the flitchhawk grabbed me.

"Now I've got you, Little Star!" it screamed. Well, it certainly did. Of course, he'd had me the whole time, so to speak, so I went on with the story as though it had been a nursery play, trying not to

remember how far down was.

“Now why did you do that, old fritchhawk?” I cried, giving it the next line. “Just when you grabbed me, I caught sight of the Daylight Bell right there, behind that cloud.” My voice trembled terribly, but the fritchhawk didn’t seem to notice.

“Where? Where?” he cried, just as though it wasn’t exactly what he was supposed to say. “Let me see,” as he sat me down on the branch. Well, I had no rope, no nothing to tangle him in, and he was too big for that anyhow, so I took the star from my neck and wrapped the thong around one talon, shouting at the top of my lungs, “Now I’ve got you, fritchhawk. Daylight Bell in treetop can’t be. Tricky lie brings tricky tie, now give me boon or else you die!” Which was about as silly a thing as I have ever said under any circumstance. This whole thing was not sensible. I was quite aware of that, even at the time. One might have thought it was a kind of magic, perhaps, with the exact words having some esoteric meaning, but that was not the sense of it. It was rather more like a play in which the players are required to know the cues and give the correct responses before they can move on to the next act. So, I merely went on with it in a kind of delirium, not learning until a long time later that it made a terrible kind of sense if one only knew what was really going on.

“What boon will you have, child?” asked the fritchhawk, and it sounded to me similar to the voice of the forest, rather sorrowful and very quiet. It had quit grimbling and grambling and was standing very still, great wings outstretched, the sun coming down through them. He didn’t need to ask me twice.

“Please, sir or ma’am,” I begged, “will you take me out of here and save me from Porvius Bloster and the Basilisk?”

Which explains how I came to be delivered to Vorbold’s House in Xammer in a manner that made my life there somewhat a problem for the next several years.

8

As Murzy said to me from time to time, “A little pomp is no great matter, but ostentation should be avoided.” And then you will recall her counsel on the matter of invisibility. And finally, you may know something I did not of the nature of girls. I met girls for the first time at Xammer.

I was delivered at dusk on the roof of Vorbold’s place by the giant fritchhawk. Because it was dusk and because it was the roof, only a few people saw it. One was the gatekeeper, who came lurching up the stairs, out of breath and furious, to berate the person responsible for such an outrage. Such deliveries were improper. During her attempt to say so, she was knocked down by a departing stroke of the fritchhawk’s wing. She then dragged me before Queen Vorbold herself, who demanded to know the name of the Gamesman—Dragon or Colddrake, she presumed—who had broken custom by Gaming, that is, Shapeshifting, in the town of Xammer.

I told her honestly that so far as I knew, the creature that had brought me to Xammer was only itself, a pure fritchhawk of giant kind, no Gamesman in Shifted shape. When she pursued the question, I told her something of my adventures—leaving out quite a lot, including anything about the forest asking for my help, as I realized even then she would not understand it and would much resent that fact. I did leave in some parts about Porvius Bloster. That could be checked. The College of Heraldry keeps a record of every official challenge, and the business between and among Porvius, Mendost, and Dorto of Pouws should have been open, public, and official enough for anyone’s notice.

Seeing no diminution of the disbelief in her face, I thought to give her a convenient way out. “Of course,

Gameswoman,” I said, “someone may have taken that shape without my knowledge. I am only an ignorant girl. That could have been possible, but if so, it was without my knowledge.”

Since she could think of no other questions to ask, she drew herself up and demanded, “Where is your baggage?”

I’m afraid that made me disgrace myself by crying. It was precisely the right thing to have done, for unlike girls who arrived in flichhawk talons at the supper hour, girls who arrived in tears without baggage were familiar ground to Queen Vorbold. She arranged for me to have clothing and a room at once, and for a message to be sent to King Kolver and another to Joramal Trandle.

So far, no occasion for dismay. However, my arrival had been seen by one or two others, and from them rumor spread throughout the School. Jinian had been delivered by Dragon from Dragon’s Fire Demesne, King Kolver disdaining the customs of Xammer. Jinian had been delivered by a tame beast from a circus, since she was actually the daughter of a pawnish acrobat by some Gamesman of note. She had been dropped out of a cloud by a Wizard, reason unspecified. It didn’t matter what the story was. Whatever story was told made me an object of speculation, something bizarre and questionable. Any such thing could be either interesting or suspect.

They would have been even more interested had they been present to hear the words of the flichhawk as it set me down. “This has been a small boon, child,” it said. “I will owe you another. The ways of the sky are mine, treetop and cloud, sunlight and starlight, wind and rain. If you have need there, call on me.” Whatever the girls of Vorbold’s House might have said of my arrival, they had not heard that. I was not sure I believed it myself.

At any rate, that was the way in which I entered Vorbold’s House.

What can I tell you about the place? It was quite luxurious. We were pampered with good food and clean laundry, excellent wines and occasional entertainment. The classes—well, compared to what the dams had been teaching me, the classes were not much. After only a few days, I realized they were not supposed to fit us to take any major part in Game.

We were taught crafty things, calligraphy and flower arranging; costume design and stitchery—we needed to be able to supervise the making of all the clothes needed in a Demesne, including all the Game costumes involved—and then how to walk and sit in the costumes we had designed. And conversation. Hours and hours of conversation. We spent ages learning to make graceful compliments, and I was reminded of Cat Candleshy drilling me before my talk with Joramal.

We learned precedence and protocol, who would walk first in procession, who would sit by whom at dinner. We learned the Index. We learned a lot of cartography, the names and locations of Demesnes, which ones were allied with which and which should be avoided. (At all costs stay away from the Dukedom of Betand, the High Demesne, and a new Demesne northeast of Betand ruled by the Witch Huldra.) We learned a good bit about contracts, since most of us would be contracted for in one way or another.

There was a class called The Way of Prudence, which I assumed to be something literary (we were encouraged to read books, since it kept us out of trouble) but found to be the study of all the various ways one might duck for cover. Things like determining whether a dangerous level of tension existed and getting oneself out of it—excusing oneself to go to the privy, for example. And how to appear so stupid and generally inadequate that enemies would pay no attention to one. And how to set up a ransom fund for oneself as part of a contract, just in case prudence didn’t work. Part of this class was dedicated to

things like stopping bleeding or fixing broken bones temporarily until a Healer could be found.

And, surprisingly, we had a class in babies. I hadn't thought of such a thing at all until I came to Vorbold's House, but it made as much sense as many of the other things we learned. Queen Vorbold got the babies from the town around. I very quickly adopted one for myself whom no one else wanted. He reminded me of Grompuzzle in a way—that same sad-animal look to his eyes. I think his own mama whapped him entirely too much for his good, but we got along quite well. It was expected we would all have babies as part of whatever alliance we had, so we were taught some few useful things about that—including an absolute prohibition against using midwives. Midwives can see into the future of the babies they deliver, and those who will not get a soul, they do not allow to live. The great Demesnes do not care much for souls; they care more for power. I marked that down to ask Murzy about. If I had a child who would never have a soul, I think I'd not want it to go on living, contract or no contract. I determined to use a midwife if the need arose, prohibition or not.

None of it was very ... well, intellectually challenging. I wanted to know about the dangerous new alliances, and who Huldra was, and what we might choose to do if we didn't make an alliance for ourselves. I was politely hushed and told none of that was relevant to my future. It was no wonder the girls occupied themselves with silliness. There was certainly nothing very serious for them to talk about. None of it was the kind of thing the dams were teaching me. That had reach to it. Even the easiest kinds of magic have oddly curled edges to them, places where the understanding goes away into some other dimension and one has to intuit meaning and draw similarities from complexity. This is called simply "connecting", and it is anything but simple.

Some of the girls, whatever they may have heard about my arrival, offered me politeness, which I respected. None offered friendship, which I understood. Most of these girls had been in school since they were four or five. They had no experience of the world at all. Their ideas of reality were oddly at variance with the world I knew, sometimes more romantic and notional, other times more brutal. All their opinions were formed by others, not by themselves, and so they suspended their attitudes toward me, waiting for someone to tell them whether I should be accepted or not. None of them decided for themselves. They were in Xammer to remove them from the Game until some good alliance could be made, and each of them would take her own positions eventually through some Gamesman or other. So, all their intelligence was bent on capturing or holding the interest of a major Gamesman, and the talk of the powers of this one or the Talents of that one and the wealth of some other one occupied all their time and attention. Some of them had Talents of their own, which they were forbidden to use in Xammer and discouraged from making much of wherever they might be, for most Gamesmen would value them as subject allies or breeders but would reject them as Gameswomen. Still, many of them had Talents. I had none. It did not make me feel any more secure.

I didn't realize all this at once or even very soon after arriving. Much of it I did not put together until much later when I was older. It was all strange, this place, and I knew nothing at all. I was gauche. I broke the custom every time I opened my mouth or took a step. I asked "why" in class instead of "who". I said things were "interesting" rather than "potent". (That was a favorite word at Vorbold's House that year, "potent".) I ate because I was hungry, whether or not the foods being served were in fashion. I refused a taste of a dream crystal that Banila of Clourne offered me—she had a case of them, all colors, which had been given her by a kinswoman. It seemed to me then, and now, a dangerously stupid gift for a girl, but then, Banila was a dangerously stupid girl. And once the novelty of having clothes of my own wore off, I couldn't maintain much interest in the narrow distinctions of dress that the girls occupied themselves with. I couldn't make myself believe it was important to wear stockings that were embroidered with names of prominent Gamesmen! Or draggle my hair over my ears in rattails. I thought it made them look like fools, but they all did it.

I might have been considered merely an oddity who was not worth cultivating. However, my gauchery was not the reason—or not the whole reason—the first half year in Vorbold's House was very lonely.

That was occasioned by the arrival, soon after my own, of Dadrina-Lucir, daughter of a Demesne I must have passed closely in approaching Chimmerdong Forest. It lay just east of the Tits (which were called, according to Dadrina-Lucir, Mother Massif) and a little north of the route I had taken. I had never heard of it before. Daggerhawk Demesne, it was called. Its device was a fitchhawk impaled by a blade. The manner of my arrival came to Dadrina-Lucir's attention early—I had some reason to suppose that she had arrived already aware of it—and she remarked that in Daggerhawk they saw fit to make fitchhawks the prey rather than the other way 'round. "Rather than be dangled like a dead bunwit," were her exact words. This led to some interesting nicknames for me, ending at last in the one everyone adopted, "Dangle-wit". My place of origin was called "Dangle-wit Demesne", and my betrothed's place was known as "Dangle-fire Demesne".

Needless to say, Dadrina-Lucir never put a foot wrong. She knew instinctively what utensil to use at table, which wine to praise and which to deprecate—or, if she did not, everyone preferred what Dadrina preferred, so it made no difference. What Dadrina wore became the fashion, and what Dadrina said became the rule. Dadrina, I soon learned to my anger and confusion, had ruled that Jinian was to be the butt of all their little jokes and pranks. Jinian was the enemy. They were "us", and Jinian was "her".

It was more or less the same kind of treatment I'd had at home, but that didn't stop my crying into my pillow. Thank all the gods old and new that Vorbold's House set a premium on privacy and we all had rooms of our own. My room had no visitors; it was mine alone. I preferred it that way, and as I settled into it and became quieter in my mind, I realized Dadrina was making it necessary for me to do what I should have done anyhow: follow Murzy's advice and become truly invisible.

To go about one's business, Murzy had said, in such a manner that no one notices.

Simply not to hear the nicknames and hawk calls. Simply not to notice the mimicking behind the back, the faces and sneers. Simply not to react . . .

To dress so that no one notices. To arrange one's hair so that no one notices. To study the classroom matter so that every answer could be calm, correct, and without any excitement whatsoever. To show the Gamesmistresses precisely the right shade of deference to prevent resentment without one jot more to provoke fondness. To eat whatever was offered, without comment. I could hear Cat Candleshy reading off the recipe for invisibility, her low, calm voice going on and on, repeating; never tiring, never moving as she spoke. I could see Bets Battereye's hands gesticulating, her rubbery face showing me proper facial expressions as she told me how, when, under what conditions to wear each one. I could hear Murzy saying, "There, there, chile. 'Tis only a time, and a time. Nothing permanent."

And I worked at it. The first month or two were very hard, for there were falsities presented as truths and idiocies got up in the guise of facts, both by the girls and by the Gamesmistresses. I kept wanting to shout or argue or bite someone, but as I worked at it more and more intensely, it became easier. Not only easier, but fascinating. There were shades to it, like shades of green and blue and gray in water, shifting, none one could put name to. So there were shades to my invisibility, nameless shades, varying states of unnoticeability. And success, as well.

I knew the first success one day at midday meal. We were always seated with some ceremony at the daised tables in the great hall in order to learn to eat gracefully in public, since most of us would have to do that in our future lives as hostesses to some Demesne or other. I was looking across the room with a pleasant, meaningless expression on my face, one that would attract no eye, evoke no response from

anyone. There was a tight feeling at the back of my neck, and I looked up to catch Dadrina-Lucir's eyes fixed on me, her face blind with fury. Not merely ill-temper or the spitefulness I had noticed among many of the girls. No. Fury. Rage.

I had done nothing to her to occasion such anger; therefore she had brought it with her when she came. Later that evening, I asked one of the Gamesmistresses, casually, as though it didn't matter, if Dadrina-Lucir were not related to Porvius Bloster. Oh yes, I was told. Dadrina was his sister's daughter. His thalan.

"Daggerhawk Demesne, then," I said, "is Bloster's place?"

Oh, yes, yes, indeed it was.

So. Mendost had slipped the Game of Dadrina's thalan, Bloster. Then the girl had come prepared to fight me, but through acting invisible, I was slipping her Game. Or more accurately, I had slipped her Game thus far. I wondered how far this magic of invisibility would take me and was not such a fool as to imagine there would be no further challenge. There was no mistaking the intent on her face. Though Gaming was forbidden in Xammer, Dadrina-Lucir would Game when it suited her. Loneliness, I thought, had been spiced with danger.

However long the danger might go on, my time of loneliness was at an end. At the supper hour shortly thereafter, I was given a visitors chit. The visitors rooms were off the courtyard, and we might meet there with women relatives or friends. You can imagine my feelings when I found the room occupied by Margaret Foxmitten, her beautiful face glowing in the lamplight, and Sarah Shadowsox, looking up when I entered with her alert, startled expression which always reminded me of some small forest creature. They were there! They had arrived! Little got said and less decided. All they did was hold me, pat my shoulders, and say "There, there." All the tears I had bottled in half a year came out.

Thereafter we managed much talk. Cat and Tess Tinder-my-hand were on their way to Xammer. It was expected that Murzy and Bets Battereye would manage to get there before the Season of Storms. Margaret and Sarah had already found a house in the town; both had informed Vorbold's House that they were the servants of Jinian. As such, they could come to me—or I to them under certain circumstances—privately and without trouble. Some such fiction was necessary. Best of all, I was no longer alone.

"Joramal Trandle was furious that Mendost left you to Bloster that way," said Margaret, her eyes sparkling at the memory. "He said things to Mendost which would have burned your ears to hear. Mendost, of course, was scarcely troubled by it, but it did many of the rest of us good. Joramal has offered us a stipend to stay in Xammer to serve you, and he will visit you in due course to see that all is well with you. And now, you must tell us the truth of how you came to Xammer!"

Which I did. Which they disbelieved.

So I told it again, in exhaustive detail. I don't think they really believed it then, either, though there was something about the tale that implied something to them it didn't mean to me. They asked over and over about the giant flichhawk, and I told them.

"Why?" I said at last. "What do you think it means?"

Margaret shook her head. "Too soon to say, Jinian Footseer. The story of Little Star and the Daylight Bell is a wize-art story, a seven-dam story, passed down and passed down, and to have it come true in

that way, well ... Murzy may have some idea about it. If not, we may be told.” But they would not say when, or by whom.

Margaret and Sarah had brought a horse with them, a horse for me. A real horse. A better horse than the one I had borrowed from Porvius Bloster. Joramal Trandle had sent it. It did not trip or stumble, and I immediately named it Surefoot. Having the animal meant I could ride out through the town of Xammer, even into the surrounding area, which was beneath the Game ban. School servants were always within sight whenever the students rode, but they were there for our protection. Dedrina, seeing me enjoying myself, sneered that I must take care: Basilisks were said to frequent the fields where I had been riding. I smiled and thanked her, promptly reporting her remark to Queen Vorbold, together with a quiet comment concerning the School’s negligence in tolerating vermin in the area. She took me to mean Basilisks, which in one sense I did. I had been careful to attribute the rumor to its originator, so for a time after that, Dedrina was quieter, and angrier.

At last, coincident with the first storms of the season, Murzy and Bets arrived, Murzy with her gray hair in tangles and her shawl every which a way, Bets as busy and bustling as ever, and we were seven once more. We celebrated my fifteenth year with a cakes-and-wine party, and Murzy demanded a strict accounting of the year I had been without her. She did not seem displeased when she had heard it.

“Well, chile, we will believe that bit about the flitchhawk until someone proves it not so. I feel it was not a Gamesman in Shifted shape, though we may not discount that idea entirely. Some great Shifter could have done it. I’ve heard of those that could.”

“What about the Schooling?” said Bets. “How does it go?”

So I told her what I had learned, and they made faces at most of it. I told them about Banila’s dream crystals, and they were horrified, so I talked about classes. We did have a good Gamesmistress to teach cartography, mannish and gruff though she was, and I had learned much about the world of the True Game, and even some things—though no one would vouch for their accuracy—of the world beyond. When I spoke of Dedrina, however, Murzy gave the others a cross look and said, “This isn’t necessary, now is it, dams?”

“It’s all right, Murz,” I said. “I can handle her. Truly. I just get quieter and quieter, and she gets madder and madder.”

“I know,” said Murzy, frowning.

“Such increasing anger is dangerous, Jinian,” said Cat. “Dedrina-Lucir comes from a line of Basilisks. The one you saw in the forest was probably near kin. All the females of that line have been Basilisks of great power for seven generations. We have reason to think she has come into her Talent long since.”

I thought it over. She had certainly Beguiled the girls and mistresses in the School. She had not done any Reading of others’ minds that I knew of, but Reading was both forbidden in Xammer and easy to detect, whereas simple Beguilement was often impossible to tell from natural attractiveness. “She warned me to be careful where I ride, for Basilisks roam the fields outside the town.”

“Ah,” said Murzy thoughtfully. “So she warned you, did she? And I suppose some at the School have heard of this warning.”

“The girls before whom it was said, and Queen Vorbold,” I said, wondering now whether I should have told the Housemistress.

Murzy merely nodded. "The fields outside the town, but still inside the ban?"

"Oh, yes," I replied. "Still inside the ban."

"Then I think we may expect an attack," said Murzy, not seeming greatly troubled. "Dedrina-Lucir was announcing covert Game against you, Jinian Footseer."

"She's been Gaming against me ever since she arrived," I complained. "Without announcement."

"Well, perhaps. And perhaps what she has done up till now could be considered only girlish temper? Ah? Or mere human nature? But if she does as I expect she will, then it is truly Game, and knowing her people, I doubt it will be done in accordance with honor. She will Game you to death, but she will not tell you why, and I think Bloster's quarrel with Mendost is not sufficient reason. Well and well, Jinian Footseer. Let me think on it a bit more."

Then is when I should have told her of Bloster's words in Chimmerdong, but to tell the truth they had slipped my mind. What had come immediately after had been so wildly strange as to drive other thoughts away, so I did not remember. Instead, I left her to her cogitations, and went back to my classes, a good bit more secure and happy than I had been in some time, though somewhat troubled, too, remembering that look in Dedrina's eyes.

9

When next I met with the six dams, they told me their considered opinion: Cat, laconically; Margaret, calmly; Sarah, shyly; Bets, at some length and in great detail; Tess Tinder-my-hand, with homely examples and memories of ancient times—well, older times, to be sure—nodding her white head and losing track of what she was saying; and Murzy, firmly, expecting no nonsense. The sense of all their talk was that I must bring matters to the boil. Nothing would be served by delaying tactics. We needed to find out why Dedrina-Lucir and the whole of Daggerhawk Demesne seemed intent upon the demise of one insignificant girl.

So, we plotted a bit, and I went back to the School, riding my gift horse and feeling kindly about King Kelper for sending him, though I knew it was probably Joramal's idea. When I arrived, I went straight to my own Gamesmistress—each of us had one assigned to assist us with personal matters; mine was Gamesmistress Armiger Joumerie, the geographer—and told her I would like to be reassigned at table.

"And why is that, Gameswoman?" she demanded. "Have you suffered some fancied slight at the mouths of your table mates? It so, we can resolve the matter."

"Not at all, Gamesmistress," I said, staying as cool and unemotional as possible. "I have become aware of an unGamesmanlike tension between Dedrina-Lucir and me. As is natural, the students are taking sides. This distracts them from their studies, and needless to say, it distracts me from mine. During the day, we have no reason to meet. It is, rather, avoided between us. Thus we have little chance to work out whatever the difficulty may be. I thought if we were forced into close proximity at a time when honorable and merely social discourse is—"

"Stop, stop," she shushed me, waving her hands. Gamesmistress Joumerie was a very large woman, with great shoulders and breasts. I have never been able to imagine her as an Armiger, Flying, and perhaps she had grown too heavy for it. She was very formidable, however. "Stop. You go on and on with this eloquence, which all boils down to what?"

“If we’re forced to sit at table together, maybe I can find out what the problem is.”

“Well, why in the name of the Hundred Devils didn’t you say so? I’ll speak to her table mistress.”

So, in a day or two, there was a general reassignment of tables, and I found myself at the same one as Dadrina-Lucir. She had been stripped of some of her closest followers in the reassignment and some new students had been included, so we started on more or less equal footing.

I had thought she might wait a day or two before attacking, but evidently her anger would not let her. At the end of the first meal, she slitted her eyes at me over the fruit and said, “You’re the girl they call Dangle-wit, aren’t you?”

“I am the Gameswoman you call Dangle-wit,” I replied quietly, smiling at the pawn who was serving the soup. “Though it is a discourteous thing to call any fellow student by other than her correct name. I am sure you will learn that, however, if you stay here at Vorbold’s House long enough. They are excellent teachers of courtesy and Gamesmanlike behavior.” I then smiled at her, a very open, friendly smile, one I had practiced with Bets for at least an hour. That smile was faultless, and I made sure the table mistress saw it.

Dadrina’s eyes narrowed. I saw the lizard for a moment. Almost I heard the hiss. “I thought it was your name,” she said. “Everyone uses it.”

“Everyone you have Beguiled to do so uses it,” I said. “Though I’m sure you have not intended to influence them in this way. I understand it is terribly difficult not to use one’s Talent when one is accustomed to it. Being a Basilisk must be very difficult for you. Not having any Talent myself, I can only accept what I am told by others.”

These well-rehearsed words were triple-edged. It told those at table she was Basilisk, though she had chosen to wear no device. It reminded them not only that using Talent in Xammer was forbidden, but that using it against a student who had not yet showed Talent was considered plain un-Gamely. She flushed. I saw it and so did two of her hangers-on, who looked puzzled and somewhat ashamed at her discomfiture. I, however, merely smiled again and got into conversation with the newly arrived student across from me. I had been astonished to find I knew her. It was Lunette of Pouws, and I wanted to be sure she knew my standing, or rather lack of it, in the Game between Pouws and Stoneflight.

“I was contracted to King Kolver as part of an alliance,” I told her in my most sincere voice as soon as I had reminded her who I was. “I’ve never met the King, and since he has a living wife, I may not meet him for many years. I did not seek the betrothal, or the alliance, though I must say it was one way to escape from Stoneflight Demesne ...”

“I remember your mother,” she said, making a little face. “We stayed at Stoneflight once. I remember Mendost, as well. He tried to get me into his bed, though I was only a child, and Dorto objected to his behavior.”

Lunette was chilly, but not hostile, and under the circumstances I considered her behavior generous.

“Mendost is impossible,” I murmured. “He will end by getting himself killed, but only after he has sacrificed every other inhabitant of Stoneflight Demesne. If you speak to your brother, Dorto, tell him from me to trust no settlement or negotiation which Mendost brings.”

“Why would you tell me this?” she murmured, under cover of the dishes being cleared. “You are his sister ...”

“I have as much reason to hate Mendost as you do,” I answered. “But I have no reason to dislike Pouws, or any person from that Demesne. I offer you my friendship, Lunette. Take it if you will. If you will not, at least know that I am no part of Mendost’s Game.” Then, I could not forebear adding, “And watch out for Dadrina-Lucir. She will draw you in and use you if she can.”

“I heard you say Basilisk,” she murmured behind her napkin. “Was that true?”

“Watch her, and make up your own mind.” We rose then, I to go off to the courtyard visitors room. Dadrina-Lucir went who knows where, but very pale she went and burning with rage. The table mistress had rebuked her for discourtesy, and for one of that proud nature, it must have felt like the blow of a sword.

“Well?” asked Bets, eyes shining, wanting to hear every detail. I told them what had happened.

“She’ll bite.” Tess Tinder-my-hand nodded, her white hair waving. “She’ll bite. She’s too angry to do anything else. By Mother Didir, she will.”

“I fear for Jinian,” whispered Sarah. “Have we gone too far?”

“Dangerous,” Margaret Foxmitten agreed, “but necessary. We must bring her out into the open.” She bent above some needlework she was doing, hair shining in the lamplight. I wondered why Margaret stayed without a man. In some lights, in some times she was so beautiful.

My thoughts were interrupted by Murzy. “You’re right, Margaret. She’ll bite. But the teeth will be sharp. Which means we must be ready. Now, what shall it be? Herbary? Field magic? Summoning? Casting?”

“It cannot be Talent. It must not be wize-art,” said Cat. “Jinian may be questioned about it.”

It was true. If something happened to Dadrina, I might be asked. I might be asked by a Demon. We had at least one Demon Gamesmistress who could Read what I had for breakfast yesterday after I had forgotten what it was myself. If there were sufficient reason, the ban against use of Talents in Xammer would be set aside.

“Stones,” said Cat, suddenly.

The rest were silent, thinking. I had no idea what Cat meant. I had learned no stone magic. They looked as puzzled as I did.

“Footseer,” Cat said impatiently. “Old Road.”

“Old Road here?” asked Sarah, her face full of wonder. “In Xammer?”

“Just outside,” I said. Gamesmistress Joumerie had pointed it out during some lesson or other. A lengthy chunk of Old Road ran just east of Xammer, parallel to the Great North Road. “But what of it? What use is it?”

“Basilisks can’t see in the dark, no more than you or I,” said Cat. “On the Old Road, Footseer can.”

They started plotting, and arguing, and plotting more. At last I had to leave them, for the hours for visiting were done.

“Mind, now,” said Murzy. “You don’t ride or walk or go anywhere alone until this is planned out.”

“Yes, Murzy. No, Murzy,” I agreed. “I won’t.” Remembering my former encounter with a Basilisk, I wasn’t at all eager to meet another.

10

The next evening, Margaret Foxmitten came to visit, and we strolled about the courtyard quite openly, she giving me instructions in a quiet voice between louder bits.

“Say you are going riding tomorrow after dark,” she instructed.

“Tomorrow night, Margaret, I am going riding after dark. It is very lovely in the fields in the moonlight.”

“It will rain tomorrow,” she said loudly. “Don’t go out. It will be black as char.” Then, in a softer voice, “Tell me you’re sure it will clear later on.”

“Oh, it will clear later on,” I said carelessly, then murmured, “What in the name of the Hundred Devils is going on, Margaret?”

“Ride out at dusk, barefoot,” she said. “Be sure you find the Old Road and dismount before it gets completely dark. Lead your horse. You’ll see two red lights, lanterns, north and south. Position yourself about midway between. You’ll know when to run. Let go of the horse, we’ll get him later, and run toward the northern light like a bunwit—a long-legged bunwit. Be sure you stay on the Old Road. It makes two or three sharp little swerves right there, so be sure you stay on it. When you pass the red lantern, Murzy will be there with a wagon. She’ll have some shoes for you, and one of us will bring the horse up.”

“But, but, but,” I sputtered. “What’s going to happen? What am I doing it for? Why do I—”

“Just do it,” said Margaret. Then, loudly, “Well, if you won’t listen, you won’t listen, Jinian. Mark my words, if you go out after dark, you’ll be sorry.”

As I returned to my room, I saw a skirt flick away around a corner. I recognized it as belonging to wretched Banila, the stupid little girl from some tiny Demesne behind Three Knob. Dedrina’s particular follower. She’d been listening to me, and now she was going to report. As Margaret had undoubtedly counted upon. I shook my head. One of these days the dams would start telling me things first.

So, the night went by, and the day went by, and after supper I saddled up Surefoot and we went out into the dusk. The School servants were there, as usual, and I knew they expected me to return well before total darkness. So, I went east of town, seeing the little red lanterns glowing before me as it got darker and darker. I heard one of the Schoolmen calling me, then there was a shout as though his horse tripped. I slipped my shoes off, putting them in the saddlebag, then headed for a point midway between the two ruddy lights.

Between the lights was a ghostlike paleness against the ground, long chunks of the white stone of which the Old Road was made. I dismounted, feeling for it. Oh, it was strong here, much stronger than near the Old South Road City. I turned, facing north, and began to pace slowly along, leading the horse. The

world was very quiet. There were yells off somewhere to the west, and a flicker of light. Evidently the School servants were about to mount a search for me ...

Then I heard it. A hiss. A long, shuddering hiss that reached deep into my self and grabbed something there, wringing it, twisting it into a fearful, terrorized tangle. Hiss. Again. Going on and on until it seemed nothing could have enough breath to continue that sound. "Turn around," it said. "Turn around. Look me in the eye."

Margaret had said, "You'll know when to run." Almost I was too paralyzed to run, but Surefoot had no such difficulty. He reared back, jerking the reins from my hand. That released me from the spell. I ran. Light-footed, quick-footed, feeling the road tingle in my feet.

Behind me the hiss came again in fury. Again the command to turn around, to look in the eye. Then I heard the slithering, scraping of the scaled beast blundering after me. It had four legs and I only two. It could run as fast as a horse, so I'd been told, but my feet knew where I was going and its feet didn't. I lengthened my stride and prayed that Margaret knew what she was doing.

The road swerved. I swerved with it. Behind me the scraping and slithering slowed as the creature listened, finding me again. Then it was behind me once more. The road straightened, and I with it, and the pursuer gained. Almost I could feel its breath on my heels. I was beginning to tire. Running was not something we did a lot of in Xammer, and I knew I could not run as fast nor as far as I had done at Stoneflight. I would have given my ears then for the Talent of an Armiger to Fly, the Talent of an Elator to be anywhere else at all. The Talent of a Sorcerer to turn and blast the creature behind me with stored power. Any, any Talent at all to save me. Surely the creature could follow my sound now, for I panted, heaving as I ran.

Then another swerve. I almost didn't feel it in my weariness, but the flat-footed plop as my right foot dropped off the road told me I was awry. I swerved, curving away in a sudden swoop, following the road, actually moving away from the red lantern just a bit. The slithering behind me didn't stop. It had seen me making for the red light and it was going straight to that place, faster than I could run.

Then the sound of its following wasn't there anymore.

Trickery! I told myself. Don't believe it. I didn't believe it. I went on running, panting, heaving, until I could see Murzy seated beside the red lantern. I plodded toward her.

"Gracious, chile," she said. "Tha's all out of breath."

I was too out of breath to be pert with her, which I much wanted to be. In a few moments, Sarah Shadowsox brought Surefoot back, lathered and rolling-eyed, a badly frightened horse. Somewhere there was talking, a wagon moving about.

"When you are asked," said Cat, coming out of the darkness. "You must tell the precise truth. You went out for a ride. You were walking, leading the horse. You were frightened. The horse reared. You began to run. After a time, you came to some friends who caught your horse for you. Only the truth." She smiled one of her rare smiles at me, and helped me up on Surefoot, who danced this way and that, unsure he wanted to carry anyone or go anywhere that evening. I rode toward the gates of Xammer, and in a few moments the School servants found me and gave me quite a tongue-lashing for having lost them. I apologized in a properly subservient manner and they were in a better mood when we got back to Vorbold's House. I was not even late for bed check.

In the morning, I learned that Dedrina-Lucir had disappeared. By noon, there was a general alarm and search. By evening, certain of the students were being questioned. Perhaps one of them mentioned me. Perhaps Gamesmistress Joumerie did so. In any case, I found myself before Queen Vorbold with a tight-faced Demon seated at her side.

“Jinian, do you have any idea where Dedrina is?”

I said, truthfully, I had not.

“Would you mind telling me where you were last evening?”

“Not at all, Gamesmistress,” I said, seating myself comfortably and folding my hands in my lap. “After supper last night, I went out for a ride. I rode east. It became quite dark, and I don’t really know where I was. I saw a light north of me and began to walk that way, leading my horse, when suddenly there was a terrible hiss. My horse reared, tearing the reins from my hand. I ran to the light, and found some people I knew. One of them caught the horse for me, and I returned to the House.”

“You did not purposely avoid the School guard?”

I said, truthfully, I had not.

“Michael says he was waylaid by a woman he has seen with you.”

“Waylaid, Gamesmistress? Assaulted?” Michael was one of my favorite guards. I would have hated to have him hurt.

“Not at all, Jinian. Merely stopped and asked a question by a very pretty woman. Did you know about that?”

I said, truthfully, that I did not. I guessed, however, it had been Margaret Foxmitten.

Queen Vorbold turned to the Demon; the Demon shook her head; and I was dismissed. The Demon would have told her that I told the exact truth.

11

“All right,” I said to Murzy. “Where is she?”

“Where is who, chile?” she asked me, all innocence. “Don’t ask me anything tha shouldn’t know.”

She meant that having been questioned once with a Demon present didn’t mean they might not do it again. I humphed about, but I didn’t ask her again. Instead, I said, “Is there anything you can tell me, Murzy, about Daggerhawk Demesne? Anything useful?”

To which she replied, “Not yet, chile, but I’m sure we’ll learn many interesting things in time.”

And I had to be content with that. The only things the Demon could find in my head, assuming she was still looking, was that I had been badly frightened by something that hissed at me. Hissed, and tried to get me to turn around. That would indicate “Basilisk” to anyone who had studied the Index even slightly, and Queen Vorbold would remember what I had said to her earlier about Basilisks. Well. Very soon she called me in again. Demon was there. So was a foreign Pursuivant, a Gamesman, one I’d never seen

before. Evidently Daggerhawk Demesne was bringing some pressure to bear.

“Jinian. This is Pursuivant Cholore, sent by Daggerhawk Demesne to assist in the search for Dedrina-Lucir. We know you will want to help us.”

“I will help you, Gamesmistress, if I can, though I do not want to and do not care what has happened to Dedrina-Lucir. She was most un-Gamely with me, and I have no reason to care for her.” This made the Pursuivant blink. Which, in turn, made the Demon turn on him sharply, snarling between her teeth.

“What Game is this, Pursuivant? Your mind betrays ill intent toward this girl Jinian.”

The Pursuivant put up his hands, shaking his head. “Only suspicion, Demon. Truly. Why, I must be suspicious of all here or I could not seek the answers I have been told to seek.”

I kept carefully quiet and as invisible as I have ever been. Queen Vorbold wasn't accepting any of this, and they got into a three-way wrangle with me outside any of it. The Pursuivant obviously had a great deal more than suspicion, as the School Demon immediately confirmed. Queen Vorbold was having none of that. She came abruptly to herself and snarled at me, “Outside, student! This is evidently not the time to ask you anything.”

The time was the following morning, but the Pursuivant wasn't present. This time there was only one question. Why would Dedrina-Lucir or any other member of the Daggerhawk Demesne hold enmity toward me sufficient that they might have breached the ban in Xammer? Question.

Answer. I don't know. But wouldn't I like to have known!

Truth. I didn't. The Demon shrugged, gestured, and they sent me away again. About noon they were back. Did I think the flichhawk that had delivered me to Xammer was in any way connected with hawk as in Daggerhawk Demesne?

This surprised me. I had not really thought of this connection, but when one stopped to consider the matter, it was curious. Curious, I mean, that Daggerhawk should be so near to Chimmerdong Forest. Curious that a particularly giant flichhawk seemed to frequent that forest. Curious that the Demesne seemed to find some special significance in the killing of a hawk. I mentioned these curiosities to Queen Vorbold and the Demon, and they looked at me in a bad-tempered way. Obviously they wanted answers, and all I was giving them were enigmatic suggestions. They couldn't be angry with me, however, for I was trying to be helpful, and the Demon knew it.

They sent me away again. Two days later they found a woman's body out in the fields east of Xammer. The face was mauled and unrecognizable. There were Basilisk bites on her arms and hands. The body was presumed to be that of Dedrina-Lucir. From the School tower, I saw the Pursuivant riding away west. He would have no good news for those at Daggerhawk Demesne. I wondered if Murzy would have any news for me.

I think she did.

But she refused to tell me anything about that.

Actually, she refused at first, but then she and Cat and Margaret got into an argument in the kitchen that I overheard. Murzy was saying something about “trust” and “complete confidence”, and Cat was being firm as any Gamesmistress about “the rules” and “the covenants”.

I was sitting with a book in my lap when they came back, and Murzy told me, with some consternation and head shaking, that there was certain information vital to me. That I might have it if I were truly a member of a seven. That I was not yet really a member of a seven. That there were certain oaths, certain vows, certain initiatory rites ...

“By Trandilar the Glorious,” I said, peevisish enough already over the whole thing, “stop this muggling and mubbling and tell me what you want to tell me!”

“You’ll have to take an oath of celibacy, Jinian,” said Margaret in her usual calm voice. “Murzy’s worried about that.”

“Well, I should think so.” I thought it over. While it wouldn’t be a problem just now, the thought of the boy in Schooltown still turned my insides soft, and while he certainly was some years from being concerned with my virginity, still ... “Forever?” I asked, my voice wavering a little.

“Three years,” said Cat. “From the time of the oath taking. And it’s not a vow can be broken.”

“It seems a little silly,” I said. “Mother always said it was much fuss over nothing.”

“That’s not the point,” snapped Cat, annoyed. “The point is that for three years from oath taking the maximum possible time and attention needs to be on the art. There is simply no time for lolgagging.”

“And you won’t tell me until ... unless ...”

“We can’t,” said Cat. “It would be dangerous for us.”

That was their final word on that.

Three years. I would be eighteen. I couldn’t really imagine wanting to ... needing to ... before I was eighteen. So, I thought about it for a day or two, then told them I’d do whatever needed to be done. At which Murzy sighed deeply, and they all went into Tess’s bedroom (she wasn’t really able to be up much anymore) and got into one of their six-way conversations with me on the outside.

The first thing that needed to be done was get me out of Xammer for ten days.

It wasn’t easy, especially not right after the Dadrina-Lucir affair, which was still boiling. Daggerhawk had threatened to declare Game against Vorbold’s House. Vorbold’s House had replied very stiffly through the Referees. Schools were simply not Gameable, and everyone knew it. Fines could be assessed on behalf of Schools, however, and that’s what Vorbold’s had requested—a fine against Daggerhawk for sending someone to School under false pretenses. According to Cat, if the Referees did their usual concentrated job of consideration, no decision would be offered for several years.

The fact that a student had lately disappeared and a body had been found was of immediate concern. All the security around the place was doubled up, and it became impossible to get in or out without six people asking for your pass or your reasons. Finally, after we’d tried several other things, Murzy gave me some fever-leaf, and I retired to my bed.

The Healer came, of course, and fixed me up. The next day I was in bed again. And the Healer came again. The third time, Queen Vorbold herself came to visit the invalid, considerably annoyed. She was beginning to suspect, I think, that Jinian of Dragon’s Fire was more trouble than she was worth.

“Well, Jinian,” she said. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“I think it’s Breem fever, Gameswoman,” I said. “If you will let old Murzy come nurse me for a few days, I’m sure it will pass.”

“We don’t allow outsiders in the School, girl. As you well know. Which is why we have three times sent the School Healer to you. Little good has it done.”

I shook my head sadly. “I’ll be glad to go down to town, ma’am. I’m sure it will pass, given a little time. And at far less expense to the School than these constant Healer visits.”

“No doubt,” she said dryly. The Healer came yet again, but, when I still had the fever the following day, I got a pass to go down to Murzy’s place “until sufficiently recovered to engage in normal student activities”. Murzy shook her head over me and said it looked like Breem Hills fever, which was endemic in our part of the world. She said she thought I would be fully recovered in about ten days, and the School servants who brought me accepted this. As soon as they were out of sight, we started packing for a journey. Murzy, Cat, and Margaret were going with me. Sarah, Tess, and Bets Battereye were staying behind, partly to cover for me and partly because Tess couldn’t travel. She was becoming very feeble, and I’d heard Sarah saying that we might be seeking another seventh soon. I didn’t like to hear that. Tess Tinder-my-hand had given me the star-eye, and fed me cookies, had told me many fascinating and wonderful things. I went to the kitchen and cried about it for a while, then put it out of my mind as I lay in the bottom of the wagon with the other three as Bets and Sarah drove it out of Xammer, across the bridge to the south, and then away southeast. After a time, they let us out and returned to Xammer.

We proceeded on foot, down the south fork of the Gaywater, which emerged from the walls of a narrow canyon that we soon entered. There was a good path, though not wide enough for two of us to walk abreast. Other paths fed into it, paths coming down from the heights and from little, windy side canyons. Cautioned by Murzy, I did not say anything when the first fellow-traveler came down the path and joined our procession. Silence was the rule on the canyon walk. Others came, from time to time. When it grew dark, we lighted lanterns, and the others who came down the paths carried them also. Looking ahead, one could see a procession of fireflies winding along the canyon, the lights reflected in the still waters of the river, which lay utterly quiet between the rocky walls.

Just as I was beginning to feel both terribly hungry and thirsty, I saw the fireflies disappearing into the rock wall ahead. When we came to the place, it loomed open, a great mouth in the side of the wall, carved around with vine leaves and grain and starshapes, birds and beasts and little moons. At the top of the door was a pair of lips, a long, carved dagger thrust through them to shut them. I took this sign as was intended, as a warning.

We went in. To our left a hooded woman was busy taking small sacks of grain from the travelers. We each carried one, which we turned over to her without a word. Next was a stop at a rack where robes and hoods hung in long, dark array, arranged from long to short. We put these on over our clothes. While the hoods didn’t hide our faces, they did shadow them, and I had the feeling no one was supposed to pay much attention to faces while we were here. I wanted to ask. I didn’t.

Finally there was a journey down a long corridor lined with doors. All of them were open that we passed. When we came to the first one shut, we turned back and took the next two, closing the doors to the corridor and opening the one between after bolting the connecting doors on each side.

“Now,” said Murzy, “if you’re starving, I’ve brought some fruit, which is allowed. Other than that, you’ll

get only the porridge they serve morning and night.”

I was starving. I took my fruit and lay down on one of the cots, wondering what was coming next and not certain I should ask. Murzy, meantime, was at the door looking at a printed sheet posted there, one I had not even noticed.

“All right,” she said, “anyone have anything on the Eesties? Shadow tower? Storm Grower? The questionable alliances? Daylight Bell? That’s you, Jinian. Room four oh five, second bell in the morning. Ah. Let’s see. Chimmerdong, Chimmerdong. Nothing. It will be under Miscellaneous Topics, I guess. Cat, you and Margaret go to two oh three at the third bell tomorrow. I’ll be in initiation application all morning. Fourth bell, we can all gather here.”

“What do you mean, “That’s you, Jinian?”” I complained. “What’s me?”

“The topics under investigation as part of the wize-art are posted here.” She pointed to the list. “New ones are added from time to time, and old ones removed. Each day, there will be someone—sometimes one of them—at a particular time, in a particular room. Anyone with new information is asked to come there and give information. That’s all.”

“So how come I’m Daylight Bell? How come I’m not Chimmerdong?”

“Well, you could be either. We’re going to be here for several days, and the Auditor who hears you tomorrow may ask you to speak to someone else about Chimmerdong later on. Cat and Margaret have some other information about Chimmerdong gleaned from ... ah, someone we knew. So. You go along and tell whomever about acting out Little Star and the Daylight Bell and about the giant fitchhawk. That’ll be new to them. One interview may lead to another. Then, there are some reports on new things that have been discovered—listed here under State of the Art. There are one or two of those that might be interesting. We may not need to stay longer than a day or two, or we might be here for eight or nine. I’ve never had to be here longer than that, not even going to every lecture I could sit through.”

“And that’s all?” I said, unbelieving. “That’s all there is to it?”

Cat snorted, Margaret made a shushing noise, and Murzy stared them both down. “Now. It’s the first time for the chile. You may have forgotten how you both reacted, but I haven’t.” Margaret flushed a little, smiled, and turned away to hide her face. “No, I haven’t forgotten about you, either, Cat Candleshy, though it was twenty years ago, almost. You just relax, Jinian. We’ll get some sleep, now, and at the second bell tomorrow, I’ll show you how to find the room ...”

Late as it was, and tired as we all were, I forgot to ask about “them”. I was, therefore, utterly unprepared to meet one of “them” in the morning.

12

The first bell rang in pitch darkness. Of course it did, we were underground. I heard Margaret stumble out of bed, saw the hall door open and light coming in. She brought back a spill to light the lanterns, and we dressed by lantern light before going on to the privies and wash places, all of which were very clean and steamy and crowded with women and quiet. Oh, there was noise. Shuffle and splash and a voice saying, “Excuse me.” That was about it. Then down to a vast, cavernous refectory, where we shuffled in a long line to get our porridge bowls, then in another long line to leave them off again. After which Cat showed me where the stairs were, and how the rooms were arranged, and whispered to me to wait outside room 405 until the bell rang, then go in.

“There may be some other people there as well,” she said. “In that case, you’ll all go in at once. The person or persons inside will tell you to wait, or sit down and listen, as they choose.”

I did as directed, all by lantern light, beginning to feel more and more like some burrowing, night-living creature, like some gobbemole, perhaps. The bell rang, and I went in.

There was a top spinning in the room. Humming. Quietly twirling. Silver. I backed against the door and waited, wondering what to do next. Gradually it slowed, slowed, and I saw it was a person. Long silver fringes covered it from the edge of its wide hat to its toes. I could not see its face. I knew what it was, of course. No one who had received a first in Index could not have known. It was a Dervish.

I have heard many strange things about Dervishes.

Oh, they say things about Wizards, too. “Strange are the Talents of Wizards.” Mostly that’s a joke Wize-ards made up among themselves. Whenever we do something egregiously wrong, or silly, we say, “Well, strange are the Talents of Wizards!” and everyone laughs. But the things they say about Dervishes are not merely jokes of the trade, so to speak. When people speak of Dervishes—even when Gamesmen speak of Dervishes—it is with awe and mystery. They have the Talents of the Flesh, Shapeshifting, and Power Holding. I have read, also, that some of them have Seeing the Future, though that is not in any Index. So they are said to do strange things to others. To change others, perhaps.

They are, in short, frightening. When I realized I was alone in a room with one, I wanted to wet my pants.

However, I took a deep breath, reminded myself that Murzy would do nothing dangerous for me, and bowed. That seemed prudent, under the circumstances.

“You may sit down,” said the Dervish in an absolutely toneless voice. “Over there.”

Over there was a hard bench. The Dervish did not sit down; merely stood concealed in its fringes, like a silver column. “You have something to tell about the Daylight Bell.” It wasn’t a question. It was a statement. “You may begin.”

So I told about going into Chimmerdong, about the edge of the forest turning to mush, about the flower in the sun, the cone in the brook, the bed that moved, and finally about the bunwit and tree rat who took me into the great tree. Then I told the Dervish about the story, the way we had played it out, the flitchhawk and I. And then I sat very quietly, waiting, because the Dervish didn’t move, didn’t say anything. I wasn’t sure it was breathing, even.

At last it trembled, as a tree might tremble in the tiniest breeze. “Your name?” it whispered. This time it was a question.

“Jinian Footseer,” I said.

The figure before me started. “Footseer? Explain?”

So I explained, about the blind runners, and the honey cookies, and running on the Old South Road when I was no more than a baby hardly.

Then nothing, nothing.

Then,” Jinian Footseer, you may go.”

I went.

I went very quietly down the stairs, and very quietly along the corridor to the rooms we occupied, and very quietly in to curl up on the cot and wait. I heard the third bell ring. Not long after that, Cat and Margaret came in. And just after the fourth bell rang, Murzy came.

“Oh,” she said. “You’ve seen one of them.”

“Not merely one,” said Cat. “I think it was Bartelmy.”

“Bartelmy of the Ban? The one who ... ?”

“Yes. That one.”

I heard her, but I didn’t move. I didn’t ask, “The one who what?” even though later I was to wish I had. After a time they went away. Later they came back, bringing a mug of something hot and strange tasting. I drank it. My insides began to settle somewhat, though they still felt twisted.

“It...she ...” I said.

“The Dervish,” prompted Cat.

“The Dervish did ... something to my insides.”

“No. Really not, Jinian. It may feel like that, but the Dervish really didn’t. And you may say ‘she’. All Dervishes are female. Sort of.”

“Then what made me feel that way?” I asked, beginning to recover. “I felt sick, and dizzy, and as though I wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere.”

“You’ve been looked at, very thoroughly, is all. Rather as a Healer might, but with more attention to mental things.”

“That’s exactly it. Someone’s been rummaging through me!”

“Don’t say rummage.” Cat smiled. “Not about a Dervish. One of them would never do anything so disorderly. Well. How do you think you did?”

“Did what?”

“Do you think you told her something new? Something that will earn you initiation? As a Wize-ard?”

I had no idea. There was that tiny shiver, and when I told them about that, they seemed almost excited. About that time, a bell rang, and they all went off to hear something new about the Eesties, or maybe about the Shadowpeople, I’m not sure which. I curled up again and went to sleep and didn’t wake up until they roused me for evening porridge. By that time, my name had been posted as approved for initiation, which pleased them, and me.

“What would you have done if I’d not passed?” I asked, half-teasing, certainly not expecting the answer I got.

“There are Forgetters here,” said Margaret. “You would not have remembered anything at all about the place. And we would have sought another seventh. That’s all.”

That was quite enough.

13

The Forgetter I was introduced to at my initiation took my hand and said, “I hope you will never be brought before me, Jinian Footseer. Hold your tongue and keep your memories—for now—dedicating them to the wize-art.” The threat was explicit.

Which was neither here nor there. My initiation was quiet, almost private. There was one Dervish present, the one who ... or some other one. There was the Forgetter, and the dams as witnesses. And there was the tall, frightening presence of a male Wizard in full regalia, a friend of Murzy’s, who administered the oaths. Then we walked in still procession down endless ramps and stairs to a place hidden in the secret heart of a cavern lit by a thousand candles. At the center of these lights was a circular pool with a raised, star-shaped curbing. Very still, that pool, like some forest ponds I have seen when there is no wind, full of milky, silvery stuff. We knelt around it, all of us, staring at it. At first I thought nothing was there, but then I saw the bits of shadow, coalescing, separating, coiling. And bits of light. Shaping, unshaping. In endless motion. Within the pool. Still ... so still. I know my head fell forward, because Murzy reached out and touched me to bring me to myself.

“The shadow grows,” whispered the tall Wizard, his voice twisting off into the cavern to raise a flock of sibilant echoes, like restless birds in the dark.

Those assembled said, “And yet there is light,” in firm, comforting unison.

The Wizard took a pair of long, curving tongs into his hand. The Dervish held out a shallow bowl. Everyone breathed in, a quiet kind of gasp.

He took a grayish flat fragment of something from the bowl, holding it up in the tongs so everyone could see before dipping it in the pool, carefully not touching the pool with his hands.

There was a thin, high singing when it touched the pool. Then he drew the fragment out and laid it on the curb before me.

“Take it,” whispered Cat.

I picked it up, feeling it slip into my fingers like a knife into a sheath, a flat, triangular piece of something with one curved edge, about as long as my middle finger. Then we all stood up and proceeded out of the place in absolute silence. The whole ceremony had taken only a little time. When we got back to our rooms, Murzy gave me a kind of locket to put the fragment in so it would hang safely around my neck. “Or you can carry it wrapped in a cloth in your boot, or sewn into your garment,” she said. “Just so it is always by you and you never lose it.”

“What is it?” I demanded. “What’s it for?”

“It’s a symbol. It shows you have been initiated. It puts some of the life of the pool in a form you can

carry always, to remind yourself who you are.”

“But what is it? What is the pool?”

“Nothing we’ve made,” said Cat. “The pools were here before men came, you may be sure of that. Large ones and tiny ones. The large ones are rare, and hidden. Some say they are eyes which look into the heart of the world. Some say they are eyes which look out. And we say as long as the light moves in the star-eye, the shadow has not conquered.”

“Religion?” I asked doubtfully.

“One might say,” said Cat.

We stayed two days more while all of us went to “lectures”, which were actually kind of story-telling sessions given by people who thought they might have learned something new. The procedure is to tell an Auditor first (someone like the Dervish who heard me) and then, if the Auditor agrees, tell all the Wize-ards who are interested. Since I was new, they did not ask me to tell about Chimmerdong and the fitchhawk, but Murzy said the Dervish had done so. It was all so new to me, I didn’t remember very much of what I heard, and note taking was not allowed as it was in Xammer. One listened and one remembered. I listened as best I could, but there were no hooks in my head to hang much of it on.

Then we were leaving, taking off the robes and hanging them up, going silently away down the canyon until we came to the plains once more. Sarah was waiting with the wagon. She and Bets had been trading days to come wait for us, and we all got aboard. Only when I was settled into the wagon did I realize how exhausted I was. I felt beaten, and old, and as though I had run thousands of miles.

“Well,” said Murzy when we were all settled, “it’s time to tell you what happened with the Basilisk, Jinian. Now don’t interrupt me with questions until I’m finished. I know you, and you can’t keep your mouth shut for anything.”

So challenged, of course I had to be absolutely still, even though it griped me immensely.

“We had some men from one of the farms dig us a pit, right in the curve of the Old Road,” she began. When you ran, you swerved, but the Basilisk didn’t. It was a deep, straight-sided pit, the Basilisk fell directly into it, and we backed a wagon over it at once, so it couldn’t get out or be seen.

“Then we began asking the Basilisk certain questions. It hissed and snarled and didn’t answer, of course, but our Demon could Read the answers ...”

“Demon!” I couldn’t stop myself. “Where did you get a Demon?”

Murzy just looked at me, pressing her lips together until I subsided, then she turned and nodded at Cat. “That’s our Demon, fool-girl ... Always has been.”

Cat! A Demon! I thought suddenly of the times I had congratulated myself that I was Gamecaste and they were merely pawns and was suddenly hideously embarrassed. Were the rest of them ... ?

“We’ve all got Talents of one kind or another,” said Cat. “We don’t play with them, that’s all. We don’t Game. So far as the world knows, we six are pawns only. We say so for our own protection. Some of the Wize-ards choose to call themselves Wizards, some call themselves other things, and some call themselves nothing at all. It’s all in what one is trying to accomplish. And we couldn’t tell you until you

were one of us. Listen now, and don't interrupt."

"Our Demon," Murzy went on unperturbed, "learned that the Daggerhawk Demesne has a very ancient rule of enmity against Chimmerdong Forest." She let me think about that for a moment, seeing I was about to explode. "They call themselves the Keepers of Chimmerdong. Since the giant flichhawk is a ... What would you say, Cat? Resident? Numen?"

"Perhaps numen," said Cat. "Friend. Guardian. My own guess is, it's one of the old gods. It is certainly a being which is interested in the forest, which cares about it. You hinted at that, Jinian, when you said the voice of the flichhawk sounded rather like the voice of the forest. The Dervishes agreed that it was an interesting possibility for investigation."

"Yes. It was that which got you initiated, Jinian. They didn't know either of those things, not about Chimmerdong and the flichhawk or about Daggerhawk Demesne.

"Well, we asked our questions, received no answers, but got our answers anyhow. The creature was down below the wagon in the dark, so it couldn't Beguile us with its eyes. It tried with its voice, but we're old birds, well schooled against Beguilement."

"I wasn't," I said, annoyed. "If it hadn't been for Surefoot rearing, I might not have run in time."

"Well, chile," she said, "if you hadn't run in time, you wouldn't have been one we wanted for a seventh, would you?"

That shut me up, in several ways.

"We found, also, that those at Daggerhawk have bonded themselves in service to some northern power. Dadrina-Lucir did not know much about this; it seems to be a covert kind of arrangement. Her thalan, Porvius Bloster, and her mother, Dadrina Dreadeye, are the ones through whom the orders came. Dadrina-Lucir had the idea that this liege of theirs, whoever it may be, was also interested in your discomfiture or death. So—you have Porvius as an enemy because you witnessed his embarrassment at the hands of Mendost and then escaped from him; you have the Daggerhawk Demesne because of your friendship with Chimmerdong; and you have this unknown northern power for some unknown reason.

"When we had found out everything the Basilisk knew, we were going to let it loose, telling it we would act against it if any harm came to you, Jinian. However, when we arrived to turn it loose, we found it gone. It had dug its way out one end of the pit. Since the body they found had Basilisk bites on its hands and arms, we assume it was so enraged during the digging that it bit itself and died of its own venom—though Basilisks are somewhat immune to their own bites. When it was dead it must have changed back to human shape ..."

A sudden terror hit me, and I shivered. "No," I said. "I think not."

"I saw the body," said Cat.

"Did you notice whether the third fingers were as long as the middle fingers?" I asked. "Dadrina had odd hands. I watched her enough to know."

They looked at each other uncertainly.

"You might try to find out," I said a little bitterly. "The body won't have reached Daggerhawk yet. Is

there an Elator among you?"

There wasn't.

"There's at least a possibility she's still alive," I said. "I feel she is, somehow. Who the dead woman is, I doubt we'll ever know. Some trader, perhaps. Some pawn from the town. We could ask around, see if anyone is missing." I had no real hope for this. People came and went all the time.

"Gamelords," said Murzy. "If she's still alive, she's back at Daggerhawk by now, and she may know who we are and that we're on to them. We won't only have her to contend with, but her mother and aunts as well, and there's a plague of them, you may be sure. Basilisks are clanny and poisonous. I don't like this."

"Be wary, Jinian," said Cat. "Simply be wary. They are not particularly subtle Gamesmen, and in the beast form they lose intelligence, though they may fool you. It should be good enough simply to be very careful where you go."

I had no intention of going anywhere. "I'd like to know what all this is about!"

"It's difficult even to make a guess," said Cat. "Of course, no one is supposed to enter Chimmerdong except the Keepers. No one ever does. They've circulated all kinds of stories about it to frighten people off. They don't want anyone wandering around who has been in Chimmerdong. Not only have you gone in, but you've communicated with the forest and come out again. Oh, I don't know how much that has to do with it, but it has some part. Of that I'm sure."

I remembered then, and started to tell her; what Bloster had said to the Basilisk in the forest, but just then we drew up at the house in Xammer and Bets came running out to tell us that Tess was much worse. We all went to her bedroom, where Tess Tinder-my-hand was lying, looking very old and sleepy, though peaceful. "Ah, chile," she whispered. "So you're our seventh. I'm glad. I would look upon the pool once more."

Murzy put her hand on my shoulder, keeping me from saying anything. All around the room the others were finding their fragments, digging them out of hems or out of boots. I took mine out of the neck of my tunic, laying it on the table as the others did. Tess leaned from her bed, trembling, to put her own there. She had been holding it in her hand.

Then each of the six pushed her fragment into alignment, points together, curved line on the outside. Together, they made a circle. When only one wedge was empty, I pushed mine in as well and the separate fragments suddenly became a pool, seeming as deep as the one in the cavern, as round though smaller, flicking with the same light and shadow. Murzy helped Tess out of bed and we knelt there, peering down into the pool where the lights and shadows swam.

"Still time," old Tess murmured. "Not yet the shadow."

"Not yet the shadow, Tess," said Cat. "Why, see, there is light there yet, swimming in forever. Never fear, old friend. We'll balance it yet, we Wize-ards."

Then Tess shivered, cried out a little cry, and leaned back, her hand to her chest. They all rushed to help her, leaving me frozen over the little pool. Something had moved there, but I was the only one who saw. The only one who saw the shadow start at one edge of it and swim across the whole thing, black as char, deep as night, leaving at last only a thin, tiny edge of light. From inside that darkness, something flapped

within the pool and seemed to look out at me.

I blinked, unsure of what I was seeing. The shadow flicked away. Then the dams were all around, picking up their pieces, putting them away, putting Tess's fragment in her hand.

She died that night with the fragment held tight. When I went in to kiss her good-bye, I saw it was only a bit of metal, gray and dim, with neither light nor shadow in it. Without Tess, we were six again. None of us could look on the pool we carried until we were seven. We had been seven for a very short time.

There was no way to verify what I thought I had seen. I was sent back to classes. My study group had spent most of the time I had missed on Index review, and as I already knew the Index very well, I didn't miss much. We had a new Gamesmistress, a Healer named Silkhands. She seemed very pleasant, not much older than most of the students, but with a weary air about her that intrigued me. We started to make friends. I could do that now that Dadrina-Lucir was gone. Without her, things were comparatively peaceful.

In the nights immediately following my return, however, I several times woke myself with muffled screams, starting straight up in bed, sweating and cold at once, thinking I had heard the horrid hissing of Basilisks or the sly flapping of watchful shadows.

14

The fourth or fifth night I wakened deep in the dark hours, I was reminded of myself as a child, bearing Mendost's abuse and deciding I would rather die. Perhaps it would be better to die now than to wake in this terror at the sound of flapping. My room was high in one of the towers. Perhaps the sound had a cause; perhaps something was really there. Wrapped in a heavy robe against the cool of the night, I left the room silently and went up the cupped stones of the winding tower stairs to the roof.

As I climbed, I became convinced the sound had not been merely a dream. Dream, yes, but not merely that. Dream grafted upon reality, perhaps, as the gardeners of the House graft blooming stock upon hardy roots, the lesser reality upon the greater. This was a muddy thought, and I took time to untangle it, lost in metaphor, hardly realizing the sound I heard was a sound as real as my own heartbeat. Flap, flap, hiss. Not the hiss of Basilisks; the hiss of wind on feathers. It came from above me, and I turned face up to see giant wings fleeing across the stars.

"I am here," I called, as I had called once before in the forest, not loudly, fearful, yet not fearful enough to be silent.

Wings lifted and folded. The fitchhawk stooped, down, down, wingtips canted to guide its flight, talons stretched before it. Just as it would have dropped upon me, the wings scooped air, and the giant came to rest before me, opening its beak to let out a rush of air scented with the breath of pines.

"What is it you eat to have a breath so sweet, fitchhawk?" I said, almost in a whisper.

"What is it you eat to have words so sweet, Star-eye?" and there came the puffed, creaking sound of hawk laughter.

"I told the Dervish about you, fitchhawk."

"We knew you would."

“What is it you want now?”

“You promised the forest, girl.”

“I promised to do what I could, when I knew what to do, fritchhawk. I haven’t any idea, yet. They have made me a Wize-ard, and I’m no wiser than I was.”

“Then you must do out of ignorance, girl. You must help the forest.”

“I said I would, when I knew how, but there’s been no time.”

“No time,” agreed the fritchhawk in his creaky voice. “No time, Jinian Footseer. Now. Now is the time. This moment.”

He reached for me with one talon. I stamped my foot, really angry. “I will not be dangled,” I said. “I was dangled last time. It has caused me no end of embarrassment, and I will not be dangled again.”

He stepped back. If a beak can be said to express astonishment, then the beak on that bird face did. However, the eyes were not angry. Reflective, perhaps. Amused, perhaps, but not angry. “What would you suggest?” he asked. “I cannot have you on my back, for there is no room between my wings on the upstroke.”

“Wait,” I cried, moved by sudden inspiration. “One moment.” I ran down the stairs again, peeling off the robe and gown as I went, covering half the last corridor bare as a willow twig. There were stout boots in my room and leather trousers, a heavy jacket and some tunics not woven of the thistledown we usually wore. My knife and pack were there as well. I left a message.

“Take this message to Murzemire Hornloss, house at the corner of Goldstreet and the Hill. “Murzy, the fritchhawk has come for me and will not delay. I will return. Make my peace with Vorbold’s House.””

There, I thought. That ought to cause some consternation. I could imagine its being well read by Vorbold’s House before ever it was taken to Murzy. Still, she would get it in time. Someone had to explain to King Kelver and Joramal. I thought Queen Vorbold would duck that duty if she could.

Then back up the stairs, stopping at the end of the corridor for one of the great woven baskets that collected our dirty bedclothes and towels. It had long straps because the men who gathered them up carried them on their backs down Laundry Street, amid all the steams and smokes and sounds of washerwomen shouting. I thrust the thing before me onto the tower roof to find the fritchhawk stalking this way and that, peering over the edge from time to time like an owl seeking some small prey. The thought made me shiver. I was the prey in this case.

“Here,” I told him. “I can sit in this, and you can carry the straps in your claws. It will be easier for both of us.” And it would. The high sides of the basket would allow me to breathe, at least, which I could not remember having done during the trip to the tower dangled from those same claws.

“In, then, Jinian Footseer,” he creaked, and I plunged down into the basket, thankful there were already a few sheets in the bottom to soften it. The thing jerked, swayed, soared, and I was flying once again high above Xammer, above the towers, the walls, looking down on the ancient bridges, the quiet streets. I could see the corner of Goldstreet and the Hill. There were lights in the windows. So late? Were their faces at the window? How could there be? Still, I leaned from the basket at risk of my life and waved. Perhaps they knew, or had been told by their mysterious informant who seemed to know everything.

Then the town was behind us and we moved south along the river, then west toward the heights. They loomed before us. Flichthawk began to circle, catching some warmer air from time to time, though he labored with his wings to climb and I knew it was more difficult at night than when the sun warmed the earth and made great updrafts to carry him. We crossed the wide expanse of Middle River, silver glinting on its waves. Lake Yost gleamed to the north. Then came the soft, velvet depths of Long Valley and at last the cliffs, falling away like a sweep of carved wood, gleaming under the knife of the stars. There the forest was before us, trees taller than any I had ever seen or imagined. Leafy tops shifting. Smaller wings circling. A scented breath rising, like the flichthawk's breath: field mint and pine; bergamot and rose; webwillow and shatter-grass. Sweet, spicy, catching the breath in one's throat with memories of lost childhood among the grasses at the brookside. "Chimmerdong," I cried, unable to help myself. "Chimmerdong."

"Jinian," I imagined the forest calling in return. "Jinian."

The flichthawk folded his great wings and took hold of a treetop, rocking there. "Here," he creaked. "Here. The ladder is beneath you in the tree."

I had climbed out onto the branch and was taking inventory of myself, somewhat windblown but otherwise intact. "See here," I said, "you've got to tell me something. I've been dragged from housedoor to cellar, from kingpost to roofree without a word of explanation. Now, what's going on here, and what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Daggerhawk Demesne is killing the forest. You'll know what to do, Jinian Footseer. Use your eyes, your ears, your feet." His wings came down, knocking me flat on the branch as usual, and he was up and gone. Far off at the edge of the world I saw the rim of the sun and knew he had not wanted light to disclose him upon the forest roof. Nor did I want to be seen there. I plunged into the leafy wilderness, scrambling about until I found the ladder. It carried me down as it had carried me up. No immediate course of action presented itself. The first thing to do would be to find out what was going on. Perhaps the next thing would be to talk to the forest again. If I could. If it could. If the shadow would allow. Hows and perhaps kept me thoughtful the entire journey down, and I was utterly unsurprised to find both a bunwit and a tree rat at the bottom of the ladder waiting for me. My same ones or other ones? My same ones, I thought. They sat there propped on their hind legs the way they do, bunwit with his pointy ears and tree rat with his round ones, bunwit gray and white, tree rat black and copper, both with round, curious eyes fixed on me as though I had answers. "I've got no answers, beasts," I told them. "But if you know where something is going on, I suggest you show me."

Tree rat started for me. I picked up a branch. "Just for the record, rat, if you bite me even a little, even one time, there will be one dead rat." He backed off, surprised. I still had teeth marks on my rear from last time.

They looked at each other, conferring, I thought. Perhaps they did. At any rate, we went off through the trees at an easy pace, one or the other scouting ahead, then coming back to be sure I still followed. It was not long before we heard a sound. Both of them came back, close to me, pressing against my legs.

"That it?" I asked. They pressed closer, ears cocked toward the noise. It was a whuffling, snorting, growling noise, with crashes and smashes in it.

We were on a rounded hill with an abrupt rocky ledge above a clearing. We peered between the rocks, seeing nothing but shrubs and grasses. The noise was near, perhaps behind a screen of trees. Nothing. Then a glitter, as of sun on polished bone. Then again. Crash of branches. Gouts of soil and turf flying, a

small tree toppled, snorting, and then ...

I said, half to myself, "What in the name of the Hundred Devils is that?" The beasties only pushed closer to me, not answering.

The thing had come into the light. Great snout over curved tusks. Little pig eyes. Sharp pig hooves. It came and kept coming. Three pairs of legs, four, five. I counted silently, in awe, not even aware I was counting. When I got to fifty, I stopped counting. The thing had at least a hundred legs, like a centipede. "Centipig," I breathed to my cowering beasties, watching the turf fly in solid, muddy slabs. Champing and whuffling, the centipig ravaged its way out of the clearing and down the hill. "By Dealpas, the Doleful," I hissed to myself.

Familiar voices followed the pig-path into the clearing. Porvius Bloster. In a moment he was beneath me, he and another man, both carrying tanks with hoses and tubes. We use similar tanks in the Stone-flight Demesne to spray the sammit seedlings with water. Both carried outlandish, pig-snouted masks in their hands.

"Give it a year," Porvius shouted, waving his hands at the destruction around him. "Give it a year and it will have flattened half of Chimmerdong."

"It would be faster and surer if you had more than one," the man with him said. At first I had not recognized him, but then I realized it was the pursuivant who had come to Vorbold's House seeking Dadrina-Lucir. Cholore? If he were Reading, he would find me. Not likely, though. Who would expect Jinian to have left the luxury of Vorbold's House to return to this muddy, tangled place? I eased up one eye, peering through a crack.

"The price for this one was high enough. It was expensive. Twelve little girls from the Demesne, two of them offspring of my own. Plus much ore from the hills, as well as fruit and herbs and rarities. Still, the Magicians will make me another if needed."

"It is mechanical, then? A device?"

"No, it lives. The Magicians make such things in their secret place to the west. Monsters. In their monster labs. That's what they call the place, you know. A monster lab."

"And when the monster is finished with Chimmerdong," said the Pursuivant in an insinuating voice, "how do you get rid of it? I would not want that roaming the edges of the Daggerhawk. It is long since you have repaired the walls."

Porvius shrugged, a trifle uncomfortably, I thought. "Oh, they will give us a thing. Perhaps another plague, like the forest edge plague. The monster will not cross that plague. They will give us something to kill it with."

"And then another thing to kill the thing that kills it, no doubt," said the Pursuivant in his sly voice. "For another dozen girl-children from the Demesne. For more ore. For more herbs and rarities. Oh, I have heard of these Magicians. Gifters, aren't they? If one can survive their gifts."

"No one has died of the forest plague," Bloster said. "I told you it was perfectly safe to use."

"You told me, Bloster. Just as you told Bankfire, the Sentinel, and Warlock Wambly. And the family who farmed at the northern fringes. Still, they're all dead, aren't they?"

“Disease. Some disease, is all.”

“A disease the Healers couldn’t fix. Oh, I’ll help you spray your forest edge plague, Bloster. It hasn’t killed you, yet. But don’t ask me to stay about where it’s been.”

The two of them went off, we three quiet creatures sneaking along behind. We came to the edge of the forest quite soon. Here the mushy, fungus look of the forest edge had been encroached upon by a lively green. Bloster and the Pursuivant put on their masks and began to spray something from the tanks upon the new growth, something oily, glistening, which settled in a deadly film on the green, smoking slightly, turning it black in the instant. When they were done, the two of them turned back the way they had come. I didn’t follow. Instead, the bunwit and I approached the sprayed places and sniffed at them. It was a dead smell, acrid as burned metal. All the places they had sprayed smoked thinly, and the forest trembled at the edge as though wounded.

I walked aside from the place and plopped myself down on a green hillock. “Well now,” I advised the beasties, they being the only audience I had. “We have one hugeous pig. We have some stuff that’s been sprayed at the forest edges. Forest is hurt, no question of that. The stuff at the edges holds the forest in, eh, bunwit? That’s clear. It makes an edge. A dam. A dike. Hrum te dundun.”

The problem seemed to have no corner I could get a finger under. Kill the pig? Possible, I supposed, but then what? Porvius Bloster would merely come again with another pig, a longer pig, a millipig, perhaps. He would sell a hundred little girls from his Demesne (and at this thought I shivered, well able to imagine myself one of them, sold into some unknown horror at a tender age) to buy another, more monstrous creature.

Could one kill Porvius Bloster? Possibly. It would not solve the matter, however. The Basilisks of Daggerhawk would, presumably, send someone else. Their reasons would still be unknown, their motivations—for pig and Bloster both—dim and uncertain. In this same forest a year before, Bloster had said there was Game against me, personally, directed by another than himself. Who might that be? And why? I wondered if it had anything at all to do with the forest.

I needed more understanding of what was going on here. The flichhawk had not been helpful. The dams had told me nothing of reasons—indeed, I doubted they knew any. Someone, somewhere, knew more. Of this I was certain. That person had not helped me, however. Perhaps that person did not know I needed help. Or knew and did not care. Or knew, I said to myself, and cared, but was prohibited from helping me.

“Oh, Jinian,” I said to myself, annoyed with this endless round of speculation. “What matter who knows what? They, whoever they are, are not here and Jinian Footseer is. Now get on with it.”

The question was, what? Even if I were to figure out something to do, I could not be certain it would be the right thing or a good thing unless I knew more. Even as I told myself this, I had no doubt at all that the forest knew what needed to be done, if the forest were allowed to speak.

Well now, what did I have to use? Eh? Door magic. Window magic. Bridge magic. Herbary. Summoning. Come now. I sat in the midst of the forest and could not think of a thing. No doors. No windows. No bridges. Herbary all around and simply not useful. Summoning, yes. I could use Where Old Gods Are. Assuming that category applied to the forest. That could be done, but I needed something to control what answered the summons and keep the shadow out. Window magic once again?

“Was ever a dwelling in this forest, bunwit? Eh? Castle, keep, lodge, stable? Ever any dwelling here, great or humble? Any bridge, any structure? Eh? Two stones on top of each other?”

Bunwit had his head cocked as though listening. Since he couldn't be understanding me, he must have been getting his information from elsewhere. Not about castles or keeps, no. About whereness. Abruptly he turned and began hopping away through the trees, so quickly it was hard for me to keep up.

“Easy, bunwit,” I called. “I've only got two legs,” at which he gave me an astonished look. I'd forgotten, so had he. At least, only two used to hop with. We whipped off through the trees, up slope and down, underbrush tangling my legs and ferns crushing in my path. We came to a place. It had that look about it, you know, as though something had been there, that slightly unnatural look as of ancient stones, buried. I knelt to scrape at the surface, disclosing pale stones beneath the moss. The pile stretched away on either side, higher at the center.

What had it been, once? I walked around it, in it, on it, feeling a kind of tingle, not unlike the feeling in my feet when walking the Old Road. I lay down in the middle of it and shut my eyes. Tingle. I listened. I half shut my eyes and peered at it and out of it at other things.

There was a very minor magic to use in cases like this. Taking a deep breath, I turned myself in the proper whirl, made the proper gestures—catching a glimpse of astonished bunwit in the process—shut my eyes, and did the ‘deep look’. I wasn't very good at deep looking then. I got better later on. Margaret was the best among us seven. She could see inside mountains to the ore, Murzy said. Well, no matter. I deep looked, tilting the look backward the way Bets Batter-eye had tried to show me, back, back ...

To catch a glimpse, only a glimpse, of a strange building, doors wider at the top, high-domed, with sweet-smelling smoke rising inside, and a long wing under the trees where travelers might rest, and funny ... funny-looking travelers coming and going ... not people. Others.

It was gone. What had I seen? A kind of temple? An inn? An inn, perhaps. Nothing inimical, certainly. Nothing hurtful. A restful place. A quiet one. So.

The pile of earth-covered stone before me was low, long, obviously deep-buried. I had no idea whether I could move enough of it to see the structure. The beasties seemed to have some understanding of what I needed, so I tried that. “Bunwit, I need help. I need diggers. Builders. Handy creatures. Do you think you could find some?”

He had his head cocked again, listening. One could have thought he understood me, so intense was his appearance of concentration. However, he did not offer to go find several Tragamors for me. I estimated it would take three or four, at least, to get the stones moved. With a Sorcerer or two standing by to hold power for them.

Sighing, I turned away and began to shift uncovered stones. Many of them were too large for me to move at all, but I could lever the smaller ones where I wanted them, and each one moved away gave access to others beneath. In order to use window magic to control Where Old Gods Are, there would have to be at least two standing walls and a window. Actually, four walls would be better, and it would need a roof. Window magic, even with ruined windows, required the sense of enclosure, a thing built that opened upon a world not built. There are more Wize-ardly words to describe it, but the sense of it is that. With everything tumbled, moss-grown, and earth-covered, it was very difficult to find corners.

Bunwit had gone. They are not notable for their building skills, though they are good diggers. Perhaps he

was tired, or hungry. I went on moving rocks. I thought I had found a corner hidden under a tumble of shards that looked as though a heavy roof of tiles had fallen in.

Then I heard sounds around me. I wiped sweat out of my eyes and looked at them, a dozen furry bodies at the center of the ruin, pushing and shoving with many heaves and grunts. Flood-chucks! Great, fluffy flood-chucks, moving earth for all they were worth.

“Flood-chuck a chuck a chuck,” I called to them, bowing. All of them stopped what they were doing with a chuckle of appreciation, lining up to bow in return. Then we got back to work. They watched what I did and did likewise, digging out stones and earth from the old rooms, uncovering the old walls. Bunwit sat on the top of an earth pile, supervising. I waved a thank-you at him and went on working.

About midafternoon we stopped digging and wandered about the place, peering through the openings. We had found half a dozen rooms and doors. One of them had an almost complete fireplace as well, with an intact hearth and three walls half-standing around it, so we had concentrated on that. The chucks were experimenting with dry stone courses to raise the walls higher. One of the walls had a window, almost complete, with sill, sideposts, lintel. It looked out one side of the ruin onto a quiet glade where lily flowers bloomed. We were unlikely to do better.

“Here,” I called, gesturing around me. “Here. Roof. Walls. Floor.” Gesturing, sketching with my hands. Bunwit squeaked and ran to get out of the way.

The flood-chucks built the walls higher, cursing in their own grunting tongue as they worked, telling jokes to one another, pausing to laugh and scratch their bellies, like fat women who had just taken off tight clothing. They grinned at me when I thought so, showing two great chisel-blade teeth. When the walls were high enough, they gnawed small trees down and dragged them over the walls to make the roof. Tree rat came down with several friends to weave thatch. I’m not sure how raintight it might have been, but it looked very roofish when they were finished. The flood-chucks cleared the room down to the stone floor, and I swept that with a bunch of straw bound to a stick.

I rigged a sapling rod above the window and hung my rain cape on it as a curtain. For a time, I thought we would have to build a door, but bunwit found one buried under a section of roof, virtually dry and un-rotted. We propped it in its place and gathered armloads of wood to pile beside the hearth. Then the flood-chucks bowed at me, and I at them, and yet again, while bunwit fidgeted on his mound, until at last, surfeited by these courtesies, they departed, chatting with one another as they went.

I had been surprised—and, admittedly, annoyed—when I had learned that much of any magic is simple hard work. Muscle and sweat, no different from any pawn digging in a field to grow grain. “All magics must have a starting place,” Murzy had admonished me. “Did you think it an easy thing?” I had thought it an easy thing and was ashamed to admit it. Wize-ardry in all the old tales seems a fine and effortless exercise, like the soar of a flichthawk, without labor and certainly without sweat. During those early years, I had assumed a day would come when I could stand back from the work and say to myself, “Now the fun begins.”

Not so, according to Murzy. “All magics build upon something, one’s own work or the work of others,” she had said in that firm, unequivocal voice. “‘Wall, window, door, roof, bridge or floor, garden or field, each has its yield.’ So we say, we Wize-ards. And we do not destroy what we find already built for our use. There are those who will destroy the work—or the lives—of others to make their own magics, but we do not speak of them unless we must.”

Well, though I’d received some help, I’d done a great deal of it myself and destroyed nothing in the

process. I had earned my window magic and summoning.

Dusk had come and I was starved. Bunwit arrived with a cheekpouch full of fruit and nuts. Tree rat showed up with more, and they checked at each other about who should feed me. Finally, dark came and they went off into it, leaving me alone.

“All right, forest,” I whispered to myself. “Let’s give it a try.”

Leaving the curtain open, I built a fire upon the hearth. Certain things from my pack were laid out there, in a certain form. A pattern was drawn on the windowsill. Then I leaned from that sill and called, “Come into the light, the warm. Come into comfort. Come where fire is. Come where no shadow may come. Come in such guise as you choose, such shape as you will. Come, forest, come. Where Old Gods Are, a suppliant waits.”

Then I sat down to feed the fire. The summoning was done. It was not long before something began to gather at the window. I fed the fire and kept very still. It was something pale, I think, and tremulous. Something a little clammy, like the night. Something twiggish, leafish. Which reached across the sill and found purchase in the room. Which entered. Which shook itself into shape and stood up, a little taller than I. Twiggish. Yes.

Staying very quiet and calm, I went past it to the window and closed the curtain carefully, closing every gap, laying small stones on the bottom of it to hold it in place.

“Come nigh the fire,” I whispered. “Yet not too nigh.” It sat down near me, cross-legged, holding its hands to the fire in imitation of mine. “You are the forest,” I whispered. “Aren’t you?”

“Forest,” said the twiggy thing in a breeze voice, scarcely articulated. It turned its leafy head to the window behind it. If it had had eyes, it would have looked at the curtain there.

“By the law of dwelling, the shadow cannot enter here.” It was true. Only what was summoned might enter dwelling when fire was present if windows and doors were shut and the proper words pronounced. So all the Wize-ards of the world believed. So I trusted. “Gathers,” it said, moving its hands as windtossed branches move. “Out there.”

“Out there, Not here.” It was silent for a time, then said, “Hears.”

“No. It cannot hear.” I was less certain about this, but it seemed logical. I had laid a closure upon the window when the curtain was closed, a closure upon the roof when the tree rats had finished with it, as well as one on the door when we had propped it in place. “No. It cannot hear.”

Still the thing sat, shifting its shape slightly as its leaves moved, as its parts moved. It was one thing mostly, but could easily be another. And it did not speak. When I had been here last, the forest had spoken clearly. Why, now ... ?

As though it read my thought, it pointed to itself. “Small,” it said.

I nodded. Yes. It was small. It had to be small to avoid notice, perhaps.

It pointed at the window. “Large, out there.”

“Yes,” I agreed, beginning to get the drift. “Small words,” it said, gesturing at itself once more. “Ah.” So

the forest had sent a messenger, but the thing it had separated from itself was only a part. A small part. With small understanding, small words.

“Damnation,” I muttered at myself. More riddles and conundrums, more quips and oddities. Why couldn’t someone in the world simply tell me what was going on? The creature reached a finger—a woody protuberance, sharp, pointed—to touch my face, drawing it away with a tear hanging from it. “Sad?” it asked.

“Confused,” I whispered, astonished at its sympathy. One does not expect that from a ... whatever it was. “I only get pieces of things. You don’t tell me. The Wize-ards don’t tell me. Dervishes don’t tell anyone anything. All this mysterious, weird stuff going on, and I don’t understand any of it.”

“Shhh.” It reached to me again, touching the locket that hung at my throat, next to the star-eye. “Please.”

I clutched at it. The fragment? Please what? I didn’t want to take it off, but I did, opening the locket. The thing leaned forward, as though it had eyes. “Please, Star-eye. Look.”

I looked. It was what it was, a silvery fragment with no ... Wait. The twiggy finger touched it. The forest touched it. Touched it and it swam with light. A pattern. A circle of black. Inside that, a circle of light. Upon that, a design of such brilliance it made my eyes hurt. A cross—not a regular one, more like a letter “Y” with a center post through it. No, flatter than that. The top branch was forked at the edge. The brilliance ran through the dark circle. Outside the dark circle was a gray mixture, grains of dark and light mixed, swimming together.

It pointed to the brilliant design with its very pointed finger, then reached down to touch my foot. The voice came like a tiny wind. “Same. Uncover it, Star-eye. Fix it.”

And then it was gone. Oh, I don’t mean it left. There were tumbled branches and fragments of moss upon the floor, still shivering from the suddenness of their collapse. Outside something huge and ominous gathered, listening with all its attention, but there was no longer anything for it to listen to. I put the fragment back around my neck, then slowly, slowly fed the leafy branches to the fire. Even this, my teachers would have told me, has meaning. When you think an event is ended, look past it. The things that happen immediately following—or sometimes, just before—have great meaning. Fire, I mused. Branches to the fire.

I went to the window, pulled the makeshift curtain to one side, only a crack, drawing back as though stung. Something cold had lashed at me. I replaced the stones and crept to the fire, first humming, then singing to drown out that feeling of terrible disquiet. The song wasn’t much. A love song. Come to my fireside and shelter, my love, and so forth and so on. Gradually the silence turned to evening sound: birdsong, small animals calling, the rush of a quick rain. When only the sound of the forest was there, I took the rain cape down from the window, wrapped myself in it, and went to sleep. Just before doing so, however, I took one of the charred branches and drew on the stone hearth the design the forest had showed me in my fragment. I wanted to remember it in the morning, to look at it again in the light.

When I woke, bunwit and tree rat were there with breakfast, both of them stepping quietly aside from the design I had drawn, bringing my attention to it with their feet. Well, I had remembered it correctly. A radiant three-branched tree, the top branch forked, set on a circle of light, surrounded by a circle of dark. Outside of which was the mixture of light and dark. I marked it in with the charred stick and stood looking at it, chewing on a stalk of rootcane. It was sweet and crisp, gnawed only slightly with bunwit teeth marks. Which was still far better than having to dig my own.

The design meant something. What it meant, I didn't know. But the forest had said. "Fix it."

Uncover it?

Well, so much was clear. The gray slime that Bloster had sprayed at the edge of the forest was obviously part of what had to be fixed. In so doing, we would uncover the forest and fix it, in a sense. If the gray circle were broken ... Wait. I looked at the design again. If the dark circle represented the slimy circle around the forest, then the light circle represented the forest itself. And by breaking the gray circle, the forest would not be cut off any longer. The rest of the design could be deciphered later.

"A way out, ninny," I said to myself. "This forest is shut in, disconnected, and it needs a way out. All right, then. Try to figure a way to get rid of that filthy gray slush they've sprayed all over."

Bunwit stiffened and whimpered. Off in the trees I heard a snorting whomp, whomp. Centipig was tearing up the shrubbery again. "And at the same time," I promised myself with determination but no idea at all how to begin. "No. First we deal with that pig."

15

We spent five days following the centipig, trying to find out where it went, what it ate, when it drank. The results were very discouraging. It went everywhere, ate everything, and drank every time it crossed a stream. In the five days, it crossed its own trail a hundred times but did not establish any habits whatsoever. Trapping a thing that size without any habits one can count on would be impossible. This caused me some tears of frustration and a sleepless night or two until I thought of Dedrina-Lucir. They had trapped the Basilisk by digging a pit for it to fall into as it chased something else. So if we could get the pig to run after something, we could perhaps put a pit in its way.

Next day we tried to get centipig to chase the bunwit, or tree rat, or even me. I had the most luck, but even that couldn't be called successful. It would come after me, eyes burning, tusks flashing, but the minute something else moved, bird or beast, it would forget me and take off after the other thing. I tried standing in front of it, waving my arms and shouting insults, but it merely stared at me, unable to decide whether I or the bird flitting across the clearing made the most appetizing target. Whatever monster shop they had made it in, they had forgotten to put in any brains.

I learned when it did chase me that one way to escape was to run downhill. Going downhill, its legs got tangled and it would sometimes fall over. None of this helped, however. The thing was too big to tie up. There may be ropes strong enough somewhere, but they were not where I could get them in Chimmerdong Forest. Meantime, centipig destroyed great stretches of beautiful woods, leaving ugly, tangled messes behind it, piled with trampled greenery.

I considered putting it to sleep, but making enough potion to keep a thing that size asleep for very long would have taken pots and kettles and a large-size root masher. There was none of those available, either. At last, out of desperation, I decided to try a love potion. Love potions work no matter what the size of the creature involved, and all the ingredients I needed were in plentiful, proximate supply. Bunwit and I went back to the ruined inn and stayed two days while I gathered the sixteen herbs and earths. Bowl-fruit were ripe, so I even had bowls and containers in which to measure and compound the mixture. I made it just as I had memorized it on the way from Schooltown, long ago. When I was finished, I had a neatly corked hollow bowlfruit full of potion, another one in reserve, and a pretty good idea where the centipig was, since it had been whuffling and snorting within earshot most of the afternoon.

We sneaked up on it, managed to get in front of it, then I tossed the bowlfruit directly into its path.

Piglike, it whuffled and snorted and kicked the fruit aside, thundering through the woods with its wicked little eyes gleaming. Bunwit retrieved the bowl and we tried again.

My idea had been that bunwit should be the first thing centipig saw after eating the bowl of potion. I'd thought it out very carefully, and that seemed best. Bunwit was very fast on his feet and couldn't possibly be overtaken even at centipig's fastest. But after nine tries to get the pig to eat the bowl, I ... well, I became careless. Anticipating still another failure, I was leaning against a tree waiting for the pig to kick the bowl away for the tenth time when it whoffled it up in one gulp and turned its piggy eyes straight on me. They were full of rage and fury, just as always, but as I looked into them I saw them change. The only thing I can think of as a comparison would be the expression on Grompozze's face when he used to come licking my hands and begging for biscuits. It was a much more frightening expression than the beast-destruction look it had worn before. This was truly horrifying. A kind of sucking, intense desire. An unthinking hunger. I knew what I'd done in a moment. The thing was so big that, without even thinking about it, I'd made enough potion for any hundred persons. I'd forgotten that size doesn't matter with love potions. "Size doesn't matter," Murzy had said. "It's not like a sleeping drug." Well, I'd remembered her saying it, but I'd forgotten it in the doing.

It came for me, ready to eat me out of love, ready to pursue me forever, and I screamed as though Basilisks were biting me and got out of there. Enough sense remained to remember to run downhill and then away. It bleated horribly, then began to track me. By the Eleven and the Hundred Devils, it had never tracked anything before, but now it was tracking me.

"Water!" I screamed to bunwit. "Get us to running water." And we screeched along, first one in front and then the other, with the crashing behind us coming closer and closer.

We got to water just in time, a deep, slow-flowing stream. I dived in and swam underwater, coming out on the other side a long way downstream. It was some time before bunwit found me, and I knew he'd had forest help to do it. It was impossible to go back to the ruined inn. My smell was all around that place. The only safe place to spend the night was in a very large tree—one too big even for centipig to knock down—while the shadow crept and prowled.

Next morning we sneaked away to the northwest, to the edge of the forest nearest Daggerhawk Demesne, and got the flood-chucks to come help dig a pig pit. It was a narrow pit, very deep, very steep sided. It had to be long enough to hold the whole pig, steep-sided at the front and sides so he couldn't climb out, narrow so he couldn't turn around. Then it had to be roofed over with a net of branches and twigs strong enough to bear my weight since I'd be running directly across it. During the time they dug it out, I sat to one side, my ears up like a bunwit's, alternately shivering and sweating. From time to time, I'd fall into a sickly doze only to wake with my heart pounding. At the time I thought the expression on the centipig's face had given me nightmares. Being loved by a centipig was like being loved by a Ghoul, rather. A mindless passion that could as easily kill as kiss. I sat and shivered and watched the flood-chucks working with their usual deliberation. It took them all day and was then too late to try the pursuit. Another uncomfortable night in a large tree.

And something more than discomfort. A kind of sickness taking hold of me. By the middle of the night it was clear that this malady was not simply a pig problem. Something other than that was wrong, but there was no time to figure out what.

For morning had come, a rainy morning with slick footing. I had to decide whether it would be better to wait for good weather or get it over with. The thought of waiting seemed worse to contemplate than the terrible footing.

So, bunwit, tree rat, and I went off to find the pig. When we found it, I showed myself, wishing there were some other way and trying very hard not to see its face. Had to see its face, of course. Had to see that long, long tongue come slavering, dangling out, those eyes fix and bore into me, hear that sound, part whine, part growl, part bleat, part grunt. Then it was after me and I away.

We did it in short pieces. Somehow it was possible for me to run only a little at a time. We did a piece ending in a hillside, and I got away. Then we did a piece ending in the river, and I got away again. Each time I saw that face it drained more strength away. That kind of bestial, blind adoration sucks at you. It was as though the pig drank me up every time he saw me. Even then, though, I knew it was something more. A real sickness.

The third race almost ended it for Jinian Footseer. I stumbled and fell with the pig so close I could feel the breath from his mouth. I screamed silently, begging for help. Bunwit flashed across in front of him in a long, zigzaggy bound, and that distracted centipig just long enough for me to limp into a rock tangle where he couldn't follow. I sat down and cried. Bunwit and tree rat come in after me, snuggling close, warming me up. There was only one more piece to go, but no person around to do it. Jinian was lost somewhere else, gone. Centipig was still whomping around, but shortly he would lose interest and move away and we would have lost all the effort we had made. After a little time, bunwit hopped away, returning quickly with a few ripe berries of an unfamiliar kind. They were purple, with a green bloom upon the skin. He nibbled one to show me they were all right. I ate one, then another. Warmth ran into me and my head steadied. Well, I thought, that's one I need to tell Murzy. I had never seen them before, and had I known how rare they are, I might have saved one to prove they exist.

So, it was back into the forest again, and showing myself to the pig again, and letting it run after me one last time, blundering, thundering, with its hooves cutting up great chunks of turf and all the flowers pounded into mush where it went. Bunwit flashed ahead, finding the path for me. Tree rat chattered from above, saying, Close, closer, there it is. And there it was, the mat of branches I had watched the flood-chucks lay down.

Careful, careful I went. Slowing. One step, two.

Don't let the foot fall between the branches. Set the feet down. Careful, careful. Centipig came on behind, heedless, not knowing, not caring, the whole thing shaking and heaving like a boat on the sea. The branches at the head of the pit were stronger, to take the weight until the whole beast was on it. I ran on, feeling the structure begin to tremble beneath me. It was weaker here. Then I was at the end, stopping, turning, letting it see me plainly.

It came on and on. Its face was fixed on mine, eyes wide, a horrible anticipation there. I thought the branches would not break. We had built them too strongly, built too well, oh, it was coming on and I was not far enough back. I stepped back, stumbled over bunwit, who was at my ankles, and sprawled on my back as that hideous face loomed over me.

And then a cracking, crashing, and the whole thing went down in an instant. There was centipig, horri-bleating in the bottom of the pit, and there was I, safe above, shaking like a tree in storm as though I would never stop. I sat down and hugged bunwit for some little time, crying as though I had been a tiny child.

"Maybe we'll ask the tree rats to feed it," I whispered into the wide, furry ears. "Maybe we'll want it for something. Right now, though, I'm going to sleep for a day and a night."

We returned to the ruin, I stumbling and weaving while the animals held me up until I could get to the

leafy bed and into sleep as one falling into a well.

The centipig pursued me into sleep.

I sat in the window of a high tower and the pig rooted at the foundations far below, looking upward now and then with a glance of devotion, drool falling in long droplets from its mouth as it stared. It adored me, and that adoration slimed my skin as though it had licked me with its tongue. It loved me and would destroy me if it could, out of love. I wept in the tower, longing to escape, but the blind passion of the pig shut me in. There was no way out, no way around. Soon the very foundations would begin to shake. My small boat floated in a shallow pond and the pig wandered on the shore, calling to me ceaselessly, casting his offal in my direction with his hooves, a filthy offering, deeply sincere. Soon he would begin to drink, and the pond would go dry ...

The cave trembled and I within it, as the pig strove mightily with the stones that composed it, grunting a paean of adoration for my beauty. "Love," grunted the pig. "I will prove my love!" His great boar's prick waggled as he rooted at the stones. Already most were rolled away, soon the others would follow ...

And I woke. From far off in the woods came the sound of the trapped pig, squealing at the sky, demanding his love with brute virility. I sat up, screaming. "Come," I called to the beasties beside me. "What one potion can do, another can undo." And I ran into the darkness, they after me, before I realized I would need a torch to find what I needed and returned shamefaced to get it.

It was only after the pig was dead that I began to shiver and vomit, sick at heart and soul, eventually exhausting myself. And only as I drowsed toward sleep did I consider why Murzy had said, "Never for anything small, chile. Never for anything small." Then to remember with revulsion the decision I had made long before as I'd left Schooltown after a Festival. I had thought, then, if he did not love me, I would make him love me.

I gagged on hot bile, choking on it.

However else I might win the love of the mysterious boy, it would not be with a potion. How dishonorable and vile the creature who would force love from another. I had looked on the face of that kind of love, a pig love which cared not what it did to that it loved.

How could it? How shameful and sickening to have one's affections raped away. I would not be that low and would not bring that kind of shame upon him. And so resolved, the horror in me quieted at last and I slept.

16

I dreamed again. I was very ill. Murzy was holding me in the rocking chair. Someone said, "Either she'll get well or she won't. That's all one can expect."

Murzy said, "Nonsense. She'll get well just as soon as she knows how sick she is. She's only moving out of habit."

There was a sound then. In the dream it seemed that the foundations of my world were being destroyed, and I woke in the chill day of Chimmerdong to a continuing blast of muttering thunder rolling ceaselessly out of the sky.

The dream remained, a clear reminder of my illness, even as I climbed a tall tree in lethargic spasms of

effort, getting above the lower roofs of Chimmerdong to peer toward the west. Pillars of vasty cloud and needles of lightning played there in fitful dark as the sound beat upon us. I clung raglike to the branch, limply absorbing the fury of the sky, growing soggy and droopy with it, climbing down at last to lie at the foot of the tree like an overfull sponge, oozing resentment at having been wakened, too weary for surprise, too depressed for wonder.

“Something happened there,” I said to bunwit. “Some very large thing.” That was all I could manage. Later, of course, when I learned what had happened, that the lair of the Magicians had been destroyed in that one monstrous cataclysm, I felt sorry not to have known, not to have cared. At the moment, however, there was no energy with which to care. I crawled back into bed to sink into my dark core of sleep. There are animals that sleep in that fashion, spending a whole summer, a whole storm season, lost in kindly darkness. I wanted to sleep that way, so deeply that no dreams would come at all, so well that nothing could wake me. I could no longer ignore the sickness that had come upon me. After the forest visited me. Before the pig was trapped. Between those two events some essential link within me had been corroded by this creeping disorder, and I could not repair it. I did not even know it had been eaten away.

The sleep would not last, however. In a time I awoke, suddenly, preternaturally alert, as though by some efficacious drug that sharpened sight and sound and intellect and energy, all in one dose. This was more of the same illness. This wild energy was no less abnormal than the lethargy that had preceded it. Briefly, I wondered what the name of this cyclic disorder might be. It was a passing wonder.

I rose, jiggling in place, feeling the tingle on my bare feet which said remnants of the Old Road were there beneath my toes. With no motivation at all beyond a need to use this hectic excess of enterprise, I began to walk along it, here, there, first in one direction then another. Sometimes the road was there and sometimes not. Parts were buried under mountains of mud and rock with huge trees grown up in it. In some places a river ran where the road should run, and wherever the road entered the slime it simply disappeared. I couldn't tell whether it was underground or gone. It gave no sign of being there, and even digging down a little—oh, what a stench when that ground was dug into—disclosed nothing. Reason said perhaps the road was still there, but eyes, ears, fingers, feet said nothing.

From the northernmost edge of the forest, when I reached that point, I could see Daggerhawk Demesne squatted like a toad on the top of a rock, glaring down at me from a dozen glassy eyes. It was hypnotic, that place. I found myself staring at it, open-mouthed, without moving while the sun slid over the sky. I shook myself, muttered angrily, only to begin staring at it again. They were there, the Basilisks, the mother and mother's sisters of Dadrina-Lucir, probably De-drina-Lucir herself, the vengeful, the threat to my safety, to my life. Porvius Bloster was there, my enemy, my captor, my adversary. Those who hated me and opposed me were there, all there, and I felt a red glow of anger kindle deep inside at the sight of the place.

Eventually I left it there to wander a nearby path which wound among groves of green-trunked trees to end in a stretch of meadow around a house.

A house. I had been alone in the forest for a long time, aware of no other occupant, yet now I stood in baffled confusion, confronting someone standing before a house.

“My dear,” called the person, “I did hope you'd feel free to stop by. Do bring the darling animals and come in.”

He—she? It? This stout, much painted and powdered person, with rosy circles drawn upon its cheeks and long diamonds of black paint drawn vertically through its eyes; this clown, acrobat, actor, pawnish

performer of some kind or other, invisible within its robes and makeup; this incredible visitant posed in the door of the dwelling and beckoned to me as some merchant might summon reluctant custom from the street. Thoughts of wicked Witches, of the Ogress of Tarnost, of Trolls, and Ghouls, came to mind and were discarded. Whatever this person was, it was not precisely that. There was menace, but a menace more subtle than that; terror, but a terror more insidious. Had all my will not been paralyzed by the strange illness that had come upon me, I would have fled. As it was, I approached, mouth gaped like any simpleton at a fair.

“I wanted to thank you, my dear, for disposing of the pig. Monstrous great thing. I can’t imagine what they were thinking of. Daggerhawk, I mean. They’ve never been known for sensitivity, but releasing a thing of that magnitude into a closed system—and I’m sure you’d be the first to agree that Chimmerdong has been most dreadfully closed of late—simply begs for disaster.”

“I think that was their intention,” I said, mouth going on where wits were absent. “They seemed determined upon destruction.”

“No! You don’t say so. Well, Porvius Bloster was a nasty little boy who always picked his nose at parties, but I didn’t think he’d grow up to be like that. His sister, of course, we used to call—behind her back, I do assure you, my dear, she’d have been livid—the Lizard Duchess because of her cold, reptilian nature (one duplicated, so I understand, in her daughter), but I did think Porvius had a hint of warmth to him.”

The person fanned itself for a moment, looking off into the distance with a smile in which satisfaction and a certain cynicism were blended. Then it turned to me with its false, painted smile.

“Oh, my dear, I’m forgetting my manners entirely. Just see what a little stress will do to normally well-behaved people. Now, where were we? Oh, yes. Allow me to introduce myself. I am the Oracle. Not only am, but have been for the remembered past.” It gestured toward the door. “Please. Do come in. You must be very tired after all that road trotting, and I have some soup warming on the fire.”

I had already smelled it. It was the one thing that could have tempted me into the house. I told myself a rogue and devil might mimic good humor and kindness, and most of them do, but surely no one could connive the smell of good soup. For a moment the smell lifted my depression, taking me back to the good smells of kitchens when I was a child. We went in, bunwit, tree rat, and I, and the Oracle seemed not unkindly disposed toward any of us.

That person was now standing against a wall of its room, taking bowls from a cupboard and wiping them on a corner of its fantastic robe. This was made up of straps in bright colors, purple and blue and gold, all depending from ornamental strips that went from wrist to shoulder, across over the ears and head, and down the other side. Except for the long, pale hands, the creature was totally covered with fabric or paint. “I haven’t met an Oracle before,” I said, struggling to be polite, to make conversation. Even this minor effort was almost beyond me, and I silently cursed the dangerous extent of my debilitation. I had a brief, petulant vision of myself reduced to permanent catalepsy, unable to move at all.

“Well, my dear young person, I should think not,” it said in astonishment. “I may be the only one at all. In fact, that is entirely likely. It is certain there is no Oracle in the Index. I’ve had the matter looked into. That has been, in fact, part of the problem. They have their Seers by the dozens, all with the pretty little mothwinged masks, available on any street corner. Why should they seek an Oracle! Hmm! I ask you. And, of course, I’ll answer you, too, my child. Because the Oracle really knows. That’s why. Tell them that, and what do they say? They snort, or mock. So. I’ve given up talking to them at all. I know. That’s all. Let them fumble.” It declaimed this last, waving the soup spoon with sufficient force to throw droplets

around the room. One landed on my lips, and I licked it up. It was, indeed, very flavorful soup.

“Do you really know?” The endless whirl within me spun into silence. Oh, to have answers, to have the realities. To hold in one’s hands the keys, the cure! “Everything? And could you tell me?”

“Well, of course I could. Will I? That depends, doesn’t it. On whether you have the price. No freebies. Doesn’t do to dispense freebies. Persons of consequence don’t respect you. High prices mean high respect. Would your bunwit like some soup as well?”

I mumbled something about the bunwit liking anything leafy, or one of the fruits I could see on the table. It took a proffered vegetable, munching away watchfully while the Oracle gave me soup and bread with soft yellow cheese.

“You see,” I said at last, driven to it by the silence and the desperate need to fasten upon some subject, some perception of actuality. “I’ve been asked to rescue the forest. And I really have very little idea how to be successful at it ...”

“Well, of course you will do it, my dear. Quite unmistakably. You’re the heroine type. A survivor. When it comes to matters like that, one always wants a heroine type.”

“Well, this heroine type doesn’t know how to proceed,” I gritted between my teeth, wanting only to be away from there, curled on my leafy bed in the ruin. Not thinking of anything. I bit my lip until the blood came, ashamed to show this incredible weakness. “How come you stay in the forest, here, by the way? You can’t get much company.”

It shrugged, blinking its diamond-painted eyes so they squinched into four-pointed stars, then opened again. “At one time there were quite enough. That was before Bloster’s forebears decided to cut the forest off, of course. Stupid men. I don’t know what they thought they were doing.”

“You don’t?” I asked. “An Oracle should know, shouldn’t one?”

It waved a spoon at me in mock chastisement. “Silly girl. I don’t mean I don’t mean I don’t know, I mean to make conversation. I mean, conversationally, that it seems ridiculous for them to have done so. Doesn’t it?”

“Not from what I know about Bloster and his kin, no,” I replied, struggling to set words together. Whatever the creature was before me—and a good cook was certainly part of it—it was no giggling schoolgirl, much though it talked like one. “It seems entirely in keeping with knavery and lying and bad Gamesmanship. Bloster took me captive when I was a student, not even Gameable. Then he switched Game to me when I evaded him. Then he sent his thalan, a Basilisk named Dadrina-Lucir, to kill me, a task which she failed, in Xammer, a Schooltown which had been held free from Game by every Referee ever. Exactly the kind of man who would kill off a forest for the sheer joy of it.” My words dwindled away into silence, the spoon falling from my hand.

“Oh, my dear child, how you have suffered,” it said, seeming to push its top lip down under its lower teeth in that expression of sympathy which I detest. “Such a brave little girl.”

“Nothing of the kind,” I whispered. Though I had been thinking exactly that. Some deep, sad vein had been opened to bleed exactly such suffering thoughts. I was choking on them. I could not admit it. “Annoyed little girl. Increasingly angry little girl, if you like.”

“Well, yes,” agreed the Oracle with irrepressible gaiety. “That, too.” It offered me more bread and cheese, which I refused. “I wonder if you could come up with my fee. It might be worth it to you, considering the way you’re feeling.”

“How much?” I murmured. “How much, Oracle? In what coin?”

“Well, it would depend on how many questions, wouldn’t it. How many do you think you have?”

I sighed. All my gut turned and tumbled in that sigh, nausea moving with it, sickness rising like a tide. I sat very still, tasting the bitterness of bile, willing it away. “One,” I said, beginning the enumeration, “why did my mother love me so little that she cared not whether I died? Two: Why did my brother Mendost share this dislike of me? Three: Why am I here, alone, faced with some task I do not understand? Four: How may that task be accomplished?

“Five: Who is it directs Porvius Bloster to Game against me to the death? Six: How could I be sure to make someone love me without using potion or spell?”

Question six had not been one of those I had thought to ask, though it had obsessed me since the killing of the pig.

“Seven,” said the Oracle, “is there only this one task for you to do, or are there other things, greater and more? I will answer that one for you. There is much more, Jinian. Much more indeed.” It giggled, a high, humorless sound rasping like a file.

My throat was full of tears. The thought of more of anything made me weep.

Oracle gave me an arch look. “Interesting questions, those,” it said. “Very interesting.” It hummed, did a little dance, turning around and around like a wheeling moth. “Have more bread, dear child. See, the bunwit likes it very much. I made the cheese myself. Would you credit it? With these very own soft, white fingers. Not at all what one was brought up to do, but then times change, times change.”

“Thank you.” I nodded, unable to move. We sat in muffled silence, the very air around me heavy with my own malady. The Oracle had fed me well, though it had eaten nothing itself. I did not wonder about that, being too busy wondering whether the Oracle was going to set me a price or not. Perhaps it was thinking about it. I began wondering whether the creature was male or female, and it gave me such a look!

“I thought better of you, dear child. Really I did.”

“I was just ...” I made an equivocal gesture. I didn’t care, really.

“Well! Whatever, whichever, no one cares but me and mine. Keep your mind decent and the rest of you will follow, so my Great-Grandma Acquackabby is said to have said.”

“Was she an Oracle, too?”

“No doubt,” it said, mouth twisted in amusement. “No doubt. Well. I’ve decided. I’m going to give you an answer. Not a freebie. You can owe me for it. I’ll think of a price later on when our heads are clearer. I’ve decided to answer question number six. That’s the one you care most about, child, and we both know it. Six is a lovely number. I have a passion for easily divisible numbers. So nice to deal with. Besides, it has been my experience that petitioners often know the answers to most questions before they

ask, so I'll answer the one question you can't answer and trust you for payment. If I may say so, my dear, you do seem trustworthy.

"How can you assure that someone will love you without potion or spell? Well, you do that by letting him save your life a time or two. There is a problem with it, of course. It would be better to be sure you don't get killed in the process. I see something nasty by way of goles or Ghouls in your future, perhaps both. Saving you will require a risk, and it might happen both of you will be lost. Or, it could happen"—and it looked at me here with that terrible sidelong glance which seemed to say things no ears should hear—"it might be he would be killed and you would be quite safe."

It let me think about that, let the picture of it penetrate my disordered brain, let me begin to shudder at the thought. Even through the fog of depression, the thought of his death brought tears bubbling out of my eyes. I bit my lip as the Oracle went on, "You could guarantee his safety and your own, of course, if you had the Dagger of Daggerhawk Demesne in your possession."

"What dagger is that?" I mumbled through the fog.

"I have a copy of it here," the Oracle said, taking it from the same cupboard in which the bowls were stored. "It amused me to make the copy once when I thought of stealing the original. The people at Dagger-hawk had annoyed me. Dadrina Dreadeye, her sisters, her daughter. Bloster. Annoyed me greatly. All their power comes from the Dagger, and I thought that removing it without their knowledge might be a proper punishment. However, after a time I cooled." It laughed, a high, tinkly laugh without amusement. "Here. Ugly, isn't it?"

The wings of an impaled hawk made up the guard, a coiled Basilisk the handle of the weapon. I took it cautiously in a hand that trembled beneath the weight. "Couldn't I use this one to protect myself?"

"It's only a copy, child. It has none of the powers of the real one." The Oracle's face swelled and receded, like a face in delirium, like a Festival balloon. I wanted to laugh but could not.

"Which are?"

"Death, death to the person touched by it in anger. Death to any creature touched by it in anger. A ghost raised from the grave would be returned therein by the Dagger of Daggerhawk."

"A dangerous thing to handle," I said.

"Not at all. It will not harm one to whom it is given, or one who steals it. Only one against whom it is used in anger, dear girl. On consideration, I decided I was not angry enough to use it for anything." The Oracle laughed again. Perhaps it was not anger but some other dark emotion behind that laughter, something I did not care to examine more closely. Instinct told me to leave the place, then, at once, with no further conversation.

Instead, I heard myself asking, "Where's the real one?"

"On the wall of the council hall of Daggerhawk Demesne. Where any good thief could have it down in a minute. And most of the power of the Basilisks with it."

"And you say it would protect me—me and the one I love—if need be?" To which the creature only smiled.

And I lost track, then, of what was said. It went away, I think. When next I looked about me it was gone, though I held the false dagger still in my hand. Some of the bread and cheese remained upon the table, but the place was empty and echoing otherwise. I would have preferred, somehow, that the Oracle remain in one place. The thought of it roaming the forest in its own or some other guise was disquieting. Enervating. I crawled out upon the doorstep to sit in the sun. All that talk had been to no purpose. I would not have energy to steal anything at all, even to save my own life.

When night came, I built a fire and curled up beside it, retreating into sleep from forest and fletcherhawk, from duty and desire, from endless expectations, hoping, I think, not to waken. For a time the fiery core of life and hope burned low.

Bodies are stubborn. Minds are stubborn, too. Came morning and my own mind and body sat up once more, burning with purpose once more, full of a dream in which I fed branches to a fire, brimming with hectic initiative.

I would steal the Dagger from Daggerhawk Demesne. I would clear the slime from the edge of the forest. I would do both at once, with fire. By feeding branches to the fire.

The day went by in a rush of effort, dragging branches into a pile that grew into a hill just inside the screen of forest. Above, Daggerhawk Demesne squatted on its cliff, glaring down from malign sunset eyes, red and furious. Then dark came, the eyes shut, and somehow the small mountain of wood was moved out onto the gray. Just there the gray was thin, worn away, not as choking or burning as elsewhere. Perhaps the Basilisks had walked there often enough to scatter the gray dust. Perhaps there had never been as much of it in that spot. Whatever the cause, we were able to work there without dying. Once I was moving, it was easier to go on moving than to decide to quit, even as my forcefulness gradually left me.

“Yes,” something whispered to me, “but what will you do when the pile is moved? Then you’ll have to run, leap, exert yourself. You’re too tired. Too exhausted from trapping the centipig. Better lie down now, Jinian. Get some rest.” I heard the voice but disregarded it. It was no different from the voice I had heard sometimes in Vorbold’s House, selling despair, selling loneliness.

The voice made it easier to work up a little anger. I would lie down when I felt like it. Until then, I would pile wood.

We began the pile at the edge of the healthy forest, dead wood, fallen branches, bits of dried brush, all in a long, heaped line across the gray. It was dark, but I kept catching glimpses of things I couldn’t identify, twiggy things, mossy things, besides plain tree rats and more bunwits and something that looked very much like a long green dragon. I didn’t ask questions. I was too busy. Purpose had long since begun to fail. I did not want to do any of this. I wanted only to lie down and stop being. Nonetheless, I went on. We had to have the pile in place by dawn.

When the false light appeared along the edge of the sky, we stuffed dried grasses in all the chinks along the bottom. It would have to go up all at once, before Daggerhawk could come put it out. Still, they would have to try. With what little time remained, we built a few more lines of dried wood out into the gray, among the fungusy trees. Though there was probably a Sentinel on watch, he might be asleep. Once we lit the pile it must still be dark enough for the fire to show up, yet late enough that someone would be awake and sure to see it. Finally, there was no time to wait longer.

Then I lighted a dozen torches with my firelighter and gave all but one to the bunwits, who took them nervously. They are not accustomed to using fire. We set out along both sides of the long pile, lighting the

fuses of grass. Then the bunwits scampered back into the forest, and I scrambled into the half-dark of the dawn, straight up the hill toward the squatting toad of Daggerhawk.

I wanted to turn around and watch the fire but didn't dare. When Daggerhawk saw it, I had to be nearby. Close. So close I could see who went and who stayed. As it was, I almost didn't make it.

I heard the alarm sound while climbing the last little bit of rock to the north of the main gate. There's a cleft in the rock there, full of dark. They must have had a Herald on the ramparts, because he let go full voice, "Let all give ear; let all give ear; fire. Fire. Fire." It was an efficient alarm. Lights went on in every window, and the uproar started right away. Everyone was looking down at the forest. No one was looking at the gate.

The portcullis was down. It didn't matter. It would have stopped a man on horseback, I suppose, but not a skinny girl. Slender. Queen Vorbold says we must refer to ourselves as slender. Slender, then. The bars were no barrier, nor was the door of the little room where the rope that draws the portcullis winds around its machine. What do they call it? Capstan? Or is that on a ship?

Whatever they called it, someone came at it very quickly, half-dressed and dragging on his trousers. He set to work hauling up the gate, never glancing into the shadowy corner of the ceiling where I was crouched on a beam. When the gate was up, he locked the roller down with a lever and went running back the way he had come, leaving the door for my spy post. They all went by me, not one manheight away, Bloster and the Pursuivant and dozens of men and women, all carrying buckets and flails. Buckets and flails would not help them much. We had built a pile that would burn fast and hot as tinder, and there was no stream nearby. Still, let them try, let them try. Let them get out of there.

And at last the ones I'd been watching for. A group of women, all of whom looked much like Dadrina-Lucir, all with that same reptilian grace. Dadrina herself, I thought, and mother and aunts, slouching across the courtyard as though they did not care who might be watching. When they had gone after the others I waited only a little longer. Surely the place was empty. I ran across the courtyard. The central keep was off to the left a little, located long since from a treetop in the forest. If it was like most such places, the way to it would not be direct. We all try to make our home places confusing for invaders—Elators, for instance. If they cannot see where they are going, it makes it more difficult for them to get in.

So I cast about, finding my way. If everyone was not at the fire, those left behind were at windows where they could see the fire. I saw no one except a bare-bottomed baby lying in a basket on my way to the great flight of stairs with the heavy door at the top of them.

Quickly then, puffing a little, for it had been a long climb, I found the council hall. Found it. Stared into it in dismay.

The room was huge, square, and lofty. Across from the door, two high windows looked out onto nothingness, a wide gulf of air above the forested valley. On the right-hand wall was a fireplace with a monstrous, carved mantel high on the wall, and above that the Dagger hanging in lonely significance, a tiny dot upon that stone. To either side was an arras, which may have covered other doors. To my left was a dais with a table, two doors behind it, and down the center of the room between me and the windows another long, heavy table with a line of chairs down either side.

It would have taken an Armiger to reach the Dagger.

Or a dragon. Or a bird. I despaired, biting my lip, feeling the tears gather. Then I saw that the high chairs

beside the table had ladder backs higher than my head. They were not so heavy that I could not walk one of them over to the hearth. Then I could scurry up the back, climb onto the mantel, take the Dagger, and hide it under my cape while substituting the false one the Oracle had given me.

It was done almost as quickly as thought of; I came down the chair and walked it back to its place by the table. It was a chair from the end nearest the hearth, the side nearest the windows. It slid beneath the table with a silken, hissing sound, a sound infinitely prolonged, a sound that I only gradually realized came not from the chair but from the doorway through which I had entered, a sound I had heard before in the dark night outside Xammer. The Basilisk's sound.

In the doorway stood Dadrina-Lucir. Not dead. Not even injured. The Demesne had not been empty after all. Those who had gone had done so only to trick me.

"When we sssaw the fire in the foresst, we knew it wasss a trick," she hissed at me. "My auntsss and I."

Gods. One of the doors on the dais swung open as a blunt reptilian head came through it. Across the room an arras moved, and the sound of slithering came from behind that. Had they been here when I came in? Or had they only now arrived? Did they know? Oh, gods, if they already knew I had the Dagger, they would give me no chance. Only if they thought ...

"I came for that, Dadrina," I said, trying to sneer, trying to sound cocky, moving toward the dagger on the wall.

"You may not have that," hissed a voice from behind the arras, the heavy body thrashing across the floor to get between me and the hearth. There were three of them. Was that all? I stepped away toward the window to see the whole room. There were only the three. Between me and the way out.

"Having you ever sssseen ssss someone bitten by a Basssilissk?" This from the one between me and the false dagger, a fully lizard shape, a high crown of spines rising between its eyes, eyes as lucent and glorious as jewels fixed on me and me on them, on them, on them. I wrenched my face away, remembering almost too late that I could not look at them, at any one of them.

"I have heard the filth of a Basilisk's bite is worse than a Harpy's mouth," I said, still trying to sound unafraid. I wanted them unthinking, if possible. Murzy had said—someone had said; Cat?—that they were not subtle. Someone had been fairly subtle here; more subtle than I. But, Cat had said, in beast shape they lost some of it. Oh, gods, let them not be subtle. "I had heard it comes from the filthy nature of the beast, whether in the shape of it or not."

"And why did the idiot Dangle-wit come to steal?" she hissed, every sibilant drawn out in her serpent's voice, long and ominous. "What would it try to do with the eidolon of Daggerhawk?"

Dadrina didn't know; they didn't know.

It was the only advantage I had.

Still, there was no way at all that one slender girl could physically fight three giant Basilisks and come out victor, even with the Dagger of Daggerhawk Demesne hidden in one hand.

"Have you come to declare Game against usss?" She threw back her head and laughed, a kind of racking laughter, like hammers on flesh. We had never heard that laugh in Vorbold's House. "Simpleton.

Hawk bait. Dangle-wit!”

“I need not declare Game,” I said as firmly as possible, moving away from the chair so they wouldn’t start thinking about its laddery back. “Game was declared by your thalan, Porvius Bloster. And you declared Game against me, Dedrina-Lucir. The Game is yours. I need not declare.”

“Need not!” she spat at me. “Need not. Indeed, need not. Need not ever again, need not breathe, or move, or speak. Need not see or taste or hear. Need not live, Dangle-wit. Need not again.”

And then she began to change.

First the claws at the ends of her fingers came out, long and yellow as dirty ivory. The hands turned greeny brown, leathery and scaled, and this crept up her arms, the arms swelling and her clothing ripping to fall away. The eyes grew wider, rounder, moved out to the side of her head so that she turned it a little to keep me in sight, and those eyes burned, spoke, “Look at me, look at me.” I could feel the paralysis creeping. Her aunts hissed. “Yes, Jinian. Look at her, at us, at the Basilisks. Come to us, Jinian. Foolish child. Stupid girl.” Down in the forest I had been stirred into a little volition. Now I could feel the last of that small purpose leaving me.

And I was glad of the loss. It would be nice not to have to move. Not to worry that I had no Talent. Not to be concerned about the past, the future. Mother, Mendost, King Kolver—all. All would vanish in some venomed haze that would last only a moment and be gone. No more seeking answers that never came clear. No more frustration. No more senseless demands by curious creatures.

She should have kept still. I could not have opposed her. My will was gone, but still Dedrina went on speaking.

“First you, Dangle-wit. Then your friends from Xammer, the old women.” She laughed again. “My mother is not here. She has gone north for a time. She will regret missing our amusssement with you and your friends. A little bite to make the dying last, Dangle-wit. From Dangle-flight Demesne.”

I knew that voice well. I had heard it too often in the courtyard of Vorbold’s House, had heard too often that epithet thrown at me from behind my back. I had heard that same hiss in the fields outside Xammer. Her words recalled misery and loneliness, and I felt rage rising up, turning me away from those eyes. “No, ugly lizard,” I whispered with a thick tongue. “I will not look at you.”

Perhaps this infuriated her. She was not completely changed. Her head and upper body were changed, but the lower part of her was still shifting, the legs and tail were only partly there. Still, she fell belly down and came writhing across the floor at me, faster than I would have thought possible. If Dedrina had been able to see me in the fields outside Xammer, if she had moved like this then, I would not have lived to tell of it. Jaws were gaped wide behind a fog of venomed breath. I backed away from the carved table and drew the Dagger from my tunic, hiding it from her. With every movement, I grew angrier, for she would not stop hissing her vile words.

“Dangle-wit. A child without Talent? A girl without ability? You should have been born here, Dangle-wit. We sell your kind to the Magicians. They need no wits, there. Only soft young bodies. Betrothed to Dangle-fire, is it not? To some witless, deformed King? Who must betroth his wives young or will not get them at all. Loving sister of the foul Mendost, the foul, un-Gamely Mendost ...”

The two at the sides closed in. Dedrina came toward the table that separated us, reptilian head high to peer across it. I knew she would drop that head to slither beneath when the others had come close

enough, thrusting her way among the chairs. I was backed against the window, nowhere to go, no time to do anything ... anything but ... Her head went down.

“Mothwings Go Spinning,” I said, laying the Dagger upon one palm. It was heavy. Heavier than anything I had ever moved. “Eutras,” I murmured, making a quick gesture with my left hand. “Bintomar. Sheilsas. Favian. Up. Up. Touch all. Mothwings Go Spinning!” And I bent all my intention on it, moved by the swelling anger the Basilisk’s words kept burning.

The Dagger trembled on my hand, trembled, shook, rose, began to spin. Oh, so slowly, rocking unsteadily upon the air. Seeing the Dagger, the Basilisks to either side had begun to scramble, their hard nails slipping on the polished floor, panting like fustigars, mouths gaped wide. “Mothwings,” I gasped, “Go Spinning!” It moved faster, whirling, circling, moving out. I moved away from the wall to give it more room as it circled out and around me, tilted my left hand to guide it down, and out, and down. High behind me, low in front, tilting, whirling.

Still she was not silent. Still she went on invoking Mendost’s name, the foul, un-Gamely Mendost.

Mendost was foul and dishonorable, and perhaps Eller was no better, but it had nothing to do with me save to infuriate me. I had not designed either one of them nor clung to them from affection. The Dagger, sensing my rage, spun faster. “Mothwings Go Spinning,” I cried, widening the gesture. “Eutras. Bintomar. Sheilsas!” I realized they were names I was calling. Names of what? Who? Did it matter? “Favian! Up. Up. Touch all!”

And the spinning Dagger touched the Basilisk to my left. It did not scream. Came a hiss like some great engine under pressure, a howling hiss, gargling in the throat as from something already dead, but it stayed where it was, the eyes glazing over, still erect, jaws wide, as though it yet lived. Across the wide-flared nostrils lay a little line of blood, like a thread. That is all, one threadlike line.

From my right a scream as the second lizard saw what had happened to the first. Oh, they were not subtle. I would have retreated, but it did not. It came on as I tilted my hand to the right, sending the Dagger down on that side like a toy whirled on a string. It crossed the Basilisk’s eyes, only touching them. Only touching, yes, but I was red with rage. Again the howling hiss, again the creature frozen in place with dull eyes. And now was only Dadrina-Lucir before me, beneath the table. The Dagger could not reach her, but neither could she see what had happened.

“Now, my mother’s sistersss,” she was saying, “we will ssslowly take this Dangle-wit, this stupid girl. Ssslowly, ssslowly.” And she moved out from beneath the table.

My eyes dropped and were caught by the deadly net of the Basilisk’s gaze, feebly struggling as a fly struggles. She licked her mouth with a horrid anticipation and moved toward me as the Dagger, released from my spell, fell onto the floor between us. She looked down for an instant, surprised at the clatter, more surprised to see what lay there. Her head came around to look up at the wall where the false dagger hung.

It was all the time I had, all that I needed.

“Eutras, Favian,” I mumbled through a dry throat. “Touch all.” The dagger lifted from the floor, only briefly, wobbling in its flight.

It was enough. She was not subtle; she did not think; she put out a great taloned paw to catch it and the point spun across the scales, cutting them. She had time to turn that head toward me again for one glance

of horrible comprehension, and then was frozen in place.

I was left alone among the bodies of these great beasts. Among the bodies of these women.

One of them was tall and muscular and not beautiful, though young. So, all the beauty had been Beguilement, the Basilisk's Talent. As tall and well-muscled were the other two, but their hair was gray. All the lizard eyes were dull and dead. My eyes were as dull. I could feel the rage dwindling, the anger departing, the shadowy blankness coming back again. What was to be done now?

If I were to go on living, I would want to keep this Dagger for reasons of my own, I told myself, not caring whether it would happen or not.

And yet, if Bloster or his kin found these bodies, so little wounded, scarcely scratched, all dead—he would know. He would come hunting with others of the kindred, and they would find me soon enough, for my little rage had burned out and I could not move at all. And they would find the dams, for they knew about the dams. These I had killed were not the only Basilisks of Daggerhawk Demesne. Dedrina Dredadey had not been here. She was elsewhere, alive. Soon she would be full of vindictive anger.

I did not care what happened to me, not then, but I did not want Murzy to suffer. Nor Margaret.

There was a window at the side of the room. It looked out over sheer walls to the valley beyond. If I leaned from it a little, I could see the line of fire and tiny black figures battling it. Mostly, however, it looked out upon air.

In a kind of dull, fatalistic haze, I opened my belt pouch and took from it those things needed for a summoning, laid them out upon the wide sill while I mumbled the powering words. There was no power in me, only in the words I had learned, but such is the efficacy of those words that they carry their own power.

Then I said, "Flichhawk; numen of the skies, enter this place to take up a burden, for it is your burden more than mine."

I stood waiting in the window, head down.

Nothing.

The tiny black forms in the valley were giving up in disgust. Already some of them were halfway back up the hill. Were there oubliettes, dungeons where bodies could be hidden? I thought of dragging them there, giving up the notion in the instant. One, perhaps. Not three. I thought vaguely of stabbing them all again to make it appear they had died from more serious wounds.

Then at last, when I had given up expectation—never having felt hope—the sound of wings. The window was large but scarcely large enough. His mighty talons gripped the sill, and his beak jutted in as he spoke.

"Well, Jinian Footseer. Have you summoned me for the boon I promised you?"

"No, flichhawk. Not for a boon for myself. For you and the forest, perhaps. Here is the Dagger of Dagger-hawk." I held it so he could look upon it, so he could see it clearly. When he saw the image of the hawk impaled upon it, something went hard and icy in his eyes.

I went on wearily, "If these bodies are found here, flichhawk, they will come for me. And for the forest. And perhaps for you. I cannot carry them away. I cannot carry myself."

"A boon for me indeed," the bird whispered, a high, keening whistle that set my hair on end. "And what of you, Jinian? Do you still refuse to be dangled?"

"I will be dangled," I whispered, hearing shouts from the courtyard below. "There is no time for anything else."

So, I was dangled once again. Only as far as the bottom of the hill, behind a stony scarp, where we could not be seen. Then the hawk was away, the corpses of Dadrina-Lucir and her aunts tucked up beneath him in one mighty foot like bunwits in the talons of an owl. The thought did not bear following to its logical conclusion, so I thought of nothing as I hid the evil Dagger away and trudged down into the gray, thence into the green, thence along the edge of the forest to the place we had set the fire.

It was still burning, spreading into the surrounding gray, which smoked with a sullen, creeping glow, like charcoal, stinking as it smoldered. The forest had drawn its skirts, away from the fire. A tree pulled up its roots and walked back among its fellows, three bushes and a clump of silver-bells following its example.

"Perhaps it will burn forever," I said to myself in a dull, lifeless voice, not recognizing it as my own when I heard it.

"Oh, dear child," said the Oracle from behind me, "I shouldn't be at all surprised if it did. What a stench. Not that one wouldn't have done it, even knowing what a smell it would cause." It was standing under the shelter of the trees, leaning against one of them, its fantastic face shadowed by the leaves. "Do you have news for me, dear girl? Oh, I so hope so."

I shivered. "Yes." There seemed no point in saying more than that. Undoubtedly the Oracle already knew. I took the thing from my tunic and displayed it, only briefly. "I will not put it into your hands. I will not tempt you with it."

"Oh, my dear girl, how sensitive of you. But then, the heroine type would be, wouldn't she. Better you keep it, dear child. To protect yourself with. You and your love ... if it should come to that ..."

The voice faded back into the trees. The feeling was strong even then that I hadn't heard the last of it, though it was some time before I saw the Oracle again.

17

The grayness burned and went on burning as though it had contained some volatile material that could not be extinguished. Though it rained in the night, on the morning the grayness continued to smoke, sending long, ugly coils of black into the air to be blown away toward the east. I thought of those in Xammer, looking to the west only to see all these smelly vapors.

I could not get near the place we had put the woodpile. There was too much smoke and ash. So while the fire burned itself farther away on either side, east and west, bunwit, tree rat, and I wandered about, doing nothing, with me sometimes spending long hours sitting at the foot of trees, believing I was thinking. Looking back, there was no thinking going on. It was a mere, mushy grayness in my head, no whit different from the plague of Chimmerdong. It surrounded me and held me in. I had not the wits to know it. Once tree rat chivied me up the ladder tree to spy upon Daggerhawk. A mounted party rode out in the mid-morning, returning late that afternoon. There seemed to be some shouting going on. Near evening, I

saw Porvius Bloster come down the road from the fortress, the Pursuivant at his side. Tree rat and I went down, he headfirst, I less ebulliently. We hid in a copse and listened.

“You could not find Dadrina-Lucir while she was held captive, now you cannot find her or my sisters. Cholore, perhaps your time of service to our Demesne is at an end.”

“Oh, do not bluster so! I am no neophyte to be accused in this fashion!” The Pursuivant turned a harsh face upon Bloster, chopping the air with his hand. “I can find what is to be found, but you know as well as I that things can be hidden where no Pursuivant, no Rancelman, no finder of any kind can come upon them. Your thalan was hidden from me for a time. She and two of your sisters have been hidden from me now, or have hidden themselves for some purpose of their own. You have other sisters. Soon Dadrina Dredadey will return from the north. Perhaps she knows.”

“Those two would not have left the Demesne without the Dagger. Dadrina-Lucir would not have left. Not voluntarily.”

“So, they were abducted. You will receive Game declaration from some Gamesman soon enough, offering them for ransom. Perhaps from Mendost of Stoneflight, whom you so much detest. Perhaps from some other you have offended. Whatever. One would think you had no experience of such things.” He turned away, disgusted.

“Somehow,” said Porvius, eyeing the greenery around him with a suspicious glare, “I think not.” He ventured toward the fiery place only to be driven back as I had been by the choking smoke. “We will have to spray this again when the fire burns itself out ...”

“Why?” the Pursuivant asked in irritation. “Why this obsession with Chimmerdong, Bloster? I know the people of Daggerhawk have called themselves the Keepers of Chimmerdong, but why? It seems a futile, useless task.”

“A bargain made when the world was young, Cholore. The Demesne, the power we have held—all given us in exchange for guarding Chimmerdong and keeping it inside the circle. This was an end much desired by the Magicians.”

“Your Demesne has been close to the Magicians?”

“Close! Who can say close? Who knows what Magicians think or want? They send messages by their traders, we send messages in return. Who knows if the traders tell them what we have really said, or tell us what the Magicians really desire?”

“And it is they who want that girl Jinian killed? The Magicians have some reason to want her dead?”

“The Magicians? I doubt they know she exists. No. That order came from others. The ones who gave us the Dagger. Them. You know. From up north.” These words were in such a portentously gloomy tone, they caught my attention even through the lethargy. Porvius Bloster was stroking the dream crystal which hung on his chest.

“Them? Dream Miner? Storm Grower? What brought you into their indenture, Bloster? I did not know you were addicted to the Miner’s wares. I thought you smarter than that.”

I was surprised to see the Pursuivant pale as he spoke, this Gamesman who had seemed beyond any feeling.

“What they want, they find ways to get. And they grow stronger as time passes.” Porvius snarled as he turned toward the road once more. “They know more than any Seer, see deeper than any Demon. The future, the past, all are one to them, and they move us like pieces on a gameboard. If they have decided on this girl’s ruin or death, it is for reasons they consider sufficient. Better her ruin than mine, and better you not speak of them at all.”

Porvius, like his sister, should have talked less. If he had come and gone silently, I would not have had energy to oppose him. I could barely find intention enough to feed myself. This talk of mysterious persons in the north who would give casual orders about my life or death, however, was an irritation. Though I felt strangely little curiosity about it, anger was raised in me again. Only a little anger, but enough to make me vengeful. That night bunwit and I slipped into the fortress and set fire to the storehouse where the sprayer things and the cans of gray stuff were kept. Just as the forest burned, so that storehouse burned, with a mighty, hot malevolence that kept all at Daggerhawk busy for some days.

When the fire was out at last, the place was beyond habitation. It was filthy with smoke, stinking of greasy ash, and where one set bare skin, blisters erupted that refused to heal. Tree rat and I watched from the treetop as they left the Demesne, wagon and cart, horse and fustigar, going north. Much later I realized I should have paid attention to that direction. At the time, it meant nothing.

At the head of the procession rode Porvius Bloster, head down and chin dragging, a lean, reptilian woman at his side. When all of them had gone, I went to the place, wrapping my boots with leaves and vines, careful to touch nothing. The false dagger was stuck through some papers into the top of the great table. Evidently they had tried its powers, for there was a pawn in the corner, wounded slightly on the arm, then stabbed through the heart. Perhaps, with Dedrina’s mother in the north, Dedrina herself gone, and two other of the Basilisks missing, Bloster had attempted some ceremony of allegiance to himself. If he had, his demonstration of the dagger’s power had failed. Now it served only to pin a document to the table.

I looked at it without curiosity, a thing of swirling black letters upon parchment, the letters leaping out at me in fragmented phrases. My own name. “The girl called Jinian is ...”

“Daughter of ...”

“Must be eliminated ...” The form of the letters themselves brought an uncontrollable terror. I shuddered, fleeing the place. Good sense did not prevail until much later, but when I returned to the place, the papers were gone, removed by what? Or whom? No living thing could have walked unscathed amid that ash unless protected as I was. It had been no bird or small beast collecting paper for a nest, of that I was certain.

By this time, the fire had burned a swath of considerable width. One could walk from the edge of the forest outward, through the circle the gray had made to the fields once more. Moved by an unconsidered habit of tidiness, I swept at the ashes with a broom of dried grass. One pale stone appeared, then two. Then another, then a line. I wished for creatures with broomy tails. Neither tree rat nor bunwit had any. While wishing, I kept on sweeping. A road was there, under the ash, not whole, broken in places, but not badly. I moved stones, swept ash, got filthy. Once the ashes were swept away, rocks could be moved without burning the skin. I sometimes removed my shoes to feel where the stones could be found. At the end of a long day, one could look down the line of pale stones from the forest’s edge to the land beyond. Whatever wished to enter or leave Chimmerdong upon that road could do so. I had intended only to break the gray ring, but in doing so I had uncovered a road. In the slow, endless days that followed, the beasts and I went on uncovering it as far as the ruin, a silver thread leading to the world outside.

Then even that slight excuse for activity was gone. All anger been used up, all old pains mined out for what rage they could supply. There was nothing more to use. I sat on the tailings of my discontent, staring out the window, thinking nothing. Time went by unmeasured, dark and light. How long? Very long. Perhaps. No one counted the time. Nothing mattered.

Sound came. Rain, perhaps. A pattering. No. Wind? Odd. The sound was somehow familiar. Curiosity brought my head up and my feet under me. The remote, uncaring person inside me watched some other Jinian get herself outside the ruins where she might listen.

More a whirring sound. Like a giant top, spinning.

Then of course I remembered even before I saw the shape come spinning down the road from the north, the road I had unburdened. A Dervish. Perhaps the Dervish—Bartelmy of the Ban. The one who ...

It came to a stop before me, the fringes settling into their disturbing stillness. “Jinian Footseer,” it said to me in that toneless, emotionless voice. “The road is open. Well done.”

“That is true,” I said. “A road is open.” My voice was as toneless as the Dervish’s. Truth to tell, I didn’t even care about the Dervish.

“When one is open, workers may come in,” she said. “When one is open, workers will come in. Tragamors, perhaps, to move great hills? Sorcerers to hold power for them?”

I did not answer. What was there to say?

“What have you to tell me?” it asked then, still not moving, as though we had all day and night to stand there and talk before the ruins. I wanted to sit down.

“Will you come in?” I offered. It was only studied politeness, the habit learned from a year and a bit at Vorbold’s House.

“Stand,” it said. It wasn’t a preference. It was an order. I stood. “Tell me.”

I mumbled a bit about summoning the forest, about the Oracle, the Dagger, the Oracle again. The Dervish hissed, not like the Basilisk but like a tea kettle, full of hot annoyance. I had not thought they ever became annoyed.

“The Oracle! Here! Where is the Dagger?”

“I have it,” I said dully. “I will use it, if need be. I learned I will need it, as the answer to one of my questions.”

An angry buzz then, like a whole hive of warnets. A cry almost of pain. “Oh, Jinian, what questions did you have!”

Something snapped in me. “A lot!” I screamed at her. “A hell of a lot! Nobody tells me anything! Why don’t I have any Talent? That’s one question! How come Mother and Mendost were always so hateful? That’s another! How come Murzy keeps things from me? How come I’m all alone out here in the middle of nowhere with everybody, including you, coming at me from all sides! What the hell am I supposed to do!” Then I sobbed. I don’t know where the pain and tears came from, all at once, out of nowhere. I

thought I had used them all, but there were more ...

The Dervish trembled. I saw it even through my own tears, feeling as surprised at that as I did at my own uncontrolled emotions. The Dervish trembled like a tree in wind, as though it wanted to move—toward me? away from me?—but could not. A sound came from it. If I had not known better, I would have said it was an anguished sound. Not from a Dervish, though. Never.

Perhaps never. When it came, the voice was still toneless, unemotional, but it held a timbre as of concealed sorrow. “I will come into your dwelling, Jinian Footseer. I will answer your questions, those I can.” She spun once more and moved through my ancient doorway. I saw with astonishment that the door was shaped correctly for it, narrow at the bottom, wide at the top, as though the creatures that had come here in the far past might have been like this one who came here now.

And I followed to bend over the hearth where a small fire burned. Habit made me offer the Dervish tea, a quiet, minty brew made of plants Murzy had showed me. The pot was always full of it. It was all I had eaten or drunk for a long time. The Dervish accepted a cup and stood there, pillar still, with the hand and cup beneath the fringes as she drank, her face invisible. The cup came down empty in a wide hieratic gesture, like a ritual. I thought suddenly of thirst endured for its own sake, of hunger endured for its own sake. Of endless, whirling hours spent in concentration. Of never sitting, seldom lying down. Of becoming something other than oneself. In that moment I thought all those things and knew the Dervish thought them, too.

“You don’t care that you have done a good thing,” she said at last. “You don’t feel at all.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled. “I try to care, but I can’t.”

“Ah,” she said. “When did this unfeeling begin?” I tried to think. It had begun before I had trapped the pig, for this deadly lethargy had almost killed me then. I had never noticed it until after talking with the forest. Perhaps then. When the shadow had gathered. My body had continued to move for a while, out of habit, then for a time out of anger. I said this. She nodded, slowly. “You went to the window and pulled the curtain aside, only a crack, but that which waited outside needed only a crack. It lashed within as a whip lashes. It touched you. It needs only touch, no more than that. I have seen it before. The vital web which controls your body and connects it to your mind has been broken. Your mind thinks, but your body will not move. Or perhaps it moves wildly, without control. Sometimes you sit for hours, oppressed by a weariness so deep there is no relief from it. Sleep does not cure, it merely postpones. Instead of standing poised within the flow of all, you have fallen below it, into depression, into subsidence. There is no hope in you.”

She was right. I didn’t care, but I knew she was right.

“I have seen some persons so sunk in shadow they do not move for years,” she said. “Standing like stones. I have rescued some such. Perhaps you have some immunity to it, for you have managed to go on living. Pay attention now.” She reached for me, touched me.

She hurt me.

She hurt me and went on hurting me.

It was worse than the time the Healer had come when I was a child. Worse than the time at the citadel when she had looked at me in the Dervish way. Worse than anything I’ve ever felt. Worse than the pain of thorn or bruise or insect bite. Fire running down every nerve, meeting obstruction, then leaping across

that obstruction in an explosion of heat and color that was felt, not seen. Bridge! my mind screamed, agonized. Bridging broken places with fire. Oh, stop, stop. Oh, gods, stop. Please. I babbled. I twitched, fell down, the Dervish's hand coming with me. Back, ribs, chest, arms, then down into my groin, my legs, every toe, liquid fire running everywhere.

How do I describe pain? Everyone knows pain. The bitter companion, the hated protector. I learned in that one, endless instant to know pain. And when it was over, to value it. But not until later.

“There,” breathed the Dervish over my sobbing, thrashing body. “The shadow breaks all webs, shatters all nets. The shadow disrupts all continuity. I have bridged the places that were broken. It is painful, for the broken places must be shocked into awareness, realigned and reconnected. Now they are alert again.”

She made me look at her, made me follow her pointing finger with my eyes. “Shhh. Settle now. It is over. You have done a similar thing yourself, Jinian. There.” And she pointed to the length of road, clear to the north. “You, too, have bridged the broken places. Consider whether there may have been pain when you did so.”

I looked at the pale line of road in shocked amazement, suddenly granted an insight which I cursed myself for a fool that I had not seen before. The tingle I felt when I walked upon the road. Dissimilar only in intensity to that I had just felt.

“You see.” She nodded at the charcoal pattern upon my hearth, pointing it out with that preemptory finger. “There is a pattern of the roads of Chimmerdong, and there”—the finger directed my attention out through the open door—“there is the reality. There”—indicating the swept white line leading away north—“there is the reality restored. Now you see.” She stood away from me. “And now you must decide which pain you will bear. That of being as you were. Or that of being as you are.”

I brought myself up to my knees. That was as far as I could get. The hand that had held the teacup appeared again, a full cup in it, the steam rising into my nose. I gulped it, interrupting the gulps with sobs. “Pain of being as I am? I don't understand.”

“But of course you do. The pain of curiosity unsatisfied, of ambition unfulfilled. The pain of love unreturned, of devotion undeserved. The pain of friendship rejected, of leadership ridiculed. The pain of loneliness and labor. Silly child. Did you think living was easy?”

Well, I had, of course. Not really easy, perhaps, but easier than this. I guess all children expect life to be easy. It seems easy, just looking at it from outside. Being half-dead as I had been for the past while was easier than this.

“It's easier to be dead,” she said, seeming to Read me. “Always.”

“I think I would rather be alive,” I managed to say. “Even if it hurts.”

“As it will,” she said firmly, standing back from me to become the silver pillar once more. “Now, Jinian Footseer, you had questions. You ask what it is you are to do. I will try to answer that.

“Long ago when our people came here—that is, when human people came here—there were creatures already here governing this world. They were not simple beasts or people. That much we can infer. They were not discrete things with edges and centers, brains, hands, feet. They were different from that ...

“And our people were arrogant. What they did not understand or perceive easily, they either attempted to kill or dispose of. And so they did with these old entities.”

“Old gods?” I asked wonderingly. “Gods?”

The Dervish pondered. “That is what some of the Wize-ards call them. What are gods, after all? Do we know? Call them old gods if you like. And say our people wounded them or imprisoned them, though I do not believe we succeeded in killing them or any one of them.”

“How could they imprison a god?” I demanded. I didn’t think it could be true.

“As you were imprisoned, Jinian, alive in your own body, only minutes ago. Reduced to small volition. Living from little rage to little rage. With your nerves cut. So your brain might live and your lungs pump and your heart beat, but you would be isolated, imprisoned in your own skull, helpless. Separated. Cut off from the world, as our people cut off these old ones. As they did here, in Chimmerdong.”

“The ruined roads?”

“The ruined roads. And those that ran them, those who carried the messages to and fro. They were cut off so that forest was sequestered. And mountain, or great tree, or river. Or beast. All the great old entities. All, we believe, but one.” She fell silent for so long I thought she had forgotten me.

“One?” I prompted her at last.

“All but shadow. We do not know what it is. We call it shadow because we can see only the darkness it draws about itself. Even that is not easy to see. We can infer it was not so great before we came. Without the other forces to balance it, however, it seems to have grown.”

“I saw it in the forest. More than once.”

“Most of our kin have seen it. Seen it near the Old Road where the blind runners go. Seen it near the shadow tower where I have seen it often myself. Oh, yes, we have seen it. Studied it as best we could, though that is a dangerous occupation. And from what we have inferred about its nature, we believe there must once have been something to control it. Those you call the old gods, perhaps. We have been searching for them for a very long time.”

“I should think they would want to be found,” I said.

“Want to be found? By us? Wounded already by us? Hurt? Untrusting of man? Go into the great marshes of Firth, Jinian, seeking a wounded zeller in the limitless swamps. It would be easier to find that zeller than to find a wounded god who has no reason to trust us.

“Still, over the centuries, we have learned some things. Those who could feel the Old Road seemed to have an advantage in understanding, so we bred for that. Those who are tough and resilient learned more, so we bred for that. Women learned more than men most times, so we built the sevens mostly and the Dervishes entirely of women. And increment by increment we learned, tiny inference piled upon tiny inference.”

“What do you truly know?” I begged, afraid she would not tell me.

“What do we know firmly? Without question? There are creatures called Eesties,” she said. “Among

them is at least one of the old entities. The Shadowpeople know of it. It is called Ganver. There is an old entity in Chimmerdong, and you tell me you have spoken with it. There are others. We have not seen them, but we know they must exist. Perhaps you have spoken with one of them, also?" I thought of the fitchhawk and nodded. Perhaps I had.

"We know the roads are the key to understanding, and on this key we have based our existence, our future, our destiny. And we believe, for very ancient songs and chants speak of it, that there is a shadow-master somewhere. Something that controls and guides what we call the shadow. It may have something to do with the ancient tower the blind runners sing of. I may have seen that same tower. Others have seen what I saw. Himagery the Wizard. Chamferon the Wizard. Mavin Manyshaped, the Shifter.

"And there is something in legend called the Daylight Bell ..."

"Little Star and the Daylight Bell. The story I played with the fitchhawk!"

"A very old story. There are truths in these old tales, Jinian. They persist. The very words persist, century after century. Like rituals. Not merely tales for amusement, but rituals of truth. Perhaps the thing itself exists. And those are the things we know, Jinian Footseer. Little enough, you may say, for some hundreds of years at the task of learning more. That is the task we were given by our founder: to learn more yet. To await the renewal of the roads. To prepare for the destiny of the Dervishes."

Came a long silence then. There were many things I should have asked her. About Porvius Bloster and the things he had said. About the Dream Miner and Storm Grower, which—who?—had ordered my death. About the enmity of the Basilisks, so deadly and so unexplained. About the Oracle, who or what it was, and why I had sensed malice from it, and danger. So many things. I asked none of them. I was so awed to think I had talked with an old god that I couldn't think of anything much to say. I moved a finger, tentatively. It felt good to move. It had not felt good to move for a very long time. I rose on my toes, wiggled my arms. The silver Dervish stood, watching me.

At last, however, the sight of that still, silver pillar became oppressive and I murmured, "I thank you, Dervish. I confess I did not think one of your kind would tell me anything, and though I do not know why you have treated me so kindly, I thank you for it."

"You are my child," she said.

The words were senseless. They might have been spoken in gnarlibar growl or bunwit squeak for all the meaning they had.

"You are my child," the Dervish repeated. I saw one arm quiver, as though she wanted to reach out and could not. "We cannot bear as others bear. The way we are reared makes our bodies ... different. We have not some of the essential parts for bearing. So, we beget, but we do not bear. We choose healthy, strong women to bear for us, and we pay them well."

"My mother?" I asked. "Not?"

"The woman in Stoneflight Demesne, not." It was a final word. Odd as it was, what she had just said, I did not doubt it, not for an instant. "When we came for you, she would not let you go. Sometimes women do that out of love for that which they have carried. It was not love with her. She demanded other payment, of a kind we could not make. We could have forced her. But one of our kind looked deep and told us better not. Good would come if we did not, she said. 'Let the child grow in this hostile

soil,' she said, "'for her own strengthening. Send her help, and love, and let her grow.'" So we did, Jinian Footseer."

"Sent me ... what?"

"Our servants. Our friends. Murzemire Hornloss, the Seer. Cat Candleshy, Demon. Sarah Shadowsox, Sorceress. Bets Battereye, Tragamor. Margaret Foxmitten, glorious Queen, Tess Tinder-my-hand, Midwife. She who delivered you"

"The old dams." I was struck dumb.

"Yes, Jinian Footseer. The old dams." Was there, could there be amusement in that voice? "The Wize-ards."

I took up the cup, then set it down, noting that it was almost empty, feeling the wet on my trousers where I had spilled it. "Then Mendost ... Mendost knew. Garz, he knew? They all knew I was not of Stoneflight Demesne?"

"Of course they knew. How could they not know? Was Eller of Stoneflight Demesne a woman who concealed her feelings? Was she secretive, quiet, sly?"

I remembered Mother's rages, her loud furies, during which she would scream anything that entered her head. Those at Stoneflight had kept it from me, yes. They had not wanted me to know. But Garz and Mendost had known.

The Dervish went on, "We bid her be silent. We paid her well. But if she would not honor one agreement with us, why would she honor the other? In this case we did not judge well whom we chose. The time closed about me, and there had been recent ... distractions."

Something in me hurt. "When you do that, how do you know, how can you say who is mother and who is not? Whose child anyone is? How do you know!"

"Intent," she said. One word. It tolled like a bell. "Intent, Jinian Footseer. It was my intent to beget and rear a child, and that made the child mine. Before ever you were conceived, there was that intent. And so, no matter how it is done, the intent is all that matters. And if there is not that intent, until that intent, nothing else matters, for the child, however beget or born, belongs to no-one and has no parent."

I thought back to childhood. Humiliation and pain. Loneliness assuaged with wandering in forest places. Beast and bird and tree and flower. The Old South Road City. Grompuzzle. Misquick. Murzy. The old dams. Things and bits, places and times. Had it been ... had it been dreadful? Or merely uncomfortable from time to time? Would I have changed it? Become someone else? Not myself as I had learned to be?

"It's all right," I said at last, amazed to find that it was perfectly true. "I would not be other than I am."

"Even without known Talent?" The Dervish had turned away from me to peer out the window where the lily flowers swung in the sunlight. They would have chimed had they been bells. Almost one could hear them.

"Even ... even without Talent can I still be Wize-ard?"

"Most certainly. Many without other Talent are."

I took a deep breath. On the turf the lily bells swung, up and down, tossing their heads. They had no Talent, either. They merely were. So.

“I will be content,” I said. “I will be content.”

“And cease weeping?”

I wondered how she knew, not realizing my face bore tracks and tracks of it, dirt and tears mixed. “I will cease weeping, Dervish.”

“And get on with your work. Now that you know the nature of the illness here, there is much healing to be done.”

“Is this task truly mine?” I looked out upon the road I could see, realizing how much of it was hidden. It was a very great task. A great burden.

“Yours and none other. Perhaps this is what was foreseen by my kinswoman. Perhaps some other purpose is served here, but you feel, as do we, it is a purpose for good. Yes. It is your task. In that, the Oracle spoke true. If you meet the Oracle again, Jinian Footseer, remember that it always speaks the truth, but never all the truth, and that its speaking comes most often to pain, and malice, and death for someone. Remember that.”

There was pain in the Dervish’s voice. I wondered if she would touch me. I thought not. Could she touch anyone without bringing that pain? She trembled once more, saying, “In future time, I will come to you again. In future time, you will come to me.”

She did not touch me. I think she would have said something more but could not. Then she spun, spun, and spun away, whirling down the road to the north, the open road, the road I had built again. There were so many things I should have asked Bartelmy of the Ban. Things, perhaps, a girl might ask her mother. And I had asked nothing. Nothing.

There was a pool nearby. I wanted to see who I was now and went there to be astonished at this ashy, red-eyed creature with the tangled, dirty hair. I stared at it for a long time. It was not I, not Jinian Footseer. So, I set about turning it into myself. There was soaproot in the marsh. There were warm springs there as well. There were sandy-bottomed pools, and I had a comb in my kit. Clothes dried in the sun. Boots dried by the fire. Steam and smell of wet hair. All in a dream that said, “Whatever you are, you are Jinian. So be her.”

And at last another look in the pool to see whether she had returned. And she had, clean and neatly combed, hair braided into coils as Murzy had braided it when I was a child. I was not quite comfortable with the eyes. They were still very red and did not look accustomed to themselves, not yet.

Very well, Jinian, I told myself at last. You are what you are, now get on with it. On my hearth was the design I had drawn, the one the forest had showed me. A road from the south to the north, one slanting off west, one slanting off east, and I had cleared only the nearest end of the northern branch. As I had been wounded and brought to life again, so I must bring this forest to life again. It was my task to do.

I turned to tree rat and said with great severity, half to myself, needing the severity to convince myself that this was real, “I need all the flood-chucks in the forest, tree rat. I need any that are within reach. We have much road to restore, and I cannot do it alone.”

Then, to bunwit, "If one actor from the old tale was here, bunwit, why should not the others be? I need the largest gobblemole in the forest. Now lead me." I fully expected bunwit to look at me with that maddening, listening look, and then go dig roots. He did look at me with the maddening look, but then he hopped away, rather slowly for him, waiting for me to follow.

"Well," I said to myself. "He got something of that." I thanked the forest for telling him what I needed.

We went southwest, into a part of the forest we had never wandered through. There were vast open tracts there, wide to the sky, meadows of the sort the gobblemoles prefer, where their draggling can be through soft soil. We saw many, but the bunwit didn't stop. None of them was above average size. I heard sound from the final clearing before ever we came to it, a kind of scrape-chunk, scrape-chunk. From the edge of the trees we could see the earth flying, high on either side of a long, deep trench. It was a great, blind gobblemole, the largest I have ever seen. I came out of the woods to climb upon the draggled bank, remembering what Bartelmy of the Ban had said. Truth in old tales. Rituals of truth.

"What are you draggling away there for, old gobblemole?" I cried, clutching the star-eye in my hand like some luck-piece.

"Draggling for the Daylight Bell, Little Star," he rumbled, spewing bits of soil all over me. His fur was as close and tight, black as midnight dark, velvet all but his snout and those hard, horn claws. "Draggling for the Daylight Bell."

"Well then, I'll help you druggle," I said, letting go the star-eye to climb down into the trench. It was deep and moist, full of crawly things and ends of root. I pushed in beside the mole and began to druggie, throwing tiny handfuls of earth on either side. I was conveniently placed for him. He caught me in one foot, the horny claws bending around me like so many curved swords, not touching yet, but sharp as any blade might be.

"Now I've got you, Little Star," his voice drummed at me. As he very well did. As the flichhawk had had me before.

This time I managed a tone of petulance. "Now why did you do that, old gobblemole! just when you caught me there, I caught a glimpse of the Daylight Bell. Right there where you were druggling!"

Then was a long pause, as though the mole didn't know the words. A long, long pause while Jinian thought she had miscalculated. A long, long time when nothing happened at all and I thought the tale had gone awry or I had not spoken my lines aright.

I was about to give up and resolve to die when it said, "Where, where," dropping me and starting to druggle again as it had before.

So I put the thong about a back foot and cried out. "Daylight Bell in earthways wan't be; Daylight Bell in treetop can't be. Tricky lie brings tricky tie, now give me boon or else you die!"

And it said, just as the flichhawk had, "What boon will you have, child?"

So I told it what needed doing.

"That is not much boon, Footseer," it rumbled at me. Its eyes were so buried in its thick fur I wondered if it saw me at all, but its claws around me were not threatening. They were huge, hard as stone, and I

leaned against them, exhausted, looking up into the great gobblemole face to see a glint of light in those hidden eyes. "We will do as you ask, but a boon is still owed you. Earthways are mine, and things old and buried. If you need help with such things, call on me."

Then it set me down, and turned back to its druggling, leaving me staggering there, uncertain of my footing or my senses. Bunwit and I went back to the ruin. Next morn early I went to look, and there were a thousand gobblemoles druggling up the earth that covered the road, throwing it to either side, making huge mounds, and leaving the road beneath as clean as old bone. What they didn't get, the flood-chucks got, and as the days went by, I could walk farther and farther on the Old Road without losing it or having to go barefoot to feel it. It was slow work. The covering hills were monstrous big, but we progressed.

Days would go by during which we got great stretches of the road uncovered, and then a morning would come when the shadow lay everywhere. On every clot of earth. On every stone. Nothing moved in the forest then. No bird, no bunwit. Nothing. The flood-chucks wouldn't come near us, nor the moles. Everything stopped. On those days, I would lie close to the hearth, the window shuttered, a small fire built, and say the protection words over and over to myself with bunwit and tree rat huddling close at my side and not a sound from the forest. I knew what the shadow could do if it touched me, and I did not want it to happen again.

Then, a morning would dawn with the shadow gone, and we would resume the work as though nothing had happened. After a time, I began to think of the shadow as a kind of traveler which could not be everywhere. So, it came and stopped everything, but while it was here, it could not be elsewhere, and eventually it had to go stop what was happening somewhere else. When it went, we would go on. This was a comforting thought.

The weather turned cold. The Season of Storms came on. Tree rat and his friends put on another roof over the first one, and I built a pair of shutters for the window. Someone left me a thick blanket woven of moss, and bunwit carried in stacks of soft, dried grass for my mattress. I didn't go hungry. Tree rat and bunwit seemed to have a bottomless cache of dried fruits and nuts. Some bird left me eggs every day or so. There were edible fungi and roots. The gobblemoles were still working on the southern road. The eastern one was clear. The flood-chucks had started on the western one. There were a couple of problems, not least the river to the south and west which ran right over where the road should go.

At first it didn't occur to me to finish up the story. The third creature in the story is a d'bor wife. D'bor are ocean creatures, though sometimes found in very large lakes. They are not river creatures. They are very fearsome, a wild, unfamiliar kind of beast, neither furry nor feathered. I did not like the thought of the d'bor wife. Still, there was that river running half around the forest where it had no business being. Finally, after many many days had gone by, I sat bunwit down and put the problem to him.

"I don't suppose there are any d'bor in the forest," I said. Bunwit went on chewing, paying no attention.

"Are there any d'bor?" I asked. It looked at me. I sighed.

"Take me to the d'bor wife," I said at last, fatalistically. He would or he wouldn't. Trying to hold back wasn't doing me any good.

I wasn't really surprised when he hopped off in his usual errand-running manner. Southeast. Into the deep chasms of that part of Chimmerdong. Dangerous terrain. Leg-breaking terrain, and no Healer closer than Lake Yost. We slipped and slid. Night came on, and we slept under a tree. It was colder than comfortable. Morning came, dim under black clouds. We went on slipping and sliding.

Midday, I heard the sound. A waterfall. Sizable. A constant tumult of water into some deep, forlorn place. We were coming to it along the bottom of a canyon. The canyon opened out, wider and wider, and there the pool was before us. More than a pool, a lake. Across it the pillars of stone loomed up to the top of the sky and water fell in a strong, crashing flow.

And at the edge of the pool, grodgeling in the shallow waters, was a d'bor wife. She was slick and black and hideous. Her flappers were long and hard, shaped like coffin lids. Her one eye peered at me out of her tentacled head, and her jaws clashed their beaky plates together. I stood where I was, going no closer at all, and cried, "Why are you grodgeling away there, d'bor wife?"

She gargled at me. It took a little time before I understood the words. Story words. Oh, yes. Grodgeling to find the Daylight Bell. The lake spray tasted salt. Might be, I thought, it was tied through underground ways far and far to the Western Sea or the Southern Sea or even the Glistening Sea, far to the east. I did not want to go near her. Her mouth smelled of blood.

"Well then," I cried, voice trembling so I could hardly understand myself, "I'll grodgel with you, d'bor wife." And I stumbled forward to bend above the shallow waters and begin grodgeling at it, splash, splash.

And I saw it, there, just sinking away beneath the waters, just the edge, the very edge, golden as dawn, curved, unmistakable, a bell sinking beneath the waves of the lake ...

So when she took me up, I screamed in real surprise and anguish. "I saw it! I saw it! Just then when you took me up, d'bor wife, I saw the Daylight Bell, sinking beneath the water ..."

There was no time to be frightened. She dropped me then, at once, and began trying to find it. I forgot the thong, forgot it all. Only after a long time, as she whuffed away in the water did I come to myself enough to slip the thong around a back tentacle and cry, hoarsely, through my tears, "Daylight Bell in water shan't be; Daylight Bell in earthways wan't be; Daylight Bell in treetop can't be. Tricky lie brings tricky tie, now give me boon or else you die!" For I knew then it was too late. We had almost found it, the d'bor wife and I, but we had lost it.

When I told her the boon, she gargled, deep bubbling sounds like fountains at the bottom of the ocean. Her hide was dark as char and hard, half leather, half shell. Her tentacles wove spells before my eyes, and the suckers on them opened and closed like hungry little mouths. "Not a great boon," she gargled. "I will owe you a boon more, ground-child. The things of the deep are mine, all things washed by ocean or sea. If you have need in such places, call on me."

Well, you know the way of these stories. The river that blocked the Old Road was changed in its course, for the d'bor wife grodgeled it back where it belonged as her boon to me. The moles finished their work, and the flood-chucks. Each road was opened once more to the gray, and we set fires there that burned and burned in ever-widening arcs. When the Season of Storms was done, so was I. The Forest of Chimmerdong was open to the world on every side.

I sat in my room in the ruin and summoned forest, expecting the small twiggy creature to return. I had not thought, truthfully. It had been a long task, a dirty, endless task, with leagues run every day to spy out all the edges of the road and clear them all. So I summoned, glad it was done, not thinking much, not expecting much.

It came. I was thrust back against the wall, breathless, as all leaf came into the room, all tendril, all bark,

ramifications of trunk and twig, fortresses of root, everything in one, in itself, enormous yet contained, all smells, all light, rain and sun, mist and moonlight, stargleam on pond, dawn on marsh, noon on brook, sparkle and splash. Murmur of wind was there, and howl of storm. Quiet of evening was there, and rattle of hail on high limbs against the sky. Moss, fern, tracery of forest, lip of blossom, whir of wing, cry of beak, all, all, all.

Field mint and bergamot, rose and startle-flower, lady lily, zeller flower, Healer's balm, sweet grass.

Rustle in the underbrush, crash of fleeing prey, howl of predator, shriek of watcher, hum of unconcerned bee creature in the hollow of a stump. All. Wings folding, unfolding like gems; rise of fish from the deeps to make the single, opening ripple that reached, reached, reached outward. Night, morning, noon. High cry of the hawk on gold, low croak of the froggy marsh walker, joined, joined, music, melody, from top to bottom of being, speaking, saying—what?

“Well done ...”

Below hearing. Above hearing.

“Well done ...”

I could not breathe, did not care, died and did not care. Upon my breast the fragment burned within its locket, a heart of fire upon my own. Then it went away all at once, and I lay on the floor where I had fallen, sucking in air like a beached fish. A forest is a very large thing to come into a room that size.

Perhaps I had not really believed in the old gods, not until then.

And yet, though it had been huge, immense, beyond comprehension in its size and complexity, still I had had the feeling it was not a whole thing. A thing made whole, yes, but not a whole thing. There was more, elsewhere. After much thought I decided it was rather as though my foot had spoken to me, a good useful foot without blemish or ill, and yet only a foot for all that. Not a person entire.

And what I thought I meant by that, I was not certain an hour later. On my breast an arrow of fire remained, the skin red and burned. It left a scar there when it healed, but there was never any pain.

On the morning after that, as though carefully timed for my task's completion, the old dams came singing down the road in the wagon, all five of them, with a cheerfully plain girl of about twelve sitting on the seat beside Cat Candleshy. “Sister,” Cat said, “greet Dodie, who joins us upon the way.”

I knew we were soon to be seven once more.

18

I said hello to Dodie, politely. She greeted me a good bit more eagerly than that, and I looked her over, approving of her. A slightly uncomfortable silence fell.

I broke it. “You took a long time finding me,” trying to keep a whine out of it.

“Well, chile,” said Murzy, “we had word you were doing well enough. Coming to grips, you know, the way we all must. Seemed best to leave you at it.”

“But now,” said Margaret, putting her arms around me and her cheek next to mine, turning the full blaze

of Beguilement on me so that she glowed with it like a little furnace and me with it, warming, “we must be with you to celebrate your sixteenth year.”

That was surprising, but of course a year had gone since we’d had cakes and wine in Xammer. More than two years since Joramal had come to Stoneflight Demesne. Three years since I had been to Schooltown. Ah. The thought caught me all at once and I breathed in with a sob, as though I’d been hurt.

“Why, chile, chile, what is it?” Murzy was hugging me and listening to me breathe as though something were broken inside.

“Will you want me still?” I asked. “The Dervish says one can be Wize-ard even without Talent, but oh, I did want something ...”

“Bartelmy!” muttered Cat.

“All the sensitivity of an icicle,” murmured Sarah. “We should have known.”

“Oh, shush,” said Murzy. “Bartelmy is what she can be. Now. You’ve had a hard time, chile, but that’s no excuse for feeling sorry for yourself. Of course we would want you, Talent or no. Once a seven, always a seven, ‘til death breaks us. That’s the way of it, and that’s all.”

“However,” interrupted Cat, “there is no question of that. You have a Talent, according to Bartelmy. A very strong, unusual one. And, quite frankly, I am surprised that a girl as intelligent as you should not have realized it. No!” She held up her hand as Margaret started to speak. “Let her figure it out for herself. It may give her several hours or days—or, by all the old gods, weeks, if her current silliness continues—of honest bewilderment. Which is always good for the soul. Now, let us have supper.”

So we had supper. Smoked fowl and bread and candied fruit from Xammer. And wine. And nuts as a gift from tree rat, and fresh fruit as a gift from bunwit. To all of which I paid no attention at all, lost in wonder what my Talent was that Bartelmy should have known of and I not.

My preoccupation did not stop the celebration. There were gifts. A pair of gloves hand-stitched. “Tess made them,” said Murzy quietly. “Before she died. It was she who birthed you, she who took word to Bartelmy that the woman would not keep her bargain and relinquish you. She grew to love you dearly, Jinian. Remember her kindly.”

There was a strange package, wrapped up with coils of twine and a tough parchment layer within. Inside was a worked leather scabbard of a size to hold the Dagger. On the parchment, a note. “The Oracle told true that the Dagger would protect you. It will threaten you as well. Be sure of your anger before you use it. It is safer in the scabbard than outside it. Remember me kindly.”

It was signed with a scribble, as though she had started to write one word, then substituted another. “Bartelmy.”

“Everyone should be remembered kindly,” I said, perhaps a little bitterly.

“Being a Dervish is not easy. They sacrifice much.” This was Sarah, soft-voiced and sympathetic as always. “If the woman at Stoneflight had given you to them as she was paid to do, you would have been one of them, Jinian, and would have felt loneliness for its own sake, because you chose it, and the lesson of the shadow, because you would have had to know it. So, you felt it without choosing it and learned the lessons as you would have done anyhow. Do not think Bartelmy has not yearned over you, even

though she is not allowed to show it.”

There were assorted other gifts. Including a book from Joramal on the history and geography of Dragon’s Fire Demesne.

“Then King Kolver cleaves to his bargain.” I sighed, wondering what I would do about this.

“He does. And his wife died not a season ago.” This from Cat.

“We have come to return you to Vorbold’s House. Queen Vorbold has agreed to say nothing to the King about your lengthy absence. Provided that you leave for Dragon’s Fire soon.” Bets Battereye, very busy making plans. “That is, ostensibly we came for that.”

“And what are we going to do about that? I have no intention of marrying King Kolver, you know.”

“We know.” Sarah sighed. “We haven’t decided yet what is best to do.”

So we talked, and plotted, and drank wine, and came to no conclusions. And I talked, and drank wine, and wondered what my Talent was. And night came on. They brought mattresses and blankets out of the wagon into my dwelling, and we built another little fire there and talked, still, into the dark hours.

And Cat Candleshy said, “Ouf, but that wine has made me thirsty. Where is the pool you drink from, Jinian?”

And I, deep in conversation with Murzy, said, “Ask the bunwit. He’ll show you.”

And then silence came down, with all of them looking at me, and Sarah trying not to laugh while Margaret did laugh.

“How would you suggest I do that?” asked Cat.

And my mouth came open, then shut, then open again. Because, of course, she couldn’t. No more could I, except that I did. Because it had not been the forest all along that spoke to the animals for me; it had been me, myself.

“What is it?” I breathed, afraid to say it out loud for fear it would go away. “What is it called?”

“Not in the Index,” said Murzy. “Nowhere. Reading, some, I should think. Perhaps some power of the Flesh. Who knows? Bartelmy thinks it has something to do with your being born Dervish, but not reared Dervish. One must be reared to Dervishdom with all its special rites and foods to become a Dervish truly. But your Talent is not like theirs. It is yours. No one else’s. Bartelmy says it is most unusual.”

“Why did she ask me, then, about having no Talent?” I shouted. “Why?”

“Shhh,” said Cat. “She probably asked you about not having a known Talent, Jinian. An unknown Talent might be, in some cases, like having none. What insignia would one wear? What is the costume of the type? Ah? We said to Bartelmy when she found us upon the road that it would not matter to you, for you had learned the first lesson well. She asked you only to satisfy herself.”

The first lesson. Of course. The lesson of invisibility. As the old dams were invisible. Their Talents mattering not, except when they needed them. So what was I? A Beast-talker. Jinian Footseer,

Beast-talker. I said it out loud. Giggling.

Then we were all giggling, even Dodie, who had watched all this with wide, wondering eyes, and the night closed in around us peacefully, the fire went out, and we slept. During the night bunwit came in and snuggled next to me. In the morning he was still there. Wondered, just for a time, could he come along with us. Decided not. He would be easy prey for any hungry Gamesman, and his life was in Chimmerdong. Still, when I left him there, it was harder than leaving Grompozzle or Misquick had ever been. They had helped me little, but the bunwit had helped me much. I kissed him on his nose. I don't know what he made of that.

Slow, the wagon in its way back to Xammer. A long road, that, twisting down from the heights to the ford of the north fork of the Stonywater. Down Long Valley, easy, among fields as bright as jewels with the horses muttering in their noses and I telling them what good, biddable beasts they were. Talking to geese. Talking to strange bunwits in hedges. Singing to birds in the air or on treetops, sometimes out loud and sometimes silently. Made no difference to the beasts. They heard me, either way. I was beginning to hear them back, more clearly every day. It was embarrassing to realize that bunwit and tree rat had been talking to me the whole time I was in Chimmerdong.

"I don't suppose there are d'bor in Chimmerdong," I had asked.

"Oh, yes, ma'am," had said bunwit.

"Are there any?" I had asked, cursing him for not answering me in the first place.

"I told you, yes," he would have said, hurt. "You never listen!"

Like one deaf, I. No longer. No, I sang and tweeted and muttered up my nose like any horse. Cat told me at last to cease making such noises, as it sounded like a zoo. It didn't trouble her, really. She was only cautioning me for the future.

Because there was a future. Oh, yes, indeed, indeed.

Ferry across the Middle River. Then a bit faster down the good road to Gaywater, across and into the town. When we came to Vorbold's House, the Queen was there to greet us. She did not look angry. Merely firm.

"Your friends have advised you? Good. You will depart soon for Dragon's Fire. I have decided to send one of the Gamesmistresses with you. Silkhands, the Healer. She needs a break in duty; you need someone to keep an eye on you, Jinian." That was all. She started to go in before me, then turned.

"I'd almost forgotten. Your mother and brother have asked to meet with you as soon as you return. The visit will be chaperoned, of course. They are in the town now. I will have word sent."

I felt my face turn cold, knew it was pale, for the pallor reached deep within. I started to say no, reached out as though to stop her, then held my hand. Mendost. And Mendost's mother. Not mine. Garz was Mendost's father. Not mine. And Mendost was not my brother. Good. So let them come.

Murzy took me by the shoulder. "Tha'll be awright, chile."

"I know. Don't worry, Seer Murzemire. Your seventh will take care of herself. If worse comes to worst, I have a certain Dagger."

“Oh, chile, don’t even think of that unless you must. It’s a wicked weapon, to be sure. Remember always that those of the wize-art do not use great powers for small things. And great weapons, we use those only for great need.”

But I had thought of it. If I had not thought of the Dagger, it would have been impossible to face the two of them—not even with the School servant sitting only a little way away, as he would, where he could see anything untoward that might happen.

I went to the Queen. Somehow she was not so forbidding as I had remembered.

“I have learned I am the daughter of a Dervish,” I told her, giving no preamble. “You will know how Dervish daughters are born, though I did not.”

She blinked, flushed, started to say something, then was quiet. Finally she nodded for me to go on.

“The woman they paid to bear me is no blood kin to me. The child she had borne earlier, Mendost, is no kin to me at all. They have asked to see me, and though they are not kin, I am willing to see them. But not like this!” I gestured at myself. Tattered leather treads. A new, clean shirt, but it was too small. Murzy hadn’t known how much I’d grown. My boots were full of holes. “I am a Dervish’s child,” I said again. “I will meet them when I look like a Dervish’s child.”

“You are ... a Dervish?” She was very curious about this, and I realized that no Dervish daughter would ever be Schooled in a place like this.

“What Talent I have is my own affair. I do not ask for the fringes of a Dervish. I ask merely for dignity suiting my station. I am the betrothed of a King and a Dervish’s daughter.” What station that might be was subject to some bitter conjecture. Only in this false world did it have importance. To me, what did it mean to be a Dervish daughter?

That night and the following day, for the first and only time at Vorbold’s House, I took advantage of the tiring women and the bath attendants and all the rest of it. My hair was cut and curled. My nails were trimmed and polished—and a hard time the woman had of it, too. There were ashes beneath my nails that had been there for two seasons. They made my dress gray, like a Dervish’s dress, with fringes that would remind one of a Dervish’s fringe, but of an iridescent fabric, glistening like a seashell, with a flowing cape and train and a close headdress with a veil. I was asked if I would wear a device, and I told them yes. Beasts embroidered in an endless procession on the hem of the cape. I think six sewing women stayed up all night to finish it. I refused to be ashamed. It would go with me to Dragon’s Fire if I had to go to Dragon’s Fire. It was not too much to ask in return for what the King had paid. After all, Vorbold’s House had not had to feed or clothe me for most of a year.

And on the morrow I went to the visitors room off the courtyard, letting them wait a good time for me before I showed myself.

She, Eller, was smaller than I remembered. As a child I thought her beautiful, longing to be like her, enough like her to be loved by her, perhaps; but now I saw the deep lines from her nose to the corners of her mouth and her eyes darting at me, quick and away, quick and away, like some predator seeking prey. Mendost had grown fatter, with piggier eyes, but then I had not had centipig to compare him to before. His expression and hers had not improved. They were hot and avid both, Eller with a fine bead of moisture on her forehead. I moved to my chair quietly, regarding them in silence. The School servant was one I knew well, Michael, bigger even than Mendost. He sat quietly in one corner, merely being there in

case he was needed. Except for meetings with female servants and kin, some such servant—strong, discreet, very well paid—was always present at meetings between students and the world outside. Only if King Kolver himself came calling could I be alone with him. Mendost looked at him and shifted uneasily, hitching his chair closer to mine.

“Leave the chair where it is, Gamesman,” rumbled Michael. I smiled at him. Mendost did not.

“Jinian,” said Mother—what do I say now? un-Mother? Not-Mother? “Jinian. We have quite longed to see you.”

“Oh?” I asked politely. I moved my arm so the gray fringes swung. She saw the fringes but did not understand. Her forehead creased as it had used to do before a tantrum, but she bit her lip, turning to Mendost, those tiny beads of sweat glistening above her brow.

“We have thought ... perhaps we did not do well to ally you to Dragon’s Fire,” he said, all in a rush.

“You didn’t ally me,” I reminded him. “You sold me. It was you who were allied. Or are. If the alliance has not been broken.” I knew in that moment that they wanted to break it. They had sought to use King Kolver, but he had turned the Game on them and used them instead.

“No, it hasn’t been broken. But ... but you were very young ...”

“I believe I remarked so at the time.”

“Well, at the time perhaps we didn’t give that fact sufficient weight. But ...”

“But, Jinian,” said un-Mother, “we’ve thought it over since. It wasn’t fair to you. I’m sure if you were to tell the King you are unwilling ... too young ... he would consider breaking the contract.”

“After all,” interrupted Mendost, “He already has a living wife.”

“Had,” I said, giving them time to think that out. “Had a living wife.”

Mendost recovered first. “Even so. You are still very young ...”

“I am sixteen,” I said, “Of those who marry, many do so at that age.”

“You could stay here at Xammer until you are twenty some odd. Though you have no Talent, Stoneflight Demesne would pay ...”

“As we should have done, dearest daughter. As we should have done.” Mother was patting the air with her hands, gulping, aware that a tantrum would not answer, a fit would not accomplish, but unable to come up with much else in the way of response. What monstrously important thing must have brought her here that she controlled herself like this! “Now that Garz is gone, there would be no objection ...” As though Garz had ever objected to anything she or Mendost had wanted. As though Garz had been solely responsible for their treatment of me!

Enough of this, I said to myself.

“Why would Stoneflight Demesne pay for a Dervish’s daughter?” I asked them.

Un-Mother started up from her chair, face chalk white, hands raised against me as against a ghost piece. Mendost growled in his throat, turning red, and I saw his hands clench. Now, if the servant had not been there, he would have hit me. I pretended not to notice.

I went on, "I am grown now. I have met my true mother. She is not pleased that Eller of Stoneflight Demesne broke contract with the Dervishes. Perhaps Stoneflight Demesne should consider what it will do if the Dervishes declare Game against it. A broken contract with them can be very dangerous, I understand." I stood up, turning to make the gray fringes swirl and flow. Let them think what they would about my true inheritance. Let them fear it. Let them fear lest I choose to return to Stoneflight Demesne. Let them fear to return there themselves.

"They wouldn't ..." Mendost.

"It was long ago ..." Un-Mother.

"It was that same sixteen years," I pointed out, "which you say is not long. No, no, Mendost. If I am very young, then sixteen years is a short time. If sixteen years is not a short time, then I am not young."

"Why would they?" he blustered. "After all this time."

I pretended to consider this. "It may have been concern for my safety which has held them until now. Once Stoneflight Demesne sold me to King Kelter, however, my safety was no longer a concern. Now the Dervishes will do as they like." I said this idly, as though I didn't care, staring out the window into the courtyard the while. The Dervishes would do exactly as they liked, of course, and ignoring Stoneflight entirely would probably be part of it. No matter. The two of them didn't know that.

When I turned back to them, I wore the expression I believed Dervishes might wear. Remote and cold as ice. Whatever the reality, my pretense was good enough. They could not answer it. Could not speak to it. They had found guilt enough in themselves to tally over for a season or two, seeking where the danger to themselves might lie. They had not thought of that when they had cheated the Dervishes. They had not thought of that when they cheated me. Well, let them think of it now.

I had intended to let it go, coldly, as a Dervish might. The sight of them there, so avid, so intent upon their own needs, stirred me to a baffled fury. "Why?" I demanded of her. "Why didn't you let them have me? Why didn't you let me go among my own kind, where I would have been ... been cared about? You didn't care about me, and they'd paid you."

"Not enough," she cried, shaking her hair into a circling cloud, moved by some wild imagining to become for an instant as mist-eyed and lovely as I had dreamed her as a child. "Oh, not enough. We had a dream crystal, Mendost and I. It showed us. There's a thing the Dervishes can do. To be young again. New bodies. I wanted one." And she reached to Mendost, clinging to him, so I saw in his face that mixed repulsion and lust toward her which I had seen so often in his face without understanding until that moment.

Mendost and his mother. Lovely Eller and her son. I had seen that balance changing, too, over the years as the dream crystal dwindled and the lust faded and the revulsion increased.

A dream crystal! Fools, oh, fools. Every simple Schoolgirl knew the dangers of that. Every pawn, every half-wit. What of themselves had they sold to buy a dream crystal? What of themselves had they sold to suck it together, like two avid children with a lolly? And such dreams! False, foolish, corrupt. Oh, gods, why had I let them come here at all?

“Dervishes can’t do that,” I said flatly, telling her what Cat had told me without caring whether they would understand it or not. “The Dervishes can’t do that. They can only prolong their own lives through such self-denial as you would not submit to for a moment, but that is all. The crystal was false. Most of them are false, I understand. Long ago there were true ones, but no more. You’ve sold your safety for a false, obscene dream. And now the dream is dead.”

So he sat looking at her with an expression I could not define. Was it pity mixed with horror? I think perhaps. And she at him, a kind of haggard terror. And both at both, hideous and hellish. I knew then that their crystal was gone, sucked to a shard, to nothingness, that the dream which had held them had faded.

“Michael,” I said, sickened, “show these people out.”

And that was the end of my tie to Stoneflight. The Demesne did not last long. Poremy and Flot came to Xammer a few days later, stopping to see me, telling me they were going to Dragon’s Fire. Evidently they had struck up a friendship with Joramal and had been won away to the banner of the King. They did not know we were not kin, and I did not tell them. They were not bad boys.

Mendost did what I assumed he would, Gamed so ardently on his own behalf that he died soon thereafter. His rages were already legendary, but his life was brief. I didn’t find out for some time what happened to Eller. Truth to tell, I did not ask.

After that one dramatic, self-indulgent scene, I went back to invisibility. The gorgeous dress was hung away in dust sheets. From somewhere they found half a dozen simple gowns and suits for me. I went back to classes feeling like a large goose in gosling school. I knew—oh, I knew things they did not. The classes seemed not only irrelevant but childish. What did they have to do with the real world in which old gods walked and the shadow loomed? Only in this false little world of Xammer, this false little world of the Game ... Well. No matter.

I talked often with Silkhands. She knew something of the real world and she was only a few years older than I. If someone had reached her in time, she might have joined a seven, I think. Now her mind was full of other things. Coming as she did from a much frequented Demesne on a main road, she knew a lot of what was going on in the world. She whispered of the strange alliances that were rumored in the north, those even the sevens had worried over. “Huld the Demon,” she said, “and Prionde, King of the High Demesne! One would think Prionde would have learned from Bannerwell not to trust the Demon.” I told her I had heard of Prionde, and of his sister-wife, Valearn, the Ogress.

“Valearn!” she said. “Another strange alliance. Valearn is reputed to have gone north of Betand and joined there with Huldra, Huld’s own sister-wife. So the two men stand together at Hell’s Maw and the two women farther north under the protection of the Duke of Betand, so it is said!”

I did not know what to make of this. “I’m sorry, Silkhands. Should I know of this or be concerned?”

“Know of it? Not necessarily. Huldra has scarcely been heard of since her son, Mandor, was born. If you remember my words at all, Jinian, simply remember to give wide berth where any of these are: Huld or Huldra, Prionde or Valearn, or the Duke of Betand. Where they are, trouble and death are, also.” She shook her head, her face full of sad remembering. I mentally added Dadrina Dreadeye to the list and committed it to memory.

Silkhands, too, had suffered at the hands of those who should have been most dear. Brother, sister, one

dead, the other lost, partly through the connivance of that same Huld. Sometimes she was very sad, and we sat together in the sun, commiserating. I think it helped us both. She told me of her friends, the Wizard Himaggery and the Shifter Peter, and all their adventures. It was then I learned that the lair of the Magicians was no more, that her friend Peter was responsible both for its destruction and for thwarting Huld's plans for it. I marked her warnings in my mind, not really thinking I would need to pay attention to them. Dragon's Fire Demesne was far east of Betand. It was not likely I would encounter the dangers she mentioned.

Time waddled on. So long as the weather remained unsettled we were in no hurry to depart. The old dams still had much to teach me, and I spent all the time with them I could. They had not yet decided whether to travel north with me when I went there, but all seemed agreed that I was to go for some reason or other. Not to marry King Kolver, but for some other thing. I remembered the calm gong of the Dervish's voice, ringing in the forest. "Murzemire Hornloss, the Seer," she had said. Murzy, who evidently saw more and further than I had ever given her credit for. She, too, spoke of my going north.

"There's many a seven separates for years," she said quite calmly, while leaving me in no doubt as to her affection. "Some meet only at long intervals. And there's others tight together as flea on fustigar. No matter where you go, you'll come to us or we to you. No matter where any of us be, you'd find us." They did not seem worried by it, as though Murzy had some Seer's vision that reassured them. Long ago I had given up asking. They would tell me when they felt it wise or appropriate and not until.

The season wore on to the time of the song competition at Xammer.

The song competition is a tradition in Xammer. There are contests at all the Houses, though Vorbold's is probably the most prestigious. It goes on for ten days. Each of the first seven days there is a topic assigned, and all the songwriters must come up with something on that topic to be sung at banquet. During the last three days, the entrants sing their own selections. Students participate by choosing the topics or by submitting songs.

The final three days are most interesting—both musically and for the content of the lyrics—as the best songs are sung then, old or new, including some the musicians have written. Those who receive the prizes are those who please the audience most each night at banquet—and the judges, of course. Old Vorboldians, all of them, brought back through what they call the "old girls' net".

So, since it was a splendid affair, I chose to wear my fringed dress and was not out of place to do so. There were those present who wore ten different dresses, one each night of the gala, but they were the girls who were being approved by some Negotiator or Diplomat or even by the Gamesman who was seeking alliance himself. I remember Lunette of Pouws being very nervous at competition time. Her brother was trying to make an alliance with the Black Basilisks of Breem—though I understood that no Basilisks had been born in Breem for fifty years. It was mostly a Demesne of Elators, now, though there was a strong strain of Tragamorians running in the people there. Lunette seemed well content with the idea of alliance, so I did not speak against it. There was a hard-faced man representing Burmor of Breem who came to dinner each night and stared at her.

I had no such worries. Silkhands had told me we would leave for the north soon after the competition was over. There was nothing I could do about that, not at the moment, so I was extraordinarily relaxed and amused by the whole thing.

The final night came. The favorite singer, Rupert something or other, was to present something entirely new that no one had heard before. There were many giggles and little squeals from the younger girls, who talked of him as though he had been some major Gamesman rather than a mere pawn, however skilled. I

was to be at Silkhands' table.

See it, if you will. The great arched doorway is carved all about with leaves and fruit, two stories high, and the massive doors that swing in it are carved also in massive forms that shine like oil in the light of the chandeliers, crystal and silver, holding one thousand candles when they are filled. During the competition they are filled and every candle lighted. Great fat candles, too, to last out the evening. A long balcony runs around four sides of the hall, and on three sides of this are guest tables, laid in white cloths and silver, with crystal shining and more candles. Eight steps down from this to the floor, where the daises are raised up five steps again, each with its table. And between the tables the servants go, below the level of our eyes, so we do not see them.

The great doors open on the fourth side of the balcony, where no tables are. So the guests assemble and are shown to their tables on the balcony. Then the great bell rings, and a trumpet sounds, and a Herald shouts, "All present give ear, all present give ear." Drums, more trumpets, and we come in, glittering like frangi-flies, all jewels and draperies, to descend the stairs to the floor, then up once more to the proper dais, where we sit on backless chairs in order that the view of us not be impeded.

I had done it hundreds of times.

That night I did it again, remembering my train and draperies, which weren't normal attire with me, but it was the tenth night I'd worn the dress and I was getting used to it. The guests were assembled at their tables. Ordinarily, I paid very little attention to them. Their voices were only a low, masculine rumble under our usual sounds. Mostly I was thinking about the dinner because I was very hungry.

He was sitting directly across from the entrance, only two tables away from Silkhands.

I stopped at the top of the stairs, all my breath gone in one explosion of disbelief, and was pushed from behind by Lunette, who said, "Will you move it, Jinian? I'm standing on your train!" So I moved, in shock, not breathing, somehow getting around the dais and into my chair. He had not seen me. He was looking at Silkhands, who was now coming into the room, lovely as a flower. It was all there in his face: fondness, affection, lust. I wanted to cry. I had known him at once. The hair was the same, and the eyes, though he was taller now, taller than I, and with broad shoulders and narrow hips.

"Whom are you staring at?" whispered Lunette. "Your mouth is wide open."

I snapped it shut. "The young Gamesman at the middle table," I said. "The ruddy-haired one. Ah, I think I knew him back in Stoneflight."

"You think you did?"

"Ah, we were children. He's grown."

"Well, do you or don't you?"

"I don't know. Lunette, would you go over there during the interval? Find out who he is?"

"What'll you give?"

"Friendship, Lunette."

"I've already got that." She giggled. "What else?"

I didn't have much. "My scent bottle shaped like a frog that King Kolver sent me," I said at last. I loved that bottle, but the other was more important.

Lunette looked at me with her weighing expression. "That's all right, Jinian. If it's that important, I'll do it for nothing."

After the interval, Lunette returned. "His name is Peter," she told me. "A friend of Silkhands. I think he comes from the Bright Demesne."

So this was Peter, of whom Silkhands had spoken so much. So this was Peter, whom I had given a nutpie in Schooltown, years ago. So this was Peter, whom I had dreamed over since, lusted over, longed over, loved with a passion beyond my years and an intensity that had not waned. I tried to think. The Bright Demesne was a Wizard Demesne! Was it possible we shared ... "Wizard?" I asked. She shook her head.

"I think not, Jinian. Something else. He's wearing no insignia at all, but he's unmistakably Gamesman. Besides, he talks like a Gamesmaster. He told me all about Ephemera."

"You already know about Ephemera. We all do."

"Well, he didn't seem to know that."

Then there was a rather strange occurrence.

The favorite singer sang, and was loudly applauded. To which he responded by singing something new, very strange, and seeming to direct it at Silkhands and at her friend. "Healer," he sang. "Heal the wind. Gamesman, find the wind." It was a strange song, with much longing in it, chill as a wind itself and personal as a blow. I saw their faces, Silkhands' and Peter's. Theirs looked as mine must often have looked in the Forest of Chimmerdong; confused by a strange voice that seemed to summon them to a task ill understood at best, with unknown limits. So they looked, baffled yet intrigued. When the song ended, Peter looked across at Silkhands and she at him, then his eyes fell on me. Oh, I knew those eyes. I had known those eyes for three years. No matter how he would change, ever, I would know those eyes. And as he looked at me, his face showed curiosity, a touch of bewilderment, as though he knew me, recognized me, but could not remember when or where.

The song had not been much appreciated by the rest of the audience. The singer quickly went to something else, and the competition went on.

At last the judges spoke, the prizes were given, and the dinner was over. He, Peter, left by the front door which led from the balcony to the courtyard steps; I from the great door which led inward to the living areas and classrooms. I would never see him again. I wanted to scream, and faint, and carry on. I wanted to have a tantrum.

Instead, I went to Silkhands' room. She didn't mind the students coming to see her occasionally.

"The singer sang directly to you and some young Gamesman, Silkhands. What was that about?"

"I wish I knew, Jinian. He's been singing about wind and Healers and such nonsense all week. I hear him first thing in the morning." She gestured to her window, which overlooked the courtyard. "Infuriating!"

“And you have no idea what it’s about?”

“None. Peter may, of course. I’ll have to ask him.”

“Was that your friend? At the middle table?”

“Friend? Peter? Oh ... well, yes. I suppose. Isn’t that funny. Peter is a friend, of course, but I’ve always thought of him as a kind of brother. Perhaps to take the place of the one I lost.” And she smiled at me, her own sweet, tremulous smile. And I smiled at her, my own gleeful, dangerous smile.

Brother, was he? Oh, glorious. Still.

“He’s very good looking.”

“Isn’t he! He’s grown so this past year. It quite surprised me. Not a little boy anymore.”

“Where does he come from?”

“Bright Demesne. The Wizard Himaggery’s Demesne. At the upper end of Lake Yost.”

“And is he a Wizard?”

“No. Shifter. Thank the Eleven.” Of course. She had talked of him before. I just hadn’t made the connection. Shifter. I began to remember the stories she had told me. She had gone to Bannerwell in his behalf and had been held there, threatened with death by Prince Mandor and the Demon Huld. Peter, Shifter, had saved her. It all popped into my head. Strange. When she had told me those tales, it had been like hearing stories told by the old dams. I had not thought of them as real.

“He’s the one who conquered Bannerwell,” I said.

“Yes. And after I came here, he went into the north-lands to find his mother—have I spoken of her? Mavin Manyshaped? A very strange person, Jinian, very strange indeed—and while there was instrumental in destroying the place of the Magicians. Of course we all saw that! Who did not? Smoke rising halfway up the sky and ash which made the sun turn red! That was while you were in the Forest of Chimmerdong.”

“Ah,” I said intelligently. “I heard something or other about great Gamesmen held by the Magicians.”

“A hundred thousand of them,” she said promptly. Well, then she had been in touch with someone near to Peter to know all this. “A hundred thousand great Gamesmen held frozen under the mountain. And no one knows how to restore them. A terrible tragedy. Himaggery is quite distraught over it.” And she went on then to tell me more about them, and Peter, and Windlow the Seer, until I felt I had all his history tight in my mind.

So I knew who he was. And where he lived, at least from time to time. And now I had only to figure out how to bring myself to his attention. He might be a bit taken with Silkhands just now—and she was very lovely, that I will admit—but she obviously thought of him as a sibling.

In an instant, my complacency was shattered, for she said, “I’m glad you dropped in, Jinian. There are new rumors of trouble in the northlands. Before things get any worse, we should get ourselves to

Reavebridge. I thought we'd start within the next few days, and I wanted to ask if you need any help getting ready to leave."

Next few days. Next few days. What matter that I knew where he might live, or his name, if we were to go north day after tomorrow? What could I say? I nodded, mute, feeling myself falling away into thin shreds, as she went on.

"It would be good to have Peter with us on the trip. Perhaps he will be going in that direction. Or perhaps I can inveigle him to join us. You'd like that, Jinian. He's a good companion."

I took it for a promise, slipping away early the next morning to give the dams the news. Murzy quirked her lips at me, smiling with her eyes. Cat looked slantwise, tight-lipped, as though to consign all love and lovers to some far-off pit, shaking her head the while. Margaret rejoiced with me.

"So you know who he is! And what he is, and that a proper Gamesman. Well, and to think of it. Strange that he, too, is going north."

"Not strange," snarled Cat. "Part of the Pattern. Jinian summons Peter with Lovers Come Calling. Kelder summons Jinian with an alliance. Jinian summons Silkhands to accompany her. Silkhands summons Peter. A kind of round dance. Though what it dances 'round still eludes us, there in the northlands somewhere."

Her words brought back something I had forgotten until that instant. Bloster, heading away north with all that was left of Daggerhawk Demesne. Bloster's words at the edge of Chimmerdong. "Do any of you know anything about the Dream Miner and the Storm Grower?"

They became very still, in the manner of creatures so startled they do not move for fear of attracting attention. After a silence, Cat said, "Shhh. Jinian, don't speak of them loudly. Not even here."

"Who or what?" I demanded, though more quietly. "They plot my death!"

They hesitated, even Murzemire Hornloss, who seldom suffered tongue loss. It was Cat who spoke at last. "We have spoken of those Wizards who destroy in order to gain power. The things they choose to destroy sometimes appear randomly chosen. As are the things we choose to build with—they, too—would appear randomly chosen to those unfamiliar with our art. Would a layman know why we lay an owl's feather upon a black stone? Why we set our heels upon a bridge sometimes, or place a stem of maiden bells beneath the spray of a fall? We have a reason. So, if Dream Miner and Storm Grower have marked you for destruction, they have a reason. It is said they dwell in the north. If they plot your death, they do not do it idly and you will be walking toward it." She looked at the others. Grave faces all around.

"But that is where Peter is going." As I recall, I said it calmly, without foreboding. But then, I have never been thought to have a Seer's Talent.

Murzy did, and what she said was, "Why must Storm Grower and Dream Miner have everything their own way? Perhaps we have walked in fear of them too long."

Silence. Finally a sigh from Cat. "True, Murzemire. Though the very thought chills me."

Margaret looked at me with love in her face. "Go, Jinian. Return to us when you can. Or perhaps we will find you first."

“I wish there were time to see to your clothes before you go,” said Bets predictably, completely destroying the melancholy mood we had all fallen into.

Dodie was out in the countryside learning herbary with Sarah, so I could not even tell them farewell. Those who were there, I kissed good-bye, not really understanding the separation was to start at once.

19

We left a few days later, after such a flurry of preparation as left me no time to see the dams again. The words of the Oracle had not been forgotten. Nothing pertaining to Peter was ever forgotten so far as I was concerned. “Let him save your life a time or two,” the Oracle had said. “I see something unpleasant in the way of groles or Ghouls.” Groles I had not seen. Ghouls I had. I preferred not to see one again, but this trip northward might be the opportunity the Oracle had in mind. In which case Peter’s life, and mine, might be endangered.

I strapped Bartelmy’s gift scabbard to my thigh, high beneath my skirts, where it could be reached through a slit pocket, then stood for a long time looking at the weapon it would hold. It was an ugly thing still, breathing with a palpable menace, a hard, horrid chill. But ... but I had labored hard for the Dagger of Daggerhawk Demesne, risked my life for it, been dangled and threatened, all to have the tool to save Peter’s life and my own should it be needed. Would it be needed? I had only the Oracle’s word, and the Oracle never told all the truth.

At last I slipped it into the scabbard, recoiling as the pommel touched me. It lay angrily against my skin, an intimate hostility. After a few hours, I grew accustomed to the feeling. It was never less than discomfort.

And in the brightness of a morning Silkhands and I got into the light carriage that was to carry us north, waved farewell to Queen Vorbold (on whose face I read definite indications of relief), and were trotted out onto the road north.

Peter later wrote an account of that time. I have read it, being alternately amazed and amused. I do not remember saying some of the words he attributes to me. And though in the main it is an accurate enough account, from my point of view, things were not quite as Peter recorded them.

Since this trip was to offer an opportunity for Peter to save my life, it was obvious that I had to be careless enough to put my life at risk. I knew from Silkhands’ chatter that Peter was being harassed by some enemy, possibly that same Huld who had caused him so much trouble in the past. Both Silkhands and I knew that someone out in the wide world very much wanted me dead and gone. Despite this, neither of us spoke to Queen Vorbold about it, and we set out in a light carriage with only two guardsmen, both of them old, ready for retirement, and half-blind.

This was not unlike Silkhands. Healers tend to be a bit casual about security. I, however, looked the guards over cynically when we left, hoping they would not be victims in what was likely to occur.

As it happened, when the Ghoul came out of the woods, with a great troupe of staggering dead, the guards could make only a token resistance; both were injured immediately, one may have been killed. Silkhands was a Healer, not a fighter, and despite all my plots and plans, I was so surprised and horrified that I had all I could do to keep my hand away from the Dagger. Since the Ghoul made no immediate move to harm us, however, I concentrated on what was happening; counted the liches; and memorized the Ghoul’s face in the event I should meet him again.

Just as I was about to decide that using the Dagger would be prudent inasmuch as this wasn't the occasion the Oracle had in mind, I heard Peter screaming—his voice always cracked when he was excited; it went on doing it until he was well into his twenties—screaming, "Ghoul's Ghastr Nine." And then he swooped up the two of us, Silkhands and me, and carried us off to a treetop.

Unfortunately, he had used the last of his power in that swoop, while the Ghoul had plenty in reserve. We clung and kicked and cursed a bit, and finally Peter got a grip on one of the tiny Gamesmen he carried in his pocket—Buinel the Sentinel, it was—who stirred up a fire which burned up the Ghoul and the liches and very near barbecued us in the process. I didn't, quite frankly, think it was terribly good planning on Peter's part. Still, he had saved my life as the Oracle had suggested. Since he had saved Silkhands, too, however, it did not produce the desired effect.

We went on. Some of his enemies caught up with him in Three Knob, and I was able to suggest a stratagem that didn't require his using the Gamesmen of Barish. I thought he might act more prudently and consistently if he were not used to calling on them all the time. Loving Peter was sometimes like loving a committee. He often went into these odd, silent conferences with himself, them, leaving one very much on the outside. It was obvious he would not be able to love anyone by himself as long as he carried the Gamesmen in his pocket and in his head. Finding a solution to their presence would have to come soon. It could not come soon enough, so far as I was concerned.

King Kelter turned out to be a strikingly handsome man, younger than I had expected. The first moment he set eyes upon us, I knew he preferred Silkhands to me. Part of that was my own doing. I had not wanted him to like me much. Still, it was a bit crushing to find one had succeeded so well. His feelings seemed to be returned by Silkhands. She looked at him in a way she had never looked at Peter.

I considered them both, Silkhands and the King, and twiddled my thumbs thinking of Murzy's warning. "Never for anything small, chile," she used to say. So far as I was concerned, it was not for anything small. I found the sixteen ingredients for the love potion with some trouble, found privacy with which to mix them with a little more trouble, and then—then threw them out, threw myself down on the bed, and cried for an hour or so. It was no good. Remembering the centipig, that horrible, witless lusting that was compelled rather than felt, I could not do it to either of them. Things would just have to take their course. After only a few days, I knew no potion was necessary. She was quite besotted with him. Seeing them together, I wondered how often potions were used between two who might have loved anyhow. Well, no matter. King Kelter would obviously not object to breaking the contract.

And once Silkhands was disposed of in such a friendly fashion, I allowed another occasion on which Peter could save my life. I had to appear to do a very foolish thing, of course, and had it not been for my special Talent, it would have been a foolish thing in truth. I was shut up in a housenut that was being eaten out by groles. This time was actually much less dangerous than the previous time, since groles are beasts and quite responsive to being talked to. I kept them well away from me until the last minute, though when Peter arrived they were chewing away at my perch with every appearance of eating me imminently. He rescued me very nicely, held me as though I were precious to him, realizing for the first time that I was female.

Had it not been for Peter's old friend Chance, grumphing away in the background, my oath of celibacy might have been forgotten right then. From that point on, Peter began to have feelings for me. They were troubled feelings, yes. Uncertain feelings. Still, I thought in time he would come to love me a good deal. The whole matter might have been less complicated if there had not been that oath which still had two years to run.

We found the solution to the Gamesmen of Barish upon the heights of Bleer. Though he fought against it, Peter did the right thing. He and Silkhands raised them up, restoring them to themselves, and I was not even jealous. Silkhands saved his life in the process, so we all seemed even up with nothing owing to anyone.

A nice conclusion to the tale, his and mine. A good place to leave it, is it not? All of us properly paired off, loving couples or with some hope of being, having achieved great things. Many of the old stories end in such a way. "And then they lived happy all their lives."

And so with us, except that our lives were to be short ones lasting at most only a few hours from that time. As it was, we few stood alone upon the Wastes of Bleer waiting for too short a time to pass before we died. It was then and there I began this tale.

From what I have said, you know we did not die. The way of our salvation was this.

We stood together then upon the Wastes of Bleer, the great convoluted forms of the Wind's Bones all around us, eleven Gamesmen plus Barish-Windlow, and five of us who had come there, seventeen in all, while against us marched an army of bones stretching from one side of the horizon to the other. I had reconciled to dying, almost, and the others as well. We would die, but we would fight. We would die, but we would die honorably—and I considered the distinction with some wry, mordant cheer. A false distinction, but better than none under the circumstances. I had cried and scribbled one night away, sorry I could not have forgotten the oath for that last night. It seemed such a futile thing if I were to die, never to have loved him fully. But then I thought if I were to die, better to die true to myself than false. And who knows, making love under such conditions might not have been very wonderful the first time. I understand it often isn't. Margaret explained that to me. So, I stood there facing the marching horde, the Dagger in my hand, hoping I would have a chance of letting one of the human movers of that horde feel the edge of it, grieving a little.

Then there was no more time to grieve over lost loving, for the army of bones was upon us. Peter had Shifted into a grole, ready to eat as many of the enemy as he could. The rest of us were ready to fight, knowing it would be futile against that array, about to be overrun.

And then ... in the middle of that great tumult I felt Peter trying to raise up the Wind's Bones, those great buried hulks that lay all about us, trying to link with the Gamesmen as he had so often in the past, trying to use their strength to bring the great old bones of the world to our defense. They were too monstrous, too deep, too heavy, too far buried. He could not. They quivered only slightly, shifting reluctantly in their age-old bed. And yet, they had been beastly things after all, no matter how huge. Things of the earth, I thought half-hysterically as the marching skeletons came in their white rattling thunder toward us. Buried things, old things ...

The words rang in my head like a bell. "Earthways are mine, and things old and buried. If you need help with such things, call on me." The boon I had been promised by the gobblemole.

There was no time to do what I did! Time slowed around me as I ducked into a hidden place between the stones, set out the articles, drew the design, said the words of summoning and the boon requested, all in one great gust of breath as though I would not have a moment in which to finish. Never before, and not often since, have I felt the power of word, gesture, and intent unified into an irresistible summons as it was in that moment. I did not see old gobblemole, but I could feel him, feel him in the way the great bones heaved up all at once, higher and higher, monsters of ancient times trampling up into the daylight with the mold still falling from them. Bones to fight bones. Dead things to fight dead things. The dead things of this world to fight the dead things that had come from another world.

Gobblemole held them in himself, of course, just as forest held every tree and silver-bell, just as fitchhawk held every darter's wing, just as d'bor wife held every minnow. Old gods, holding all their kind in their minds, marvelous and mighty. And I heard them speaking as if they were beasts alive once more, heard their subterranean fury swell from the clinging soil to burst with shattering ferocity upon the skeletons of men: "Adown the false, foul, outlander bones. Adown the brittle, breaking, wildly shaking skeletons from the afars. Adown the interloper, stranger, alien horde. Adown them all, all, into dust, sand, soil, stone ..."

And in the end, as you know, they were indeed adown, into dust upon the wind, blots upon the stone, while the great old beasts trampled still, only falling to the stones once more when the long day was done. When it was over, we felt like rags, sodden and limp, the sweat drying clammy on us, unable to raise a finger. It was timely to see Peter's folk come down at us out of the sky, bearing little help for what we had been through but much comfort and food and cheer now that it was over.

In the quiet that came at last, I set my feet upon the ground to feel the tingle there where the Old Road still ran.

They shut up the old gods, Bartelmy the Dervish had said, shut them up. Wounded them.

"I would not allow myself to be shut up," I had said to Cat once, knowing nothing about it at all. It had seemed a simple thing.

It was not that simple, neither the shutting up nor the turning loose. Certainly the towering anger that came in answer to my summons was not a simple thing. There was wrath beneath my feet, vengefulness, a great force that might be loosed against all things not of this world. As I was not. As Peter was not. Though it came to my call, that was no guarantee it hated me less than it had hated the bones. No. It was not a simple thing to shut up an old god. So were my thoughts, momentarily.

There was no time to ruminate upon it. I walked among the Gamesmen of Barish, looking them over as others were doing, wondering to find myself here among legends and almost-gods. I heard them talk with one another, with Mavin and Himaggery, heard them plan for a new age, a better time, plotting to raise up a hundred thousand great Gamesmen to achieve their purposes. There was Tamor, Armiger; Dealpas the Healer. There was Thandbar, the first Shifter, forebear of Peter and his mother. There was Trandilar, great Queen, mistress of Beguilement, cosseting Peter in a tone that turned me red and eager, not with envy but with some hot feeling it was not easy to put down. Sorah was there, the great Seer of ancient times, pretending to have a vision for him.

Then I saw her face change and the vision became a real one. She was saying. "Shadowmaster. Holder of the key. Storm Grower. The Wizard holds the book, the light, the bell."

And I did not consider it. I laughed, with Peter, both of us red-faced and a little embarrassed, and we forgot it. The terror was over. All either of us could think of was the fermenting, bubbling joy of being alive, of having a future. Nothing else seemed important. I knew nothing then about the shadowmaster except what Bartelmy had told me. I did not care to hear more about Storm Grower. I had only seen one edge of the bell—had I really seen it at all?—and knew nothing of the book or light. I was only a young girl. I was alive, who had thought she would be dead. I was in love.

I did not give much thought to Bartelmy's words, or those of the Oracle who tells only part of the truth—not then. Peter had invited me to go with him, northward still, to see the world we had not seen before.

There were things ... things my head wanted. And I'll confess it, even then a faint fatal curiosity was beginning to brew.

But Peter had asked me to go with him northward.

And for that little time, that was enough.

Dervish Daughter

CHAPTER ONE

Just across the chasm from the town of Zog a bunch of wild brats with crossbows—and poisoned arrows, to add to the general sense of fun—had given us quite a run. We'd barely gotten away from them with our skins whole.

There had been constant storm damage blocking the roads, continuous sullen clouds, and a threatening mutter of sentient-seeming thunder. I had a huge, aching lump on my forehead from not being quick enough ducking into the wagon during the hail storm four days before. Hail the size of goose eggs!

Add to that the remains we kept finding along the way, more and more of them as we went farther north. Human remains, mostly, and the yellow dream crystals that had killed them.

Throw in the fact we'd been driving two days and nights without sleep, dodging shadow, which seemed to be everywhere.

Then season the whole horrid mess with a harsh scream as a night bird plummeted across the moonlit sky screeching, "Lovely dead meat, not even rotten yet!" I understood it as easily as though it had been shouted at me by some old dame in the underbrush.

The bird's cry said "human meat," not some luckless zeller killed by a pombi's claws. I put my hand over Queynt's where they lay on the reins.

He snapped out of his doze, immediately alert, as I reached beneath the wagon seat for my bow. "More trouble ahead," I said wearily, nocking an arrow.

Queynt yawned, giving my bow a doubtful look.

Though he had been teaching me to shoot with the stated intention of providing for the pot, my inability to hit anything smaller than a gnarlibar had become a joke. They had begun to call natural landmarks that were suitably huge a "good target for Jinian." The problem was that I couldn't shoot anything that talked to me. Oh, if someone else shot it, I could eat it, and if something came at me with unpleasant intent, I was able to kill it readily enough no matter what it was saying. Bunwits and zeller and tree rats, however, were safe from my arrows so long as they said good morning politely. I hadn't discussed this with Queynt, though I thought he suspected it.

He glanced down, then back into the wagon where his Wizard's kit was. I knew he was considering getting out his own bow or taking time to set a protection spell, evidently deciding against it. We'd

learned to trust the instincts of Yittleby and Yattleby in times of danger, and neither of the two tall krylobos pulling the wagon seemed overly disturbed. Their beaks were forward, their eyes watchful as we came around a curve at the crest of a hill, but neither of them showed any agitation. We came out of the jungle at the top of a long, sloping savannah, dotted with dark, crouching bushes and half-lit by a gibbous moon. I could see all the way to the bottom of the hill where the forest started again and two twinkling lanterns, amber and red, moved among the trees near the ground. That had to be Peter and Chance. They'd been riding ahead and had evidently found something, disturbing the bird at the time. Queynt clucked to the krylobos, and we began the slow descent toward the lanterns with him looking remarkably alert for such an old man.

Vitior Vulpas Queynt is over a thousand years old.

Everything I have learned about him indicates this is really true and not some mere bit of rodomontade. He hadn't made a special point of claiming to be that old, mind you; it simply came out as we went along. Peter and I had met him a couple of years before, or rather, he had picked us up on the road—he and his remarkable tall-wheeled wagon and the two huge birds that pulled it. He had picked us up and made use of us and we of him, all in a fit of mutual suspicion, and when it was over we found ourselves quite fond of one another. And the birds, too, of course. Krylobos are very large—tailless, as are all native creatures of this world, with plummy topknots and somewhat irascible tempers. They like me since I can talk to them, and I like them because they dislike the same things I do.

Bathing in very cold water, for example. Or eating fruit that isn't quite ripe. They don't have teeth to set on edge, but the expression around their beaks is quite sufficient to evoke sympathy.

Which is beside the point. Queynt has a fondness for fantastical dress and ornamental speech and enjoys being thought a fool. He says he learns a great deal that way. He is an explorer at heart, so he has said, and exploring is what he and Peter and Chance and I had been doing for some time. He is the only person to whom Chance has ever given unstinting admiration. So Peter says, who has known Chance far longer than I.

This admiration is more understandable in that Vitior Vulpas Queynt and Chance much resemble each other. Both are brown, muscular men who look a little soft without being so at all. Both are jolly-appearing men who seem a little stupid and aren't. And both have quantities of common sense. As for the rest of it, Queynt is a Wizard of vast experience and education, while Chance is an ex-sailor with a fondness for gambling who was hired to bring Peter up safely and did so more or less. Both of them have had a certain tutelary role in our lives. Peter's and mine, and truth to tell, I like them both mightily. Even on an occasion like this, when weariness made it hard to be fond of anyone.

We approached the lanterns. A faint sweetish smell told me everything I wanted to know about it before we got there. More dream crystal deaths.

Before we ever started on this trip—after the Battle of the Bones on the Wastes of Bleer it was, when we were all remarkably glad merely to be alive—I had known about dream crystals. My un-mother (the woman who bore me but did not conceive me, if that makes sense) had had at least one. It had led her into ruin and ended, I supposed, by killing her. My much hated enemy, Porvius Bloster, had had one, and it had done him no good at all except to make him exceed his limitations and bring destruction upon his Demesne. Even girls at school had had dream crystals, assortments of them, like candies. I had known what they were in a casual way, known enough to stay away from them and mistrust those who used them, but it was not until this trip that I had seen them in general use. Misuse.

Whatever. It was not until this trip I had seen them killing people by the dozens. There, that's plain

enough.

The current situation was a case in point. It was another of those pathetic encampments we had seen entirely too many of during the past season.

One couldn't dignify the structures even as huts.

They were the kind of shelter a bored child might build in a few careless moments; a few branches leaned against a fallen tree—its trunk loaded with epiphytes and fogged by a dense cloud of ghost moths—and a circle of rocks rimming a pool of ash. And the corpses.

Three of them this time; man, woman, and baby.

Starved to death, from the look of them, and with food all round for the picking or digging—furry, thickskinned pocket-bushes full of edible nuts, a northern thrilp bush—smaller fruit, and sweeter than the southern variety—table roots just beside the tiny stream.

“Hell,” I said to Queynt, disgusted. “I suppose they've got those yellow crystals in their mouths, like all the rest.” Half-right. In the lantern light we could see the male corpse had one on a thong around his neck; the female had one in her mouth, having sucked herself to death on it. Their bodies were still warm. The baby was cold, probably dead of dehydration after screaming his lungs out for several days trying to tell someone he was hungry and thirsty and wet.

Chance and Peter were dismounted by the corpses.

Peter gave me a troubled look, knowing I'd be upset by the baby. Chance eased his wide belt and mused, “I suppose we could dig them in, though there seems little sense to bother.” At first we'd stopped to bury the human dead along the road, but they had become more and more numerous as we came farther north. There had soon been too many to bury, but it still bothered me to let the babies lie. “I'll bury the baby,” I said in a voice that sounded angry even to me. “Let the others alone.” Queynt shook his head, but he didn't argue. All the babies reminded me of one I'd taken care of in a class back in Xammer. The one in Xammer had the same baffled look when he fell asleep that many of the dead babies did, as though it had all been too much for him and he was glad to be out of it. I wrapped this one in our last towel, reminding myself to buy towels the next time we got to any place civilized—if there were any place civilized in these northlands. I'd used up our supply burying babies and children.

Queynt said, “Jinian, if you're going to go on like this, I'll lay in a supply of shrouds. It would be cheaper than good toweling.” I flushed, getting on with the half-druggled grave I was digging with the shovel we used for latrine ditches.

“I know it doesn't make sense, Queynt, but otherwise I get bad dreams.” He already knew that; we'd discussed it before.

“There's a city somewhere ahead,” said Peter, trying to change the subject. “I can hear it.” It wasn't surprising. He had Shifted himself a pair of ears which stood out like batwings on either side of his head. Probably hadn't even realized he was doing it. I turned away to hide the expression on my face—he did look silly—only to see Queynt touching his tongue to the crystal the dead man had had around his neck.

Even though Queynt had told us over and over he was immune, seeing him do that made me shudder. I was going to find out about that alleged immunity sooner or later, but so far he hadn't explained it. Now he saw me shiver and shook his head at me.

“We have to know, girl!” Well, he was right. We did have to know. Those louts outside Zog had had crystals hanging around their necks, too. Reddish ones. Queynt hadn’t had a chance to taste one of those, but then he hadn’t needed to. It was evident what dreams of violence and rapine they were breeding in the brats. Along with everything else, they had been chanting a litany to Storm Grower while they tried to kill us. We’d been hunting Storm Grower for some seasons now, and hearing the name in this context made the hunt seem even more ominous than we’d already decided it was.

Queynt nodded at me about this yellow crystal, telling me it was like the others we’d found beside the dead bodies along the road. Anyone touching it to his tongue would be utterly at peace, in a place of perfect contentment with no hunger, no thirst, no desires.

Someone sucking a crystal like that wouldn’t hear a baby crying or the sound of their own stomach screaming for food. Someone sucking on that dream would lie there and die. And there were hundreds along the road who had done just that—families, singletons, even whole mounted troops, dead on the ground with the horses still saddled and wandering. We’d found one pile of small furry things which Queynt believed were Shadowpeople, though the carrion birds had left little enough to identify. All with yellow crystals in their mouths, their hands, or on thongs around their necks.

We hadn’t found a single one on anyone still living.

When the grave was filled in, I pulled myself up on the wagon seat again. Queynt nodded sympathetically as we started off into the gray light of early dawn.

“Someone’s getting rid of excess population,” he mumbled. “Dribs and drabs of it.”

“What I can’t figure out is how and why certain ones are so all of a sudden excess! We’ve found dead Gamesmen and dead pawns, young and old, male and female. All with these same damn yellow things. The crystals are all alike, same color, same size. Someone has to be making them!”

“You’ve mentioned that before, Jinian. Several times, as I recall.” He sighed, yawned, scratched himself. “You know, girl,” he drawled, going into one of his ponderous perorations, “though we may conjecture until we have worn imagination to shreds, theorize until our brains are numb with it, baffle our knowledge with mystery and our logic with the futility of it all, until we find out where they’re coming from, anything we guess is only hot air and worth about as much.” He fell into a brooding silence as we rattled on with the krylobos talking nonsense to one another and Peter and Chance riding just ahead. So we had ridden, league on league, hundreds and hundreds of them, ever since leaving the lands of the True Game. Some days it seemed we’d been riding like this forever.

I could see Peter’s animated profile from time to time as he turned to speak to Chance. His face was bronze from the sun. He’d grown up, too, in the last few seasons. The bones in his cheeks and jaw were bold, no longer child-like, and there was a strong breadth to his forehead. It was his mouth that got to me, though, the way his upper lip curved down in the center, a funny little dip, as though someone had pinched it. Every time I saw that, I wanted to touch it with my tongue. Like a sweet. No. Not like a sweet.

Well, I needed comforting, and seeing him there within reach, within touching distance, made me want to yell or run or go hide in the wagon.

Sometimes I wished that the way I felt about Peter was an illness. If it were an illness, a Healer could cure it.

As it was, it went on all the time with no hope of a cure.

Every morning when the early light made sensuous wraiths of the mists, every evening when the dusk ghosts crept into erotic tangles around the foliage (see, even my language was getting lubricious), I found myself thinking unhelpful thoughts that made me blush and breathe as though I'd been running. I furnished every grove with likely spots for dalliance, and lately I'd taken to crossing off every day that passed, counting the ones that remained until the season my oath of celibacy would be done.

Queynt had been watching me; I caught his kindly stare and blushed. "Troubled about your oath?" he asked me sympathetically.

He caught me unaware. One of the things that bothered me about Queynt was his habit of knowing what I was thinking. He wasn't a Demon. He had no business just knowing that way. "Yes." I turned red again. It wasn't any of his business, and yet. "By the Hundred Devils and all their pointy ears, Queynt, I can't understand the sense of it. They said it was to let me study the art without distractions, but I'm not studying the art! I'm traveling. Trying to keep my skin whole. Trying to locate Dream Miner and Storm Grower and find out why they want me dead. Praying Peter keeps on being fond of me at least until the oath runs out. Celibacy doesn't seem to make a lot of sense!"

"Oh," he said mildly, "it does, you know. If you examine it. For example, you've been doing summons, haven't you?" Well, I had, of course. A few. I might have called up an occasional water dweller to provide a fish dinner. Or maybe a few flood-chucks, just to help us get through some timber piles on the road. I admitted as much, wondering what he was getting at.

"Well, if you've been doing summons, have you ever stopped to think what an unconsidered pregnancy might do to the practice of the art?" An unconsidered pregnancy—or even a considered one—was about the furthest thing from my mind at the moment. But this was something not one of the dams had mentioned to me, not even the midwife, Tess Tinder-my-hand, who would have been the logical one to do so. My jaw dropped and I gave him an idiot look.

"Well, let's say you're pregnant and you summon up something obstreperous in the way of a water dweller. Then you go through the constraints and dismissal, but the water dweller considers the child in your belly was part of the summons. That child has neither constrained nor dismissed. So, time comes you give birth to something that looks rather more like a fish than you might think appropriate. Recent research would indicate a good many of the magical races are the results of just such Wize-ardly accidents."

"Mermaids? Dryads?"

"Among others, and not the most strange, either. Have you ever called up a deep dweller?" I had heard them laugh a few times during bridge magic but had never called them. Murzy had told me to be careful, very careful, with them. I shook my head again.

"I have. Pesky, mischievous creatures, but more than half-manlike, for all that. If it weren't for their fangy mouths, you'd think them children. I shouldn't wonder if that race came from some magical accident during pregnancy. Not that deep dwellers are common." All of which was something to think about. I snapped my mouth shut and thought about it.

I'd never really understood the reason for the oath—three years of celibacy (virginity in my case)—sworn when I was just fifteen. I'd done it, of course, because they wouldn't let me be in the

seven otherwise, and if I weren't in the seven, I couldn't go on studying the art.

At that time, the art was just about all I had to care about except for the seven old dams themselves. Well, six and me.

So, I took the oath, and got initiated, and learned some fascinating things, all a good bit of time before Peter came along. When he did come along, however, the oath began to feel like a suit of tight armor. There was it, all hard and smooth outside, and there was me, all sweaty and passionate inside. And that's the way this trip had gone, with me being hard and cold half the time and hiding in the wagon the rest of the time, afraid of what might happen if I came out. I didn't wonder that Queynt could see it. No one could have missed it.

Peter came galloping back, head down, looking thoroughly tired and irritable. "More trees down. A real swath cut up ahead. We'll need to find a way around. No possible way of getting through it." When we arrived at the tumble, it was obvious he was right. Seven or eight really big trees, fallen into a kind of jackstraw mess, their branches all tangled together. Lesser trees were fallen in the forest, the whole making a deadfall that we could have scrambled through if we'd had a few extra hours with nothing better to do and hadn't minded leaving the wagon behind.

Off to the right the forest thinned out a little. There were wide-enough spaces between the trees to get down into a meadow, and the meadow looked as though it stretched past the obstruction and back to the road. Chance was at the edge of the open space, beckoning.

Queynt kreked a few syllables to Yittleby and Yattleby, they turning their great beaks in reply. He had said, "Can you handle this?" and they had replied, "Why even ask?" He had picked up a few words of the krylobos language over the years. I wasn't always sure that he knew what he was saying.

It was first light, still very dim. I got off to walk beside the wagon as it tilted from side to side over the road banks and through the scattered trees. Watching where I was walking had become a habit, and when I saw it I stopped without conscious effort, hollering to Queynt, "Shadow! Stop. Look there." Unlike the rivers of dark we had seen flowing along the road farther south, this patch was a small one, the size of an outspread cape. It lay under a willow copse, directly in my path, easy to miss in this half-light.

When we'd started this adventure, traveling along the shores of the Glistening Sea among the towns of the Bight, we'd seen shadow piled on shadow. We'd taken refuge in the wagon more than once when we'd encountered great swatches of it creeping and crawling about us in the forests and chasms. In comparison to that, this little patch was almost innocent looking.

"What's holding you?" asked Peter, riding down behind us.

"Shadow." Queynt was laconic about it. Though he claimed to have seen it seldom before we started our northern trip, he had accustomed himself to the sight better than I. Shadow never failed to give me a sick emptiness inside, a fading feeling, as though I had become unreal. I had been shadow bit once, in Chimmerdong. As they say, once bit, twice sore.

"Well." He sat there for a moment, staring at it, shifting from haunch to haunch, looking cross the way he does when he's hungry. "It doesn't look any different from any other we've seen. Are you going to sit here all morning looking at it, or can we go around it and get back to the road?" Peter was, as usual, impatient.

There was no reason to watch it. Shadow seldom did anything. When it was angered, and as far as I

knew no one knew what made it angry, it attacked. Otherwise, it simply lay. Anything that stepped into shadow, of course, would be better off dead sooner than it died.

Moved by a fleeting curiosity, I took off one boot and set my bare foot on the ground. There was a tingle there, very slight, which meant there was a remnant of the Old Road buried deep beneath us. I'd had the suspicion for some time that the shadow gathered mostly where there were remnants of the Ancient Roads, though I had no idea what it meant. Seeing Queynt's curious gaze focused on me, I flushed and put my boot back on.

We led the birds around the shadow patch, though I think they were fully capable of avoiding it on their own, and then back up through the meadow to the road once more, where the stack of shattered trunks was now blocking the way behind us. Since hearing those Zoggian brats chant their litany to Storm Grower, I had a pretty good idea where this kind of damage came from—not that we could verify it. Ever since we'd first seen this random destruction, we'd asked about it.

Those we'd asked didn't answer. Since we had no Demon with us to read minds, we had given up asking, but we hadn't given up wondering. We went on, with me still suspiciously looking for shadow as we rattled along the road.

"There's the city Peter heard," said Queynt.

We had topped a rise and looked down into a green valley, a city cupped at the center. The place was crowned with ostentatious mansions, much carved stone and lancet windows and so prodigious a display of banners—which were either excessively pink or blushed by the sunrise—some festival must have been in progress. I sighed. Towns of any kind seemed to mean trouble recently, and I was too tired even to fight for my life.

"I wonder if there's an inn with a good cook?"

"Burials make you hungry, do they?" I swallowed my protest. Fact was, they did make me hungry. As did traveling, practicing the wize-art, talking to animals, or virtually anything else one wanted to mention. "Good appetite, long life," I said sententiously.

"I suppose you're right." He sighed, peering down at his own round belly. "My appetite is very good, and I seem to have lived some time."

"Which is a story you have promised to tell me, Queynt. About long life, and immunity to crystals, and things."

"Ah, well, Jinian. Sometime."

"I'll make you a deal, Queynt. You tell me about you and the crystals after breakfast, and I'll tell you something you don't know."

"It's a long, dull story."

I snickered. Queynt didn't tell dull stories. Oh, he could be dull, but if he was, it was for a purpose. At storytelling, he was a master. I said, "I presume as much, and we haven't time now, anyhow. The city will be all around us shortly. But when we find lodging? Is it a promise?"

"You won't let me alone until I do. You're a presumptuous chit. A nuisance. Still, there's no real reason

not to tell you, and it may gain me a little peace.”

I held out my hand to clasp his, making a bargain. I'd wanted to hear that story for a long time, but Queynt always seemed to evade telling me about it.

A difference in the sound of the wagon wheels rang in my ear. Paving. The talons of the krylobos scraped upon cobbles. Beside the wagon a sign. BLOOME WELCOMES YOU. Another, only slightly smaller. SHEBELAC STREET.

CHAPTER TWO

We rode on Shebelac Street, paved as far as the eye could see with glistening cobbles, shiny as turtle backs from the night's rain. At either side were high, carved curbs, and above that, slabs of walk-stone, embellished with an incised serpent's twist, to make them more interesting to walk on, I suppose. On either side of the walks, the houses and shops of the outskirts of Bloome were still quiet against the jungle in the dawn time, not bursting from doors and windows with banners and bells and drums as they would on the morrow.

It took us very little time to learn that five days before had been the procession of Jix-jax-cumbalory and that tomorrow would be Finaggy-Bum. It took us no time at all to learn that today the procession route would be announced, and every house and shop holder attentive in the forum to know whether he would need to spend the night getting ready or might sleep for once.

Those along the Forum Road, Tan-tivvy Boulevard and Shebelac Street had given up sleeping long since. All processions came to the Forum along one of those three and left by another of the same. A one-in-three chance of sleeping the night before procession meant less and less as the season picked up speed. Five days hence, we were told, would be Pickel-port-poh, with Shimerzy-waffle three days after. The cloth merchants would rise early. The banner makers not long after.

Tent and marquee manufacturers would be in their shops even as we rode. As I say, we were soon to learn all this. And more.

And in the high mansion upon Frommager Hill, reached from the Forum by the twisty peregrinations of Sheel Street, Dream Merchant's man Brombarg—whom we were shortly to meet—woke in an unusually foul temper. Time had come to make a decision. Time to go on or get out, one or the other, and he couldn't make up his mind. If he decided to retire, he'd need a naif to lay the job off on, and there weren't any strangers in Bloome to choose from.

He rose, fuming, yawning, scratching his crotch with erotic insistence. (I am not certain about this, but it seems in character.) The festivals of Finaggy-Bum and Shimerzy-waffle! Merchants' men were always elected on the one and sworn in on the other. He could wear the pink vertical for the election. No one had seen it yet, and hideously hot and uncomfortable though it was, it was the most stylish thing he possessed. And it was pink! It would be at least a season before the fashions would swing back to anything comfortable to wear, and it might be forever before there was any other acceptable color. Damn the machine. Couldn't afford the fine if he was judged to be far out of fashion, either. Being Dream Merchant's man took every coin he could lay hands on. (It did, too. The poor fellow had next to nothing of his own.) Still scratching, he leaned from the westernmost of his tall, lancet windows. From this tower he could look across the city walls to the jungle, brilliantly, wetly green in the morning light, swarming with birds. From here every street in Bloome was clearly visible. Only the huddle of servitors' huts along the walls themselves could not be seen, they and the prodigious mill that rumbled on the eastern border of the

town, shivering the ground in a constant hyogeal vibration.

Sheel Street sinuated down Frommager into the Forum. He followed it with his eyes, imagining himself on a capacious horse riding there. Down Sheel, across the Forum, into Tan-tivvy and along that, titty-tup, titty-tup, all the way to the city edge and away northwest.

Leaving it. Dressed in a simple shirt, mayhap, with trousers that fit. A cape to keep off the storm and a hat to shelter his eyes. "Oh, by all the merchants in Zib, Zog, Chime, and Bloome," he moaned. "But I am sick of this." And he was. He would leave it in a minute—if they would only let him!

A distant movement caught his attention.

There. Entering the city along Shebelac, which ran south, far south, becoming merely a track at the base of the mountains if one went far enough. What in the name of five foul fustigars was that? A wagon drawn by birds? And two riders alongside on great southern horses.

Sweating with sudden excitement, Brombarg moved toward his closet. Day before procession he could get away with something fairly simple. He dressed quickly, knowing he had to get to them before anyone else did.

Them, of course, was us, riding down Shebelac in the early morning. Chance and Peter kept their eyes busy looking at the houses and shops while I yawned and struggled to stay awake. The two days without sleep, mostly on the run, was taking its toll.

"Years since I've been here," Queynt said, looking about him with interest. "Three, four hundred, maybe. Cloth-manufacturing town, as I remember. It isn't much bigger. They used to have a special kind of wineghost—Good merciful spirits of the departed. What's that?" Queynt drew up the reins, and the tall, dignified birds halted as one, their long necks bent forward to examine the creature that had come into the road at the distant corner and was now plodding toward them.

"Gods," I murmured sotto voce. "A madman, perhaps?" At that first instant, I really thought it was, and my hands started for my bow.

But Peter shook his head. "A player, maybe. The town shows signs of festival. Costume booths on every corner. Banner wires across all the streets."

"Trust you to notice such a thing." I gave him a relieved and adoring look—remembering too late to make it merely friendly—and he flushed with pleasure, pushing back the ruddy wave of hair that seemed to be always draped across his forehead. I went on hurriedly, "I did see the streets were freshly swept. Look at those trews!" We examined the trousers together, equally interested, unequally appalled. I didn't care that much about dress, quite frankly, and was simply dismayed at the thought of wearing any such thing. As a Shifter, however, Peter was professionally intrigued, busy calculating how the vast protrusions were kept afloat. The man coming toward us seemed to have a huge hemisphere of fabric around each leg, which bulged forward, back, and to either side like halves of a monstrous melon.

From the back of his shirt, five vasty wings exploded, their inclined planes just missing the edge of his huge, circular hat brim. Glitter shot from his hands; more glitter from the throat, where some seal of office—a plaque of jet picked out in brilliants—hung on a lengthy chain. Only the boots seemed rational, and even they were topped with a fringe of chain that swung and tinkled as he walked.

"He comes," intoned Queynt, "robed in glory."

Tinsel, I thought. Robed in tinsel. As a student in Vorbold's House I had learned to distinguish quality, and there was no quality in this apparition. The materials were sleazy. The seams were crooked, gaping, shedding frayed thread from the edges.

"I greet you, strangers," puffed Brombarg, horribly out of breath. The balloon pants were hell to walk in; he had forgotten that. (A perennial optimist, Brom. He did tend to forget unpleasant things.) "Welcome to Bloome."

Peter and I bowed politely. Both of us had been school-reared for sufficient time to make courteous behaviour almost second nature. Chance and Queynt were subject to no such disadvantage. In any case, Chance wouldn't have submitted to mere courtesy.

"What in the name of Seven Hundred Devils are you got up as?" he demanded.

Heaven smiles on me, thought Brombarg. A naif has come to save me. "Clothing, stranger," he said. "We're having a minor festival, and we all dress a bit ... fantastical during it." (I can tell you what he was thinking. Later it became more than obvious.)

"There," said Peter. "I knew it."

I had seen lies before, and I knew one had just crossed Brombarg's mind, though his lips might have told most of the truth. Still, I smiled with a kindly expression. "We'll need costume, then, if we decide to stay."

"Not obligatory." He waved a coruscating hand, throwing sun-sparkles into my eyes. "Certainly more fun, wouldn't it be? But no need to go to any trouble. I've a wardrobe full of festival dress. You're welcome to it. And to the hospitality of the mansion. Yonder." He gestured again, upward at the looming bulk of the walls upon Frommager Hill. "A short way up Sheel Street."

"Then you are?" I pursued the point, catching Queynt's skeptical look. He was no credulous youth to believe everything he heard. Chance, neither, who was still staring at the apparition before them, breathing heavily through his mouth as though to taste what it might be. "You didn't tell us your name."

"Auf!" Dramatic blow to the forehead to illustrate his own stupidity. "Dream Merchant's man. Brombarg. Everyone calls me Brom."

"Dream Merchant's man? I don't think I know the title." Still smiling, though inside every fiber quivered to alertness. A solid lead to the Dream Miner, perhaps? I knew Brom wouldn't take offense at a woman. Queynt was keeping still. He knew what I was trying to find out, though Peter didn't, shifting on his horse impatiently as he was. Well, poor man, he had been riding all night.

"Ah ... why, there used to be a Merchant's man in each town hereabouts. Cloth Merchant's man in Bloome. Pottery Merchant's man in Zib. Metal workers were over in Thorne, and so on. Merchants' men did the job of managing the towns—you know, Zib, Zog, Zinter, Thorpe, Fangel, Woeful, Chime, and Bloome." He chanted this last like an incantation, grinning and sweating the while. "All the towns need someone to see to the garbage, you know, and to the streets and the fire brigade. So, when the Dream Merchant set up in Fangel, he took over all the old Merchants' men and made 'em Dream Merchant's men. Different title but same duty, you know." The man was a fountain of inconsequential information.

“Dream Merchant?” Queynt was smiling, quiet, nonthreatening, helping me out. “That’s one I haven’t heard before.”

“Would your invitation include breakfast?” This Peter, breaking our concentration, changing the subject. “I’m starved.”

Sighs all around. I was peeved at the interruption, thinking it too soon to put ourselves in the man’s arena; Queynt likewise; Chance and Peter both hungrier than consonant with good sense and relying, as usual, on Peter’s Shifter Talent to get them out of trouble that a little patience might have avoided. Brombarg grinning, turning to lead us up Sheel Street. Windows beginning to open, now, and him in a hurry to get us high above the town before someone said or did the wrong thing.

Yittleby and Yattleby, the two giant krylobos who drew the wagon, turned to one another, then to Queynt. “Krerk whittle quiss?” I heard the question conveyed in this wise. “This man is dishonest, friend-humans. Do we follow him or kick him to death?”

“Follow,” I said to them in a croaking whisper. They whistled a few choice phrases and nodded plumes at me, argumentative but obedient. Queynt cast me a sidelong look. Perhaps I wasn’t fooling him. Perhaps he knew what my Talent was, though I had not told him.

Peter had already dismounted to walk beside Brombarg. “What is the nature of your festival, Merchant’s man? Is that the correct title?”

Brom nodded, puffing. “We are a festival-ridden city, my friend. I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

“Peter. Just that. We don’t much use other titles.”

Brom smiled more widely. In his experience, those who had titles used them, and those who had none said they didn’t care for them. So, likely these were insignificant creatures of a certain eccentricity. (He had begun to patronize us.) The birds, for example. Now there was a team worth having. (This was evident from his expression.) He revised his earlier vision to include himself on Queynt’s wagon seat, riding titty-tup down Tan-tivvy toward away. (Extrapolation, but not unjustified.) “The lady’s name is Jinian. Beside her is Queynt, and the other one is Chance.”

“And you come from?”

“Far away,” said Queynt firmly. “To the south.”

Brom smiled more widely yet. No titles, no place of residence. Drifters. Tra-la. He did not notice my eyes fixed upon him from behind, like a gimlet into a hole, no longer smiling. “As to our festival, it is the festival of Finaggy-Bum, during which are processions, bands, feasting and gaiety, dancing in the streets, and fireworks at dusk. And,” he said with a sidelong, sly look, “the determining by the Cloth Merchants’ Council of who should be Merchant’s man for the next year.” He must have been disappointed that we showed no interest in this topic. Instead, Peter changed the subject once more.

“Are there many Gamesmen hereabout?” We had seen none of the familiar Game garments among those on the streets.

“Gamesmen? From the True Game lands? Oh, no, young sir, indeed not. It seems their Talents are somewhat muted in these Northern Lands. Was a Tragamor came through only a season ago told me he could not Move a filled cup off the table here in Bloome.”

“Krerker,” said the left-hand krylobos, most probably Yittleby. “Liar.”

“I know,” I agreed. Still, there were very few Gamesmen about. Either they did not come here, or did not stay here, or ... Or they stayed here in some other guise than their own.

“Keraw whit,” agreed the birds.

The way up Sheel Street was lengthy because of its many turnings as it wound back and forth across the hill. There were wagons everywhere, transporting bolts of cloth, mostly of a vile, organic pink color. There were more costume shops, and here and there a booth blazoned, NEWEST CRYSTALS: NEW FEELINGS; NEW TALENTS: NEW WORLDS OF SENSATION, with a display case of dream crystals glittering inside, green and violet and amber orange. I didn't see any of the reddish ones we'd seen at Zog or any of the piss-yellow ones we'd found on the corpses, but every other color was shown.

Large, ornate houses stood on either hand, most of them in some state of disrepair, sounds of occupancy beginning to be heard in the street, “Morning, Brom,” said one gatekeeper curiously, leaning on his broom as he spoke. His hat was two armspans tall, with a ruff of feathers at the top, and his trousers were made up of narrow ribbons wound 'round his legs, ending in a kind of obscene pink tassel over his crotch. “Visitors?”

“Visitors.” Brom waved offhandedly, not stopping. “Hungry visitors, Philp. Can't stop. Have to offer some breakfast before they fall flat.” Then, as the road turned to come back above the sweeper, “Nice fella, that. Cloth merchant. 'Course, most of us in Bloome are, come to that.”

We approached the portal and were admitted to the courtyard through a narrow door set in the greater one. Queynt unharnessed the birds, refusing the assistance of a rat-faced stableman, and left them to guard the wagon. We hadn't walked twenty paces down a corridor after Brom when a terrified squeal from the courtyard brought us back. The rat-faced man lay supine beside the wagon, a large bird's foot planted on his belly. “I was just having a look at the wagon, having a look, that's all.”

“I wouldn't,” said Queynt cheerfully. “The birds don't like it.”

Brom's face was not quite as cheerful as he led us the rest of the way to the dining room. He left us there while he spoke to certain kitchen people, obtaining enough reassurance from that to regain his grin by the time he returned. “Breakfast coming,” he said. “Baths if you want them. Then—why, then I can lend you some clothes to wander about town, if you like.” He seemed almost to be holding his breath as he awaited our response.

“Perhaps after we've eaten,” I said firmly, in a don't-contradict-me voice. “We'll talk about it then. And we would appreciate a bath, if you don't mind.” Thinking it would be the one way we could get off to ourselves.

Which I, but only I, achieved after refusing an officious offer of service from a chambermaid. Brom accompanied the men to their bath and stayed with them. Peter told me later he thought Brom would probably have washed their backs for them given half an opportunity. They came back for me when they were clean and brushed, and without ceremony I invited Peter and Queynt inside, saying, “Excuse us a moment, Brom. There are a few things we need to discuss ...” waving him away with Chance, hearing Chance's voice start up immediately.

“This is a city worth seeing, sure enough, friend Brom, but let me tell you about the city of Cleers. Well,

now..."

"For heaven's sake, Jinian. What's the matter?" Peter knew from my expression I was bothered.

"I have a notion of trouble, and the man's a liar."

Queynt was examining the room for hidden panels or grills. "What do your notions tell you, friend Jinian?"

"Hints only, but worth considering. Whatever the Merchant's man is up to, it isn't what he says he's up to. I suggest we go wary, Peter, wary."

"Seems a nice-enough fellow."

"I'm telling you."

"I hear you. Seems determined to get us to wear his old clothes, doesn't he?"

"That, yes. Among other things."

"You think he's connected to this Dream Miner nemesis of yours?"

"Could be."

"A lot of villainy to lay on one strangely dressed fellow."

"I know. He may not be involved at all, but he's mighty sweaty and eager over something. It's that which bothers me. He's trying to use us for ends of his own, all excited over some possibility or other. Go wary, folk. That's all. Don't eat anything I don't." I laid down my hairbrush, threw my hair over my shoulder, and led the way to the door. "I thank him for the bath, at least. It's been a while." I scarce knew myself these days, so breezy and casual I'd become. It was the only way I could manage to get along with Peter, I'd found. Intensity itched at him, and since my celibacy oath prevented our being . . . well, closer than mere friends, it was better not to itch at him with things he could do little about. So, I'd adopted this manner, this easy loquacity, which sometimes rubbed me raw. Now, for example, all I wanted to do was huddle in the room with the others discussing all the possibilities and deciding what to do next. It's my basic nature to be a long thinker and slow mover; it's more Peter's nature to push at things and see what happens, getting himself out of scrape after scrape by pure intuition and flashes of sudden, inspired fire.

Queynt merely watches a lot of the time, humming to himself often, as though he were invulnerable and it didn't matter what we do. He did so now, probably wondering what Brom planned to give us for breakfast.

While in the bath, I had wrought a small spell over my lips, Fire Is Sparkening, setting them to burn if they touched anything unhealthful. So, I tried the sliced thrilps in syrup, finding them delicious, and the whipped eggs and sliced, smoked zeller, finding them likewise, the menfolk politely letting me eat first. Seemingly, I had worried over nothing. That is, until I raised the teacup and felt more than a natural heat from its steam. I coughed.

"This tea," I said, allowing my voice to complain a little. "It has an odd smell, friend Brom. Acrid. Something I've smelt before but don't remember where. I think it must have become spoiled somehow.

Here, smell it?" Holding it out to him so that, perforce, he must sniff at it and make up a puzzled face. "Yes? I thought so. I have some lovely stuff we bought in Zinter, and I'll just whip into your kitchen and brew some for us all." Brom did not drink the tea he had sniffed, nor did he insist the others do so, regarding me glumly when I returned with a steaming, well-rinsed pot.

"Your kitchen help seem oddly depressed, Brom. Is it all these festivals? Hard on kitchen people, I've always thought." Passing clean cups. Seeming to pour it around, filling Brom's cup, chatting the while in that casual, wordy way that cost me so much effort. Peter was looking at me with his face squeezed up, two vertical lines between his eyes. He knew I was up to something.

Brom drank. We seemed to drink. Brom's face cleared like a misted window under the caress of the sun.

"Oh, that's very good!" And it was, for that which had gone into his cup, and only into his, was a Wize-ard brew that guaranteed both calm and truth a good deal of the time. Bless herbary. It's so useful.

"Why do you want us to wear your festival clothes?" I asked him in a friendly voice.

"They're out of fashion," he said, suddenly desirous we should understand. "Last year's. Last season's. So, if you wore them, the arbiters might pick you up, you know, and sentence you to service for being out of style. They might elect one of you to be Merchant's man. Then you could deal with the garbage and the roads. And the Cloth Merchants' Council, and the festival board. And the distribution of the crystals. More cloth coming every day, all to be made something of before tomorrow. More crystals arriving every day from Fangel and all to be sold before the next lot comes. I'm tired of it all. I want to ride away, down Tan-tivvy, you know, titty-tup, titty-tup, going north."

"Oh, I see. You were sentenced to the duty for being unstylish? Well, why haven't you become stylish? Surely they could find someone less stylish than you?"

"Bribes," he muttered. "They bribe the costume makers. My outfits are never right. Never. Too big, too small, too red, too green. Whatever."

"And you can't bribe the costume makers?"

"With what?" he cried, anguished. "Being Merchant's man takes every coin. Who pays for the street sweepers? Eh? Who pays for the parade horses, the musicians? All of that falls on Merchant's man. And nothing coming in but taxes on cloth, and that never enough!" He put his head between his hands with a gesture of despair.

"What would happen to you if you simply went away?" asked Queynt, tapping his glass with a fork to make a tiny, jingly sound in the room, an obligate to Brom's moans.

"Death. Death sudden and horrible. So they say. Merchant's man who's derelict in his duties or goes without leave is taken by the shadow. So they say. I don't know. So far it hasn't been bad enough to risk it."

Me, eyebrows halfway to my hair, nostrils narrowed in disbelief. "So what was in the tea you gave us, Brom? Not healthful stuff, that."

"Zizzy stuff was all. No worse than a bottle or two of wineghost to make you happy with life. So you'd wear the clothes and not realize how old-style they were. Oh, Devils and dung-lice, I've done it now,

done it, and no other naifs coming to town soon enough. FinaggyBum tomorrow, and that's the last chance, for after that I've been summoned to Fangel. I've no time. No time."

"Shhh." Me once more, sorry for this unfortunate, ineffectual fellow. Poor thing, caught in some trap or other. Well, he bore the name of dream and dream we sought. "We'll stay a while," I said. "Perhaps we can think of a way to help you."

"You're crazy," Peter said to me affectionately. I knew I was a sometime enigma to him, the oath standing between us like a perforated screen, half hiding, half disclosing, driving him wild sometimes, wanting to see what was really there. He was not sure of the true shape of me, even now, even after months of traveling together. This was merely one of my new insanities. "Quite crazy. You go 'round and 'round."

"'Round and 'round," said Chance, making hypnotic circles with his head. "'Round and 'round. If the rest of you are as near to sleep as me, you're talkin' through your ears. I'm for findin' a bed."

"As we all should be." Peter dabbed his mouth with the napkin and rose from the table. "We've been riding all night, after all, and lucky to do so. I thought we never would escape those brigands on the slopes above Zog."

"Children," said Queynt sleepily. "Mere children."

"Children with crossbows," said Peter. "And poisoned arrows. Deadly children. Thank you, Jinian, for the whatever-it-was-you-did! I thought we'd die there, late supper for the owls."

"It was nothing." I shrugged. It had been the hiding spell, Egg in the Hollow, done masterfully quick in time to save our lives, a good deal more than nothing, but Wize-ards didn't talk about that. "Come, Brom. Take us to a room we may share for sleeping. We'll keep watch, as we would in any unfriendly territory, but that won't stop us trying to help you."

The man's face, as he rose, was a study in halfness. Half disappointment we had found him out. Half hope the finding out would come back to his own advantage.

CHAPTER THREE

Brom gave us his own rooms in the tower, trying to court our favor, I suppose, but kindly meant for all that.

There was an inner room with a wide bed, which the menfolk allotted to me, and an outer room full of great soft couches, which they took for themselves, barricading the outer door against intrusion with several items of furniture. Perhaps we were overly cautious, but I had no quarrel with the barricade. More than once on this trip we'd been awakened to danger in the middle of the night.

Then Queynt got out one bottle of wineghost and Chance another. Queynt, I knew, would try to give me at least two glasses. He found me very funny when I had had several. "Serious as an owl when sober, silly as a duck when zizzy," so he said, pretending to think it a good thing for me to be unserious from time to time.

This time I gave him no room to get started. "We have a bargain," I announced. "You are to tell me about your long life and what you learned from the Eesties."

“Arum, ah, oh,” he mumbled, “but that would be a bore for the others.”

“Oh, not a bit of it,” said Chance. “I’ve wanted to know about those rolling stars all the years of my life, ever since my own mother told me tales of them at her knee. Wonderful things they are, and a wonderful tale it is, I’m sure. Tell away, Queynt, and I’ll keep your glass filled.” He muttered a bit, but with us all set against him, he couldn’t refuse. He settled down with a full glass. The rest of us gathered around, and he began.

“It was shortly after I’d put brother Barish to sleep in that cave along with his Gamesmen, most of a thousand years ago, give a hundred or so. He had arranged to be wakened every hundred years, and I was supposed to meet him—supposing I lived that long, which wasn’t at all certain. We’d extended our lives quite a bit by then, but I was doubtful I’d meet him more than once, if that. So, having put all my kith and kin into storage, so you might say, I went looking for something to do with myself.

“There were many stories about the rolling stars. People had seen them, particularly back in certain parts of the Shadowmarches. They were said to be thick there, so thick that the people left their farms. Not just a few people, but many. A veritable flood of people coming out of the north, frightened and hungry.” His voice lost its usual pompous, theatrical tone and fell into the rhythm of the storyteller, dreamy and possessed. We did not interrupt him, listening with our mouths open and glasses largely untouched at our sides. “They said that nothing prospered there ...”

Nothing prospered in the Shadowmarches. Crops withered or were eaten by beasts. Domestic zeller broke the fences and wandered away or went mad and attacked the herdsmen. Rank growths sprang up along the streams, poisoning the water. Noises in the night woke the inhabitants from deep, drugged sleep, and the dawn came through greenish mists with a sharp, chemical smell.

And there were sightings of the rolling stars. Great wheels rolling on the hills, spinning discs down the river valleys, the smell of burned air and hot metal.

Vitior Vulpas Queynt heard all this as rumor in the farm town of Betand, a day’s travel south from the ancient city of Pfarb Durim and as close to nothing as a town could be, a few implement merchants huddled along one dirt street together with one general merchandiser, one farmstock merchant selling both hybrid and thisworld livestock and crops, two inns, and five taverns.

Don’t forget the taverns, said Queynt to himself as he came into the Blue Zeller to stand a moment waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark. No matter what world one came to rest on, there were always taverns, and those taverns were always dark. A re-creation of the primeval cave, Queynt thought. Smoky, as from campfires, with rituals as old as time. Probably earliest men crouched in a place not unlike a tavern, fortifying themselves with something brewed or distilled, getting ready for the hunt. Man did not seek to return to the womb, as some alleged. He sought to return to the cave. Drier than a womb. More congenial.

Though not always. The Blue Zeller did not look or sound congenial. The place was almost empty except for a depressed-looking couple against the far wall on either side of a sleepy child.

“Got run out of the Marches,” said the barman, Guire, nodding in the direction of the family. “Lost everything to the rolling stars.”

“I didn’t know it was the stars causing the trouble,” Queynt remarked in his usual uninterested voice. The way some people were feeling lately, it didn’t do to take any position very strongly.

“If not them, then what?” brayed the woman, thin lips drawn back over stained teeth. “You never see anything but them! Them and dead stock. Them and dead crops! You never hear anything but their music—singin’ wild in the hills.”

Queynt commiserated. “Things are better in the south. If you’re set on farming, why don’t you try west of the Gathered Waters. I just came from there.”

“No stock left,” grumbled the man. “Nothing left. Horses died.”

“Horses don’t like it here much anyhow,” Guire remarked, wiping the bar in an immemorial gesture. “And there’s nothing local to cross ‘em to. Still, the animal market says they’ve got a new strain’s more likely to make it.”

“My dad’s dad said it was a damn fool world didn’t have some kind of draft animal on it,” the woman bleated. She did not seem to be able to speak softly. “Nothing but pombis to eat your stock. Nothing but warnets to run you out of your house.”

“If you decide to try south,” Queynt said, “I’d be glad to lend you enough to stock up for the trip.” He did not expect them to thank him, and they did not. Both ignored the statement, peering at each other as though for some confirmation of a closely held suspicion. Queynt did not repeat the offer. They would think it over, and the town was not so large they could lose him in it. He turned back to his beer.

“What about those wild Talents,” the woman shrieked. He wondered if she were deaf, pitching his answer very softly to find out.

“What about them, ma’am?”

“We heard they was profligatin’ down south. More all the time. Traggymores. Flickers. Dragons and all that. Freezin’ out the common folk.” She had heard him. The shriek was simply a harpy’s cry for notice.

“It’s not that bad,” he assured her, lying only a little. It wasn’t bad, quite, though it was getting worse. At first the Talents had been interesting and, if not benign, at least not overtly harmful. Lately, though, there had been more and more births of Gamesmen, the name they had chosen for themselves. Not exactly a game, he thought. Talents were not easy to handle. Someone needed to start some schools for the youngsters, teach them some rules or something. He made a mental note.

“The towns around the Gathered Waters need food,” he said. “The Talents leave the farmers pretty much alone.” Which was more or less true. Gamesmen would be fools to meddle with the farms. Though Queynt had yet to see the limit of their foolishness. Some of the things the new race of Gamesmen did were not only unbelievable but childishly silly and cruel. “There’s lots of good land west of the Lake, and plenty of it left. The farmstock market in Laketown sells on credit, too. I’d recommend you go there and give it a try.”

There. He’d given them his best advice. He finished the beer and left, hearing them coming after him before he was halfway down the short street.

“Sir! Sir!” Her voice like a whetstone, he thought, wondering how the man and child could bear it. Maybe they were deaf. “We’d be mighty grateful for the loan you offered.”

“You’ll go south?” He kept his face neutral, still. No loan would help them if they were determined to

return to the northlands.

“South,” the man agreed in a toneless mumble. “We won’t need so much, actually. We do have one good milk zeller left.”

He gave them money. “When you have prospered,” he said, “you are to make this amount available to someone else in need. It is a trust, you understand?”

The woman turned away, eyes wary as a fliethawk’s, but the man gave him a straight look. “I take it as such, sir. Don’t mind her. We left two children buried there, north.” He put his arm protectively around the woman and they went down the street, the child silent as a shadow at their heels. Queynt stared after them, not the first he had met, not the first he had sent south with enough to buy food and little more. And still he did not know the truth of what was happening there, in the Shadowmarches. He would not know, until he went himself.

He went afoot, trusting no horse—new stock or old—carrying only a few odds and ends and what he needed to eat to supplement stuff taken from the wild.

At one time, he thought sardonically, he would have distrusted anything resembling a hunch, but he was in the grip of a hunch when he walked alone up into the Marches. It was the woman’s plaint about music in the hills that had set him off, and he thought much about that remark during his travels. When he had come past the farthest reach of the attempted settlements, he found a tall rocky hill and camped himself on it in a half cave with its back to the wind.

It was a high, lonely moor he sat upon, the stones at his back raising themselves like the heads of questing beasts toward the lowering sky. Low, woody plants carpeted the hills, amber and wine, bronze and green. At the bottom of the hill, the forests began, twisted and low in a furry mat like the pelt of some great beast, wide swamps of darkness lying beneath the trees. And over all a shrill, keening wind, coming and going like a visitant ghost.

Queynt smiled, well pleased. He took the bait he had brought out of its careful zellerskin wrappings, an ancient instrument, one brought from the former world, a thin column of old wood with double reeds to blow through and a plaintive, importunate voice, unlike any in this world. The thing made a sorrowful, interlocutory cry, which would, he felt, summon any creature with a grain of curiosity in its bones—or whatever passed for bones with northern creatures.

Waiting for a caesura in the wind, he played. While no great shakes upon the instrument, still he had a feel for it when he stuck to easy things, and the simple melodies winged out from the height like native birds seeking nests. A few quiet elegies and nocturnes were what he knew best. When he had finished, the hills around sank into waiting silence.

It was the third day he was there—playing each day a bit at dawn, noon, and dusk, sitting in the meantime quietly over a steaming pot of grain and broth, mostly native stuff—that he heard a phrase from one of the elegies come fluttering at him out of the shadows along the hill. It was almost the sound of his double reed, but not quite, and the phrase was followed by a tiny spitting sound which could not be other than an expression of artistic annoyance.

In a moment the unknown singer tried again, closer this time, but still not exactly. Queynt set the reeds between his lips, gave a faintly expository warble, then played the melody into the waiting air once more.

A small creature, virtually invisible in the dusk, came out upon the hillside before him and sang. It had

wide ears, huge eyes. From either side of its face soft, flowing whiskers swept back to join its shadowy mane, and needle teeth glimmered in the half-light. It had the flattish star shape of all the tailless, backboneless creatures of this world, yet with legs, arms, and head that parodied humankind. It stood there and sang.

By the time full dark had come they had progressed to the point that Queynt dared assay a contrapuntal arrangement. The shadow voice dropped into silence.

Queynt played the first part again, encouragingly, taking up the counterpoint when the singer began again. After several false starts the singer got the idea and they proceeded through the composition, harmonically intertwined. During this concert, Queynt was conscious of a soft gabble, interrupted by fragments of song, as though the audience were explaining to one another the intricacies of this new—obviously new—kind of music.

So, he thought with satisfaction, they are musical but did not know harmony. What an interesting gift to have given them. He set his instrument down, put a few more sticks on the fire, and settled himself to await developments. There were none. There was only a softly retreating murmur interspersed with fragments of melody. After some time, he sighed and settled himself to sleep.

The following night they progressed further. Not only did the singer keep strongly to the melody, but the harmony was picked up by other voices in the woods. By the end of the evening Queynt was sure he heard one flutelike voice in an original harmonic line high above the rest.

On the third night they sang and Queynt listened ruefully, wondering if he would ever touch his own instrument again. When they had finished, he felt a small hand tugging at his own to put something in it.

There were half a dozen jewels there, bright blue and faceted. He held them, admiring them, surprised when the same tiny hand took one from him and pressed it to his lips. His sucking reflex took it in, fondling it with his tongue.

When he came to himself again, the fire was burnt to ashes, only a few coals blinking at him from slow, basilisk eyes. Nothing was left of the jewel. It had dissolved into him, permeated him. He could feel it moving in his veins, a flow of quiet certainty. Beside the dead fire crouched the singer. When it saw he was awake, it pointed to the pouch at his belt, to his hand.

The jewels he had held had been put away. Finger on lips, the creature shushed him. Secret. Secret gift. Not to be mentioned. Then it summoned him with flickering fingers. Queynt packed up his few belongings and followed.

Though he was an experienced woodsman, a good tracker, an excellent navigator, he was never able to find the place again. Sometimes, remembering it, he felt there had been some large, brilliant curved structure in the background. Other times he remembered only forest and rock. Whatever the setting may have been, he was sure of one thing. The Eesties.

“The singers call us Eesties or Eeties, which in their language means “bone music” or “bone song” or some other such phrase. Call us something similar if you like.” The star stood to speak with him, tall upon two of its points, the other three moving as though blown by a harsh wind. Later he recalled it as having had a face painted at its upper end, but the voice spoke as much inside Queynt’s head as in his ears. He did not find this surprising. What he did find surprising was the tone of irritation, of an angry contempt that hid something deeper and more vital.

“Why did your like come to this world?”

Queynt spoke of several ships that had fled to this world in recent centuries, his own group only one among many, and of the wars and destruction they had fled from.

“You have fled from destruction, yet brought it with you? Like a beast which flees from the plague it carries?” Since this was what Queynt himself had thought many times, he could only agree.

“We try to flee. We, some of us, do not want such violent things, do not want conflict. So we try to run. But I suppose we do bring some of it with us.”

“Like the little singers, the Shadowpeople. They, too, desire holiness. They, too, have little talent for it.” The creature’s irritation seemed exacerbated by this, a scarcely veiled hostility that did not at first threaten force, but rather seemed to imply anathema, a casting out. It was as though the Eesty tolerated Queynt’s presence at all only with difficulty, and now the mention of his yearnings for peace infuriated it. It was then Queynt thought he identified what lay beneath the anger, beneath the contempt. Guilt. This being, whatever it truly was, was guilty of something, and that guilt ate at it like a cancer. He did not know how he knew this. Later, he realized the crystal he had taken had enlightened him in ways he was scarcely aware of.

“We want you to go hence,” the creature told him. “Go away, to some other world. This one does not need you. You do an evil thing here.” It moved away in a flutter of ribbons, leaving a stink of hatred behind it.

Queynt could not understand what the evil was they were trying to communicate. The concepts swam in his head, half-formed, vertiginous edges of ideas which touched and darted away, only partly seen. A word.

“Bao.” Or maybe “Bah-ho.” It had no meaning for him. In it there were Eesties, Shadowpeople, birds, beasts, trees, long white roads under a scarlet sun, stars spinning upon them in a constant glittering flow. Disruption. He tried to explain that the ships were gone, disassembled, that mankind could not leave. The Eesty went angrily away.

It tried again later. “Badness is being done. (Most desirable of all things) is being destroyed.” Again he struggled with the concept. Humans were doing something wrong. He could not tell what it was. Not a matter of breaking a taboo, not a matter of destroying some holy site. More than that. They were doing this (had done this?) evil by merely existing.

Then why did the creature feel guilt? What was it hiding?

Then there were three of the Eesties, not now merely questioning him but examining him as well, looking into him as though digging some root crop, plunging through him to leave disruptive pain behind.

One of them had his pouch, was looking through it.

They saw the blue gems.

Fury. Anger. Hot, hideous, destructive. The air blazed around him, fire hot, making him fear for his life until a great cry came from somewhere, from some other Eesty, perhaps, a warning, a threat? The creatures were all around him, whirling in a frenzy of hatred, frustrated hostility, desire to kill. Queynt fell to the ground, covered his neck with his hands, curled upon himself knowing he was to die then, there, in

the instant.

Against that anger was no possibility of reprieve. Even through his fear he heard the cry come again, louder, more impassioned, a kind of agonized command.

Another of their kind had come and made them stop.

“Ganver,” someone whispered. “Ganver.” Then it was all over and he was alone upon the hillside, unchanged, totally changed. He had failed, but so had the rolling stars; they had exhausted one another in their mutual failure.

He had understood almost nothing. How could he have understood its frustration, its anger, perhaps its fear? The bright images swam in his head like fishes, but he had no hooks with which to catch them. There was an understanding that evaded him, a sense of incompleteness.

The singers came back for him, sadly, patting him on his bruised places and offering herbal teas and poultices.

He came down out of the hills, sometimes playing for the Shadowpeople, sometimes listening as they sang for him. To accompany their singing they had only drums. When he returned to a town where there were craftsmen, he had bells made, and silver flutes, taking them into the Marches as gifts for the Shadowmen ...

“And now, a thousand years later, I sit in a tower room,” he said, “in a strange city telling the story to Jinian Footseer, watching the wrinkle between her eyes deepening like a crevasse. You will be a quizzical oldster, Jinian. What deep thoughts has my story raised in you?”

I was fingering the star-eye that hung about my throat, which had hung there since I had received it from Tess Tinder-my-hand when I was only a child. I had always thought of it as an Eesty sign. Now that Queynt had told me his tale, I was not sure it was an Eesty sign at all. The Eesties he described were not what I had thought then. They were not what Mavin, Peter’s mother, had thought them, either. A mystery there. I asked him, “But if they hated you, why have you lived so long, Queynt?”

“Something to do with the blue crystal, I think. When I left the Marches, I knew I would live a very long life. No. That’s not quite right. I was conscious of death being remote, put it that way. The blue gem did that. It imposed a kind of understanding upon the fiber of oneself.

“I said to Peter once they would likely do the same for him. I think they would do so for any of us. If whatever makes the gems could only make enough of them to go around, to make everyone understand what I did ...”

I recoiled at this, but he did not see me. I could not bear the thought of being compelled by some outside force. I rebelled against it.

He went on, “That is why I am immune to other crystals, I suppose. The pattern of the first one, the blue one, is too well set in me to be disrupted.” He sighed then, taking the pouch from his belt and pouring the crystals into his palm. “There are enough here for you to have one, and Peter.”

I thrust out my hands, warding him away. “No! No, Queynt. Not for me. And I would hope Peter would say no as well. I do not like the thought of compulsion.”

He shook his head at me. “Not compulsion, Jinian. Information, more like. It is as though I had been given a map which showed both the good roads and the swamps. Is it compulsion to avoid the swamps if one knows they are there?” I thought he was sincere, but still I would have none of it. Compulsion is always said to be something else.

“Kind of you, Queynt, but no.” Changing the subject, “It is noon. We have been riding for two days without sleep. If you wish to drink and tell tales, do so, but quietly. I’m going to sleep.” Which I did, lying awake only a little time thinking about Queynt’s story and that strange word or meaning the Eesties had used. Bao. Bah-ho. I knew I would think of it at more length another time.

CHAPTER FOUR

I woke with a start to a cacophony of shouts, thuds, and explosions. Among these louder sounds were Chance’s whuffing complaint at being wakened and Queynt’s calm voice going on in one of his loquacious monologues.

“... when one is having the best rest one has had for ages, something eccentric in the way of barbaric behavior breaks loose outside one’s window, and the peace of the evening is disrupted ...” It was disrupted further by more violent blows on the door and another explosion from the street below.

“Friends, visitors!” Brom’s voice, frantic with a mixture of frustration and panic. “The fireworks shop on Shebelac Street has caught fire and is going up all at once. Let me in. You have the best windows!” Furniture-moving sounds came from the neighbouring room, the barricade being removed. I rose, albeit reluctantly, leaning out of my own window to watch bouquets of rockets blooming across the darkening sky above a volcano of spouting scarlet. Whistles and sirens competed for attention. Figures as dark and tiny as ants ran to and fro before the leaping light.

It was night. We had slept the day away. I rummaged in my pack for something to wear, taking what was on top, one of the voluminous smocks they wore in the purlieus around Zog. Pulling the soft, bright fabric over my head, I went into the other room.

Brom hung half-out the window, hitting his fist on the sill in an agony of amused apprehension. “Oh, what a mess! It’s funny, you know, but it isn’t funny at all. At dawn tomorrow comes Finaggy-Bum—not a major festival, but one that deserves some effort for all that—and there won’t be a rocket left. The revelers will be so disappointed.”

“Revelers?” asked Queynt. “Who are the revelers?”

“Why, Queynt, those for whom the festivals are held, surely. Those from the towns of Zib and Zog, Chime and Woeful. Those from the villages and farms around Thorpe. Those travelers from no settled place. We do all we can here in Bloome to attract them, though there are those who say our festivating so to excess has lowered our custom rather than raising it...”

“Customers? For?”

“Well, originally for anything at all made of cloth, sir. We’re a cloth-weaving town, after all. More recently for the dream crystals as well. What else have we to sell? Why else am I Dream Merchant’s man?”

“Would some of these be yellow crystals?” I asked. “Yellow as piss, about the size of my thumb-tip?”

“They would not,” Brom said in an offended voice. “They would be green ones, some large, some small. And amber-brown ones as big as my ear. And little red ones. Those yellow crystals were never intended for commerce. Dream Merchant sent a man here from Fangel. He told me to keep an eye out, confiscate any I found. Which I did. Told me to destroy any I found. Which I would have done. Save for that damned Oracle. Took the sack I put them in. Took them all. Stole them.”

“Would this “Oracle” be a strange creature in a fancy robe?” I asked. “With a painted face, and full of emphatic language?”

Brom assented at once to this description. “Oh, he came here, all ribboned up like a Festival Horse, wandered around Bloome, full of amusing stories. So, I invited him here to amuse my ... my friends. When every day is festival it’s hard to come by any genuine amusements. He was gone the next day, and so was the whole sack of yellow crystals meant for the disposal pits. And since, then I’ve been hearing troubles from every side. People who should have come to Bloome to take part in festival, who should have come to buy costumes, come to buy good crystals, dead along the road! Dead! What good will that do commerce? I ask you! Bad enough that half the roads are ruined.” For a moment, when it seemed he knew something about the crystals, I had been almost ready to fly at him, dagger in hand (and no small weapon, but the Dagger of Daggerhawk which needed only to touch in anger to cause death). Now I took my hand out of my pocket.

The Dagger was in its holster high upon my thigh. It was seldom far from my reach, but Brom did not seem worth the use of it. Besides, what he had to say was interesting.

I said casually, “And what has destroyed half the roads, Brom? Come. Tell us.”

He choked. I saw him struggling not to speak. He had been told not to speak? Threatened, perhaps? Whatever it had been that kept him silent was no match for the truth tea we had given him.

“Storm Grower,” he mumbled, making two syllables out of it, the last one a growl.

“Why? Why is that, Brom?”

“Does ... does that when she’s angry. When people don’t ... do what she wants. Oh, don’t make me speak. She’ll kill me, truly she will. Or Dream Miner will. Or the Merchant. He’s their son, you know. So he says. I don’t believe it, but so he says.”

“So you are not responsible for ruining roads or distributing yellow crystals. None of it.”

“None of it but doing my job,” he sulked. “And that’s no more than anyone would do. All I really want to do is go away.”

“How was it you had the things in the first place?” asked Peter, watching the man through narrowed eyes. “Where did you say you got them?”

“They came in a shipment from the Dream Merchant in Fangel, as all of them come. Neatly packed in boxes, a dozen to the box. They come to me from the district headquarters, in Fangel. They come to Fangel from the Dream Miner, I suppose. How these yellow ones got in with the others, no one says. No one tells me anything.”

“And the Miner gets them where?” pressed Queynt, eager to learn something real after our long search.

“Why, I suppose he digs them up! I’ve seen Dream Mines. Well, no, I saw one. A little one, just outside Fangel. Nice old fella there, him and his wife, they watch the place. He digs them up with a shovel and a pick, just like you’d dig for anything.” An idea nicked through my head, one of those quick, glittering ones that go before you can grab it.

Something to do with mines and crystals. I sighed.

“There for a moment, I thought I had something. By the Hundred Devils, Queynt, but this whole business gets stranger and stranger.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it now, Jinian,” said Peter, doing what he too often did, coming close to me, putting his arm around my waist, his hand flat against my side, burning there with an aching heat. I took a deep breath and moved away, choking back a desire to return the caress.

“I suppose you’re right. But still, I’d like to know more about these mines.”

“Well, of course,” said Brom. “If you’d like to come with me to Fangel, you could see the one I saw for yourself. But if you come with me to Fangel, you wouldn’t be staying here in Bloome, and I’d still be Merchant’s man.”

I returned to the other room as Chance said, “And why’re you goin’ up to Fangel, friend Brom? Is it a city worth seein’?”

“There’s to be a great reception there for the delegation of the Duke of Betand on his way north,” came the answer in a dull, uncaring voice. “Him and his new allies. The Ogress, Valearn. The Witch, Huldra. There’s another Gameswoman, too, but her name I can’t remember. All the Merchants’ men have been sent for.” I turned, suddenly alert, seeing Peter stiffen as well.

He had responded to the first name mentioned; I to that of Valearn. Queynt, too, had suddenly grown very quiet. “Huldra?” he said. “Peter, I seem to recognize that name from conversations I had with Mavin. Isn’t that the twin sister of your old friend Huld?”

“Gamelords,” Peter hissed. “I thought that family done with. Is there no end to them?” He began to enumerate them, coldly ticking them off with his fingers. There was Huld’s father, Blourbast the Ghoul. Huld killed Blourbast, and Mavin saw him do it. Then Mavin herself killed Pantiquod the Harpy, Huld’s mother, and that other harpy, Foulitter, Huld’s half sister. All that was long ago, before I was even born. Then I came along to fall victim to Huld’s son-thalan, Mandor. He died by his own act, though Huld held me at least partly responsible. I thought all were gone but Huld, and him we did away with on the Wastes of Bleer. That should have been an end to it! Now we hear there’s another one yet alive? That Huld had a twin?”

“That and worse,” I said from the doorway. “You also did away with King Prionde on the Wastes of Bleer. But he had a sister-wife, Valearn. Their son, Valdon, was killed by the Faces some eighteen or nineteen years ago, so Mavin told me, though it is unlikely they ever knew Mavin’s part in that...”

“My mother seems to have confided greatly in you both,” said Peter, not altogether pleasantly.

“Peter, before we began this journey, you may recall that you and I and Mavin and Himaggery and a great mob of people all traveled together to Hell’s Maw, a trip of some days’ duration, during which time I got to know her rather well. She told me her life’s story, as she would have been glad to tell you if

you'd ever taken time to sit down and listen. I continue: Out of grief, it is said, Valearn turned Ogress and feasted upon the children of our region. Those of us from the lands around the Stonywater in the south were warned to fear her more than her late husband, the King. And now these two are allies with the Duke of Betand? I heard of these dangerous alliances in Xammer!" (Actually, I had heard of them at the Citadel of the Wize-ards, but that was no one's business but mine.) "Now, what is going on here? What is the reason for these alliances?"

Brom was looking from one to another of us, his worried face growing more haggard with each word he heard us say. "It would be more likely for the Cloth Merchants' Council to award you ten thousand bonus points than for me to know anything about that, lady. Do you think the Dream Merchant consults me? Do you think he asks a Merchant's man, "May I take an ally?" He sends us crystals to sell, and sometimes he summons us up to Fangel for some do or other, and that's all I know about the monsters you're talking of. And I'm supposed to go be part of a welcoming deputation!" He sobbed. "I would as soon walk into a gnarlibar's jaws."

"Ah, well," I said comfortingly. "It is the Merchant's man who is to go, is it not?"

"I. Me. The Merchant's man, yes."

"And on the festival of Finaggy-Bum, tomorrow, the arbiters of Bloome will select their Merchant's man?"

"From among the least stylish, yes. But you have found me out. You were not naifs at all. My chances of laying the job off on one of you are next to nothing." So saying, he burst into angry tears, letting them flow down his face and into his beard without bothering to wipe at them at all. The truth tea had this effect of truth telling even upon emotions. Chance patted the fellow on the shoulder, commiserating, while Queynt tried to hide his smile.

"I think we may assure your stylishness tomorrow," I told him. "And one of us will wear your old clothes, friend Brom, thus guaranteeing that it will be one of us who goes to Fangel as Merchant's man of Bloome." Of course, which one of us it would be was another matter.

"One of us, then," I said to the troupe. "Whoever wishes to act the part?"

"I," said Queynt. "Peter and Chance may be known to Huldra or Valearn. You traveled in the High Demesne, didn't you, my boy? Some three or fours years ago?"

"We did, yes. But I never saw Prionde's wife. Chance, did you?"

"I didn't see any such lady. Oh, there was talk of a wife hiding somewhere in a tower, but I never saw her."

"Still, she may have seen you. You, Jinian, will be needed for something else. Therefore, it must be me." Queynt smiled again, posturing. "I will make a very good Merchant's man."

"We are not too different in size," said Brom. "The old things would fit you. But... but no matter what we do, it may be the Cloth Merchants' Council will still hold me to the position. They've said I'm not bad at the job. Or maybe they just hate me. Oh, it may be hopeless!"

"We will see to that," I promised him. "Do they meet at any given time and place?"

“They will meet tonight,” he answered. “In the loft of the weaving mill.” He turned away, his face working, murmuring as he went, “Think of it. Riding out of Bloome. Titty-tup, titty-tup, along Tan-tivvy Boulevard. Not to Fangel. No. West, I think. Or even south. Tittytup, titty-tup.” He went down the corridor, galloping as though he had a hobby between his legs, lashing one thigh with an imaginary whip.

“Mad,” said Queynt almost affectionately. “Quite mad.”

The great mill of Bloome crouched upon the eastern edge of the city, a heaped monstrosity, glaring banefully through a hundred eyes, growling and munching as it ate the provender brought by the citizens, spewing out its cloth in endless lengths to be rolled into bolts and carried away. Day and night those who were not involved in the festivals of Bloome were involved in feeding the mighty machine or carrying its excreta away.

Just now all the shoulder-high slots in the courtyard were vomiting fabric of an excruciating pink color into waiting wagons. A bored knife man stood to one side, ready to cut the weave when each cart was full, and around him the drivers sat, some drinking, some playing at dice, some half-asleep.

From this cluttered courtyard, a narrow door opened upon an even narrower iron stair, which twisted its skeletal length upward through roaring, dust-filled spaces to a loft. This space, tall as a church, was lit by grimed windows and a few scattered bulbs whose filaments alternately glowed and dimmed as the mechanicals below grumbled and howled. There, at a brokenlegged table, the Cloth Merchants' Council of Bloome sat upon rickety chairs at its interminable meetings. It was here they were assembled while the fireworks shop burned on Shebelac Street, unable to hear the sirens for the endless growling of the looms below.

If one looked out the dirty windows by daylight, one could see the hoppers at the rear of the building where the carts lined up each day to dump weeds and trees, trash and old furniture, last night's costumes and banners and tents into the huge, shaking hoppers. The hoppers emptied into a steel enormity where no man had ever gone alive and from which only fabric emerged at the other end. There were only two rules of life so far as the Cloth Merchants' Council was concerned. Never let the machine run out of stuff to weave. Never run out of ways to use the weaving up.

The machine had run out of raw materials only once.

Bloome had learned then that the machine had its own ways of collecting materials if it was not sufficiently fed.

Babies, geese, fustigars, tame zeller, houses, people: the machine did not discriminate. Since that time (called “The Exemplary Episode” in the minutes of the council) the machine had not been allowed to run dry.

That was practical politics, that rule.

The other rule was religious.

Bloome had been a cloth-making town as long as anyone remembered. The mill had always been there. It was assumed to have been put there by a god or by the ancestors, either to be equally revered. Since neither god nor the ancestors did things without purpose, the cloth, arriving in quantities ever greater and always far more than could be used in Bloome, must have a purpose. It had been up to the people of

Bloome to find it.

They had found it at last, after many trials. Festivals.

At first only once or twice a season, later six or eight times a season, most recently every few days. Every few days a new festival, to deck the city with new banners.

Every few days a new festival, requiring new costumes for residents and visitors alike. Every few days a new festival, with new tents and marquees to be sewn. And in the quiet times between, weary cleanup crews laboured to gather the materials to take to the hoppers again. A precarious balance, but better than another "Exemplary Episode".

"I'm not selling the pink stuff," said a banner maker, who, as he often mentioned apropos of nothing, had been a member of the council for fifty years. "It won't go. They don't want it. Everyone is sick to death of it."

"Bonus points," remarked a heavysset, dark-skinned woman, scratching her nose and making notes at the same time. "We'll award bonus points for pink. The way we had to do with the puce chiffon three years ago. Machine made it for two seasons, and we couldn't give it away."

"How about lining the streets with it? We did that once, I remember. In my mother's time."

"Trouble is, the stuff tears so. Shoddy. You'd have half Bloome tripping and rolling around on the cobbles. No, we'll award bonus points and double to tent makers if they'll quilt it in layers. Next?"

"Arahg," growled the long-faced banner maker, referring to his notes. "Everyone's running out of thread. Machine hasn't given us any thread for three seasons. We're going to have to set up to ravel if we don't get some soon."

"We saved out a thousand bolts of that loose, blue stuff last year," said the heavy woman. "The thread pulls right out. No weave to it to speak of. We can put the children on it."

"Going to look like hell," growled the banner maker.

"So what else is new?" The door opened to admit a wizened man in a violently striped cloak, notable for its inclusion of the pink stuff in wide, bias-cut borders. "Evening," he said. "Mergus. Madame Brawl. Gentlemen. Sorry I'm late. Stuck around my front door for a little extra time tonight waiting to see if Brom's guests came out. I think he may have found a naïf."

"Evening, Philp. I didn't know anyone came to town today. Why, when there was no festival?"

"Wasn't till early this morning. Don't think they came for festival. Four of 'em. Wagon with birds pulling it. Haven't seen anything like that before. Two older fellows. One young one, one girl. Brom got to 'em before anyone could stop him. They didn't exactly look simple. Brom may have a time with 'em."

"The problem is," said Madame Brawl, scratching her nose once more, "whether we want to let Brom off the platter. He's been a good Merchant's man, all things taken into account."

"Gettin' restless, though."

"Well, restless is one thing."

“Mad is the other. Don’t want him doing anything silly. We had one once who did, remember?”

“Tried to blow up the machine, by Drarg. Got a hundred or so of us killed.”

“Still, I’d be disinclined to let Brom go. A visitor simple enough to accept the honour might be too simple to do the work!”

“Might have been an honor once,” said Mergus, the droopy cheeks of his long, lined face wobbling as he spoke, one tufty eyebrow up, the other down in a hairy diagonal that seemed to slide off his face near his large left ear. “Since the Dream Merchant’s been in on it, it’s less so.”

“Dream Merchant only took advantage of the fact we’ve flocks of revelers,” said Philp. “The Merchants’ men in Zinter and Thorpe have to distribute crystals, too. We’re not the only town with the burden.”

“Not the only town under threat from storm, either. We haven’t been hit by wind or hail yet, but there’s towns farther north that have!” Madame Brawl growled at them, looking from face to face. “Towns that complain learn to regret it. I say we do whatever’s needed to keep things peaceful and running, and Brom’s not been bad at that.”

“Still,” said Philp, “there was a time the Merchant’s man of Bloome worked for the Cloth Merchants’ Council of Bloome, not for some foreigner. Makes it hard to hold him accountable.”

“Come, come,” huffed Mergus. “We hold him accountable enough. Except for a day or two a year when he’s off to Fangel or a few days when the emissaries from Fangel come here, he’s biddable enough. I vote we keep Brom in the job, no matter he’s been tryin’ to bribe the costume makers to get him off the hook.” High in one shadowed corner of the room, a slithery shape that had been extended over a roof beam withdrew itself into a ventilation duct, slithering out again some distance down in the building with me in its dusty coils. Peter and I had heard all we needed to hear.

“Well?” asked Queynt.

“They’re not inclined to let him off,” said Peter, brushing the dust off his slithery skin even as he Shifted back into a shape closer to his own. “Funny thing. They don’t seem to be in control of the weaving machine. All these festivals? Just to use up fabric.”

“Ah,” Queynt said, scratching his head with one finger. “What happens if they don’t use up the cloth?”

“Two of the oldsters were mumbling about the machine seeking raw materials on its own. The way they figure, they have to use it up so they can feed it back in.”

“It seems to be religion,” I said. “They’re predisposed to believe that the cloth has to be used for something.”

“Ah. Well then, we’ll have to take that into account. If the problem has emanated from a religious source, the solution will have to come from some similar source. What do you think, Jinian? If it’s me to be the naif, then it’s you to be the plenipotentiary. From whom will you say you have been sent, do you think?”

“A god, perhaps. There’s less chance of controversy that way. If I represent myself as coming from an

ancestor, someone is likely to ask which ancestor, and that might lead to endless conversation. Who do they worship here? What gods are given houseroom?"

"Few or none," said Chance. "I trotted up and down half a dozen streets, in and out of a dozen taverns or so. They swear by no gods I know of, though they swear often in a cowardly craven manner by the wind and the hail..."

"By Storm Grower?" I asked him.

"Never. They swear by the wind and the hail, and then they spit, thus, to drive the evil away. Oh, and sometimes they swear by Great Drarg, Master of the Hundred Demons."

"Great Drarg of the Hundred Demons," I mused. "There's something I can use. Well. No time like the present." And I went off that weary climb up those long, metal-echoing stairs to the room where the council met, leaving Peter to scramble into the ventilation ducts once more.

I could read their faces well enough. The Cloth Merchants' Council of Bloome had probably not been interrupted in living memory. Never by a stranger, certainly. Still, they were impressed by my demeanor, by my hauteur, my poise.

"Good citizens," I said. "Council members of the town of Bloome. I have arrived today as plenipotentiary of Drarg, Master of the Hundred Demons, sent to beg your pardon and ask a small boon on Drarg's behalf."

The voice I used was one learned from my Dervish mother, Bartelmy of the Ban. It was a cold voice, without edges, which left nothing of itself lying about to be picked at by the argumentative. The best Madame Brawl could do was stutter, "We ... what have we to do with ah... Drarg?"

"Nothing, madame, save that his minions have been trifling with you. You have here a certain great machine established by your ancestors. Is that not true?" They nodded that it was true, very true. Since they were sitting on top of it, it would have been difficult to deny.

"And this machine has a voracious appetite which cannot be stayed? Ah, yes. So we have been informed. Such was the work of the Demons. My master's apologies. He has sent me to rectify matters."

"You mean ... you mean the mill isn't supposed to be fed—isn't supposed to run ... all the time?"

I allowed frost to creep into my words. "Have I not said as much?" They nodded, shook their heads. Had this person said as much? Had she? Perhaps she had.

"While my master is unable at the moment to correct the actions of his minions (he is far away on pressing business), he has directed me to take measures to alleviate your troubles. Measures which will allow the citizens of Bloome to sleep, to dream, to cook good food, to make love. Ah"—I changed the voice to one lyrical and romantic, lush as a summer meadow—"to enjoy all life's pleasures." It became cold once more.

"Drarg wishes the boon, of course."

"Boon?" Philp trembled. "What boon would that be?"

"Simply to release your current Merchant's man from his position. It is not fair that he be kept in his job

longer. He has suffered much, as indeed so have you all.” I stared around the table, meeting incomprehension on some faces, distrust on others, hope on a few.

“How do you say, council members?” Madame Brawl found her voice again. “If you can do as you say, ah ... Your Excellency? Your Worship? If you can relieve us of the constant necessity to feed the mill—oh, yes, we would grant any boon. Provided no blasphemy takes place. No heretical notions?”

“None. On the festival of Finaggy-Bum tomorrow, pick yourselves a new Merchant’s man. There is an excellent candidate, one Queynt, among the visitors. As soon as that is done, send carpenters and metal workers to me where I reside at Brombarg’s house. They will be given instruction.” I turned, wishing for some glorious gown and high headdress to punctuate this speech and make a dramatic exit. Well, the smock from Zog would have to do. It was certainly unlike anything being worn in Bloome. I let myself out, not pausing to listen to the babble behind the door. Peter would be hearing it all from the ductwork, anyhow.

“Done?” I asked him when he returned below.

“Done! Half of them don’t believe you, but they’re all willing to give it a try. There are one or two say they’ll hunt Brom down and kill him if you’re lying, and another few who talk of putting you into the hopper if you’re leading them a fool’s track. All told, however, I think they’re peaceful enough. For now.”

I nodded, thinking very hard. This put a serious expression on my face, and Peter did what he always did when I got that expression. He reached for me.

That particular expression, he had told me, reminded him of Jinian when he had first met her, so serious, so determined, like a belligerent child, set upon knowing everything there was to be known. That particular expression turned his stomach to jelly, so he said, and he could no more stop himself reaching for me than he could have stopped eating ripe thrilps. He flexed an arm to draw me closer mere in the dusty, roaring room, me all unprepared for his lips on mine and the warmth of his body pressed tightly to my own.

I trembled, adrift, unable and unwilling to do anything at all except drift there in his arms while the hot throb of my blood built into its own kind of ending. I was saved by an urgent summons from Queynt, a clatter of feet coming down the stairs. Peter tried to hold my hand, but I drew it away, suddenly so distressed I couldn’t speak. It wasn’t fair of him to do that. Not fair. I had talked to him about it. He knew well enough what gaining the wize-art meant to me. I felt tears beginning to burn, half frustration, half anger. Oh, why couldn’t he ...

Fuming, I slipped down the stairs after the others, reaching the bottom only moments before the council members erupted into the street. Peter was looking for me, but I slipped away from him. He was doing this more and more frequently, as though to make my own body betray me. As though to test whether I would choose between him and my Wize-ardry. He simply wasn’t content any more to let patience solve the matter.

My knees were weak. I could hardly breathe. I was angry, and sorry to be angry, and wanted to run after him, and wanted to run away. Things couldn’t go on like this. Once we had taken care of the matter of Brom, something would have to be done about it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Early in the morning, Brom was valeted by the three men. They dressed him in pink vertical, lacing and buttoning, rigging the internal bones and stays that held the unlikely garment aloft, trying vainly to keep their faces straight. There was as much of it above his head as there was from head to foot. That part above his head was decked with such unlikely ornamentation as to cast doubt upon the humanity of the wearer, and the part below his head was of sufficient discomfort as to deny whatever humanity existed. It took some time.

I watched for a while, disbelieving any of it, then went to the tower room where I could be private and laid two spells upon him.

First I laid Bright the Sun Burning, a beguilement spell. No one looking at Brom that day would consider him any less than stylish. He would gleam like the sun itself, making a warm space in any perception, a suffused glow like a little furnace. And, lest that perception wane as the day passed, I laid Dream Chains to Tie It, a keeping spell—though I had a devil of a time finding a live frog and finally had to summon one from the garden window. There were other and more esoteric uses for Dream Chains, but Murzy had always taught that the tool might be turned to the task if the Wize-ard willed. When it was all done, I tested it by going down and asking Chance how he thought Brom looked.

“I thought it was enough to make a pombi laugh,” Chance said, walking around Brom and looking him over from top to bottom. “It looked like pure foolishness on the hook. Now—well, it has a kind of majesty to it, don’t it?”

I nodded, contented. It was probable the council members would keep their agreement with me, but why have the town buzzing about their reasons for letting Brom go? If the town talked, some rumor might reach Fangel. No. Let the matter be self-evident. Brom had become stylish enough to escape, and a naif was present to take over the job.

At the end, Queynt could not bring himself to wear Brom’s cast-off things. Instead he burrowed into the wagon and found those garments he had been wearing when he first met Peter and me, wildly eccentric clothing that was certainly not in fashion. Then Queynt and Brom swaggered into the street, a colorful exercise in contrasts. It would have been difficult to say which of them looked more ridiculous.

Chance disappeared into the town with a few innocuous words. Seeing his compact form disappearing down Sheel Street, I shook my head over the fate of the gamblers of Bloome. Peter dozed in the garden, the warmth of the sun provoking dreams—probably erotic—that made him twitch and mumble in his sleep.

Looking down on him from a window, I could almost tell what he was dreaming of, as though I could read his mind. I frowned and bit my lips. There were only two seasons of my oath to run, but while I had kept that oath to the letter, the spirit of it had been lost long since. It was impossible to concentrate on the art—or on anything else—with Peter around. The more casual I tried to be, the closer he came. There were a dozen things one might do; putting a spell on him came first to mind. A distraint. That same spell I had used on Brom, Dream Chains. I still had the frog. It would do Peter no harm. He wouldn’t even be aware of it.

No! I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t compel him to do anything, or not do anything. Not ever. I would rather have lost him, or so I thought then, than do anything to put him under compulsion. No matter how tempting it might be.

And it was very tempting. I could only distraint his touching me. Nothing else. And only for a short time. I

could still allow affectionate speech, companionship.

And yet—if he couldn't touch me when he willed, something would have been taken from him. As something must have been taken from Queynt when he was given the blue dream crystal by the Shadowpeople.

Though he denied it, I thought it must be so. It was unlikely he had not been changed by it. So he was compelled, whether he knew it or not, by something or someone outside himself.

And yet, being honest about it, I'd met him after he'd tasted the thing, not before. So how could I say whether he was changed by it or not?

I sat upon the windowsill, looking out over the town with its crumbling towers, its moldy roofs, the streets clean swept and shining for festival, the lower walls painted and gleaming, and all above the street level falling to dust and decay. The vibration of the mill shook the stone I was sitting on, a ceaseless quivering, a gentle dust of mortar from between the stones, a constant reminder the mill was there. The people of Bloome had made an uneasy peace with the mill, but I was going to change all that. Compellingly. But that was Game, of a sort. Compulsion was allowed, in Game.

Barish, for example! He had arranged for himself to be put to sleep, to sleep for a thousand years or so. And while he slept, one hundred thousand great Gamesmen were to be abducted and frozen into sleep like his own.

Compelled. For some misty idea he had about a better future world. An idea so misty that he and Himaggery had done nothing but argue about it constantly before we left and were probably still arguing about it. Meantime the hundred thousand rested beneath the mountain, still frozen. Compelled.

Everyone else did it! So why did it bother me so?

Besides, there were situations when it seemed right.

If I had come upon that man and woman outside Bloome, for instance, sucking upon their piss-yellow crystals and lying there in their own stink. If I had compelled them, even against their wills, to give up the crystals and live again, wouldn't I have been their friend?

A better friend, perhaps, than their own inner spirits, who had let them die? Or was the right to die part of one's own right? If so, was it everyone's right, or only the right of some? A child, for example. If a child risked its life foolishly, without knowing what it was doing, shouldn't one save that child by compelling it to forgo the risk? Or a stupid man, perhaps one besotted?

Though if one were to follow that argument, it was probable the besotted one got that way of his own will and had been told often enough the dangers of it. Or true naifs, simpletons, those who would never learn the ways of the world, the eternally surprised, the perpetually astonished? Should they not be compelled, for their own good?

When one played Game, there were rules—oh, often disobeyed, but still acknowledged. If one compelled outside of Game, then what was it one was doing? If one seduced, which was another kind of compulsion?

“Saving one's life, perhaps,” I mumbled, remembering too well what I had had to do to the centipig in the Forest of Chimmerdong. “Saving someone else's life.” Or, said some deep voice, saving something

more important than life itself.

I remember putting my head down on the stone, wishing Murzy were there to give me some advice. It would be so easy to hold Peter at a comfortable distance, just for a time. Surely there were rules! Surely there were answers!

Well, Murzy wasn't there, so it did no good to wish it. I gave up the whole matter and went to find myself some breakfast.

The delegation from the Cloth Merchants' Council arrived a little after noon bearing Queynt on their shoulders and hailing him as the new Merchant's man.

He already wore the sparkling seal of office, the letters "DM" entwined in gems upon jet. Brom, sneaking along behind so as not to draw any attention to himself, stayed only long enough to divest himself of the pink vertical and get his horse out of the stable. It seemed he had been packed long since, for the merchants had scarcely begun advising Queynt of his future duties before the titty-tup of Brom's horse's hooves was fading down Sheel Street.

"The garbage schedule tomorrow," Madame Brawl was saying in a firm voice. "First thing tomorrow!"

"Not tomorrow," said Queynt. "Tomorrow the Merchant's man is summoned to Fangel. Brom told me so. I leave tonight." The council members scowled at one another, robbed of their opportunity to show authority immediately and thus, some seemed to feel, robbed of it perpetually.

"Well then, when you return. As soon as you return."

Queynt had no more intention of returning than I did, but he agreed amicably and things went on pleasantly thereafter as they discussed the matters of garbage and machine-feeding detail and the maintenance of the fire brigade. In the midafternoon the festival ended—early, because there would be no fireworks—and soon after that, the workmen I had asked for arrived. Peter and I went off with them to the great mill while Chance and Queynt prepared to depart. There was something in my boot, and as I stopped to empty it, I heard the two of them behind me.

"What's she up to, that girl? Lately she's seemed troubled." Chance was a dear to care like this. Though he never seemed to be taking notice, nothing really escaped him.

"She has power, Chance. Power she may use, if she will. Power she fears using unwisely and thus fears using at all."

"Looked on Barish, didn't she?"

"Yes. Yes, she looked on my brother, Barish, and what Barish did. Jinian sees the implications of that, I think. She does see things like that."

"But Barish took the hundred thousand for something greater. So you said."

"Oh, yes. And now he must try to answer the question I've been trying to answer for these hundreds of years, Chance. The question those hundred thousand will ask when they wake. The question Jinian is trying to answer. Is there anything greater?" And there it was, of course. That was the thing that had been bothering me, and it didn't help greatly to know that many others had wrestled with it as well.

We went out onto the dusty cobbles of Sheel Street, littered with torn banners and tangled worms of confetti.

Birds quarreled in the gutters over spilled confections.

Wagons were moving from corner to corner while weary crews filled them with the festival flotsam. Down the hill we went, twisting and turning to arrive at the yard before the mill. We got to work, Peter and me and a dozen carpenters and metal workers, toiling away on the roof.

When Queynt and Chance arrived in the wagon, each endless length of pink cloth that had spewed from the front of the building was drawn up like a great fustigar tongue, licking the nose of the mill.

Chance was astonished. "Now, by all my grandma's teacups, what're they up to?"

"Rollers, I should imagine," said Queynt. "Drawing the stuff up the front, and across the top, and down the back into the hoppers. Saves all that using up in between."

"Well, why didn't the silly Bloomians think of that?"

"Religion, I imagine, friend Chance. Religion serves to prevent thought in many cases, and I'd say it had done so here. They started with the presumption that anything as complex as the mill must exist for a good reason. Then they spent all their time inventing a good reason—and some god to be responsible for it—rather than looking for a sensible solution to their problem. Jinian has merely substituted Drarg for whatever other deity they had involved."

"Clever," mumbled Chance. "Only I don't think she'll let herself enjoy it. By night she'll be worrying whether it was the right thing to do." He leaned back to watch the carpenters where they hammered away on high and saw that I'd been listening. He merely winked at me. Chance wasn't at all shy about his opinions.

There was a cheer from the roof as the first of the cloth reached the hoppers in back. Queynt clucked to Yittleby and Yattleby, who strode off around the building to the rear. Wide bands of pink descended in a steady flow to disappear into the huge, shaking hopper.

Queynt got down from the wagon and came to meet me as I came down the ladder.

"They're going to have to add some trash now and then, you know," he told me. "The cloth alone won't be enough."

"It won't? I thought if everything that came out went back in ..." In fact, I had been rather proud of thinking this up, and his corrections made me peevish.

"Not quite. It uses up some, you see. During the weaving. Better tell the workmen, or it may not work right." He strode back to the wagon, pausing to take a bow to the group of council members who had just come around the corner of the building. Madame Brawl was staring upward, face creased in concentration. Mergus frowned, at first unable to believe what he saw. Others murmured behind them, Philp among them.

"An excellent solution," said Queynt in a loud, definite voice, winking in my direction. "Drarg's representative is to be congratulated."

“But, but...” Madame Browl seemed about to object.

“No longer the endless round of festivals!” cried Peter. “The people of Bloome may sleep of a morning.”

“No more uncomfortable clothes,” cried Chance, getting into the spirit of the thing. “No more being bedeviled by the Hundred Demons!”

“No more banners,” someone cried from the rooftop.

“No more pink stuff!” cried someone else.

At the reference to the pink stuff, there was a general cheer, under the sound of which Madame Browl’s disapproving voice fell silent.

“Leaving already, are you?” Philp asked Queynt, staring suspiciously at the great birds the while.

“Drarg’s ambassador will ride with me to Fangel,” he replied in an innocent tone, bowing in my direction. “It seemed impolite to delay her. Inasmuch as she has helped Bloome so immeasurably.”

“Well. Be sure you get back promptly. This”—he gestured at the mill—“is going to cause upheaval. Half the people in town won’t know what to do with themselves. Do we go ahead and arrange for Pickel-port-poh? I ask you, do we? And Shimerzy-waffle?”

“Oh, I would,” said Queynt. “Definitely. However, as Merchant’s man, I’d suggest Bloome should start looking into handlooms for your weaving. No reason you can’t use some of the stuff from the mill, here, if it ever produces anything you want, but for real quality, one wants the handwoven stuff. That will provide jobs for all those ousted as hopper fillers, and it will be better quality than you’ve had for centuries. That, in turn, should increase custom. No reason you can’t still sell costumes, and have processions. And fireworks. The fireworks factory should be half-rebuilt by the time I’m expected back. I’m sure the Cloth Merchants’ Council can hold things together while I’m in Fangel.” And thereafter, I thought to myself. And thereafter.

I came to the wagon, walking in my best plenipotentiary manner.

“Madame.” Queynt bowed.

I gave them all a haughty look before climbing to the seat. “When Drarg returns, he will see to turning the mill off for you, though I am bound to tell you he may not return for several hundred years.” Then I waved at them all in an imperious manner while Queynt kreked to the birds and took us off.

Peter and Chance mounted up and plodded behind the wagon. “We could’ve got one night’s sleep,” complained Chance. “Before settin’ out again. Those were good beds there in the mansion.”

“I think our Wizards are on the track of something,” said Peter a little sullenly. He was cross and irritable, overtraveled, underslept, underloved. With a sudden clarity I realized that if I was finding our relationship difficult, Peter was finding it damn near impossible, and this threw the whole matter into confusion again.

If he felt grumpy and uncivil about it, well, so did I.

We followed on Brom’s track for the first part of the way, back up the twists and down the turns of

Sheel to the Forum Road, thence northwest on Tan-tivvy until it came to a crossing some way out of the town. Painted signboards pointed the way to a dozen places, east to Omaph and Peeri and beyond them to Smeen. Northeast to Jallywig and the unexplored depths of Boughbound Forest. Northwest to Luxuri and the Great Maze.

South, the way we had come, to Zib, Zog, Zinter, Chime, and Thorpe. North to Woeful and Fangel.

The way from Zinter to Bloome had been river bottom, a flat road and an easy one, which went on through Bloome to Luxuri through the warm, moisture-laden airs of the jungle. The northern road to Woeful climbed abruptly out of this basin onto a narrow ridgeback above the trees. We looked down onto a steaming roof of vegetation, where flocks of bright parrots screamed their way toward the setting sun. The road stretched upward, no end to the slope in sight, and after some leagues of it, the krylobos decided abruptly that they had had enough for one day. They communicated this fact by squatting and waiting to be unharnessed.

“They never stop unless there is water near,” commented Peter. “I’ll find it.” He set off down the western slope, listening as he went. In a few moments he called out, returning shortly thereafter with a full bucket. “A spring,” he said. “Running into a lovely, cool basin. Supper first, then cold baths if anyone wants.”

“How far to Fangel?” I asked.

“A long day,” replied Chance. “The fellas I talked to usually make it in two, stopping in Woeful for the night, but that’s with a late start. I figure we can make it in one.”

“The fellas?” inquired Peter. “What were you up to, Chance?”

The round, brown man shrugged elaborately in response. “Well, we have to know what’s goin’ on.”

“There wasn’t a small game, was there?” Peter asked.

“Might have been,” Chance replied with a complacent expression. “Looky here.” He squatted at the side of the wagon, spreading the contents of his pouch on a flat rock. Coins, large and small, silver and gold. A piece of worked gold—half of a lacy brooch. And an amethyst dream crystal, larger than others we’d seen, of a curiously muted color, as though a shadow lay across it.

“They gamble with crystals? As though they were coins or gems?”

“This one fella did. I said no to him twice, told him I didn’t want it. Fella insisted. Said it was valuable, not like any others we’d ever seen.”

“You won, of course.”

“No reason not to.” He shuffled his loot upon the stone, running it through his fingers. “Wonder what good it is?” Before I could move to stop him, Queynt reached for the stone and touched it to his tongue. Truly, I did move to stop him, warned by something, perhaps by the shadow that seemed to lie across the color in the stone. I was too late.

It was as though he had turned to lava, a kind of liquid stone that surged slowly beneath the skin, changing him as one watched, but so slowly one could not see change from moment to moment, could not say, “See, see what just happened,” for nothing just happened. His face changed, and his body, not

as a Shifter changes, but as water in a bucket changes, sloshing to and fro, returning always to the shape of the container. I couldn't keep myself from screaming, a little high-pitched shriek of horror that brought Peter to us at once.

Queynt was weeping, huge tears welling from both eyes to make long dust tracks down his broad face, and he making no effort to stop them or wipe them away, meantime shrieking a high, lifeless sound like a knife upon a whetstone. His eyes were distant, unfocused, his breathing shallow and slow. The hideous shifting under his skin went on for a moment longer, then stopped slowly, like a tide ebbing away as he sagged onto the ground, the thin, shrieking sound going on and on, endlessly. The amethyst crystal dropped into the dust. I seized it and put it away, where it could do no more damage.

He had showed me the blue crystals he carried, those few the Shadowman had given him in the long ago, the ones he had offered to me. They were in his pouch, and I burrowed for it, trying to move his heavy, shrieking body aside, finally dragging it out and pouring the contents into my hand, three of the small blue crystals he had shown us in the tower of Bloome.

I didn't know what to do! Surely these had some curative properties if one of them had kept him alive for a thousand years. There was nothing else to try. No wize-art could be used against the totally unknown, and I could not taste the amethyst crystal to see what horrible thing in it Queynt had encountered. Peter read my terrible doubt and indecision and said, "Do it, Jinian. Something awful has him. Anything's better than this ..." as he helped me get one of the blue stones into Queynt's mouth.

For a time nothing changed. Then the thin, tortured shrieking ended, the tears stopped flowing, and he looked more or less like himself. We held him between us, warming him. After a long time he spoke in a distant, windy voice not like his own.

"I thought I was immune." The words were said so slowly I had to recapitulate the sounds to understand them.

"What was it? What did it do?" He could not or would not answer. He could not or would not say anything. We sat beside him, watching his face. After a time, his eyes closed. After a longer time, he began to breathe as though he were asleep.

We wrapped him warmly. After a long time, we left him there. The two krylobos had come nearby during his shrieking, and they sat by him, keeping him warm.

We prepared a meal, laid out our blankets, fed the birds, who were up now, striding nervously back and forth, staring at Queynt from the sides of their eyes, muttering bird talk that I could not really understand because they didn't understand it. I took it to be some kind of rote-learned ritual or invocation.

We ate. Chance took a bowl of broth to Queynt and spooned it into his mouth, whispering to him the while. I think Queynt slept then. Later, when we were all almost asleep by the coals of the fire, he began to speak, little more than a whisper, so we had to strain to hear him.

"I thought I was immune. The blue crystal I was given so long ago—oh, it does not seem long sometimes, but now it seems an eternity since that happened. The blue crystal—often I tried to tell myself what it had done to me. All I could think of to describe it was to say I had swallowed a map." He fell silent again, as though thinking what he might say next.

I sat up, seeing the fire reflected from Peter's eyes where he sat half against a wagon wheel.

“Perhaps it was not a map or not only a map, but a set of instructions, a guide in cases of perplexity, a set of consistent directions to be used in all eventualities.” He struggled up on one elbow, reaching for the water jug.

I gave him a drink, hushing him. “No, no. You worry, Jinian, that the crystal took my will from me. It did not. If one has a map which shows two routes going to a place, one a good road, the other through a swamp, does it destroy one’s will to know the swamp is there and reject that direction in favor of the better road? You are not sure. You would like all choices to be equal. Only if all choices were equal could one be sure one had free will. Otherwise ... otherwise ...” He pushed himself up, half-sitting.

“Otherwise one always wonders if someone else is pulling the strings. However ... however, I had swallowed the map and it was part of me. From that time to this I have never felt anyone else pulling the strings. Inside myself the map was clear. Avoiding the swamps was simple good sense. Avoiding accident. Avoiding death. Avoiding pit and dragon, both. So. I wandered the world of my map ...

“Which, like most maps, did not specify a destination.” I could hear him breathing, deep, fast breaths as though he fought to climb some great height.

“A destination?” I asked at last, prompting him.

“Most maps are tools one uses as an aid in journeying. They do not usually give a destination.”

“And the other crystal?” asked Peter hesitantly. “The amethyst crystal? Did it show a destination, Queynt?”

“A wrong one,” he sobbed. “Yes. A wrong one.”

“Shhh,” I said, putting my arms around him, cradling him to me as though he were a child. “Shhh, Queynt. Tell us. What do you mean, a wrong one?”

“It summons to another place. Not on the map I was given at all. To some horrid cavern beneath the earth where monsters roar in the dark and all dreams are murdered.”

“Summons you, Queynt? Against your will?”

“Not against my will, child. Making it my will to go! That’s the horror of it! But bless you, child, the blue one is there as well, saying, No, not the right place, not the right thing to do.” He could not say any more. Perhaps he would not say. I sat there cradling him well into the night, he still crying without a sound and Peter sitting by, the fire making mirrors of his eyes, glowing disks turned in my direction. At last Queynt slept.

“Well, Wize-ard?” said Peter.

“I won’t let it happen,” I said. “I will prevent it.”

“What will you do to save him?”

“I don’t know, Peter. I don’t know. Whatever it is is inside him. Perhaps by morning it will have worn off. Perhaps it’s addictive, as the yellow ones were. We must watch him, protect him. But I don’t know what I’ll do if he isn’t well by morning. I haven’t any idea at all.” It was some time before we slept.

I woke Chance early, while it was still dark, whispering to him, "I need to know what was said about that amethyst crystal, the one Queynt tasted."

"What was said? Little enough, girl. Let's see, there was five of us gaming. Man named Chortle, two brothers from a place somewhere north of Bloome, man named Byswitch, and me. Byswitch had most of the coins and the big crystal. Said it was new, no one had anything like it, very unusual. Said I ought to try it. Share it with my friends. Just came, he said, from That Place."

"That place?"

"I don't know. That's what he said. "That Place north of Fangel where the Dream Miner is."

"Would you say—Chance, would you say the fellow lost it easily?"

"Didn't put up much of a fight, that's true. We gave him a chanst to get even, but he wasn't up to much. Said he had a woman waiting for him."

"Who lost, besides him?"

"Nobody much. All the rest of us was more or less even."

"So he lost, you won, and nothing else much changed hands?"

"You're thinkin' it was a plot? Thinkin' I was supposed to bring that thing where Queynt could get it?"

"Queynt, maybe. Or Peter. Or me. Or all of us."

"More likely Queynt, I think. He's been around long enough to attract attention. You, girl, you're practically brand new." I didn't talk with Chance further about the Dream Miner. So far as we all were concerned, it made little difference which of us was the intended victim. Perhaps any of us would have served. If Queynt had not been to some extent immune, perhaps all of us would have been.

I lay down, only for a moment, to wake much later with the sun a handsbreadth above the eastern mountains. Queynt was sitting up, staring at his hand from which the two remaining blue crystals winked and gleamed like eyes.

"Two," he said, noticing that I was awake. "I have two left."

"And the other?"

He shook his head. "Like being drunk. I can see the map I have carried for this thousand years: forests and roads. Sparkling. Whizz. Dart. All speed and sureness. Mmmm. Cities, full of Full of people. Not quite. There's a white road leading to a good place ... an inn. A place to rest. And over that is another, dark and hideous, and yet seductive. Leading to that terrible place. Buried down. Oh, too deep. Too deep."

"Are you going to take another of the blue ones now?"

"I'm going to wait to see if the other wears off," he replied with great dignity. "It is less demanding already than it was last night. Foolish of me to have done that. I was so sure I was immune. Why should I not be?"

“Because the crystal you tasted had been sent particularly for you,” I said. “I think. Designed for you. Designed to get through whatever immunity you might have. Hell, Queynt, you’ve been wandering the world a thousand years. You think nobody knows about you? You think nobody knows about the blue crystal? We can’t be the only ones you’ve told. You must have had wives. Lovers. Friends, at least. You must have got drunk sometimes and talked about things.”

He flushed. “Perhaps I have. Long ago. The Eesties knew I had it, of course. And perhaps there are Seers and snoops in various guises all around us. Why me?”

“Why any of us?” I asked. “Perhaps it was designed for any of us or all of us. Why? Why did Porvius Bloster get an order to do away with me from Dream Miner and Storm Grower—it’s no fiction, I saw the parchment myself, read the writing on it. I didn’t even know such a thing as a Storm Grower or a Dream Miner existed. So, if it is nothing in my past, our pasts, then it is something in our future. Perhaps some Seer has told these two, whatever they are, that in the future something will happen which involves one of us, or all of us.”

“I thought your search for these creatures might be a foolish one,” he said. “I did not even think they existed. Now we are sure they exist, perhaps it would be wiser not to seek them!” He sighed. “Though perhaps we will learn more in Fangel.”

Queynt shut himself in the wagon that morning. I did not ask him what he was doing. The art is a secret art. Each Wize-ard had his own solitary ways. I know he worked to do what I could not do for him, protect himself. He did not ask about the amethyst crystal, and I did not tell him it was hidden away in a pouch beneath my skirts. Besides the crystal, it held the locket with my Wize-ard’s fragment in it and a lock of Peter’s hair. Since Shifters could grow hair as they pleased, of any kind and color, I had never been sure why this sentimental gesture had occurred to me. Nonetheless, I carried it just as I carried the star-eye around my neck, as a symbol of what I was and what I intended.

It was a steady climb from the campsite to the city of Fangel. We passed the trail to Woeful at midmorning and stopped only briefly at noon. We walked a good part of it to save the krylobos and by late afternoon could see the walls of the city on the heights above us.

We were no longer alone on the road. Other wagons and riders had filtered in from the east so that we were hard put to it to find a space for ourselves and the fire.

We camped on a rocky shelf separated from the height by a tangle of steep roads and paths with no wood nearer than the jungle far below. A charcoal vendor moved among the wagons, doing brisk business, and we bought a sack to warm our supper over.

“When are the Merchants’ men due in the city?” I asked Queynt.

“Tomorrow, I think. About noon. The Dream Merchant will meet the various Merchants’ men in the residence, according to Brom, to be given their instructions. Merchants’ men change frequently, he said. No one will wonder that I have a face new to them.”

“If it is new to them,” grumbled Peter. “Let us hope none of them have seen you before.”

“Well, I must take the chance of that. However, the rest of you may do better. Remember those half veils the people in Zinter wore? I bought some when we came through there, along with several sets of their black dress. It occurred to me then we might need a disguise somewhere along the road. All three

of you can be travelers from Zinter. They're known to be belligerent when bothered, like those from Zib and Zog, so the likelihood is you'll go untroubled."

"And when does the delegation from the south arrive? The Duke and his unlikely allies?"

"Also tomorrow, I think. It gives us little time to look around."

I had been somewhat distracted by my own thoughts, but this mention of the Duke reminded me of something, and I asked if Brom had said anything about the location of the crystal mines near Fangel.

"Where are they? How can we get there?"

Peter stood thinking for a moment, turning to look up at the town above us. "Near here, I think. Chance? Brom said the mines were just below Fangel, didn't he?"

Chance went on stirring the pot as he tried to remember. "I didn't pay that much attention, to tell the truth. No. Wait. He said there was an old fella lived there, remember? While we were dressin' him up. He talked about it."

"Buttufor," said Queynt. "Gerabald Buttufor and his wife, Jermiole. Guardian of the mines. Right?"

"Where?" I was cross with myself for being impatient with them, but I was impatient with them, though there seemed to be no reason for it. "Come on, where?"

"Well, while the pot boils, we'll see if we can find out." Peter stalked away among the wagons, asking questions, smiling, chatting, playing the good fellow, Queynt off in the opposite direction doing the same.

They returned almost simultaneously with the same story.

"Down that southernmost path. Not far. We can go now, if you like. Food will stay warm on the fire."

I did like, leading off in the direction they'd indicated with a haste almost frantic. Curiosity, yes, but not only that. Something more than that. Since Queynt's disastrous accident, it had become very important to me to learn everything I could about the dream crystals.

We came to a small house at the edge of a pit, two old folk sitting on the stoop, he with a pipe of some sweet-smelling stuff, she with a mug of some kind of happiness, chirruping like a tree frog in the evening.

"Well, and well, visitors, travelers, folks bound for Fangel. Come to see the mine? Not much going on here anymore, not since the crystals started comin' up spoiled, but you're welcome. You're welcome." Nodding like a little doll, smiling at the shadows: I realized with a start she was blind.

"You folks like a tour?" Gerabald Buttufor heaved himself to his feet, leaning heavily on his cane. "Noticed two or three nodules this mornin', 'bout ready to bust. Interestin' to see. Can't use the crystals. Like Jermiole says, all spoiled now. Can't say why. Don't know why. Are, though. All spoiled."

Queynt passed coins into the old man's palm. "We'd like to see it. Lucky we got here before dark."

"Oh, you could'a seen it after, as well. Nodules get all hot and feverish, shine like little moons, they do. Get along down here." He led us, stumping along with the cane, down a twisting path into the declivity. The sides and bottom of it were pitted with rounded scars, as though from a shower of great stony hail or

meteors.

He went along a path, stopping abruptly beside a fistsized dome of stone.

“Here.” He tapped it with his cane. It rang, twangingly, a harsh, ugly sound. “Good crystals don’t even sound like that. Used to like the sound of the good ones. Now you watch.” He struck the stone again, sharply, several times in one place. The cane was shod with iron. The ugly sound repeated, but on the last blow the rock broke.

Fragments flew, disclosing the center. Like an egg, it held a yolk, a yellow crystal swimming in silvery liquid that oozed over the broken edge of the stone and into the ground. Peter leaned forward.

“Don’t touch it!” I cried, seeing what it was.

“That’s right, lassy. Not many know that unless they’ve worked the mines. Can’t touch the crystal milk, boy. That’s what we call it, crystal milk. Burn you right through to the bone.”

I had last seen similar stuff in a great pool deep in the Citadel of the Sevens; I carried a fragment dipped in that pool as one of my most cherished things. It had been approached with great care and considerable reverence when I had seen it, enough so to make me wary of it.

“May I borrow your cane, friend Gerabald?”

I dipped the iron tip in the liquid to hear the same high singing I had heard in the Citadel of the Sevens, far beneath the surface of the earth. I clutched the pouch containing the locket, disbelieving. So! That most marvelous and esoteric stuff was, in fact, well known elsewhere.

“How do you get the crystal out?” I asked.

“Why, that’s no trouble.” He bashed away at the stone once more, breaking it so that all the liquid ran away, raking the crystal out onto the stone. “Soon as it dries, you can pick it up. Don’t taste it, though. It’s one of the death ones.” The others wandered off, but I waited while it dried, while the evening came on, bending at last to pick it up, piss-yellow and deadly as poison. I crouched over the empty shell, rising at last in some puzzlement.

“Peter,” I called, seeing him turn and move toward me with more eagerness than I needed. “Lean down here,” I whispered. “Shift your eyes. I can’t tell, it’s too dark, but isn’t there a kind of channel or duct at the bottom of this hole?” He stretched out on the stone, taking the opportunity to put one arm around me as he stared into the hemispherical hole. Shift eyes, Shift nerves behind eyes, peer deep. Even in the deepening darkness he could see it. “Yes. A twisty little duct, leading down into the earth. You want me to look at some of the others?”

“Please. Do. See if they’re all alike.” He wandered away, keeping his face with its oddly Shifted eyes turned from the loquacious old man who was lecturing Queynt and Chance on the intricacies of dream mining.

“Sometimes there’d be a dozen little ones in one nodule, sometimes only one. Used to be pretty green ones in this mine, good ones, too. Happy stuff, no death dreams; forests and birds mostly. I ‘member one was about flyin’. Oh, me’n Jermiole shared that one, flew all over. Mountains, valleys. One great chasm we saw all full of cities built on tree roots, if you could believe that. Great goles down in the bottom of it, too, and up on top the hugest beasts you’ve ever seen. Saw parts of the world never knew were there.

Well, p'raps they aren't, if you take my meaning. In the crystal they were, sure as certain."

"Were a lot of these yellow ones dug out of here and put into commerce?" I asked Gerabald.

"None from here. Fella used to work here dug up the first one, tasted it — well, we almost always did, you know. Didn't know what to ask for 'em until you tasted 'em—and we found him four, five days later where he'd wandered off to, deader'n a baked bunwit, half the crystal still in his hand. Well, if that wasn't enough, came some ijit through here a few days later, didn't ask, didn't tell anybody, and dug a bunch of 'em, gave 'em to his entire party, parents, children. They must've shared 'em around, cause we found 'em all gone. That was enough, let me tell you. We never sold another from this mine after that."

"If we've seen a lot of these on the road, then, they must have come from somewhere else?" I asked.

The old man stumped over to me, looked up at me with rheumy eyes, whispered, "Way I hear it, lassy, they're coming up ever'where. Used to be a mine over near Smeen, nothin' but pure greeny-blue crystals. Most greeny-blue ones are the best kind. Make you healthy, they do. Long-lived. Me'n Jermiole'r more than a hundred ten, you know that? We just go on, cheerful as tumble-bats from the ones we used to get fifty, sixty years ago. Well, that mine's nothin' but these yallery things now. So I hear. Sad, too. I've got a few of those old ones left, but sad to think there'll be no more." He stumped away again.

That was more than merely troublesome. It was scary. Peter came up behind me, began stroking my back. All I wanted to do was turn around, but I gritted my teeth and told my belly to stop melting in that ridiculous way.

"All of them," he said, continuing the stroking. "All of them have that little tube coming up from deep in the earth somewhere."

Gerabald Buttufor looked back at me, calling loudly, "Better throw that yallery thing away, lassy, pound it up to powder. Dangerous, those are."

"I know." Who knew better than I? No one else had buried more of the victims than I had. Still, the thing went in my pouch. Sometimes one had need for dangerous things. This crystal was one. The idea I had just had was another.

CHAPTER SIX

As soon as it was light, Queynt arrayed himself quasifantastically as suited a Merchant's man from Bloome.

He wore the seal of office, the plaque of jet with the letters "DM" picked out in brilliants in a circle of multicolored gems. We three others put on the black garb from Zinter that Queynt had provided from his costume store. I considered it inauspicious clothing while accepting that nothing could be more anonymous. A stretchy black garment covered the body and head with a half veil over nose and mouth. Over all this went a voluminous cloak, dark as midnight, with one stripe, the color of dried blood, running from throat to hem. The cloak had a larger, metal-lined hood hanging at the back to be used in case of hail. The people of this region were preoccupied with the possibility of storm, and we were beginning to understand why.

There were no boots among Queynt's provisions, so we wore our own, decorated with new ornaments

to make them look foreign and strange. I chose a pair of gilt snakes for the outside of each boot: Peter chose salamanders and Chance a pair of Basilisks. At the sight of these last, I couldn't help shuddering.

"What's wrong?" Peter came to my side with a concerned expression.

"Nothing much. It's those Basilisks on Chance's boots. Made me think of Dadrina Dredaye. Dadrina-Lucir's mama."

"Lucir? That was the one who tried to kill you?"

"Yes, she tried, but I succeeded. I killed her, and I've walked in fear of the Basilisks' vengeance since. Dadrina Dredaye is still alive; sometimes I remember that and it makes me go all over cold. Porvius Bloster came northward, I remember. Likely his sister Dredaye did, too. I keep expecting to encounter her, or him, or both." I wandered toward the rocky edge of the shelf we had camped upon, stood looking toward the eastern horizon.

"We've seen no sign of her, or him." He stood beside me, giving me lecherous looks. No. I thought of them as lecherous. Perhaps he intended them only to be admiring.

"True. I'd feel happier if we had—if we knew, for instance, she was headed off in some specific direction, preferably away from us. Ah, well. Not important now. What is important is Queynt. How's he feeling?"

"Seems in good spirits. Asked me what we'd done with the amethyst crystal." He turned to look back at the wagon, where Queynt and Chance seemed engaged upon wheel repair.

"What did you say?"

"Told him I hadn't seen it since the event." He moved toward me with a purposeful leer.

"Peter," I begged weakly. "Don't."

"Peter, don't!" he mimicked savagely. "Gods, Jinian. I've had enough of "Peter, don't.""

"You know why. It isn't that I want to say it! It's that you'll never listen."

"I've listened long enough. You're not studying the art now. The seven aren't here. But you're here, and I'm here, and all this going on about your oaths is meaningless. I know you love me—want me. Unless you've changed completely since the Wastes of Bleer. I remember a certain night there. If we'd had a little more time, the oath wouldn't have mattered then!"

"You know I haven't changed. But we thought we were going to die then."

"I know. And we could die tomorrow. Which makes this oath business even more stupid. Well, Jinian, love, I'm not going to go on like this ... " He had the look of a man who had spent a restless night of frustrated desire and was determined it should be the last.

What I might have said was stopped by Queynt's voice.

"Time to move," accompanied by a bugling cry from the krylobos.

"I'm not going to go on, Jinian," Peter repeated in a thick, passionate voice, pulling the veil up over his mouth so all I could see was the determination in his eyes. "If we're to travel together, we're going to have to be together. I can't take much more of this." He strode off, not waiting for me.

Chance was already on the wagon seat. Queynt was mounted. "So far as Fangel is concerned," Queynt said, "I am a mere Merchant's man. You three black-cloaked Zinterites are the owners of this strange equipage. We travel in proximity, but not together. Isn't that so?" We started off, Peter riding close beside the wagon, Queynt slightly after. Others from the campsite creaked into motion as well, a fragmentary snake crawling toward Fangel.

The city lifted its roofs before us. Its towers bore long black pennants, like great tattered bats flitting silently above the hill. There was no sound from Fangel, not the creak of wagons nor the sounds of commerce, no vendors' shouts, no children's laughter.

A silent city, it poised above with expectant gates like open mouths.

It had no smell, Fangel, no woodsmoke, cookery, market goods, people-cum-animal smell. If there had ever been a kindly stench of people there, the jungle wind had blown it away. Now was only the graveyard odor of stone and dust.

Outside the open gates a troop of guardsmen stood, each arrayed with the Dream Merchant's insignia, looking us over with long, calculating stares.

"Business?" asked one, leaning on the wagon step.

"On our way to Luxuri," said Chance. "No real business in Fangel."

"Turn aside to Dungcart Road, to your left outside the walls."

"We heard there was a procession. Thought we'd go in to see that."

"Procession this afternoon. In that case you can park the wagon off the avenue in the park. Leave before dark. No fires in Fangel. No rooms, either, and no food served after dusk, so don't think of staying. We've plenty of room in the prison for vagrants who remain after dark."

Chance clicked to the birds and they moved through the gate. "Friendly," he remarked. "A real friendly place."

Behind us we heard the guard saying to Queynt, "Business?" and Queynt's reply. "Merchant's man from Bloome, summoned for the reception." We dawdled, letting Queynt pass us. High walls enclosed the street, blank walls marked again and again with the linked letters of the Dream Merchants. Above the featureless walls jutted ornamented facades of great houses or blank sides of long unwindowed buildings.

"Factories?" I wondered. "Warehouses? Is this a manufacturing town, then? At this height?" The streets were empty. No person walked there; no curious head protruded from a convenient window. Our scanty caravan wove through the city to a central park, a place of mown grass, trees, and wide basins of polished stone in which water lay quiet.

Even here there was no smell, as though the trees had been made of some inorganic material, the water poured from some sterile vat. Across a wide avenue a twisted metal fence made a barrier between the park and the much embellished walls of the residence. As we watched, the doors of this ornate building

swung wide to emit a voluminous, almost architectural robe. A square head protruded from the neck of it, close-clipped no-color hair, a promontory of nose overhanging a clifflike upper lip beneath which the mouth writhed wave-like around fallen stones of teeth. "Thtrike," said the mouth in a sibilant shout as the robe gestured with practiced drama.

"Gods," mumbled Chance, looking at the gong they were about to strike. "Look't the size of that thing. Hold your ears!" The warning came barely in time. An earth-shaking "Bong!" set up a trembling reverberation throughout the city, the very ground shivering beneath us, the sound seeming to gain strength as it continued, permeating the buildings with an inexorable message.

"Bong!" again, and yet again. Then a slow falling into momentary silence, broken at once by other sounds.

Doors opening, people speaking, carts moving out of warehouses and onto the streets, a child screaming laughter, fountains suddenly splashing. Somewhere a band started to play.

It had been like a stage set on which the curtain had suddenly gone up. It was unreal. I did not believe it. Queynt sat on his horse only a little way from us.

"The man in the robe was the Dream Merchant," he remarked. "Brom described him to me. The gong could be a kind of curfew, to keep everyone off the streets at night." He did not sound convinced of this.

Across the avenue the guardsmen opened the iron gates and propped them wide as the Dream Merchant retreated into the residence. Waiting beside the convoluted fence was a bulbous, beak-nosed man displaying a seal of office much like the one Queynt wore. He raised his hand to Queynt, beckoning.

"Merchant's man? New at it? From Bloome? Ah. I'm here from Woeful. We can check in with the Dream Merchant now if you like. I'll show you the way." Queynt dismounted, tied the horse to a convenient tree, and walked through the gates with the other Merchant's man, leaving the three of us to ourselves.

"I smell food," said Chance. "No inns, but lots of food carts. Suppose I get us some breakfast."

"Do that," said Peter. "Meantime I'll take a short prowl around and see what's to be seen. Jinian?" He invited me with a gesture.

I didn't want to go anywhere. If truth were told, I wanted to get out of Fangel, the sooner the better. The silence before the gong went; the lack of smell to it; the way the people moved; everything about it gave me the shakes. "No. It'll be easier for you to go here and there without me. I'll keep an eye on the wagon while you two roam about." He turned away with rejected sulkiness, moving into the gathering crowd that was assembling to stare at the krylobos.

"Aren't they pretty things," gushed a lady of Fangel, got up herself as a pretty thing, all ruffles and bows. "Great beauties. What do you feed them?"

Not of a mood to be tactful, I said, "About a twenty weight of raw meat a day, including the guts."

The lady made a moue, tossed her head. "So savage! And where are you from? I have not seen garb like that before."

"From Zinter. It is the usual dress there. Our people have a dislike of displaying their faces." I tried to

look the woman in the face, tried to make eye contact. Each time I came close, her glance slid away as though greased. Her expression was not unkind, and yet there was something about her that set my skin aprickle.

“Is it a Games dress of some kind?” She evidenced no particular interest in my answer, but I didn’t like the question.

“No, madam. It is the ordinary dress of our people.” She posed, simpered, displaying her own face in several well-practiced expressions. On her bodice she wore a jet plaque with the letters “DM” picked out in brilliants.

“How exotic. Do you allow others to know your names?”

So here it was. “Jambal,” I replied. There are many spells, seizings and sendings that can be done against those whose names were known. Silly to suspect this stupid-looking woman of any villainy. Silly. Why then did I suspect it? “My name is Jambal.”

“I am happy to meet you, Jambal. My name is Sweetning Horb. I live over there”—she pointed at one of the high-walled mansions along the avenue in Horb House. “Perhaps you will come to dine with us?”

“Alas, lady, no. We are expected in Luxuri and will leave before long.” Thank all the gods.

“All honor to the Duke of Betand. Hail Huldra. Hail Valearn. Hoorah for Dadrina Dreadeye. What a pity you must leave so soon.” I heard the name but did not. Dadrina Dreadeye.

Frozen with shock, I was still alert enough to see that Sweetning Horb wore a dream crystal about her neck. It was a pinkish stone set in a gold bezel.

Nausea struck at me; it was hard to raise my hand to stop her, but I managed to put a hand on the woman’s arm. “Please, who are these people you exclaim honor upon?”

“Honor? Upon whom, Jambal?”

“You said, “Honor upon the Duke of Betand.””

“I did? Well, undoubtedly he is an official visitor worthy of honor.”

“But who is he?”

“But my dear, I haven’t the least idea. I must run. Lovely to have met you, and your huge savage birds.” I was given no time to recover. An oldster with a raffish beard stood importunately before me demanding to know the names of the birds.

“Yarnoff and Barnoff,” I said at once, trying to keep from shaking. “Yarnoff is the female.”

“And where were they captured, madam? I am zoo keeper for the city of Fangel and would be glad to know where a specimen could be acquired. Honor to the Duke.” He wore the jet badge, the pinkish crystal.

“It is my understanding they were taken as chicks from the mountains above the Southern Sea. However, since they came into my care as adults, I cannot vouch for the truth of this.” All lies, good safe

lies.

“All honor to the Duke of Betand. Hail Huldra. Did I understand you to say they are fed raw meat?” When I nodded, he went on, “From my own experience, I would counsel the addition of cooked grain. I have been told that krylobos in the wild do eat grain, and it might be their health would suffer from a diet of meat alone ...” He took his crystal in one hand and licked it reflectively.

“Idiot,” commented Yittleby to Yattleby. “I’d feed him stewed grain. Actually, Jinian, a few ripe thrilps wouldn’t be amiss ...”

“Hail Valearn,” said the man, looking at me earnestly. “Hoorah for Dadrina Dreadeye.”

“I’m sorry,” I replied. “I didn’t hear. What was that you just said?”

“That their health might suffer from a diet of meat alone.” He licked the crystal again.

I shivered deep inside, trying to keep it from showing. “Whether it would or not, sir, they must be fed now. Will you excuse me?” Then, almost silently, “Yittleby, couldn’t you two clear the area somewhat?” Yittleby charged the onlookers with a hungry caterwaul. Yattleby began to kick, missing his targets but only slightly. The oglers drew back in dismay, some reaching for the pinkish crystals that all of them wore. Some sucked upon them, seeming not to notice that they did so.

“The krylobos don’t like crowds,” I called, voice cracking. “Stand well back.” Now, I said to myself, it will be only a matter of moments before someone appears at my side with a pink crystal and insists I have a taste of it.

It was Chance who appeared, however, bearing fragrant meat pies and pastries. “All honor to the Duke of Betand,” he remarked. “This place is enough to give you the grues. I’ve decided my name is Biddle, by the way.”

“Thank the gods you were cautious. I’m Jambal. I hope to hell Peter had sense enough to—”

“Don’t worry about him. He’s all right. Tell you something interesting, though Jin ... Jambal. There was a fella over there on the street in Tragamor dress. First Gamesman I’ve seen since we left Zinter. Came in on a wagon just behind us. Well, he was picked up by some woman dressed up like a Festival Horse, all ruffles, and before he could get two steps away from her, she’d given him a dream crystal right off her neck.” Chance wiped his brow as he set the food out on the wagon seat and cocked his head to the bird’s uproar. “Lemme get those birds some food and I’ll tell you the rest.” He went to the rear of the wagon where the meat stores were kept.

I sniffed at the food ravenously. Seemed all right, but just to be sure I murmured a renewal of the Fire Is Sparkening spell, which would warn if anything unhealthful were encountered. I was halfway through a savory meat pie when Chance returned.

“So, like I was sayin’, this flouncy high-nosed dame gave him this crystal, right off her neck. Then she teased him into tasting it. Well, that’s all right, just a taste doesn’t usually—you know. But it was like those yellow ones, Jin ... Jambal. He tasted, then he took off his helm and left it lying, and as he went off with her over there, he was sayin’, “All honor to the Duke of Betand.” Now, I ask you!”

So this was why they had seen no Gamesmen. Gamesmen were particularly targeted to be supplied with crystals. And once given them, it seemed they were not only full of praise for the coming visitors, but also

forgetful of their own status. Praise for the visitors did not so much distress me. The mention of Dadrina Dreadeye did, however, coining as it did out of the blue. Down the avenue we could see a tall black form returning. Peter.

He arrived somewhat breathlessly. "Hail Dadrina," he whispered. "Have you heard?"

"Could anyone not hear? You didn't tell anyone your name, did you, Peter?"

"Nobody asked. I was moving too fast to get into conversation. Good idea not to, though. I'll be Chorm."

"Jambal," I announced. "And he's Biddle. I wonder if Queynt—"

"Queynt will take care of Queynt. He got along for some thousand years before you came into his life. Sometimes you sound like his mother. And mine." He sounded grumpy again, still, very much like someone working himself up to some irrevocable pronouncement. Sensibly, I said nothing. Across the way the doors of the residence opened and Queynt emerged, along with his beak-nosed new acquaintance. They came across the avenue. "Ah, the travelers from Zinter. May I introduce you to the Merchant's man from Woeful. Ballycrack Willome. My fellow travelers from Zinter. I'm sorry, I've forgotten your names?" His eyebrows wagged caution at us.

"Jambal," I said, bowing. "Biddle, there with the birds. And this is Chorm."

"I am gratified to know you," said Willome. "All honor to the Duke of Betand." I looked at his chest. Yes, he wore one of the pinkish crystals. And so did Queynt.

"Hoorah for Dadrina Dreadeye," Queynt said softly, shaking his head at me. "We are so looking forward to the procession and reception."

"The procession will enter Fangel shortly after noon," announced Willome. "We Merchants' men and you other visitors will cheer and exclaim with delight from the park here. Residents of Fangel will cheer from their windows or the streets. The Duke of Betand with a great retinue will arrive. Also the Witch, Huldra. The Ogress, Valearn. Both with their followers. And the Basilisk, Dadrina Dreadeye, recently allied with them."

"How exciting," commented Peter, one hand on my shoulder to stop my shaking.

Queynt went on, "When the honored guests have arrived, the Merchants' men are invited into the residence grounds for the reception. After which we must take our latest shipment of crystals and get back to our own towns, eh, Willome? Hail Huldra. Hail Valearn."

"All honor to the Duke of Betand," intoned Willome. "Will you all excuse me while I get some breakfast?" Belching gently, he moved away through the crowd, somewhat lessened since the birds' threat upon the spectators.

"I keep expecting someone to show up and force those things on the rest of us," I said. "Queynt, you didn't—"

"Calm down, girl. No, I didn't. Though it was chancy there for a moment. A little sleight of hand and enough sense to mimic what was going on around me seemed to do the trick. I'm using the name Abstimus Baffle, by the way. One of my oldest noms de guerre." Seeing our puzzlement, "Never mind. A

phrase from a former life.

“Now, I think they will not force anything on you as long as you attract no more attention than our krylobos friends have already done. The pink crystals are only temporary, only for this event. They will be used, I suppose, so long as the Duke and his entourage are in Fangel. Since you are to be gone before dark, it is not necessary to “crystallize” you, so to speak. I, on the other hand, will be attending the reception and must be relied upon to act correctly. So.”

Peter was astonished. “Do you mean to tell me that they have given those foul things to an entire population in order to assure the Duke gets welcomed appropriately? What do they do between visits? The people, I mean? And where do they get the crystals? Do they really come from mines?”

“Why should there be a town here at all on this sterile height?” I asked. “There’s no water. There’s no agriculture to support the population. No reasonable explanation why commerce should center here. But it is a fortress easy to control. The population has to be engaged in the crystal commerce somehow. Or in something we can’t even imagine. I’ll tell you, this place makes me crawl.” I stared out at the street where the populace moved, buying meat pies and fruit, hot sweet breads and sugary candies, confetti and flags, moving and talking as real people move and talk, and yet every other breath stopping to put the pinkish crystals to their mouths, moving then again, to spew, “All honor to the Duke of Betand,” without knowing or caring what it meant.

“Still, we’re here,” murmured Queynt. “Let not the time pass us by. Peter, learn what you can, will you, my boy? And you, Chance. Meantime avoiding those crystals as though they were Ghoul Plague! We should all be back here shortly after noon when the procession arrives.”

Obediently we scattered, Queynt and I staying together as we walked the streets of Fangel. All the large, blank-faced buildings opened off secluded courtyards, and these courtyards had guards posted outside them. “By noon,” murmured Queynt, “Peter will have investigated a dozen places in as many shapes, I doubt not. You may be right about their crystal factories, though the probable methodology escapes me.”

“I envision it having something to do with that silvery stuff the crystals grow in. Crystal milk, Buttufor called it.”

“Is it the wize-art tells you this, Jinian Footseer?” He sounded amused.

“It is my troubled heart tells me this, Queynt. That and what I saw at that little mine outside town.” Before I could go on, we were accosted.

“Jambal! Are you enjoying Fangel? Sweetning Horb, remember? We met this morning! Oh, my, have you left those great brutal sweet birds alone? Oh, tisk, they’ll eat half the populace by the time you get back. I hope you tied them tightly!”

“I did, yes. May I present Abstimus Baffle, Merchant’s man from Bloome. We traveled more or less adjacent from Bloome. Abstimus Baffle, Sweetning Horb.” I stepped back to let Queynt take over, which he did, bearing the woman off on a flood of words that put the quantity of her own to shame. I didn’t follow them. All day my discomfort had grown, my skin crawling in a spontaneous writhe of escape, convinced that someone was watching me. It was impossible to go on moving and acting as though nothing were wrong. I turned back to the wagon.

“Was a twit here, Jinian,” said Yattleby. “I stomped him, only a little. Tried to poison us each with some

pink thing.”

“The whole town’s a trap,” I mumbled. “Keep watch, will you. I’m going to sleep in the wagon. I’m exhausted.” Peter had not been the only one to spend a troubled night.

I fell into sleep as into a pit, disturbed by pertinent dreams of crystals and mines and dead bodies along the road, waking when the others returned along about noon.

“The lady wanted to be sure I shared the town’s need to honor the Duke,” Queynt confessed. “I came very close to tasting this pretty pink crystal, friends, though I managed to avoid it with a minor Wize-ardry. They are persistent here.”

Peter was very white-faced and not in a mood for this jocularity. “Jinian was wrong,” he said. “The buildings I could get into are all full of people. Laid out on the shelves like so many sacks of grain. Children. Men. Women. And creatures, lizardy things. Furry things. Asleep, I think. When the gong goes, some of them must get up, but the others just stay there. There’s nothing in those houses but storage. And all of them have crystals in their mouths.”

“Gods!” I had not even imagined this. “What do they have the look of, Peter? An army, perhaps?”

“Could be.” He pursed his lips, thinking, making quirky wrinkles around his eyes. “Come to think of it, most of those on the shelves are fighting size—big. Men or other things, both big. Some smaller ones, but I’d say nine out of ten could be warriors.”

“Gamesmen?”

“It would explain where they’d all gone.” That was a disquieting thought. We didn’t have time to worry over it, however, for there was a trumpet blast that spun us around facing the avenue. Heralds rode toward us, horns in hand, tabards gleaming. “All those within sound of my voice give ear! All those give ear! His Grace, the Glorious Duke of Betand. Her Highness, Valearn, Queen of the High Demesne. Her Worship, Huldra, Heiress of Pfarb Durim. Her Eminence, Dedrina, Protector of Chimmerdong!”

“Heiress of Pfarb Durim,” stuttered Peter. “Still claiming the city, is she? Not damn likely.”

“Protector of Chimmerdong,” I snarled obstinately, even while my body melted in a sweat of terror. “Over my dead body.”

There was no time to say more. The first of the procession was passing, a sonority of trumpets, a frenzy of drums, so loudly bellicose as to drown all other sound and all thought. Then striding banner bearers, then muzzled pombis shambling in formation with small, frightened shapes tied to their backs.

“Shadowpeople!” hissed Peter. “And not here of their own will.” A huge cage on wheels with a gnarlibar inside, asleep: twelve chained krylobos who screamed such a cry as could have been heard in Schooltown far to the south when they saw Yattleby.

“Rescue! Rescue!” they cried.

“Wait! Wait!” cried Yattleby in return, a vengeful shriek. “We will!” Several of the guards along the route turned at this, scowling.

“Hush,” I hissed at them in their own language. “You will betray your purpose.” The great bird subsided,

his anger shown only by the huge toenail tracks he was scratching in the earth. “Shhh,” I said again.

“All honor to the Duke of Betand,” piped Queynt, giving us cautionary looks out of the sides of his eyes. “All honor to the Duke of Betand!” He waved his fists, smiling as the cart came toward us on which the corpulent hulk of the Duke rode, canopied with silken draperies and jeweled like a Tragamor’s helm. He bowed from side to side, waving a puffy, negligent hand. Behind him marched his retinue, and behind them a line of captives in chains, both men and women. Most carried treasure on display. One stalwart couple carried a huge woven basket between them.

Just behind them was a young woman in rags, carrying a child. She was a pretty thing, little more than a child herself, and I was about to say something to Peter about her when he made a strangled cry.

“Sylbie!” he shouted, so loudly that the chained young woman heard him and turned searching the crowd. Her face was very lovely, though tracked by tears. The child she carried had a wave of ruddy hair across its forehead. “Sylbie,” Peter said again, a guttural snarl. “That bastard broke his bond.” The marching woman was not the only one who had heard. So had the Duke. He heaved his bulk upon the cart, trying to see who had called out, spoke sharply to one of his guards, who spurred away from the procession and into the park.

“Happy he’ll be,” Queynt caroled in frantic rhyme with Peter’s exclamation. “Happy he’ll be. All honor to the Duke of Betand.” He had made his voice sound almost like Peter’s.

The guard stopped, came forward more slowly.

“What’s that you’re yellin’, Merchant’s man? Somebody’s name?”

“No one’s name. No, only a fervent wish for the Duke’s happy future, Guardsman. All honor to the Duke of Betand!” This was echoed by the others in our group, and the guardsman galloped back to his place beside the Duke’s cart. We saw him speak, saw the Duke heave himself up to cast a smiling wave in our direction as the cart turned the corner to circle the park.

“Gods,” murmured Queynt. “Don’t scare me like that again, Peter. Thank all the gods you’ve got that veil over your face. Who in the name of all that’s holy is the girl?” Peter didn’t answer. Only his eyes showed above the veil, the skin around them very red, then very white. I watched him with a sick, sinking feeling.

“Someone you knew?” I prompted him.

He nodded. “Someone . . . ah, someone I met in Betand. When I went through there some—oh, it would be almost three years ago.” I had judged the baby the woman was carrying to be about two. So.

“You said the bastard broke his bond. You meant the Duke?”

“He was set on having Sylbie for himself—set on having her dowry, at any rate. I did the town a considerable service while I was there. In payment, he was to let Sylbie choose her own husband. I don’t know what he’s done to her, but she was a wealthy girl when I left Betand.” Wealthy and pregnant, I said to myself. Queynt threw me a sidelong glance as though he read my mind.

Peter was still worrying at it. “If she’s a captive in the Duke’s train, he’s done some foul thing. He was a mean-spirited bastard in Betand. It’s unlikely he’s changed.”

“If she is a friend of yours,” I said in a voice as calm as a glacier, “then we must rescue her. Her, and some Shadowpeople, and several krylobos. It seems we have our night’s work cut out for us.”

“Where’ll all that mess be stayin’?” asked Chance. “Inside the residence grounds?”

“There’s a large guest compound there,” said Queynt. “Together with barns and dormitories. I saw it this morning. I’ll try to get a better look during the reception. Gods, Jinian, you mean to try getting the krylobos out, and the Shadowpeople, and the girl and her baby?” He popped his eyes at me in pretended astonishment.

“Well, Queynt, I don’t think Yittleby and Yattleby will give you a choice about the krylobos. Either we do it or they will. In case you hadn’t noticed, Yattleby is about to take on the Duke of Betand and all his retinue, all by himself. He won’t restrain, so I wouldn’t try it. As for the Shadowpeople, I’ve wanted to meet them ever since Mavin told me about them. And the girl? Well, I think that’s Peter’s baby she’s carrying, so we have no choice there, either. Wave, now. Smile. Here comes Huldra!” Amazed at my own chilly calm, I waved.

And there was a cavalcade of mounted drummers, beating an erratic thunder on great copper tubs, followed by a high, black cart with the still-faced Witch upon it, long dark hair curling around a white, red-lipped face with eyes that burned. The dangerous, watching feeling I had been having all day suddenly intensified like fire. It burned. There was a seeking feeling in the air, as though a creeping tentacle reached toward us. Peter turned to one side, hiding even his eyes. The invisibly flaming hunter passed with the creaking cart, turning the corner to continue the procession. Some kind of seeking spell. I shivered.

Next a row of fan-horns, shattering the air with dissonant blasts to announce Valearn, gray hair standing in great spikes around her ravaged face, eyes like dead coals, black and lightless, and the skeletons of children rattling on the wheels of her wagon. It should have sickened me. Instead, I felt anger, hot and horrid. Queynt put a hand on my arm, hissed at me.

Then came a row of men bearing huge wooden spirals that emitted a blood-chilling hiss when stroked, endless and chilling. Dadrina Dreadeye, mounted upon some great lizardish form that none of us had seen before, its monstrous tail heaving back and forth as it waddled down the avenue, head swinging left and right, as did its rider’s, left and right. At her side on a blindfolded horse rode Porvius Bloster, looking old and ill. This time it was I who turned my face aside. I felt the Basilisk’s attention on the crowd. She looked exactly like Dadrina-Lucir except for age, and seeing her was like peering back into time. I had already killed three who looked like this. Daughter and two sisters of this one. I had killed them with the Dagger of Daggerhawk Demesne. On my leg, that same Dagger burned and throbbed.

The head of the procession had come around full circle and moved into the grounds of the residence, musicians, guards, and animals moving off to the left, honored guests to the right. The girl and her child went to the left. I asked Queynt, “Do we have a better chance during the reception, Queynt? Or after it, when all visitors are presumed to have left Fangel?”

“After, Jinian. After,” he whispered. “My suggestion is that you depart northward now. I am expected to leave by the south gate when this affair is over. Is there a path from north to south outside the walls of this place?”

“Dungcart Road,” answered Chance. “Along the western wall. Shall we wait for you then, Queynt? Outside the north gates?”

“Wait for me there. Except you, Peter. You might slip along Dungcart Road and offer me help, if needed. Hard to say how many there’ll be in company when we leave. I’ll have to get away from them somehow.”

Thus quickly were we determined. Two of us three putative Zinterites began hitching the birds while one talked with highly irritated krylobos. “We’ll come back, Yattleby,” I kept saying. “If we stay now, it will attract attention, and some of your kin may end up getting killed. If we leave, they’ll all go to sleep thinking there’s no danger. Wait until dark. Come on, now. Take the harness and quit kicking. We won’t leave your kinsmen—ah, kinsbirds behind.” Eventually the giant bird agreed, though I knew very well he wouldn’t go far from the walls. His eyes were red and furious. I had never seen them like this before. He was too angry even to talk to me.

Queynt went to the residence, nimbly bowing and smiling, full of quirky gestures and fulsome words, echoing the universal greeting. “All honor to the Duke of Betand.” I know from him what he learned there and will tell it here.

Inside the gate he encountered Willome once more, and they made their way to the tables where liquid refreshments were provided. “Will we be introduced to the guests of honor?” Queynt asked offhandedly, seeming to pay attention only to the spitted chime birds he had been offered.

Willome shook his head. “I think not. Hoorah for Valearn. They have not done so on any occasion heretofore. We are here to fill the grounds, I think. As is proper.” He bit a crisply toasted bird in half, spluttering bone fragments in all directions. “Hail Huldra.”

“Hail Valearn,” said Queynt. “I must find a place to relieve myself.”

“Round back,” said Willome. “Near the stables.” But it was to the residence itself that Queynt repaired, carrying with him, so he said, the worried look of a man seeking a necessary with a view to immediate utilization. He carried the expression only so far as the deeply carpeted corridor leading to an ornate audience chamber he had located from outside. Here, sheltered from the glow of midday but visible to the mob on the terraces, the guests of honor and their more highly placed attendants eddied to and fro in a swirling slosh of sidling waiters. Here, hidden from observation behind heavy portieres of gold-cruled velour, Queynt came to rest, poised on one foot to flee if necessary, ears pricked and one eye applied to a judiciously located crack between the hangings.

The Dream Merchant, seen only at a distance that morning, was less than a manheight away, his long face still as a carving, the looming upper lip immobile as stone, undisturbed by the words that sprayed from its foot.

“Well, Betand! Tho you have come to Fangel at latht.”

“Well, Merchant! So I was invited at last. Little wonder I came.”

“Invited for what, I wonder. Has the Backleth Throne determined upon thome action? Ah?” The Merchant regarded his guest with suspicion. “Thtorm Grower and Dream Miner, my lovely parenth? Have they told you why you are thummoned?” The Duke belched lovingly, threw bones over his shoulder which struck the hangings before Queynt’s nose, almost startling him into betraying movement.

“Have they told me? Come now, Merchant. Do they write me letters? I got this!” And he waved a bezel-mounted crystal in the Merchant’s face. “This. As did those three crones with me. Give it a lick and you’ll know everything I do. We’re off to That Place, higgypiggy, as may be, and Devils take him who

lingers. I am much bewitched in this endeavor, may I tell you, Merchant, with three such ugly dams as you have yet to dream ill of. I will tell you that Valearn is enough to give a child nightmares for all his life, whether she threaten to eat him or no, and the lovely Dedrina does the same for me.”

“And yet, even in thuch company, you go?”

“Do you hear me preaching rebellion? There is profit in following the Backless Throne. They suggest this alliance, and so we ally. I do well by the Throne and they by me. I have always felt well paid.”

“And you are taking all thith entourage with uth?”

“Unlikely, Merchant. That lizard of Dedrina’s is only something Huldra called up and will as easily let go. The others ... well, when I go hence tomorrow night, I will leave most of the traps and booty here in your charge until I return.”

“Not in my charge, Betand. I am to go with you. I am thummoned ath well.”

“We will be six, then. Valearn will go, and that Witch, and the serpent queen, Dedrina Dreadeye, with her lackadaisical brother, Bloster. He wants only a minor catastrophe to kill himself over, so depressed he is. Well. We will go and find out what’s wanted and then return.”

“I take it you have not been there before,” said the Merchant, sulky and offended at the Duke’s offhand tone. “If you knew what you will find there, you would thound leth casthual. I have not been there for a very long time, but I do not ekthactly look forward to the vithit.”

“So much the better for us, to have your company. Though I am told some visitors don’t come out as well, I suppose we need not fear that. So long as they need us to distribute the crystals they send.”

“They require enough of that,” he replied sulkily. “More and more crythtalth, more and more every theathon.”

The Duke turned at this, piggy eyes burning into the Merchant’s face. “And what do the new ones require, Dream Merchant? More of the same? A little perversion there? A little treachery here? Self-interest in odd quarters? Subversion and deceit? Or is there something new?”

“They will tell uth when they are ready for thomething new. They thay they are not ready for the latht thingth, not yet. And I mutht thit here until they are.” They were interrupted by the close approach of another guest, that woman who had been so curious upon the streets of Fangel. She simpered toward the two men, curtsying and nodding like some doll on springs, face creased like a nut in a hundred sycophantic puckers.

“Sweetning Horb, Your Grace. I’ve been busy among the visitors to Bloome, as I was bid. I thought you might want word of them—though there’s little enough to tell.” The three drifted away from the portieres, leaving Queynt straining his ears. He could hear only fragments. “Say they’re Zinterites ... got their names in case you want them ...”

Queynt watched as they turned away, then drifted out onto the lawn once more, thoughtful, breaking his concentration from time to time only to utter the obligatory “Hail to Valearn.” Meantime, we three had departed through the northern gate, where the guardsman referred to a list, checking us off as we went. They were careful to be sure all visitors who came in also went out. It made me nervous, this great care. What had there been in Fangel we had not seen? “Pleasant journey,” the guard wished us. “Hail to

Huldra.”

“Hail to Huldra,” snarled Peter, no happier than were the krylobos.

Poor thing. Wasn't he caught in a dilemma? It was Sylbie, and he had no doubt of it. It was his baby, and he'd no doubt of that, either. Perhaps he had even known that she was pregnant when he'd left Betand.

Evidently he had taken some steps to provide for her, yet here she was, unprovided for. And here was Jinian. Not saying anything. He watched me from the corner of his eye. I didn't help him, though it would have been kind to do so. He knew I had not missed any of it and knew well what he was thinking.

“Oh, shit,” said Peter, muttering. “Pombi piss. Hell and damn and may the Hundred Devils dine on my gizzard.” He did not need to have invoked them. Seemingly he was feeling as though they already were.

The road continued upward for a short distance before entering the jungle which had climbed to meet it. Out of sight of the walls of Fangel it began its twisting descent toward Luxuri. Here we left the wagon, unhitching the birds.

“I think reconnaissance,” I said to Peter, keeping things quiet and emotionless. “They took the captives off to the left after they were inside the gates. Also, we will need something to cut chains if we're to free the birds.”

“That's my metal saws,” said Chance. “All neat and nice in the tool box, sharp as a file can make 'em. You goin' to have a look around?”

“Yes,” said Peter in a surly voice. “Julian. Jinian?”

“You'd best go,” I said. Now wasn't the time to talk about it. Or perhaps it was, but I wasn't willing to do so.

He went. Under cover of the jungle he laid the Zinter clothing aside and changed it for a fustigar's hide. Once at the walls, he would change again. For now, however, he gave his soul some peace by growling hugely, setting up echoes that ran along the distant valley.

“He's upset some,” said Chance.

“That was his baby with the girl,” I said calmly.

“Well, happen I know a bit about that. It wasn't any love affair, if that's what you're thinkin'. He did it to remove a curse from the city of Betand, and that's the truth.”

“Unlikely.” In a fatalistic mood, I was not allowing myself to accept logical explanations.

“I don't care how unlikely, it's true. Some Necromancer or other had raised up the spirit of someone yet unborn and set it to haunt the city. So, all the travelers had to beget when they went through. Tryin' to get the unborn born as fast as possible, that's what they were doin'.”

“He remembered her name.”

“Well, it wasn't that long ago and likely it was his first time, lassy. That kind of thing sticks with you.

Mine's name was Barbra. Barbra Queet. She ran an alehouse in Sabistown, beside the Southern Sea. She took pity on a lustful young squinch with two left feet and 'nitiated me. Ever' now and then I say a prayerlike thank-you for Barbra Queet."

I did not reply. It was not from lack of sympathy, but from seeing likely what was going to happen. It could hardly fail to happen. Not given Peter, as Peter was, and me as I was, and Sylbie—heretofore unknown but now known all too well. "Never mind, Chance. I'm not blaming him for anything. I've got to go settle the birds down."

"Why don't you just say 'talk to 'em,'" said Chance, miffed. "We all know you can."

I know that I flushed. There were no secrets. Silly to imagine there could be.

Dusk was falling when we saddled the birds.

"Slowly," I counseled both Chance and Yattleby. "We want to arrive outside the northern walls under cover of darkness, not fly over it while it is yet daylight." We got there shortly after dark, well enough, only to wait about in increasing impatience and worry, waiting for Peter and Queynt. By the time they arrived, it was almost midnight.

"Gamelords, what a mess," moaned Queynt. "There were a full dozen of us left the southern gates all at once, and nothing would do but that we travel together. Willome had a grip on me like a vice. I tried everything I could think of to break up the group. Finally, Peter had to Shift to gnarlibar shape and stampede the horses. Mine went with them, but I fell off. Luckily. I don't think they'll be back to look for me."

"Had to take on bulk to make the gnarlibar," said Peter, "and it took me a while. Before that, I did find out where the captives are, though. Sylbie's in a kind of dormitory right against the residence walls, along with some other captives. The krylobos are in a barn alongside that. The Shadowpeople are in the barn, too, in a cage. The krylobos are the only ones chained up, but it's the kind of chain that runs through a metal loop on a metal cuff, so we'll only need to cut one link. That'll leave them with the cuffs on, of course, but we can deal with that later."

"Did you get a chance to speak to her?"

"Sylbie? No. I was in the shape of a snakey thing, and I didn't want to scare her to death. She has no idea I'm a Shifter. When I knew her, I barely knew it myself."

We stood there, looking at the walls, no one moving, as though we were all equally reluctant to go over. "Queynt and me can take care of the north gate," said Chance at last. "You do the rest, and we'll have it open by the time you get back." We agreed. It seemed the best plan.

Yittleby and Yattleby bounded over the wall. Peter Shifted into a huge, spidery shape with long, taloned feet and lifted the rest of us over. Queynt and Chance sneaked away into the darkness toward the north gate as we crept through the silent streets to the residence. Something about those streets set my teeth on edge, no less in the dark than it had in daylight, a kind of watching terror, as though something hugely ominous were held on a fragile leash which might break at any moment. Do you know that dreadful dream feeling? Walking up by the lair where the dragon is probably asleep. Stepping through the swamp while the Basilisks are probably away. In Fangel I always had the feeling that probably something awful was about to get loose.

When we reached the residence it was dark in most of its windows; only a fugitive glow betokening some servant up late on the business of fires or breakfast. I needed no help to get over this wall. It was mere decoration. Evidently the city of Fangel relied upon its crystals and its curfew. Otherwise, except at the gates, it did not post guards at night.

Otherwise, I amended to myself, it does not seem to post guards at night.

There was one, however, lounging sleepily against a doorpost. Yittleby stepped forward without a sound and brought her beak down on top of his head. He slumped silently onto the stones. Peter leaping to catch his sword before it made a clatter.

Inside was a babble of bird talk.

“KrerK,” said Yattleby to his kin. “Be quiet.” We pushed open the heavy door, hearing the rustle of feathers, the harsh scratching of talons upon the boards of the floor.

“Please tell them who we are,” I asked Yattleby. “And what our needs are in this venture.”

“KrerK, gargle, quiss,” said a voice from the dark. “Why don’t you speak for yourself, girly-person?”

“You might as well,” kreked Yattleby. “They can hear you anyhow.”

“We are releasing some prisoners, yourselves among them,” I said. “You can help us if you will by remaining together and quiet and assuring that we all get out safely.”

“Whirfle krek. Will you release the little people?”

“The Shadowpeople? Yes. Of course.” I had already heard a line of plaintive melody which located the cage of the Shadowpeople for me. The latch was tied down outside the reach of the captives, but Yattleby reached over my shoulder to make short work of it.

The tiny forms went past us in a scurrying cloud, calling songfully as they fled into the night. “Lolly duro balta lus lom. Walk well upon the lovely land.”

Peter was busy with the chain. “KrerK quiss?” the birds demanded urgently.

“I’m sorry?” I turned to Yattleby. “I didn’t understand that.”

“Whistle whistle krek quiss. Rrrr.” What was this they were telling me? I turned to Peter in astonishment. “Did the Shadowpeople make a song for your mother?”

“They did, yes. When she was very young. It was at the time of the plague in Pfarb Durim.”

I turned back to the birds. “KrerK, Mavin Manyshaped, quiss rrr quiss.” This went on for some time.

“They say,” I told Peter, “that there are two human people among the captives who came looking for Mavin Manyshaped. The Shadowpeople heard them say her name. We saw the people in procession. Carrying a huge basket.”

“Friends?” asked Peter doubtfully.

“Someone Mavin knows. Or someone who knows her. I don’t think we dare leave them, just on the off chance—”

“All right, all right. Will the krylobos help us?”

“Yes. They’ll help us. Out of curiosity, if nothing else.”

“Quiss rrr,” said Yittleby. “Out of wonder at a person who can talk their language.”

Peter was halfway through the heavy link, watched with intense interest by fourteen pairs of krylobos eyes, fourteen great beaks hung above his head like a threatening crown. He cut through with a muffled exclamation, and the krylobos began to pull the chain through the links of their leg irons, freeing themselves in moments. They stalked out into the paved court.

“Next door,” Peter whispered. Here there were no guards at all, but the door was securely locked. Peter remedied this with one tentacular finger. We pulled it open, the birds standing about outside like so many great sentinels.

“Sylbie?” Quiet into the darkness.

“Who is it?” Plaintive.

“Peter,” he said. “Ah—Nobody. Do you remember Nobody from Betand? When we broke the curse?”

“Peter?” Wonderingly.

“Are you tied or chained?”

“No. No, I’m coming.” A glad bleat of words.

“Is someone here looking for Mavin Manyshaped?” I called softly into the dark.

“Here.” A woman’s voice, deep and humorous.

“The person with me is Mavin’s son.”

“Ah.” The woman laughed, “Come, Roges. It seems we have once again encountered a doer-good and are being rescued.” They came into the half-light of the courtyard, Sylbie staggering under the weight of the child, one shoe half-off, flinging herself into Peter’s arms with glad tears and he patting her there, soothing her, while I tried not to see him do it. The woman and her companion still carried the great basket between them.

“What’s in it?” I asked. “Treasure?”

“In a manner of speaking,” said the woman. “At least, it is something we should not leave behind.” She took a deep breath. “My name is Beedie. Whoever you are, I thank you. Now, how do we get out of here?”

The Shadowpeople had already fled. However, with five people, six counting the baby, and fourteen birds we were still a mob. Burdened by the basket, the two strangers could not be expected to move very fast. The dilemma was solved almost before I thought of it. Yittleby and Yattleby stepped to the

basket, each bending to take one handle, then moved into the night in their usual unvarying stride. The other krylobos spread at either side like skirmishers, and we went over the wall into the silent street.

I reached out to take the baby. "Let me have him," I said. "You fix your shoe, or you'll trip before we're halfway there." The child snuggled into my arms, reaching to pat my face. Tears burned in my throat. I had had dreams, betimes, of carrying Peter's child. Needless to say, I had not dreamed it like this. Peter went ahead, half carrying Sylbie by one arm.

The streets echoed, footfalls magnified into approaching hordes that dissolved at each intersection into silence. Despite this, every building seemed to watch, to be intent upon us. The jeweled insignia of the Dream Merchants peered down from every wall. I squeezed eyes half-shut, concentrating. Something in those buildings was watching, not yet moved to intervention—but soon. I could not make an effective protection for us unless I knew what to protect against, but nothing betrayed itself. No creature could be seen. We were almost at the north gate when the alarm bell rang, breaking the silence with a hideous insistence.

"Run," cried Peter, setting his own command in action, swooping Sylbie into his arms and lengthening his legs all in one movement. I felt myself seized from behind by my belt: I squeezed the baby tightly with one arm and grabbed the bird's neck with the other as one of the freed krylobos deposited me on its back and began to run. I gritted my teeth, thrust my legs in front of the stubby wings, gripped the baby as in a fitchhawk's talons, and prayed we would not slide off. Beside me, Beedie and Roges had been unceremoniously mounted in the same fashion. We dashed down the street, the gate appearing impenetrably shut. Just as we came close we saw one of the mighty halves standing sufficiently ajar to let us through.

"KrerK quiss rrrr, quiss!" I screamed. "Someone pick up those two men!" Then we were racing away up the long road toward the jungle as a flight of arrows struck the gate at our back. Something had wakened at last. Another flight whistled through the opening, shrilling above our heads to rattle upon the stone. I could hear Chance cursing and knew he had been wounded. I didn't hear Queynt's voice at all.

We came to the wagon. "I think we may expect pursuit," said Peter breathlessly. "You, Jinian, take Sylbie and the baby and these people in the wagon. Take Queynt, too. He's been knocked silly. Chance, get the horse and go with them. If Yittleby and Yattleby will pull and one or two of their friends will go along as guard, perhaps the others will stay and help me?" I croaked this request in bird talk, voice breaking.

The stalwart man and woman seemed accustomed to this speed of activity; at least, they were holding up the harnesses for the krylobos as though they had done it a thousand times. There was much krerking among the freed krylobos, then the matter sorted itself out. The wagon was moving speedily down the western road, past the fork that would have taken us to Boughbound Forest. Chance rode before us, dabbing at his shoulder with an already blood-drenched rag. Just behind us were two additional krylobos, one of them a giant of his kind, larger even than Yattleby, and behind us on the road something huge and furry was beginning to form itself.

"What's happening?" begged Sylbie in a small voice, looking back. "What's he doing?"

"He's a Shifter," I said flatly. "He's Shifting himself into something very huge and horrible to turn back any pursuit that comes after us."

"A Shifter?" The offended tone made me quite angry.

“A Shifter, yes. And you’d better pray, little girl, that he Shifts monstrously, or you may be back in the Duke’s clutches by morning.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Sylbie whispered. “I was just so surprised. I wouldn’t ever say anything bad about Peter.”

“Never mind. There’ll be time to sort it out tomorrow, if we’re still able to sort anything out. You go back there and sit down. All of you. Keep quiet. Keep out of my way. Right now, I’ve got to concentrate on driving.” Liar. Liar. No one needed to drive Yittleby and Yattleby, who would find any road needful, any hiding place needful by themselves. Liar.

I didn’t care. At the moment all I wanted to do was forget that Peter or Sylbie or Sylbie’s child had ever existed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The first of the sendings came on us just before dawn. I was nodding on the wagon seat next to Chance.

He had tied the horse to the wagon and taken time to bandage himself with much cursing and help from the strangers, Beedie and Roges, friends of Mavin Manyshaped from far over the Western Sea, so they said. They had been useful in bandaging, useful in watching, and had offered to drive if I needed help, which I had refused, preferring to keep busy or at least appear so.

Yittleby and Yattleby had passed the time in conversation with their kin, a bird tribe now mightily angered at the Duke of Betand. “Yerk quiss krerk,” conveyed fury and the details of their capture.

“How did you folks get picked up?” asked Chance of Beedie and Roges.

“We came into Hawspport on a ship,” said the woman, “asking in the port where we might find Mavin Manyshaped. We had gems to pay our way and buy information. A black-haired eel of a man attached himself to us, saying he knew where to find Mavin. The next thing we knew, we had been dragged off to Betand, where we were questioned at length about the source of the gems. The Duke’s people didn’t seem to be interested in anything but that. When we told the sleek one he could find the mines three years’ journey west and oversea, he cooled somewhat, but made no offer to release us.”

“You don’t think it was using the name of Mavin that got you into trouble?” I’d been worrying over this.

“Not then. Though when we spoke of her later, in our captivity, it seemed to stir the little furry folk.” They fell silent. Sylbie and the baby were asleep.

Far off on the eastern sky lay a thin greenish line heralding light.

It was then the sending came.

It came shrieking down the trail far behind us, clearly visible over the trees at the top of the slope as it cast back and forth like a scenting fustigar, a blue, skull-jawed haze with a voice that shattered the dawn.

The voice cried, “Jambal!” and then again: “Jambal.” Birds fled from dark foliage, screaming terror. In the underbrush small movements ceased. Yittleby and Yattleby stopped, frozen, turning their long necks to see what came.

“Gods,” I hissed. “I should have been prepared for this. Quick, Chance, get out of those Zinterite clothes.” I was ripping the black clothes off, shouting hissing directions to Beedie meantime. “There’s a sack of straw back in the wagon somewhere. Find it. No, it’s bigger than that. That’s it. Here, stuff this garment with enough straw to make it shapelike. Tie the hood on top. Here’s the veil. Pin it. Cloak over the whole thing. Paper. Paper. Gods, Queynt, where did you put the paper? ...” Stumbling over Queynt’s unconscious form, I fumbled on the shelves. “Here. Now—hell, give me a piece of that charcoal.” I muttered a likeness spell, half stuttering in my haste, then leapt half-naked from the wagon to fasten the dummy high upon a branch. I labeled it with the torn paper, hastily scrawled in charcoal with the name “Jambal,” and left it dangling in the dawn wind as the blue haze circled down toward it, shrieking triumphantly, “Jambal.” We fled, leaving the haze to eat the straw manikin with great munching, masticating noises and cackling screams.

“By the Lost City,” murmured Roges, “what was that?”

“A sending,” I panted. “Sent by that Witch, Huldra, I’ve no doubt. It seeks an entity named Jambal. The entity named Jambal is hanging on that tree. That’s all Jambal was, thank all the old gods, a costume, a bit of playacting. Luckily. If it had my real name, I’d be Witch’s meat by now.” I flushed, began to look for shirt and trousers, only then conscious that I was shivering in my smalls. “Hurry up, Chance. They’ll be hunting Biddle next.” And to Beedie and Roges, “Get Queynt’s clothes off him, too. They may not connect him to us, but best we be ready if they do.”

The dummy labeled “Biddle” was mounted high on a branch before the next sending announced itself, a purple haze with Demon’s face and banshee voice, howling the jungle silent in its wake. I didn’t remember the birds until this sending fastened itself with hideous voracity on the strawman; then I remembered my own voice saying, “Yarnoff and Barnoff,” or some such fool thing. They, too, had been named to a resident of Fangel. I chattered in krylobos, yelling at them when they refused to understand. It was the huge stranger krylobos, stepping forward to krek at Yattleby in tones of unmistakable mastery, who prevailed. Sulkily, they tugged plumes from each other’s topknots, a few feathers from wings, legs and breast.

Soon there were feather tufts mounted high, labeled “Yarnoff” and “Barnoff,” while I was frantically wondering if it mattered whether I had put the right feathers with the right names.

It was not done too soon. Wraiths red as hot iron came screaming from the sky to settle upon the hasty bundles. If we had delayed a moment, we would have delayed too long.

“Now what?” begged Beedie, pale as milk. “We have no such things as these in the chasm.”

“What chasm is that, lady?” asked Chance, breathing heavily. He had not liked the look of those wraiths and was eager to talk of something else.

“In the chasm where we live, on the great root cities.”

“Great root cities,” I said distractedly. “Are there things like groles there? Great things like huge worms?” And on being told there were, I was confirmed in an earlier supposition and saddened thereby.

“I ask again,” said Beedie, amazed at this easy change of focus. “What now?” I rubbed my head wearily, trying to remember.

“Well, now the Witch will be told by her wraiths that they have found and eaten the ones she sent them

after. If she is not too clever, that will be enough. If she is very clever and does not mind the time it takes, she will examine the wraiths for blood scent and, finding none, know she has been tricked.”

“At which,” came Queynt’s heavy, pained voice from the wagon, “she will be very annoyed. You should have put some fresh meat in the dummies, Jinian.” I was ashamed to have forgotten it. There was no excuse for it except funk, fear and funk from a growing supposition that something was terribly wrong. “I forgot.”

“Well, you had little time to do anything. Sorry I was of so little help.”

“Any meat? Why not blood of your own?” Roges asked.

“Because that would feed the wraith and lead it directly to the source,” said Queynt. “No, any nonhuman meat would do. It is a clever Witch indeed who can tell the difference between man blood and zeller blood by smell. Of course, Huldra may be that clever. We know almost nothing about her, including the source of her animosity.”

“Let us take her animosity as proven, Queynt, without worrying about its source.”

“Not only hers,” he said. “The Dream Merchant spoke to the Duke concerning Storm Grower. They travel to meet with Storm Grower and the Dream Miner, who also have animosity toward you. I wonder why.”

“Before traveling to the north with you, Queynt, I had heard the name twice. Once in Chimmerdong Forest, when Porvius Bloster said the order to kill me had come from ‘them, the Dream Miner and Storm Grower’. Then again on the Wastes of Bleer, Sorah the Seer said something to Peter about a Storm Grower. It made little enough sense, then or now.

“Shadowmaster. Holder of the key. Storm Grower. The Wizard holds the book, the light, the bell.” Make what you will of that, Queynt. It meant nothing to me.”

“I make nothing of it yet. Nonetheless, there is a Storm Grower, and a Dream Miner, both somewhere together. And tomorrow the Duke goes there with his ghastly maidens.”

I tried to make sense of this. “Oh, Queynt, I am too tired to think! I wish Peter and the other krylobos would come tell us pursuit has been sent aside.” Privately I was thinking it was not a long leap of suspicion from Jambal to Jinian, if the Witch knew Jinian existed. If the Witch cared. If the Witch were a creature of the Dream Miner. If. If. If. Perhaps another sending would come before long.

As though summoned by my thoughts, a cry from the forest brought an answer from Yattleby. “Pursuit ended. Peter comes.”

“We can stop,” I said thankfully, reaching for the reins. “We can stop,” I kerked to the birds.

We did stop, gratefully, waking Sylbie and the baby in the process but otherwise much gratified to be able to stretch, walk about, go into the woods to relieve ourselves.

“Doe see birs!” demanded the baby.

“What’s his name?” I asked, in a fatalistic mood.

“Bryan,” said his mother, surprisingly. “It was my older brother’s name. He had hair just this color. My mother always said I should name my first child after my brother, if it was a boy. This is Jinian, Bryan. Can you say Jinian?”

So much for Peter’s inherited red pate! I stood by as the baby did go see the birds, seeming totally unafraid of the great creatures. “This one is Yittleby,” I instructed. “That one is Yattleby.”

“Yilby,” crowed the baby. “Yalby.” He had a fine grasp of infinitesimal distinctions, this one. “Jinny,” he went on, giving me an effulgent smile.

“He’s very friendly,” murmured Sylbie apologetically. “My mother always said I was, too, as a baby.”

“A charming child.” I was cool, not very amused at myself for being so.

A disruption in the underbrush announced Peter. He came out dressed in his own Shifter fur and carrying the Zinterite garments. “Damn,” he said when told of the wraiths. “I liked those clothes. Besides”—hopefully—“I didn’t tell my name to anyone.”

“I did,” I apologized. “Unfortunately. Sorry, Peter, but it’ll be safest if you hang them.”

“What was the name we used for me?” he wondered aloud. “I’ve forgotten.”

“Chorm,” howled a hungry wraith voice, far back up the trail. “Chooorm ...”

“Oh, yes,” he said, scrambling for the straw sack and the upward trail all at once, while I mumbled the likeness spell for the fifth time. When he returned he was paler. “Nasty thing, that was. All greenish and flapping. Gamelords, but I’m glad I hadn’t met a Witch before.”

“You did,” corrected Chance. “We met one together on the road to Xammer. Before we met this Wizard,” indicating me, Jinian, with his elbow.

“Well, that one was nothing much. All Beguilement, as I recall. Nothing compared to this Huldra!”

“Huldra may have a Witch’s Talent,” said Queynt, “but mere Talent would not enable her to send these wraiths. No, she’s studied the arts. Not wisely, but deeply in a narrow way. Found some corruptible Wizard, most likely, and bought the secrets from him.”

“Did I hear Chance say you’re a Wizard?” asked Beedie curiously, eyes turned weighingly on me.

“Yes. Of a sort. A very young one,” I admitted.

“Can you do ... things like that? Like those blue things?”

“I could, yes. Likely I wouldn’t. There’s a blood price for doing things like that. One I wouldn’t want to pay, but that someone like Huldra wouldn’t mind paying. For each wraith she sends, someone dies. It is lifeblood which empowers the creatures. To Huldra, the life of a pawn or follower would be nothing. Her whole family was like that, starting with Blourbast, so I understand.”

“Bloody intentioned,” agreed Peter. “Though sometimes they hid it for a time, to further their own aims.” He was remembering the time at Bannerwell when he had been almost convinced—for a very short time—of Huld’s honor.

Sylbie and Bryan returned from their bird watching. Bryan staggered to Peter and climbed onto his knees. Peter patted the child awkwardly as he blushed deeply. "Tows!" the baby demanded vehemently. "Tows!"

"Baby wants his trousers," said Sylbie. "I had to take them off him. They were wet and he was getting peevish. We were so long in the wagon, and I had no others to bring."

"Well, now," said Roges heartily, "that's easy to remedy. Let's see if the wagon master keeps needle and thread and whether there is such a thing as a raggedy shirt no one needs any longer ..." He picked Bryan up, jogging him expertly, and went to query Queynt where he lay beneath a tree.

"Roges misses ours," said Beedie. "Though none of them are babies anymore. The youngest is eight by now, five when we left."

"Where is he? she?" I wanted to know.

"She. Our first girl. We named her after Mavin. She's home in Bridgers' House, being spoiled rotten by my Aunt Six. We talked of bringing her, but the journey was so chancy."

"How did you meet Mavin?"

"Oh, Jinian, that's a story for a week in the telling. She came flying from far over the sea, down into our chasm in the shape of a great, white bird. Just take it she saved my life, more than once, and did a great good to our part of the world, too. When this came up, well, we couldn't know what to do about it, could we, down in that great chasm with no contact with the outside? There seemed only one thing to do: bring it to the only outsider we knew well and trusted."

"This thing?"

Beedie looked at Roges, and he at her. "That man is Mavin's son," said Roges, indicating Peter. "And these others are his friends. Some others ought to know, Beed."

"True. Others ought to know." She went to the basket, then, taking the cover off and removing some leafy wrappings from within. "It may be," she said, pointing to the basket, "that this was the reason we were kept captives by the Duke. He may have intended our friend here for his zoo."

"I aaam huuungry," puffed a small voice from within. "Pleeeez food."

"Do you have any meat?" asked Beedie, her voice concerned. "He hasn't been fed for several days." We gathered around the basket to peer within, seeing only a formlessness there, a roiling shininess.

"How much do you want?" asked Chance.

"A chunk, about head-sized." She spoke into the basket. "Meat coming, Mercald-Mirthylon." When Chance brought it to her, she lowered it into the basket and put the lid back on. "It will only be a minute." Roges was busy with needle and thread and an old shirt of Peter's, jouncing Bryan on one knee the while. "Not a pretty sight, watching them eat, so we don't. I suppose, from their point of view, watching us eat could be mighty unaesthetic, too. I'd better warn you, don't touch what's in the basket. It will eat you as quickly as it will that meat, not intentionally but uncontrollably. That's how it got the name of Mercald. Mercald was a friend of ours, a priest, and he thoughtlessly laid hands upon it." Beedie

nodded. "We call the race 'the Stickies'. They are sticky on top and dissolve anything that touches them. In their native chasm land, they live on insects and plants and small fish which brush against them. Or larger things, if such are unwary. And if a Sticky eats something with a mind, then the mind becomes part of it, too. So, we have a creature here in this basket who has eaten two living men—one named Mirtylon many hundreds of years ago. One only twenty years ago or so, named Mercald." She looked around at the circle of disbelieving faces.

"Well, you shall hear for yourselves." She removed the lid from the basket and turned it on its side. The moist shininess within rolled out onto the earth, settling itself into a thick disk, rounded upward at the centre, from which an ear and a small trumpet gradually extruded themselves.

"How do you do." It puffed. "I am gratified to meet you, Peter, Mavin's son. (Puff.) I knew Mavin. She was very wise. Wiser (puff) than I." There was then a strange, strangled sound, and after a time we realized the thing was laughing.

"Jinian, you are very brave. (Puff.) I heard the sending screaming. Most frightening. (Puff.) Sylbie and the baby we knew already from the procession. (Puff.)" The trumpet collapsed into the general shininess, which quivered for a time before the vocal apparatus extruded itself once more.

"I feel much stronger, thank you. (Puff.) I am happy to meet Chance and Queynt. (Puff.) Also the birds. I was a birder priest. Birds are (puff) messengers of the Boundless. (Puff, puff.)" Though I didn't understand this at all, I translated it for the benefit of the krylobos and was rewarded by an incredulous hoot.

"Well, perhaps they have not (puff) been taught of (puff) the Boundless." The windy voice sounded sad.

"Tell them about the discovery, Mer-Mir," said Beedie. "You can talk about religion later."

"Yes. Ummm. While wandering deep in chasm (puff) found tunnel leading deep. (Puff.) Took others and formed expedition. (Puff.) Tunnel went very deep. Fires there. Pools of strange stuff. Silver. Thick. Very poisonous. One of us was dissolved (puff) in it. Near the pool were scattered blue crystals. Many."

"They brought a lot of them out to us," said Roges, trying his handiwork on Bryan, who crowed delightedly. "How they got in and out of there, I'll never know."

"Very difficult. Took much time. Effort. (Puff.) But we had touched the blue crystal. (Puff.) Once we had touched it, we had to bring it out. (Puff.) Touched it. Knew we had to. (Puff.)"

"They touched it with themselves, absorbed some of it, and it turned out to be message crystal." Beedie, striding about the clearing, swinging her arms, stretching.

"Message crystal?" These words were like the ringing of an alarm bell. Everything inside me sat up to take notice of the world. "Message crystal?"

"The things you call dream crystals, we call message crystals. In our land we have a necessary tool, the root saw. The teeth of the saw are made from jewel gravel, hard jewel gravel from the bottom lands, glued to a flexible band. The saw makers buy the gravel from traders, so much a weight, and among the real gems are often tiny pieces of message crystal. When we were brats, we would "borrow" the gravel from the saw makers so we could suck through it for message crystals. Unsanitary, as my Aunt Six would say, but you know how disgusting children are."

“What kind of messages?” I begged, sure that I already knew. “What did they say?”

“Oh, pictures, mostly. Dim, dreamy things. The messages weren’t intended for us, you know. Now that I’ve been to the bottom lands, I can guess some of them were messages to the great bottom worms. Locations of vines to eat. New hot springs with special minerals to cure skin troubles. I found one crystal once that must have been intended for a bird, full of flying, strangeness, lands and valleys below, and a queer town with funny doors, wider at the top, and a lovely tall tower. It was a tiny crystal. It dissolved in a minute, but I’ve remembered it for years.”

“The city you saw might have been Pfarb Durim,” I told them. “It has odd doors like that. Lots of places used to have doors like that. Gerabald Buttufor once found a flying crystal, too. He said it was full of great cities built on roots.”

“Our cities are built on roots,” said Roges, amazed.

“Think of that! Messages concerning your cities on our side of the world, and messages concerning our cities on yours. Well, it’s all one world, after all.”

“Excuse me,” puffed the thing from the basket. “But we have to tell Mavin (puff) about it.”

I said, “I don’t understand this necessity. Is there some astonishing message in the crystals?”

“Astonishing?” Beedie thought about this. “No, Jinian. Not astonishing. The only astonishing thing is that we haven’t had this message before. You must see for yourself.” She burrowed deep into the small pack she carried, came up with what appeared to be a small, rough block of wood. “We couldn’t bring very many because of the weight. We got out of the chasm in a balloon made of flattree leaves, and weight was crucial. If we carried them openly, we were afraid they might be stolen. So, Roges made this.” She pressed the wood along one of its sides, sliding a thin slice away to reveal a cubby hidden inside, tipping it to drop something into my hands. A small, bright blue crystal.

“Taste it.”

I recoiled. I’m sure my face was flaming. “I ... I can’t.”

“Let me,” said Queynt. “I’m already overdosed on the damn things it can’t hurt me worse than I already am.”

“It won’t hurt you,” said Roges, shocked. “I’ve tasted it, and Beedie. All of our children. Almost everyone in the chasm by now, I imagine.”

I didn’t object. He took the thing from my hands. I couldn’t watch him. In a moment, however, he gave it back to me and spoke in a puzzled voice.

“I can’t taste anything, Jinian. It must be identical to the one the Shadowpeople gave me all those years ago. Why are you so nervous about it?”

I tried to laugh. “Probably nothing. Nerves. The wraiths have put my skin on backward. Put it down to some personal quirk, Queynt.” I held the thing but did not taste it. “If you are agreed that it should be taken to Mavin, then take it. And if you believe it should be taken quickly, then take it quickly. If it will undo some of the evil those yellow crystals are causing, then do it, soon as may be.” I turned the blue crystal in my fingers, passed it from one hand to the other. I thought I knew without tasting it what the

intent of it was.

Queynt gave me one of his odd, concentrated looks. I stared him down, not letting him see how troubled I was. I could have been wrong. I wanted to think about it more. This time I couldn't be breezy and quick. This time I wanted to crawl in a hole and think, and sleep, and think some more. I put the crystal in my pouch. Beedie had others. I might have need for this one.

The baby, newly trousered, staggered toward Peter's lap and almost fell into the fire in transit.

Under cover of this confusion, I leaned near the strange being—very careful not to touch it—and asked, “Mercald-Mirtylon, in the cavern where the blue crystals were, was there any evidence of any living creature?”

“(Puff.) Nothing there at all. Stickies were the first (puff) and probably only. Very hot. (Puff.) Not good for living things.”

“Do you think the blue crystals had been there long?”

“Very long. They were (puff) far from the white stuff. At the edges of the (puff) cavern. Only yellow crystals near the white stuff (Puff.) I think, very old.” I thanked the creature, remembering at the last minute not to pat it, which would have been my instinctive gesture of thanks with most beasties.

The baby had been rescued, had gained Peter's lap and plumped himself down there, chattering in sleepy infant talk which even my language Talent could not follow. Sylbie came to curl beside Peter and the child, inserting herself neatly under Peter's arm so that he held her, perforce, without actually having reached for her. Still, he did not draw away.

He looked up to catch my gaze, flushed in half guilt, then gave me an unrepentant stare as though to say, “Well, you won't and she will, so gaze me no gazes, Jinian Footseer.”

“We must sleep,” I said carefully, keeping my voice expressionless. “All of us need sleep.”

As I moved about the clearing, preparing for the night, I stopped beside Queynt. His eyes were still red, and there was a great lump on his forehead, but he looked otherwise his own indomitable self.

“These crystals the visitors believe are so important perhaps you have known their contents so long you have not really thought about them, Queynt? Perhaps you have not considered the implications—if, for example, everyone had had one.”

He seemed surprised at this. “Well, yes, Jinian. That's possible. In which case, someone new, someone like Mavin or Himaggery is needed to make a judgment. To consider, as you say, the implications.”

I stared at him, willing him to pay utmost attention.

“A bit farther down the hill, Queynt, there is a fork in the road. The southmost road leads down to Luxuri and thence to Bloome again. From there it is not far to the Great Road which comes north from Pfarb Durim. And on that road, the journey to the Bright Demesne should not take long—or no longer than any such journey will take. If you can get there, and if you can get Himaggery and Barish to quit calling meetings to discuss the hundred thousand, perhaps they would consider what the true meaning of the blue crystals may be. Perhaps Barish would do it for you?”

“I can ask him,” he said.

“It’s important enough to go, and quickly.”

There was no point in further talk. No sense in worrying them with questions that could not yet be answered. We arranged ourselves for the night. To rest, if that were possible. Roges lay looking at the dark. Beedie close beside him. The creature was back in its basket. Peter had stretched himself out on a blanket by the fire, with the baby beside him, and Sylbie lay against Peter, half-curved around the baby.

Peter slept, one arm across the child, the hand touching Sylbie’s breast, and she not moving away from this touch. I, wandering late, saw this. Well, where else would Sylbie sleep except beside the one among them she knew as a friend?

I lay down away from the fire, able to see the flames as they undulated against the black of the forest yet unlit by them, lost in a pocket of darkness as in some secret closet, spying upon the outer world as through the keyhole of that closet, closed about with baffled jealousy coupled with the anxiety that my suspicions had aroused. If they were true, did it matter what Peter did?

None of them saw. All the myriad clues were there in front of them, and none of them saw. Not even Queynt. Queynt, who should have seen long ago on the Shadowmarches, when he was given a blue crystal by a Shadowman and interviewed by the Eesties.

Oh, yes, Queynt should have seen then. But he did not. Only I believed I saw, from this cavern of quiet darkness.

And I could be wrong.

But if I were right, could I do anything useful if I stayed here? Where Sylbie was and Peter’s child? I thought of the baby, opening each day with his bubble sounds, crowing like some cock-bird from his basket, pure joy unalloyed. Could I accept that, not grieve over it, and get on with what must be done? Even if I could accept it, what good could I do here? Could I think of staying only to stand between Peter and Sylbie and the child? Would Jinian take a parent’s love away from a child? Jinian, who knew well enough what it meant to be the victim of an abductor of love, a robber of faith? Should I do to another what Eller of Stoneflight had done to me?

There was an easy way to do it. Jinian could go into these dark woods and gather the needful things: sixteen herbs and earths, and those easy to find, not scarce in any land, not difficult to locate even in the dark. A torch would be enough light. Her own senses would serve without any light at all. To make a love potion. To guarantee Peter loved Jinian, not Sylbie but Jinian, not the crowing child but Jinian. A simple thing, taking only from now until dawn. And then she could bring him his tea and sit by him looking into his face while he drank it...

There was a pig that had loved me in the Forest of Chimmerdong, loved me well, unable not to love me. So would Peter be unable not to love me. And if I were a monster, he would love me still. And if I were Valearn, Ogress of Tarnost, still he would love me.

And I, knowing that, would feel—what would I feel?

If crystals could compel without blame, could not one small Wizard? And if what I feared was true, who would be alive to judge me for it? And if what I feared was true, what time would there be for any alternatives? And if what I feared was true, what point in refusing to taste the blue crystal and verify what

I believed?

Except that if I knew, I might be too terrified to act.

But as long as there was doubt, however small, then action could take place.

Exactly.

Even if I did it totally alone, I had to do something.

This was the lesson of Chimmerdong.

So, not the sixteen herbs and earths. Not the liquor of love, the efficacious potion. Not love at all.

And not a patient traveling with them, either, coming between them, becoming less myself with every passing hour as I sought to become whatever it was he loved, forgetting my oath, changing myself to the needs of love rather than being true to myself and doing what must be done. Not jealousy.

And not the mere running off in a huff, to sulk in some distant place until the world was changed. Not anger. No. Not love, not jealousy, not anger. Duty instead. The lesson of Chimmerdong instead. I would need to depart, but depart to some purpose.

I sneaked from my pocket of darkness to gather the things any traveler would need. Quiet as shadow I drifted into the forest, up along the hill, back toward Fangel. Morning would take me far enough from this place that they could not find me, even if they looked, which they would not. The need for them to move southward was too imminent, too persuasive.

Pray Queynt understood this. A man as perceptive as he must understand it. Pray they did not delay.

And I would do what I had to do. This was to find the Dream Miner and this companion, this Storm Grower, and see if they knew why the foul yellow crystals were being spread across the world. And, I reminded myself, learn why they wanted me dead.

Behind me, a log broke among the flames, showering sparks, shattering into coals. An omen. Even the hottest fire would break and cool in time. It was a better hope than nothing. I moved into the night, pacing leagues back toward Fangel between myself and the sleepers.

It was again near dawn the final sending came, high in the eastern sky, a pale gray blot white-fanged against the dark, the voice a howl of wind from between the stars. "Jinian," and again, "Jinian." So, whoever it was in Fangel had found me out, put two and two together to come up with six; put Jambal and Biddle and Chorm in a pot to pour out Jinian. Was it Huldra behind this sending? Or Dedrina Dreadeye? Or Bloster? Whichever, this one would not be put off with strawmen.

There were defenses against sendings. Defense was a paltry game that waited upon others for its intentions. I was too tired and angry for defense. Therefore, let the forest beware!

I left the trail, moving into the forest. Then.

The amethyst crystal from my pouch. Set upon a stone. Then Music and Meadow to bring an innocent creature near, to wring its neck quickly so that it died without fear or pain. Unjust to use its blood so, and yet I could not use my own. Bright the Sun Burning set upon crystal and blood. Dream Chains to Bind It

to hold an image there.

“Oh, here I am, Sending,” I sang in the false light of predawn, dancing widdershins about the crystal on the stone, blood on the stone, song on the stone, herbs and twigs on the stone. “Here am I, Sending, deep in amethyst halls, deep in crystal silences, within, hidden within.

“A twig of red rowan, a sprig of midnight tree, a leaf of web willow, shall summon you to me. Come, Sending, to find Jinian where her blood leads you. Come, Sending, and feast where your hunger waits.”

“Jinian,” the sending called, spiraling down from the empty sky. “Jinian,” in a husky, hungry voice which raised bumps on the skin as a cold wind might. “Blood,” it called, rejoicing. “Blood.” Down to hover above the stone. It did not see as others saw, did not perceive as others perceived. It was both sent and summoned, and the blood led into another place. Into which it went, all at once, like a wisp of smoke drawn into a chimney, and then Jinian gathered the last of her strength to do Dream Chains once more, quickly, holding the wraith where it was, within the crystal, where it could not get out.

And when it was done, she fell on the earth like a felled sapling, unconscious, limp, all strength gone and drained away, the place cold as a glacier around her. She, not I, for I was far away already, lost in some inner maze without any way out. On the stone the amethyst crystal burned, trembling. Around her, me, the dark changed slowly to day.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I was awakened by something, then lay for a long time on the cold earth wondering if me and I and whoever had reassembled themselves to be a person again. Where that person might be was another question which took some time to settle. I was near the trail that led from Fangel, hidden from it by a slope and a line of trees, and there were voices coming from the trail. I had lain there for about a day.

I felt fairly weak, without much will or ambition, but otherwise normal. Beside me on the stone the amethyst crystal rocked as though inhabited—which it was in a sense—and I put it in my pouch rather unwillingly before crawling into the trees to see who came forth from the city into the dusk.

It was the Duke of Betand, traveling from Fangel with far less panoply than when he had entered. His allies and the Dream Merchant traveled with him, escorted only by Porvius Bloster and a few Armigers and Tragamors, men evidently not corrupted by the crystals, for they went in alert watchfulness as outriders of the small procession. Huldra and Valearn had left their high-wheeled carts; Dedrina, her huge crocodile.

They, like the Merchant and the Duke, were mounted on stocky ponies and wore sensible traveling garments. The air of menace that accompanied them was as great as when they had entered the city, however, and it brought me alert among the underbrush, suddenly threatened and vigilant.

There was Valearn, the Ogress. All the fears aroused by nursery tales were made immediately manifest, swarming in the shadows, wakened more by this one danger than by the presence of others, equally perilous. In her lands of the High Demesne in the south she had walked the woods alone, garbed in ragged robes with the staff of an old mendicant, seizing children who wandered by themselves, leaving their bones half-gnawed for the were-owls to finish. She had not troubled adults, only children.

Them she had sought relentlessly, the child from the cot by the window, the babe from the blanket by the fire, the toddler snatched from a mother’s arms. But, only children. Only children. I told myself this, more

than once, assuring Jinian the child that she was too deeply buried in Jinian the Wise-ard for Valearn to find her, ever. Jinian the child was not so deeply buried inside me that she did not doubt this. We all doubted it together.

I waited until the troop had moved almost out of sight, then laid a hiding spell, Egg in the Hollow, that I might not be seen by them, that I might most assuredly not be seen by Valearn. It was all very well to assure oneself that the child one had been was outgrown. Such children had a habit of coming back at odd moments, moments that might prove unpropitious indeed.

I did not think of Sylbie's baby, and Peter's. Sylbie and the baby should have been far on the southern road by then; why think of them in connection with Valearn?

The rest of the night was spent in scrambling down long dark roads the way I had come twice in recent days. A drift of krylobos feathers beneath a tree, a scatter of straw, confirmed the location. Here the sendings had come.

The allies were not so far ahead I couldn't hear them talking. "Clever," drawled Huldra, seeing these telltale signs by torchlight. "Clever little bitch. She sent my creatures back to me full of straw and quills, them that cost good blood to send, back with nothing but trash in them. Save one which came back not at all."

"You think it's that Jinian?" Bloster, sounding as bedraggled as he looked. "The one the Backless Throne wanted killed, the one who destroyed Daggerhawk Demesne?"

"You don't know that she destroyed Daggerhawk," said Dadrina Dreadeye. "The Seers have not verified it."

"I know it," he said obstinately. "Even if the Seers said she had not, I would know it."

"What ith thith girl? Thome great Afrit full of mighty powerth? Thome twinned Talent or other?" The Merchant did not sound really interested.

"She's the cause of my losing my captive," snarled the Duke, trying to ease himself in the saddle. "You may lay money on that." He was too fat to ride in comfort; he and the pony suffered equally upon the road.

"And why doeth the Backleth Throne take an intereth in her?" the Merchant asked.

"I was never told," said Porvius, aggrieved. "Only that the Throne wanted her dead. As do I. I had her in my hands, like an egg between my fists. I was only concerned with her brother then; him I hated. But if I'd killed her when I had the chance, we'd not be homeless, traveling on the charity of our friends."

"Scarcely charity," hissed Dadrina. "We pay good coin for our keep, brother. Cease your whining. If you have energy to spare, remember you are a Tragamor and spend it smoothing this road. It is unpleasant to travel full of bumps as it is."

"Talents don't work well this far north," he said, in the petulant tone of a child. "I have not the strength even to Move gravel." Oh, how far Porvius had fallen, into this meekness, this whining infancy.

"Keep silent, then, lest you waste what little power you have!" They rode on, becoming less loquacious as the hours passed. Near dawn they paused; and I was ready enough that they do so. I was wearier

than the distance would explain. Following, keeping quiet, finding the trail in the dark, worrying that I might be about to step into shadows, all had been an exhausting effort. The fact that I did not step into shadows, that none of us did, should have told me something. I was preoccupied with other thoughts, however, and did not learn from what was not there.

We had come to a small village. The Merchant called it Bleem. While the guards were left to camp in the forest as best they might, preparations had been made for the others to spend the night under roof. Someone's house had been vacated and made ready for the group with a supper laid upon the table and the beds prepared with fresh straw. So much I learned from the lean-to at the back, where an old wagon lay half against the warm chimney, making a nest for me to supper in. I could hear them through the wall.

Moreover, I could see out the open end of the shed well enough to observe the comings and goings of the people there. There was no rejoicing among them, certainly. I had seldom seen such a whipped-fustigar crew, their jaws dragging halfway to their bellies and more of the women crying into their neckerchiefs than not. I still had the hiding spell on me, so I left the cozy nest and went among them.

Curiosity, I suppose. There was something about them that teased at me.

There were two men standing at the well, one a fairly well-set-up middle-aged fellow, the other slightly older. He was lecturing the younger man, beating his fist upon the well coping, tears running down his face like a river.

"I say we can't go on, Dolcher. We can't. You know that. First it was just a few zeller off to Morp. Then it was a few zeller plus a few old people. Now it's all the oldsters and most of the zeller and half our children. By all the old gods, they'll have your son next. This time it's my Zenina they've chosen to take, and your boy was to wed her this season. Next time him. The time after that, what? There's none of us left..."

"Servants," whispered the other man. "They want our young ones for servants, that's all. When they've served a few years, they'll be home again." His gray face belied this.

"Man, are you blind? Why take our oldsters if they want servants? They took Granny Zeeble, and she so trembly the children had been calling her Feeble Zeeble for ten years. They took your own father, who hadn't walked a step without two canes for seven seasons. Hush. Here's the wife."

A woman approached them, one of the weeping ones. "You can't let her go, Vorge. You can't let Zenina go. The time's come to say no. We've given enough."

"Well, well," the younger man said, patting her clumsily on the shoulder. "That's what we've said to them at Morp, Lina. We sent that message only yesterday."

"But he's here. The Dream Merchant. They say he's their son. Talk to him. Beg him. Make him understand."

"Now, Lina. We've sent the message already. I wouldn't want to get them upset."

"If you won't, I will."

The man called Vorge shook his head, wrung his hands. "It would be better if you did, Dolcher. You're village chief. It would be more natural." The old man shook his head. "We've got to do something."

Two of them went away. Dolcher stood at the well, one hand dragging into a bucket of water, lifting it to drip the water into the well, listening to the slow plop, plop. I examined his face; hopeless. Something was tugging at my memory about Morp. I'd heard the name somewhere.

I wandered through the village. There were empty houses, small places falling to ruin, empty stables. Of all the people left in the place, Vorge was about the oldest. So, the oldsters had been sent—where? And if not as servants, as what? Around the village stretched the small fields; between the houses were the gardens.

Ill tended. As though the people could not spare attention for them. It had the look of a settlement upon its last breath.

Dolcher still stood at the well. At last he shook his head and went to the house occupied by the Merchant and his group. I slipped back into the lean-to, my ear against the wall.

“Well, fellow, what do you want?”

“May I speak to you, Your Reverence?”

“Thpeak. You are thpeaking. Tho thpeak.”

“Your Reverence, they've come from Morp, from the Backless Throne again. They want our young people, sir.”

“Tho?”

“We can't send our young people, sir. They're needed for the crops. For raising the zeller. The Throne wants the zeller, too.”

“Let me underthand thith. You are refuthing to do the Throne'th will?” Silence. I could visualize what was going on. Groveling. Fumbling for words.

“No, sir. Not the Throne, sir. Just Morp. Morp isn't the Throne, and they don't understand ...”

“I hope you have not thaid thith to anyone!”

“We did send a message, sir.”

“Fool. Then why are you thtanding here? Get under your roof. Pray you do not all die.” The door slammed. I slipped out to watch Dolcher staggering away from that door, reeling from sorrow and apprehension. Over his head I could see the sky, boiling. It had an unhealthy look. Suddenly I remembered what I had heard about Morp. A charnel town. A town of butchers. Through the wall came exclamations from the group there.

“The idiot hath refuthed the Throne. Yethterday he did it. Morp will have complained to the Throne. Thtorm will come. We will be fortunate to ethcape with our liveth.”

Back outside I went. Yes, storm boiled over the western horizon. Black cloud, drooping at the bottom like great pustulent udders. High-piled, running toward us with the inexorable flow of lava. I got myself back into the lean-to and under the wagon just as the first drops of rain hit.

It was a punishing storm. First rain and wind, tearing at the structures of the place, removing roofs and shutters, sending them flying like pennants into the east. Then hail, piercing what the rain had left.

Then greater wind. And with it all, a screaming sound of fury. Time and another time, dark as night. Howling rage. The roof of the lean-to went, but I remained half-dry beneath the wagon. I had anchored it as best I could with stakes driven in during the first roaring moments.

I lay flat, empty, the storm driving out all thought.

There was no village. There was no life. Only this horror of falling water, this terror of screaming wind.

One might as well die. I knew they were dead, I was dead. No point in being alive in this.

And then, after a forever time had passed, it was over. They had given the best house in the place to the Merchant, and now it stood alone. From inside it I could hear snoring. The Merchant and his guests were asleep. Among the sodden ruins the people of Bleem struggled into the light. There were no fields left, no gardens left. I went out into the woods, took away the hiding spell, and came into the village from the other side. Dolcher was there, standing dazed in the midst of the ruin, staring with empty eyes at the punishing sky.

“Dolcher,” I said. He had been deafened. It was hard to make him aware of me. “Dolcher. Listen to me. Take all your people, now. Right now. What little they can carry, nothing else. No wagons. Nothing else. Go. Go that way, back toward Fangel, around the city, not through it, and then south. You hear me?”

“Who are you?” He looked at me, not really seeing me. “Who are you?”

“It does not matter who I am. I am here with a message for you, to help you. Storm Grower will kill you all. You cannot pacify Storm Grower. Only when you are all dead will she rest. So, you must leave here. Go quickly. Go far. Find caves to protect you from hail. Forests to protect you from sight. Go. And go before those in the house waken.” I used every persuasive trick of voice I could manage, setting several small compliance spells on him meantime.

Not enough to draw interest, just little ones. When I went back toward the lean-to, he was in motion, staggering, bleeding, crying, but in motion.

It did not take them long. The longest time was spent simply in getting their attention. Once they understood, they moved quickly, as quickly as people can who are half-drowned and totally beaten. There were some dead. They laid them out in one of the wrecked houses and set fire to it. It bled smoke into the sky, smoldering. Then they went as I had suggested. Back toward Fangel, a sad, straggling procession. The last of them wended over the hill out of sight sometime before the Merchant woke.

He came to the door, opened it, stared out into the shambles. I had restored the hiding spell and was sitting on the well coping. He did not see me.

“Hey,” he shouted. “We will have our breakfast now!” Needless to say, there was no response. He cursed for a time, which woke the others, and they came out of the place together.

“Storm Grower?” asked Betand. “Did she not know we were here?”

“I doubt they thought of it,” sulked the Merchant. “We will find no thuthtenance here. Let uth depart.”

“What was all this about?”

“The people objected to the levy from Morp. It ith Morp which provideth provender for Thorm Grower and Dream Miner.” Provender was one way of putting it.

Huldra came into the light, blinking, snarling.

“How much farther? You have been to That Place before, Betand. How much farther is it?”

“I haven’t been there,” he said in astonishment. “What made you think I had? No. I have been near there once or twice. The Merchant knows. He has been there.”

“I don’t know,” the Merchant said. “I have been there many timeth, but each time there hath been a guide.”

“Then how do we know where we are going?”

“There will be a guide thith time ath well.” My ears pricked at this. What kind of creature could serve as guide to the Dream Miner? Premonition stirred, and the Dagger of Daggerhawk burned with sullen fire, as though it had ears of its own. I tried to ease it on my thigh and bit back a curse. I was wearing loose trousers with tight cuffs, almost a pantaloon, a very sensible garment for this kind of scrambling travel, but there was no slit in the pocket through which the Dagger could be reached. There was no time to remedy the situation. They were going off into the forest to find their guards.

The Tragamors had Moved themselves a cave large enough to protect them from the storm. They were unharmed, perhaps even slightly amused to have had a better night than those they guarded. This was my own conjecture, from the few words I overheard as we went downward in the early light, the horses’ hooves making soft plopping noises in the dust of the narrow trail, the troop almost silent except for occasional exclamations when low-hanging branches buffeted them. The voice that greeted them startled them all, and me as well, though I realized I’d been half expecting it. My old friend the Oracle. I sneaked forward through the underbrush to get a clearer view of it. Somehow I had known it would be the Oracle.

It stood half-concealed behind a leafy branch, only its painted face and one hand clearly visible. “Oh, my, isn’t this a fine array of Talent and perspicacity to bring before the Backless Throne. How marvelous Dream Miner will find you all, how intrigued the Storm Grower will be. I have waited for you for simply days.”

“Nonsense,” grated Huldra. “We are here on the day appointed.”

“One anticipates so! One cannot wait!” In this sober light of early day, I was struck by the artificiality of the creature, by a certain surreal quality. I had been too ill in Chimmerdong to notice much, but I wondered at myself for not having seen this. It still wore the hooded robe of straps, bright-colored ribbons that moved and swayed, hiding its form. It turned its face away as it spoke, and I strained eyes to see it. Had its mouth moved when it spoke?

The question went unanswered as the Oracle swept away in a flurry of ribbons. It went through the trees, appearing now and then upon the trail, the ponies following from point to point. Within a few turns it led them aside from the main trail into a twisting path. Patches of shatter-grass and startle-flower grew across it, growing evidence it was seldom used.

“Do you bring us to the Throne by some servants entry?” the Duke demanded. “Is this the honor done the Duke of Betand?”

“Oh, Duke, my love, be not offended. There are only three entries to the Backless Throne! One from the center of the Great Maze, and we have not the time to take that path. One from the charnel houses outside Morp, where provender for the Great Ones is prepared, and we have not the stomach for that one. And this one. Of the three”—the Oracle giggled in a shrill mockery of amusement—“this is the safest.” Morp? Again Morp. I thought the people of Bleem had done well to escape when they had. I doubted their young had been useful as servants. Morp had an evil reputation. There was an entrance there. So. And another entry from the center of the Great Maze. I made a mental note, hanging back at a turn of the narrow path, waiting for them to get farther ahead.

The way ended at a tunnel mouth, a gaping hole between two tumbled pillars that once had been carved in the likeness of some great beast. I identified claws, horns, a vast bell-shaped ear. Obviously this route had been more used in ancient times, and I wondered why it had fallen into such neglect, but this question, like others, had no time for consideration. The Oracle had plunged into the darkness.

“Leave the guards to guarding, good friends. Come along! We are no doubt eagerly awaited!” Well, I had half anticipated some such problem when the hiding spell was set; now I reinforced it, binding it more closely about me. When I drifted from the trees and among the surly Tragamors and Armigers, they noticed me no more than they did the wind. Though I had taken little enough time, the others were far ahead, down distant turnings of the tunnel way.

Since that time I have often pondered over my heedlessness. I think it was the label set upon Huldra that did it. She was a Witch. Wize-ards had nothing to fear from Witches. They were a minor Talent, no more, and nothing to worry us. Never mind that sendings had come from her; never mind that Queynt had taken the trouble to point out she had more than mere Witch’s Talent to her; still I thought of her as a Witch. This is the trouble with too much Schooling. One learns to manipulate the labels in a way that the Gamesmistresses approve, and one doesn’t realize that things do not always act in accordance with the labels in the real world. One doesn’t realize that the labels, come to that, are often wrong.

Be that as it may, and even though I knew better, I had taken no steps beyond a simple hiding spell; there are a dozen forms of Egg in the Hollow, and I had used the easiest—to protect myself. It worked well enough against the guards, and I didn’t think beyond that. Ahead of me were the ones I followed, and that is all I was thinking about.

Fortunately, there were no side ways, no mazes to confuse. One way, one way only, the dust of the tunnel clearly marked by their footprints. I sped after them, risking a wize-art light from fingertips to show the way. I heard their voices, extinguished the light, slowed to their pace. Now they were dawdling, moving without haste.

“Is this the way guests of the Throne are greeted?” Huldra, more than merely annoyed. Sharply irritated; perhaps suspicious. “Hauled through dusty tunnels, league on league?”

“Oh, lovely one, why say guests’? Are there guests honored in the great audience hall? Do plenipotentiaries arrive with their steeds all caparisoned, bringing gifts from potentates afar? Guests? Did you imagine you were asked as guests?”

“What then?” Dadrina, stopping dead at the center of the tunnel. “If not guests, what?”

“You should not imagine these are my words, dear friends, not my language at all, who am the perfect

fount of diplomacy—but if asked—as indeed I have been — I would wager the word used by Storm Grower would be “lackey”. Dream Miner might say more than that, though both grow laconic with the passing centuries. Still, “lackey” will do.”

“Lackey!” The Duke spat. “I have long been a faithful friend of the Backless Throne!”

“You have long”—smiled the Oracle—”been a well paid puppet. Ath hath the Merchant here,” in bitter mockery of the Merchant’s lisp. “Come now. It is not wise to linger. Should Storm Grower grow impatient, we all know what consequence might follow.” This was sobering. For the first time, I began to worry. I had assumed what the Duke had assumed: he and his party were guests and would be treated with some degree of courtesy. If they were at risk, then so was I.

They wound deeper under the earth, down twisting ways. Above us, I later learned, the Great Maze stretched its illimitable hedges; around us worm holes opened into the tunnel, admitting odors of swamp and jungle, hill and moor. They had walked half a day away with me scurrying in their wake when I began to hear the sound, the susurrus of the sea, the ebb and flow of waves upon a shore.

Waves.

Not quite. Not quite that ebb and flow. Two rhythms, rather, running almost counter to one another. One slightly slower. And with the sound the movement of air, laden with that same sweetish-foul stench we had smelled too often upon the road.

Dead things. Decaying things.

Huldra made some expression of disgust. The Merchant said something to her that made me shudder, something to the effect that it would be wisest not to notice the smell of anything she might soon see. They had fallen silent, so I slowed my pace, peering carefully around each corner before sliding around it into the next stretch of rocky corridor. Still that wave sound. The stench stronger. Still those ahead moving in the wake of the Oracle, now taking no notice of either smell or sound.

They came to an open area, perhaps two manheights from floor to roof, that roof supported by several dozen great, rough-hewn pillars, irregularly set, much as though the diggers had left a pillar whenever they felt like it rather than by any plan.

Beyond this hall of pillars was a much larger space.

There was light there, though not much, and the sound of vast emptiness swallowing up the footsteps of the troop. They moved to the left among the pillars, and I to the right, keeping a pillar between myself and them. By this time the sound was enormous, great heavings of air which I felt gust past me in first one direction, then another.

The hall of pillars ended in a gallery, a wide shelf curving high around one side of the greater space. A low parapet of stones set in mortar edged it. The others were looking over this parapet at whatever was below. At one point the parapet was broken as though something had struck it; the stones were tumbled inward upon the shelf. It was here I stretched myself, hidden from the others both by my spell and by the stones, looking out into the cavern.

It was lit from above by a few worm holes piercing the stone. Dust swam in these beams of light, fugitive shining specks to speak of the day. At the center of the cavern a great pile hid the opposite wall, a monstrous, fantastic pile, twisted into organic forms; prodigious legs, monstrous warty arms, folded stone

almost like gigantic faces; great jutting plinths of nose above twisted strata of lips. Wrinkled runnels of water-deposited stone above seemed to form gigantic cheeks and eyelids.

Which opened.

I was clinging for support to a block of stone while an enormous eye peered into my own. It did not blink or change expression. Only gradually, as my heart slowed, did I realize it didn't see me.

The others were at a point far to my left, somewhat around the curve. I could see them easily. The Merchant stood at the center of the group, his long face as impassive as the stones. On one hand were Valearn and Dedrina. Porvius stood somewhat behind them, his face down. The Oracle was some little distance from them, waving and bowing as it made introductions.

"Dream Miner. Honored sir. Storm Grower. Monstrous madam. I bring you once again your servant, Dream Merchant of Fangel. Also, those you have summoned. Betand. Valearn. Huldra. Dedrina. Fop, cannibal, crone, and lizard. An assortment, madam and sir." The huge stone lips writhed, revealing themselves as flesh capable of great, slow words, like rocks rolling together in avalanche. "If you say 'cannibal' as a term of derision, Oracle, you would be wise to say rather less. Some of us eat what we will. So far as we are concerned, Valearn may eat what she likes."

"Come a little closer!" Another voice, one seeming to come from the opposite wall, enormously booming, higher in pitch. Hearing it, all those present squirmed, feeling the words as an assault. I saw them bend a little, twisting, trying to shed those words.

"Come a little closer so I can see." The voice was full of wind, horrid and cold. "Only a little closer."

"Careful," said the Oracle, laughing. "I would not recommend that any of you leave this gallery. If you come within reach of the mighty madam or the honored sir, they may eat you. They cannot help it, poor dears. They are always hungry." They moved down the gallery, however. I didn't need to follow them. I could see the source of the other voice well enough from where I was, though it had its horrific head turned away from me. It was another giant, seated behind the first and faced in the opposite direction, a female, perhaps, though what I could see of the huge face had no delicacy to it and was as obdurate as the first. If they had been standing, they would have been ten manheights tall. They were about seven manheights tall, seated as they were back to back upon a colossal pillar.

"The Backless Throne," I said, surprised into uttering it half-aloud.

Across the cavern on the gallery the Oracle turned in my direction. It had heard me! Through all that ebb and surge of mighty breathing, it had heard me. I lay quiet, not moving so much as an eyelid, letting the surge of air wash to and fro. With all the echoes in this chamber, it could not be sure. So I told myself.

So I assured myself, sweating, swallowing, trying to get my heart back where it belonged. After a time, it turned back to the others, ribbons quivering as though in laughter, poised in its eternal mockery.

I slipped back into the hall of pillars and worked my way toward them, pillar by pillar, keeping stone between. The damned Oracle might see through my spells. I thought it might see whatever it pleased, quite frankly—but it was not likely to see through stone.

"Storm Grower, mighty madam, may I present your servants." The Oracle bowed, gesturing to all those on the gallery. "Your most obedient servants."

“By all the gods,” said Huldra, amazed. “What are you?”

“Oh, do not be offensive,” said the Oracle. “Giant madam may be most annoyed.”

“I am not offended,” said Storm Grower in that voice of horrible wind. Her left arm came up, slowly, like a tree rearing skyward, bent, straightened, its skin like a lava flow, cracked deep, soiled with the dirt of centuries, its huge fingers like scaly pillars with nails twisted and ragged, slowly, slowly, then snapping toward the parapet with lightning motion, missing the parapet by less than an arm’s length so that Huldra stumbled back with a screaming curse, tripping over Bloster and falling full length upon the stones.

Laughter then, monstrous laughter, as though volcanoes amused themselves. The left hand did not fall but stayed where it was, twisting and twisting as though to wring a neck. “I am always glad to educate lesser creatures. I am a giantess, sweet Huldra. Born with my brother many centuries ago in the monster labs of the humans. Reared there for a long, long time. Fled from there by my own courage and resourcefulness ...”

“And mine,” rumbled Dream Miner. “You were not alone.”

“Never alone.” The other laughed, shifting to display the obscene flaps of filthy flesh that bound them together, shoulder to shoulder, rib to rib, buttock to buttock. “No, never alone.”

“Grown to great size and power over the centuries,” thundered Dream Miner. “Grown to a size and power capable of revenge.”

“Handicapped somewhat in that their great size prohibits mobility,” chanted the Oracle. “Otherwise, most puissant, most powerful.”

Storm Grower twisted her fingers once again, and a lightning bolt nicked from the air to the gallery where the Oracle stood, missing it by a finger’s width.

“Subside, beribboned jester, painted riddler. You are useful, but you try our patience.”

“Try our patience,” agreed Dream Miner. “Take those with you elsewhere for a time. We will tell them of our will later. Now we have other matters to see to. Besides, I am hungry.”

The Oracle led them away. There were a number of lighted tunnel openings from the gallery, and into one of these the troop went, shuffling, seeming both fearful and angry. There was no point in following them. They would be returning. There was a narrow crevice to one side of the hall of pillars, one about my size. I decided to explore it, finding that it climbed upward and outward toward the cavern and it had a window in it, a place where the stone had broken.

From this vantage point, I could look over the parapet and down into the cavern. I could see Dream Miner’s feet—not a sight to inspire confidence or good appetite—and a part of the floor of the cavern.

To either side, right and left of the giants, low, long archways curved like bows led off into the darkness.

From the archway at Dream Miner’s right, several dozen long poles protruded into the cavern, their nether ends hidden in the darkness.

Dream Miner reached for one of these. His monstrous arm descended toward the rocky floor; the flesh between the two giants stretched, revealing its leprous, mottled surface, full of crusty sores and small,

scurrying vermin; his hand grasped the pole and dragged it forth. Its end was burdened with the body of some large food beast, perhaps a giant zeller.

This spitted beast was thrust into the giant's mouth and half bitten from the pole, the pole withdrawn like the stem of some obscene fruit. It made two mouthfuls for Dream Miner, two huge, bloody mouthfuls gulped down with much gnashing and masticating.

I put my face into the stone, unable to watch it.

Until this moment I had not seen his monstrous nakedness. He was so stonelike, so monumental, that one did not think of it as flesh. The act of eating, however, with all its gustatory noises, the stinking belch that filled the cavern, the rubbing of the behemothian stomach—all this, all at once, horrifying and sickening both.

Worse was to come.

"Pass me one," blared Storm Grower. "Pass me one as well."

"You don't need it," he bellowed. "You live off my gut as well as me."

"We live off our gut, monster. I have a tongue to taste food as well. Pass me one."

"Get your own, Cloud Teaser." He set himself, grunting, not giving way as the flesh between them stretched. A lightning bolt flicked him on the ear and he bellowed, jerking upright. Storm Grower took advantage of this to pull out a pole of her own, this one decked with the body of a man. I stuffed my hand into my mouth to keep from crying out, for the body was not dead.

"Not fresh," she complained in her giant's rumble. Stones quivered from the roof far above, and a sprinkling of dust fell upon them. "Not fresh enough."

"Keep your voice down, idiot. You'll have us buried alive. And what do you mean, not fresh? I saw it squirm."

"Barely. Been there too long. Mostly dead. I like 'em lively, Miner. Lively. So they tickle on the way down."

"I'll tickle you if you don't keep your voice down. You're bringing rock on our heads."

"Time this cavern was opened to the sky, brother. Time to get the moles in again."

"Time enough for that when we've done with our plans for mankind, sister. Soon, now. Call the creatures back. Time to dispose of them. And keep your voice down." Still the caverns quivered at her call, a vasty bellowing as though some cataract rumbled far beneath them, summoning the Oracle's return. When it came, it brought the Merchant with it, but only him, to stand as they had before at the gallery edge.

"Well, my son," bellowed Storm Grower. "Have you done our will?"

"I put the powdered crythtalth in their wine at the rethephion, if thatth what you mean."

"All of them? Huldra? Valearn?"

“All of them. They didn’t know it wath there. They thtill don’t. Tho far ath they know, they follow you of their own free will. Jutht ath I do.”

“Ah. Well and good, my boy. Well and good.”

“Tho, now I’ve done it, I want you to tell me.”

“Tell our great boy what? What would he like to know?”

“When I’m going to grow. When will it be? I am no bigger than ten yearth ago.”

“Ah, well, when do you think it will be, Miner? When was it we began to grow?”

“Not much for the first hundred years. We were no bigger than he when we escaped. After that, sometime. And mostly in the last hundred. You’ll be mobile a while yet.”

“I want to grow.”

“What’s this? The power you have in Fangel isn’t enough for you?”

“I want to grow. I want to bring down the thky, ath you do. You have no idea what impertinent I mutht put up with. They do not fear me ath they ought.”

“Tush, my boy. Nothing. Mere nothing. You have your city, your servants, your hunters. You have your warehouses full of creatures ready to come out and do your bidding when we empty the world of men! You have your army laid away for the coming day. You have a city full to come out and play at the sound of your gong. What more would a boy want? Ah?” And the monstrous face broke in a cavity of laughter, laughter that did bring rocks down upon their heads and made the Merchant dance back into the tunnels to escape being crushed. I was safe enough where I was, wondering if this madman was truly their son and, if so, how such a monstrous thing might have been accomplished.

“Enough,” snarled Storm Grower at last. “Be on your way out, my boy. Wait for the others at the entrance, they’ll not be long. We have one or two small items of business.”

The Oracle led him away, very silently for the Oracle, usually so full of quips and speeches. For a time the cavern was full of breathing noises, then the Oracle returned with the others. All of them.

“We have summoned you for a reason,” said Dream Miner in an insinuating whisper. “The time has come for one of our most-hoped-for projects to reach fruition. We must depend upon you for the next stage, but we know we can do so, for the rewards are great.”

“Let us talk of those rewards,” drawled the Duke. He was standing well back from the parapet, well out of reach. “They have not been inconsiderable in the past, but let us talk of them further.”

“Ahhh,” hissed Storm Grower. “Let us rather talk of punishments when our will is not done, for those are severe. I was limited in my range at one time, Betand. At one time I could bring storm only upon those places near to me. Then I began to grow, greater and more great. Over eighty years ago I began to reach out, and out, beyond this very world. It was I who tumbled a moonlet from the sky onto the Wastes of Bleer, I who wrecked Dindindaroo and all the lands between, foiling the works of Wizards and men. I am no longer limited in any way. As the disobedient people of Morp have found to their

dismay. And those of Thorpe and Woeful. So will those of Betand, or of the High Demesne.”

“Tsk,” said the Oracle. “We need not speak of punishments, lady. These good people are eager to help you.”

“Hear us, then. In our caves here we have prepared a new crop of crystals. They are of a lovely amethyst color. Those who take them will be our slaves. They will find their way here, eager to do our will. It is our desire that they be widespread among the lands of the south. There are Demesnes there which we need to have under our sway. You will be our agents in this matter.”

“Where do you want them distributed?” The Duke, sulky, not liking this. His notion of the fitness of things was suffering. Punishments were not a proper thing to have discussed. Still, for some reason, he did not seem inclined to rebellion. I thought I understood this. They sought their own advancement through following the giants and were as much the lackeys of these great beings as the Oracle had said.

Storm Grower was continuing. “Firstly in the Bright Demesne, to a Wizard called Himagery and one called Barish. I have ended their works before, but they have had the luck of man and may yet bring something from it. They are contentious. Ambitious. So far, all they do is meet and plan and devise processes while time spins away, and it is likely they will not need my crystals to spoil their future. They may do it for themselves. Still, why should we risk, eh? Give one also to a Shifter there called Mavin. And in Schooltown to Mavin’s brother, King Mertyn. Those first. Those most importantly. They are engaged in a project we do not wish to see fulfilled. They would raise the hundred thousand frozen Gamesmen, the great Gamesmen, those who lie in the ice caverns near the place we were born. We do not wish those great Gamesmen raised. Let them lie, let them lie, until time spins out and the world cools. Let no man come near that place.

“Thus, when you have given crystals as well to all in Schooltown and the Bright Demesne and to those in Xammer, and Dragon’s Fire, and the other Demesnes in that land, and particularly among the Immutables—they are governed by a man called Riddle. Him first, then all others, being sure to include a man named Quench—I say when this is done, then go to the caverns I have spoken of, destroy those who sleep there, and guard the place until we tell you a guard is needed no more.”

“We are your willing servants,” said the Duke.

“You are what you are, Betand. And what you are is not quite good enough. Do not fear. You will enjoy being our servant. Enjoyment is built in.” Dream Miner laughed, a hugely hideous laugh that shook the rock walls, causing me to tremble to the floor and lie there curled against the wall, hoping it would not fall. “This, however, is a negotiable point. If you can do us a small service we have previously mentioned, you will earn your freedom of the crystals.”

“Any service is too small to convey our gratitude,” Huldra, bowing, smirking. “The Oracle has told us what is needed. We will be glad to comply.”

“We won’t discuss it here,” snapped Storm Grower.

“What we may discuss is the yellow crystals.” I got up from the floor, pricked my ears, and listened. Yes, yes, the yellow crystals.

“They must be stopped!”

“Stopped! I thought they were yours?” The Duke, much surprised. “I thought you had dug them.” The

cavern rumbled as the giants shifted upon the Backless Throne. Discomfort there, so I thought, some vast distress. What was it?

Dream Miner, rumbling like a forest fire. “We have dug no crystals for fifty years. Until then there were many we could use, many we could change to suit ourselves. Our moles dug them in the deep mines and brought them here.” He gestured to the low arch at his left. “And here we changed them, corrupted them. We would look into the crystals to see what message they carried, and then we would corrupt that message. It is easy. Easy when one knows how. As we knew how.” Storm Grower, flicking tiny bolts of lightning around the cavern, playing, fitful gusts of wind teasing at the garments of those on the gallery. “As we knew how. Some we used to corrupt Pfarb Durim, ancient city of your kin, Oracle. And Hell’s Maw, which lay at its feet. And those who dwelt there. Some we used to move Huld—this should interest you, Huldra—into bringing forth the great army of bones upon the Wastes. He would not have done it had we not moved him. That was a favourite project of ours.”

“He failed,” Huldra said, her voice dead. “He died there.”

“He failed because someone opposed us. Some deep dweller brought forth by a girl, a creature called Jinian. A girl we were warned about in advance by our Seers. The girl you were supposed to have disposed of for us, Basilisk.”

Dedrina Dreadeye looked coldly into the giant’s eyes. “We attempted to do so. I sent my own daughter to take care of it.”

“It was not taken care of. You, Bloster, hiding there behind your sister. You had her in your hands.”

“That was before,” he mumbled. “I didn’t know you wanted her dead, not then.”

“Perhaps not. And let us speak of you, Ogress. We had another favorite project here in the northlands. We were using your son, Valdon—”

“Do not speak of my son,” she shrieked. “My beautiful son. Valdon the glorious, the perfect boy. Do not speak of him.”

“Do not tell us not to speak.” The lightning played at Valearn’s feet, making her dance. “We speak of whom we will. Valdon, for example, stupid Valdon, proud Valdon, sucked dry by the Faces his own servant had set in the Lake. Oh, we have seen it all, our Seers have seen it all. We know. We know. So Valdon failed us and we have you, Valearn. And Bloster and Dedrina-Lucir failed us, but we have both Bloster and Dedrina Dreadeye. And Huld failed us, but we have his sister, Huldra, as well. So. We will not fail again, will we? Though our strategy in these northlands has failed somewhat heretofore, it will not fail again. Not here. Not anywhere.” Silence. The threat was palpable. Even where I crouched, far across the cavern, I could see the sheen of sweat on Betand’s face, the sick slackness of Valearn’s jaw.

“Never mind,” said Storm Grower. “Past is past. But tomorrow is ours, and we cannot brook delay or opposition. And we cannot use crystals which are dug from the mines, for they are all yellow ones, and the yellow ones we cannot change. We are forced to grow our own, but that does not stop the yellow ones being spread about upon the earth.”

“What should they do about it, Great Ones? You have not told them how they can serve you.”

“Find where they are coming from. Find whatever Wizard or Magician is responsible for them. Come and tell us. Whoever is making these yellow crystals must be sought out, caught out, destroyed! See to

it!”

The Oracle bowed. To me the gesture looked mocking, sinister, as though the Oracle, had it willed, could have answered many of the questions the giants were asking. Seemingly, however, the giants found no fault with it.

“Go, now. We are weary of you,” rumbled Dream Miner.

“Beware my lightning,” whispered Storm Grower. “If you think of disobeying. Beware my hail.” The troop I had followed came toward me along the gallery, moved into the hall of pillars. I crawled down to the entrance of my rock cleft, waiting until they had passed. The Oracle was still standing at the parapet, around the curving cavern. I heard the giant ask if all had been prepared and heard the Oracle say yes, it was all in readiness, these words almost in whispers, and then the Oracle swept by in a flutter of ribbons and all of them moved through the hall to the tunnel mouth from which we had come.

I did not think.

This is true. My head was full of giant talk, conjecture, ideas, theories. I wanted only to get out of there, out into the clean air once more. Behind me the great surge of breathing faded as we turned one corner, then another...

Into blinding light and a chanting voice and a smoke that sent me reeling. A fire, a caldron, Huldra there with the smoke pouring forth, the others halfhidden in it, and the Oracle somewhere nearby.

Huldra’s voice. “Disclose by the Deep Powers. Disclose by the Shadow’s dark. Disclose by the Night’s teeth. Smoke surround, dark betray, blood holdfast.” They saw me! All of them but one were turned toward me, eyes upon me, avid and victorious, not moving, not needing to move, for there were other things swarming around me, binding me, while the smoke held me fast and I could not move. Porvius Bloster lay upon the stone, a knife deep in his back. It was his blood that held me. His life.

The words came as though in a dream, from some distantly echoing place. “Let me have her,” begged Dadrina.

“No,” the Oracle said, looking in my direction. “Such is not what the Great Ones prefer.”

“Ah, but let me have her, Oracle. I will dispose of her well enough. For my daughter’s sake, whom she killed, though we have never proved it. For my sisters’ sake. This one did us great harm, took from us a great possession. Let me have her.”

“The Great Ones have their own ways. You have all done your part. Well done, I should say, particularly Huldra. You will all be rewarded for it.”

“I will have her as my reward. Her and what of mine she carries.” Dadrina was persistent.

“The Great Ones intend that you remain free as your reward. I may, of course, go back and ask them. If you would prefer.”

“Shut yourself, woman,” demanded the Duke. “Leave well alone. You’ll have your avengement. She’ll not live long, and she’ll not leave here, ever.”

“Ah.” The Basilisk seemed in agony, dimly perceived through the veils that were settling around me. “So,

so, let it be.” She seemed deep in thought, turning to the Witch as though for guidance.

Huldra turned her back, but not before I saw the gleam of triumph in her eyes, not before I heard the words, “Vengeance is sweet, Jinian Footseer. So dies the killer of my brother and the beloved of my son’s killer.”

I hadn’t killed Huld, not really. Peter had. Still, I supposed I was responsible for it, in a way. “You didn’t give a damn about your brother,” I tried to say.

I said nothing. Lips and tongue did not obey. No part of me would move.

They went away into darkness then, Jinian Footseer became someone else. I, the observer, floated in the air somewhere, uninvolved, yet unable to escape.

Where Jinian went, I would have to go. Something was dragging her through the rocky corridors. They came through beams of light from above, and I saw they were Oracles, six, eight, a dozen of them. Surely not. The smoke must have disturbed my reason. Still, they looked very much like Oracles. The same shape, size, costume. The same painted faces. The same napping ribbons. They slipped in and out of vision, finally fading into darkness.

There were creatures. Moles. Not gobblemoles with their clean velvet skins and little pink feet. No, other moles, ragged creatures with fangs and hands and half-blind eyes, which dug and dragged and dropped Jinian in a corner, where her eyes stared, unable to shut. Creatures from Morp, Jinian thought.

From the charnel house at Morp.

There were people in the place. Someone came to peer down at Jinian. “This is the one,” she said. “This is the one I have Seen.” I looked up into a gauze mask painted with moth wings. A Seer, leaning forward to finger the little star-eye pendant Tess Tinder-my-hand had given me when I was a child. A Seer in this place, speaking as though her gauze mask were thick as a curtain, sound-deadening. Though I did not seem to be present, still something within me heard and remembered. “This one wears the star-eye, Riddler. Here on her breast. She has worn it since a child. It was given her by a Wize-ard. And it was given to the Wize-ards by those you know. It has power, Riddler. I would advise you to take it from her.” Even in my weakness, something within me rebelled at the thought they would take my star-eye from me.

“Why take it?” Laconic, a voice I knew. “The old ones, Ganver and the rest, they pretend it has significance. Oh, I recall that pretense, Seer. In my youth I was shown many things. ‘Watch and learn,’” they said to me. ‘Bao,’ they said to me. So I watched, but it was only nonsense. They showed me this and showed me that, but it meant nothing. It was only pretense, done to mystify us young ones and keep us subservient. The sign has no power. It is nothing. A symbol only; a symbol of our degradation. If it had any power at all, it would be the power of our people, not hers. She could never learn to use it.”

“You’ve been playing with her, Riddler. Playing. Games. Oh, I can See, See what you’ve been doing. Games. Risky Games. You gave her the Dagger.”

“Why not?” it asked in a bleak, careless voice, full of malice and yet without emotion, as though its evil were an abstract thing, intended but not felt. “I created it out of my anger. I gave it to Daggerhawk Demesne, saying it came from them” And he gestured back, toward that place where the giants were. “In time I grew annoyed at Daggerhawk Demesne and wished to remove my gift from them. So I played with them, with her. Why not play with her, with any of them? A moment’s amusement at least?”

“Am I not protected by your Seeings, Seer? You looked into the future and Saw her fall into our hands. You Saw she could not use the Dagger against me. Now. Why should I not play with her? Why not, Seer? Are you saying now you did not See what you told me?”

“No,” the Seer mumbled. “I Saw as I told you. And yet the place I Saw her was not like this. The time was not this time. Do you not fear, Riddler? Fear she may yet find the book and the light? Fear she may yet find the bell?” The words held association for me. They circled into my dizzy fog and whirled there, like moths made of light, and I remembered Sorah the Seer upon the Wastes of Bleer saying, “The Wizard holds the book, the light, the bell.” What Wizard was that? Was it Jinian?

The Oracle paid no attention, made no answer.

She—I—was dragged away again, seeing things at the edge of vision, as through a cloud. Glass jars, vats, tall vats full of the same silvery stuff that had filled the pool of the sevens. Crystal milk. Wires hanging down inside the vats, and on the wire crystals growing.

Green ones. Amber. Red. Amethyst. All with that shading across them, dimming the color. From the tops of the vats the wires ran out along the walls.

Where? Where do they go?

The moles have picked Jinian up again, tugging her along, head bumping on the stone. They are dragging her along the wall of the cavern, near the giants’ feet, just out of reach. See the fingers reaching for her, just out of reach. High against the cavern roof are great caps where the wires go. That’s where the wires go, into the caps, and the caps on the giant heads and the thoughts of the giants flow down into the vats and crystals grow. There. In the crystal milk.

Darkness and pain.

Then only darkness.

I came to myself at last, knowing nothing except that a very long time had passed. All of me was present in one place. I wanted to giggle about that and couldn’t. Someone had put a gag in my mouth.

Light.

Low, at the level of my eyes where I lay. Dim. A long, bow-shaped arch between the place where I was and some other place. Out there the dim light swam and blurred. Things were moving between me and the source of the light. I slipped away, faded into black, realizing how uncomfortable I was. Something hard and curved was pressed into my back.

When I came back, the light was a little brighter. I could see what lay to one side. A pole. A long pole, extending outward through the window into the light. There were a pair of hooved feet in front of me.

There was something tied to the pole. Something dead.

I could move, some. I twisted my head, trying to roll myself on the curved surface. It shifted, rolled.

On the other side, another pole, something tied to it as well. This body was human. The feet were on a level with my eyes. I pressed a trembling hand to my mouth, realizing for the first time that my hands were

free.

The gag first. It came loose after a time, some wad of filthy stuff. I spat it away, blacked out for a moment, then came back to begin a frantic exploration of the ropes that bound me to the pole I was on.

No knots. Two heavy ropes bound below my breasts. Two around my thighs. I could move my arms, my lower legs, but it did no good. I was lashed to the pole.

My pack! In it the things needed to lay some spell upon the ropes, some freeing magic. It had been a little pack. When Huldra's smokes had caught me, it had been on my back. I raised my head, twisted, trying to see, sorry I had looked. The poles stretched away on either side, each with its burden. Not many.

Half a dozen or so. Against a far wall was a packshaped blot, put where I could see it, where I could know where it was without reaching it.

There was a fine cruelty in that. The Oracle, perhaps. It felt like a thing the Oracle would do.

I lay back, breathless, screams trembling at the edge of my throat. I could feel them gathering there, like birds, fluttering in panic. They were ready to come out, fly out, shriek their way into the cavern's quiet.

Quiet. Too quiet. An expectant quiet.

Perhaps that is what they were waiting for. To hear me scream. It was obvious they intended to eat me but had not done so at once. Why?

Vengeance, Jinian, I told myself. They want to hear you scream, girl. Want you to struggle. Cry out. Beg.

They will eat Jinian then. But not until then. Perhaps.

So she would not scream. Would not let herself make any sound.

Out of this frantic fear I heard an old voice, long remembered, harsh as a slap across the face.

"Enough, Jinian. Consider water." Murzy's voice, coming clearly even through this hysteria and fear. So I took a deep breath and considered water. The dams had always suggested this as a way of recovering calm and good sense. I considered water in all its aspects, raging and still, bringing myself at last to a kind of quiet.

Outside the low archway, in the light, something moved from right to left. By raising my head from the pole I could see its shadow. There was something familiar in that shadow.

"Our vengeance approaches," rumbled the voice of the Dream Miner. "Are you content at that?"

"Who can say?" the answer came, a whisper, something familiar about that voice. "Who can say if we will be content?"

"You have planned it. These hundreds of years, you've worked at it, as we have. It was you who began it."

“And yet, who can say we will be content? Some of us think not.”

“Faugh. Some of you are witless fools, hiding in your graves like rotten nuts in their shells.”

“Still, they are some of us. We feel their absence, Giant One. As you might feel Storm Grower’s absence if she were reft from you.”

“In which I would delight,” came the other giant’s voice. “I would walk the world in joy.”

“You could not walk the world at all,” said the Miner. “Nor could I. We have grown too great for our bones to carry us. Never mind.” The great voice paused, then continued speaking to the smaller creature, whatever it was. “No, never mind. Vengeance will come from here, at last, as it was begun a thousand years ago when you gathered up all the blue crystals and brought them here.”

“Which some of us have since regretted.”

“Fools. Hadn’t you suffered enough at men’s presence?”

“We thought so, then.”

“And now?”

“Some of us still think so. Though we may find our vengeance bitter.” There was a titter then. Highpitched; the sound a bird makes in the night when it only dreams of singing.

“It wearies me,” whined Storm Grower. “Send it away. Then give me one. I’m hungry.” There was a great huffing sound, as of lungs compressed. Into the light came great groping fingers.

One of the poles was pulled outward into that light and the munching sound began. Another pole followed. And then two more. Chewing, swallowing noises, a scream. One of the poles had carried live meat. Now there were only three left. The ones on either side of me and the one I was lashed upon.

I began to rip at my clothing. Perhaps they had left me the Dagger. If I could get to the Dagger, I could cut the ropes. It took only a moment to find what a vain hope that was. The scabbard lay at the back of my thigh, tight between my leg and the pole, bound there.

The Seer. She had seen me falling to the Oracle.

She had seen the Dagger being of no help to me. Of course they had left it. As they had left my pack, out of reach. Out of hope.

I fumbled at my waist, trying to find the cord on which my pouch was hung. It was tangled deep in the fabric of the pantaloons, lost in them, which was probably why I had it still on me. If they had seen it or felt it, they would have taken it.

I worried it out at last, opening it to pour the contents onto my chest. The amethyst crystal in which Huldra’s sending was trapped. The yellow crystal from the mines outside Fangel. The blue one Beedie had given me. A few restorative herbs. A tiny bottle of scent, shaped like a frog. A lock of Peter’s hair. My fragment from the well of the sevens. I lay, head up, looking down at these few things. After a time I returned all but two of them to the pouch, shoving it inside my shirt.

The munching had stopped and the breathing sounds from the cavern had become louder, slower, as though the giants slept. Soon this breathing was succeeded by snoring, great rumbling sounds, rhythmic as tides.

I braced my feet and arms against the rock on either side of the pole and pushed, trying to drag it back, out of the light. It moved a finger's width.

Again. Again a tiny movement. I timed the pushes to coincide with great snores. Once again. And again.

Over and over, endlessly, exhaustingly. I was wet, even in the clammy cold of the cavern, soaked with the sweat of this effort. Push, and push again. The creature on my left was almost even with me now. I reached out to touch it. My fingers were a hand's width from the thing's mouth. I needed its mouth.

Push again. The snores stopped. A giant mumbled in his sleep. A giantess answered in hers. Again the breathing of sleep. Push, and push again. My legs felt as though they had been dipped in fire. I could reach the thing's mouth.

I took the amethyst crystal in one hand, reaching out. I was trembling. My hand was slick with sweat. I dropped it, dropped it, rolling about on the stony floor.

Tears then, silent and bitter and exhausted. And after the tears some measure of resolution. I rolled as far to my left as I could, explored the floor with my hand. It could not have gone far.

Fragments of rock. Bits of bone. Things filthier than these. And then the hard, faceted shape of it in my fingers. I brought it back to my chest, wiped the fingers dry, tried again.

I reached out and thrust it into the mouth of the dead thing next to me.

Push, push again. The human corpse on the other side was farther back. Twice I had to stop to rest, the second time using some of the restorative herbs from the pouch, which left a bitter taste in my mouth but a painful clarity of mind. Then push and push again, and the yellow crystal in the corpse's mouth. It was a corpse. It was dead. I wept at this, too. I had been wondering what I would do if it were alive.

I peered down between my feet. The end of my pole still lay outside the window, in the light. With the last of my strength I pushed once more, seized a rock behind me over my head and pulled as well, seeing the end of the pole slide under the arch, into the shadow, into the room where I lay. So much for that.

I let the swirling darkness swallow me up. Just for a time, just for a bit of rest, to wake thinking of the Oracle, perhaps having dreamed of the Oracle. Oh, I knew the creature now for what it was. Not a simpering, harmless creature. No. No. Full of malice and ancient guile. The true source of the evil in the north.

The Oracle, not the giants. They were too simple. All their cleverness came from the Oracle. I prayed it had gone away. I prayed it had not stayed to see my end.

"Aaaangh," came a whining rumble from the other room. "Aaangh. Give me one. I'm hungry."

"Get it yourself. I'm tired of giving you. Get it yourself." The sound of lightning. A frying noise. Complaint, monstrous hairy fingers groping at the window.

"There's only two here." Voice like thunder. "Where's the other one? The fun one? The one that was

supposed to be here. You there, minions. You from Morp. Provender!” Chewing, masticating noises. At the far side of the low room, a scurrying as some large furry creatures moved in and out of the light, moving poles, tying bodies to them. They did not come near me. I made not a sound. This had an air of calculation about it.

The giants would not eat me until they had wrung the last shred of agony and apprehension from me. I played dead. Let them think I had fainted, or slept.

Then an anguished howl, the howl of a tornado, of a hurricane. “Ouuuuugh, pain. Brother. Ouuuuugh, pain. I have got a pain in my gut.” I caught my breath. Across the dim room the furry shapes stopped what they were doing, froze in place.

The howl was immobilizing, terrifying. It rang through the cavern, blasting at the stones. Dust fell.

Gravel rolled.

Oh, she should have a bellyache indeed, should Storm Grower. She had Huldra’s sending in her belly, dissolved out of the crystal that had held it, a voracious sending ready to eat its way out of its fleshy prison. It should find enough in Storm Grower to fill it. I wondered briefly what Huldra would think when it returned. This made me want to giggle hysterically, and it was all I could do to bite down hard on a finger and keep silent.

“Hush,” breathed Dream Miner. “You are disturbing me. I want to ... want to ... sleep. Peace. Contentment. How sweet. I did not know how sweet...” She had the amethyst crystal. But he had the yellow one. He desired sleep. Peace. Contentment. I hoped it would last for some time. This would solve the problem of being eaten, but I was still firmly lashed to the pole.

“Oooooogh, pain.” A sizzle of lightning ricocheted from the floor into the room where I lay. In the flash I saw one side of the room disappear in a sapphire glow. In the after-image I thought I saw a small form leaping there. Perhaps more than one.

Wind began to blow. Wet wind, clammy with fetid smells in it. The pain the giantess felt was being translated into storm. “Ouuuugh, pain. Dream Miner. Wake. How can you sleep? Wake. I’m dying.” There was disbelief in that voice, horror and anguish. “I’m dying and you sleep!”

“Lolly lolly alum baff?” sang a quiet voice. “Is the Wizard girl in here?”

“Here!” I cried half-hysterically. “Who’s there?”

“Proom,” answered the small voice, approaching.

“Come to help you if you need help in return for the help you gave our people in the town.” He was not alone. Others of the small people had joined him; still others were gathered at the far wall in an excited horde, busy with something.

“What did you do to the giants?” He seemed to know I had done it, though that was far from obvious, given my condition.

“I fed them something bad for them. She may die of it, maybe not. He may die of it, maybe not. They are very big and what I gave them was quite small.”

“Then we had best hurry.” He knelt at my side, busy with teeth and knife. I felt the rope loosen, then give, as I struggled to sit up while he worked on the ropes around my thighs. When he had done, I stood up, wavering on my feet, almost falling.

“We will lead you out!”

“In a moment. First. ... first I should be sure they do not recover.” I stumbled to the pack where it lay against the wall, falling over bodies of men and beasts, to stand over it panting. What could I use? No missile I could control would be large enough. There were two or three very complicated spells that might be useful. End and Beginning. That would take all day, and in the other room Storm Grower was summoning up such a storm as might kill us all. Lightning flashed around us, in and out of the room. No time for that.

No, no, not that. No window magic usable in such circumstances. Gamelords, what? Rain splashed wildly around us. Water.

“Proom, is there a river near? Any water? Anywhere near?”

“Under us, yes. lean hear it.”

Of course. There had to be a river there to carry away the filth of the giants, else they would have long since drowned in their own excretions. That was it.

I burrowed into the pack, laying out the few things needful. I did the gestures twice and didn't get them right either time. My shoulders kept going into spasms. Oh, gods and Gamelords, but I prayed the one I was about to call upon would remember. A boon a d'bor wife had offered me. The d'bor wife, rather. One of the old gods, perhaps. At least some thought so. A boon. Call on me, she had said. Call on me. I bowed my head, thought of water for a few moments, got myself together, and then tried it again.

“All things of the sea are yours, great and small, of river and lake, of pond and stream. I call upon you, d'bor wife, for the boon you promised me.” Nothing. Only the raging of Storm Grower from the outer cavern, the stertorous breathing of Dream Miner. Nothing.

And then a rivulet running beside my feet, coming from a gap in the wall. Rock breaking free to make it larger. A moist echoing space full of the sound of waters. Salt. The smell of tidal flats. The cry of gulls and the crash of waves in my ears. And with all this the harsh music of a well-remembered voice.

“What would you have, Jinian Footseer?”

“I would have this cavern flooded, d'bor wife. Filled from top to bottom so that those creatures within may be drowned.”

“So be it, Jinian. I will fulfill the boon I promised you.” The Shadowperson had been standing beside me, watching me, seemingly unafraid. Well, this was Proom, Mavin's friend. Proom, Peter's guide. He had seen strange and mighty things before, this one.

“Out,” I said to him. “We've got to get out, and all your people as well.”

“No,” he cried, anguished. “There are things here we must take.”

Things he must take? What? There were no victims left. He pointed to the far wall, where his people

were dashing about, calling to one another.

“Too late!” I pointed at the roof. A stream had broken through and was flooding down onto the sapphire heap where the Shadowpeople were at work. In the intermittent flashes, I saw what it was. A pile of blue crystals, a hill of them, millions. A shout of dismay was all I had time for, echoed by the little people. Then we were all running up the twisty stone corridors toward the light. Behind us the storm raged and the water rose.

When we came into the light, it was into the heart of the storm. Hail fell around us in great, white boulders, and the wind raged against the night, throwing huge trees across the sky like arrows. We crouched in the entrance to the cavern, me, Proom, a dozen of his people bent protectively over their sacks of crystals, all staring with disbelief into the night.

Storm Grower did not die easily. For hours the storm raged. Toward morning it began to wane.

Then, as we watched in fear, a fog spewed from the hill above us and took the form of the sending; screaming with laughter, it dwindled into the east.

“Is she drowned?” asked Proom. “Is the great giant Deviless drowned for all?”

“I think so. Drowned or eaten. One or both.”

“Then perhaps it is a good trade. Long and long ago did great Ganver send me seeking these things. Blue, he said, as a summer sky. A great thing of Lom, of the land our parent, a great thing misused and betrayed and hidden away.

“Find them, Proom,” he told me. “Go into the world and find them where they have hidden that we may undo the wrong which had been done.” So I sought, long and long but fruitlessly, and returned to my people to find they had been abducted by Blourbast the Ghoul. Then was the song of Mavin made. She was a young girl then. And now you come. And you are the friend of Peter, Mavin’s son.”

I apologized to him, wearily, sincerely. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see the crystals were there until after I’d called for the boon. I didn’t know you were looking for them.”

“Who would have thought to look in the lair of the giants? Who would have thought the evil ones would have brought them there?” He sighed, calling to his people. The storm had almost abated. “I must take these to Ganver. Farewell, Jinian, Peter’s friend.”

“A moment, Proom,” I begged him. “Will you leave a few of the crystals with me?” He assented, pouring a small heap of them into my hands. Then he and his people ran off into the morning, leaping over the fallen trees, flitting like birds into the shelter of the forests—that of it which was still standing. There were a thousand questions I could have asked. A thousand answers he could have given me. I could talk to them. Mavin couldn’t. Queynt couldn’t. But I could. A thousand questions, Jinian, I told myself. At least that. But those I should have asked them of were gone.

CHAPTER NINE

I had no need to choose which way to go. The Duke’s party had gone back to Fangel, obedient to the instructions of the giants. Those instructions, once set in motion, would not have been stopped by the giants’ deaths. So, one must go to Fangel once more, brave that strange city once more, see what could

be done to stop the amethyst crystals going south.

I wished for some way of getting there more quickly. If I had only been a Shifter. Or if Peter were with me.

“If wishes were geese, we would all have featherbeds,” I told myself sternly. “Come, girl, what is the matter with you?” The matter was I was exhausted, hungry, battered, worn. I knew the feeling well. I had felt it before in Chimmerdong and was too experienced in it to give it houseroom. I will eat as I go, I told myself. I will rest when I must. My body did not believe these promises, but the rest of me calmed down somewhat. I took time to fish out the Dagger of Daggerhawk and slit a seam from the pocket with it, returning it to a more sensible location, cursing all the leagues I had not needed the thing and could have had it in my hand, only to have needed it the one time it could not be reached.

I climbed upward from the entrance to the cavern, over tortuous drifts of fallen timber, through slides of mud and rock, around piles of hail so high they looked like snowdrifts, wondering how long I had spent in that underground warren. How far ahead of me were the Duke and Valearn and Huldra? Huldra?

Huldra. A shiver down the spine. A hard clutch at the stomach, pain behind the throat. It was Huldra who had caught me in the cavern. Huldra who had been ready for me, expecting me. How?

There had been a Seer, of course. I vaguely remembered seeing a Seer. A Seer in the employ of the giants.

Somewhere down in that underground warren right now there was a Seer, perhaps more than one, alive or dead, who had seen Jinian’s part in the battle on the Wastes of Bleer. And likely that same Seer had seen Jinian following the Duke of Betand into the cavern of the giants?

Likely, yes. And once seen, the vision had been used to trap me. When the Oracle had taken them aside, he had told Huldra of it, told her to make herself ready. Those spells had been rehearsed beforetime. The ingredients had been laid ready to make the paralyzing smoke. Certain creatures had been posted in readiness to bind me.

I dimly remembered Dadrina demanding to have me for her own. The Oracle had said no. No. The giants had wanted me for another purpose. To feel fear, panic, pain, humiliation. Was it indeed the giants who wanted me for that? Or had they been led to that thought by the Oracle itself?

I reflected on this. How they must have hated mankind, mankind who had created them so monstrously, no less monstrously than the pig I had met in Chimmerdong. How they must have fumed and plotted through the centuries; how they must have welcomed the power that came to them, slowly, the hateful destruction moving out from them like a cancer. What did they desire in the end? That all men should be enslaved? That, at least. That all men be made as horrified, as panic-stricken, as humiliated as they themselves had once been? Oh, yes. They would have left me tied to a pole a long time. Long enough to wring every drop of agonized apprehension from me.

But, as it happened, they had left me a little too long.

Huldra believed I was dead. Still, Huldra was more than a Witch.

And I had seen Huldra’s sending go screaming back to her, out of that dripping cavern. What might Huldra learn from that?

“I hope it drops a washtub full of blood on her,” I muttered, too tired to ill wish more usefully. “She’ll be there in Fangel. Likely she is able to unspell any spell I set. Unless I can come up with something she’d have no knowledge of at all. Oh, Jinian, why did you decide to be a Wize-ard?” There was no answer to this. The Jinian who might have answered had crawled between two sheltering trees and had fallen asleep.

I woke some hours later, feeling more hopeful, able to go on. I went past the place Bleem had been.

There was nothing left of it but trash, and the remnants were awash in shadow. Where did it come from? Where had it come from so recently? Where had it lain, waiting? At least those poor unfortunates had had a chance to escape. I wondered if they had made it to safety. If any place could be called safe in these days. The farther I went, the fewer trees were fallen, the fewer landslides in the path. Storm Grower had not reached far with her destruction; she had probably been unconscious much of the time. I tried to feel some pity, could not.

The way became easier, drier. I passed a scattering of krylobos feathers.

“Back and forth,” I groaned aloud. “Back and forth. Like some backleweep, bat, bat, bat.”

“Jinian?” The voice was disbelieving.

“Who?” I demanded, putting my back to a tree. “Who is it?”

“Jinian?” No mistaking the joy in it this time. “It’s Peter!” Something large and furry slid down the tree, encompassed me in an enormous embrace, half smothered me before beginning to Shift into a Peter shape. “I thought you were lost forever.” He kissed me; I so surprised I could do nothing about it. He shook me. I did nothing about that, either.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded. “You’re supposed to be on your way south, taking the blue crystals to Mavin!”

“They’re going. Queynt and Chance are taking them, with those two from oversea and their monster in the basket.”

“But you ...”

“But I wasn’t about to lose you, stupid girl. I love you, Jinian Footseer. After we found you were gone, I sat there for hours trying to convince myself it was all for the best. You’re not easy to get along with, you know ...”

“I’m not easy! I’m not!”

“That’s what I said, you’re not. Neither am I, but we both knew that to start with. It doesn’t matter, though. I love you, and that’s all. I’ll just have to make the best of it.”

“But. . . but. . .”

“I know. It would have been easier to just let you go. I know why you went. At least partly. It was my fault. Some of it. But what decided me was thinking about Mavin and Himaggery, you know. They love each other and always have. The first time I ever heard my mother say his name, I knew she loved him. The first time I ever saw him look at her, I knew he loved her. She risked her life to save him, you know.

Risked mine, too, come to that, though I was a bit too undeveloped to know anything about it. But he never really said the right things to her. And she never said the right things to him. And so they spent most of their lives apart and the time they spent together they spent fighting with each other. So, I said no. I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't just let you go, and when I found you I wouldn't sit around saying nothing. Even if I said all the wrong things and had to take them back."

"Sylbie," I said stuttering. "The baby."

"Oh, well, yes. There is that. Stupid girl left the wagon and followed me. I didn't catch her at it until it was too late to send her back. Then the first time I Shifted she went all hysterical."

"But she ... it's your baby."

"Yes. It's my baby. Which was begot, you might say, in pursuance of duty. Now I'm not going to do what Mavin would, which is not talk about it. And I'm not going to do what Himaggery would, which is talk about something else. You've got to understand this ...

"It was in Betand. They called it "the City That Fears the Unborn". Some Necromancer had come there, got drunk, and summoned up a ghost. Instead of being a ghost of something dead, though, it was the ghost of someone unborn. So, every visitor to the city had to beget if at all possible in order to get the unborn born as soon as possible. You understand?"

"I don't understand what an unborn could do to send a whole city so silly."

"Well, Jinny, you're going to have to take my word for it. The howling alone would have driven you crazy. It was a real haunting, no mistake about it. Half the people in the town had lost their minds. Well, so there I was, riding up to Betand, all innocence, trying to find out something about where Mavin was, and the next thing I knew I was in this room with Sylbie, having been instructed to beget. She was crying and carrying on, and I was scared to death. See, I'm being honest. If you don't like that, tough.

"It was more Trandilar who did it than me. I didn't know anything about sex at all, Jinian. Not a shred. I knew it would be awful, so I summoned up Trandilar, and she actually did all the lovemaking and so forth. Of course Sylbie fell for that. Who wouldn't? I would have myself. Trandilar is—well, you know what Trandilar is. So, we begot a baby, which was what we were supposed to do. As it happens, it's likely the very baby who was haunting Betand. At least, so Dorn said when we put the haunting down. He's turned out to be a very nice baby, but I don't love Sylbie, I never did. It would be very easy to love the baby, and that would be pleasant, but not if it means giving up Jinian. If we can work out something including Jinian and the baby, very good. What I got to thinking was, suppose the baby turns out Shifter? Sylbie will fall apart."

"She really had hysterics when you Shifted?"

"Full-fledged, whooping and screaming hysterics. All I did was a snakey little thing to get to the top of a tree, and it set her off."

I had seen some of Peter's snakey little things and was not entirely unsympathetic with Sylbie. "Where is she now?"

"She's up this trail, a league or so. In a cave which I dug for her—took pombi shape to do that, and she didn't like that, either—until I could get back. She's got food and water."

I sighed, sagging back into his arms. It would be nice just to stay here, close held. Spend the night, perhaps, cuddled in furry arms in the hollow of a tree. Too much had happened. Too much was going on.

Too much was going on. Exactly. I drew him down beside me and told him the tale.

“Giants? I never dreamed there were real giants. And Proom?” he whispered when I had done. “Really, Proom? He’s like some kind of fairy godmother following my family around. Mavin, then me, then you. Gods, those amethyst crystals. We’ve got to warn them. They have no idea.”

“None of them have any inkling at all. Not Himaggery, nor Mavin, nor any of the rest of them. But there’s more to it than that.”

I told him then what I suspected. What I’d been worrying over in my head ever since we saw the little crystal mine outside Fangel and talked to old Buttufor.

“I’m afraid it’s true, Peter. Everything the giants said only confirmed it. Up until then, I thought they might be responsible for those yellow crystals, but they’re not. They were as frightened by them as I am.”

His face was as drawn and hopeless as I’m sure mine had been many times in recent days. “What can we do?”

“I don’t know. It may be too late to do anything, but we have to try. That was the lesson I learned in Chimmerdong, Peter. No matter how hopeless it looks, you still have to try. I got a few more of the blue crystals from Proom. You’ll have to take them south with you. Warn Himaggery and Mavin and all the rest. Then suggest to them in the strongest possible way that they stop arguing and get the hundred thousand out of the cavern. And when each one wakes, he or she must have a sliver of this crystal in his mouth. If the ones I have here aren’t enough, then more must be found in Beedie’s land. Perhaps Mavin can get them, and perhaps some of her kindred would help.”

“You’re going with me.”

“It would slow you down. I hope you can take some shape that flies, for that’s what’s needed now. You’ve got to go south. Gamelords, how I prayed for a Shifter outside that cavern.”

“I can’t leave you.”

“You have to leave me. The warning must be brought to our people, Peter. As soon as possible, delaying for nothing at all. I’ll meet you when you return. Ah. Where? Listen, if you follow this trail down to the northwest, past where the village of Bleem was, you’ll come to a trail leading north. The trail forks. The right-hand one goes to the giants, and the left-hand one goes up over the mountain by a huge red pillar of stone. I’ll meet you there, by the red stone, with or without Sylbie. I’ll go get her. Maybe I can find someone to take care of her and the baby, bring them south to Mavin. If not, I’ll keep them with me, but they should be taken farther from Fangel. I don’t like the idea of the baby that close to Valearn.”

He wasn’t listening. But then, he hadn’t been reared on nursery stories of Valearn. “I don’t want to leave you! I’ll carry you with me.”

“I don’t want you to leave me. But you can’t carry me and Sylbie and the baby without wasting time, and we can’t just leave them here alone.” Briefly I let myself melt against him, let all the turbulent feelings I had quelled for season after season burgeon between us until a new kind of storm began to batter at me, melting me. “I don’t want you to leave me. And whichever of us gets to the pillar first is to wait for

the other one—forever, if need be. I don't want you to leave me, but I have to ask you to.”

“Jinian, I swear by all the gods and most of the new ones, if we get out of this ...”

“Yes. Now go.” I didn't watch him, not out of any sense of dismay at the changes, but simply because I was crying and didn't want him to see. I heard odd sounds, a strangled cursing, and then the irregular beat of wings. When I turned at last it was to see a blackwinged form staggering across the sky. Evidently Peter had not recently practiced wings. The thing looked more like a dragon than a bird, and it was not built for speed. Even as I watched, however, the black silhouette elongated, became more slender, more streamlined. It plunged out of sight against the southern clouds.

So much for that. I dried my face, noticing in passing that all my hermitish notions seemed to have left me. So much for the lonely life, then. If there were any future, I would spend it with Peter.

If there were any.

I plodded a league away, seeking the cave, calling softly when I should have been near it, and only after wreathing the area with Inward Is Quiet, a pacifying spell when done in the passive mode, to be sure no one lurked there with evil intent. No response. I walked another league, repeating the call. Nothing.

Now seriously worried, I returned the way I had come, this time casting back and forth either side of the trail. Halfway to the place I'd met Peter, I found it, a cave well dug in sandy soil, half-hidden behind a fallen tree. And tracks around it. Boots. More than one pair. Two parallel lines, where someone's feet had been dragged. The soil still moist. It had not happened long before. A baby nappy drying on a branch. It, too, still damp. Half-hidden under a stone, the baby trousers Roges had sewn, their bright checks showing up against the dun earth.

I didn't need window magic to peer into the past and learn what had happened. Huldra had been watching, through a Seer, perhaps. Through a sending, perhaps.

Or perhaps Valearn herself had hired some Rancelman to help her find the food she yearned for. It did not matter which. More than one person had come here to drag Sylbie and the baby away. Up the hill a way were the tracks of horses, not on the trail. That's why I hadn't seen them as I searched. They did not join the trail to Fangel for another league beyond.

Weariness left me. I went at speed through the waning day, forgetting the ache in my legs. At sunset the trail left the forest, sloped downward along the meadow toward the walls of Fangel. When dark came, the city would lie in a cataleptic sleep; watchers would watch, but they would not be the people of Fangel. Huldra? Valearn? Perhaps the Duke of Betand?

There was no spell I could cast that Huldra might not be able to counter. Worse, if I used any spell at all, anyone competent in the wize-arts could smell it out. My use of the arts would say “Jinian” as loudly as the Fangel curfew gong. The only advantage I had was that they all thought I was dead.

I sat, arms wrapped around knees. Shortly it would be night. If Sylbie was to be saved, it could not be put off until the morrow. On the morrow there might be no Sylbie, no child. The walls of Fangel loomed, the gates still open but shortly to close. I dared not use a spell, not the least one in my art, for Huldra was there and watching, there and waiting. Huldra might have learned much from the return of her sending. Full of Storm Grower's blood and d'bor wife's water, it might have had much to tell her.

So. Get in. Without a spell. Without being seen.

There were wains moving in and out of the north gate when I arrived, hay wains, others that had been loaded with meat and vegetables for the markets and were now returning empty. My hair was thrust up under a cap, my face dirtied, my clothes stained. I walked beside a horse, talking to it, it obligingly hiding me from the wagoner who drove, my face further hidden behind a sheaf of fodder I had picked up along the way. The team hid me not only from the driver but from the guards as well, troubled enough by this great load of hay arriving so late.

“Business?”

“Oh, come down from it, Gorbel. You know my business. I’ve got a load of hay for the residence stables, and I’m late enough without all this.”

“You’re almost too late. Word runs there’s a hunt tonight. Get in and get out.”

“I’d ‘a been in and out except for a broken wheel. Don’t shut the gate ‘til I’m through. Won’t be long.” When the wain turned into a side street, out of sight of the gate, I slipped away into an alley. The late afternoon light made cold blocks of shadow in the streets. People were leaving the park, the alleys. Doors were shutting. A food cart still plied along one alley; I hid my face behind a meat pie, working my way toward the center of the town.

From there one could see in all directions down radiating avenues, almost to the wall. I ensconced myself in a deep doorway, black with shadow. After a time I heard the distant creaking of wheels as the last wagon went out through the gate.

The gate closed with a metallic, clamoring echo.

Nearby, at the residence, the great gong rang its tremorous demand upon hearing, shattering into silence.

The streets were empty. On the western horizon the sun sank in a swollen ball, leaving a stripe of red like a bloody sword upon the horizon. Dusk came, then the rushing dark, then the first light of the full moon setting alternating blocks of gray luminescence and ebon shadow, long diagonal lines of black slanting down the sides of walls and into the street to make hard-edged crevasses of dark. I walked from light to dark to light again, no less conscious of being watched in the darkness than I was in the light. And yet, it was almost an impersonal watching. A machine kind of watching.

High on the walls the twined letters of the Dream Merchant’s monogram glittered and twinkled, little gems gleaming with a light of their own. It was a machine watching! Up there on the walls were eyes.

But who observed what the watchers saw? Was there some deep den in this place where human observers crouched, seeing through these glittering eyes? I thought not, sensed not. The city of Fangel watched for itself, but what it watched for or why it cared, I did not know. There was undoubtedly some action that would bring out the denizens of this place.

Briefly I wondered what would happen if one rang the great gong now, in the middle of the night. The idea sent horrid premonitory shivers down my spine, a kind of visionary grue, as though a door had opened into some unpleasant future.

I shut down the thought, crept around a corner, paused within sight of the residence, its serpentine gates now opened wide.

Somewhere in the city a pombi roared and was answered by another, a howling, grumbling tumult that waxed for a time, then waned into silence. There were beasts loose in the city. And hunters. What had the guard at the gate said about a hunt tonight? For whom? By whom?

Somewhere a baby cried, shockingly close, and a woman's voice hushed it. Echoes from this, from one side, from the other. No direction. I sought the location frantically, running back the way I had come.

Nothing. Nothing but the sound of my own steps magnified. Nothing but the sound of laughter. Laughter. Somewhere. Nasty, chuckling laughter, a sound that reveled in its hunt, in its prey.

Valearn?

Footsteps, not my own. I shrank against the wall, into a hollow there where a heavy door barred entry to the courtyard beyond. Out in the street a skulking figure walked from shadow to shadow, its long staff tickling the stones with a small clicking, barely audible.

Again a pombi roared, closer this time, perhaps only a street away. The skulker turned, mouth stretched wide in a gape of surprise, Ogress fangs exposed to the moon. Yes. Valearn!

She moved too fast for me to follow her. One moment she was there, the next moment gone.

Again the baby cried, was silent.

So. The Ogress was hunting the baby. Sylbie was fleeing from the Ogress. The pombis would eat either the Ogress or Sylbie, though it seemed the Ogress might not have known of their presence. And Jinian . . . What are you doing? I asked myself. You're not being useful here!

Light and shadow. A sound of something panting, a massive body running, scratch of claws upon the stone, heavy lungs heaving as the thing went past. I expelled my breath, tried to melt into the stones, thanking whatever gods there were that I smelled only of greens and hay. That had been something larger than a pombi. I remembered the caged gnarlubar in the procession and cursed silently. What kind of zoo was loose in the streets? How many hunters were there?

Now a horn. A horn and the sound of hooves, far away. An echoing clatter in the hard streets. It was to be a drive. The game was to be driven into the hunter's claws. Or the hunters upon the game? Or both against the wall for the amusement of whoever was coming?

Enough of this. Risk or no risk, I had to find Sylbie and the baby. Huldra or no Huldra, I had to use the art. I fled along the streets, seeking. Somewhere should be something besides blank, closed walls. A window that could be used for window magic, to make a summons. Even a room, an enclosure, a corner of a courtyard.

Everything closed tight, obdurate walls towering over my head, stone streets, black and gray, the moon swimming in silence, far off the horn and nearer than that the howling of things abroad in the night. A chuckle again, echoes, how near? Valearn.

The distant hunt was circling the walls. The sound had come at first from the south, but now it extended east and west from there, a circle growing. As soon as I realized this, I knew what they were doing. They would circle the walls, then drive in along each street, ending at the residence, with all driven before them to a bloody conclusion there. Valearn could merely have waited to have Sylbie driven into her hands.

Again the chuckle. Waiting was not Valearn's way.

I ran quick footed down that street, around the corner. I thought the baby noises had come from this direction. Nothing. Gamelords. I was planning what of the art to use. Assuming that Valearn had none.

Assuming that Huldra was elsewhere, with the hunt, perhaps, not hanging around the next corner waiting to sniff me out.

Abruptly, I saw it. There in the wall next to me was a grill, a rare, narrow window in the wall that separated courtyard from street. I grabbed the bars with both hands and went up it like a thrisbat, up and over the wall and down the other side. Unseen, one hoped. Unseen. I was in a barren little court, barred door at my back, barred gate to one side, grill before my face, blank wall to the other side.

I could not lay a hiding spell on Sylbie if I didn't know where she was. Or, truth to say, I could, but it would have taken too long. Each uncertainty one added into a spell made it take that much longer. All I could use was her name and the baby's name, very important, true, but without knowing where she was, a hiding spell wouldn't do. Besides, Egg in the Hollow wouldn't cover the baby's crying. There was another one I should have learned, one Cat was going to teach me. Damn. Too late. No point thinking about it now. It had to be something else. With the grill before me, I could do window magic. Summoning.

Them to me. Or something else to Fangel, to confuse the issue.

Which made me think of what Queynt had said about not being pregnant when one did summons.

Which made me remember what he had said about summons resulting in mermaids and dryads. Which made me remember the deep dwellers.

Mischievous. Pesky. And childlike.

Valearn sought children.

So. There were only two things I needed that I did not have in my pack, and I found both in that barren little courtyard. Luck? Perhaps. I set them out on the sill, where the iron bars were anchored in the stone, starting the summons silently. Music and Meadow.

The bars were perfect for this window magic because it established that those summoned were barred from me. If the window had been an open one, I would have hesitated to try it.

I called them up, those near, those far, those within sound of my voice, those within the intent of my action. Deep dwellers. By Bintomar. By Favian. By Shielsas. By Eutras. By the scent of this herb, by the sound of this bell, by the color of this stone. By the flame I flicked from a fingertip, by the winding of a hair. Dwellers of the deep, all you childlike creatures of the depths, come up, come up and into Fangel, where Valearn who loves children awaits you.

The first sign I had that something had heard me was the rattle of a cobble in the street. I peered between the bars, quickly brushing the necessities of the spell into my pack. I didn't want the dwellers even looking for me. I had used Valearn's name, and that was where they should be going.

The cobble rattled again, heaved up, banged upon another to reveal a cavity below out of which a pair of luminous eyes stared at the walls of Fangel. What came out of the hole did look childlike. Short.

Slender. Large headed. Arms and legs nicely proportioned. There were not children anywhere with such teeth as those the dweller had, however. When the thing smiled, the grin split its head in two and both halves of the grin were fang-fringed and eager.

Now, quickly, protection from these specific creatures for the baby and Sylbie. That was a simple distraction, done in a moment. It wouldn't keep the dwellers away from the girl, but it would keep them from harming her. And they would find her. I was certain of that.

Up and over the wall once more. Follow the trail of forms pouring out of the earth where they went sniffing, seeking, like hounds upon the trail. They called to one another, chuckling, a pleasant chuckle, not like Valearn's. I remembered hearing them, long ago, when Murzy first did bridge magic over Stonybrook. Almost, one would like to pat them on the head. One did not, wary of those teeth.

A calling from this one to that one, running feet, taloned toes scraping upon the stones. I looked back.

They were still coming up out of the hole. I frowned, reviewing what I'd done. It had been a rather unlimited summons.

Chatter of voices; baby cry again, fretful. I went toward it, through the crowded dweller forms to find Sylbie crouched against a wall, baby tight held against her, just getting ready to scream. They weren't menacing her, just looking at her, but she was ready to scream anyhow.

"Don't," I said. "Get up from there and follow me." I turned on the dwellers. "Valearn," I hissed. "By the stone, by the hair, by the bell, by the flame, by the scent of the herb, find Valearn." They chattered at me, mockingly, knowing well enough what they were here to do and that it suited them marvelously, but still taking time to make a bit of deviltry over it.

Pesky, as Queynt had said.

"What are they?" shrilled Sylbie, barely able to stand.

"Never mind what they are. You and I have to get out of this city. Away."

"They're hunting me. With horses, the Duke said. And with strange creatures he wakened up, like people only not. Like lizards. Like frogs. And when they catch me, they'll kill me."

"Very probably. Which they will do if you insist on standing here talking. There's worse than the Duke abroad. The Ogress is looking for Bryan, there. She wants to eat him." This was perhaps the only thing I could have said to get her moving. Threats to herself paralyzed her. Threats to Bryan mobilized her. Ah, motherhood.

Nature is quite wonderful.

We went back the way I had come, back to the grilled courtyard. I found it by following the line of dwellers, who were still coming out of the hole in the cobbles, single file, seemingly in endless numbers.

One or two of them said "boo" at me as we went past, but I spat a spark at them and they let us be. I went over the wall, unbarred the gate, and let Sylbie in, barring the gate behind her. With any luck at all, the hunt would go by us. Sylbie sank to the floor, sagging there like a bundle of laundry. The baby seemed to have gone to sleep, and I fervently hoped he stayed that way.

I hung in the grill, watching the dwellers pop out of the hole, one after another like so many corks. Far off something screamed. Pombi, I think. There was an avalanche of laughter, dweller laughter, so they'd found some mischief to get up to.

Horns again. Hooves at the end of the street I was watching. I pulled a scarf to hide my face, leaving one eye to peer with.

There at the end of the street came a mounted man, the Duke of Betand, perhaps, or even the Merchant himself. And to either side walked big men in remnants of Gamesmen garb, Tragamors without their helms, with only arms telling what they were.

Elators. Armigers. Blind-eyed, marching as in sleep.

And scaly creatures out of nightmare, armed with whips. The whips were being dragged, slithering on the stones. It sounded like a convention of serpents. I dropped to the floor, crawled over beside Sylbie, and put my arms around her. Whatever else happened, I didn't want her to yell.

I needn't have worried. No one could have heard her if she had screamed her head off. The dwellers had discovered the hunter. The scaly creatures had discovered the dwellers. What had begun in black, mysterious silence under the swimming moon went on in a tumult of sound such as I had never heard and do not wish to hear again.

Laughter, screams, curses, whip cracks, snarls, shouts, horses neighing and screaming, hooves clattering on stone, growling, more mocking laughter, shrieks, howls, and all the time more dwellers popping out of the hole in the ground. Queynt had said they were not common. I think Queynt must have been mistaken.

None of which was helping us escape from Fangel.

I had hoped the dwellers would keep Valearn busy and the hunt would pass by. Neither had happened.

They all met in a general confusion, much of it outside the grill, and there was no possibility of getting through that mess. Moreover, the noise had wakened the baby.

So, I said to myself, on the verge of hysteria, why don't we make it a really good mess? I fixed Sylbie with a hard, hypnotic eye and said, "Can I depend upon you to stay right here until I return for you?" She nodded fearfully and I took it (the more fool I) for agreement. "Don't move," I said. "I'll be back shortly." Up the wall once more, this time to perch upon the top, well above the melee below. The wall stretched for a long block toward the residence, and I ran along its top, unnoticed by any of the participants in the brouhaha. At the corner, two dwellers were strangling a lizard man, and I thanked them for the courtesy as I jumped off the wall and went past. The next street was fairly empty. A pombi was trying to play bakklewheep with two dwellers in the middle of the block, they evading him and he getting angrier about it by the minute. He was too busy to notice me.

Next block was the residence itself, still dark and silent. The great gong hung in its usual place, the striker beside it, and I put every measure of strength I had ever possessed into hitting it, not once or twice but three horrendous times.

Lights came on. Doors opened. People poured out, just as they had done on that morning we had arrived in Fangel. Food carts, guardsmen, populace, more of the lizard warriors, more of other kinds of things, too.

Though their responses were fairly limited by the crystals they had been given, the populace had not been prepared for lizard men or any of the other creatures that swarmed from the Merchant's warehouses. They ran screaming through the streets, their voices betraying terror even as their words did honors to Betand, to Huldra, to Dadrina Dredadeye. They had no other words to scream with and were forbidden the safety of their houses by the tyranny of the gong.

Better than I had hoped, great mobs of them made for the gates. Of course. When the gong rang, the gates were always open. Good. Now back to Sylbie.

I ran openly in the street. There were so many creatures running, people and monsters both, that I was merely one of a throng that spread in every direction, like an anthill that had been overturned.

One block, two, down toward the grilled window ...

To stop, horrified. No. Furious. The gate into the little courtyard was open. Sylbie had unbarred the gate and left.

I found her two streets down, toward the gates.

Unfortunately, Valearn had found her first.

Valearn had the baby. Sylbie had Valearn by one leg. There were a dozen deep dwellers fastened onto Valearn at various points. Valearn was paying no attention. Her fangs were bared and she lowered them to Bryan's throat. . .

And all that had gone before became as nothing.

There was no baby in her hands. There was a boiling, formless, gorbbling cloud, a keening scream of rage and hatred battering her with its sound, its horrible sound, driving her before it like some farm zeller while she screamed in genuine horror, Valearn the Ogress, victim of what she had sought.

I sagged on the stones beside Sylbie, trying to hold my splitting head together against that sound, mouthing, "What in the name of all old gods? ..." There was a break in the howling.

The unborn," she whimpered. "It's the unborn. It's Bryan. He went back to being what he was before. He was frightened. I told her not to frighten him."

"You knew he would do that?"

"He does that. Whenever he gets angry. Or doesn't get fed on time. Or gets too wet."

"You hadn't seen fit to mention it."

She arranged her dress and looked at me with honest-seeming eyes. "I didn't think it was important." Little liar.

"How long will he stay that way?"

"I imagine until he kills Valearn. She bit him."

"And then?"

“And then he’ll find me, wherever I am.” Was there a note of satisfaction in that?

“Outside the walls?”

“Of course. He may be very temperamental, as my mother would say, but he’s quite bright. He’ll find me.”

“Then let’s go, Sylbie. Let’s leave Fangel to its own mighty troubles.” Which we did. On the south side of the city there were wagons parked that had been waiting to enter Fangel on the morrow. I made arrangements with a wagoner and his wife to take Sylbie south, all the way to Zinter. “From there,” I told her, no longer worrying about her safety. “From there, keep going south. Here are enough coins to pay your way. Don’t waste them. Get to the Bright Demesne, south of Schooltown, on Lake Yost. Once there, ask for Mavin. That’s Peter’s mother. I think she’ll want to meet her grandson.” Two of a kind, I thought.

“I was waiting for Peter.” Shyness personified, sweet little look out of the corner of her eye.

“Don’t, Sylbie. Peter’s a Shifter. I think it probable that Byran is, too. This manifestation of his is strange, but it fits with being Shifter. Shifter young need to be reared by their own. I know Bryan comes back to you now, but when he begins to change into snakey things”—why did I enjoy seeing her shudder at the thought?—“he’ll need some older Shifter to control him and teach him. I’m sure if we put our heads together, we can come up with a better plan for you than just waiting for Peter. I hope that doesn’t make you too unhappy.”

“He was different once,” she said, a dreamy look in those violet eyes. “In Betand, he was wonderful.”

“That wasn’t really Peter,” I said brutally, telling her who it really was.

“Trandilar! But she’s ... she’s ...”

“Trandilar is the great Queen of Beguilement. She’s female, and who would understand better what some young female would enjoy? It wasn’t Peter. Now, can I rely on you to go with these people, or will you do something stupid again?”

She nodded. It was a real nod, I think. “I’ll do what you say, Jinian. Tell Peter ... tell him I decided it wouldn’t work.”

“I’ll do that.” I trusted that little nod not at all. I watched from the forest until the wagon left in the morning. Both Bryan and Sylbie were aboard.

CHAPTER TEN

There were many dead in Fangel. The Merchant was one, the Duke of Betand another. The pombis and the gnarlubar had been less successfully hunted than they had planned. I found Valearn’s body just down the street from the place she had bitten the baby. Her neck was broken, it appeared. There was no sign of Huldra.

Nor of Dedrina Dreadeye. On reflection, I thought it likely they had left Fangel before the confusion started and were on their way south with the crystals they had been told to distribute. Of all in that group,

those two were the most dangerous, and I regretted that they still lived.

There was great disorder in Fangel. The dwellers had gone back to their depths, but there were bodies everywhere, and roaming beasts, and those strange creatures that had come out of the Merchant's warehouses. The city was not likely to survive. It had no real reason for being. Already the wagons that had been assembled to enter the gates were turning away. They would find other customers.

I went to the residence. It was luxurious and spacious and empty. I knew which room Huldra had occupied by seeing how it was littered with bits and pieces from her spell casting and from the great flood of mixed blood and water on the floors. Her sending had returned, but Huldra had been gone. She did not know, then, that the giants were dead.

Looking the rooms over, I shuddered. I knew what some of the litter was for, and it was the kind of stuff that the seven would repudiate, always. Still, it was best to know how deeply into the art she was. The answer: deeply indeed. She knew things I did not. Of that I was sure. I picked up what food was available in the place and went out the northern gate. It stood open and unguarded.

A day traveling once again the same old way. Around ever-deepening masses of shadow, down toward Bleem. I didn't go into the village, though I did speak to a herdsman on the road to tell him Storm Grower was dead. If there were any left there or any who had returned, let them enjoy that news. The next day I got to the red pillar of stone. I had seen it from the valley before. Up close it was even more imposing, an obelisk that pointed a long black finger of shadow down into a little valley, much damaged by storm but with a small lake sparkling at its bottom.

The evening was spent thinking before the fire, pulling the shreds of evidence together. I stared for a long time at the blue crystal. I didn't taste it, just stared at it. There was no one near to make demands upon me. No rescuing to be done, no sneaking or slying. No great white roads to be repaired. Merely quiet in the evening with the fire making small scrolls of smoke, ephemeral writing upon the slate of the sky, meaning flowing into meaning and mystery into mystery.

And, on thinking it over, I decided I had been right.

Right all along. Everything I had told Peter was true. All the evidence pointed in one way and one way only. I felt as I had felt so long ago, traveling toward Bleer with Peter, when he put the clues to a mystery in my hands and asked me to make sense of it. Now, as then, all the pieces were in my hands, or in my head. The great flichhawk who had granted me a boon in Chimmerdong, and the d/bor wife, and the gobblemole. The story of Little Star and the Daylight Bell. The Oracle.

The Eesties. Yellow crystals and blue, separated by a thousand years of time, more or less. What was a thousand years, after all? Even to Vitior Vulpas Queynt it was a mere lifetime. My illness in Chimmerdong. The diagnoses of Bartelmy of the Ban, the Dervish, my mother. All these. And they did make a kind of horrible sense. No matter how I turned them, there was no other explanation. Only this one.

So. Could anything be done?

If anything could be done, who would do it? Not one young Wize-ard alone, surely. It was all very well for Bartelmy of the Ban, my mother, to set me a gigantic task in Chimmerdong, saying it was mine and none other's. No one's life had hung on that. Had seemed to hang on that, I amended. If I had failed, things were no worse. Though I had succeeded, were they any better?

But this. This meant an ending. For all of us. For everything. Tree and flower, hill and road, sea and shore, man, woman, child, all beasts, all birds, all fishes.

And though I might do what I could alone, surely it would be better if a disciplined body of persons were to work at it as well.

So. I thought about that for some time. Finally, I resolved upon a sending. Not an eater of blood, like Huldra's, but a seeker of persons. It did not take a blood sacrifice, at least not much of one. A few drops of my own, was all. I sent it out into the world to seek Bartelmy of the Ban. She had said we would meet again. Why not now? Now, when I needed her. The sending pulled at me. I was like the reel on a fishing pole; it was the line with the hook; and it pulled at me, reeling out and out and out until there was nothing left of me at all. Only the line, spun into the world, far, far beyond any place I could see. I lay upon the ground, close-wrapped in my cloak, and let the line spin out.

For a very long time, I knew nothing. Then the line reeled in, restoring me to myself. The hook had caught something. I lay on a long bank above a length of flat that could only be a buried stretch of road. Down this flat the Dervish came, a whirling silver cone balanced on its tip, blurring with motion, settling before me into a still column of fringed quiet.

"Jinian, Dervish daughter," it said.

"Bartelmy?" I replied from the ground. It had not sounded exactly like Bartelmy and yet almost like.

"No. She is not far from here. I was closer, however. I am one of her near kindred, alerted to expect your coming."

"Even I did not know I would be coming this way."

"Still, Bartelmy had thought it likely. When your sending came, we were not surprised. A Seer's vision, perhaps." Murzemire Hornless, I thought. Who had not been distressed at my going into the north. Was it because she had known what would happen? Had she known why I would leave the others?

"You say you expected my coming. Have you plans concerning me?"

"Not plans precisely, since we do not know why you have come. Provisions, certainly, for one not exactly a Dervish. A rare thing among us to provide for one outside our company." The Dervish gestured off down the flat stretch. "If you are strong enough to rise and walk?" I struggled to my feet. The line had been reeled in, but I was still weak enough to stagger.

"Heat food for yourself. I can wait." The Dervish not only waited, but helped me by gathering sticks for the fire and talking gently about trees and clouds while I ate. Much refreshed, I buried the fire and stood ready to walk beside the Dervish, who surprised me by walking beside me, stride on stride. It noticed my surprise. "We walk, sometimes. Sometimes we eat, drink. Rarely, we sleep." It made a sound, almost like a chuckle.

"You astonish me," I murmured. "That sounded almost like laughter."

"We even laugh, sometimes. Bartelmy is among the most serious of us. She finds little to laugh about. I can find it amusing to walk beside a Dervish daughter who is no Dervish, who is a Beast-talker, so I am told. Speak to that owl yonder and tell me what it says." The Dervish gestured and I saw a tiny dot upon a branch, so far at the limit of vision it could scarcely be seen at all.

It was too far to speak in its language, so I spoke to it silently and it replied in muted tones which floated toward us on the wind. "It says, "Good day,"" I said. "As would any polite and sensible beast." The Dervish laughed again, a very small sound, but unmistakably amusement.

"Where are we going?"

"The pervasion of the Dervishes is nearby."

"What is your name?"

"Cernaby of the Soul."

"What do they mean, your names? Bartelmy of the Ban? What is that? Of the Soul? What sense does it make?"

"If you have ever lain beneath Bartelmy's Ban, you would know. As for me, I can see souls, Dervish daughter. As you would see a flame burning. I see yours now, hot and red with angry pity. It must itch you, burning like that."

This surprised me, sure as I was I had achieved a kind of balance. "I suppose yours are never like that."

Cernaby did not answer, merely turned to lay her hands upon my eyes, like a mask. I could see through them to the flames that surrounded her, blue as the noon sky, cool and limpid as water. I looked down at myself to see my hands and arms, blossoming with heat.

"You can dim it," the Dervish whispered. "Watch it, concentrate upon it, think of it turning orange, then yellow, then green. Finally blue, blue as water." She laughed a little. "As your dams of the seven would say, 'Consider water.'"

With Cernaby's hands across my eyes, I could do nothing else. The flames upon me leapt and danced as I watched them, thinking them faded, thinking them cooled. At last they were green as grass upon me, only an occasional flicker of yellow lighting the edges of the flames. I could cool them no further than that. Cernaby took her hands away and I blinked up at the evening stars. I had not been conscious of the time passing. "It will come easier next time," said Cernaby. I felt a little calmer, that was all, together with a little core of anger at her having wasted so much time.

We walked farther then, along the winding flat among the jungle trees, then up a rising trail that wound above the trees toward two pillars of stone high upon the ridge. We looked down to our left to see mighty hedges, solid as walls, twisting, turning, winding upon themselves as far as I could see.

"The Great Maze lies below us," said Cernaby, "league upon league of it, from the mountains to the sea. When last the band marched here, it spent ten years marching through the edges of the Maze. It is said there are cities in the Maze lost from all outside contact for millennia. It is said no man knows the extent of it or the way to its center." She pointed to this impenetrable wall of foliage below the trail we were on. "That is the edge of it."

"What is it, exactly? I had always thought it was roads with walls or hedges, full of misleading turnings."

Cernaby again made the sound of quiet amusement.

“More than that, Jinian. Men can climb walls, cut through hedges. We will go a little way in and I will show you.” Along our trail several little paths went down the slope into openings in the hedges. She spun down one of these. I followed.

A narrow door was cut into the solid green. A narrow path stretched inward. Cernaby stood upon it at some small distance, where it made a turning. “Here,” she called. “Come to me here.” I took a step.

Onto the rim rock of a high cliff, so near the edge I staggered back in fear. Below me lay a shadowed bowl of green. The dawn, or sunset, was on my face and on the rock at my feet. From above came a shrieking, a banshee howl, mightier than any number of voices. I looked up to see a dart of silver falling, bellowing as it came, downward and downward, the sound shivering the rocks on which I stood so that I fell to my knees, hands over ears, watching in amazement as the thing landed in the bowl, as a door opened in it and something strange came out. Strange? So I felt, and yet it was obviously human. Nothing strange about it? Why this feeling of intense curiosity, this thought of weirdness?

“Jinian,” I heard the voice. “Turn to your left and walk toward that midnight tree, the first one. Go behind it.” Cernaby’s voice. “Jinian!” Commanding now. Obediently, I turned and made my way to the midnight tree, outpost of a grove. I moved behind it...

Onto the Wastes of Bleer. It was as I had seen it last, barren and cold and dry. Full of thorn and devil’s spear. Heaped with wind’s bones, which were not wind’s bones at all but the bones of the ancient creatures of this place. Coming toward me out of the eastern sky was a glowing ball of flame. No sound, only this ball, hurtling toward me. “Jinian. Quickly, to your right, and down into that little empty crevasse.” I did not like the look of the doom approaching so made quick work of the directions; half a dozen steps to my right and down ...

Into a hall, vast and gray, where my footsteps echoed whispering down corridors of pillars. From a high window came a crowd roar so threatening I turned instinctively to flee.

“No!” cried the voice in warning. “Turn again. The other way! Beside the pool.” Resolutely I turned back, stumbling across a fallen pedestal, kicking a silvery lamp that lay there in my path. I caught myself. Another pedestal lay across the way, the book it had held flung against the far wall. I walked beside the low coping of a pool, coughing as a fitful draft blew smoke into my eyes, so that I stepped blindly...

Onto a road. Cernaby was beside me. “Here,” Cernaby said, stepping in a certain direction. I followed. We stood outside the Maze on the path we had left only moments before. High on the ridge the tall stones brooded above us.

“What is it?” I asked. “I can’t believe it!”

“Who can? One time long since, Mind Healer Talley came here to confer with the Dervish paramounts. She spent long hours within the edge of the Great Maze and left at last, saying the places within it were memories.”

“Memories?”

“She did not explain. We did not ask, for at that time we were greatly concerned with another thing. The Maze, we then felt, was not the greatest mystery of Lom. There are many things about Lom we do not understand.”

“Lom, Cernaby? Is that what this district is called?”

“Lom. The world. This world. We took it from the language of the Shadowpeople, whose word for the soil is “lom”.”

I realized suddenly it was so. What had the little people called to me when I’d released them in Fangel?

“Lolly duro balta lus lom.” Walk well upon the lovely land. I turned to examine the leafy walls of the Maze behind me. “You say the band marched through that? How could they?”

“They hired a guide. The only guide. They put on blindfolds and marched to the music. They didn’t turn. At night, the guide would stop them in some relatively safe place until the morning, when they were blindfolded again. It’s the only way.”

“But you . . .”

“But I know a few short ways in and out. Not to the center. No one does, except the guide. Perhaps not even the guide. No, I know only a few short ways.”

“How did you learn them?”

“Oh, step on step. One step in, turn and take one step, take that step back. Turn and take another. Take that step back. And again. Each time returning to the same place, building the chain longer with each try. In that first short chain you walked, there are many other ways out to other places.” Cernaby made the amused sound once again. “I don’t know what good it does to know that. Except to show a Dervish daughter what to be wary of.”

“Who is the guide?” I already knew but wanted it verified. Who else could it be?

“Bartelmy tells me you have met it. It calls itself the Oracle.”

“The Oracle!” I spat. “It has probably had no time for guiding recently. It is too busy giving comfort to giants and distributing death crystals to the unwary!”

“We know of the death crystals. One more reason why we are gathered in the pervasion now, to talk of this.” We went up the last little way to the ridge. At either side the great stones peered down at us, an electric tingle between them. Had I been alone, I don’t think they would have let me pass. Cernaby stopped, looking downward. “And we have arrived at the pervasion.” We looked down on a long clearing through which the road ran, bulging at the center into a wide oval, then narrowing once more to continue over the next rise. To either side were small houses. No, I thought after a moment, not really large enough to be houses.

Small, one-room places perhaps two manheights square, neatly made, but little more than sheds. They reminded me of the small outbuildings in which domestic zeller are shut at night to protect them from prowlers.

Outside each of these stood a Dervish, still as a tree.

“What are they doing?” I asked.

“Thinking. Practicing. Becoming.”

“How long will they stand like that?”

“Some days, perhaps. Some for a season. Or until the next obligatory takes place in which they must join. There is an obligatory going on now in the next node.” The Dervish led on, between the rows of silent figures.

I sensed that the very air around her was under tension. It vibrated like the string of an instrument, full of silent harmonics. I could hear them, could have sung them had I the voice for it, and it seemed that the soil sang in this same way. Soil. Trees. Air. We moved over the next small rise.

Again the road bulged into an oval, paved space, this time occupied with silent ranks of Dervishes, all moving together like a wind-waved field of grain.

“An obligatory,” whispered Cernaby.

Below us the Dervishes spun and stilled, advanced, retreated, twisted with outstretched arms, then fell into pillar quiet. From somewhere music came, at times insistent, at others almost lost among the sounds of the trees. It was the previous music made manifest, and it was some time before I realized it came from the Dervishes themselves.

“They dance their dedication,” whispered Cernaby.

She laid her hands over my eyes, revealing the pure blue flames in which the Dervishes moved. It reminded me of something, an elusive thought that came and slipped away.

“Shhh,” whispered Cernaby. “They are almost at an end. We will wait until they finish.” The dance went on for some time, making me wonder when it had begun that so long a time was considered “almost at an end”. Still, my impatience faded as I watched. The surging movement was hypnotic, relaxing, like watching waves move around rocks on a quiet shore. This relaxation troubled me.

Deep inside, I chafed against it.

At last the music faded into silence, the dance into immobility. This, too, was part of the obligatory, for they stood still in silence for some time before the Dervishes moved away toward their huts.

“It is likely Bartelmy has arrived,” said Cernaby. “We will go to her cell. We have arranged it so that you may stay there as well, though this is never done once a child is past babyhood.” That sound of amusement. “We are a solitary people. Perhaps we have carried our reclusion too far.”

Bartelmy was waiting for us beside one of the whitepainted huts, a silver pillar beside the weathered gray of the door. She said, “I said I would come to you, and you to me. So we have come. Welcome, Jinian Footseer.”

“Call her rather Dervish daughter,” said Cernaby, a note of admonition in her voice. “She calmed herself into the green, Bartelmy, and stood for half a day of the obligatory.”

“Would we have expected less?”

“Yes, considering how she was reared. I was doubtful, Bartelmy.”

“I was not.” The pillar turned a little, as though to examine me more closely. I heated a bit at this, at their

talking of me as though I could not hear them.

I smiled nonetheless. "Is this to be another game without a name, Bartelmy? Like the one in Chimmerdong?"

The pillar shook itself, a negation. "No, Jinian. Except that you are one always eager for answers, and there are not always answers. If we have an answer, we will give it to you. If we do not give it, you will know we do not have it to give."

They did not know I had come to give them answers. Not yet, though. "You expected me!" It was half a challenge.

"Murzemire Homloss told me long since you would come here at this time. Yes. We expected you."

"But you do not know why I came?"

"No. Murzemire saw you. She saw Storm Grower. She saw Dream Miner. She saw shadow. She saw the Daylight Bell, broken. And when she had seen all this, she told us it might mean nothing much." Cernaby laughed. "Nothing much."

I realized the laughter had grief in it. Perhaps they had seen something of the truth. "Nothing much." The words spun among us in the quiet clearing, without reverberation, without echo, and yet without end. "Nothing much." Said humorously. Said without consequence. Said without anger. Said in the blue, my heart said; said in the blue they so much cultivated. In me fury bloomed like red flowers. "Nothing much." This calm interchange had the very flavor of Dervishes in it. I shook away the spell the dance had put me under, demanding concentration from myself. It would not do to fall under their sway, their patience, their strangeness. There was too much patience among Dervishes. The time for patience had passed.

I had not planned what I did next. I had never done it before. It came out of my belly, out of my lungs, my heart, all at once full blown. Before I knew what I was doing, my hands were out and I was making that gesture which the seven called "Eye of the Star". It was an Imperative. It allowed no choice. Though I did not know its meaning—might never, so the seven had said—I put all my fury behind it, all my red flame. I felt it going out of me like a shout, a summons, a demand.

They stared at me from behind their fringes. Had anyone ever evoked the Eye of the Star upon them before? There was only one spell stronger than this; one I would probably never know enough to use.

"Nothing much?" I said. "A little more than that, I think. Storm Grower sat in a cavern making moonlets fall upon this world, destroying cities. Dream Miner sat there as well, corrupting the messages of the world into filthy intent and evil consequence. Hell's Maw was his doing, and the corruption of Pfarb Durim, and they only a few among many. Even now his will speeds south to be spread among our kindred there. The giants are dead, but their evil lives.

"Knowing nothing of this, I came north. I came, to be with Peter. Nothing seemed as important as that. As we traveled, we began to find dead people, men, women, children, even babies, all along the roads, all with yellow crystals hung upon them or sucked away to shards. Peter saw it, but it did not seem to tell him anything. Queynt saw it. Him, it troubled, but he did not see in it what I did.

"We came to Bloome, and Bloome led us to Fangel, where the Dream Merchant was—with guests. Huldra. Valearn. Dedrina Dreadeye. And with captives. Sylbie, a girl Peter had known in Betand, and Sylbie's baby, Peter's baby. And two people from far over the Western Sea, people Mavin

Manyshaped had known years ago. Beedie. Roges. And with them a creature so strange I can scarcely believe it...”

“Come inside,” said Bartelmy with enormous effort. It took much for her to break the Eye, but she did it. “Cernaby also. We will forget the eremitic laws. We will sit together, drink together, talk together...”

The pillar that was Bartelmy was shivering in the effort of control. I knew why. Dervishes were not constrained by others. I had evoked the star-eye upon her. I was being allowed this presumption only because I was Bartelmy’s daughter, but if we went inside, all urgency would be set aside. Oh, I longed to be patient, quiet, to put decision aside, to take time ...

I made the gesture again, even stronger. “There is no time,” I said in my Dervish voice, cold and demanding.

From the edges of my eyes I saw a multitude gathering about us, a thousand silver pillars upon the hillside, turned toward me. There was fury there, barely withheld. They had felt my summons. Their resentment was a palpable menace. Bartelmy wanted to save me.

Too late. I could not be saved.

I said, “All the time we might have spent talking has been wasted away. Listen to me, Dervishes! The pissyyellow crystals come out of this world—this Lom, as you call it. A kind of milk secreted in pockets of stone, and out of this milk a crystal grows. Little tubes run from the crystal pockets down into the earth, deep into the rock. The giants beneath the earth sent their messengers out to find who made these things. We have traveled league upon league wondering who made these things. You have gathered here to discuss who it is who makes these things.

“They are not made!

“They are not made by man or by any other creature. They come from the world itself. The woman from over the sea calls them message crystals. The little old man at the crystal mine says there are no more blue ones, no more green ones, only these yellow ones, only these death ones.”

“We know.” Bartelmy’s voice, hushed hesitant, plaintive, beating my will away. Was she begging for my life from her kin? “We would talk of this matter, Jinian. Consider it.”

“There is no time to consider it! When Beedie told me what the crystals are called over the sea, I knew then. These are not dreams which the world dreams. These are messages which the world sends. To itself. To all parts of itself. To bunwit and tree rat, to gobblemole and d’bor wife. To Shadowman and gnarlibar, krylobos and pombi. To Eesties. To mankind. And there is only one message now. Death. Peace and a final contentment and death.”

She cried at me with the last of her strength. “Why does the world want its creatures dead? We have known this for some time. But we do not know why.”

“Listen to me!” I stamped my foot in my frenzy then, knowing I must be blazing red to their perception, seeing them shiver in an agony of what? Anger? “Listen. You’re not understanding me. The messages are not to the creatures. The messages are to all parts of itself.

“Do not ask me why the world wants its creatures dead! Ask why it wants itself dead!” Stillness then. A thousand Dervish pillars standing around me, not moving. The fringes did not shiver but merely hung, still,

as though extruded of some hard metal. The anger was gone as suddenly as it had come.

Nothing moved, and yet I felt something go out from them, a hard blow, a wave of... something. Pain? No. More a question. I looked up to see them there in their thousands. I stood at the center of an ominous circle, so silent, so utterly silent.

I made the gesture of release.

“Itself,” said Bartelmy at last. “Sisters. Dervishes. Could we have been mistaken?”

“Mistaken?” A breath. A sigh.

“Mistaken?” I demanded. “Mistaken in what? What have you done?”

“Not done,” breathed Cernaby. “Been.”

“Long ago,” said Bartelmy, “far in the past, there were creatures who ran the roads of Lom. Looking deep into the past, we have seen them.”

“I saw them, too,” I said impatiently. “When I looked into the past in Chimmerdong.”

“But those creatures run the roads no longer. Not since we came. Lom cries for this journey to be made, this endless journey.”

“The blind runners do it,” I said. “All the time. Every year.”

“Not correctly. Not as it should be done. They cannot. The roads are broken. And they are still too near to ... to humanity.”

“And you are not?”

“We have bred ourselves for centuries to run the roads of Lom as we believed another creature did before us. We have believed this to be Lom’s will. But if this is Lom’s will, then Lom would not will to die. If Lom wills to die, then what does Lom will for us?”

“To die also,” I said flatly. “I don’t know what you Dervishes have been up to all these centuries, Bartelmy of the Ban. I don’t know what Barish thought he was doing fooling around with that hundred thousand Gamesmen under the mountain. I don’t know what any of us thought we were doing. All I know is that every sign points to this world wishing *itself* dead.”

“But this must be recent...”

“Not all that recent, no. Within old Buttufor’s lifetime, certainly. He can remember the crystals coming out blue and green when he was young. He is over a hundred now. But it has not been long.”

“Why? Why?”

“Listen to me,” I said again. “I’m not going to waste my time asking why. I’ve been thinking about this for days now. In Bloome I thought about it. Outside Fangel, it seemed sure. After leaving the others, I did nothing but think about it. If a person wished himself dead, we would assume he was sick. Injured, perhaps. Well, we know well enough this world is injured. You told me that, Bartelmy. It was you told

me to fix the roads in Chimmerdong. Was that only an exercise? Some kind of lesson you wished me to learn? Or did it mean something?

“And if it meant something, then why are you here? Why are you doing your dances when there are roads broken everywhere? Why are we wondering why the world wishes itself dead when we are doing nothing to heal it?”

“How do you know this?” A sigh again. Was there a hint of anguish in it? Of injured pride?

“I know it because I am Dervish born, Gamesman reared, wize-art trained. I know it because I am Jinian Footseer and have run those roads while you all were studying to do so. I know it because I have seen all its signs and portents across all the lands, seen the clues to it where I have walked and ridden, heard its voice in the quiet reaches of the night. I know it because I know it.

“I know it because logic tells me it must have happened. A world, this one, Lom, which has existed for untold time, which is in balance with itself, which is healthy, which sends messages to all parts of itself in order to stay in balance, to stay healthy. Messages to groles and Shadowmen and Eesties. And into this world comes man, the destroyer, for whom no message has been made.

“What then? What does logic say must have happened? It says that Lom must have made a message for men and about men. A blue crystal, telling men their place in this world. Showing them the balance. And the message was sent.

“But evil walked upon the roads of the world, evil and envy and pride. Evil which did not want man in this world at all. Evil which believed man would die if deprived of the message meant for him. Not knowing Lom would die, instead. So the message meant for man was stolen away, taken into deep caverns and hidden there, where no creature might receive it.

“Except Queynt, who was given the message by the Shadowpeople in the long ago.

“Except a few, here and there, who found it without knowing what they found.

“Except the people of a chasm far over the sea, who found it, knew what they had found, and brought it to Mavin Manyshaped, their friend.

“Except for Jinian, who took that message and carried it with her and carries it now!” I staggered. Suddenly my legs wouldn’t hold me and I plopped to my knees, shaking. “A message meant for me. And you. And every human person here. And for all other creatures as well.” I had given almost all of them to Peter, retaining only eight or ten. I took one of the small blue crystals out of my pouch, almost dropping it from trembling fingers. I passed it first to Bartelmy. “There isn’t much of it. Make it go as far as you can ...”

“Hold!” The voice hummed from the back of the throng, a reverberating, gonglike sound. “Hold, Bartelmy of the Ban! I, Marno of the Morning, speak. You hold a crystal in your hand. Has Jinian Footseer tasted it?”

“I have not.”

“Then why should we?” The voice was cold and scornful. My heart sank beneath the weight of it.

“I will if you wish. I have not.”

“Why have you not?”

“Because I know what it says. And I am vain and proud and would do the message’s will of my own will, knowing I do it of my own sense and intelligence, without compulsion. But if I cannot gain your understanding in any other way, I will taste it.”

“Taste it, then!”

“No!” This was Bartelmy, in a voice that ached. “This is a Dervish daughter. My daughter. If she would do a thing of her own will, is there any Dervish would say her nay? And if I would do a thing of my will, is there any Dervish who will deny me? So, what I do, I do of my own will.” The crystal disappeared beneath the fringes of her veil and in a moment reappeared to be thrust into Cernaby’s hand.

It passed from there beneath the concealing fringes, here and there, mouth to hand to hand to mouth, from one silver pillar to another. Some refused it. Most tasted it. I gave them all the others but three. Fringes shook, quivered, bodies turned. One reeled into another. Some cried out. Then stillness. The Dervishes were there in their thousands, assembled rank on rank, and the rear ranks quivered now as the remnant of the crystal passed.

“How long?” asked Bartelmy. “How long, Jinian?”

“How long? How long ago did this world send us that message? You guess, Bartelmy. Soon after we came here, I would suppose. If we came here a thousand years ago, perhaps a few hundred less than that. More or less.”

“And who robbed us of it?”

“I don’t know. I suspect, but I don’t know. A race of creatures, ambitious, proud, who did not want this man on this world. A race of beings who sought to drive me away, who gathered the message crystals up, every one, and who took them to the cavern where the giants dwelt. Some creature which hated man.” I could not identify that creature. I suspected. Only suspected.

“Is it too late?”

“It may be. I suppose we could give up with good grace. Lie down and die. Disport ourselves for a time, like lice on a corpse. Or go on dancing while the shadow comes. The shadow is part of this, I’m sure. You’ve seen it Bartelmy. I’ve seen it. Perhaps all you Dervishes have seen it. It flows now, from somewhere, like a flood. Where is it coming from?” Silence greeted this, but they did not disagree. “Of one thing I am very sure. If this world dies, we will not survive it long, but we might play while there is time.

“Or we might try, whether it is too late or not. Try to get the roads fixed. Try to get some runners on them. Yourselves, since that’s what you’ve been breeding for. What race ran these roads before we came?”

“Eesties. We have seen so with the deep look.”

“Eesties? Really?” This did surprise me. “I thought it might be Shadowpeople.”

“No. Eesties. We look into the past and see them spinning upon the roads, spinning into the ancient

cites. They spin. As we do. Those odd doors in Pfarb Durim? Larger at the top? They are Eesty doors. It was an Eesty city. All across the world there are ruins with those doors.”

“That’s why you’re Dervishes. You copied them.”

“We tried. It is said one of them helped us originally.”

“You copied them, but then just sat about waiting?”

“We thought ... we thought the day would come. We were holding ourselves in readiness for the day.”

“The day when someone else would fix things?”

“The day things would be fixed, somehow. Yes.” A collective sigh. Then, “Jinian, why was it you who saw this?”

I considered this. How had I known it? How did anyone know things? “I don’t know, Bartelmy. There always has to be someone to see things first. By the time Queynt gets to Himaggery in the south, others may have seen. Surely—oh, surely you will not merely stay here in your pervasion and let it happen.”

“What can we do?”

“Mavin told me you have powers. You changed Himaggery into a beast one time.”

“We made him think he was.”

“Then you can make Tragamors and Sorcerers think they are road builders. You can make Demons think they are hunting fustigars to seek out whoever robbed us of the message. You can make Healers think they are Lom fixers. I don’t know. You can do something!”

“If there are more of these crystals across the sea,” said Cernaby, “they must be brought here. Shared out.”

“Better late than not at all,” came a voice from the ranked multitude. “Better a tardy lover than a lonely bed.” A quiver of what could have been laughter ran through the ranks. Laughter? I was shocked at this, realizing only later that it was the laughter of despair.

“You can help Himaggery decide how to get west over the sea and back again. It took Beedie and Roges three years, and we don’t have three years to spend. Mavin flew there, Beedie said. Which means Shifters can fly there and bring crystals back. Oh, Dervishes, I beg you ...”

“You need not beg,” said Bartelmy. “I told you once to stop crying and get to work. I will not wait for you to say the same to me ...”

“Mother,” I said, shivering at the sound of the word in my mouth. “Mother. Do not take time to confer. Can you truly set your patience aside?”

“When we must. Yes, Jinian. When we must.” They went. I was not sure which way they went, except that in a few moments all were gone. Beside me the door to the hut stood open. Within were two narrow beds, a table with two chairs. A cupboard. They had indeed set their laws aside and prepared for my visit. I sat at the table, laid my head upon my arms, and wept as I had not wept since Chimmerdong,

weariness mostly. Sadness, perhaps. And after weeping I lay upon the narrow cot and slept.

When I woke Cernaby was standing in the doorway.

“I waited,” said the Dervish. “We wanted to know what you were going to do next, and Bartelmy thought you might need one of us to carry a message somewhere, to someone.”

“Where are the others?”

“Some have gone south to others of our race. Some to find Queynt and the rest and be sure they reach the south safely. Some into the Shadowmarches in search of the Shadowpeople, though it may be we will need Mavin to help in that search. Some to the caves where the hundred thousand lie. A few to the giants’ cavern to see whether any of the blue crystals remain there when the waters drain away. Some to carry messages among those others, to keep us all informed.”

I stared at her incredulously. “So quickly! I did not think it possible.”

“We are not benighted, Jinian. If we have had any fault, it has been too much pride. We had a revelation from our founder. We had Seers’ visions which we misinterpreted. We had what we thought was the answer and we troubled to look no further. Who ever believes that time will end before one’s solution can be put into place?”

I laughed, coughing. “Give me a moment, Cernaby. You have moved faster than I can.” I rose, walked around the room, found bread in the cupboard, ate some of it with a cup of water from the pitcher on the table. “It seems I am part of this matter. Not of my own doing, but merely because Murzemire Hornloss saw me involved in it. If for no other reason than that, I must play out that part.” I thought long on this. Then, “Cernaby, my thanks. No. This is one of those games without a name and which I keep getting involved in. Let me play it out, I do not think your presence will matter. Though I would welcome your company, perhaps your company is not what is most needed. I would rather you carry a message for me. To Murzy—Murzemire Hornloss. Tell her what we found. Tell her to raise the sevens. In all my dreams I can think of only three forces in this land unified enough to do anything sensible: the sevens, the Immutables, and the Dervishes. Himaggery and Barish will argue. Mavin will go kiting off on her own wild way. The pawns? Well, what powers have we left them that would make them useful now? Peter has destroyed the Magicians. Beedie’s people are far away. So. Go to the Immutables, and carry the word to Murzemire with my love.”

Cernaby did not linger. There was no sentimentality among the Dervishes, there was little enough sentiment. When she was gone, I was alone in the pervasion with only my thoughts for company. I went through a number of the huts, packing what food I found. There was not much. Evidently the Dervishes lived on air, or sunlight. It would not have surprised me much to learn this was true. When I had repacked everything, as tightly and neatly as possible, I went back the way I had come. Wherever I was going next, I wanted Peter with me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I arrived at the pillar of red stone. Peter wasn’t there. I didn’t really expect him. It would have taken some time for him to get to the Bright Demesne—assuming that’s where everyone was, which might not be the case—and convincing them of anything might take longer. Unless he’d simply put the crystals in their soup. Which I abhorred philosophically but thought might be pragmatically justified. As long as it wasn’t me it was done to.

Since it was possible I might have a long wait, I made a good camp, summoning up a few flood-chucks to help me with it. They explained they were very busy cleaning up the storm damage, and I explained that I understood all that, but I needed a camp nonetheless.

We bowed to one another and said it all once again.

Finally we compromised on a tightly woven hut thatched with reeds on the shore of a nearby lake. They threw in a latrine as lagniappe. We bowed again, satisfying one another with our mutual respect, and then I gave them one of the blue crystals, which they shared before moving away very thoughtfully into the woods. I had not even taken time to consider before giving them the crystal. It seemed right they should have it.

I needed the hut to keep the shadow out as I had needed a house long ago in Chimmerdong. Shadow had lain deep on Chimmerdong, and I'd learned of its evil ways at first hand, getting myself shadow bit in the process. It lay thickly now in these northlands, flowing from somewhere in an unending flood.

Even if there had been no shadow, a hut would have been a comfortable thing to have. Though Storm Grower was dead, it might rain. There were pombis rambling about in the wood. I might have to wait a very long time. Forever, if necessary, I think we had said. So.

I would wait. And watch.

Each day was spent wandering, looking, finding different lookouts from which one might spy upon the world. Each vantage point was more depressing than the last, for there were great swatches of forest dying, strange stinking smokes rising from far valleys. One day I thought of going back to the cavern of the giants but did not. Funk, I think. I couldn't face it. My imagination told me too vividly what I would find there.

Having rejected that idea, I decided to visit the ridge above the Great Maze. Since it was a high point, I could see a long way from there. It occurred to me I might see Peter returning.

It wasn't far, actually. Less than a half day's scramble.

It was saddening to look down into the empty pervasion, and the hill wasn't as lofty as I remembered it.

Still, it gave a good view out over the Great Maze and the lands sloping down to the sea. I scouted around in the pervasion, robbing a few huts of their stale bread it wasn't bad dipped in tea—and a pot to boil water in. Somewhere between Storm Grower and Fangel, I'd lost mine.

I built a small fire at the foot of one of the stone pillars, brewed some tea, and set myself to watch the southern sky.

Birds. Clouds. Nice white ones, for a change. Sitting there with the fragrant breeze in my face, it was hard to believe that the world was dying beneath me. Grasses nodded; small things crept about making nests. It didn't feel dead or dying, and yet I knew it was. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted Peter, and the less likely it seemed he was going to come. The sky was empty.

I looked down for a while, to rest my eyes.

I saw it coming out of the Great Maze.

It came from the Maze itself. There was a movement at the edge of the Maze, a puzzling kind of change. I stared at it. The hedge of the Maze was no different.

Nothing was entering or leaving it. And yet...

Something had changed. There was a new configuration of light. Something shifted. For a time I gazed at it, uncertain, and then it moved. The shadow. Flooding out of the Maze and flowing downward, along the trail.

An endless gray tide, covering the world.

From the Maze? Why from the Maze?

I spent a few minutes in futile cursing, then headed back for my camp. I'd have to find out as much as possible, before Peter came. He might drop directly into it. Be frozen, as Himaggery had been before Bartelmy had rescued him. Oh, by the Hundred Rotten Devils, I sighed, why now?

Finding out anything would be like playing with an avalanche, rather. Toying with an angry dragon. I had talked long with Mavin. I knew what the shadow could do. Still, one had to know, as Queynt would say. One had to know.

Back at the hut I considered the matter. What was there around me that still retained some integrity? The forest was smashed, riven, and storm-wrecked. The very mountains were torn. About the only thing around that looked whole was the lake we had built the hut beside, a charming little oval of shallow water, set in reeds, decked with lilies, full of fish and small plopping things. Though the forested banks were reduced to rubbish and the lake itself muddied from landslides upstream, still it had a certain immaculate charm left about it.

The hut had one window, which I used for the window magic. As in Chimmerdong, I hung my blanket before it to serve as a curtain. Then I called up the lake.

I don't know quite what I expected. Some bubbly shape, perhaps, with fish for eyes. Some reedy thing with lilies in its hair. What came was a rounded silver dart, not unfishlike in shape, curved on every side and reflecting the interior of the hut like a mirror so that I saw a hundred Jinians in its sides. It did not bubble; it did not splash. It spoke as running water speaks, a quiet burble, a ruminative sibillance. "What would you, Jinian Star-eye?" it asked me as I was shutting the curtain.

"The giants are dead," I told it. "I expect you already knew that."

"We did. Yes." Expressionless. That fact meant little to it, I thought.

It made me dizzy to look at it. I stared into the fire, instead. It kept shifting, never alike for two instants. "I have seen the shadow flowing from the Maze. I thought it might come from there for some reason."

"You thought your being here might evoke it? That your summons might interest it?" It still seemed very little concerned. Instead it was detached, remote. "No. It does not concern itself with you now, Jinian Star-eye. It grows as the algae grows when lakes and rivers have died. It grows without thought, without care, and will die in its time without grief. When everything dies, so then will the shadow die as well."

"I am told," I said carefully, "that the shadow can seek a certain person."

“It can be sent to do so,” sighed the lake. “Of itself, it does not seek. It grows in the Maze and flows from there. Whenever the destruction is remembered, more shadow flows”

“Destruction?”

“Of the Daylight Bell.” I thought about that. At the moment it didn’t make much sense to me, but I didn’t pursue it. “Then the only reason it’s flowing out of the Maze now is that the Maze is full of it? No other reason?”

“No other reason. We are too near, too small, to concern those who sometimes send it.”

“Chimmerdong concerned it.”

“Chimmerdong was mighty, once. Boughbound was mighty, once. And the Glistening Sea and the Southern Sea and the River Ramberlon, which you call Stonybrook. If we live, call us up again, Jinian Footseer, and we will tell you the names of all the mighty who once gloried in the world.”

“If we live. If the shadow does not catch me.”

“You know,” it whispered to me. “You know. They may send it after you, human-girl, but they have not done so. Yet.” It left me then. I had not had the foresight to realize the hut would be very wet when it left. That night I slept beneath the stars, nervously.” Peter returned in the morning. He woke me where I slept, rolled in my cloak.

“There was a flood in your hut?” he asked in a despondent voice. “I thought maybe you’d drowned.”

“Peter, what’s the matter?” He hugged me sadly, almost absentmindedly. “Oh, Jinian, from worse to worse yet. Himaggery and Barish were arguing when we left there two years ago. While we’ve been away it went from argument to open animosity, and from that to a split at the Bright Demesne. Barish is for raising all the hundred thousand at once to make what he calls ‘massive changes’, not that he’s raised even one of them yet. Himaggery wants them raised a few at a time to make what he calls, ‘balanced programs’. Mavin got disgusted with them both and left. No one knows where she is. Mertyn went back to Schooltown.” He seemed about to weep.

“Shh, shh,” I hushed him. “Bad enough, my love. But I know you. I know my sly, snakey Peter. What did you get done?”

“I talked to Barish and demanded that the old Windlow part of him listen to me. He heard the warning. I said it over and over until he really seemed to have heard it. Then I put a blue crystal in his tea.”

“I thought you would.” I wanted him to know I did not disapprove. Himaggery and Barish were stubborn, pombi-proud idiots. Heaven save me from male Wizeards who want to play politics. “And then?”

“Then I told Himaggery he owed it to me as his son to listen to me. Which he agreed to. I warned him. Then I put a blue crystal in his wine.”

“Ah.”

“Then I left. I made a stop in Schooltown. Mertyn did believe me and he will send word to

Mavin—somewhere, somehow, if he ever figures out where she is and though no one knows how long it will be before she gets the message, if she gets it at all. The two of us together went to see Riddle and Quench in the land of the Immutables. I gave crystals to each of them. I was sure the Immutables would be immune, just as they are to Talent, but they weren't. None of them doubted me."

I cursed. "Doesn't it prove what I said, Peter? Only three disciplined forces in the world. The Immutables; the Dervishes; the sevens."

"Well, we've got three alerted. A Dervish arrived about the time I left Schooltown. Don't ask me how she got there that fast, because I flew the whole way. She said her name was Cernaby and to tell you your message had gone to the sevens." He sighed, stretched out beside me, and pulled half my blanket over him. I didn't even worry about his closeness. Oath or no oath. It just wasn't that important anymore.

"What did you do with the other crystals? You had several dozens of them?"

"Gave them to Riddle and Quench and Mertyn. One for Mavin, when they find her. Six to be sent by trusted messenger to the others of your seven in Xammer—if they are still there ..."

This astonished me. I had not thought of it myself, but Peter had. He continually surprised me by being more thoughtful and intelligent than I expected him to be. He didn't notice my surprise but went on.

"The others they will use as they see fit. I told them what you said about the hundred thousand good Gamesmen who are still frozen under the mountain. When I left them, Quench was talking with Cernaby about starting the resurrection, Barish or no Barish. Quench has the resurrection machine, you know. It's his people who fixed it, and they were the ones who were going to do the work anyhow, if Barish ever got around to it. The problem is, of course, that Quench hasn't enough of the crystals to be sure all of the resurrectees are given them, and you said that was important."

"I think it's important. Why bring them back at all if not to help? Otherwise, they only return to die with the rest of us. I would have thought Barish would have started bringing them back to life by now, Himaggery or no Himaggery."

He turned toward me, laying an arm across me, tugging me close. "He'd rather argue than do. I think the mixture of Windlow into him has immobilized him. He still remembers what he planned to do once, but with Windlow inside his head he sees all the flaws in his original plan. I felt sorry for him." He breathed very deeply in my ear. I lay very quietly, not discouraging him. If something was going to happen between us, I was not going to talk about my oath. What did happen between us was a gentle snore. So much for breaking my oath to make love beside the limpid waters. I laughed at myself and fell asleep.

When he wakened, I told him what I had learned about the shadow. Peter had heard Mavin's story of the shadow. "It lives in the Great Maze?"

"So the lake creature said. It lives in the Great Maze, among the memories of the world." I did not realize what I had said until I had said it. Cernaby had told me that.

"Among the memories of the world? Jinian. We store our memories in our minds."

"In our brains," I corrected him. "The mind is something else. It, too, lives in the brain, but it is something else. So I was told long ago by a Healer who saved my life. Peter, if the shadow lives in the brain of Lom, of the world, then is the shadow part of this world, or is it something else? Something from outside?"

As we were from outside? As mankind was from outside? Did we really bring some plague with us? Queynt talked with Eesties who alleged so. Were they right?"

"We could go in the Maze and find out," he offered.

I laughed, then told him only a little about my short journey through a shallow edge of the Maze. He gave me disbelieving looks. "Wasn't there a guide?"

"The Oracle. The Oracle who almost got me killed at Daggerhawk. The Oracle who trapped me and gave me to the giants. That Oracle?"

"We could tie it up. You could put distrains on it."

"We could tie it up. I don't think that would work, but we could try. Distrains, however? I don't think so, Peter. I think anything I know, the Oracle knows something stronger. It's a kind of evil Devil. A kind of dancing mischief maker. All full of—puffed-up anger and pride and envy. Some kind of trouble-god. And there isn't only one of it. I thought I was dreaming in the cavern, but the more I think about it, the more sure I become that it was all true. I saw many of them in there. Oracles and Oracles. One, perhaps, as the leader, but followers without number. And oh, Peter, but I am afraid of them."

He was listening to me, concentrated upon me, looking deep into my eyes. "You know what you're implying, Jinian. You don't say it, but you must know it."

"That they're the ones who hid the blue crystals. The ones who took them all instead of seeing they were distributed all around the world. Yes, I'm sure they did it. The Oracles." It was out. Said. It rang true. Who else would have assembled them in the cavern of the giants? Who else would have taken them? Who else would have displayed such warped hatred for mankind? Oracles. Who never told the whole truth. "Oracles The very father and mother of liars," I said. "Not trustworthy as guides, Peter. Truly not."

"I can see you thinking, Jinian Footseer. You're thinking about going into that Maze, guide or no guide. No matter what it's like."

I couldn't deny it. I'd been thinking about it for days.

How to get in. How to find my way in. How to test whether my art worked there, and if so, how. How to use it, then. How to find the place the shadow lived. If Lom was dying, wasn't it possible the shadow was killing it, no matter what the lake had told me? Oh, I thought about it. At various times I had thought about a whole seven going in. Or maybe a group of Dervishes.

Each time, something within me said, No. Not great armies, just one or two people. That's all.

"Yes," I admitted. "It seems someone will have to. Everything that can be done on the outside is being done, except one thing."

"And that is?"

"Going to Beedie's land and getting the crystals that are there. Mercald-Mirtylon said there were many. They only brought out a few. Since I made that mistake at the cavern, calling up the boon too quickly, the ones in Beedie's chasm may be the only ones left. I was depending on Mavin to do that."

"Mavin will, when they find her."

“If they find her. If they find her in time. If she agrees to go. If she gets there. If she gets back.”

“I see. You want me to go.”

“Someone has to. I can’t. I’m no Shifter.”

“Jinian. Oh, Jinian, I’m not nearly the Shifter Mavin is, either. You may not know that, but in Shiftery, experience counts. Mavin was much older than I when she flew the Western Sea. Stronger. She had more experience with the forms, with the quick changes. My pride suffers to have me say it, Jinian, love. But I’m not sure I’d make it, Jinian Footseer.” I hadn’t known. He always seemed so confident.

Then I remembered that clumsily staggering form that had left me a few days before, wobbling across the sky, and I wanted to cry. Wings, I suppose it took years to really get accustomed to wings.

And it dropped into my head like a stone into a pool.

Wings. The great flichhawk of Chimmerdong owed me a boon. The last one of the three great boons I had earned in Chimmerdong. And if any creature alive in this world had wings, it was he.

There was no reason to wait, so I didn’t. Peter and I sat beside the fire, and I called him. I let Peter see me do it; that was against the rules, but I did it anyway.

“The ways of the sky are yours, treetop and cloud, sunlight and starlight, wind and rain. I have need of these and call for a boon.” We sat quietly for a time until he arrived. On all previous arrivals, I had been buffeted by the huge feathers. This time Peter was in the way. He stood up to it no better than I ever had. It sent him sprawling.

“Your eyes are like moons, flichhawk,” I said. “Have you seen much of the world in the last two years?” He perched on the ground, a monumental thing, his beak like the curved roof of a tower, his legs like obelisks, wings out like the boughs of mighty trees, shading us against the sun. When he looked down at me, I felt very small, and yet that gaze was no less friendly than it had ever been. He answered me.

“Destruction and wrack, Jinian Dervish daughter. High winds and low. Chimmerdong lives yet a while, but elsewhere the green of life dims to gray. I have swum in clouds, waiting for your call.”

“I want you to take my love over the sea, flichhawk. Far over the sea to a great chasm, where he must gather crystals as blue as your skies and bring them to Mertyn and Riddle and Quench.”

“Is this the boon you would ask?”

“It is,” I said.

“No,” said Peter. He strode from beneath the great wing to stand facing the flichhawk, unafraid of it, his face quite calm and adamantly strong.

“No?” The great bird flexed its feathers, letting the light shine through them. We stood in its dappled shade.

“When I said no, I meant that it wasn’t quite right,” Peter said. “Not quite what was wanted. You see, I

must stay here. Otherwise Jinian will go into the Great Maze without me, and if I cannot be with her to help her and protect her, then I do not care if Lom dies. If I do not care, I could not do the job well over the Western Sea.”

“So you don’t want me to take you,” the flitchhawk murmured, raising those wings.

“No. We want you to go instead. The crystals are blue. They lie at the bottom of the great chasm. The Stickies will bring them to you if you ask. Beedie’s people will help you if you ask. Birds are holy to that people. Messengers, so they say, of the Boundless. If you will go now to the south where Beedie and Roges are, they will direct you.” He said this all in a rush, never taking his eyes off the flitchhawk, and I could not stop him.

“And is this your wish, Jinian Star-eye?” The wings were fully raised, high.

I didn’t even take time to think. “Yes,” I cried.

The wings came down, a huge buffet of air knocked us to the ground, the flitchhawk lifted away, circled, higher and higher, and we saw him turn away south, in the direction Beedie and Roges and Queynt and Chance had gone.

I was crying. Not sadly. Not happily, either, come to that, but out of a certain fullness inside me. “We may never come out of the Maze, you know,” I said to him.

“I know,” he said. “That’s why I couldn’t let you go alone.” We stayed there that day. Resting a little. Talking of things long gone. Not that we had lived so long as to have many such things, but those we had were precious. I talked about the girl in the window of Schooltown who called up her love and gave him a slice of hot nut pie. He told me of seeing a girl at a banquet in Xammer and never being able to forget her after that. We were not even tempted to make love. Something sadder and higher had us by the throats, and we slept in one another’s arms, needing nothing more than that.

And in the morning we left the little hut by the lake and went up the trail to the Great Maze. Somewhere inside it lay all the answers to all the questions we had ever asked. We stood a long time hand in hand above it, readying ourselves. I knew what we must look for in that Maze. A book. A light. A bell. Twice now, Seers had Seen those things as having meaning for me, for us, and if they existed in this world, then Lom should remember them.

The little path Cernaby had shown me lay below us.

Beyond those first few rooms? Cells? I did not know what we would find.

And there were no answers where we were. Peter kissed me. I heard him sigh, two sighs, both of us.

Then we went in.

Jinian Star-eye

THE GREAT MAZE

So far as one could see from the outside, the Great Maze was merely a jungle of paths and hedges, trees and bushes, a mighty entanglement lying to the south of the Pervasion of the Dervishes, stretching from there away to the distant sea. Standing on the hill above the Maze, I had looked down into it to see winding trails, clearings, pathways, even quite large open spaces with impenetrable edges of luxuriant green, and in some of these spaces the easily recognized outline of well-known plants: rainhat bush, thrilps, giant wheat. Only natural things.

I suppose if you took the top of my skull off and looked at the quivering stuff inside, you would see only flesh, only natural things. Looking at that quaking jelly, one wouldn't see ideas or fears; no dreams would leap from the pinky-gray convolutions to dance on the brain top.

So, when Peter and I stood beside the Great Maze of Lom—which is the name the Shadowpeople give to this world—we saw no memories rising from the clearings or insinuating their way through the underbrush. And yet, according to Mind Healer Talley, who had told the Dervishes long before, the Maze holds the memories of our world.

Each time I thought of this, my mind chased about for a moment and then stopped working. It was not easy to believe, a whole world, remembering. A world actually thinking, planning. A world dreaming, perhaps. A world regretting. A world dying.

No. Not merely dying. Killing itself.

Outside the Maze were boiling fumaroles casting acid palls onto age-less forests; chasms opening to swallow mighty rivers; mountains bursting into flame and ash. Outside the Maze was a world sick unto death and with no desire for healing. And we were on it, with nowhere else to go.

Oh, yes, part of our fear and pain was for ourselves. Why deny it? And part for those we loved. I fretted, thinking of Murzy and the rest of my seven away south. Peter groaned, thinking of Mavin, his mother, and Himaggery the Wizard, his father, and other kin dear to him. And both of us together thought of Queynt and Chance, fondly and with foreboding. At one point I even found myself regretting Queen Vorbold, back in Xammer, for all her unsympathetic pride. But if we went to them, there was nothing we could do to help any of them. If anything could be done, it would be done here, now.

The reason for Lom's death would be found among those memories. The reason had to be there, somewhere in the past.

Perhaps if the reason were known, something could be done to reverse this final agony.

There seemed to be no one else to make the attempt.

We might be able to do something. If we were very lucky, it might even be the right thing.

Peter said all this to me, and then I repeated it to him with all the tone and frenzy of conviction. So we encouraged ourselves. Both of us knew that each of us was sick with anxiety and apprehension, and each of us was very busy concealing it from the other. "Oh, yes," we seemed to say, "this is perfectly possible. Of course we will get on with it at once," while our stomachs hurt and a smelly sweat oozed on skins already damp. Even I could smell us. A fustigar could have followed us for leagues. We stank of fear, and everything we saw and heard made it clear how late it was to attempt anything at all. If we failed, we

died with the world. And even if we succeeded, there was no guarantee we would survive the effort.

I had been inside the Maze once before, only just inside a shallow edge. Cernaby of the Soul had showed me one way in and one way out, and now that Peter and I were going in together, it seemed wise to start by retracing those earlier steps. To get the flavor, so to speak. Or rather, to let Peter get the flavor, since I was afraid I already had it. A flavor of confusion, mostly. Of connections just out of reach. At any rate, after an affectionate and—if we're honest about it—bravely-hiding-our-true-feelings-for-fear-of-frightening-ourselves embrace, we went in hand in hand by the same path I had tried before, an easy path making a shortloop into the Maze and out again, the entrance and exit only a few paces apart along the road.

We took one step . . .

. . . To find ourselves upon a height, sharp with wind. Below lay a cliff-edged bowl carpeted in spring green, sun glinting on the western rim of stone, the depths still in shadow. From above came an enormous screaming, mightier than any fleshy voice, metal on air, burning gasses, hot shrieking wind.

Down from above a silver spearhead, falling butt end first, buoyed on its bellowing, gas-farting rear, down into the green. I smelled the burning; trees burst into flame; the grass crisped into ash; smoke billowed into the morning. Then quiet. A feeling of dread; dread and excitement, curiosity and pain. Mixed.

A door opened high on the silver spearhead, and a strange creature came out. It was too thick through to be normal. Too thin from side to side and too thick from back to front. Not star-shaped, as would have been normal. Limbs oddly jointed. Naked-faced. Not attractive. Ugly, rather. It called with a weak little voice into the shadowed bowl. Um, um, blah, um. Uttering nonsense. Um, um, blah. I knew what it was saying but could not understand a word. A nasty little human creature, an invader, and I could not understand a word.

I shook myself, frightened, grasping Peter's arm and hanging on as though I were drowning. I had not seen that creature through my own eyes but through the eyes of the world. Through Lom's eyes. I gasped, blinked, tried to find myself in all this.

"Jinian . . . Jinian?" He was shaking me gently, looking at me with that tender concern he showed sometimes, the kind that made my heart turn over and stop beating.

"It's all right," I breathed. "It's all right. Let's get out of here." I tugged him to our left along the rim of the cliff, toward the grove of midnight trees. He followed me reluctantly, eyes turned back to watch that silvery vehicle in its patch of burned grass. Just before we reached the tree, the silver vessel disappeared from the green bowl below and we heard the howling begin high above us. As we stepped into the shadow, I looked up. It was coming down again. Below us in the valley the green meadow was untouched; the blackened scar had vanished. "What?" Peter started to say.

"Shh," I said. "Just come on a few more steps, then we'll figure it out." I was shaken. When I had been here before, I had merely observed, not been battered about by these waves of feeling.

We stepped out from the shadow of the tree onto the Wastes of Bleer. The place was unmistakable; a high plateau, barren and drear, with the contorted shapes of the Wind's Bones all around. `Thorn bush and devil's spear and great Wind's Bones. There was no feeling here, only a waiting numbness.

"Quick," I said to Peter, moving toward the crevasse I remembered from the time before. "Before it

comes down on our heads.” Above us, out of a clear sky, a moon was falling at us, burning bright, soundlessly, hideously plunging out of the east. He looked up, gasped, almost fell as I pulled him down into the hole . . .

. . . Into the great, gray temple I remembered from last time. Outside the walls, the menacing roar of many voices. Above us, a great- vacancy, an enormous height. Smoke rising. Somewhere doors opening and closing, the sound far away and vague, as though heard inattentively. Shadowy forms moving around us, back and forth across the immense nave. Two pedestals were toppled against the wall, the lamp that had evidently rested on one of them lay at my feet. Beside the other fallen pedestal was a great book, its leaves crumpled.

Before I could stop him, Peter broke from my side and ran to a carved stone monument that loomed beneath one of the high windows. He was up in it in a moment, neck craned to peer through the opening. I remember being surprised that he Shifted a little as he went, making spidery arms and legs for himself. Somehow I had felt our Talents would not work in the Maze. There was no time to consider it. I cried out, “Peter, don’t. . . .” afraid he would *gothrough* into some other place. He heard the tone of panic in my voice, if not the words, came scurrying back. My heart was pounding; every muscle was tight. I could barely breathe among the feelings of apprehension and horror. We fled around the low curbing of an empty pool toward the stairs and the altar. From high above came the dreadful breaking sound that I remembered half hearing the time before, a sound like a great tree breaking, tearing apart in an agony of ripped fibers. . . .

We stepped behind the altar and out onto the path in the Maze. It opened to our right onto the same road we had left.

“Wall,” Peter gasped, breathless. “Gah. Oh. That wasn’t what I expected.”

I tried to take a deep breath, choking myself in the effort. Horror. Sheer horror. After a time the feeling diminished. I managed to ask, “What did you see out the window?”

“Eesties. I mean, I guess they were Eesties. I’ve never seen them, but Mavin has. And Queynt saw them, of course. I don’t know what else they could have been. Star-shaped. Hundreds, maybe thousands of

them, all roaring at the building we were in. Why did you yell at me like that?”

“I was afraid you’d *slipthrough*. Cernaby said each ‘place’ has many ways out. That’s what makes it a maze. If you’d gone somewhere else, I’m not sure I could have found you.”

“Is it all like that?”

“I think so. Places. No, not exactly places. More like events. Did you notice that first one we were in? . . .”

“It was the Base. The place the Magicians called the Base. I’ve seen that ship before. I’ve been there.”

“Have you really!” Somehow this was astonishing to me. Even though I knew Peter had had a life before we met—or met again—evidence of it always had the power to surprise me, to shame me, as though I felt he could not have survived without me. “Then you know what was hap-pening?”

“It was the human ship arriving. The ship with all the Magicians on it. Barish was on that ship, and Didir,

and Queynt himself. It landed a thousand years ago. Didn't you see Barish come out the door on the side of it? I wanted to get closer and see what Barish was like before—when he was just Barish.”

Barish was no longer just Barish. I knew Peter blamed himself some-times for putting old Windlow's mind into Barish's body, but then at the time we all thought Barish had no mind of his own. Since then, the two of them had lived an uneasy joint tenancy, two sets of memories, two sets of opinions on everything, all in one head, and it would have been interesting to see what Barish was like, just as himself. Nonetheless, we hadn't time to think of it now.

“All I could see was something that didn't look natural,” I confessed. “Even though I knew it was human, I thought it was very strange. I couldn't understand it.”

“That's odd.” He thought about this, peering at me intently, then nodding. “Well, no, not really odd. If these are the memories of the world, as your Dervish friend told you, then you're probably picking up how the world feels about it. Felt about it. To this world, men would have been strange. Very strange. Come from some far place, not of `itself,' so to speak.”

This made sense. At least it was no stranger than the rest of it, and it would explain the horrifying feelings I had been having.

“The second place we got into was the Wastes of Bleer,” mused Peter. “At the time the moon fell. You said Storm Grower brought the moon down, just to prove she could. Lom must have found that traumatic, too.” He thought for a time longer. “And I have no idea what the third place was.”

“I don't, either,” I confessed. “But I do know how it's connected to the other two things.” It had taken me a while to figure it out, but I had come up with an answer. “Just as we came out, there was this sound from above, the sound of something breaking. Like a great beam of wood.”

“I heard it.”

“Well, after it broke, I think something fell. Something huge.”

“So each event was about something falling?” He sounded doubtful. “I think so. Each event was part of a category labeled `Something falling.' Or, more specifically, not merely `something,' but `something very big.' I'm not really sure about that last one, because we didn't stay to see.”

“Could we step back in and find out?”

“I'm afraid to.”

“Can it hurt us?”

“Quite frankly, Peter, I haven't any idea. Reason says no. My skin says yes. I barely made it out of there this time.”

You stay here,” he said, patting me fondly on my head as he might have petted a tame fustigar. He stepped back the way we had come, leaving me with my mouth open. I swallowed, choked, started to scream after him, then thought better of it. Peter often did things I was afraid to do. Then my fear for him overcame my fear for myself, and I went roaring after him, usually quite unnecessarily. Just now there was something I had wanted to do that would take a few moments alone. There might be no better time later.

Peter had Shifted inside the maze. If his Talent worked there, then mine would probably work close by. Not my Talent of understanding languages, but my Wize-ardlv one. There was a spell I'd been saving, a multiple one Murzy had taught me early on, telling me not to use it save in times of great need. It was a combination spell used to find appropriate destinations. Not particular ones, you understand, but appropriate ones. Murzy called it a blood, dust, and total trust spell. Nothing needed but a drop of my own blood on a roadway and total faith that what I would ask lay in the will and purpose of the art. The problem with it would be, she had said, its tendency to pull other creatures into it with me. Just as the road would be connected to many other roads, so the spell would connect me to many other things. Considering the puzzle the Maze presented, I thought it worth the risk. Our chances of finding what we needed on our own seemed very remote. So, I plopped myself down on the green edge of the path and made myself concentrate. It was hard. Something about the place made concentration difficult, words hard to remember.

"Day or night, dark or light," I prayed, gulping a little, shutting everything out except those words, "lead me to the place I need to be. Bright the Sun Burning, Night Will Come Turning, Road's Dust to Find It, Heart's Blood to Bind It." I used the edge of my star-eye to cut a finger, dropped the blood on a thirsty patch of bare road, then sat very quietly, letting the words flow through me until all my parts understood them.

It always seems to take a long time. Actually, it doesn't. Within moments, I was worrying about Peter again. There was only time for a modest fret before he emerged from the Maze, somewhat untidily. "I Shifted," he announced. "To stay out of the way. Something enormous fell. It made a noise like some huge being screaming in agony, a great metallic clamor. It killed several whats-its, then after a little while it was gone and everything was just the way it had been originally. It goes on over and over, like some one-act play at a festival. Performances every few minutes."

"Did it hurt you?" I wrapped my punctured finger in a leaf and tucked the star-eye back in my shirt.

"Oh. No. No, I couldn't even feel it."

"Well, if you can hear it and smell it, how come you can't feel it?" "Probably because the world . . ."

"Lom.

"Probably because Lom hears it and smells it but doesn't feel it. I mean, if they're memories, then they act like memories, don't you think? If I set myself to remember—oh, that time I tried to rescue you and Silkhands from the Ghoul. Remember that?—I remember the stink, and the heat of the flames, and I can still hear my own voice yelling stupid things, but I don't burn. I don't singe. *Iwince* at the memory, but I don't end up half-asphyxiated from smoke. I remember the *firehaving happened*, but I don't reevoke it, so to speak. The stink, though, that always comes back."

This, too, made sense. Smell, sight, and hearing happen inside one's head, but assault comes from the outside world. So the memory of smell could be the smell itself, but the memory of pain . . . Well, creatures probably survive better if they can't remember pain too well.

He nodded. "Of course some memories are very hurtful. It would probably be prudent for us to be careful."

Now he was talking about prudence. Peter! I didn't believe it. Agreed with it, yes; believed it, no. Peter had never been prudent in his entire life. He nodded his head a couple of times, as though he were setting

that firmly in mind, then asked, "Now. Where do we go, and what do we do?"

During the night we'd just spent together, tight-wrapped in each other's arms and chaste as two baby bunwits, both trying not to say the things that would frighten us to death or make us cry, sometimes he'd dozed off with his lips next to my throat, his breath tickling me like an owl's feather. It had been necessary then, since I couldn't sleep, to think of something unemotional, so I'd spent the time thinking about the Maze. Now I trotted out my conclusions, hoping they were correct. "If these three events are linked, so to speak, by a single line of thought or category or index heading, then we'll have to suppose other things are linked in the same way. So. We try to find some line of thought that might logically take us where we want to go."

"Which is?"

"Wherever Lom is thinking about dying."

He looked depressed. There was nothing I could say to make the task seem either easier or more pleasant. I knew exactly how he felt. It's how I felt in the Forest of Chimmerdong when something vague and impossible needed doing and I seemed to be the only one around to do it. "I know," I commiserated. "It's terrible sounding."

"It's not that. You've said these events are memories. If Lom is actively thinking about dying, it won't be in memories, will it? Won't it be somewhere else? Some other part of its mind?"

I didn't know. Probably no one did. And if it were so, it was not helpful. "They have to be linked together somewhere, Peter."

He sighed a put-upon sigh, not offering any better suggestion. "All right. So they must be linked. Now, what shall we look for?"

"That last place? The temple? There were creatures in it. When the thing fell in, whatever it was, you say something got killed. If I'm right, that means there's a link out of that place to the idea of things dying. We find that link if we can, and we follow it. Event by event."

"And if nothing got killed?"

"Then we look around until we find an event where somebody did get killed."

"Makes me feel like a Ghoul," he said.

So did I, to tell the truth, and only the knowledge that whatever we would see had already happened and could not be changed made me feel any better about it. We took a deep breath, held hands once more, and stepped back into the temple.

Gray and huge and the roar of angry voices. This time I paid more attention. I looked straight up, trying to see what was above us, but there was only a receding immensity of stone and smoke. There was no roof. We were below a tower. Huge doors on all sides of the room opened to admit hurrying figures, misty, dim, not fully remembered, I guessed. They might have been Eesties. I got the impression of fluttering robes or ribbons around a low curbing at the center of the place. Peter pressed me tightly against the stones, becoming a kind of wall between me and whatever was coming. The roar was louder, a furious chanting. Then a cracking noise. High above us. Huge. Like a tree coming down in a forest. That creaking again, as when something tries to remain whole but is destroyed fiber by fiber. And then it

let go.

I heard it coming. An agonized scream of metal. A tumbling clangor, banging down the tower with thunderous crashes. It was only a few instants before it hit. Shattering. Shards of metal flying in all directions. One buried itself in the wall beside me. Voices crying out, weeping. The furious roaring outside suddenly stilled, as though in horror at what had happened. Then one voice raised, then another, rebelliously cheering.

Struggling gray forms on the floor, one or two. I went toward them, trying to feel where one might go out. No door. No exit. Even close beside the writhing figures, I couldn't see them clearly, and the revelation almost stopped me in my tracks. The sound was as clear as my own voice, but these figures were misty, which meant that Lom didn't remember them very well. It remembered the sound and those outside, but not these. Just something, something dying. There was a rush of unfocused anguish, a kind of thinning in the atmosphere of the place. I grabbed Peter's hand and moved toward it, trying to find it. It was stronger beside the monument he had climbed upon earlier, shattered now. The anguish I felt was anguish at the destruction of this! Not at the death of the creature, but at this shattering. . . .

I moved in the direction of the feeling, pulling Peter along by one hand, not certain where.

And came out.

We were standing in a desert. Nothing was happening. A chilly wind blew a few grains of sand restlessly across the parched soil. Bristly growths spiked here and there on the limitless flat around a jagged line of broken statues.

"Don't move," I said, frustrated. "I think we came in the wrong direction." I tried to breathe, gasping, as though I had been crying. What was it?

"What were you after?"

"There was this feeling of anguish. Grief." I stopped, unable to go on. The feeling was still there, all around me, a sadness so palpable it stopped my breath. I gritted my teeth, did a small concentration spell, and was able to breathe once more. I went on, "At first I thought it was grief over something dying, but Lom didn't even remember the things that were dying, so it had to be the grief over something else. Maybe grief over the destruction of the carving. Perhaps it was a work of art."

"Maybe not." He mused over the unchanging scene. "It could have been a monument. A cenotaph, maybe. A memorial to someone or something dead which Lom did remember. And these may be more of the same." He gestured toward the shattered statues.

There was a funerary air to the place. Solemn. Still. No rush or fury of life. Only the barren soil, the keening wind, the stark bulk of the carved stone against a line of distant mountains. The statue nearest us looked away from me, to one side, staring into eternity. I couldn't tell what it was from this distance, but I was afraid to go closer. I didn't want to leave the place we had come in without marking it. And how did you mark something in a place like this? I tried scraping away at the sand beneath me. It scraped very nicely, then slowly filled itself up like oozy mud. Evidently I could have only a temporary influence here. I tried breaking a branch off a thorny bush. It broke, nipped my finger with a thorn, quietly dissolved in my hand, and reappeared on the bush. The hole in my finger was still there. "We can't make any lasting changes, Peter. [t restructures itself."

"If we can't make any changes . . ." His voice trailed away as he stared at me. I knew what he was

thinking. If we couldn't make any lasting changes, then how were we to have any effect on Lom's mind? He broke off the thorn branch I had broken. It dissolved in his hand and reappeared on the bush. He broke it again, stubbornly, and went on doing it while I watched, wondering what he thought he was doing.

At about the dozenth break, the branch did not dissolve right away. At about the twentieth, it stopped dissolving altogether. He stood there, holding the branch, watching it, scratches all over his fingers. "It seems to respond to persistence," he said, sucking his thumb.

I ventured, "I'd like to take a look at that statue, the closest one, but I'm afraid to lose the place we came in."

"I'll stay here," he offered. "Perhaps I can get some bearings." It was true there were mountains around the edge of the place, and other monuments scattered out in several directions. One should be able to take sightings on several things and locate the spot. I left him at it and trudged away to the nearest monument.

Sad. Oh, my, sadness doesn't half say it. The broken stone was awash with grief. It was that same unfocused grief I had felt before. Lom's grief, not mine. I could not understand it. I could only feel it, and feeling it was more than enough. I leaned against the plinth on which the monument sat, making my lungs behave.

Chunks of the pedestal had been broken away. Great riven stones lay about, and the edges of the breaks showed no signs of weathering. When it was new it must have been an imposing thing. I'm not sure what kind of thing. Not a d'bor, but something rather like that. Something huge and majestic, solemn and marvelous. Not merely a creature, but a Creature of creatures. As the D'bor Wife had been. As Gobblemole and Flichthawk had been. Looking on that carved face, I was quite sure it had been a wonderful being. It had the same feel to it as the Wind's Bones on Bleer. It might have been one of those mighty, ancient creatures as it had appeared when alive. And the statue wasn't a grave marker. Nothing was buried under the monument. A creature like that may be killed, but it doesn't just die and it can't be buried. No, this was a memorial to some mighty and wonderful creature that had reached its end, elsewhere, perhaps far away. I leaned against the monument to feel it pressing into my thighs, solid, like real stone. I scraped a hand across a crumbled place and stared at the palmful of gravel. It didn't dissolve. I trudged back to where Peter was waiting, notebook in hand, busy with his pen.

"I've taken sightings," he said. "I think we could get out again." "I've been taking bits of things." I showed him my specimens. "This place is variable. Those monuments are as real as I am. They break and stay broken."

He shook his head over this anomaly, but there was no point in discussing it. I think we both felt it was wisest just to go on, gathering experience, learning what we could. So we tried the exit to the temple to be sure it still worked, one step back into the roaring gray space, then one step back into the desert. Both were unchanged. Each time we entered the temple, no matter where we entered from, we got there before the thing fell down.

Back in the desert, we went to the monument. "It feels very sad around here," I said. "So this is the direction we want to go." Mutter mutter. He sounded disgusted.

"What?" I asked him. "I didn't hear you."

"I was just saying it was an odd direction. Go five paces angry, turn grief-stricken, and take ten paces in

a generally sad direction.”

“It may come to that.” He meant it to be funny, but it wasn’t. “Can’t you feel it?”

“Not really. I’ll take your word for it.”

“How come I can feel it and you can’t?”

“Because that’s your Talent. Empathy. That’s how you talk all those beast languages. You empathize and just naturally understand them. This is just another kind of language.” He was feeling around the base of the monument, walking to and away from it, circling away from me to the left. “You understand these things on a nonverbal level. . . .”

He didn’t come around the other side. I waited, carefully not moving. Silence. No Peter. Only the wind. My teeth were clenched so tightly that my jaw ached. I kept telling myself he was all right, had always been all right, would always be all right. There was a small sighing, as of a door swinging open or closed, and in a moment he backed into me. “Found it,” he said, taking me by the hand and tugging me forward once more.

And we came out in the village of Betand as it had been a thousand years before.

Not that I knew that right away. What we saw was so raw and strange that neither of us tried to identify it. We did, however, catalog it as we stared. One street, dirt—mud, rather—deeply rutted and hideously ugly. Two stark wooden buildings with signs saying they sold farm stock. Other wooden stores, some a little grayer, which sold equipment. Small groups of people in the street, families with children, some with a few horses or zeller, most with carts piled high with household goods. A tavern; The Blue Fustigar. Even then I didn’t identify the place.

It wasn’t until I turned to see Vitior Vulpas Queynt emerging from the tavern that I knew where I was. It was Queynt, not one whit different in height and size than when I had seen him last, and yet in some way much younger looking. It was the expression on his face. Dissatisfaction. Annoyance. His expression was less like the Queynt I knew and more like Peter, full of jittery impatience. A much less poised expression than he wore now. “Queynt,” I said.

He did not see us. Did not hear me. He went past us as though we had been smoke. Behind him came a depressed-looking couple with a child, the woman calling, “Sir, sir.”

That’s when I knew where we were. Betand. The beginning of the city of Betand. When man was young upon Lom, scarcely come, and the rolling stars were driving him from the Shadowmarches.

Peter had already figured it out. He was busy stripping leaves from a bush, seeing whether he could make them stay off. He couldn’t. “Newer,” he breathed at me, his eyes unfocused. “This memory is newer. The newer the memory, the less effect we can have on it. What does it have to do with grief?”

“Not grief. Destruction.” I waved at the forests that stretched up the northern hills toward the marches. Everywhere were the stumps of trees in cleared fields. “That’s the common thread, Peter. You said it yourself. You used the word ‘traumatic.’ The world was injured during each of those episodes. Destruction in the temple. Destruction of the monuments on the desert. Destruction of the forests here.” I was right. None of it had really been about dying at all, and I wanted to cry. This wouldn’t lead us where we needed to go.

He must have seen my face. He pulled me close and we stood there for a long, wordless minute, me with my head on his chest, both of us watching Queynt talk to the couple. Then they went away. Queynt went back into the tavern. After a while he came out. We followed him around for a while, and after what seemed to be the better part of a day, he started out of town to the north. All this time we'd been waiting for the story to start over, and it hadn't started over yet.

"If this is an 'event,' it's a very long one," Peter said. "Does that mean it's important?"

"Who's to say? I remember some things from my childhood in complete, exquisite detail, and so far as I know, they don't mean anything. Except to me, of course. And you, maybe. Someday I'll tell you." He smiled at me, teasingly, and I knew he did it just to cheer me. "Do you want to go after him?"

"Peter, I'm not sure we have enough to eat. Somehow I thought there'd be food in here. You know. Roots. Berries. I didn't expect it all to be shadows and pictures."

He shook his head at me, being practical as he sometimes was, most surprisingly. "It can't be all shadows, Jinian. It's substantial. The Maze is substantial. You can see things growing in it from outside. Some of it has to be real. Like your brain. If you could walk around inside your own brain, you might be able to see the ideas, but you'd still be walking on something real. Cells. Flesh. Something." He reached out and stripped leaves and fruit from a thirip bush beside the path, moodily waiting for it to dissolve.

And it didn't. It lay there in his hand, dripping juice, smelling very ripe and real. I laughed. Couldn't help it, I guess, he looked so discomfited. Mouth open. He had just told me some of it had to be real, but he hadn't expected it to be the tree he was working at. My strained laughter made him laugh in turn, somewhat ruefully. He picked a hatful of thirilps, stowed them in his pack, and started after Queynt's receding form, far in the northern distance.

"Don't know about you, Jinian, but I'm going to see whether he told us the truth or not."

I ran to catch up. It seemed an insane, completely random thing to do, unlikely to lead us anywhere helpful. And yet—I had done the guidance spell, Heart's Blood, Road Dust, lead-me-where-it-would. There had been those ripe thirilps, almost like an answer to a prayer. And there had been grief in Lom's mind, grief about something. Perhaps this road was not as unlikely as it seemed.

2

MEMORY

I have in recent years often reflected upon memory. One takes it so for granted. One remembers with such facile infallibility. And one finds with such shock—at least it was a shock to me—that memory isn't truth.

This occurred to me first when I read Peter's account of our meeting and the events around that time. The big things that happened were there, seen from a slightly different angle, perhaps, but intact. I remembered the Wind's Eve and so did he. I remembered the Battle of the Bones, and in general he remembered it as I did. But many of the small things were totally different. I did not hear things he heard, even though we stood side by side when they were said. I did not see things he saw. And conversely, of course, I saw and heard things he did not. It struck me then, an interesting reflection without particular

import, and I resolved in future not to be too insistent upon the truth of my own memories. I thought of the way Murzy had recalled old events. "I remember it this way," she said. "I remember it this way, but on reflection, I think so and so must have happened, and even that may not be true."

I thought of the subject again as we followed the memory of Vitor Vulpas Queynt into the Shadowmarches. It wasn't very long since he had told us the story of that journey—what had it been? A handful of days, no more, since we had been cozy in the tower room at Bloome, listening to his reminiscences. And now we followed him upon that same journey as remembered by another mind, as remembered by the world that held him and that, for some reason, dignified this event with absolute clarity in every detail. The farther we went, the more convinced I was that we had come upon the right trail all unwittingly.

Peter kept experimenting as we went, testing which parts of our environment were real and which mere images. I gave him one clue to the nature of our surroundings when I told him somewhat impatiently to stop picking rainhat berries because I was stuffed.

"It's been hours since I gave you the last one," he complained. He had generously given me most of them, over my objections.

"It can't have been," I muttered. "I can still taste them. Really, Peter. It was only a moment ago."

"No. It was when we crossed that last stream. All the way down this slope and through that forest at the foot of it"

It struck us both, simultaneously. Memory time, subjective time, might not be the same as "real" time, stomach time. I put a finger on my pulse and counted as we followed Queynt across several leagues of forest. A few hundred pulses, more or less, for a lengthy journey that should have taken thousands of heartbeats. Peter was counting his breaths. We shook our heads at each other in disbelief, but Peter did stop picking berries. "Space," he muttered at me. "We're probably not walking as far as we think we are."

"It certainly hasn't tired me any," I admitted. "All of this is probably happening in quite a small place in the Maze."

"One would think large memories would take larger spaces," he objected, but he didn't go on to say why. I thought privately that large memories might simply be more dense than others. Or perhaps they thin out with time. Probably a thousand years is no time at all for Lom. Which for a human being is a fairly discouraging thought in some respects and a very encouraging one in others. One hates to think that all of existence is trivial. It is better to be even a small part of something very large than a sizable part of nothing much.

We went along, Queynt stopping from time to time to talk with settlers, giving some of them money, waving his arms, talking persuasively. All of this was much as he had remembered it, except for the sadness. He hadn't remembered the sadness, and Peter didn't feel it. I seemed to be the only beneficiary, and I could have done well without it. When the tears started flowing down my face like a river, Peter took time to dry my face and make tender sounds, which helped a little. After that, I held on to his hand. The fact he couldn't feel the pervasive emotion seemed to ameliorate it somewhat. There was a certain hard pragmatism about Peter—probably inherited from his mother, Mavin, since I hadn't noticed it in his father, Himaggery, very much—that cut through sentimentality like a knife. Sometimes I hated it, but now I blessed him for it.

Lom remembered night, and night came. Lom remembered morning, and morning came. Lom remembered the rocky height Queynt had described. There were more trees than he had mentioned, more and closer. His rendition on the wood instrument was less expert and more plaintive than he had told us, and the tears flowed down my face again. By the time three days had passed and the Shadowperson moved out of the trees to stand singing upon the moor, I was in full flood. The beauty of what ensued evidently had captured the world's attention as it did mine, enough at least to distract it from its sadness. There was no sadness in that singing, and it was more glorious in Lom's memory than it could possibly have been in reality.

We sat upon the moor for several days, which was probably not really more than an hour or two. We saw the gift of the blue crystals from Shadowperson to Queynt. Queynt had said they were small; he had showed them to us, and they were quite small, no larger around than the nail of my littlest finger. Lom remembered them as large, glowing, a sapphire radiance that the Shadowman could barely hold in his two cupped hands.

"You were right, Jinian," Peter told me, awe-stricken. "The world considered those blue crystals to be important. Terribly important." We followed Queynt and the Shadowman as they went north to meet the Eesties.

We saw the Eesties.

And Peter had to hold me to keep me from running.

Ever since my recent captivity in the cavern of the giants, I'd had this horror of the Oracle—Oracles, one or many. Every time I thought of the creature or his minions, my mouth went dry and the Dagger of Daggerhawk burned on my thigh as though it were made of hot coals. I thought of trickery and evil. I thought of pain and malice. Long ago in Chimmerdong I'd taken food from the creature's hands, and it had pretended a mocking friendship while it toyed with me. More recently it had plotted my death. In Chimmerdong it had put a dreadful weapon in my hands; in the cavern of the giants, it had set that weapon outside my reach. In short, it had played with me, trifled with me, amused itself with me, and I hated it.

So now, deep in the remembered dark of the Shadowmarches, two Eesties came out of the shade to stand before Vitior Vulpas Queynt, and I shuddered at the sight. They wore ribbons and precursive suggestions of that fanciful cloak the Oracle had worn, and they, too, had faces painted upon their upper ends. They were as like the Oracle as one thrilp is like another, each unique, perhaps, but still instantly recognizable as what it was.

They didn't see me fall apart in incipient hysterics. Peter did, catching me as I was about to flee, holding me while the shivering stopped. "Sorry," I mumbled. "They—they look like the Oracle."

"They can't both be the Oracle," he said in a reasonable voice. "And unless they live forever—which I suppose is remotely possible—then it's likely neither of them is."

"You—you don't understand," I stammered irrationally. "I don't think it matters which individual was the Oracle. I think they all are, so to speak. All. Each. Like a hive of warnets. If one knows me, then all of them do."

"Perfectly possible," he said calmly, "but *notthen*."

Which was true. They might all know me now, whenever now was, but they had not known me then, a

thousand years ago, when Queynt had walked upon the marches. For which, in that moment, I was extremely thankful.

Queynt, on the other hand, had nothing to be thankful for. He had not told us they had trussed him up, which they had. And he had not told us what they had said to one another in their own language, because he hadn't known. I, on the other hand, looking on, could understand every word, both when they talked to him and when they talked to one another. Which meant Lom had understood it, too.

They began by accusing him of being of a filthy race that carried destruction with it. Queynt apologized for this but said many humans were trying to rise above their destructive natures. The Eesties twitted him then, comparing him to the Shadowpeople, whom they seemed to hold in contempt. Shadowpeople, who were no more than beasts, no more than animals, who aspired to "elevation," who were "above themselves."

They wanted him to leave the world and take all mankind with him. So much was obvious. Through it all, Queynt was calm, fairly reasonable, polite. He kept trying to understand them. He didn't hear what they said to one another, however.

"How could Lom claim to find bao in this filth?"

"How could we be so little thought of that *these* would be set beside us?"

"This stinking thing."

"This animal."

"No better than a pombi." "No more bao than a thrilpat." "We should loose the shadow on them. . . ."

The meaning conveyed by *bao* wouldn't translate for me. It meant something like allness or wholeness or completion, used as a noun. Bao was both a thing and a quality. Something Lom had. Something they, the Eesties, had and we, humans, did not. Presumably. At least so they shouted as they tore at Queynt with insulting words.

Back among the trees there was a great, curved shell, bright red, like the egg of some monstrous bird. Every now and then the Eesties would look nervously in that direction, as though something slept inside it. After a time, another one came out of the trees, larger than the first two, and then the three of them began to touch Queynt, fumble at him, look through his pouch and pack.

When they found the blue crystals in his pouch, they went mad. For a moment I forgot they had not killed him in reality, they seemed so likely to do so here in memory. I started looking for a rock, reaching for the Dagger, anything at all to protect Queynt from their wrath.

"How could he have this? We had them *all!*" they screamed.

"How did it come by this? They were stored in the monsters' cavern." A wrathful bellow.

"Traitors! One of the Brotherhood [Fraternity? Society? Conspiracy?] has betrayed

All the time they were striking him, working themselves up into a fury. Though I knew they had not killed him, still I began to worry that history might be playing itself wrongly. I reached for the Dagger.

Then the cry came, enormous and aching. I understood it clearly. "Halt. Stop. Hold it right there."

The Eesties froze. Queynt was rolled into a ball on the ground, still tied, hands covering his neck. The cry came again. One of the three said, "Ganver," in a strangled voice. They left Queynt, rolled away from him like naughty boys caught at mischief, running away, afraid to own what they had done, what they had almost done.

And another Eesty came from the direction of the great egg. Much larger, this one, and with no paint or ribbons. Merely a great, star-shaped thing with a suggestion of face at its center. No expression. I could not tell whether it was sad or angry. It leaned toward Queynt, moved about him, untied him. It cried again, a great, accusing cry with all the woes of the world laden in it, turned and looked directly into my eyes, itself eyeless, then rolled away toward the scarlet egg again.

And Queynt, patted into consciousness by several of the Shadowpeople who had come from the trees, was on his feet, brushing himself off, looking pale and bruised but somehow indomitable.

"It saw me," I said to Peter. "That last Eesty, the one that yelled. It saw me."

"Jinian!" He was sympathetic, pat-patting my shoulder, thinking I was losing my control once more.

"Really, Peter. Honestly. It saw me! Let's follow it." This was unlike me, but I was having a very strong hunch.

"If we lose Queynt, we may not be able to find our way back to Betand, and from there to the desert, and from there--"

"We'll be able to find Betand. And if we didn't, all we'd have to do is come back here and Queynt would show up here eventually. Again." I wasn't sure of this at all. This particular "event" didn't feel like the others. It wasn't nearly as discrete and repetitive. None of which mattered at the moment. "Please, Peter. Let's follow it."

"Ganver," he said. "Mavin told me about Ganver. Or wrote about it, rather. She could never talk about it."

"I know. She showed me what she'd written. It was Ganver's bone that stopped the Ghoul plague in Pfarb Durim. And Mavin found him in a scarlet egg, so she said. Peter, we have to try."

"I thought you didn't like Eesties!"

"I don't like the Oracle kind. The maskers. The dressed-up ones, all full of false flourishes. One of them called themselves a—a . . ." I tried to find a human word for it. All I could come up with was "Brotherhood," which wasn't very close to the actual meaning. "They called themselves a 'Brotherhood,' Peter. But Ganver isn't part of that. Couldn't you feel it?"

"No," he said as he always did to such questions about what he could feel or not feel. "I'll take your word for it."

Guiding ourselves by that flash of brilliant color, we set off through the trees. When we came to the curving wall, both of us stood there, mouths open. It was huge. Bright. Scarlet as blood. Smooth as stone. Crystalline. Very much like the monuments outside Pfarb Durim, so Mavin had written. We circled it, warily, finding no opening at all. "Damn," I whined. "We can't get in!"

"I don't know why not," said Peter, leaning himself against the egg and pushing. "It's only a memory." He went on pushing, whistling between his teeth. I stared at him for a moment, then leaned beside him, pushing along with him. At first it was hard, stony. Gradually it changed. It felt like pushing the side of a monstrous d'bor. Rubbery.

Not immovable, not impenetrable, merely very, very resistant. When we were half-buried in the wall, I began to fear we might end up smothered inside it. Peter went on whistling. Then we fell through. "See," he said in a cheerful voice as he picked himself up. "It yields to persistence."

I had a feeling I would learn to hate that phrase.

The inside of the egg was as Mavin had described it. Many star-shaped maintainers bustling about, polishing pedestals, faceting gravel in the walk, doing other things that I found mysterious and totally unfamiliar. The whirling flowers were there; the grass that cried; the gravel that repeated, "What, what," just as Mavin had said. Even the tall pedestals were there at the end of the walk, but the first one, on which Ganver should have rested in an enigmatic red globe, was empty.

We were not totally surprised when the voice addressed us from behind. "You followed me," it said accusingly. We turned, stepping back involuntarily. This Eesty was very large, larger than it had seemed when assisting Queynt. It was also very troubled. The trouble was in the tone of its voice, in the way it stood before us, almost trembling. The vague facelike structure at its center showed nothing. Its voice did not come from there. It came from the creature itself, needing no lung, no mouth, no tongue.

"Yes," I replied, keeping it simple. "We followed you. We need you."

"How could you come here, into our dreams, our memories? Into our timeless place from which all times are spun? Is there no place you cannot come, you intruders, vandals, you who usurped our children's heritage? Oh, humans, go away from here."

I would have sworn it was crying, such a tragic weeping it put me off and I could not answer.

I heard the misery, but Peter didn't. "We can't," he said. "My mother came to you. You helped her. Now I have come to you and you must help me. You must help me help the world you live in."

"Why must I?" it cried. "We have put that all away. We have let it go. Let come what will come!"

For some reason this made me furiously angry. "Oh, very nice," I snarled. "Cause this great tragedy, this death of a world, the world which bore you and nurtured you, and then simply turn your back. Go off into some dream dimension of your own. Selfish. Horrid. You're responsible for this, Ganver. Your people did it. Your people, those Oracles, those beribboned mischief makers. They're killing Lom. *They* are the ones who are killing Lom's bao!" I still didn't know what the word meant, but it was the right word to use. Before us the Eesty stiffened, became rigid, began to shake, shook for a time that seemed endless before crying out *asound*.

Around us the world trembled. The great egg quivered. I felt it roll. The sky cracked, broke, and blue distance showed through rents in the scarlet shell. Black lightning struck from the blue sky. A feeling like hard smoke went through me. A sound that tasted of rotten flesh startled the air, and my skin felt sour, acid.

We were standing in the forest. The egg was gone, all its parts and contents gone, there was only the

giant Easty there, still as the light of a distant lamp, cold and far.

“You have accused me of complicity,” it said in a chill, tiny voice. “You have accused Ganver.” There was a threat in that voice, a threat and a wounded pride so deep and massive it made me tremble, and I felt Peter’s hand shake a little in mine. *That* he had felt.

Never mind. We had to go on. We had come too far not to.

“We have accused you of betraying this world,” I said, struggling to keep the tremor out of my voice. “Of killing your parent.”

Silence. Silence full of danger. In my hand, Peter’s fingers changed, became covered with horn. He was preparing to Shift, to defend himself and me if need be. The moment stretched into an endless, breathless age.

“You need not think of weapons,” it said at last, contemptuously. “Ganver does not retaliate against infants, against children, against silly-beings.” It was thinking of small chattering birds, of tree rats in their nests. All of that was implicit in its voice.

“Silly-beings may have more good sense in their simplicity than great minds in their pride.” I don’t know where the words came from. Out of something Murzy had said, I think. Or perhaps one of Cat Candleshy’s scholarly epigrams. Whatever their source, these words were the key. The word “pride” was the key.

“You have accused. Among our people, we treat accusation seriously. We are accused seldom. Never by . . . others.” It meant inferiors. I was depressed. Mavin’s account of her meeting with Ganver had led me to expect something more understanding and godlike than this. It went on, “If you accuse, then you must judge.”

“You let your accusers be your judges?” Peter, astounded.

“Who else should be satisfied?” it asked. “If one’s accusers cannot be satisfied, what is justice?”

“One’s accuser might be mad,” Peter suggested, very unwisely I thought, considering where we were. “Mad, and incapable of being satisfied.”

This stopped it, but only for a moment. “We would deal otherwise with defective creatures,” it said very softly. “Are you defective?”

“I believe we are not,” said Peter. “As a matter of fact, we may be far less defective than many.”

“Of your kind,” it said. There was no sneer in its voice, but the words carried enough to shut Peter up.

“How must we judge?” I asked, eager to change the subject.

“You must see, experience, be one with the events which occurred. You must know. Feel. Only then can you judge.”

“And how do we do that?”

“Thuswise,” it said.

It began to spin, spin and sing, words I could not afterward remember. It spun, and as it did, so did I, and Peter, both, up on our toes, spinning like Dervishes.

“How?” I cried. “How?”

“Can a human Dervish do anything which an Eesty cannot? They who were taught by us and then sought to usurp our functions? Can they do what we cannot?” There was anger there, and hurt. Even if I’d been able, I would not have pursued the subject, and I was not able. Dervishes could change the shapes and natures of other beings. I knew that. Mavin had said so. Evidently Eesties could do the same, for we were being spun, Peter and I, into Eesties, small copies of the great Eesty before us, small creatures otherwise identical to Great Ganver, who whirled and sang.

“We go,” it cried, and we rolled away, spun away, sometimes one and sometimes the other, upon a road that only Ganver could see. Scenes and events flickered by. I saw mountains in flame, heard seas in retreat, tasted monstrous creatures engaged in battle. Or was it a game? A dance? They fled at the corner of my—eyes? At the edge of my perception, rather. I still don’t know how Eesties see or hear or speak. Peter says the organs are spread all across the skin, that the creature senses the world with all of itself. So be it, however it was, that is the way it was for me. Time sped by, space sped by, I knew we were still in the Maze, still in the memory of Lom, and still in that place when we stopped at last.

At the edge of a city.

We stood upon our points at the top of a little hill, green with grass and decorated with flowers. Each group of blossoms had arranged itself, pink against deeper rose, blue against white, lower blooms at the outer edges, higher blooms to the center, all against a bush of glowing green. A perfection that made one’s breath stick in the throat. I had no throat, but the feeling was the same. A kind of hesitation in the pulse; an inner voice crying, “Look at me.”

The white road beneath us went down into the city, became a spider’s web of roads running out in every direction. The city itself—I thought for a moment it was Pfarb Durim. Then I realized it couldn’t be. There was no cliff edge to the west of it. There were no walls. Only the shape of the doors and the style of the buildings had made me think of Pfarb Durim. That and the feeling of it, the feeling of elder times, of eternal stones, of history going back and back beyond any individual memory. Old, this city. Old, and as beautiful as the flowers upon the hill.

“Look at me,” said the garden walls, carved and decorated with tiles, topped with graceful crenellations. “Look at me,” the towers calling, slender and tall as trees, girdled with mosaic brilliance. “Here,” the buildings directed, rising on colonnades of arches, making a welcoming shade at their edges. “Here.”

And at the center of the city one tower higher than all the rest. It made me hurt to look at it, so tall it was and so perfect. White as milk, pure, undecorated except by its own perfect lines. At the top it rounded softly above a row of pointed arches opening into some high, secret room.

It was dawn in this place. A brightness lay beneath the eastern rim of the world.

“Listen,” whispered Ganver. A bell in the tower rang.

No. No. This was *nota bell*. *The Bell in the Tower* rang.

The sound came from it like a color, not loudly, not vividly, softly as a flute sound, pure, pervasive,

running out like a hue to stain the city and the hill on which we stood, out beyond us to the forests and the mountains, and beyond, to the edges of the world, until all within the world heard the sound, bathed in the color of the Bell. The Daylight Bell, painting the world. Within me something woke, stirred, looked around at the world with a feeling of enormous recognition, something there, within, which I had never recognized before. Beside me, Peter sighed, and I knew that within him, too, the waking had come. From a door low in the beautiful Tower flew ambient flakes of light, settling onto every surface, every creature, on me, on all of us, and we glowed in that instant like angels.

“Listen,” whispered Ganver.

From the far northern reaches a sound came back, an echo, a resonance, soft as the first and as pure, slightly dissonant, pushing the color back from the north, past us upon the hill, into the city once more to leave it as it had been, and with it went the flakes of light to enter the tower once more. And at that instant, the first ray of the sun struck the Tower to shine, ivory gleaming, pure and trembling.

“The Shadowbell,” I sighed, peering into the north, from which that second sound had come. “Shadowbell rings in the dark, Daylight Bell the dawn. In the towers hang the bells, now the Tower’s gone. . . .” But it was not gone in this time, not in this memory. Here, in the mind of Lom, the Tower still stood and the bells still rang. . . .

And I stopped, distracted by a flood of recognition. I knew where I was! The line of hills was totally familiar. The way the land folded, the way the forest ran down into the valleys, the buildings before me in the city. I had seen them before; not as they were here, tall and beautiful, but as they had become: tumbled; broken.

I had seen them not far from Stoneflight Demesne in the ruined city of the Old South Road, the city of the blind runners. It was here the Daylight Tower had stood, here the Daylight Bell had rung. Here. There. Here in memory. There in reality. I wanted to cry.

“Come,” said Ganver.

We went down into the city.

I have had trouble describing that city. Among the skilled pawns there are musicians, singers, writers of tales. Some among them are called poets, and it is they who write lyrics for the singers, epics for chanting at banquets, or merely beautiful words to express things for which ordinary language is insufficient. I am no poet. I longed then for a poet, for someone to put words to what we saw. I have written these words over and over, trying to say what it was like. Any I write are not good enough. You must stretch beyond them. You must bring poet’s feeling to them, knowing the words are not enough in themselves.

I had been in cities. Not many, true, but some. I was in Schooltown when I was young. And in Xammer, of course. And in our travels we had seen other cities and towns, all of them full of people and commerce of one kind or another. And in every city there is a feeling of—you see, here is where the words are hard for me—a feeling of irritation. Oh, it may not be great. But there is the need to step aside from another’s way and the need to avoid being bumped by or bumping others. People move without regard for one another sometimes, or even mistakenly in the belief they are regarding others. There are bruises and confrontations, and small itches of annoyance.

There are hard places in cities. Places where cold winds flick past hard stone to catch one’s clothing and blow gritty dust into one’s eyes. Places where sound hits stone and reverberates more loudly than is comfortable. There are other noises, too, calls of vendors and shrieks of children, the scream of

ungreased wheels, the rattle of wagons and pound of hooves. Cacophony, one might say. Not altogether unpleasant, most times. Sometimes unbearable.

There is nastiness underfoot sometimes as well. Things spilled or fallen and left to rot. There is often a smell of decay. Of drains. Sometimes there is such crowding that there is irritation, and this makes fear or anger; and following fear comes meetings of councils to make regulations; and following regulations is further irritation at the laws that are made.

Or dwellings. Consider dwellings. They become dirty and cluttered and hard to clean. There are animals that nest in corners and walls, and the animals harbor vermin that bite. And buildings make an interior darkness, a loss of sun and light. Stairs twist upon themselves in tangled steep ascents.

Now imagine a city in which none of these things happens. A city in which the wind funnels away from the street, leaving only pleasant warmth behind. A city in which every room is light and airy, in which no vermin dwell. A city in which movement flows like water, with no eddies except purposeful ones, in which hard sounds are muted and pleasant sounds transmitted, in which the stones are as clean as grass and every wall sparkles with reflected light.

Imagine a city in which one might hear either laughter and joy or tears of grief, but never the disquiet of anger. A city in which one might find music or quiet, as one chose, in which one might rejoice or sorrow at remembrance of friends lost, but in which even the sorrow had a sweetness.

Imagine a city of angels. Imagine the city of the Daylight Tower. You will have to imagine it. I cannot describe it, even though we were in

We lived there for some time, Ganver, Peter, and I. We ate there, getting fruits and edible plants from the vendors, drinking from the fountains. We went to concerts. We went to exhibitions of art and dance. The various creatures of Lom do dance, beautifully, and we saw some of those dances. Shadowpeople perched on the walls and sang. Eesties were everywhere. Other creatures came into the city sometimes, sat upon their hind legs and asked the vendors for fruit, and were given fruit or nuts or whatever they liked. There was no medium of exchange. All seemed to be carefully balanced, enough of everything but not too much. And each morning, just before dawn, the Daylight Bell rang in the Tower and everyone listened while the far, plangent sound of the Shadowbell returned. And each evening from the far north came the sound of the Shadowbell again, and a flight of shadows coming over the city like black birds, wanting to fall upon us. Then the Daylight Bell resonated to that distant sound with a pure tone of its own, and the shadows fled. Every morning light and dark. Every evening dark and light. A rhythm, a balance. "Tha one bell, tha two bell, that cannot ring alone." So Murzy had said, long and long ago.

And after a time in the city, we went one morning to the Temple at the base of the Daylight Tower, through the open portals of that place, into the shadowed solemnity within. A silver lamp stood on a high pedestal, lighting the place, and I knew it was from this lamp that the light came each morning at dawn and to this lamp the light returned when the Shadowbell rang. On another pedestal lay an open book, and from this book a choir of Shadowpeople sang, their voices as clear as the Bell itself. On the tessellated pave was a pool—oh, so familiar to me. A pool like the one where I had been initiated in the Citadel of the Sevens, glowing, running with light and shadow. It was surrounded by a low curb. Around the pool were joyfully solemn Eesties, who dipped long silver spoons into the ambient liquid and drew forth gleaming crystals to lay them upon the curb. Each of us Eesties gathered there ate one of the crystals and then spun our way out upon the northern road to carry the will of Lom, which the crystals had conveyed.

We were not compelled to do so. Even as we were whirling along the northern road, busy as flood-chucks with our messages to every creature in the world, I realized that we were not compelled to

carry those messages. We did it because we wanted to. It was good to do, and pleasurable, and right. We had felt that way before ever taking the crystals from the curb of the pool. We went on feeling that way. It was the Eesty feeling, the Lom feeling, the feeling of oneness. Bao.

So, Peter and Ganver and I buzzed along the white roadways of Lom, carrying messages to Shadowpeople and trees, to flowers and rivers. Some of our messages were delivered to very large creatures: to a fitchhawk, to a D'bor wife, to a gobblemole. I knew these were the spirits of very large things; the spirits of forests or rivers or seas—parts of the whole with minds and wills of their own. They touched us, and we told them of the will of Lom. There was no difficulty in translation. The message was a—I suppose it was a chemical one. Transmitted through our skins. From crystal to our bloodstreams; from our bloodstreams to the equivalent in others. Simple. Easy. Without possibility of misunderstanding.

I don't know how long this went on. Long enough to learn about it, see it, understand it. Ganver left us in no doubt as to the purpose of the exercise. "This is how things were," he said to us over and over. "Before man came."

We left the world of the Daylight Bell. I couldn't tell how we got out. At one moment we were spinning along the road, the next we were in the flickering travel that told us we were traveling among the memories. Forests, oceans, other cities. Something that looked like a huge stadium full of peculiarly shaped revelers. When we moved among the memories, time slowed. I knew we were traversing actual distance. The Maze was very large, and we were moving across it, from side to side, end to end.

Then we stopped again. Peter recognized the place.

"The Blot," he said. We were looking down on it from a height. It lay beneath us like a clot of filth, full of noise and stinks. Iron railways with cars that ran upon them. On every side the forest had been cleared; the stumps protruded from the earth like severed fingers. We spun down the road, down—onto nothing.

The road had been broken. Torn up. Great chunks of it lay here and there. I could see no purpose to the destruction at first. Then I saw the stone of the road had been quarried to build a squat, ugly building against the mountain side. People went in and out of it, hurrying, bumping into one another. At one side a group of men screamed at another group. A dispute over some detail of the construction. The sound was ugly. The emotion was ugly.

"Come," said Ganver.

We went away from there, into memory again. In and out. Always to scenes of destruction. Roads torn up. Forests leveled. River plains ignored while slopes were cleared. Cliffs of easily quarried stone neglected while roads were torn up to build ugliness.

And then we saw scenes of rebellion. Those great creatures, the spirits of the places, creatures like the Fitchhawk and the D'bor Wife, rose up. Ganver let us watch while they rose in wrath and fought against the intruder.

And we watched the intruder, man, fight back. With chemicals and fire; with sonic beams and huge machines. The Magicians from the Base fought back. Far to the west, over the sea, the people of the Chasm were driven down into the depths by that rebellion. Here in the east the people were scattered, fleeing the wrath of the facets of Lom.

But in the end the Magicians conquered. Those who had risen up were made captive in their own places. Chimmerdong was ringed with gray fire. Boughbound was dead. The spirits of Ramberlon

dammed up and driven away. Only a few of the great ones roamed free still, and they roamed a saddened world.

“Would you blame me, human?” asked Ganver. “Boughbound Forest was my friend. So was River Ramberlon. Great beings, those. Lost, now, for a thousand years. Would you blame me?”

Peter answered. “I would not blame you if you had killed us, Ganver. We were stupid, heedless beasts, and Lom would have been better without humans. But you didn’t kill the humans. It’s Lom who’s dying.”

“And with Lom dies the Fritchhawk,” I said. “Isn’t Fritchhawk your friend, too? D’bor Wife will die as well. And all the Shadowpeople. And likely you, too, Ganver, unless your scarlet egg can protect you, like some eternal womb. I agree with Peter. I could have forgiven you for killing all us humans, but why are you killing the world?” At that time it seemed the only thing to say. At that time in my Eesty shape I cared more about the world and all its glories than I cared about myself, the human, Jinian. I knew then why the Eesties made judges out of their accusers. Having seen what we had, I hated us, even myself, though I had never cut a tree and had done more to restore the roads than anyone else I knew.

“Let us go back to the city of the Bell,” it said. So we returned.

A shadow lay upon the city. There was pain in the city. The Eesties moved jerkily, there was an uncoordinated feel to things. Sound was not always pleasant. We ached with the feeling of the place.

“Do not go to the pool,” someone called. “We are not going to the pool.”

Ganver stopped. “What is this? What Eesty rejects the pool of bao?”

“We,” said the voice. “We of the Brotherhood.”

It came into view then. One star tip painted in the mockery of a human face. Ribbon-decked. One of those who had abused Queynt. One of the Oracle’s followers.

“And how many of you are there, Riddler?” Ganver’s tone was indulgent, even fond, the voice of age to the silliness of youth. The Eesty that confronted us was not large, not old. Scarcely larger than Peter and I. “How many? A few fives? You children? Who have only carried the will of Lom for a season or two? And now you are a Brotherhood?”

“We are those who protect Lom from the interlopers,” it asserted in a proud, impatient voice. “Seemingly, we are the only ones. The rest of you go on as though nothing were happening. Look around you, old star! Look what these filthies are doing to our world!” At the sound of its voice, several others had gathered around it, all with that painted caricature of a face, all with the fluttering ribbons. Suddenly I understood these painted faces, these ribbons. The faces were a symbol; a symbol of that which was to be destroyed. The flapping ribbons were Symbolic of the clothing men wore. They costumed themselves as the enemy, mocking him. Ganver’s attitude and voice did not change as he reasoned with them.

“Do you not trust Lom to meet this challenge, Riddler? Lom has met others. Greater ones than this. Don’t you trust Lom?”

“Lom is deluded. We waited, old one. We waited for wrath. For destruction. We waited for the mountains to flame and send these creatures into smoke, as happened in the time of the mud monsters. As in the time of the metal beasts from the farther star. Nothing. Only corrupt messages come from Lom, pitiful messages, messages which seek to bring these *men* into wholeness. The Brotherhood will not carry

these messages.”

“The Brotherhood may not,” said Ganver, and his voice was like thunder in the city. “But Ganver will, and all the Eesties of Lom who are not witless children.”

We were in the Temple of the Bell once more. The lamp glowed with its glorious light; Shadowpeople sang from the book; dignified Eesties with solemn faces lifted crystals from the pool and laid them upon the curb. Green they were, glowing like drops of dew upon new leaves. We took them, absorbed them, then went out of that place.

“Oh, by all the gods,” moaned Peter, reaching for me. We had no hands to hold with, but we touched. The human parts of us could not believe the message we carried.

Lom had decided that man was destructive because he was weak. Man knew no way but destruction. He knew no way of quiet strength and slow building, no way of harmony and peace. He was weak and small and needed weapons and walls to protect himself. He did not believe in the kindness of others. He did not perceive the willingness of Lom to provide, even to these foster children from some other world.

And Lom, in response to this weakness, had decided to give man Talents. The message we carried was the Talent message, to be touched to children yet unborn.

All I could think of in a dazed way was that the Gamesmen would be much less proud if they knew. I—suddenly I was much less proud. My Talent of beast talking, it had been given. My Talent of Wize-ardry. Was that, too, a gift? Peter’s Talent of Shifting. And Mavin’s. Himaggery’s Wizardry. All the Seers, the Sentinels, the Armigers. All the Sorcerers. Nothing of our own. Only what we had been given? Tragamors and Elators, nothing of their own. In each of us, it was a Lom gift.

We had stopped our travels in a space of gray nothing, a cloudy, peaceful place. Ganver confronted us here, looking into our hearts, knowing that we knew what message it was we carried. “How much do you need to see?” Ganver asked. “How much of what we did, we Eesties? We carried the gift which Lom gave; we carried it high and low, far and near. To every place men dwelt, we carried it. Not all received it. Of those who did, most misused it. Some few learned to control it. Those you call the Immutables, they learned to do so. But most, most simply accepted it. Shall we go into the later memories, shall we see what happened then?”

I knew what had happened. More of what had already happened. Men began to use their strengths as they had used their weaknesses. To destroy.

Ganver did not show us much. It did not need to. There were more broken forests, more broken roads. There were creatures killed who should never have been killed, whom it was a monstrous arrogance to have killed. There were Great Games played upon the plains of the world, leaving them deep in blood, bones, and cold. Seldom—oh, too seldom—were there places of beauty built. Too seldom were there things of beauty done.

“Do you accuse me?” Ganver asked. “Do you still accuse me?”

Peter was stubborn. “My question is still the same, Ganver. Why are you letting Lom die?”

“Let us go back to the city of the Bell,” said Ganver.

So, we went back for the third time. This time the city hummed with dissension, like a warnet hive, full of

hostile rumor. The ribbon-decked young Eesties were everywhere, and those old ones of Ganver's bulk seemed somehow diminished. "We go to the pool," called a familiar voice. "But we do not carry this last message of Lom."

"Why, Riddler?" asked Ganver in a voice that already knew the answer. "Why?"

"Lom is mad! It has chosen to set these monsters beside the Eesties. It has messaged them to become as we are. To run the roads of Lom!" They pushed us before them, thrusting us into the Temple. The pedestal where the lamp had rested was toppled. The lamp had rolled into a corner and lay there, lightless. There were no Shadowpeople singing. The book was closed. There were young Eesties at the pool, painted ones. They were fishing blue crystals from the silver surface as fast as they rose to the top. From the low curbing they were raking them into baskets, carrying them away. Before any of the young ones could move to stop him, Ganver had seized two of the brilliant blue stone gems and passed them to us, into us.

After all that time of refusing, all that time of denying compulsion, I was compelled to know what the message had been that Lom had designed for men.

Which was only to show mankind what we had just seen and call him to run the roads of Lom, to serve as the Eesties served and to live as the Eesties lived.

Which was only to invite man to become like the angels.

Across the pool, the one they called the Riddler danced along the curbing, taking up the crystals one by one. "We will not carry this message, old Ganver. This message goes into a deep cavern somewhere. Let the man-beasts die of their own destruction, as they will. And when they are gone, we will carry Lom's messages once more. Until then, let Lom rest in peace, let Lom recover its senses. Until then, no messages will be carried."

"Are you teaching rebellion, Riddler?" Oh, but Ganver's voice was weary and sad, carrying so much pain it made me want to weep. It did not make the Riddler weep. Instead, it posed, making a mockery of humankind of its Eesty shape.

"Oh, *my dear*, but of course. What could we *possibly* preach but rebellion? We are the true Eesties! Not witless fools of old rolling stars who should *know* better!"

I knew him then. Of course. How could I not have known him even among all his fellows dressed as he was? The Riddler. Rebel angel. Not one of the Oracle's followers, but the Oracle himself.

And he looked aside from Ganver at me, at Peter, seeing us, sneering at us. He knew us. This was not only memory but a time-place in which actuality existed, and the Oracle saw me not as an Eesty shape but as who I was.

3

THE DAYLIGHT BELL

We went out of the time-place, leaving the Oracle behind us. "I have one more time-place to show you," said Ganver.

I could guess what place that was. Ganver intended to show us the place we had just left, only somewhat later in time.

It had come to me as I stood there confronting the Oracle beside that pool with its low coping, feeling the echoes in the tower that lofted above us and the purposeful activity all around. The Temple of the Bell and the place we had seen at the edge of the Maze—the place with the roaring, angry crowd—were one and the same. I would have realized the connection sooner except that the Temple of the Bell was bright and joyful, full of purpose, while the place we had seen at the edge of the Maze had been colorless, dim, full of horrid shouting.

"You want to show us the Bell being destroyed," I said. "We have already seen it happen. Several times. We don't want to see it again."

"That place where the metal thing fell down?" asked Peter. "The gray place where all the Eesties were yelling?"

"That place. Yes." Ganver still sounded sad, anguish in its voice. The poor old thing was grieving. I knew why it had retreated to the scarlet egg—what had Mavin called it? "Ganver's Grave." It had gone there to bury itself away from the destruction.

"Why did they destroy the Bell, Ganver? I suppose it was the Oracle and his crew. The one you call Riddler."

"The Oracle, yes. The Brotherhood. The rebellious young Eesties. Only a few of that generation stayed with us, allied with us, with the elders. Come. You have not seen all that I have to show you. It is painful, but you must see it."

And we were off into the flickering twilight of memory travel once more, never a pause, light as blown leaves, until at last we came to the place. This time, however, we did not arrive *inside* the Temple. This time we were outside, watching the multitude gathered there.

Dim that city. Gray and chill. Walls were dirty and buildings smoke-stained. There were no Shadowpeople there. While none of the huge old Eesties were there, there was a great mob of the Oracle's Brotherhood, dancing in their ribbons, chanting and shouting in a zealot's parody of purpose, a frantic anarchy that could see no farther than the next bit of inflammatory oratory being shouted on every corner. Ganver remained with us where we were, hidden behind a partly fallen wall near the Temple. "Watch," it said sadly. "Watch and learn."

A flight of white stone stairs led to the Temple entrance, wide and gentle as the Eesties preferred them,

like a shallow fall of frozen water in their polished perfection. The Oracle stood on the broad terrace at the top, speaking to its assembled minions. The painted face was more detailed, and it wore a garment that was more robelike than the mere ribbons it had worn before. Cressets burned beside it, stinking of grease-soaked wood, and I thought of Pfarb Durim. Pfarb Durim must once have been as beautiful as this city once had been; and yet in my lifetime it smelled as this one did now, of smoke and sick violence. The Oracle's voice and the smoke rose upward, equally oily, equally black.

"These man-animals have the luck of beasts and the weapons of devils. They wage Great Games upon one another, but still they breed faster than death can take them. They survive their own malice, their own stupidity. They do not fall to their own destruction, and they will not fall to those who hunt them. Still they bask in Lom's favor, but the time of that favor is done. . . ."

The Oracle's voice rose in a brazen, monstrous shout: "Let loose the shadows!"

"Shut out the light. . . ."

"Let them die in the darkness. . . ."

"And when they are dead, we will build the Tower up again and cast the Bell once more. . . ."

"Let loose the shadows!"

The assembled multitude screamed, howled, babbled. I looked around. There were no older Eesties, none like Ganver, none there to speak against what was being done by this mob.

"Where were you?" I cried, horrified. "Why weren't you here?"

"We had tried," it said wearily. "We had tried and been rebuffed. We could have destroyed them utterly, but we did not do so. Many of us had grown weary. Some of us . . . felt a kind of sympathy for them, for our pride had been hurt as well. Who can say? I was not here. I had gone away. I had told myself I could not bear it."

From high in the Tower came that sound of agonized breaking we had heard before. When the Bell came down, it was with a great shattering, as though the heart of the world broke in pieces. Stupefaction greeted this at first, then rebellious, impudent cheering, which built to a clamorous roar.

Which faded almost at once into horrified silence. The sound of that roaring was still in our heads. Only very gradually did we perceive the other sound, the sound the mob had heard, reverberating, growing, a vibration loosed upon the city. From the north. The sound of the Shadowbell, going on, and on, and on, not dying but growing, louder with each moment, the dissonance keening in a knife-edge of noise, drowning the Eesties' voices until it became the only sound, the only reality, driving the light before it as clean water is driven before the muddy flood. We watched as the light ran out of the city before the flood of shadow, as the white stairs crumbled, as the Tower shattered before that sound and fell.

And those who had cheered were crushed under stones, sprawled onto rippling pavement suddenly full of chasms. Roofs cracked and swayed, crumbled into shards and dust. Walls tumbled. Shadow filled the streets, fluttering, deadly shadow. Many of the Brotherhood fled, stupidly shrieking, leaving behind one figure to stand at the top of the stairs, swaying as the city died, its painted clown's face staring down at Ganver, at me. What was it thinking? What had it really thought would happen? Was it so misled by its own ambition it could not have known what would occur here? I did not have long to wonder about it.

Some trick of the light made its painted face seem real, made the malice there seem to move. No matter whether the face was real or not, the thing itself was real enough, and it came for us, whirling down the shattering stairs like an avalanche of fury. It knew us. I clutched at Ganver and we went away, into the gray nothing.

“It saw you,” said Ganver. “As it saw me.”

“Were we there or not?” Peter asked in a breathless voice. “Sometimes we seem only to be watching history, sometimes we seem to be involved in it. How long ago was the Tower destroyed?”

“The Daylight Bell was destroyed some centuries ago,” it said as though beginning a chronicle. “First was the arrival of your people; then destruction and pain followed by the Battle of the Great Ones against your people, in which many of the great ones were destroyed; then the giving of the Talents; all these in a narrow space of years. Within one lifetime of your people, from the time you came, all these things occurred. . . .

“Much later came the blue crystals; then the destruction of the Tower. There were three irreplaceable treasures in the Tower of the Bell: the book from which the Shadowpeople sang; the lamp from which the light was spread; and the Bell itself. All destroyed when the Tower fell, as the great ones had been destroyed. Destruction and destruction. In my own memory, all these events were not long apart. In the eternal time of Lom, they were close indeed. . . .

“And since that time, the shadow has gathered with each ringing of the Shadowbell. It gathers most deeply here in the recollection of Lom, gathers here and flows from here. As for your being part of what you saw, yes, you were there. There are eddies in time. We Eesties move among memories, along the lines of thought. Sometimes we observe, sometimes we are there. Sometimes we participate. It is our movement in the Maze which recalls memory to Lom. It was your movement into the mind of Lom which recalled those memories. Our dance is the dance of recollection.

This seemed to me to be more poetry than practicality, but the sense of it was clear enough. The usual rules of cause and effect didn't apply. This world we were in, this Maze, existed outside normal time. It had its own rules which even Ganver might not totally understand.

“There is one thing I do not perceive,” Ganver was saving to me now. “The Riddler, the Oracle, it wants to destroy you particularly, Jinian. Why?”

“I don't know why! But I know you mustn't let it happen, Ganver. If it wants to get me, it must have a reason connected with this evil thing it's doing. And if you want to stop the evil, then you have to help me. That's all there is to it.” I was as sure of that as I was of my own name.

“Ah, ah,” it said. “So I must help you. I have been told this by another of you, by others of you. I helped the one called Queynt. I helped the one called Mavin. I helped the one called Bartelmy, though she did not know it.”

“Bartelmy is my mother,” I said. “Mavin is Peter's mother. Fate, Ganver. Do you believe in fate?”

“I have believed only in Lom. Is there something other than Lom?”

“I don't know, Ganver. Truly I don't. But at this moment, I think it would be wise for us to assume there is at least something else we can call upon. Call it fate or what-you-will, still we had better believe.”

The big old Eesty was silent so long I thought we had offended it mortally and it might not speak to us again. Finally, however, it said, "You accused me of complicity. Before we go further, tell me if you accuse me still?"

I couldn't say anything. The old being was obviously so shattered by it all, it was hard for me to tell it what I really thought. Peter, however, seemed to have it well in hand. Of course, Peter was impervious to some of the *feelings* that had been floating around, which had cushioned him somewhat. Now he stood very straight on a heap of gray vacancy. I could visualize him in his own shape, his thumbs hooked into his belt as he sometimes posed when he was being judicious.

"I would not judge you wrong to have killed every man, woman, and child upon Lom for the destruction we did," he said once more. "That would have been self-defense. Nor would I have blamed you if you had killed the Eesties who rebelled against you and against Lom and against all that was good in following the Oracle. But I judge that you have betrayed Lom also, for you retreated from the fray and did not move to assist and had to be winkled out by me and Jinian. If you had done nothing else, you could have struck at them when the Bell fell in. All the beribboned ones were frightened then and in disarray. But you didn't. So you are culpable, and so are we, and that's my judgment."

I thought of Mavin's story in which she had said, "Once you've interfered, you simply have to go on. You can't say it isn't your responsibility." I wanted to laugh, somehow, even though there was nothing at all to laugh about and Ganver would probably get angry and do something drastic to us at any moment for what we'd said already.

But that didn't happen. It simply stood there, looking inward at something we would never see, in a sadness too deep to measure. And at last it said, "Then I must atone. If it is not too late for atonement. And your safety must come first because the Oracle threatens you, Jinian Star-eye."

"Why do you call me that?" I asked, curious.

"Because of the Eesty sign you wear upon your body. The sign of the eye. The sign we taught to some of your people early in their lives upon Lom, trying to teach them other ways than the way of destruction."

"It was you who taught the sevens?"

"It was we who taught them some things. And we who taught the Dervishes some things. And I who laid myself upon Queynt to teach him some things also, after he had been abused by those. . . ."

"The Dervishes believe you are one of the old gods, Ganver. Is that true?"

The being before us was silent. Perhaps stunned? Perhaps offended. "I am to the old gods as you are to me, Jinian," it said at last in a voice that shook a little. "We are not unlike, and yet we are not equal in what we are."

Ah, so it would at least allow we were not unlike. "I thought you hated us."

"We hated what you did. In some of you we could find no bao at all. Some of you did not have it. Would never have it. You have a type of person who assists at birthing. . . ."

"Midwives."

“Your midwives. One of the “Talents given by Lom allowed them to seek bao in your children, to let only those young live who had it. Perhaps, if the midwives had been more respected . . .”

I took the pendant out of the neck of my shirt, staring at it. I had worn it ever since Tess-Tinder-my-hand had given it to me when I was a child. Tess the midwife. Who had, evidently, found some bao in me. Something about the shape tickled at my memory. Someone had said something about it. Someone else had called me Star-eye recently. The memory fled away, refusing to be caught, leaving a trail I sniffed at. The memory was important. Why couldn't I hold it? “What does the star-eye mean?” I asked.

“It is a lesson which must be learned from observation,” it said. “We say, ‘Watch and learn.’ It is a knowledge with five parts. Though we have no midwives, it is a knowledge we have always believed all Eesties have at birth, as the warnet knows the meaning of his hive and the gnarlibar the meaning of his teeth.” Ganver spoke in a grieving voice, and yet there seemed no reason for sadness in what it had said.

We hung there in the haze, nowhere. At the edges of vision were roiling movements as though something struggled to shape itself. Inside my head—or what passed for my head in the Eesty shape—there was similar roiling. It was Peter who broke the lengthy silence.

“It is profitless to discuss this now,” Peter said. “We must do something, Ganver. The Oracle is hunting Jinian. Is she safe here?”

“We are between forevers here,” the star replied. “The gray land in which nothing changes. Though the Oracle cannot find us, we can do nothing here. Of such a space was Ganver's Grave created. It is a space in which nothing may occur.”

We hung there a time longer, saying nothing, meditating, I suppose, on all we had seen and heard. It would do no good to stay where we were. At last I sighed.

“Take us out of here, Ganver. If we can do nothing here, we must leave the place.”

It nodded. We spun once more, out through the flickering lights of memory travel. Ganver gasped, and I glimpsed a pursuing shape, wildly flapping. In an instant we were in the gray once more.

“The Oracle?” I asked hopelessly. “Did it find us?”

“It caught sight of us.” A pause, the silence of thought. I perceived in Ganver a slight red flush, as of the merest hint of anger. “The Oracle seeks these shapes we wear. So, we will shape ourselves differently.” Ganver turned to Peter. “You, I will take to the edge of the Maze, where you may go away before it knows you are gone. The Oracle seeks three, not two.” Ganver turned to me. “I will return to hide you away where it will not find you, then I will trick the Oracle away, far away, to a place from which it cannot return quickly.”

“But . . . but,” said Peter.

“It's all right,” I murmured at him, feeling something inside me melt like hot sugar, a flood of bittersweet anguish. “It's all right, Peter. Go, get out of here. One of us has to get back to Himaggery and Mavin and the rest. They have to know about the Daylight Bell. About the Tower in Old South Road City. About the Oracle and the blue crystals and how all this started. See if you can find Murzy. Tell her I need her.”

“But, but,” he said again, his body slumped into a tragic pose, like a clown's. “Where will I find you? I

can't leave you. Jinian, I just can't!"

"Meet me in Old South Road City, Peter. Where the fragments of the Bell will still be, buried there under the ruins. Oh, they must be there. We must see to recasting the Bell, Peter. Meet me there. With all the help you can bring, and as soon as you can." Privately I thought I might not live to meet him. If the Oracle was after me, it would find me eventually. As though I were a Seer, I knew we would fight, the Oracle and I, and I had no hope of the battle between us coming out in my favor. Even if I were defeated, we might not lose everything if Peter had a chance to get away. So I thought, glad of the Eesty shape which did not show my emotions. The shape was calm. Inside was a whirling pool of fear and love, loathing and longing.

I had the feeling that Ganver was looking at me closely, though nothing in that enigmatic Eesty shape actually seemed to peer. Never mind. I leaned against Peter, star to star, every part of my body pressed against him. For a moment there was this ecstatic *flow*, then he was pulled away.

"We have no time for mating now," said Ganver in a tone of prissy concern. "And you are only two."

I laughed to keep from weeping. "We were not mating, Ganver. And among our kind, it only takes two. Take him away. And keep him safe." I turned away so Peter could not see me crying, forgetting for a moment that this shape didn't cry. And in a moment I was alone in the gray, watching the roiling shapes at the edge of my sight, trying not to feel utterly alone.

4

PETER'S STORY: THE FLITCHHAWK

At sunset, Ganver brought me out of the Maze at its southern edge, which would be to the north of the Shadowmarches, somewhere west of the River Haws in its upper reaches. The creature took pains to tell me where I was and point the best direction of travel before releasing me from its enchantment to my own Peter-shape once more.

I stood back from it and bowed in as courtly a manner as I could manage, considering the sudden acquisition of arms and legs which felt quite foreign to me. It stood there looking at me. I suppose one may say "looking," though when I had been inside that shape it had been rather more like tasting. Can one taste a shape? A color? Certainly I had done so as an Eesty. "My thanks," I said at last, realizing it expected some-thing from me. "Will you try to protect her? Please."

It nodded. I knew enough of Eestiness to realize there was no promise more binding than this nod. It agreed to do what it could, and no documents or oaths were necessary.

"I'm going to fly," I said. "As fast as possible. Tell her I'll be waiting."

It sighed. When it spoke, the voice was breathy and sad once more, without any of that anger it had displayed recently. "Your Talent is of Lom," said Ganver. Then it pointed down the hill we were standing on. I looked, at first not seeing what was indicated, then realizing that great stretches of the forest were dead. "Your Talent is of Lom," it repeated. "And Lom dies."

Experimentally, I Shifted an arm. It went into the shape I wanted for it, feeling about the same as usual. "I'll be careful," I said.

"Husband your power," Ganver directed. "Use it carefully. Go in the day, where there are sun-warmed places. Remember the Shadowbell has rung."

I considered this. Power from the sun wouldn't be influenced by Lom's weakness, though my Talent might. If there were dangerous shadows about, they could only be seen in daylight. Ganver had given me good advice, for which I was grateful. I bowed again before turning to make my way down the hill. It was evening, and I needed to find somewhere safe to hole up until morning.

There were shadows, not many. Until I came out of the Maze, there had been nothing much to attract them. They seemed undisturbed by my passing, rising in my wake to flutter gently in the air before settling again. I wondered, as Himaggery must have wondered in his time, as I know Mavin had wondered, what it was the shadows wanted, what it was that shadows felt.

There was a rocky wall above a small stream halfway down the slope of the forest. The wall had a hole in it large enough to sleep in. We might have been in the Maze for days or for a season. However long it had been, we had not slept in that time. Now I felt the need for sleep, and something about the place reminded me of my travels in Schlaizy Noithn. As a wanderer in that strange place, needing rest and peace, I had found both in pombi shape in a hollow tree. I found both again in similar shape on this evening. A pombi with weapons on his paws and fangs in his jaws, a pombi who could fit into a hole, leaving no room for shadows.

It was warm in the hollow. The air breathed coolly upon my face. The agonies of the world slipped away in the comfort of the moment. Sleep tugged at me, but so did thoughts of Jinian. I did not want to sleep for fear I would dream of something else.

When I was young, in Schooltown, I had not much considered love. The first love I'd believed in had been Mandor's for me, and that had proved false. The first true love I'd seen had been Mertyn's for me, and I had not thought of it as love at all. Mertyn was my thalan, of course, Mavin's full brother, but I hadn't known of the relationship until after leaving Schooltown so did not much regard it when I found out. The next love I saw was the love of Yarrel for his long-lost sister, Izia, taken by a Shifter, so it was said. That I believed in well enough, for when he learned I was Shifter, too, it had cost me his friendship. In the mean-time, I had lusted after the Immutable girl, Tossa, the one who had died. And after Silkhands, in a sort of brotherly way. And after Izia herself, though I think it was really Yarrel I longed for.

At last I had taken up with Jinian, without any intention of loving her at all. And yet I had dreamed about her sometimes. I dreamed she was sitting in a window, leaning down to hand me something marvelous. I dreamed she was in danger and needed me. I could not escape thinking of her. Oh, yes, she irritated me. From the first times we were together, she chivied me this way and that. But it got so I could not think of myself without thinking also of Jinian. I wanted her near. Wanted to argue with her. Wanted to touch her. Wanted to tease her. Wanted to make love to her—wanted to.

And couldn't, of course, because of that damn oath of hers. I had come close to breaking that oath, telling myself I'd do it by force if necessary, but good sense prevailed. Mavin had said it often enough. A man who forces a woman is no true man. He is only a thing. Without soul, said Mavin. "Without bao," I said to myself. Jinian would not love one without bao, I supposed. Better wait than woe.

So I thought, half-dreaming, letting the dream come at last. I slept, and when I woke I could not remember what the dream had been.

I came down to sit upon sun-warmed rock thinking of Jinian once more with an accustomed degree of frustration. I would go south because it needed doing, but also because Jinian said go south. I would wait in the Old South Road City because there would be work there to do, but also because Jinian had said she would meet me there. My body did not move, however, and I did not Shift wings, for I was closest to her where I was and did not want to leave her. If this is love, then love is what it is. If love is something worse than this, I do not care to know about it.

The rock wall faced east. It heated quickly under the morning sun. Shaking myself back into a sense of duty, I took that heat to change myself into a flying thing, sleek and shapely, blue below and dark above, like a fish with wings. I had a quick, unreasonable longing for Chance. "Brother Chance," I would have said, "get yourself on my back and we'll go find that sportive widow of yours in Mip." Or had it been Pouws or some other place? "Brother Chance, get yourself on my back and clutch tight with your legs, because I'm scared to death." Fine thing for a Gamesman, a Shifter, fine thing for the son of a Wizard. I was scared, and it took a bit of time before I realized it wasn't me—or certainly not only me—I was frightened for.

At last it was the shadows that moved me. I saw them trembling beneath the trees, fluttering as though about to fly. I did not want to encounter them in the air so thrust downward with wings long warmed in the morning sun and launched myself to spiral above the stone, where an updraft lifted me higher and higher.

From above, I could see how the world died. Throughout the Shadowmarches were leprous patches of dead forest. All down the River Haws were mud slides and eruptions of red and yellow smoke, as though great pustules had broken from beneath the skin of the world. So suddenly. So long hidden, and now so suddenly the illness broke forth. And yet it is the way of some sicknesses, so Healer Silkhands used to say, to give no sign while they eat away inside, then break through when it is almost too late to do anything about them.

It was the filthy smokes that had killed the trees. Looking down from my height, I could see creatures fleeing from shadow to light, from dead to living. Tree rats in little bunches, darting like bats across clearings. Bunwits, large and small. A follow of wild fustigars and a prowl of pombis moved into my sight and away again as I circled, and even from the height I could hear the cries of birds driven from their nests by shadows.

"Brother Chance," I said to my absent friend, "this is a rotten bad place we've come to."

"Then best get out of it, boy," he absently replied.

Which I did, winging away to the south over the blotched forests and the rising humors of decay. I'd had some practice with wings in that last trip, and a Dragon at the Bright Demesne had given me a few pointers. In my whole life, I'd done wings only briefly once or twice before. I hadn't really understood the proper proportion of wing to body, the way wings could lift almost by themselves, the length-to-width ratio necessary for endless soaring flight. On the way back from visiting Mertyn, I'd experimented as the Dragon had suggested. This shape was a good one, one that could well have carried me over the Western Sea. Since I was not permitted to be with Jinian anyhow, I might as well have gone over the Western Sea. This thought upset me; I lost the proper structure at the ends of my wings and dropped a good part of a league before I got it right again.

I did have sense enough to stick to the places where warm updrafts gave me the lift I needed. Far ahead, jagged against the southern sky, lay the southern mountain rim of the Shadowmarches. From above those peaks I could look down on Cagihiggy Creek, upon what little was left of the Blot, on Schlaizy Noithn.

Upon the ice caverns, where lay one hundred thousand frozen men and women.

I tilted a wing to steer a little west. The cavern was the closest place where I might find someone, and whether anyone was there or not, it would make good sense to check the caverns before I went farther.

Below me the land was in ferment. Shadow bulks rose upon it, bubbling upward, subsiding once more. I circled, looking behind me. The air held roiling wings of shadow. Not near me, particularly, simply there, both high and low. I could see places that looked as though the air trembled, quivered, where a kind of grayness was. Once having seen them, I made a circle every few leagues, being sure that none of the patches was near me.

Noon came above the Shadowmarch mountains. Below, the land sloped down in a long basin, east to where Hell's Maw had been, where Pfarb Durim still stood—unless it had vanished in the years I had been gone. I had not flown above it on my return to Jinian. West the basin bent to run both north and south; north into a cul-de-sac rumored to be the site of a Bamfug Demesne, southward to the Blot. The cavern lay north of the Blot, hidden in a curl of broken mountain, the way to it blocked by falls from the time the mountain had exploded, when the Magicians were destroyed. My doing, at least partly. And mother Mavin's. I found myself glad that Quench and some of the other techs had escaped, but I was not generally sorry the place was gone. An evil place; based on an evil custom.

Ahead and to my right a swimming dot plunged about the sky in erratic flight. I Shifted eyes to see it, making telescopic lenses, wondering what would make any flier dodge about so.

It was the Flichthawk! Jinian's Flichthawk, coming from the west, carrying something large, pursued by shadow!

It dropped and darted, dived and soared, mighty wings pumping hard as it fought to gain altitude. Behind it the shadow came, effortlessly, fluttering, dropping as the Flichthawk dropped, soaring as the Flichthawk soared. I beat my way toward it, hurrying, wondering even as I did so what possible help I might be, answering myself immediately that I might carry part of the Flichthawk's burden, for it was very heavily laden.

I came beneath it, calling to it as I came. "Flichthawk! I will carry one of your baskets!" It had two, one in each mighty set of talons. I beat upward, slipping sideways to avoid a flicker of shadow at my side, then the other way as it closed on me. Gamelords, but this shadow was persistent, and fast.

I came just beneath the mighty bird, heard its heaving breath, heard the thunder of its heart. There was something almost like panic in its eyes.

I don't know what made me do it. It wasn't reasoned out at all. Just memory and instinct working together. I saw the shadow. I remembered how the Daylight Bell had driven it away, how at dusk the Daylight Bell's sweet resonance had cleared the city. I changed the chords of my throat and cried out, cried with the voice of the Bell. .

Once, twice, and the shadows fled.

We dropped from the sky, Fritchhawk losing one of his baskets as he fell. It tumbled down and down, breaking upon the earth to shed a sapphire radiance far upon the dusty ground. When we landed, I stood near him, panting. I heard the thunder of my own heart. I had never flown so high.

“Where did you hear the Bell?” cried the Fritchhawk in a voice of heartbreaking woe.

“In the Maze,” I mumbled. “In the Great Maze, from a time very long ago.”

“I had never thought to hear it again.”

“You will hear it again,” I promised. “We will recast it in the Old South Road City. We will build the Tower once more.” I was not at all certain of this, but it seemed a comforting thing to say.

“We will build little unless we can gather up again what I have spilled,” it cried. I remembered the crystals then and began wandering aimlessly about, looking for them. There must have been thousands of them in the basket.

And as we were wandering all futile in the underbrush, trying to pick up the crystals, we heard voices coming through the trees. I faded into the shrubbery. Fritchhawk somehow vanished. I crouched.

“I heard your voice, Peter, Mavin’s son,” cried the voice. “Come out of there.”

Someone else was mumbling, a rhythmic kind of chant. It ended with four words spoken loudly, clearly. “Where Old Gods Are.” Abruptly the Fritchhawk stood forth, looking surprised, as though unable to help himself. The bushes shook at the edge of the clearing, and six women came through. Two old ones. Two middle-aged. One not much older than I, one younger. They did not need to introduce themselves. I knew at once who they were. The other members of Jinian’s seven.

“Well,” said one of the middle-aged ones with some asperity in a clear, demanding voice. “What were you hiding from? Ghosts?”

I bowed. This could only have been Cat Candleshy. “We have just escaped the shadow, ma’am. And dropped a valuable cargo in doing so.

Now we are faced with gathering up thousands of the blue crystals, scattered over leagues of earth, no doubt.”

“A well-spoken thing,” said the beautiful one, who was little older than I. Margaret Foxmitten. It had to be. “Is this flying thing really Jinian’s Peter?”

“Should you call him a thing?” This was the shy one, Sarah Shadowsox.

“Why not? It looks like a thing.” The other older one, Bets Battereye, with the no-nonsense braids across her head. Indeed I was a winged thing, so I did not take offense.

The white-haired one had said nothing as yet. When she did, I knew it was Murzemire Hornloss. Murzy. “Where’s Jinian, Peter? Is she all right?”

I nodded. “Ganver’s looking after her. She’s still in the Maze, trying to stay clear of the Oracle.”

“What was that ringing sound we heard?” This was the youngest, scarcely more than a child, still with

baby fat on her arms. Dodie.

It was the Fritchhawk who answered. "That was Peter, pretending to be the Daylight Bell. For which I owe him a boon."

"Did you really do that, Peter? How clever." This was Murzy. "I suppose you heard it in the Maze? Is it true, as Mind Healer Talley says, that the Maze is the memory of Lom?"

"Is it true that there are guides?"

"Is it true that space and time are changed inside?"

"Is it true . . ."

I waved them silent. "Murzy. Madam Hornloss. We have a precious load scattered wide. I am no Wizard, but it seems we need help. . . ."

"Surely not," said Murzy. "Not with a lord of the birds at your side." She bowed deeply. "I have long known your name, but only recently your identity, great Favian."

The Fritchhawk inclined its mighty head. "Perhaps Favian is still great lord of the birds, ma'am. If the sickness is not too close. If the shadow is not nigh." It called into the sky and was answered in a moment by a twittering from every side. Small birds began to gather by dozens, then hundreds, hopping about, darting here and there, their bright eyes seeking, their beaks opening to pick up crystals as though they were grains of giant wheat. It was not long before the contents of the broken basket were heaped before us. Murzy shook out a tablecloth, and we piled the crystals upon it, knotting the corners, while I answered the questions they had asked about the Great Maze. They asked a great many, and it was some time before they were satisfied.

"Where are you going, Mavin's son?" Murzy asked. "Up to the ice caverns where the Gamesmen sleep?"

I nodded, wondering how she had known about that. Mavin, Himaggery, and I had not broadcast knowledge about the caverns, though there were a number who knew of it. "I thought I would stop there, yes. Then I would have come hunting you. Jinian asked me to find you, to tell you she needs you."

"Ah, well, we thought perhaps that was the case," said Cat Candleshy. "Some time ago Murzy suspected it might be true. And Bartelmy said something of the sort, also. Your confirmation of it now makes us glad we left Xammer when we did." Until that moment I had forgotten that Murzemire Hornloss was a Seer.

"We'll go on north to her, boy. You get on your way. Don't try that bell sound again unless you must. It will only work when it comes as a surprise. It could not have been the sound of the Daylight Bell alone which kept the shadow at bay, but then you probably know that."

They nodded at me then and went on toward the north, across the Shadowmarches, as though they were out for an afternoon stroll. "So that's a seven," I said. There had been no opportunity for me to meet them before Jinian and I had set out two years before, but I had heard much about them since, of course. "So that's a seven."

"Only part of one," murmured the Fritchhawk. "They are more impressive when they are complete."

I don't know that "impressive" was quite the word I would have used. "Indomitable," perhaps. I did not worry about them further; they needed none of my concern. Instead, I faced south and asked, "Are you strong enough to go on? We can get to the cavern before dark. I will watch if you will carry. Or I'll carry and you can watch."

The Fritchhawk said something about meeting the terms of the boon, which meant it had to carry. I watched, therefore, from above him, or under him, or off to one side or the other. Several times I saw roiling air away in the distance, but nothing approached us. Evidently the surprise of the Bell sound had been enough for a temporary surcease.

We came to the cavern before dusk, slipping in along the fold of hills to find it, spotting it at last by the firelight gleam in the cavern's mouth. I started to lose my shape and knew that one of the Immutables must be present, so I turned and landed some distance away, coming the remaining distance on my own two feet, naked as a fish.

The governor of the Immutables, Riddle, was there with Mertyn and Quench and a smallish crowd of men and women who could have been techs or pawns or Immutables. When they saw the Fritchhawk slanting down out of the evening sky, there was a great hoorah, and Mertyn came running to the rock shelf, where he landed just about the time I arrived, puffing. He hugged me, and I him, and someone fetched me some clothing. Then we stood merely looking at one another until an outcry aroused our attention.

The Fritchhawk had set down its burdens, knocked several dozen of the workmen down with its wings, then taken off again. I saw it circling high above me, moving off to the south while the workmen exclaimed and shouted. It was going toward Chimmerdong, I supposed. Jinian had said it preferred to live in Chimmerdong. I waved, not knowing whether it saw the gesture or not. Then they were all around me, pulling me along toward the tents and barracks they had set up just inside the cavern, invisible from above.

"We've been waiting for you, boy," said Quench. "Waiting for those crystals, rather. Didn't want to start until we had them. Important things, those."

"Very," affirmed Riddle, punching me lightly on one arm. "Good to see you, Peter. We didn't really expect you just yet, but we're glad to have you here. A matter has come up. . . ."

"It's the resurrection machine," said Mertyn. "It's in good repair, and they can start using it anytime, but the best they can do is bring back twenty-five or thirty a day. At that rate, it will take twelve years to get all the frozen Gamesmen awake, and yet the crystals you gave us urge haste."

"It's more than mere urging, Mertyn," I said, trying not to sound too panicky about it. "We don't have twelve years. It is questionable if we have even a season left." And I told them about the deadly yellow crystals and the tragedy of the Maze while they exclaimed and sighed and shook their heads. "We'll have to do something faster," I concluded.

"It seems to me that something was mentioned about using Demons? Demons and Healers, wasn't that what you did on the Wastes of Blear? I couldn't quite remember." This was Mertyn.

Of course they could use Demons and Healers. Silkhands the Healer and Didir the Demon had wakened Thandbar. After which Didir and Dealpas—also a Healer—had wakened others. "Didir should have remembered," I said half-angrily. "She did it, and it wasn't that long ago."

“I’m sure she would have remembered, Peter, but she’s down at the High Demesne. It’s something any Demon and any Healer could do, do you think?” This was Riddle, sounding very uncomfortable about some-thing.

“I should think so.”

“Then I think our strategy is obvious,” said Quench. “Sort out the bodies in there, use the machine to wake the Healers and Demons first—Gamelords, what a job it will be to sort out both bodies and blues and be sure they match—then get teams of them resurrecting the others.”

“I would have thought Didir would have been here to help you. She and Dealpas.” The last time I had seen her, she had been at the Bright Demesne, with Barish-Windlow.

They looked at one another, shifting from foot to foot very uncomfortably. It was Mertyn who sighed at last and invited me into his tent. “Come in, my boy. I’m afraid we have bad news.”

He hummed and hawed until I was half-crazy with it. I don’t know what it was about Mertyn that made him so irritating; perhaps because he was so cautious not to use Beguilement (which was the Talent of Rulers) on me that he went the other way. He could not even be normally sympathetic without worrying whether he was being manipulative.” After a time I grew weary of it and said, “Mertyn, quit being diplomatic and tell me. Something’s happened to Mavin?”

“No. No, not Mavin.”

“Himaggery then. He’s dead.”

“Gamelords, boy! What would make you think that?”

“You would! You’re dodging all over the place, not telling me what’s happened. What has happened?”

“It’s the Bright Demesne. It seems to be under siege.”

I sagged. Bad enough, but not as bad as I’d feared. “How did you find out? Who’s doing it? Is it a Game?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. We sent an Elator with a message for Himaggery, and he came back saying he couldn’t deliver it. Game has been declared, and the place is shut off. The two main players seem to be a Witch named Huldra and a Basilisk named Dadrina Dreadeye. Ah. I see you know them.”

“I do, yes. Yes, Mertyn. Indeed I do.” As I did. Huldra was, I hoped, the last of her family. I had done away with all the others, one way or another. As for Dadrina Dreadeye, she was Jinian’s enemy, which made her mine also. “Who’s in the Bright Demesne?”

“Himaggery. Barish. I think all the Gamesmen of Barish as well, though some of them could have left before the siege was laid. Oh, that girl, the one Jinian sent from a place called Fangel. The Elator did manage a few shouted messages before the besiegers came too close.”

“Sylbie? And the baby?”

Mertyn blushed. “According to the Elator who saw her on the walls with the child. Do I understand the

baby is yours?"

"It is, and honorably got, Mertyn, so don't make faces. Jinian fully understands the situation. So who else is there? How about Mavin?"

"Mavin had gone before the siege, I think. I still haven't heard from Mavin. She left another of those enigmatic clues of hers, and there's been no time to figure it out. Something about the best apples to bake upon the hearth are those from one's own orchard. She's really quite maddening at times."

"No reason given for the siege?"

"We have no idea why the siege, but the Gamesmen have turned up in overwhelming numbers and with an unfair advantage as well. They're using shadows. Which is why my Elator couldn't get in and none of the people in the Demesne can get out."

I smiled. The three who were watching me looked at one another, wondering if I'd lost my mind. "My expression isn't one of joy," I said. "It's just that you seem at a loss for an explanation, and I can give you one. Huldra and Dedrina were sent south to dose us all with poisonous purple crystals. You, Mertyn, and Quench and Riddle. Everyone at the Bright Demesne. However, that could be done easily enough through spies and Elators without need for a siege. So, it's obvious the siege is for some other reason, probably to do precisely what it is doing, which is to keep Himaggery and Barish bottled up. To keep them from coming here." I laughed. "Huldra was instructed to come here and destroy everything, but she doesn't know about you, Riddle. With you here, no Seer can peer into the cavern. So, they don't know the resurrection is already beginning. Make sure they don't find out!"

The Immutable frowned. It was his Talent to form a barrier against the use of any other Talent. Barish and Queynt were said to have bred his people long ago in the early years of the millennium as a kind of defense against the unlimited Talents of the Gamesmen. Now he objected, "If Demons and Healers are to be used to raise the frozen Gamesmen, we Immutables must withdraw. Else their Talents will not work."

"Withdraw, Riddle, but only so far as you must, and let a good rank of you camp between the cavern and Lake Yost, where the Bright Demesne is. Let Huldra's Seers struggle to get a vision through your people. Let them try to get an Elator through. They won't be able to penetrate the barrier you'll make. They'll continue to try, however, so be on your guard. Sooner or later they'll send a force to try and destroy the place."

"Why does this Witch want the resurrection stopped?" Mertyn was puzzled by this, as he should have been.

I had thought about this for many hours during the flight from the Maze. "She cares nothing for the resurrection, thalan. But the one who gives her orders, *that one* cares that the resurrection should not take place. Huldra thinks she is doing this for the giants in the northlands, giants who are dead, though Huldra probably doesn't know it. Dead or not, I do not think it was ever the giants who decided upon this. They were huge and powerful, but they were not subtle. They were cruel but not amused at their cruelty. No, they were guided by another mind, a mind more subtle and more depraved, though they never knew it."

I told them about the Oracle.

There were expressions of consternation, vows of retaliation, loud expostulations from Quench, mutterings from Riddle. When all their exclamations and posturing were done, however, the truth was still

there before us. Lom was dying, and avenging ourselves against the Oracle had to take second place to that. When that understanding finally came, also came silence.

“You must get the frozen Gamesmen moving,” I said gently. “The Demons and Healers to raise the others. To raise Tragamors to move the stones of the Ancient Roads and set them in place again. To raise Sorcerers to hold power for them. Sentinels to keep watch against the shadows. Armigers and Elators to carry word across the breadth of Lom. Even the Necromancers, Seers, and the Gamesmen of mixed Talents. All who can must go south, to the site of the Old South Road City,” and I told them where it could be located, using Stoneflight Demesne as a guide. “The city must be raised up again. The Tower must be rebuilt. It *must* be done as soon as possible, and even that may be too late.

“All beneath the mountain were chosen because they were *good*,” I said. “By which is meant, I suppose, that they were unselfish persons of perception. And the lords of fate know we need those qualities now.”

“I have not heard that oath,” said Mertyn. “What lords are those?”

I laughed, perhaps a little shrilly, for I was very tired. “The lords of fate? Those we pray are larger than Lom. If nothing is larger than Lom, then whom shall we swear by if Lom dies?” They smiled at this, as I had intended, though not much.

“That is all we have to do, then?” asked Riddle.

Mertyn answered, shaking his head. “Yes, that’s all. To undo every wrong man has done. Rebuild every road. Replant every forest. Clean every river. Send the message that is in these crystals to every being who walks, swims, flies upon the world. . . .”

“Stretch the crystals as far as they will go,” I advised them. “Have Healers try laving their hands upon other creatures. The Eesties convey messages in this way, and Healers may be able to do it also.”

I sighed. The sleep that my pombi self had had the night before seemed very long ago. And I was worried about Jinian. I seemed to see her face before me, that troubled, slightly concentrated expression she so often wore. “Danger,” her vision face said. “Danger, Peter.” I took a handful of the blue crystals from the basket and secreted them in a pocket. Something told me I would need them.

“Well, then, we’ll be at it,” said Riddle. “And what about you, boy?” “Why,” I said, “I have no choice, really. Someone must carry this word to the Bright Demesne.”

5

JINIAN’S STORY: THE FIRST LESSON

Time in the gray spaces between memories was not an easy thing to judge. I might have been there for a season, or perhaps for a few breaths. However long it may have been, there seemed to be a good amount of thinking time. About the time I had decided to count my pulse as a way of measuring—realizing with a panicky sense of loss that the Eesty shape had no pulse I could detect—Ganver came back, sliding through the gray walls of the place like a fish into a shallow.

“Is Peter out?” I asked.

“Out of the Maze, yes. It is evening in the world. He will fly in the morning, south to the lands of your

people.”

I must have shown some emotion at that, though how it could be perceived in that Eesty shape I don't know.

“He is in your bao?” Ganver asked. “Your wholeness, your ubiety?” Wholeness and whereness. I had not thought of it in those terms, but it was true.

“Yes,” I said. “Peter is my . . .”

“Bao-lus,” said Ganver, giving me the right Eesty word for it. “I, too, have experienced this. Once. Among our kind, it takes five to become bao-lus. And only from the perfection of bao-lus does a new form come. You have no child as yet? No. There is an oath among the sevens. I had forgotten. Well, we five had a child. Among our people we say `a following of perfection.’”

It was silent, then, for a very long time. I did not want to interrupt its thoughts. Finally, Ganver shivered and turned to and fro, as though shaking its head. “I will take you now where you may be safely hidden while I lead the Oracle away .”

I shook my top end. “Before we do that, Ganver, there's something else we can do.”

“Do?” it asked, as though “doing” anything were foreign to its ability. Well, in a sense, I suppose that was true of Eesties. They had never really “done” much except buzz about carrying messages. At least those of Ganver's generation hadn't.

“There are a great many things which might be done,” I said, not wanting to give it any time to think the matter over. “The first one that comes to mind concerns how memory works. From what you've said, I don't suppose Lom is remembering everything all the time, simultaneously. At least my mind doesn't work that way.”

“No,” said Ganver stiffly, not unbending but condescending to explain. “As we messengers move through memory, Lom remembers. Part of the duty of the Eesties is to move through memory, wandering, dancing through every part, recalling all past time to Lom's consciousness.

“Well, since you've been holed up in your grave there, Ganver, who's been doing the remembering? Don't tell me. I already know. The Oracle and his friends, right?”

It nodded. If an inclination of the top three points can be considered a nod, that's what it did, and it did it in that superior manner that made me very angry.

I stamped one point of me. “You know,” I said in a conversational tone, “mankind is no great shakes in the holiness department. I think the Shadowpeople have it all over us, quite frankly. But I'll stack us against your people any day, great Ganver. Half of you are fanatics and the other half are quitters.”

This was not really a very diplomatic thing to say, nor was it at all kind. I repented of it immediately but was angry enough to go on in dogged fashion, “If the Oracle is in the Maze with its brethren, Ganver, we can take it for granted it is circulating repeatedly among the worst possible memories. It is undoubtedly recalling everything it can of destruction. Of pain. Of the fall of the Bell. All that. And while that is going on, how many of you elder Eesties are sequestered away, not doing anything?”

“Too many,” the Eesty said. It was said so humbly I was ashamed of myself for the outburst. “It seems

even one is too many.”

“Well, the point is, of course, that if there are enough of your generation—enough who aren’t ‘Brotherhood’—I’d suggest a thing you might do immediately is to start circulating among the pleasanter events of history. Recall to Lom’s memory some pleasanter times. Cheer it up a bit.”

Ganver did not reply. Even I had to admit to myself that when talking about an entire world, “cheering up a bit” did sound undignified. “And another thing,” I went on stubbornly, “is to figure out whether any particular memory can be destroyed.”

“Destroyed!” The Eesty was aghast. You’d think I’d suggested murdering its entire race.

“Yes, damn it, Ganver. The memory in which the Bell is destroyed. If we could just get rid of that one! If Lom didn’t remember it was gone—don’t you see, if it didn’t know the Bell was gone, it might act as though it weren’t.”

“But the Bell is gone!”

“Where did it come from in the first place? Lom made it, didn’t it? Constructed it, Eesties didn’t make it, did they? I thought not. I think it’s like newts, I really do.”

“Newts?” Ganver evidently didn’t know the word. Well, why should the Eesty know about newts? Nevvts aren’t exactly prepossessing, and they certainly aren’t native to this world because they have tails.

“Newts. If you cut off a newt’s foot, it grows another one. I think it’s because a newt is so stupid it doesn’t know the foot is gone, so another one just pops out. Somewhere inside the newt is the idea of footness, and footness takes over when it is needed. You cut off my foot, on the other hand, and I know very well it’s gone, so another one just doesn’t grow. Well, if Lom didn’t know the Bell was gone . . .”

“You think another one might pop out?” Ganver sounded exactly like Murzy, that same tone of slightly outraged elder dignity.

“I think it’s worth the chance, whether it does or not. Even if another Bell didn’t pop out, it would make Lom feel better not to remember the actual act of destruction.”

The thing I was remembering really had nothing to do with newts. It had to do with that time in Chimmerdong when I had grodgeled with the D’Bor Wife, pretending to find the Daylight Bell, only to see the Bell itself, golden and glorious, sinking beneath the waves of the lake. That was the idea of the Daylight Bell, I knew it. The idea, the model, whatever. If I had seen a Daylight Bell in that distant lake, there might be more or could be more than one. If I had seen another, it must mean that Lom could make another, several, many, If it felt like it. If it felt better!

“And if Lom felt better, maybe it would stop making those yellow crystals that are killing everyone,” I finished, knowing I had not been particularly persuasive. Ah, well, it was mostly hunch, intuition, not reason. Still, to do that would be better than doing nothing.

“How?” asked Ganver, much to the point.

“I’m not sure whether it would work or not, but I’d start by getting some flood-chucks in, and we’d cut all the hedge away from the outside until we got to the place the memory is, then we’d tunnel underneath and collapse it and dig it all out and carry it away. I mean, Ganver, I don’t know how Lom’s mind

works, but I do know that part of it is material. Real. Lom-flesh, so to speak. So if we take the real flesh part away, then the memory will have to go with it, won't it?"

Ganver did not indicate comprehension. I decided to try again. "Look, sometimes a Gamesman will get whacked on the head. After which, at least once in a while, that Gamesman forgets things because part of its brain has been injured or destroyed. So if Lom's memory is at all like other creatures' memories, and if we're very careful about it, why couldn't we remove just this one memory?"

Ganver breathed a word that I could only translate as "Sacrilege," though what it said was, "Corruption of the holy reality greatly to the discomfiture of those whose job it is to maintain the status quo."

Really, this old Eesty did make me peevisish. "Well, the real sacrilege was when young Oracle and his friends brought the Bell down, Ganver. After that, anything else that is done can't be called anything but helpful. If we could find Mind Healer Talley, she might have a better idea, but short of that, I don't know what else to do."

"We could go to that place, to that time," it said with a certain chill reserve. "The Oracle would not expect to find us there soon again."

"Yes, let's go there. Let's go outside the Maze, onto the road. I'd like to have my own shape back and eat humanish food."

It took me to the road below the Dervishes' Pervasion, standing silent at the edge of the trees while I in my Jinian shape built a fire and made myself tea. I was fully clothed, as though I had never changed, with my pack still on my back. While I drank, it stood. While I toasted bread, it stood. Finally, it said, "This thought of yours. This destroying of memory. It could do great damage."

"It could. Yes. But quite frankly, I can't think of anything which would make things much worse. I don't know if you've noticed, but there's shadow all over the hillside behind us."

"I don't know if you've noticed," it replied, "but the forest on the mountain to the east is dead. It would have been alive when you entered the Maze."

Ganver was right, and so was I. I wondered how much time we had actually spent in the Maze. I remembered there had been widow's bush in bloom back at the little lake when I called up its dweller. If I wanted to hike back there, I could see how far it had come toward setting seed, which would give a measure of the time. If it hadn't merely died. Hardly worth it. It didn't matter how much time; the fact was sufficient unto itself. There had been enough time for a forest to die. Enough time for shadow to come flowing along in a gray carpet.

"I can't think of any good reason not to," Ganver said at last, sounding almost personlike.

I got out my things. A summons. An easy, any-first-year-Wize-ard-can-do-it summons. I couldn't. It took me three tries before I could even remember the words. "Gamelords," I whispered. "Something terrible is happening."

"Of course," Ganver said gently. "As Lom dies, so all our senses and skills die. Both yours and ours. Remember."

Well, of course then I remembered. Remembered, gritted my teeth, and did the summons. Did it right, too, even though it was like wading through deep mud. Every word was an effort. This close to the bad

memories, this close to the shadow, the life-force had to be at an absolute minimum.

In a few minutes, however, I heard a chirruping call from the top of the hill and saw three worried-looking chucks threading their way down the path, staying well clear of the shadow. We bowed halfheartedly. I began talking. They were the ones who had been given the blue crystal before, so they understood at once what I was talking about. Still, they conferred for a long time before agreeing. One of them went back up the trail, even more carefully, for the shadows were thicker than ever, and returned after a long while with six or seven more of them. Meantime, I'd gone back into the Maze and found the edge of the memory place.

The chucks and I decided to clear all the growth between the road and the path so we could get at the edge of the memory place. I explained carefully that they must not get onto the path itself, and if that accidentally happened, they were to stay very still in one place and I would come in after them.

They set to work. I would have liked to help, but I had brought no tools at all, and my teeth were not up to the job. By nightfall, they had all the brush cleared along the edge of the path, cleared and carried away. I asked if they could bring gobblemoles on the morrow, and they said yes, After which they went carefully away while Ganver took me somewhere else for the night. I don't know where, and it didn't matter. I was asleep by the time we got there.

The next day we dug out the memory. That is, I think we dug it out. The gobblemoles went under the path from the cleared space, tunneled it all out underneath, then let it collapse. After which Ganver and I went in at the other end of the path, watched the ship arrive, watched the moon fall, and then ducked into the crevasse, which should have brought us out into the Temple of the Bell just in time for the destruction. Instead, we came out in the bottom of the gobblemoles' pit. No destruction of the Bell.

Which might have meant it was gone. Which might have meant it had moved. Which might have meant nothing except that *we* had no access to it anymore. I thanked the creatures, explaining as much as I could, and they departed.

Coincident with their departure, we heard a threatening sound, rumbling, like a mutter of thunder. "The Oracle knows we're here," breathed Ganver, scooping me up. I heard the sound again. A fluttering roar. Above Ganver's shoulder I could see the slope behind it. The shadows rose from it like a flock of monstrous birds. It was their fluttering we heard. "They are *controlling* the shadow," Ganver said, horrified. "No one has controlled the shadow before. . . ."

They were around us before Ganver could move. It did something, a kind of shifting of space. The gray, formless place was all around us, but some of the shadows had come through as well. Ganver dropped me, spun, roared, picked me up, and did the thing—whatever it was—again. We were somewhere else, only a few shadows now, fluttering madly. One of them brushed by me, so closely I felt it and shuddered, remembering being shadow bit from that time in Chimmerdong.

"Pfowgrowl," snarled Ganver. "Would that I had a dozen of the Gardener's shadow-eaters and I would teach these shades to leave Eesties alone." We fled once more, Ganver muttering as we went. "I'm going to leave you, Jinian, Dervish Daughter. Stay until I come for you. If you would know the meaning of the star-eye, watch and learn."

The Eesty dropped me again; I felt it go, the shadows in close pursuit. Anger burned behind them like a lightning track through the gray. I was alone in a place, making a great crackle of broken shrubbery as I picked myself up.

A quiet glade. No sign of anything dying, not here. Dark stone buildings half-sheltered by the trees. Zellers grazing on the sward. Evening? Dawn? Lamplight in the windows of the place. A door opened and someone, evidently attracted by the noise I was making, called into the half-light, "Hello? Hello? Can we help you?"

I stepped out onto the meadow, adjusting my pack and keeping a pleasantly neutral expression on my face as I approached. "Hello. Yes. I seem to have lost my way." It was a young woman in a smock, hair drawn back in a sensible braid. Something about her reminded me of Silkhands.

I said, "My name is Jinian."

"Jinny. Do come in. I was just about to put the kettles on for the children's wash-up, and for our tea, of course. Come into the kitchen." She bustled off ahead of me, down a stone-floored corridor. The ceilings of the place were low, no more than a foot or so over her head. A tall man would have had to stoop. Perhaps there were no tall men here. The place looked clean enough, and yet there was a smell . . . like a latrine. A urine smell. I twitched my nose and tried to ignore it.

She opened a heavy door, closed it behind me, and gestured me to a chair as she began filling heavy kettles with water and hanging them on hooks above the fire. There were dozens of them, great iron things that looked heavy. She grunted when she heaved them, and I went to help her, curious. "Are you doing this all alone?"

She smiled at me, a tired smile. "Well, it's all part of the dedication, isn't it. Part of the saintly work. Thank you for your help, though. Since I've had this flux, it's been hard to lift them." Her hands on the kettle handle were raw, with chapped, bleeding places.

There was a smaller kettle hung closer to the flames. I laid more wood upon the fire as she filled it, wondering who it was who cut all that wood. If she heated so much water every morning, it would take a forest full of trees to provide the heat. Before long the small kettle began to steam, and she poured water into a teapot, setting a cup before me. "We've time for a cup before wash-up." She sighed. "Now, what brings you to the Sanctuary?"

"That's what this place is called? The Sanctuary?"

"Oh, yes. The Sanctuary and Church of St. Phallus. The monastery of those in service to the Sacred Seed." She smiled as though these words had some particular meaning to her, face glowing briefly as in firelight. "I'm Sister Servant Rejoice."

"Rejoice," I murmured.

"Just call me Sister Servant," she corrected me. "We don't use individual designations much. Father says we don't need them."

"Father says that, does he," I murmured again, sipping at my tea. I was all adrift. I understood the words she had said, but the sense of them escaped me. "Ah, Sister Servant, can you tell me how long the . . . Sanctuary and church have been here? Historically speaking?"

She was confused by this. "Always, Jinny. Always, since arrival. Since our Holy Founders broke with the evil under the mountain and brought away St. Phallus."

"Evil under the mountain?"

“The monster makers. The triflers with the holy fruit. Some called them . . .” She looked at the closed door before whispering, “Magicians.”

Well. That placed it somewhat. This was evidently some offshoot from early times. “How long ago was that, do you know?”

She shook her head. The count of years evidently didn’t concern her, though the kettles did. She was watching them intently, waiting for steam to emerge from each one. As soon as the first was hot, she took it down from its hook and substituted another before tugging on a bell rope beside the door. Far off I could hear the jangle, insistent in the silence. Then voices. Approaching footsteps.

Those who came in were much like Sister Servant—were Sister Servants. Smocks, braids, tired-looking faces, chapped and bleeding hands. They took the steaming kettles and went out, leaving the last to boil for Rejoice. “You can come with me,” she whispered. “To see the work.”

I was too curious not to. We went down the echoing hallway to one of the rooms. In the room were half a dozen beds. On the beds were children.

So I thought. Well. An orphanage. A foundling home. I had seen such before. There was one in Xammer. We students of Vorbold’s House had borrowed babies from it from time to time in order to learn child care. I knew about babies, and my heart cheered. “I’ll help you,” I said, turning to the first bed. “I’ve bathed babies before.”

I started by trying to tickle it awake. It lay there, drool streaming in a gelatinous rope from the corner of its mouth, eyes open. It did not seem to see me. I turned its head toward me, and the body rolled, stiffly. This wasn’t a baby. It was a child, seven or eight years old, perhaps.

I smelled it then. Dirty diapers. Making a face, I drew the covers back. “What’s the matter with . . . her, Is she sick?”

Rejoice shook her head, an expression of disapproval on her face. “Of course not. She’s perfectly all right.”

“If she isn’t sick, she seems a little old to be dirtying her pants.”

“A little slow to be toilet-trained. That’s all. Otherwise, perfectly fine. See, she’s smiling at you.” I looked at the child. Its mouth was twisted in a grimace of pain. I started to say something, then stopped. The source of the pain was all too evident. Sores. Sores on its buttocks and between its legs. “It has sores,” I said, carefully neutral. “Do you have medicine or a Healer for those?”

She shuddered, whispered, “Do not say ‘Healer.’ Father would not have a Healer here. As bad as midwives, Healers. There’s powder on the shelf. Clean linen on the shelf. Washcloths on the shelf.” She herself was busy with another, even older. It seemed to be a boy—man, really a man, with hair on his face. Lying in his own excrement, on a soaked bed, his face turned upward without expression.

I went back to my work. I had done worse. Not often, but on occasion. Burying was cleaner. Corpses were cleaner, even those half-decayed. When we were through, the six bodies in the beds were clean, too, and the filthy linens were piled high in a basket by the door. I leaned against a sill and thrust a window wide.

“What are you doing!”

“Airing out, Sister Servant. Getting rid of a little of the smell.”

“It’s the smell of service. Nothing to repudiate. Revel in it, Jinny, for it is a holy smell.”

Holy shit, I thought to myself, wondering what madhouse Ganver had brought me to. Holy pee!

“How old is he?” I asked, pointing at the man she had worked on first.

“Bobby? Why, Bobby’s just a wee baby.”

“He’s large for a baby.”

“Oh, in years perhaps he is. Thirty or forty, I suppose. But he’s just a wee baby nonetheless. Slow. A tiny bit slow.”

“When will he grow up, this Bobby?”

“Oh, every day and every day. The therapist says he’s growing up all the time.”

“The therapist says that?”

“Oh, yes. You’ll have to meet Sister Servant Therapist. We’ll see her over breakfast. Now that the babies are all clean, we’ll feed them, then we can have our own breakfast.”

We could have our breakfast. When we had carried out the dirty linens, rinsed them in a stream, put them in kettles to be boiled over the fire, and spent an endless time spooning gruel into mouths or into gaping tubes that led into stomachs, we could have our breakfast. We assembled in the kitchen, all the Sister Servants and me. The smell of the dirty linens in the kettles was overwhelming. I could not eat. They did. I was introduced. I nodded at them over my teacup, pretending I had eaten earlier. Well, I had, sometime earlier.

“Sister Servant says you’re interested in Bobby.” This Sister was a little older, deep lines graven from nose to the corners of her lips, lips curved in a constant, meaningless smile. Habit held her face in that expression. She did not know how her face looked.

I nodded, noncommittal. She took it for assent. “He’s making such progress.” She made enthusiastic noises. “We’re working on toilet training.

“Ah,” I said.

“Teaching him to make a noise when he needs to. I sit by him, and then when he does, I make a noise. Eventually, he will learn to mimic the noise, then he’ll associate it with doing it, don’t you know, and that will be a help. If we have a little warning, we can get a pan under him.”

“How long have you been working at this?”

“On, only about ten years—isn’t it about ten, Sister Servant Rejoice? Ten years. Bobby hasn’t quite got the hang of it, but he will.”

“Do you really feel there is sufficient intelligence there? To . . . ah, get the hang of it?” I had seen only a shell, a body without a mind. I wondered if my eyes had tricked me.

“He makes progress,” she said stiffly. “Every day. It doesn’t matter that he’s a little slow. He’s a unique, valuable fruit of St. Phallus. Father says it doesn’t matter whether it takes one year or a hundred. Every fruit of St. Phallus is sacred.”

I smiled, nodded. They were all looking at me intently, too intently. Sister Servant Rejoice was holding a bread knife, turning it and turning it in her hands as she looked at me, something deep and violent in her eyes. “Of course,” I said. “That’s very true.” Sister Servant Rejoice laid down the knife. I breathed a silent sigh. “I’d love to hear Father talk. He sounds very eloquent.”

This was the right thing to have said. They told me about Father, about the several Fathers. A few of whom were present in the priory. The rest of whom were out in the world, seeking out special fruits of St. Phallus to bring them to the Sanctuary. “And more Sister Servants,” sighed Rejoice. “We need more of us.”

“Don’t presume,” said Sister Therapist. “Father says don’t presume. We don’t need any more of us than there are, Father says. ‘Sufficient unto the duty are the Sisters thereof.’ That’s what Father says.”

“I suppose the Fathers could always help,” I said innocently.

“That would not be fitting,” said Sister Therapist. “They have higher duties than ours.”

I went again with Sister Rejoice, from room to room, place to place. I talked with Sister Therapist.

“It is my duty to structure the children’s day,” she said, her voice wavering between pride and exhaustion. “Each of the holy fruits of St. Phallus has his own program. The children in this building are being toilet-trained.”

“Can any of them walk? Crawl?”

She shook her head, making a sour mouth at me. “Each thing in its time. After they learn one thing, then we will teach another. Those in the next building are learning to crawl.”

“Ah. And when they have learned to crawl, what then?”

She seemed doubtful. “We have one or two in the building by the stream. They learned to crawl long ago and now are learning to feed themselves with their hands. It would be easier if they were not so frail.”

“Frail?”

“Well . . .” She looked around herself, whispering, “There are only two. And one of them is over eighty years old. She has forgotten her toilet training now, but I have refused to bring her back here.” One evidently did not discuss the age of their charges; to do so required a whisper.

I said nothing. I could say nothing. Back in Stoneflight Demesne I had had a neutered fustigar named Grompuzzle. Grommy for short. It had taken me exactly six days to house-train him. He had known how to feed himself from birth. I looked at the beds around me, stinking again, the odor permeating the very stones of the place. I thought I very much wished to meet Father.

The day went on. It went on in the same way. Sister Therapist sat by Bobby, grunting whenever she smelled him. Sister Rejoice cleaned shit and pee out of endless bedsheets. Sister Someone Else spooned gruel into mouths that would not open or would not shut, down throats that would not swallow. I watched as long as I could, then went out into the forest to hit trees. I waited for Ganver, but Ganver didn't come.

Nighttime did. Along toward dusk, a bell rang, and the Sisters left the buildings in procession, single file, winding through the woods toward a tall lamplit building with an arrangement of bell tower and chapel to one side. I followed them and filed in behind them, me being invisible as taught by the seven. To no avail, for one of the hawk-eyed men who sat in the tall chair at the front of the place saw me in the instant. His face was lean, very handsome, very stern. His eyes gleamed like a were-owl's sighting prey when he sighted me.

The Sisters sang, not very tunefully. I couldn't blame them. They were tired, dispirited, and they smelled. No matter how clean they tried to be, the poor things couldn't help it. They did smell.

The tallest Father preached. He stood before us in robes of gleaming white, surrounded by the smoke of sweet incense, fondling his groin from time to time as he talked of St. Phallus. St. Phallus loomed behind the altar, erect, massive, as though ready to rape the world. It was not the first such monument I had seen. Wherever men were ignorant and hungry for power, I had seen these things, though never one as large as this. Father fondled his groin and preached.

"Holy fruit of St. Phallus," he said.

"Clean seed planted in filthy ground," he said.

"Corrupted by dirty woman-wombs," he said.

"Sisters atone for being women by being Servants," he said. The Sisters nodded, a few of them weeping. I wondered how old they had been when they were brought here. After the service, I asked Sister Servant Rejoice. She thought she had been around eight years old.

"Why did you decide to come to the Sanctuary?" I asked, wondering why anyone would.

"I didn't decide," she said, astonished. "Oh, no, I was only a filthy woman-child. Father decided. He took me from my people; he brought me here. He saved me. Oh, I fought him, too. Threatened to run away. Father had to tie me up for a long, long time. He had to whip me before I would settle to my duty. Bless Father."

"Oh, yes," I agreed. "Bless Father indeed."

From behind us in the clean, sweet-smelling place, Father watched me walk away, his intention clear in his face. I went in the front door of the other building, down to the kitchen to get my pack, and out the back door. Jinian was young and strong. Jinian could be tied up and whipped until she, too, settled to her duty. Jinian had no intention of allowing that to happen.

In the woods, from a high ridge of stone behind some bushes, I watched the place. Sure enough, it was not long before Father and two or three of his ilk came along, one of them carrying what looked very much like shackles. What was it Ganver had said, "Watch and learn"?

Learn what? What question had I asked? Ah, yes. I had asked what the star-eye means.

So I settled there upon the ridge, listening with some curiosity to the shouting going on below, the running about, the muffled scream of some Sister as she was slapped for letting me get away. I sat staring at the star pendant Tess Tinder-my-hand had given me. A star. With an eye in the center.

An eye. Looking out.

A star shape. With an eye, looking out. Looking away.

Away from its own shape. Toward . . . ?

For a moment I thought I had it, but then it eluded me. I knew it was there, in the shape, in the lesson, but I couldn't quite reach it. I struggled for a long time, chasing the thought as I might a fish in shallows, but each time it slipped through my fingers.

Then, because I felt great sorrow for the Sister Servants and pity for the flesh they tended, which mercy would not have kept alive, I did Inward Is Quiet upon all the mindless creatures that lay in the beds in those buildings below. Inward Is Quiet in the imperative mode. Forever. They would not need to be cleaned or fed again. I wondered how the Fathers would react to that. Almost I wanted to stay to find out, but Ganver returned about that time. I looked up from my work to find the Eesty watching me.

"Have you seen?" asked Ganver.

"I've seen what's down there, yes. I'm afraid it doesn't explain the star-eye to me, Ganver. And I can tell you, I hate this memory."

"Oh," said Ganver. "This place is not part of the Maze. This place is real. It has been thus for a thousand years. These genital worshipers live well, and they are not encumbered by too much work. They have their Servants."

"It need not be thus much longer," I told the Eesty. "I can set a few spells upon it to try the philosophy of those who enslave these women." Ganver looked at me very keenly. "You may punish these men, surely, for what it is they do, but they will not profit from it. Think what you do!"

Without answering, I opened my pack, took out certain things I needed. I was not truly listening to Ganver. The evil of the place was too much with me. I could not bear it.

I made a little image with a little phallus, dressed it in a bit of white fabric from my shirt, incensed it with sweet gum and resin. I named it. "Father," I called it, bathing it in the sweet smoke. Then I melted its little phallus away in the fire. I did Dream Chains to Bind It to include all the Fathers, no matter where they were. "You must find another saint to worship, Fathers. You no longer have the symbol of St. Phallus to comfort you." I wondered how they would handle that.

I put things away in my pack, suddenly uncomfortably aware that Ganver still stood there, staring at me, saying nothing. It made me self-conscious, embarrassed, and for the first time I began to consider what I had done, casting about for an explanation.

"Think, Jinian," Ganver murmured at me. The voice was hypnotic, compelling. "Think what you do, how you feel, what you have just done. You have been angry. You sought something which was not there. Because it was not there, you punished certain creatures for its lack. Why, Jinian? Will you punish a gnat because it cannot sing? You will not have the power of the star-eye until you understand these things."

It came back to me then, all in a flash, standing there in that dark forest with the scent of the resins still in my nostrils. I remembered where I had heard the star-eye mentioned recently before. By the Oracle. In the cave of the giants. The Seer had looked at the star-eye on my chest and had suggested the Oracle take it from me. The Oracle had refused, saying it was only a symbol, that it had no real power. I mumbled something about this, trying to put that notion together with what had just happened. Ganver, hearing me, gave a high, keening sound, like weeping—or terrible laughter.

I tried to comfort it. “Ganver, Ganver, do not grieve so. The Oracle is only a foolish thing. . . .” Which seemed only to make the matter worse. I could not tell what it was that grieved Ganver so. It was all part of that star-eye puzzle which it kept trying to teach me without telling me anything helpful at all.

After a long time, we left the place and went elsewhere.

6

PETER’S STORY: THE BRIGHT DEMESNE

I used the flying shape—which had worked quite well previously—to get as far as the mountainous scarps south of Bannerwell, stopping for the night when dark, weariness, and the chill air of evening made it imperative. There were farms along the shelving mesa lands, and I bought my dinner at one of them with civil words and appropriate coin. The shape I took was a nothing-much minor functionary type; harmless, as I thought that would do best and be least threatening in this isolated place. They fed me middling well and offered me a bed, but the pawnish farmer had a glint to his eye that boded ill for a sleeper’s safety, so I smiled and made conversation and got myself off into the forest. I had been gone but a half league and was well hidden in the brush when he came sneaking along after with a bludgeon on his shoulder. I spent a little effort to Shift and gave him a pombi scare to last him some years. He may have stopped running in Bannerwell.

Next day took me a little south of southeast down the range to the cliffs above Long Valley and a dinner hunted by me in fustigar shape and eaten raw. From there it was a mere skip of the wings over the hills to Lake Yost. A high scarp lay at the northwestern end of the lake, and from it I could see the Bright Demesne across the waters. It was a good vantage point, but not good enough to make out details. Also, I did not wish to make any decisions until full day, considering what Mertyn had said about shadows.

When time came for the last lap, I flew slow and low and careful, among trees or down canyons, glad I had done so when I came out at last on the eastern edge of the hills. I thought at first a thunderstorm had gathered over the lake, so gray and dismal it was, then understood what I saw with some dismay. Before spying it out, I spent some time arranging myself to be unobserved: finding a rock nest set behind foliage and with a good overhang and camouflaging myself to discourage detection. Not that they were looking for me, but one could not be too careful. That was a Jinian thought. Three years ago I might not have considered it.

The Bright Demesne lies on the shore of Lake Yost. Middle River flows into the lake slightly to the north

of the Demesne, and there is a bridge there. East are forests and the meeting of the roads to Vestertown and Xammer. South are farmlands reaching away for leagues until the forests begin again, and other ranges of mountains.

The Demesne is surrounded by hot springs. Even the hills behind me showed the remnants of old cones. This place had once been alive with fire pots and volcanoes, many thousand thousand years ago, so had said Windlow, the old Seer and teacher. Now only the hot springs remained, they and an occasional wisp of smoke or stream rising from a cone to the south of the High Demesne, where King Prionde and the Ogress had reigned.

So, one expected the Bright Demesne to be surrounded by clouds of waving mist; it is one of the charms of the place. In the cold seasons it is more than charming, for then the great house and the dormitories are pleasantly warm while elsewhere people go shivering about their business. The steam is white, however, and the cloud that now seemed to cover the Demesne was gray as ash.

Until recent years the Demesne had had no walls. It was Barish who had convinced Himaggery they were needed, and the Tragamors of the Demesne who had built them—together with a hundred or so skilled pawnish craftsmen recruited from the countryside around and well paid for their work. Now the walls stretched in a loop from the lake eastward, southward, and then west to the lake again, including all the hot springs except one small one that steamed away to itself in isolation quite far to the northeast. I had always called that one the “Porridge Pot,” for it plopped and mumbled away to itself as the morning grain did over the kitchen fire. (Forgive me for going on and on about the setting, but you will not understand the siege unless I tell you.)

Along the lakefront a bastion of stone had been built, a kind of high quay with a crenellated wall, broken in several places by wooden gates above stairs that went down to the jetties. Thus the Demesne was surrounded on all sides by walls or heavy gates. As you will know, walls are no protection against Elators, who may flick in or out where they will. Himaggery had met this threat by channeling the power of the hot springs into a network of glowing fire which hung above the Demesne like a great inverted colander. He had used this power first at the Battle of Bannerwell, as I had good reason to remember. It was kept in place by the concentration of linked Sorcerers and Tragamors, working in shifts, or it may be by some Wizardry Himaggery and Barish had worked up between them. That is, if they were speaking to one another. They had not been when I had come to the Demesne last.

Outside these walls, above this net of fire, the shadow lay on everything, including the surface of the lake. Even in the sky there were shadows, rippling masses of gray, like wind-torn storm clouds. There were shadows everywhere except along the level lands to the southeast, where stood the tents of the besieging army.

I Shifted vision, creating telescopic eyes to spy out Huldra’s tent; she was flying her dead brother’s banner. I recognized the colors and ensign from my captivity in Bannerwell. At some distance was another high pavilion; this one belonging to Dadrina Dreadeye. I did not recognize the ensign of Daggerhawk Demesne—now vacant and home for were-owls, according to Jinian—but I recognized the Basilisk herself. She had not improved in appearance during the seasons since we had encountered her in Fangel. Along with these two were a great horde of Durables and Ephemera, major and minor Gamesmen. I recognized a few banners; players all, whom Himaggery had not much respected, and there was one tall tent with no device or banners at all.

So, it appeared the Demesne was safe enough. Those outside could not get in. However, neither could those inside get out, and in time food would run short, even though there were stores in the cellars below the great house and fertile gardens inside the wall. They produced crops in all seasons beneath the gentle

benison of the steams. I wanted to get in, mostly to tell those inside that others were aware of the difficulty and ready to assist. However, the fact that Himaggery had not struck at those camped at his gates when he had the power to do so troubled me and gave me another reason for the attempt.

I lay there the better part of the day. There was no activity in either camp. When night came, I decided to try to get in. If shadows could not exist underwater, my maneuver would probably work. If they did—well, if they did, I would be in considerable difficulty.

Dark came. I slipped down to the lakeshore under cover of the night and into the water. Snake shapes were easy to take. Eel shapes were no more difficult. A fish might have been easier yet, but the water gates that let the water of the hot springs run out through the base of the bastion were covered with grills too small for a large fish to enter.

It was a long cold slither from the western shore, warming as I went farther, becoming quite warm, rather too warm, near the jetties. I thickened the eel's skin, building in a layer of insulation below it. I hadn't thought about the heat, which made me divert my path from the northern-most water gate to the one farther south. The water there was cooler since it had been used to warm the buildings before flowing out into its own drainage ditches.

No shadows could be seen on the surface of the lake, but they could be felt. There was a tingling discomfort on my eelskin, that same feeling one gets sometimes when being watched, not palpable but discernible. I slithered and was silent, wriggling among the water weeds and ooze, up current, finding my way to the gate.

It was hotter than any human could have withstood. As it was, there was a good deal of discomfort when I snaked through the grill and plunged madly upward into the familiar tunnel, seizing its rough rock roof with spider claws to pull myself out of the hot water and hang panting from that slimy vault, gasping, putting out feathery gills to shed heat, waving them madly. I suppose it was a fairly noisy process.

"Who goes there?" came the bellow, then the lantern light peering down the tunnel at me like some huge eye. "Who goes there?"

For a moment it was so surprising, I couldn't remember how to Shift vocal organs, and it was only in the nick of time I managed to gargle, "Himaggery's son, Peter," before someone decided to launch a flaming spear at me.

Mumble, mumble. "Didn't look like a person at all."

Mumble, mumble. "Heard he was a Shifter!"

"Shifter? That's right. Child to that Mavin."

Mumble, mumble. "Best thing would be to kill'm."

Mumble, mumble. "Not if he's who he says. Come out slowly."

"I'm not in man-shape," I called.

Mumble, mumble, in which "Get rid of'm," and "Come out slowly" were equally voiced.

So I came out, pincer foot by pincer foot, then Shifted very slowly while they watched. They made

faces. I don't know why other Gamesmen always make faces, but most of them don't like Shifters, and that's all there is to it. So far as I can tell—and I've watched in a mirror—there's nothing particularly repulsive about it. Oh, an occasional inside-outness, perhaps, but guts are guts, after all. We all have them.

I stood there, decently dressed though dripping. "If one of you will be kind enough to inform Himaggery I am here, he can identify me," I said. All the guardsmen were strangers, and they looked nervous. Being under siege had done nothing to improve their equanimity. "Or, if Barish is available, he can identify me." Some of their faces smoothed somewhat. Uh-oh, I said to myself. There's factionalism here. It occurred to me an excellent time to try the Eesty way of message transmission. I stepped forward and laid my bare hand on the hand of one of the guardsmen. "I would appreciate your bringing word to either one of them," I said, concentrating on my skin, "pushing" the blue crystal message through. It had worked when I was an Eesty.

It worked here, also. The man's face was slightly hostile when I approached him and touched him. Then less so. Then conciliatory. "Brog," he said to one of his fellows. "Go tell the boy's father he's here."

Ah. So it did work. I offered my hand to another of the guardsmen, and then the others, one by one. "Cooperation," that was the message. All of them got it but one. Him, I had no initial success with, a blank-faced, squint-eyed fellow who nodded at me but would not take my hand. "My name is Peter," I said to him, smiling. "And yours is?" This was the one who had wanted to kill me. I was sure of it.

He would not answer me. An officer told him sharply to mend his manners. "This's Shaggan, sir. Joined us just recently. Came down from the north. About the time the Lady Sylbie came."

I smiled at Shaggan once more. "A difficult time to come to the Bright Demesne. Was it a pleasant journey?"

He looked around him, shifty-eyed, trapped into talking though he obviously didn't want to. I reached out and brushed at his face. "Spiderweb," I said, pushing the blue crystal message for all I was worth. "It badly needs cleaning down here."

He stepped back, mouth open, confused looking. He had received the message I was carrying. But then, I had received a jolt of what he was carrying as well. I covered up as well as I could. "He's been spider bit. Look at his face, pale as ice." Which was better than saying, "He's a spy sent here by the Witch, Huldra." The picture had come through my skin, clear as though an artist had drawn it. The man had been dosed with a crystal and was no more aware of what he was doing than the citizens of Fangel had known what they were doing, day by day. I wondered how many more spies the Witch had sent, and then I remembered what the officer had said. This fellow had come down from the north. Where he had been recruited, undoubtedly. And he had come at about the same time as "the Lady Sylbie"? Interesting. How had Sylbie come to arrive near the same time as a man like this?

I murmured something soothing and told them to take the man to the Healer. He was struggling in the grip of half a dozen of them at the same time he was trying to remember why he was here. I left him to it. If the blue crystal I'd pushed at him didn't make him forget why he'd come, Himaggery's Demons might find out something interesting by Reading it out of his head.

We went out into the cellars; Himaggery came and embraced me. As soon as we were private, I told him about the spy, and he shook his head angrily. He knew as well as I that if there were one, there might be more, and it would be no easy job to find them. There were thousands of men within the Demesne, many of them recently recruited, and though I could go about touching them all, it could not be done

quickly. He would have to set his Demons to Reading the men, and that couldn't be done quickly, either.

I told him once more about message crystals and for the first time about the shadow and the Shadowbell and my having to leave Jinian behind. I did not mention the fact that Mertyn, Quench, and Riddle were busy raising the hundred thousand. There was at least one spy in the Demesne; I could not know who might be listening; and this was something that should not be widely known. At any rate, without mentioning that particular stop on my journey, I told him everything else. He was open, sympathetic, and warm, which was both surprising and gratifying. When I had been here before, neither he nor Barish had been able to talk except in peevish monosyllables and not at all to each other, which was the reason I'd slipped blue crystals into their food. It had had a salutary effect as far as his relationship with me went. I wondered if it had solved the other problem.

"How are you and Barish getting along?" I asked.

He had the grace to blush. "You got the message to us one way or another, didn't you, my boy? Well, so far as that goes, we've made up our difference. Trouble is, we made them up just before the siege set in, so it's been little noticeable good to us."

"There's a good deal of factionalism among the men," I said.

"Well, Peter, you know how it's been. We hadn't been able to agree on anything, and though most of our disagreement was in private, word got out and sides were taken. It was simply a case of my men championing me and Barish's men championing him, and who cared what the truth was? Now it all seems foolish. Still, it's hard to undo several years of conflict all in one strike. That's why we've thought it unwise to try countermeasures against Huldra until we've had time to sell the men on one plan. At the moment, we're not sure they'd act as a unified army. Quite frankly, Barish's men might sell me to Huldra, or vice versa. I wish we had more of those message crystals."

"We do," I said, showing him the contents of my pocket. "But I can push some cooperation into them without using these up if I have enough time." I told him then about the Eesty method of message transmission, which he then tried on one of his servitors with no success at all. I sighed. I had known it wouldn't work for him. I was pretty sure a Healer could do it. Otherwise, it would have to be someone who had had the experience of being an Eesty. Probably no one but me could do it at all.

About that time Barish came in. Or, I should say, Barish-Windlow or Windlow-Barish. Last time I'd seen him, it had been Barish-Windlow, with poor old Windlow very much eclipsed, and I had been quite saddened thereby. I blamed myself often for having put them both in one body, though it had been all unwitting and with the best intentions. At any rate, he came in, embraced me, looked me squarely in the face, and said, "I want to thank you, Peter. I know you tricked me, but it was wisely done. The message you brought may have been a good thing to others, to me it was salvation." He didn't say anything more. He didn't need to. I understood in the instant. The two warring halves of himself were now at peace, brought into alignment by the same message meant to align mankind to Lom. It was the best thing that had happened in quite a long time, and I was pathetically grateful for anything good.

We talked a long time, sitting in the comfortable firelight as the evening wore on while I told them about leaving Jinian in the Maze. Small scuttling noises spoke of creatures in the walls, a sound I always associated with the Bright Demesne, though once Barish went to the door and looked sharply outside as though he had heard someone lurking there. If anyone had been there, they had fled at his approach. All our nerves were a bit on edge from the siege and the discovery of the spy and the possibility of conflict among the men. I told them about the giants then, and they exclaimed at Jinian's luck and level-headedness in getting free of the monsters. When it was very late, I went off to bed, knowing I'd

see the others in the morning.

Queynt and Chance and the rest had been at the Bright Demesne for about fifty days, almost half a season. Roges and Beedie were still with them, though the giant Flitchhawk had shown up a day or two after they had arrived and carried the strange, dual-minded Sticky creature in the basket away over the sea.

“It said it owed a boon to Jinian,” Queynt explained, “that it needed the Sticky in order to complete the mission.”

“The Mirtylon part of the Sticky was a bit apprehensive,” Beedie confided, “but the Mercald part was in ecstasy. To have been a bird worshiper all his life and then to be going off with the very god of all the birds made him believe he was in heaven. I assume the Flitchhawk was going after more blue crystals?”

“That’s the mission it was sent on,” I replied. “And given the fact that the Flitchhawk is probably one of the old gods, he will undoubtedly complete the mission with satisfaction. Though it is a very great distance, as I understand it, and he may not return for quite a long time.” That sounded incredibly pompous, even to me, but I’ve never been able to lie in a casual voice. I was still resolved not to tell Queynt or Chance or anyone that the Flitchhawk had already returned and that Mertyn and his crew were busy at the caverns. With spies about, it was better if no one knew.

“Where’s Sylbie, then?” I asked, changing the subject. “She should have arrived only a few days after you did. Jinian said she sent Sylbie off not more than seven or eight days after the rest of you left.”

“She didn’t arrive until twenty days ago,” drawled Chance. “And when I twitted her for being a slow-grole on the road, she flounced me.”

“Her manner was odd,” agreed Beedie. “And it’s continued to be.”

“Now, Beed,” said Roges.

“Don’t now Beed me,” she said. “The girl was very pleasant on the way down from Fangel, after we all escaped from the Duke. Very well spoken. Excitable, but reasonable. Now she’s . . . well, she’s different.”

I, too, thought it curious that it had taken Sylbie so long to arrive but did not pursue the matter just then. “Where have you put her?” I asked, wondering why I had not heard the baby.

Himaggery made an embarrassed face. “We put her in the little gatehouse, Peter. Her and the baby. That baby—well, it’s got this habit of changing into a howling something-or-other, which it does whenever it’s peevish or doesn’t get fed on time. It happens less frequently if it’s kept quietly off to itself where Sylbie can devote her full time to it. Not that she’s fond of the isolation, but she does understand the problem. Being under siege from inside as well. Last time, we almost lost the gate guards and the Demesne. I must confess, I didn’t realize Shifter babies manifested Talent quite that early. Or so violently.”

“They don’t,” I said. “This one is exceptional. There was some prenatal interference, you’ll remember.”

“Ah,” he murmured. “Of course. It seems the little creature needs discipline, but none of us here are capable of arranging it. Thank heaven it always changes back to baby shape when it gets hungry enough, or the whole matter would be quite hopeless. I kept thinking Mavin would show up, or that Thandbar

would come back from his trip—he went off just before the siege, he, Trandilar, and Dorn, to set a guard over the cavern where the frozen Gamesmen are, and don't mention it, Peter. I don't want anyone to know. At any rate, there's no one here to provide guidance for the baby. Something he much needs.”

“I'll see what I can do,” I promised, privately thinking that it would take Mavin or Thandbar or more likely both to do what needed doing. Nonetheless, I did want to find out what Sylbie had been doing on the road for so long, so I trotted through the pear orchard and one of the smaller vineyards to the gatehouse, taking along some fresh fruit tarts from the kitchen, which I thought she and the baby might enjoy. High over the walls of the Demesne the sky showed blue and gray, a patchwork of shadow and clear air between the meshes of fire. It looked safe, but depressing. We couldn't stay penned up here forever. I put it out of my mind for the moment and knocked on her door.

She had Bryan in her arms, and he came to me in a moment, babbling on about something or other, getting his face all covered with berry juice as he happily gobbled tarts. She smiled and smiled, exclaiming over the tarts, telling me they'd go so well with tea. While she went to get it, I jiggled the baby on my knee, commenting loudly at how much he'd grown since Fangel. He seemed happy enough, though if the tarts gave him bellyache, I supposed we might be in for a haunting. After a time Sylbie was back, bearing a steaming pot with various accouterments, and we sat comfortably on either side of the fire while Bryan finished his share of tarts on the rug.

The little gatehouse is actually set into the wall of the Demesne, or rather into the bases of two great buttresses of those walls. There is a small gate that opens from the gatehouse—from the room in which I sat—through the wall itself, though it is always kept heavily barred from the inside. I noticed the heavy chains across it and nodded to myself, thinking that she and the baby were secure enough here while still being private. There were parapets upon the buttresses and Sentinels keeping watch not more than two or three manheights above that door.

“However did you get through the siege, Peter?” she wanted to know, peering up at me from under her lashes. Since I didn't want to talk about the spy just yet, I equivocated and said I'd come in on the lakeside, leaving her with the impression I'd done it in a boat. Though Sylbie knew I was a Shifter, I'd learned she didn't like to think about it. She did not think of me in any shape but my own.

She wanted to know if I had “seen anyone” on my way south. It seemed an odd question.

“Who do you mean by anyone, Sylbie? There were lots of people about, as a matter of fact. I had supper with a farmer and his wife just a night or two ago.”

“Oh, Peter, that's not what I mean. Anyone you know? Umm. Your thalan? Or your mother, for example? Have you seen Mavin?”

I chose to answer only the last question, replying honestly enough that I had not.

“Jinian told me Mavin would especially want to see her grandson.” Sylbie sighed. “But she isn't here. No one seems to know where she is. Do you know, Peter?”

I shook my head, distracted by Bryan's antics. He had finished with the tarts and was now trying to share my tea. He was very strong for his size, which was fairly large for his age. I wasn't paying too much attention to Sylbie, wondering rather if there were some progenitor back in my line or Sylbie's who would account for the baby's stalwart build. “Was your father large?” I asked, to her surprise.

“Not very, no.”

I mused on this. Himaggery was sizable, of course, though I would not have called him a really big man.

“Do you know where Jinian is, Peter?” It was a sweet little voice uttering harmless words, not words to have drawn my close attention except for the repetition of the question.

I looked at her, scrutinizing her for the first time, to surprise something sly in her expression, something covert. It was only a fleeting thing, and I didn't let my perception of it show. “No,” I answered. “I really don't. I left her in the northlands. She was going off somewhere at the time, and I honestly don't know where.” Her questions were odd enough to remind me why I had come in the first place. “Sylbie, Himaggery says you didn't arrive here until long after the others, though you left only a few days later. Did you have trouble on the road?” I watched her, waiting for any sign of confusion or embarrassment. Instead, I saw her stamp her foot in anger.

“Trouble on the road? Indeed I did have trouble on the road, and no thanks to your Jinian, who sent me off alone in that way. I had to leave the farmer she sent me with, for good-enough reason. And then it took time to find another wagon coming this way. It's a wonder I got here at all!” She turned away with a petulant moue, while I made sympathetic noises. It was all very likely, and she sounded genuinely angry about the whole thing.

It took her a while to settle down. She was quiet for a time, thinking something over. “I wanted to meet that Trandilar. They say she's gone away, however. I wonder where she went?”

I knew well enough where she had gone. Himaggery had been quite clear about it and had asked me not to mention it. By now they were at the cavern of the hundred thousand, being welcomed by those working there. I didn't say so. Instead, I lied. “Trandilar's gone off south, Sylbie. With one or two others.”

“Someone said they saw them headed west.” This in an annoyed voice.

“Oh, only far enough to confuse any possible watchers,” I said off-handedly. “Then they turned south. There are settled areas along the Southern Sea they had never seen. A short journey of exploration. I'm sure they'll be back.”

I was beginning to suspect what it was that made Sylbie act in this odd manner. Jealousy. Here she was with the baby, off to herself, in a Demesne under siege, not having any fun at all—and as I recalled the Sylbie I had known so briefly in Betand, she had talked a good deal about her enjoyment of clothes and balls and splendid court events—while the rest of the world went on without her. She had no lover, no suitor, and so her thoughts had tended back to me. Which is why she wanted to know where Jinian was, and where Mavin was, and where others might be who might have some influence on me. So I thought, not without some degree of preening satisfaction. Oh, I knew well enough it was Trandilar's skill at lovemaking that had confused Sylbie about me, Peter, but still I did not totally discount my own considerable charms.

She nodded, not quite satisfied. “I suppose your thalan is still at Schooltown?”

I nodded, playing with Bryan, not looking at her. “Where else would he be? He certainly can't visit here with a siege on.” Another question about someone close to me. Was she making some kind of plans? Did she intend to try to woo me away from Jinian? Or try to get Mavin to do it? It was all most curious and quite uncomfortable.

As soon as I could, I got away from there, giving Bryan a pat as I left. He was sleepily contented on the rug and didn't mind my going. I got back to Himaggery and Barish as quickly as I might.

We talked over plans for locating spies, plans for rebuilding morale among the men, plans for countermoves against Huldra. They had some plan for some Wizardly contrivance that might be used against the shadow. All the time I was wondering what Sylbie was really up to and how I would handle it when she finally came out with it. I wished for Mavin, or Jinian, knowing either of them would handle it—whatever it was—better than I.

Eventually, I left the two Wizards, tired of it all. Jinian and I had been doing a great deal of sneaking and slying recently, fleeing from Oracles and dodging Sendings and generally creeping about like the bottom side of a mudsnake. Out of sheer frustration I was working myself up to a face-to-face battle with almost anyone, something trumpety and overt, even though that might be very unwise. I felt the same annoyance I had always felt at the Bright Demesne. Other people were making all the decisions, telling me to be patient when patience was the last thing I wanted. I wanted action. I wanted to know what was happening in the northlands, what was happening at the cavern. I wanted Jinian.

There was a small, walled orchard high above the lake which had always been a special favorite of mine. I went there and lay down upon the grasses to smell the blossoms and pretend Jinian was beside me. Speaking to her made it seem more real.

"I miss you," I told her, my eyes shut, visualizing her as I had seen her last. "I miss the lines you get between your eyes, Jinian Footseer, when you are concentrating upon some problem. I miss your peevishness when we stumbling men say something particularly egregious. I miss the way you smile at me when you forget to keep me at a distance. Oh, Jinian, I wish the time of your oath were over and you here beside me."

"Very pretty," said the tree I was under.

I leapt to my feet, claws forming on both hands, fangs halfway to my chin. . . .

"Very, very pretty," said the tree, turning itself slowly into my mother. Mavin. Mavin Manyshaped.

I retracted the fangs. "When did you get here?" I snarled. There was simply no privacy in this place. "No one knew where you were. Mertyn said he couldn't find you."

"Actually," she said, stretching, "I never left. I simply grew weary of the constant arguments and decided to take a rest. Trees are an excellent vacation. Birds are good, too, of course, but trees have an elemental quality which is restorative." She chucked me under the chin with one hand, as I suppose she had done when I was an infant before turning me over to Mertyn's to raise. "What's going on, love? I take it Jinian's not with you? Or have you had a lovers' quarrel?"

"We have not had a lovers' quarrel," I said impatiently, almost angrily. "She's somewhere in the Great Maze, being shepherded by Ganver the Eesty, who's trying to save her life. The Oracle is after her. And I'm here because she sent me here, and I don't like being separated from her one bit. And, a little thing you wouldn't know because you've been so occupied with treeishness, the Demesne is under siege."

"It is?" She sounded interested but not at all distressed. "Who? Let me see. It would be Huldra, wouldn't it. It would have to be Huldra. Tosh. I should have done her in long, long ago when I was only a log she sat upon. Have I told you of that time, Peter?" She had, of course, more than once. It was long ago, when Mertyn was only a child. She went on. "I could have Shifted long, long teeth and eaten her,

bottom first. Shame that I didn't. An opportunity lost. Ah, well, I suppose we shall have to get out of it somehow.

"And you haven't had a lovers' quarrel? Ah, Peter, Peter. I'm so sorry, child. I didn't mean to tease. Come now. Sit back down and tell me all about it." She plumped herself down on the grasses. "Have some fruit. I seem to have shed a good deal."

It was true. She had shed fruit widely over the orchard grass, and it smelled like all the honeycombs of the forest, rich as perfume. So we sat eating Mavin fruit while I told her everything, including all the things I had not mentioned to Himaggery—being careful to say I had not. "If we get out of here," I told her, "we must head straight for the Old South Road City, not to the Ice Caverns. Things are already moving well there, and I don't think they need help. But the Old South Road City must be rebuilt." We talked about this for some time, she nodding and nodding, seeming to understand exactly what was needed. Well, she had seen the Shadow Tower, after all. When we had finished, she brushed off her skirt and told me to go along. "I want you to go fetch your son," she said. "Tell his mama you are taking him for a walk. To get better acquainted. Then bring him straight to me. What nonsense, trying to rear a Shifter child somewhere other than behind a p'natti. Though, I must remember, you turned out well-enough reared elsewhere though you were."

"You didn't like it behind the p'natti much yourself?" A p'natti, according to Mavin, was a kind of ritual obstacle course the Shifters used during their holidays.

"I didn't like Danderbat Keep, my boy. I didn't like Danderbat of the Old Shuffle, that's the truth. But Battlefox the Bright Day was a good place for Swolwys and Dolwys." She was speaking of my cousins. "And there's Bothercat the Rude Rock and Fretowl and Dark Wood, and Watchhawk Keep and Fustigar Mountain Keep as well as a half hundred others. But I wasn't thinking of that. I was only going to look him over, for now. From what you tell me, we've no time to be running weanlings off to a Shifter keep. There's too much else to do."

I went off to collect Bryan, finding Sylbie still full of questions about where people were but quite willing to have the baby gone for a while. I took him down to the orchard and left him there with Mavin for a time while I went back to see what Himaggery and Barish had decided. I didn't tell them Mavin was back—or that she had never left. She preferred not, so she said. I have never understood my mother or her relationship with my father. I thought I was unlikely to understand it in my lifetime and would be wise to give up trying. Better to leave it alone, which I did.

7

JINIAN'S STORY: FURTHER LESSONS

We two came out on a hill overlooking a long, fertile valley, Ganver whirling as we came into the place, whirling us into other shapes, other sizes. When Ganver had done, we began to walk down the winding road, Ganver in the guise of a statuesque woman clad in an Elator's dress and I a page, smaller than myself, with a face I knew was changed though I could not see it.

"Do you think the Oracle will follow us here?"

“I think not. The Oracle will cool, in time. It will stop this flapping pursuit and start to think. It will not consider this place. Why would it seek meaning in what it thinks merely symbolic?”

The bitterness in Ganver’s voice was deep and harsh, but I knew it was not directed at me. “Watch and learn,” it said to me again, so I turned face forward and watched where I was going. Evidently there were more lessons in store. More lessons that would make no sense and from which I would draw no meaning. Who had said that? The Oracle. In the giants’ stronghold. The Oracle had looked at my unconscious body and mocked the meaning of star-eye. Remembering it infuriated me. I resolved to find meaning or die, then set that resolution aside as I saw what awaited us.

Two fortresses stood on opposite sides of the road, tall and strong with mighty walls, facing one another like two Gamesmen in the lists during a contest of skill.

“Watch,” said Ganver again. “And learn.”

As we approached the two fortresses, Armigers detached themselves from the opposing walls and stalked toward us, one from each side like fighting birds in a pit, plumes high and spurs glittering, a yellow-clad one on the left, a black-dressed one from the right. Ganver stopped. “My name is—well, what should it be, Jinian, Dervish Daughter?”

It—she looked very militant, and I bethought me of Gamemistress Joumerie at Vorbold’s House back in Xammer a time that seemed long ago indeed. “Joumerie,” I said, giving Ganver my old gamemistress’ name. “You are, ah—you are Gameswoman Elator Joumerie.”

“Very well,” she said. “Now keep a modest face on you.”

The Armigers stalked, pace on pace, posing and posturing, lifting their feet high, plumes nodding on their helmets, keeping in step with one another until they came up on us at either side. The one from the left-hand fortress spoke first, leaving the other fuming a bit, red in the face.

“What business have you here?”

“None at all,” said Ganver. “We but pass through on our way north.”

“Your names and station?” demanded the other.

“I am Gameswoman Elator Joumerie,” it—she said. “Passing quietly with one servant, opposing none, asking no Game.”

Left hand sneered. “We accept none such in this valley, Gameswoman. You must choose left or right, right or left, the fortress of Zyle or the fortress of Zale.”

“I have heard of two brothers styled Zyle and Zale,” said Ganver in a mild voice. “Could these be they?”

“Who or what they are is no business of yours. You have only to choose which you will follow.”

“And if I choose to follow neither?”

“Then you will go no farther on this road.”

“Then we will return the way we came.”

“You will neither go forward nor return.”

I looked over my shoulder to see the Armigers ranked behind us, interspersed with Sorcerers to Hold Power for them and a few Tragamors for depth of attack. Half of them were in yellow and half in black, standing well apart, alike in intent though not in allegiance.

“Well then,” said Ganver, “I will let my page choose, for it matters nothing to me.”

I had had enough of blackness, blackness of shadows and grayness of spaces where nothing happened. The yellow reminded me of the Daylight Bell, so I moved a step to the left.

“Zyle it is,” said Ganver. There was a low growl from the black-clad Armiger, and he stalked off toward his fortress with the others after him. We, surrounded by a yellow-clad escort, went toward the left-hand fortress. As we drew near, I saw they were much alike, these two bastions, both with high, crenellated walls and fangy portcullises, both decked with banners that hung slack in the quiet morning air. When we came through the barbican gate, we were confronted by a pale, slender man wearing the shabby cloak of a Prophet and walking with the aid of a cane.

“Accept my apologies for delaying you Gameswomen. It is my way of saving travelers the inconvenience of serving Castle Zale. If you will accept a meal, rest perhaps a day, there are tunnels which will take you into the forests north and safe away. . . .”

Ganver mimed confusion, modest outrage. “And what if my page had chosen Castle Zale?”

The Prophet dug into the paving with his cane, seeming unconcerned at the question. “Few do. They find the black garb of my . . . of the Dragon Zale forbidding. Also—I am able with some degree of certainty to See if that is a likelihood. . . .”

I remembered then that Prophets have the Talents of Flying, Fire, and Seeing. If the Dragon of Zale was indeed this one’s brother, they shared family Talent. If I remembered the Index aright, both Prophets and Dragons were Armigerians; Zale would lack Seeing and have a limited power of Shifting instead.

Ganver was asking in a cold voice, “And if you had Seen that likelihood?”

“I . . . ah, I would much have regretted it. The Dragon of Zale does not treat travelers well. We do what we can to assure fairness.” He looked at us with dead eyes that did not seem to see us, glancing always away toward the other keep across the valley as though whatever he could feel was housed there, not in this place at all. As though, I told myself, his heart were there, with his enemy.

Ganver did not press further; we accepted the hospitality of the place, I wondered all the time what this was about. Evening came. Ganver asked to see the Prophet Zyle, and we were escorted into his presence. As we went, Ganver whispered once more, “Watch and learn.”

The Prophet was on the walls, and we went to him there. As we came up to him, I heard a sound, far and far to the north, like a reverberation from memory, quiet as evening and yet with a plangent hush that flooded the world. The Shadowbell. In a moment the echo returned from the south. The Daylight Bell, resonating softly to keep the shadow in check.

Both Ganver and the Prophet stood facing me. In Ganver’s face I saw the brightening, the awakening,

the *hearing* that I knew was on my own. On the Prophet's face nothing, no consciousness. He turned from me impatiently, peering at the keep across the valley, and I thought again it was as though his being dwelt there and not here where we were.

This one lacked something. If he did not lighten at the Daylight Bell, however soft and far its sound might be, it meant something within him was missing. My heart was sick within me, and I could not understand. He had treated us well, though coldly. He had not seemed a soulless wight. The Eesty caught my eye, shaking like a garment the Elator head it wore.

"We came to express our thanks, Prophet. If it is convenient for you to show us the tunnels to the north, we will take our leave. We go on a matter of some urgency. "

And we went, to come out far to the north under the early stars. "Now we will return," said Ganver, "in yet another guise." Ganver whirled, whirled, and it was afternoon. In new forms we were coming down the long hill to the valley from the north, seeing the castles of Zyle and Zale on our right hand and our left. Ganver was in the likeness of a crowned Sorcerer, and I at his back in the black frock and white collar of an Exorcist.

This time we chose the black-garbed Armiger and were taken before the Dragon of Zale.

He was charming. Full of humor and gaiety, sudden quips and outrageous jests. He invited us to eat with him, listened to Ganver's fictitious tale of a Great Game to the north, and when the meal was done he invited us to walk with him upon the battlements.

There were men there, Divulgers and other torturers, busy with braziers of hot coals and devices to rend and tear. There was a chuffing of a little bellows and the shrill cry of a wheel on which knives were sharpened. I stopped short. Ganver stopped also.

And beside these horrors the Dragon of Zale turned toward us with a charming smile as he offered to cast lots with us to see which of the two of us would be tortured to death where we stood.

I could not believe the words coming from that smiling mouth. As he spoke, the Bell rang as it had the evening before. And his eyes did not hear it, neither the Bell of the dusk nor the Bell of the day, and I knew that in this one, too, some necessary part was missing.

"Why would you say such an outrageous thing?" asked Ganver. "We have no Game with you, nor was Game announced to us. You have treated us hospitably. Why would you now take one of our lives?"

"Oh, I will take both," said the Dragon of Zale offhandedly, with a twinkling smile and a charming shrug. "One today and one on the morrow. As to why, it is a Game I play with my brother. He dislikes it very much, to see me at my play. He does all that he can to forestall me, but in the end I always win." And the Dragon laughed, a high-pitched wail of amusement, like a wind-soul lost in chasms of dark. My skin crawled as though slimy things moved there, testing their barbed feet. Ganver was looking at me, urging me to do something, and I caught my lip between my teeth, thinking furiously. This was a lesson, and I had no idea what it was I should learn.

"I will die first, Master Sorcerer," I said, surprising myself immensely.

"Ah, faithful one," said Ganver in an odd tone. "I call upon the Rules of the Game, Dragon. I claim the Victim's Interrogation."

Well, I had forgotten. It isn't often one is threatened with terminal torture—I should imagine once in a lifetime would be about the limit. However, the Rules of Play did allow the Victim's Interrogation, the three questions that must be answered honestly. I wondered if the Dragon of Zale would allow it.

He merely smiled, without objection, and we stood there in the dusk on the battlement as his Divulgers and Invigilators readied the irons and the knives and I tried not to look at them. I did Inward Is Quiet very softly to myself in the passive mode, hoping it would help me understand what was happening. I concentrated, not helped by the sizzling noises behind me as the Invigilators spat upon hot irons.

"Dragon Zale," intoned Ganver, "were there midwives at your brother's birth?"

The Dragon stared at us with empty eyes. "There were."

"And were there midwives at your birth?"

"There were not. You have one question more."

Across the road, only a little way, I could see a knot of men assembled upon the battlements of Zyle Keep and knew the prophet of Zyle stood there, peering this way with his cold, empty face. Ganver was speaking again.

"Dragon of Zale, have there been times when your brother might have killed you but did not?"

He stared at us then with a bleak, unholy joy in his face. "Many times he might have killed me, traveler. And each time he withheld his hand. For love of me, he said. For hate of me, I think. And now to the rack, Exorcist, unless you would like to try to drive out the devil that dwells here." He tapped himself upon the breast, smiling at me with lively malice.

"No," said Ganver in a great, Eesty voice, whirling and whirling. "There is no devil there, Dragon. There is only yourself." The world went still; I saw the Dragon's face fall apart like shards of glass, the fortress crumble beneath him like a sand castle, built in an hour, washed away in moments. Ganver whirled while the world remained motionless and the castle melted beneath Ganver's tide, finer and finer, to flow away in silver dust. Rain came to pock the dust with the world's tears, and it was gone.

Across the way Zyle Keep still stood. "Look," said Ganver, turning my head so that I saw the face of the Prophet. It stared at the place where Zale had been with hopeless intensity and a longing so great I had no name for it. "Come," beckoned the Eesty, and we were gone.

"That was long ago," I said when I was able to breathe once more. "Long ago, Ganver. Before the Daylight Bell was broken. Perhaps it was not even real."

"I remember it," Ganver said. "Lom remembers it. Now you remember it. Which makes it real enough."

"Was it you destroyed the Dragon then, Ganver? Or did he go on and on?"

"He went on," breathed the Eesty without expression, "for many years. Until the Prophet of Zyle died, and there was no reason to go on after that."

"I am trying to understand the lesson," I mused.

"Ah."

“There were midwives at the Prophet Zyle’s birth, and they would not have let him live if his future had not shown him to have a soul. There were no midwives at the birth of the Dragon of Zale, and he may have been soulless. I think perhaps he was.”

“And?”

“And they hated one another. The one for what the other had; the other for what his brother had not. And in the hate, the one lost what he had had while the other gained nothing. At the end was only emptiness.”

“And so?”

“And so, Ganver, I will think on it. Perhaps the lesson will mean something to me as I consider it.” Privately, I thought I might never perceive it. So far, it was only a tangle of Sanctuary, Dragons, Prophets.

“Perhaps.” Ganver mused in the gray place where we were. “Come, we will go elsewhere.”

We came out of the grayness this time on a shore where a silver river ran laughing into the sea, Ganver in his own shape and I in mine. My shape, my own Jinian shape, was ravenously hungry and thirsty, as though it had not eaten for many days—and indeed, perhaps that was true. Who knew what time was like in the gray spaces between memories, or whether meals eaten there were real or only remembered? Ganver, perhaps, but it did not tell me. I ran across the sands to drape myself across a stone and suck water into me like a great empty jug. After a time I was sloshingly restored but as hungry as ever. There were silver fishes playing in the pool beneath me, delicious-looking fishes, and I knew I could catch them with my hands if I drove a few of them into one of the shallow pools along the stream.

“Look, Ganver,” I called. “Fish. I’ll catch a few for my supper!” The Eesty strolled over to me, stood peering down into the water. “Jewel fish,” it said at last. “The only breeding population of jewel fish on Lom. Rare and few.”

I was hardly listening, full of plans for filling my belly. Still, there was something in the tone in which Ganver had said, “Rare and few. . . .” I tried speaking to the fishes. Nothing. Their language was a flip of the tail, the feel of a splash of water on the skin, four or five words, nomore. Food. Fight. Flee. Breed. Chemical words, running quick hormonal fingers along their spines and fins.

“Ganver,” I said, “the fish have no souls.”

“Ah,” said Ganver. I knew that “ah” and disliked it. “Is that so?” the Eesty asked.

“They have no awareness even.”

“True.”

I sat there watching those damn fish, mouth watering until I thought I would die. There were some table roots near the stream. A sharp stick dug them out, and I sat looking at the fish while washing them clean and peeling them one by one before crunching their unsatisfying bland sweetness. They were not bad baked or boiled as an accompaniment to other things: roasts, stews, broiled fish. . . .

A flower clump moved in the wind, and I thought of Chimmerdong. The Forest of Chimmerdong, where

every flower seemed aware of itself. No. No, where the forest seemed aware of every flower.

“What place is this?” I asked.

“Boughbound Forest,” said Ganver. “Long ago.”

“Tricky, Ganver,” I remarked in a conversational tone. “Very tricky. And undoubtedly the being which was Boughbound knew of these fish, as I know of my toenail or little finger or hair?”

“Possibly.”

“If I catch a few of them to eat, there won’t be enough of them to guarantee reproduction, is that it?”

“Likely.”

“They are—ah, how would we say this. They are part of the soul of something greater?”

“Possibly.”

“And while it wouldn’t be wrong for me to take nuts from a tree or roast a bunwit for my lunch—there are plenty of nuts and plenty of bunwits . . .”

“True.”

“It would be wrong to take these.”

The implications of this were so provoking that I forgot to be hungry. “There are plenty of men,” I said at last. “If a man had a soul, it would be wrong to kill him. If he had awareness but no soul, it would be less wrong. If he had neither, it would not be wrong at all?”

“What did you do at the Sanctuary?”

“I let those pitiful creatures go to sleep forever.”

“Why?”

“Out of mercy, Ganver.”

“But you did not do the same for the Fathers of the place.”

I thought on this. “But they had awareness, Ganver. I did not want them to get off so easily. I wanted . . .”

“You wanted to punish them.”

It was true. I had wanted to punish them.

“Why did you not let them go mercifully as well?”

Why? Why, indeed. Why had I sought to punish, to hurt, rather than merely let them go? Did the Fathers of the Sanctuary have bao? I thought not. They had had no sense of fitness. They had shown no mercy.

They had prolonged pain and caused it, to no purpose. Out of seed ego. Out of worship for St. Phallus.

But I had been no more merciful than they! Out of shape ego. I had told myself the Fathers were aware, therefore—therefore they should have known better. They were aware, therefore they should have understood. They were aware. Shape ego. My own kind, therefore . . . therefore nothing.

It slipped away from me. “Ganver, I’m too tired and too hungry to concentrate on this lesson. Are you finished with your teaching?”

“There are five points on the star,” it said. “Five lessons to learn, five parts to understanding. I have given you what I can.”

“Then feed me, Eesty, or take me somewhere there is something I can feed myself. And when I have eaten, perhaps it will all make sense. Are you sure you can’t explain it to me in simple language?”

“There are certain lessons which are not difficult to explain but which are very difficult to live by,” said Ganver, moving away once more into the gray, the roiling, the smoke place between time. “And one who has not tried to live by the lesson of the star-eye cannot yet understand it. And one who thought it did live by that lesson may learn it did not do so. Come, Jinian, it is safe to let you leave the Maze now. The Oracle has gone elsewhere, and I must follow.”

We slipped between places and came out at the edge of a forest, the sun high overhead, a dusty road stretching south before me. Far down that road, six little figures trudged along, coming in my direction. I knew them. Oh, yes, I knew them. A noise came from behind me, half a sigh, half the sound of a door closing. I knew without looking that Ganver had gone and suspected I would never see the Eesty again. In that moment I was so joyous to see Murzy and Cat and Bets and Sarah and Margaret and Dodie that I did not take time to care. Later, when I understood the lesson it had tried so hard to teach me, and the reason it had not lived by that lesson itself, I grieved for Ganver’s grief.

8

PETER’S STORY: THE SPY

Himagery and Barish had decided that our first and most important problem was the one of spies. Huldra and Dadrina had set out from the north with quantities of the amethyst crystals, and we had to expect they would use the vile things. If there were a spy in the kitchen, any meal might contain an unpleasant surprise. If there were a spy in the wine cellar, the shock could be equally unexpected and even more wide-spread. So, we very methodically set about determining whether those employed in sensitive positions were trustworthy, using me for part of the task and well-trusted Demons for the rest.

“It would be a good deal easier,” Barish fussed, “if we could do the whole thing openly, just line them all up against a wall and have at them, but the way the men are feeling just now, full of suspicion and ill will, it wouldn’t take much to have a rebellion on our hands. No. Better take a little longer and do it quietly.”

So we took longer and did it quietly, with me pushing the idea of cooperation to everyone I encountered, remembering how the Eesty shape had done it. It was hard, tiring work, frustrating because we found nothing. It made no sense! Why put one not-very-clever spy into the Demesne when they could have planted a dozen?

I went down to the dungeons to have a word with Shaggan, the one spy we knew of.

“I don’t know,” he kept babbling in answer to my questions. “I haven’t any idea how I got here. The last thing I knew, I was on the road from Fangel, south to Betand, with a few friends, all of us making for Pfarb Durim for the Harvest Festival, and the next thing I knew I was here.”

“He came shortly before the siege, Lord Peter,” said another of the guards. “I remember it well enough. He came knocking at the gates saying he was out of coin and out of patience and needed something to keep himself for the next season or so. Well, we’d been recruiting right along, so I saw no reason not to take him.”

“No one else presented himself at that same time, or around that time?”

“Nobody. Later on, the Lady Sylbie came, of course, but those who escorted her simply left her at the gates and went on south. And then only a few days after that, here came the besiegers with enough baggage to last them two seasons.”

Shaggan wasn’t lying. He really didn’t know what he’d been supposed to do as a spy, so after a time he returned to duty—or, shall I say, enlisted for duty since he couldn’t remember having been on duty before. I took the time to search his cubby down in the guardsmen’s dormitory, and it had nothing in it but what one would expect. No amethyst crystals lurking in the bottom of his weapons chest or the hems of his tunics.

It occurred to me then he might have been a decoy, someone for us to discover to keep our minds off some other, more important one. Yes. It really did occur to me. And I did little or nothing about it!

Barish shared my suspicion, however, so the Demons kept doggedly at it, and so did I. Several days went by, and the feeling in the place grew noticeably better. Little cliques of men who had spent their time twitting one another a few days before, hands on knives and false smiles on lips, were now sitting side by side at their meals, talking over old battles and more recent conquests, laughing behind their hands. I followed one of the Demons into the bathhouse—I’d known him for several years, a good, reliable man—to ask him if he’d found anything at all, and he merely shrugged. “Nothing except what you’d expect, Peter. Many of them had bets riding on who would come out on top, Himaggery or Barish, but they’re starting to feel sheepish about it.”

I went down to the orchard to roust Mavin out of her tree shape, which she had reassumed immediately after meeting and approving of Bryan. “Take him back now,” she’d said, “and come rouse me if anything significant happens. I’ll want to take the boy to Battlefox the Bright Day when it’s safe to do so, and I’ll wager that girl will be glad to see him go.” I wasn’t so sure of that. Sylbie seemed to dote on Bryan, though she never mentioned his Shifter Talent. It was almost as though if she didn’t admit it existed, it wouldn’t exist.

“Himaggery’s getting ready for some countermove,” I told Mavin. “Don’t get too deep into your bark because I think they’re going to need you.” She promised to come out of tree shape each morning and evening, just to check on what was going on, and then went back to fruiting. These days, when I remember her doing that, I think it must have had some symbolic value for her. It certainly didn’t look very exciting to me, but it seemed to have some essential meaning for her.

The next morning Barish said he felt secure enough about the men to tell them at least some of the truth. He addressed them, twenty or so at a time, in the practice yard, telling them to be on the lookout for poisonous crystals and report any suspicious activity. Aside from a little muttering, the men took it well enough. The blowup we’d been afraid of didn’t happen. No Barish follower began conniving against

Himaggery; no Himaggery man started fulminating against Barish. We took a deep breath, figuratively speaking, and began to plan countermeasures.

Himaggery had heard from me everything that Jinian or I knew about the shadow, and Mavin had undoubtedly told him long since what she knew. He did not tell me what he planned—as was probably wise. The fewer who knew the better—but I knew he and Barish had some plan to use against the shadow.

Thus it was with a quite unwarranted feeling of security that I answered a knock at my door late that evening to find Sylbie in tears. “Oh, Peter, Bryan’s gone and I can’t find him anywhere.”

I tisked and there-there’d, thinking the baby had turned into a gorbline haunt and would be back as soon as he got hungry enough, but Sylbie said no. “He wasn’t hungry, or tired, or wet. He just toddled off. I went in to get a hot cup of tea—we were sitting in the garden near the gatehouse enjoying the evening—and when I came out he was gone. Oh, Peter, do come help find him.”

So I hemmed and hawed and put on a cloak against the evening chill and pulled my boots back on and went yawning off beside her, never for a moment thinking that the baby was into anything more serious than an infant’s exploration. We searched the garden, then Sylbie put her hand on my shoulder, saying, “What’s that?”

At first I heard nothing, then a far-off whine, like a lost cat. I shifted bat ears inconspicuously, glad of the darkness, and heard it again. It was coming from a drainage ditch that wound back under the wall to let the water from the distant Porridge Pot hot spring warm this end of the garden. It was a low, narrow ditch about Bryan’s size but certainly not Sylbie’s or mine. She started to cry, and I told her firmly to go inside.

“I’ll get him,” I said. She said something strange about coming with me. “You can’t,” I said in a no-nonsense voice. “You won’t fit in there.”

At which point her mouth pursed the way it did whenever she had to think of my being a Shifter, and she turned and walked off toward the gatehouse. I remember thinking at that moment that when I returned later with Bryan, I wanted to check the locks on the gate. There were parapets with watchmen on both the buttresses. Anyone approaching the gate would be seen long before he came close. Still, I remember thinking of it even as I slithered down into eel shape and entered the ditch.

The thin whine came intermittently, strangely echoing. I wondered how the boy could have come this far. The water was uncomfortably warm, not really hot but not at all pleasant, and the ditch reeked of chemicals. Then I saw light ahead and realized he must have actually come out beneath the wall. Remarkable. Quite remarkable.

Once out from under the wall, the ditch ran through a swale of low bushes, and I took my own shape to slog through this morass, following the sound, very close now.

I had no idea where the smoke came from, or the chanting, or the strange lights that seemed to go off inside my head. I tried to Shift and couldn’t, tried to move and couldn’t, tried to speak and couldn’t. From behind me on the parapets I heard a guard shouting something that seemed senseless at the time: “Lady Sylbie, Lady Sylbie, do not leave the Demesne!” A sentinel’s horn went tara-tara-tara whoop-whoop-whoop, as it does to raise the alarm. A voice was chanting something about the dark betraying and the blood holding fast. The last thought I had before everything went very dark and quiet was that we had looked in all the wrong places for the real spy.

I woke in a tent. The canvas flapped in a night wind, and little gusts of smoke came to my nose like warning signals. I lay quiet, not letting anyone know I was conscious, trying very hard to Shift the nails of my hand to claws. The hands were tied behind me. I didn't need to see them to know that the Shift wasn't happening. Some geas had been laid on me, some preventive enchantment or binding spell. There was a low, bubbling noise in the place, and it was some time before I realized it was Sylbie's voice.

"You're sure he won't ever Shift again," she was saying. "You promised me he'd never be able to Shift again."

The voice that answered was amused, sinister. It was the Witch, Huldra. "Oh, I assure you, girl. He'll not Shift again."

"And you promised he'd not see that Jinian anymore. Just me. Just me and Bryan." Her voice was a little petulant, more than a little confused. "I'm sure he'll not see Jinian ever again." My heart almost stopped as the sense of the words came through. This was the Witch Huldra telling the absolute, literal truth. What had Jinian called the technique? Truth spelling! Twisting what the listener wanted to hear so that one could promise in words without promising in fact. Truth spelling. That was what had occupied Sylbie's time on the road, why she had been so late in arriving at the Bright Demesne. She had been truth spelled into betraying me!

Now a new voice, Dedrina, the Basilisk. "In return for our services in this matter, we asked you to find out where certain people are. You recall?"

"Of course. I asked Peter and he told me. Mertyn is in Schooltown. No one knows where Mavin is. She went off somewhere, and no one knows how to find her."

Dedrina made a spitting noise.

"It's true," said Sylbie. "Evidently she's always done that. Sometimes she goes away for years. Who else? Oh, yes. Jinian is up north near the Maze. Peter doesn't know exactly where she is now. That's true, too. I listened outside the door when Peter was telling Himaggery all about it, and he really doesn't know."

"How did she escape from Storm Grower?" asked the Witch.

"Storm Grower? Oh, the giants. I don't know. Perhaps Peter told them when he was here last, but he hasn't spoken of it this time. At least not when I've been able to hear. Perhaps she and Peter have had a falling-out." Sylbie seemed very satisfied at this thought.

"I would think you might have more gratitude to one who saved you from the hunt in Fangel," said the Witch. "You do not seem to care much for Jinian."

"It wasn't her who saved me, it was Bryan," Sylbie answered. "Bryan gorbled the Ogress when she tried to bite him."

Jinian had told me of that hunt. I thought Sylbie's account of it was rather oversimplified. Though it was true that Bryan had dispatched the Ogress, the Ogress had been only one of a considerable hunting party. If it had not been for Jinian, both Sylbie and Bryan would likely have perished along with an assortment of other prey. I sweated, snarling internal reproaches at myself. There was a new voice, a chill voice with an icy sibilance in it.

“You were supposed to plant the amethyst crystals in the wine stores. I suppose you did that?”
Dedrina’s voice.

“No. I’ll do that when I go back. I-”

“When you *goback!* What makes you think they will let you in, stupid girl?”

“They’ll let me in,” she said doubtfully. “I’ll have to be there or Bryan will have a fit. . . .”

“Where’s the girl Jinian?” Dedrina asked.

“No one knows where Jinian is,” said Sylbie. “And I for one don’t care.

“Shut your mouth, girl. You’ve done your part and are finished. Comes our part now, to use that young buck Shifter in there as bait for the girl. Then Huldra gets him and I get her.”

“No!” Sylbie, very sharp, frightened. “I get Peter. That’s what Huldra promised me.”

“Stupid chit. She promised you he would never Shift again, never see Jinian again. Quite true. He will neither Shift nor see when he is dead.” The Basilisk laughed.

Silence, a wail, a tantrum wail. Though I was nowhere near I could visualize it. Sylbie throwing herself at the Basilisk, nails scratching. So a kitten might launch at a gnarlbar, hissing and scratching, and like a kitten she was thrown across the enclosure to land against the main tent pole. The canvas shivered. There was a crack, as though something had broken, and then a breathless sobbing. The voices grew nearer. Eyelids half-shut over eyeballs rolled well back, shallowly breathing, I let them come. They looked at me, kicked my presumably unconscious body, and went away again.

Sounds outside. Shouts, the crack of a whip, a quick tuppa, tuppa, tuppa on a drum calling some work party or other. Someone came in and got me, packing me in a wagon like so much luggage, me never quivering. Lords, but I wanted to open my eyes and look. Where was Sylbie? Where was Bryan? Evidently I had not really heard Bryan, there under the wall. That had been all mockery done by Huldra and her cronies. I tried for the Shifting—nothing. Tried again, tried—nothing. Still again. Gave up trying with my whole self wet with sweat and stinking from the effort. Lay quietly, quietly, trying to think while wheels creaked and the entourage began to move away. Then I risked half opening my eyes. I could peer out the back of the wagon to see a great part of the camp trailed out behind it in the predawn gray, all making a great dust with feet and wheels as we came away north on the Great Road. At least half the besiegers were in the train. So much the easier for Himaggery and Barish. So much the worse for me.

So, we were going away. What was it Jinian had told me? Huldra and her companions had been instructed to distribute amethyst crystals in the southlands and then to go to the Ice Caverns and destroy all there. Which was undoubtedly where we were going. They were going. Moving on to the second part of the duty, leaving the first undone. I thanked all the old gods that Sylbie had been so eager to betray me she had delayed betrayal of the Demesne. Those at the Bright Demesne were safe, at least. For a time.

As for me, I was being taken away like a sack of roots, like a stack of wood, like nothing living or thinking, like bait for a trap. If I could have wept, I would have done so. Beside me a lumpy sack was breathing in a harsh, irregular way, gasps with too long silences between. I tried to say “Sylbie?” but my voice wouldn’t work. Still, I knew it was Sylbie. The breathing was that of someone badly injured, and I thought of Bryan, wondering where he was. Likely sleeping peacefully back in the little gatehouse. It had

all been a trick and a deceit.

The reeking smoke of the spell casting had made my head hurt quite badly. I gave up pretending to be unconscious and actually became so for a protracted time.

When I came to myself again, it was in the tent once more. The train had stopped along the road to make camp. From where I lay on a pile of packs and rolled rugs, I could see past the tent flap to an open space with a cookfire and another tent. Shadows lay close and tight at its base. Noontime. The smell of the food made my stomach clench, and I realized I could move, though only a little. My hands and feet were still tied and no amount of Shifting did me any good. It was as though I had never been able to do it, as though I had only dreamed the Talent and it had never actually existed.

The ropes that tied me were deadly black, wound with a thread of silver fire that glittered and flowed like water along the cords. I thought of Shifting my feet and the silver flame blazed toward my feet. I thought of Shifting hip joints and the fire spun upward, surrounding my loins in a steely embrace. So. Fire was one of the attributes of Witches, along with Power Holding and Beguilement, though I had seen no Beguilement from Huldra. Her Talent had set this fire upon me, and her Talent held it there. I preferred it to be a matter of Talent rather than of enchantment. If she had enchanted it, many lives would have been spent on it. Jinian had spoken of Huldra's willingness to spend lives upon Sendings and enchantments.

I was thinking so deeply of this when I raised my head to look out through the tent flaps once more that the sight there seemed only a continuation of the thought. They had Sylbie trussed up like a zeller for the butcher, lying close beside the cookfire. Her eyes were open, rolled back into her head, the whites staring at me blindly. There was blood on her forehead, probably where she had hit the tent pole. A lock of hair lay across her face, and it moved slightly with her breath. She was alive, then, though barely. I wanted to cry out, "Get a Healer for her!" but I could not speak.

Oh, Sylbie, Sylbie, foolish, silly girl. First rule of the Game, Sylbie. Put not yourself into another's hands. First rule. And you put yourself in Huldra's hands completely, holding nothing back, no motivation, no emotion, nothing you could use to fight with. And you put me in Huldra's hands as well, making me impotent to help you. Because you didn't like my being Shifter. You destroyed us both, Sylbie, because you did not like my being Shifter.

The waves of smoky black still came over me from time to time. I closed my eyes for a moment. When I opened them again, the hair across her face lay quiet and there was blood on her chest, soaking her shirt. Beside the fire Huldra chuckled as she dropped something into her cauldron.

"Rise Gambelor, Rise Gundegor. Rise Gurnasham!" She shrieked at the cauldron, stirring it, steam coming out of it in a great rush as though it had been one of the hot springs. "Rise Boldam, Burwar, Bass!" The steam coalesced, began to roil and eddy, making faces and forms in an endless succession, mouths that opened and shut, teeth that gaped, eyes that stared through shadow holes at the Witch, Huldra. On the other side of the fire, Dedrina sat, smiling, watching.

"Rise Sorfut, Sarbat, Shandypas!" screamed the witch. "Bring her whose heart I fed you to do my will!"

The horror of it clutched me. When Dorn the Necromancer had been my companion, I had seen Mandor, many days dead, rise up from his grave to answer my questions, and I had seen the ghosts of Bannerwell march to war. But I had not seen the newly dead called forth before, still grieving over life, rising from the cauldron in which her heart's blood boiled. Oh, Sylbie, Sylbie.

She was there, weeping, shadow hands reaching out. I saw her mouth moving and could read the words

on her lips. "Bryan! Bryan!" Calling for the baby she had left, her child and mine. Silently calling, "Bryan!"

Helpless, hopeless, I swore vengeance against Huldra. "Mavin," I pled, "if I am dead, venge me against this Witch. Himaggery, if I am gone and the world goes soon after, still requite me against this hag." All this horror and pain while still unable to move more than a muscle, tied tight by enchanted bonds and knowing nothing of what the Witch intended.

That was soon obvious. She beckoned the ghost, waving her hands in an endless dance, fingers making quick signs of fire, like letters in the air. Almost I thought I could read those signs. The ghost seemed able, also, for it wept and pled.

"What are you doing?" growled the Basilisk.

"Telling this unwilling Sending what it must do," replied the Witch. "I tell it the child is forfeit if its mother does not do my bidding. It knows the man is forfeit if she does. So. It hangs there, quivering, in agony. Aha. Amusing, is it not, great lizard? So caught in their little feelings of goodness and badness, of love against love. Foolish, to care so much for any creature. . . ."

"Still, I remember the love of a child. I had a son once. Mandor, his name was, as beautiful as the sun itself. That one inside there, that Peter, killed him—or as good as, though Mandor took his own life in the end. My son declared Game against King Mertyn of Schooltown, using Peter as Talisman in the play. Perhaps he knew Mertyn was thalan to the boy, perhaps not. It no longer matters what he knew or did not know. There was a hidden Sorcerer in play, and Mandor was burned with Sorcerer's fire. Even I could not bear to look at my son after that. He was hideous who had been so beautiful. Well, my vengeance has been slow in coming, but it will be all the better for that. Watch now. The Sending is ready to depart."

The Witch stood taller, reaching toward the sky as though to summon something hideous from beyond the clouds. "Find Jinian," she cried. "Tell her I hold Peter the Shifter in my care. Soon he will begin to die if she does not come to me, and his dying will be long. If she will come to the caverns where the hundred thousand lie, if she will come there and submit to me, I will release him from his bondage."

Ah, so and so she would release me. At the point of a knife, perhaps, or in the new heart of a fire, or only to bind me again in some new and more stringent chains. I begged silently that Jinian would not listen to this Sending, this screaming ghost that fled upward now into the sky, a streak of bloody gray, leaving the two hags behind to stare after it.

"I thank you for your cooperation," the Basilisk was saying. "So we will be alike in vengeance. For your son, Mandor. For my daughter, Dedrina-Lucir. What avengement is in your mind?"

"I had thought to freeze him yet alive in the ice of the caverns where we go. It can be done with an ensorcellment to leave him alive and thinking for every moment of a thousand years. We will leave him so and seal the caverns behind him. Let him lie there and think of Mandor, and of Huld, my brother-husband, whom he also killed. Let him think of them until he dies at last, after a millennium, in the lonely cold."

"This seems good to me." The Basilisk stretched, talons forming at the ends of her fingers, scrabbling at the ground on which she sat to leave long furrows there. "As with him, so with Jinian also. Let them both lie a thousand years in the ice before they die," and she began to laugh, choking herself with her mirth. "Except that I will scratch her first, only a little."

In a moment the Witch summoned someone to drag Sylbie's body away.

The day wore on. I heard the cries of carrion birds and knew they feasted upon Sylbie's flesh. A servant came in to press bites of food into my mouth, food that I chewed and swallowed stubbornly, keeping my strength for the moment in which it might do me some good. Huldra did not come to gloat over my captivity, unusual for her family. Both Mandor and Huld had been gloaters.

Late in the evening we began to move once more, leaving the road to wend our way north and west across the fertile valley toward the mountain wall to the west. If we kept on in this same direction, we would come to Bannerwell, and from Bannerwell we could drop westward to the River Haws. North along that river would bring us to Cagihiggy Creek, and upward along that creek would bring us eventually to the ruins of the Blot and the Ice Caverns. How many days? Ten or twelve at the least. With wagons, probably longer than many days? And Jinian, alone there in the north, traveling to that place. For she would. I knew she would. 'Though she feared Huldra and Dedrina Dreadeye, still she would come for me.

And for the first time in years, I gave way to slow, impotent tears, unable to hold them back.

It was then Huldra came to punish me for the fact that Mandor had died.

9

JINIAN'S STORY: THE SEVEN

I greeted the seven with a good deal of grabbing and squeezing and exclamations of joy. Cat shook me, wagging her head from side to side. "You're all bones, girl! What've you been up to?" Then hugged me when I tried to tell her.

We went no farther than a few hundred paces to a grassy hollow among a dozen great trees, there to build a fire for the making of tea while the words poured out of me like wine from a cask, bubbling and frothing and spilling somewhat as I tried to make sense of it all. Ganver and the Great Maze and everything that had gone before.

"And I have failed," I cried. "Ganver tried to teach me the meaning of star-eye, but I have not learned it."

Five of them drew in their breath, in awe, their eyes wide. Dodie did not know enough to do it, but she watched them with her mouth open. "What does that mean?" she whispered to them, to me.

"To have been taught by an Eesty!" Murzv marveled. "Why, if you could learn it," she said, "you could do the final couplet. It is said no Wize-ard has done so since the time of Trindel the Marvelous."

"The final couplet?" Dodie asked.

"Eye of the Star, Where Old Gods Are," I told her. "To summon up the old gods, one and all. I have used Eye of the Star to fasten the Dervishes down while I spoke to them. They did not like it much. I wonder if the old gods would like it at all, being summoned up."

"That spell would be worth having, considering what we are facing," said Cat. "Can you tell us of the

lessons? Or did you take an oath of secrecy?"

"Nooath, no nothing," I told her. "And I'll tell you everything. Perhaps you can make more sense of it than I. But let me tell you as we go. We must move ourselves. We must go to the Old South Road City and build it up again."

They looked at one another, like so many owls. "Build it up again?" asked Sarah Shadowsox at last. "That seems rather a large job for one seven, Jinian."

"Of course," I cried. "Of course it's too large for us alone. There must be more. Other sevens beside us. And Dervishes. The Immutables. All the Great Gamesmen from the Ice Caverns. The hundred thousand."

"There should be," murmured Murzy, shaking her head. "Indeed there should be, Jinian. The question is, can there be? Can there be any at all?"

"I don't understand," I faltered, afraid that I understood all too well.

"Shadow," said Bets. "Murzemire Hornloss, Seer that she is, has done a bit of peering and prying. She Sees shadow and more shadow. Everywhere. The Bright Demesne under siege by shadow. Great drifts of it cutting the road south of Lake Yost. Xammer cut off. Schooltown cut off. Betand surrounded—at some distance, true, and there is still travel in and out—but Pfarb Durim is completely isolated. Most of the cities and Demesnes had some warning; most of them brought in stores and prepared for siege; but still, travel is becoming very difficult, Jinian. The question is whether anyone can get to the Old South Road City at all."

"Gamelords," I whispered. "Ganver said the Oracle had learned to control the shadow, but I had not thought of this. Are you sure that what you saw *isnow*?"

They shook their heads. No, they weren't sure it had happened yet, but it would be soon if not now.

"Nomatter," I said. "We must get there. There is no other way. Somehow we must reach Old South Road City; we and all the others needed there. Tragamors to rebuild the city and the towers. Sorcerers to Hold Power for them. Elators to carry messages; Armigers to Fly aloft and see where ancient walls and roadways ran. Perhaps even Necromancers to Raise up the ghosts of that place to learn how the Bell was cast in the first place."

"We have spread the word as widely as we could, Jinian. And the Dervishes tell us they have carried word to the seven as well as the other Wize-ards everywhere. If we can get to Old South Road City, there will be others come to help—such as can."

"What are the Dervishes doing?" I cried, thinking mostly of Bartelmy of the Ban, my mother.

"Running the roads of the world," said Cat. "In their hundreds and thousands. They seem proof enough against shadows, at least when they are moving, and have taken up this work as though it were some kind of penance for an old guilt. Do you know why?"

I shivered and mumbled something about it being better late than not at all, which was enough for them to guess the rest. I really didn't want to talk about Bartelmy. "So, shouldn't we start south?"

"Yes, we will go south," said Murzy firmly. "Dealing with what comes as it comes."

Which we did, me in new clothes they had brought for me and a new pair of boots. The old ones had holes through the soles, and I'd been slipping pieces of bark into them for days. "Did you See my boots had holes in them?" I demanded of Murzy, half-exasperated at the lack of privacy her Seeing seemed to grant me. "Did you actually See my trousers were ripped in the seat?"

"Common sense," barked Bets Battereye. "Your boots have always had holes since you were three. And if you ever had trousers which weren't ripped in the seat, none of us can remember when."

Which was somewhat comforting. It's preferable, I think, merely to be known for one's peculiarities than to have them constantly peered at. More familial, somehow. I put on the new clothes without further comment, and we headed south.

The Great Maze lay north of the Shadowmarches. Peter and I had approached the Maze from the east, having come there by a long, torturous route that had taken us far to the east and north before coming to Bloome and Fangel. From the Maze, the land sloped generally southward, ending at the widely separated peaks that marked the edge of the marches and fell away on the other side to the wide valley of Cagihiggy Creek. By following the creek west and south to its source and then striking west into the tumbled mountains, one could come to the Ice Caverns, where Peter had been headed. This was not the most direct route to the Old South Road City, but we discussed going there nonetheless. If Shifters or Dragons had been awakened from among the hundred thousand, we might find someone willing to carry us to our destination, thus saving much time.

If, on the other hand, we were to attempt to go straight to Old South Road City—which I knew well from my childhood, as it was not far from Stoneflight Demesne—then the shortest route would lie down the River Haws to Zebit, then up into the hills to the Willowater, a smallish river that ran from among the mountains into River Banner, south along Willowater to its source, then southwest along the curve of the mountain to the canyon lands north of Stoneflight. I wondered if Stoneflight was still there. And this made me wonder if my un-mother, Eller, and her son, Mendost, were still alive. I didn't ask if anyone knew, telling myself I didn't care whether they were or not.

At this point it didn't matter which route we might eventually choose. We were still high north in the Shadowmarches with a long way to go before we decided east or west.

So we trudged south, me unable to put shadow out of my mind. I was simply scared to death of the stuff. Mavin had said it made people eat themselves sometimes. Or freeze themselves into a kind of black haze. Or it could make people chew themselves up from inside, as it had done with me. Whichever or whatever, I hated the idea of shadow. Even Ganver had hated shadow. I remembered the Eesty flailing about inside the Maze, trying to get away from the flapping flakes. "Would I had a dozen of the Gardener's shadow-eaters. . . ." I repeated, remembering Ganver's growl.

"What was that?" asked Cat, quick as a fitchhawk stoop.

I repeated it, shaking my head. "Something Ganver said when the shadows pursued us into the Maze."

Cat looked at Murzy, then both of them at Sarah, who shrugged. "Don't look at me. I never heard of it."

Bets denied any knowledge of shadow-eaters, as did Margaret Foxmitten, but Dodie spoke up—she who had said little or nothing until now, youngest of the seven as she was—"The Gardener? Oh, I've heard of the Gardener."

“Well, tell, child. Don’t be mysterious!” Bets was as impatient as ever. The two years or so I’d been gone hadn’t changed her.

“I’m n-not being mysterious,” Dodie stuttered. “It’s just I don’t know what to say. My grandda, that’s my mum’s da, he used to tell tales of the Gardener. Tales he had from his grandda and he from his, way back, before all the people left the marches.”

“Well? Well?”

“Do you want me to tell you all the tales? There’s dozens.”

“Why don’t you start with one exemplary one.” This was Cat, being academic. “Start with one you heard frequently.”

“Well, let’s see.” Dodie thought for a moment. “There’s the one about the three bunwits trying to steal the Gardener’s greens and losing their fur on the fence, so the Gardener turned them into fish. And there was the one about the Gardener fooling the tree rats into eating webwillow instead of table roots and how they got so sick they never came near the garden again. And the one about the Gardener feeding shadow to his turnips. . . .”

“The one about what?” Murzy, amazed.

“The one about the Gardener feeding shadow to his turnips?”

“Tell us that one,” said Murzy, moving toward a circle of stones, where we all sat down like a coven of crows, looking expectantly at Dodie. She cleared her throat nervously, smoothed her shirt down over her trows, folded her hands as though about to sing, and told us.

“The Gardener, he had a fine crop of turnips growing along in the hot time, burgeoning big and getting somewhat ahead of themselves in the growth department, beginning to push at each other in the rows and get argumentative over root space. Every morning the Gardener would come down to the garden to look them over, and every morning what did he see but more of them limping about with their roots all twisted and bruises on their cheeks.

“‘Enough is enough,’ said the Gardener. ‘What’s the matter with all you turnips, you can’t get along?’

“‘It’s crowded we are,’ said the turnips, ‘so crowded there’s no air to breathe or sun to gollop up or dark, fertile wet dirt to suck. Time we was thinned out, I say.’

“But there was an uproar over that, you may be sure, for none of the turnips planned to be the ones thinned. And sure as sure, the Gardener hadn’t planned to thin them, either, for he wasn’t one to eat his garden stuff. He was more in the nature of an experimenter, trying this thing and then that thing, and some he’d turn loose in the world and some he’d root out entirely, because that was his job to do for the whole world. So far he’d been very satisfied with the turnips and wasn’t inclined to thin them at all, but he had to admit the space was running short to put them. There was dark wet dirt in the forest, but no sun, and good sun on the mountain, but no dirt. Air was no particular problem, but finding all three together, that was something else.

“‘You could clear some of these trees,’ said the turnips, ‘to make space.’

“‘No,’ said the Gardener. ‘The trees are some I’ve been growing since they were seeds, a new kind I’m

mighty fond of.’

“`Well, you could knock down that rocky mountain there to the north with the three poky peaks on top. It’s an ugly thing and it would make good gardening there.’

“‘No,’ said the Gardener. ‘That mountain has seven whole tribes of mushrooms growing on it I’ve been working on for a hundred or so years. There’s just no space to be had unless I move out of the marches and start another garden down in a valley somewhere.’ Everyone in the garden knew the Gardener wouldn’t want to do that. He was a mighty secretive fellow and didn’t have much truck with other beings, except for my great-great-great- a hundred times great-grandda, who showed him a new way to prune fruit trees flat against a sunny wall.

“So he thought and he thought. There wasn’t any space in the forest, and no space on the roads, but there was the Shadow Tower back in the marches, and there was space around that. So the Gardener said to the turnips, Whyn’t we go off through the trees here to the space around the Shadow Tower? Every evening the Bell rings the shadows out, and they’re dark as any dirt and full of whatever they’ve sucked up around the world. They’ll be lying thick on the ground, there, and maybe you can catch a few.

“So that’s what the turnips did. They walked themselves a little way through the woods to the place near the Shadow Tower where all the trees stood back away from it. And they plunked themselves down around the Tower, their leaves spread out, and when the Shadowbell rang and all the shadows came out thick as leaves falling in the cold time, well, those turnips moved all their little hairy roots into the shadow and sucked all the dark, moist stuff in them up.

“And that’s how the Gardener’s turnips grew and grew, but he didn’t let them out into the world for fear they’d eat all the shadow that was, so he kept them there in his garden except for every dusktime when the Shadowbell rang.”

Dodie unfolded her hands, wiped a few beads of perspiration from her forehead, and plumped herself down, grinning.

“Well,” said Murzy. “Isn’t that interesting.”

“Myth survival?” asked Cat in her usual teacherish voice. “Or something real turned legend, do you think?”

“Whichever! It is worth our time to find out!”

I gathered from this they perceived a kernel of truth in the story Dodie had told. “How . . .” I started to ask, only to shut my mouth, for the others were already digging into their lockets or boots for the pool fragments each had been given at oath-taking time. I hadn’t had mine out of my locket in the last two years, and the locket was in my pouch. By the time I had my pie-shaped fragment ready, the others had laid theirs upon a flat stone, and only mine was needed to make a circle. “Do you know what the pool stuff is?” I asked pedantically, ready to lecture on the subject. “I found out. . . .”

“Yes, dear. Of course,” said Sarah in her soft voice. “Of course we know. Now do put your piece in so we can look.”

Abashed, I pushed my piece into the circle and sat down with the others, peering into the silvery circle that began to shimmer once the pool was completed.

“A mountain,” said Murzy in a firm voice. “A mountain with three peaks. In the Shadowmarches.”

Darkness swam across the pool, then light, then darkness once again. Something flapped horribly within the pool, seemed to look out at us, then fled. We seven reached out to take hands, making a circle around the pool, bending our will to Murzy’s in order that she might See.

“A three-peaked mountain,” she repeated insistently. “A mountain in the Shadowmarches, with three peaks. . . .”

Something floated up at us; not a mountain. A Tower. Black and tall. Except for the color, I knew it. It was the Tower of the Daylight Bell in reverse image. Dark as coal. Shadow swarmed at its base, around its walls, poured from the arched openings at its top. Something seemed to peer out at us from those openings.

Patiently, Murzy repeated, “A mountain with three peaks.”

The Tower dwindled. We were looking down on it from above. It dwindled still further, and I could see the fold of valley that held it, the road spur that ran to it, the road that ran past it farther down the hill. Against the sky was the mountain with three peaks. This, too, diminished until we were looking down on it. There was the sea, to the west, and the line of road east and west through the marches, and to the north of the road a faint glimmering, as though a star burned there. “Enough,” said Murzy in a weak voice. “Enough for now. We have the general direction. Let’s get closer before we try to see in greater detail.”

As it was, it was morning before we set out. Murzy was in no condition to travel until then. Seeing takes a great deal out of one, particularly when it is done purposefully in this way, not merely allowing any random vision to happen into one’s head. One does it at cost, and one weighs the risk first, as Murzy had done.

The starlight glimmering on the envisioned map had marked our own position relative to the three-peaked mountain. We needed to go on south until we encountered the remains of an Old Road. Cat estimated two days’ travel, and about noon the second day I took off my shoes. It had been some time since I’d done any footseeing—and longer since I’d gone barefoot for any period of time, so my feet were sore by evening.

We struck Old Road early the next morning and turned west upon it, me leading, for it was virtually invisible under drifted soil and leaves and the growth of centuries. We would need to go a day’s travel west, Cat said, rubbing salve into my feet, which made them look even dirtier. If Footseer had not already been my proper Wize-ard nickname, I would have been called Jinian Dustboots by the end of that day. As it was, Dodie found she, too, could feel the road in her toes, so she was given the sobriquet. Dodie Dustboots. She seemed very proud of it.

In midafternoon we stopped to use the fragments again. The glimmer that was us was almost due south of the three-peaked mountain, and when the clouds lifted along about evening, we could see it. “Show us the garden of the Gardener,” Murzy demanded, and the fragment flowed up and down the slopes, stopping at last on the southern slope, about halfway up. Sighing, she let the image go, and we wearily prepared a sensible meal before curling into our blankets for the night.

“Do you think it’s really there?” Dodie asked me in a whisper, the firelight making a specter’s face of her, all black and orange.

“Who knows. The fragment showed us something.” “Maybe it’s only ruins.”

“Maybe.” Possible, I thought. If it were really there, why hadn’t the Gardener done something about the ever-encroaching shadow? Even as I thought the question, I knew the answer. Because whoever or whatever the Gardener was, it hadn’t been his job. Just as it hadn’t been the Eesties’ job. Just as it hadn’t been anyone’s. This started to make me angry and tense, so I set the thought aside and thought of Peter instead. “At the Old South Road City,” I said to him, wherever he might be. “My oath’s about run out, Peter Shifter. Please be at the Old South Road City.”

Silence and the stars. No point in crying about it. I put Peter out of my mind—mocking laughter from certain parts of my body—and went off to sleep.

We climbed north from the road the next morning. After a time we came upon a flattened, twisty trail through the trees, a place animals had walked for many years, zigzagging first east then west but always northward. We followed along it, noticing how it avoided the steep places and the rock outcroppings and how it made clever crossing use of narrow places in the streamlets. We had just stopped next to a fringe of tall trees to catch our breath when we all heard a tiny, shrill voice crying, “I tell you, the ground is shaking. There are feet coming, and not feet that belong here. No zeller trying to get through your fence, Gardener. People feet!”

At least that’s what I heard. The others, so they told me, heard only a shrill piping, rather like a bird’s inconsequent whistle. When they started to move on, I stopped them, whispering what I had heard into their cupped ears.

“Just behind this fringe of trees,” I said. “Shall I creep through to see what’s there?”

They clasped hands, all at once, without even conferring, and began to do Egg in the Hollow for me, making me as invisible as they could on short notice. I took this for an affirmative answer to my question and began sneaking through the underbrush, wishing I were Peter so that I could slither without making a sound.

As it was, things whipped about just a bit. I came out on the other side looking down into a small, flat-floored valley, trees all around and the three-peaked mountain staring down upon it from the north. Garden filled the entire valley, from rail fence on the north to rail fence on the south, fruit trees espaliered along a wall, great pots of flowers here and there, orderly rows of this and that. No *Mostly* orderly rows of this and that. On the near side of the garden was a perfect jumble of plants, some with only their tufty leaves showing and the others walking about on their roots complaining in high, shrill voices about the overcrowding.

Now “turnip” is a word we use for any kind of bulbous-rooted edible plant. There’s no one plant called “turnip,” just as there’s no one tree called “willow.” It’s either webwillow or gray willow or grease willow or some other kind. So it’s either blood turnip or sour turnip or swamp turnip. These turnips weren’t any of those. They were big, fat, white with a blue belt and with great fluffy tufts of leaves coming out of their tops. At the bottom they were bifurcated, trifurcated, multifurcated into rooty legs or leggy roots on which they wandered about in a rather desultory way, sometimes tripping each other out of what seemed to be sheer ill nature.

One of them stood at the feet of a very tall being wearing a green robe, shrilling out, “Feet, I tell you, Gardener. People feet.” A slit in one side of the turnip seemed to serve for a mouth, and there were several eyelike protuberances on its body.

“Well, and so?” said a deep bass voice, rumbling like a distant roll of thunder. “People feet. So?”

The Gardener was half again as tall as I, not so slender as to seem unnatural but still quite skinny. He had a gaunt, blank face which looked as though he did not often use it for anything. And when I stood up, brushing the leaves off my shirt and undoing the invisibility spell with one gesture, he did not seem at all surprised. “People feet,” he repeated as though it had been some kind of incantation. “Well.” His face had no expression at all.

“I am one of the people,” I shrilled in close approximation of turnip talk, then lowering my voice and addressing the Gardener in common language. “Can you understand me?”

He confronted me with no change in his face, not so much as a furrow between his eyes indicating he had heard me. “Can you understand me?” I asked again in the vegetable language.

He nodded, rather distantly, as though acknowledging a stroke of wind. There, I heard that, he seemed to indicate, without giving any appearance of intending to continue the conversation.

“People, people,” shrilled the turnip, rushing away among his fellows, shrieking as he went. “Come see, come see. It’s people.”

Murzy came through the trees, the others following, and we all stood there in various states of amazement as the turnips gathered. I looked about curiously to see whether there were any other talking roots or ambulatory bushes, but these seemed to be the only ones. Which seemed a good-enough fact with which to start a conversation, I thought.

“Can you tell me how these beings came by the power of speech?” I shrilled in turnip talk.

The Gardener said not a word, but all the turnips began talking at once. They had always had it. No, they had not had it until after they started eating shadow. No, they had had it since the enchantress gave it to them, many centuries ago. The outcry was so great it was some time before I noticed that the Gardener was shaking his head, over and over. I gestured for silence, quelling the outcry by threatening to roast and eat several of them if they didn’t hush. They subsided with a grumpy babble.

“I gave them speech,” said the Gardener in his tumbling voice. “I crossbred them with the Sensible plant.”

“I don’t know the Sensible plant,” said Cat wonderingly. “Where may it be found?”

“It cannot be found,” the Gardener replied. “It is extinct. Sensibly. It was parasitic upon other plants, and when it became conscious of its own nature, it chose to become extinct rather than continue to be what it was. A pity, I felt, though exemplary from an ethical point of view. So I preserved some of its qualities in these turnips, though their parasitism has been carefully controlled. They eat only soil and shadow. Not foreseen, precisely, but useful nonetheless. Actually, shadow makes quite good mulch. For them.”

I considered that while shadow seemed lethal to animal life, it had not, in fact, seemed to have any effect upon plants.

“Have you come to get us?” cried a turnip. “It was foretold that people would come to get us and when that time came, we could go to seed!” There were cheers, cries of encouragement, and three of the turnips began a dance that I could only interpret as frankly erotic.

“I have forbidden them to seed,” said the Gardener. “As it would have upset the ecological balance between light and shadow to have them sucking up shadow at every turn. They’re greedy, as you can see. Despite the overcrowding, still they insist on overeating and becoming fat. If I were not who I am, I would be tempted to eat them myself.”

“Who are you?” said Murzy, coming closer to him. “Who are you, Gardener? Are you creature of Lom? Son of mankind? What are you?”

“Ah.” He drew a long, gnarly hand across his face, seeming to be in some confusion. “After all this time, who can say, person? Does it matter? I am here. The garden is my task. To grow and hybridize and combine. To seek out new things and try them. To set out into the world those things which seem advantageous. To destroy the others.”

“And the turnips? Are they advantageous?”

He was given no time to reply. A tumult broke out among the turnips as one called, “Shadow. Shadow by the fruit trees!”

We looked up to see several questing flakes settling along the wall, around the roots of the trees there. A mob of turnips began to rush toward them. Once at the shadow’s edge, they dug themselves in, roots flipping soil like some digger-toads I have seen, squirming into the dirt like little corkscrews. Soon nothing was to be seen except the tufts of leaves, and every inch of the shadow perimeter had a turnip planted adjacent.

“By Towering Tamor,” whispered Bets. “The shadow’s shrinking.” So it was. Fading. Shrinking. Dwindling. Within moments it was gone and the turnips began to uproot themselves once more with an air of complete though somewhat petulant satisfaction.

The Gardener had regarded this display with no change of expression. Now he reverted to Murzy’s earlier question. “Advantageous? I really don’t know. They are company, of a sort.”

“Would you mind dreadfully if we borrowed some of them?” I asked. “We would find them most advantageous. There is rather more of the shadow about than is generally considered useful.”

The Gardener seemed puzzled by this. “There has seemed to be more than usual. However, that may be only a local phenomenon. The Shadow Tower is close by. I had wondered if perhaps there were a leak.”

Cat, with her usual passion for both getting and giving information, set about bringing the Gardener up to date while I wandered off among the turnips, recruiting several hundred of them with ridiculous ease. They tumbled over one another in their eagerness, and I had some trouble choosing the stoutest and strongest as those best suited to the trip. Since their power of locomotion was not of a protracted or speedy kind, we considered how to get them where we were going and decided on a kind of narrow-wheeled vehicle halfway between a barrow and a cart. The Gardener very kindly helped us build two of these—which I resolved to exchange for a well-built wagon and some wateroxen at the earliest opportunity—and helped load the volunteer turnips into these conveyances.

“Would you mind,” he asked when we were ready to depart, “if I came with you? I haven’t been *outside* for some time. If there is indeed an *imbalance*, as your teacher person suggests, I should be aware of it.”

I thought “imbalance” was rather a slight word for the threat that hovered over us all but could see no

reason why this strange being should not come with us. Soon we were returning the way we had come, with the turnips riding at ease in the barrows, exclaiming shrilly at every turn in the trail. When we rested for the night, it was in a circle of them with still others dotted among us, ready to suck up any shadow that came upon us in the night. And so our travels went, with us staying to the sunny valleys where we could for the turnips' sake, stopping at every streamlet for a good drink, and making more progress than one might suppose, given the awkward nature of the barrows.

Two nights later, the Sending came.

We heard it casting about in the sky, crying my name like a lost child, high and far in the star-pierced dark, "Jinian, Jinian." I knew it was Sylbie's voice almost immediately, though the timbre was nothing like. Something in the intonation, perhaps. I told the others who it was, and their faces turned cold and stern. We gathered ourselves promptly, setting up Wize-ardly defenses and protections. The turnips were planted away from us, the Gardener set to stand among the trees. The rest of us set ourselves in a fire-centered circle with seven little fires burning around us, waiting what would come.

"Jinian," it called, still casting east and west, high above us in the northern air. It had gone far to the north in seeking me and was now on our trail of return. "Jinian."

"Only a girl, isn't that what you said?" Margaret asked. "Little more than a child herself?"

"A year younger than I," I answered. "She bore Peter's baby in Betand, a Shifter baby who had been haunting the town. Bryan is the baby's name."

"Bryan is now a motherless child," whispered Murzy. "No live creature casts about so among the clouds, riding the moonlight in that way. No, she is dead, poor Sylbie, sent by an evil creature to find you, Jinian."

"I know who is responsible for this Sending," I told them. "Huldra, the witch. More than a Witch, however. One who has studied the art." They shivered, as I had known they would. There are things the sevens hate, among them those who study the art for evil's sake, spilling blood as if by right.

"She is more Peter's enemy than mine, but Dadrina Dreadeye is mine, and she stands beside Huldra," I went on.

At this there was general consternation, for it was the seven who had captured the daughter, Dadrina-Lucir, the one I killed with the Dagger of Daggerhawk. We had no further time to think about it. High above, the Sending called out triumphantly, "Jinian," and plummeted down upon us only to recoil from the circle of fire and land wearily outside it on the meadow grass.

"Jinian Footseer," it cried in a high, inhuman voice. "I bring word from Huldra, sister-wife of Huld, mother of Mandor. Peter is held fast and will shortly begin to die a long death if you come not to the Ice Caverns where the hundred thousand lie and submit you there to Huldra." The specter drooped in the starlight, white as a peeled branch, its voice becoming human once more. "Bryan," it wept. "Bryan."

Cat had already started Dream Chains to Bind It to hold the Sending where it was. Bets was busy with her book of charts, judging where we were and how long it might take us to come south. We had figured it several times before, but we had been farther north and east then. I simply stood there in a state of shock, unable to move or think or say anything. Peter. Did they really hold Peter? How could they? My loving, Shifterish Peter. Murzy put one hand on my shoulder and said three hard, sharp names. The world steadied and I became icy calm.

I waited until Dream Chains to Bind It was finished, then asked the wraith, "Where is Bryan? Where did you leave him?"

"Sleeping," cried the wraith. "Sleeping in his crib in the gatehouse of the Bright Demesne. The crying we used to decoy Peter outside was only pretense. Bryan lies sleeping."

I found myself coldly hoping that either Mavin or Thandbar had been at the Bright Demesne and had been conveniently located when Bryan had wakened.

"We're going to have to use her to carry the message back," said Murzy. "There's no way to get around it."

"Can we limit it?" asked Sarah. "Dissolve her as soon as the return message is given?"

"Limit it, and send her by a route north of here," said Cat. "So that the Witch cannot find where we are."

"Why limit her suffering?" I asked. "She betrayed Peter." Immediately there was a pain in my head and I gasped with it. "No. No, I didn't mean that," I said. There'd been a sharp, revelatory gleam in my mind, like a sword of light. Oh, Gamelords, I had been acting as though there were some bao here, something that could be taught. There was nothing, only a wraith. It could suffer, but it could not learn, and to impose suffering on something that could not learn was . . . was a bad thing, I told myself, wondering where I had learned it. Evil. The purest kind of evil. "Let us do as Cat suggests. Let's limit it."

So they began to weave Dream Chains to Bind It into a complex thing, a fabric, a basket, a holding that would untie all knots as soon the return message was delivered. They ended the spell with Inward Is Quiet, the same one I had used on the creatures at the Sanctuary, and I felt ashamed to have felt anger toward the pathetic thing.

"What message?" I asked. "Don't let Huldra hurt him!"

"I think it unlikely she'll hurt him much, girl. Not until you arrive. Then, likely, she'll try to kill you both, but we won't allow that. Come now. Don't fall apart like this. You've been endangered before and known him to be endangered without going to pieces. Stand yourself up her and deliver the message. It must be in your voice; you can trust Huldra to check whether you sent the reply yourself, and she must not know we are with you."

So I stood and delivered. "The Sending finds me fourteen or fifteen days' travel from the Ice Caverns. Jinian will come as she is bid." Actually, we felt the distance was something like ten to twelve days' travel, but we had decided to overstate the time it would take, both to mislead the Witch and to allow for accidents on the way.

Then we let the Sending go. It rose into the sky, still crying, this time, "Bryan, Bryan. . . ." to flee first toward the southeast, then turn sharply toward the north. It would go some distance that way before turning southeast once more. We had done all that we could to mislead the one who had sent it. However, we had first seen the direction it would go to meet Huldra.

"Ah," said Cat, who had tracked its southeastern flight against the stars. "Then Huldra is not yet at the caverns. Let me see your charts, Bets." They bent over them, measuring and nodding. "That line of flight will intersect a line between the Bright Demesne and Bannerwell at about . . . here. It may be she is as far from her destination as we are. So. If we speed ourselves, we may come there two to five days before

them.”

We went as quick as we might along the rolling road, among live forests and dead ones, smelling the stinks of distant fumaroles as though they had been the stinks of a body decaying, waking sadly in the mornings and walking the day through no happier, urgently going, driven by our own need to do whatever it was needed doing without any real hope that it would do any good at all.

As we went, I did as I had promised and told them about Ganver’s teaching, not once but many, many times. They tried, as I had tried, to unravel it, with as little success. Whatever the secret truth of the star-eye might be, thus far the Oracle had been right about it. Its power, if any, was beyond me. It might as well have been merely symbolic, as the creature had said. Only stubbornness and respect for Ganver’s pain made me continue to believe otherwise.

10

PETER’S STORY: HULDRA

While the Sending was away, Huldra had amused herself by making me acutely uncomfortable. This was mostly by way of mockery and jeering, accompanied by some rough cruelty without much subtlety to it. It was enough to make me sweat, nonetheless; sweat and fear for the future. After a day or so of it, she tired of her amusement and left me in the care of a warder, who sat beside me, took me out among the bushes from time to time, and fed me twice each day. They did not even loosen the cords that bound me, and the pain of muscles that could not move became torture enough after a time.

It was evening of the second or third day—third. I had been in the warder’s care for a full day at that point—when Sylbie’s ghost returned. I heard it crying far off in the northwestern sky, “Bryan, Bryan.”

The warder had me just inside an open tent flap, mostly because he liked seeing what was going on. I saw Huldra and Dadrina move toward the fire, Huldra’s hands making endless weaving motions as though knotting a net. The motions burned in the air, leaving a trace of fire behind. By the time the Sending came down, however, she was still, waiting.

“Tell me the answer to my Sending and who gave it,” she called imperiously, beckoning the Sending to come nearer.

‘Jinian is fourteen or fifteen days to the north. She comes to the Ice Caverns now, to meet you there.’ So cried Sylbie’s ghost.

Huldra made an impatient motion. “Tell me where she is, now, precisely!”

But the ghost did not reply. Instead, it began to fade, raveling away like something knitted of smoke.

“Hold!” Huldra cried, busy with her hands. “Hold, I say.”

But there was no holding it. It moved on the wind like a column of smoke and was gone. I heard only the whisper of sound. “Bryan.” Huldra raged, burning and howling in her fury. “That bitch. That serpent. That Wize-ard filth. She has taken my own Sending and unknotted it against my will. It was to have told me where she was, but it told me nothing!”

“She said she will meet you at the caverns. It is what you asked.” Dadrina gazed at the Witch slantwise

from the corners of her eyes. "Why this fury?"

"Because it was my will to come upon her while she was yet a distance away and unsuspecting. Now she will be prepared, and it may be more troublesome. That is all, snake, that is all. Mind your own business and I will mind mine."

"Who do you call sssnake?" hissed the Basilisk. "Careful, Huldra, Witch. Let usss continue as friendsss."

The Witch was in no mood to temporize. She snarled her way out of my sight, leaving the Basilisk beside the fire. I could see the lizard hands as they made long, scaled talons and scabbled at the earth, a dangerous sound, one betokening great anger.

Huldra returned shortly with two Elators to sit muttering with them. Though I tried, I could not hear what was said, and I did not really need to hear. She was sending them in search of Jinian. I saw her gesturing toward the sky, motioning the direction from which the Sending had come. Her voice rose. "Fourteen or fifteen days' travel to the caverns."

One of them murmured to the other and flicked out of sight. In a moment the second one also disappeared, and Huldra returned to the fire. After a time she twisted her lips into a mockery of a smile and said, "Do not ever threaten me, Dreadeye. Do not ever grow so angry with me that you presume to threaten me. We are allies, but there is no question as to preeminence between us. You are a mere Talent of no particular distinction. It would be unwise to press your fortune."

Dedrina looked at her with a long, lizardlike stare, then rose and left the fireside. I did not see them together again in the days that followed, and I thought it unwise of Huldra to have so gratuitously made an unfriend on the eve of battle. It cheered me a little. Enmities among one's enemies are always comforting.

I was comforted, too, by the Sending's vanishment. This spoke of an older mind than Jinian's, one more subtle because more experienced. I thought it likely my love was part of her seven once more, and I had hope for her and therefore for myself.

The Elators did not return. This made me more hopeful still. Days went by as we traveled toward the caverns, and they did not appear. Days went by, and Huldra grew more furious and violent with each one that passed. Whenever she looked in upon me, I pretended to be asleep or unconscious, offering no target for her frenzy. Withal, I was careful to eat everything the warder offered and to strain every muscle once each hour or so, pushing against the cords since I could have no other exercise. I knew something Huldra did not; if she kept on in the direction she was going, she would come within the range of the Immutables. Then—if the cords that bound me were Talent made—then might well be an opportunity for me, and I was determined to be in condition to take it if it arose.

While my days wore wearily on, behind me in the Bright Demesne, things were happening that Huldra had not intended and did not yet suspect. I learned of them later, a few words from Mavin, mostly from Himaggery, and can tell of them here.

The Sentinel had not seen me leaving the Demesne, but he did see Sylbie creeping away from the walls. She had opened the little door out of the gatehouse and was sneaking along the buttresses, making for Huldra's camp, the shadows heaped at either side of her path, as though commanded to clear a way. He cried out to her, those cries I had heard during my enchantment, then he saw the smoke and fire rising from the besiegers' camp, and this caused him to set up the alarm. In a moment the walls were swarming; men had secured the little gatehouse, and Himaggery was on the walls staring across at the besiegers,

wondering what had set off the scare.

It was only when a servant said she had seen me leaving the main house with Sylbie and when the Sentinel said he had seen Sylbie sneaking away to the camp, confirmed by their finding evidence of my passage through the ditch, that they realized what had happened. Barish was wise enough to realize I had been decoyed away; he even suspected they had used the baby to do it. The baby, however, was found sleeping in his crib, and with a total lack of foresight, they left him there, unattended except for a half-wit serving man, who promptly fell asleep and was still asleep when the baby later wakened. Barish and Himaggery immediately went into conference with all Barish's Gamesmen who were present to plan an attack against the besiegers in order to rescue me. Barish and Himaggery had been working on a Wizardly stratagem against the shadow; they decided it must be tried immediately, did so with a minimum of fanfare and found it would not work. It had to do with sucking the shadows down with a great fan, chopping them up with the blade, and compressing them somehow. The shadow sucked up nicely but refused either to be chopped or compressed. It merely flowed up again, against the wind, as it were, and resumed its patrol. All this went on during the night, you understand, and then Bryan woke early.

Bryan's mother was not present. The serving man was asleep, possibly drunk, for he did not awaken even when Bryan turned into his most monstrous gorbiling form and fled the tiny gatehouse to wreak havoc in the Demesne. According to Himaggery, people were fleeing every which way, the place was like a hive of warnets that had been overset, and there was serious danger of the inhabitants breaching the gates in their panic and falling straight into Huldra's hands. Huldra, however, had departed before dawn, leaving only half her strength behind. Otherwise, the story of the Bright Demesne might have ended at that point.

The noise brought Mavin out of the orchard, blossoms in her hair and apples growing from her ears. She did not wait to be told what had happened but went straight to the place Bryan was gorbiling and boiling, howling like a monstrous siren. There she began to take bulk, screaming at Barish and Himaggery to bring her bread. Afterward, it became a kind of joke. "Twenty more loaves," she cried. Only they two and some of the Gamesmen could withstand Bryan's howling. All the others in the Demesne had fled as far away as possible, and only the loyalty and training of Himaggery's men kept the walls manned.

When Mavin had gobbled enough bread to give her the bulk she needed, she Shifted into the form of a giant basket, which snatched up the gorbiling ghost. Then she closed, compressing what was within into smaller and smaller shapes, compressing even more, and more, until baby Bryan was uncomfortably pressed into his own shape, no other, and had learned he could not terrorize the Demesne with impunity any longer.

"It was quite a horrid sight," said Himaggery thoughtfully. "In some respects, it is not easy to love a Shifter."

"I quite frankly thought I would be ill," said Barish. "Thandbar never did anything like that in all the time I knew him."

"I found it interesting to watch," said Dealpas the Healer. "I thought she'd squash the baby, but she didn't. Bryan was perfectly all right, though less temperamental subsequently."

"The part that interests me is that taking on of bulk," said Shattnir the Sorceress. "Theoretically, at least, it should provide additional power to . . ."

Well, you get the idea. Other Gamesmen find Shifters either repulsive or odd, for the most part. Himaggery told me all this much later, including the comments of those present, laughing over it in genuine

amusement, and I suppose I laughed as well. Mavin would not have been offended. She had come past the time of being hurt over what others think of us Shifters. One thing Jinian never said to me was that it was difficult to love a Shifter. Perhaps that is why I loved her so much when I finally decided that I loved her at all.

Which is beside the point. All of this happened by midmorning of the day I had been carted away.

Not content, then, with merely having squelched the baby and restored general order, Mavin decided to get into the besiegers' camp and see to my rescue herself. She did this just as I had, eeling herself along the drainage ditch from the Porridge Pot, slything out onto the bank among some bushes, then creeping silently as any wraith—avoiding the shadow meantime—into the camp. While there was shadow plastered over every possible exit from the Demesne, there was none at the drainage ditch. I was known to be the only Shifter present; everyone thought Mavin was far away. It's a mistake ordinary Gamesmen often make: assuming we're far away when we're not.

In the camp there were scattered tents for the Gamesmen, a rather large contingent of Armigers and Armigerian types, along with any number of Tragamorians. No Elators. Huldra had taken them all with her. No Seers or Demonics or Healers. No Rulers, of course. Huldra would not have wanted her own sway threatened by any other's Beguilement. There were, however, several Sorcerers and Sentinels, ready to assist an assault on the Demesne if and whenever its defenses failed.

Mavin noticed all these and ticked them off as of no importance once she knew I was no longer there. Her interest focused on that other tall tent at the midst of the camp, a tent with closed flaps and guards set close around it. Though I had never seen her do it, Mavin had told me of her practice at moling and weaseling, a skill that took her underground, beneath the guarded tent, and allowed an extruded eye to protrude inside at the canvas edge.

There were two beribboned forms within the tent, forms with painted faces and a strange way of moving. "Like Eesties," she said, "trying to move like humans, waving their points first here, then there." She watched for a time, not betraying her presence, and was horrified to realize that the creatures were controlling the shadow.

"It made me peevish," she said with her typically Mavinish under-statement. "They were so silly looking; so much a travesty of humanity. Making a parody of us in order to mock us; waving and weaving their points to make the shadows flow first here, then there. Well, those two will not mock again."

She told us later what she did to the Eesties, leaving the tent empty. "For the mystification of the guardsmen. Mystification is always good for guardsmen," she remarked. "It makes them watchful."

She returned to the Demesne in time to supervise Bryan's supper and bedtime. She did not bother to tell Himaggery what she had done until afterward, by which time he had already noticed great rents and vacancies in the shadow. The fluttering menace seemed no longer organized by malicious will; though dangerous still, it was patchy rather than ubiquitous. Waiting for a propitious conformation, Himaggery and Barish made a sortie in force from the main gates, shadow or no shadow. Good fortune may have had something to do with it. They were not shadow eaten, and they left very little of the besiegers for the were-owls.

"We will go after Peter," Himaggery announced, furiously ordering horses and wagons and equipage for the road while the Gamesmen ran hither and thither and Barish gave similar orders to his own men.

"No," said Mavin. "You must go to the Old South Road City," and she told them why. She says they

were very stubborn about it, almost disbelieving. It was only when she threatened to turn Bryan loose on them that they began to listen seriously to her. And, at last, she had her way—and mine. Himaggery, Barish, and all but a small garrison of the inhabitants of the Bright Demesne set out for Old South Road City, while Mavin, somewhat slowed by being burdened by Bryan, came after me. Often I wonder what might have happened had she gone with Himaggery instead. Often now I wish she had done so.

11

JINIAN'S STORY: THE CAVERNS

Murzy had been right. By moving swiftly, calmly—and by trading the barrows for a farm wagon on the third day of our trek—we managed to reach the Ice Caverns before Huldra did. The old codger living at the edge of the marches had not been at all willing to let his only wagon go, but between Cat's talking and Margaret's Beguiling, he couldn't hold out against us. He was well paid for the wagon, and we left half a dozen of the shadow-eaters with him as lagniappe. When we left him, he had begun telling them the story of his life, and one of the turnips had a sprout out its top that looked suspiciously like a flower head to me.

"They'll seed, you know," said the Gardener in his gloomy, uninflected voice. "Soon they'll be all over everything."

"I can think of worse things," said Sarah. "Wildthorns, for example. Or purple briar. Or shadow."

"True," murmured the Gardener. "Except that wildthorn extract cures heaves in wateroxen. And split purple briar makes the best sieves in the world."

"I didn't know that," said Cat, showing immediate interest. "What else are they good for?"

He told her, for the better part of a day. Everyone else walked away from the wagon, tiring of his voice, but Cat sat up there on the seat, taking it all in, and the turnips babbled to one another about every cloud in the sky and every new flower or stone along the way. I was beginning to see differences among them, differences in their markings and the locations of their eyes. I named them to myself; Bulgy and Flop-top and Big-blue, who had the widest, bluest belt. Pasty, all white with yellowish leaves; Fringes, who had at least ten or twelve root legs; Molly-my-dear, slender—relatively speaking—and coy, with an almost supersonic giggle. They had no names for themselves and were delighted when I began to name them, after a time beginning to think up titles for themselves, some of which made them collapse into the bottom of the wagon, full of mysterious, vegetable mirth. I could understand the words well enough, but not what they really meant. It was not a humor I could share, though that fact seemed to frustrate no one but me.

The Gardener had been right. More than a few of them were sending up flower stalks and casting meaningful looks at one another. I had not thought of pollination as an erotic exercise before, but these hybrid creatures did not regard it as routine, so much was obvious. They were full of devious, volatile pranks, reminding me rather of the deep dwell-ers I had summoned up in Fangel. Devious or not, they were more interesting than the Gardener. I had yet to see him display any interest in anything whatsoever.

All of which was a mere distraction, to keep my mind off Peter. When I thought of him, I thought of him

being tortured, maimed, savaged by Huldra's wanton evil or Dedrina's casual brutality. Once or twice I had fallen into shivering fits, and Cat or Murzy had had to recall me to myself with an utterance of names. Not for the first time, I found myself wondering whose names we uttered and why they made any difference. Who, or what, was Eutras? Who, or what, was Favian?

At any rate, we came down Cagihiggy Creek at some speed. The way is level along there, not precisely a road but without major impediments to travel. As we neared the place where we thought the caverns were, we made camp while Murzy, Cat, and Bets sent up some kind of Wize-ardly signal, a tall, blue smoke with sparkly bits in it. They went on making it for some hours. Along about dusk, it was answered by a cautious call from behind some rocks, then by a tall, serious-faced man, who stepped out and approached us with visible trepidation.

I went to him, showing my empty hands. "I'm Jinian Footseer," I told him. "A friend of Peter, Mavin's son. He may have stopped by here fairly recently? I'm also known to Mertyn and a man named Quench, and I know the name Riddle, Governor of the Immutables, though we have not met."

He gestured vaguely at the others of us. "And these?" He was staring at the turnips, frankly staring, as though he could not believe what he saw.

Sometime deep in the night we heard a yelping scream from the sky, followed by a dull, squishing thud. Torchlight found the source, an Armiger, dead as a Ghoul fetch. He had been Flying some fifty or a hundred manheights up and run abruptly into the Immutable's screen. We moved the body behind some rocks, heaping some others over it. He had been a scout. Huldra wouldn't be far behind.

Before dawn, Murzy and the others joined me, together with Mertyn and his men. When the sun rose, we saw them, all drawn up in battle array from wall to wall of the valley, with some Armigers floating high in the air and others just above the creekbed to keep the lines straight. They had a Herald out front, floating importantly along. He stopped just short of the place the Immutable screen would have touched him and gave voice.

"All within sound of my voice, give ear; Huldra, Witch, Student of the High Arts, having taken the person of the Shifter, Peter, offers him now in exchange for the insignificant person of one Jinian, so-called Wize-ard, named Footseer. Let her come forward and the exchange be made."

Huldra was standing at some distance behind the Herald. The person next to her did look like Peter. Murzy sighed and did Bright the Sun Burning in the affirmative mode, a disclosing spell. The person next to Huldra no longer looked like Peter. Shit. Huldra wasn't going to let Peter go. Even from this distance I could see the creature was a mere semblance, not unlike a Sending or a wraith. She'd spent some poor fool's blood on it, but it wasn't worth the trouble. We had a quick conference, and our Herald jumped up on the rock.

"All within sound of my voice, give ear. Mertyn, King, most Powerful, most Puissant, calls the Witch Huldra to account for her un-Gamely abduction of Mertyn's thalan, Peter, Shifter, friend of Wizards. Let Huldra make her camp where she stands, and then between the lines will her accounting be heard."

Where was Peter? Back at the rear of the battle, no doubt. In one of those tents pitched far back along the flat. I hiked back to the Immutable lines and found one of Riddle's men, then pointed out the tents. "Could you get close?" I asked him. "Not close enough to be noticed, just close enough to damp any Talent in those tents?"

The man nodded, grinning at me. I rather like Immutables. They are so very secure in everything they do,

knowing we Gamesmen are utterly harmless when they are around. "Any price you ask, Sir Immutable," I said. "My love is in one of those tents, and your presence may help him escape."

"No price, lady," he whispered, putting down his banner and preparing to slip away along the mountainside among the trees. "Your love is Peter, and it was Peter who broke the evil at Bannerwell, and Peter who destroyed the evil of the Magicians. Any small assistance I can give, I am only too willing to provide." And he took himself off, still grinning, at what, I had no idea.

Behind the ledge of rock, other Immutables were marching to and fro with banners in their hands, first one banner, then another, giving the appearance of an army. From the canyons above the knoll I heard shrill cheering. The turnips had half planted themselves along a ridge to watch the battle. I thought of Big-blue and Molly-my-dear, wondering where they were. The last I had seen of them, they had been squirming into the earth outside the cavern entrance, and I had not thought of them since. There was no time now, for Huldra's ranks surged forward. She had no intention of camping and negotiating anything. The Peter semblance at her side stood in idiot confusion. She had forgotten to tell it what to do.

No time to think about that. Armigers darted forward through the air, arching high to get a sight behind our rock parapet before releasing their arrows. Elators flicked out of existence at Huldra's side. A line of Tragamors stepped forward, Sorcerers just behind, their eyes fixed on the rock wall that protected us and on which the other six members of the seven leaned, casually, as though watching a display of horsemanship or a class in cooking.

Armigers screamed, fell, thrashing about like wing-clipped birds. They had encountered the Immutable barrier. Elators appeared halfway to the wall, their faces bloody, battered. Most of them fell at once, one or two staggered about, shrieking. The Tragamors were holding their heads, and a Sorcerer blew up all at once in a flash of violet flame.

"Snakes," said Murzy to Dodie casually, and Dodie nodded, beginning to make a complex set of gestures, her face set in concentration. From the rocky slopes of the mountain to the left of the approaching army, snakes appeared, as big around as two men, heads reared high and eyes fixed on the approaching men. Some hundreds of Huldra's minions dropped their weapons and fled as the snakes reared even higher and hissed with a harsh, venomous breath that seemed to choke all those before it.

Huldra's voice was raised in fury, screaming words I had not heard before. The snakes vanished, all at once.

"Oh, quite good," said Murzy to Cat, "She did that very quickly."

"They were designed to be easy to disperse," said Cat. "We want her lulled into a false sense of security."

"Still," Murzy murmured, "she was quick. I think deep dwellers next, Dodie, if you don't mind."

This was only one word. Everything else had been done ahead of time. Dodie spoke the word, and the stones before the approaching army lifted from the ground to disclose endless lines of deep dwellers, popping out like corks, just as they had in Fangel. Fangy monsters, virtually impossible to kill, they launched themselves at Huldra's myrmidons, jaws gaping and claws fully extended, dancing, leaping, among the ranks before Huldra could react.

She was close enough now that I could see her turn pale with fury. Thinking, thinking. Twice she reached out to make a gesture, aborted it each time. I could almost read her mind. She thought we had

rigged a wall of enchantment across the valley. She knew she would encounter it in a moment. If she stopped to deal with the deep dwellers, the army might encounter the wall. If she dealt with the wall, the dwellers would make chopped meat of her men. She did the only thing she could do, signaled abruptly to a Sentinel at her left, who struck his drum three great whacks while a trumpeter blew taratta taratta tara tara. Retreat.

“She hasn’t thought of Immutables yet,” muttered Murzy in my ear. “Why are you carrying those turnips about with you?”

I turned my head, catching only a glimpse of a floppy leaf at the edge of vision. Growling, I took off my pack. Big-blue and Molly-my-dear had hidden in it and accompanied me to battle, peering over either shoulder. Shrill cheering came from the ridge behind me. It had not been us they had been cheering for. No wonder the Immutable had been grinning.

12

PETER’S STORY: A SHIFT IN TIME

I heard the Herald. I’m sure Huldra wanted me to hear the Herald. I’d seen the semblance of me she intended to trade for Jinian, and I knew it wouldn’t fool Jinian for a moment. From what glimpses I could get of the country outside the wagon and then outside the tent, I thought we were in the Cagihiggy valley north of the Blot. Not that the Blot was there anymore, but north of where it once had been. I drifted into that unpleasant dreamy state that was the best I could manage in the way of sleep and gave myself a few nasty minutes’ dreaming about the Blot. Izia. I had rescued Izia at the Blot. Yarrel’s sister. My friend Yarrel. Something terrible was to happen to Izia, and I woke up choking back a scream.

“Wozzer rampin?” the warder demanded with his usual elegant articulation. “Wozzer imperashun.”

“Nothing,” I said. “Nothing.” There were screams from outside; running feet fled past the tent.

“Wozzer rampin?” demanded the warder from those who fled past. “Somin atterus?”

He received no answer, which seemed to make him nervous. He went outside and stood there, scratching his groin and rubbing the back of one leg with a boot. He was one of the itchiest men I had ever had the misfortune to meet, and the fact that he itched and I could not scratch was one of the most refined tortures of which mankind is capable. I wanted to scream.

More running feet. He took one quick look at me, then went around the tent and away, after the runners. Now I could not even ask him to scratch my nose. Not that he would have done. I thought of scratching my nose, thought deeply and lovingly of it, and found one hand doing exactly that. The cords that had bound me were sliding toward my ankles. I knew at once what had happened. The cords had been made at least partly through Talent, and there was an Immutable near. I prayed he was going or gone, as quickly as may be. I needed my own Talent to escape.

“Taratta taratta tara tara!” Retreat screamed through the air, sounded by a Sentinel. No time to worry about how or why. I Shifted, frantically, gasping as waves of pain punished every part of me. Nothing worked right. I tried a claw and achieved a feathery thing that looked vaguely like a duster. Memory. Gamelords, I couldn’t remember how!

Voices. Huldra approaching the tent. No time, no time to do anything. Panic lent strength, and I flowed

up the tent pole, coating it with a round smooth layer of Peter, hard and brown as itself, appearing no different at all, not at all. Where I came through the tent top, an extruded eye peered forth at the world, an ear listened, invisible from below.

“Warder?” she screamed. “Warder!”

Then she found the cords. Fury. Rage. Summoning of this one and that. Dadrina summoned. Could not be found. The warder searched for. Could not be found.

“He’s a Shifter!” she screamed. “He could still be here. Bring every-thing out and throw it on the fire.”

They built up the fire and began to haul stuff out of the tent. Pillows, chests, rugs, mattresses, costumes and paraphernalia. All fed to the fire until it was put out by the sheer volume of fuel. More screaming, other fires started and fed more gingerly. Everything Huldra owned fed into the flames to make a stinking smoke that swirled around my top, making me want to sneeze. All. Everything that had been in that tent. But not the tent itself, and not the tent pole. Thank all the gods.

After a very long time, they went away. Huldra went flouncing off to some other tent, still screaming; the men seemed to be gathering for some kind of assault. It was getting dark. The fires glimmered into coals and went out. At which point I slid down the pole and crept away, flat as a leaf upon the ground, flowing like a tide of melted sugar out of the camp and up toward the hills.

Abruptly losing my Shifted shape and finding myself nakedly in my own.

“Ah, there he is,” said Mavin.

She was seated comfortably beneath a tree, dandling Bryan on one knee and talking contentedly to an Immutable, one who tugged his forelock, grinned at me, and unceremoniously took his leave. When he was far enough away for Talent to work once more, I Shifted some clothing.

“Worked, did it?” asked my mother. “I told him to go close to the tent for just a brief time, then withdraw. Close, to get you loose—assuming it was Talent which held you, which it seems to have been—and then far enough away to let you use your own Talent to escape. Clever, wasn’t it. Not my idea, actually. Jinian sent him.”

“Where is she?” I begged.

“Just up the hill, boy. Don’t fume so. She’s quite all right, but she’s surrounded by Immutables, so your clothes won’t last.” She put Bryan down to burrow in her pack. “I have a sort of robe kind of thing here. You might like to have it before you go haring off. . . .”

I had it in a moment and tarried only long enough for her to hug me. Only that long. She let go of me reluctantly; there was a tear in her eye. I knew she wanted to hold me for a time, knew she had longed for my escape as a thirsty man for water, that she had ached and agonized over me—I knew that, but I was telling myself there was plenty of time later, and I was halfway up the hill before she could say anything more.

I found Jinian behind a rock on a knoll kind of place. Surrounded, as Mavin had said, by Immutables. Mertyn was there as well, and some men I recognized from Schooltown. I saw none of them until later. Jinian was all I saw. She caught sight of me then, and a kind of light came over her face. I forget what happened next; there were some things said as I recall—and I do, really recall. When we had done

hanging on to each other for all our lives were worth, I settled down a little. Mertyn was shaking his head at me. Mavin was standing there smiling that outrageous smile of hers, her face quite clear of the longing that had been in it down the hill—almost as though she had set that need aside for the time. I remember feeling grateful to her and resolving to do something exceptionally nice for her soon. One of Mertyn's serving men was waiting patiently with some trousers over his arm. Jinian's and my greeting had evidently taken some time.

"How did you get out of the Bright Demesne?" I demanded of Mavin, hugging Jinian to me. "Huldra left half her army there, and all the shadows."

Mavin shook her head, making a face. "The shadows were not following Huldra. No. There were Oracles there. At least I suppose they were Oracles, for they looked as Jinian described."

Jinian gaped. "What did you do?"

Mavin laughed uncomfortably and described the technique she had developed to control Bryan. "A kind of basket," she said, making a face. "Baskets were used for discipline back in the place I grew up. The only way to control a Shifter, really, though I never appreciated that fact until your son came along, Peter. At any rate, when Bryan misbehaves, I make a basket of myself, scoop him up, squeeze him into his own shape, and then hold him till he settles down." She jiggled the baby, he crowing at her. Evidently he bore no ill will for having been basketed.

"And that's what you did to the . . . Oracles?"

"Basketed and squeezed, yes. Only this time rather smaller than their natural shape. I'm afraid they were quite squashed. I buried everything under the tent to cause mystery and confusion among the troops. Evidently it worked." She told us a few more details of what had happened at the Bright Demesne, concluding, "The shadows fell into disarray, and Himaggery managed the rest." She spoke with a kind of weary pride, and I knew that despite everything, she continued to love Himaggery. Those two! I had never understood them.

"I wish it had been the real Oracle," whispered Jinian. "Though I'm afraid they were only followers."

"Well, there are two fewer followers now," Mavin said, hugging her. I was struck, not for the first time, by how well these two seemed to get along.

Evidently there had been enough time for Huldra to regroup, for we heard trumpet and drum sounds from her lines, and everyone behind the stone became suddenly very busy.

The oldest member of the seven, Murzemire, materialized at my elbow and suggested in a kindly voice that I go with Jinian up to the caverns. "We've put everything in place already, everything a seven can do, Peter. Jinian'll not be needed here for a while, at least. Your mother, too. I'm sure she's tired from the journey"—not seeing or perhaps purposely not noticing Mavin's outraged face at this presumption—"and there are more comfortable quarters up there."

We were rather a cynosure at the moment, and I could understand her wanting us out of the way. Mertyn was shouting commands. Great pillars of flame had erupted from Huldra's lines, fire elementals, as Murzy said in a horrified voice. "I really didn't think she'd dare."

"It's all right," said the one with braids, Cat. "We've prepared for it with water elementals of our own. Do get out of the way, Jinian."

So we went up the hill, hand in hand, through the Immutable lines, on to the caverns.

13

JINIAN'S STORY: WITCH AND BASILISK

After all my longing and agony, Peter's escape was almost anticlimactic. He simply showed up, wearing some kind of lounging robe, having escaped when the Immutable came near the tent, then hidden when the Immutable left again. Mavin, it seemed, had suggested that refinement of my original plan, and she told us about it in a chuckling voice as she followed us up to the Ice Caverns.

"Immutables," she mused while Bryan burred and chortled at her. "Now that's the answer for you, grandson. You may try to gorbly all you like, but with Immutables around, it won't work. I think a few days spent among the Immutables would train you very nicely, and all the Gamelords know I'm tired of basketing you." She sounded lively and jolly, rather more contented than I had ever thought of Mavin as being. Seeing her face as she played with Bryan, I realized she must have enjoyed Peter when he was a babe. And I thought I knew why, too. That time must have been the only time in her life when she did not Shift, was not Shifter, did not think about Shifterish things, but merely was, womanlike, rejoicing in the flow of life through her and on. Seeing her, my eyes teared up, and I thought again of bearing Peter's children. If there should ever be time.

There was a jostling on my shoulders. The turnips had tired of my pack and were trying to get out, so I let them loose at the entrance to the caverns, introducing them to both Peter and Mavin. Both these Shifters had seen many strange things in their lives, but they stood there with their mouths open when they were introduced to Big-blue and Molly-my-dear. Both turnips were in full flower, much given to nodding their tops at one another in an obviously lubricious way. I was a little embarrassed, frankly, but Peter and Mavin seemed to pay no attention to that.

"Shadow-eaters?" Mavin asked. "Really, Jinian? Have you seen them do it?"

I told her that I had.

"By all the old gods. How marvelous. Oh, how I wish I'd had some of these that time long ago when I brought Himaggery down from the north in the shape of a singlehorn and the shadows tracked us, league on league. What a wonder. I'd been wondering how we'd—well, from what Peter has said, it seems likely there will be a force to oppose us when we reach Old South Road City. A shadow force, likely. It's not something I was eager to face." And I saw in her expression again that woman longing, that desire to be at peace, playing with the baby, if only for a time, rather than risking her life as we all risked ours in some great endeavor. She shook her head, repeating firmly, "From my prior experi-ence . . .

I shuddered. From my own prior experience, a shadow force would be unopposable. The best one could do was hide from it, and little construction got done while builders cowered in caves or huts. "I know," I said. "That's why we brought them. There are more on the ridge out there, watching the battle."

At the word "battle," Big-blue cried in an excited voice, "Snakes. Snakes and fire and trumpets. Tara

tara.”

“Taratta tara,” echoed Molly-my-dear, waving her root-legs. “And people feet.”

“Settle down,” I said. “If you’ll plant yourselves here by the door, I’ll take you back down when I leave.”

The Gardener was already by the cavern entrance, peering out in his dispirited way at the fireworks in the valley. “How goes the battle?” he asked as though it did not matter.

“As well as can be expected,” I said, and he nodded gloomily as we went on into the hum and babble inside and through that to the distant, twisty little room off the tunnel where we had slept.

“I remember this place,” said Mavin, staring about with eyes full of recollection. “You and I were here, Peter. In this very place. Gamelords, that seems long and long ago. . . .

“We had just saved Himaggery, remember? We came into the cavern through that tunnel, there. It goes back and back into the mountain and out to that Base place.” She touched Peter’s face with a tender gesture, patting him, flushing a little, then wandering off to disappear with Bryan behind a pillar, obviously intent upon reminiscences she did not intend to share.

Peter looked after her, his face sober. “She’s right. We were here. I remember all too well. The fool Magicians, without any idea what they were doing, had set off some kind of infernal device which was going to blow the mountains up. Mavin and I were trying to escape, with Himaggery. The resurrection machine had failed when we tried to put Windlow back together. I had his blue in my pocket with the other blues, the Gamesmen of Barish. We came on the railway, through that tunnel.” He pointed down the twisty way, shaking his head at the memory, musing for a time as we moved deeper into the room. “Huld was out there in the cavern. He had some kind of firebolt shooter. If it hadn’t been for the Gamesmen of Barish, I’d have been cooked.” He stared at nothing, remembering. I came close and took his hand as he went on, “The entrances were all sealed. I used Shattnir the Sorcerer to clear a way to the sky. Tamor the Armiger helped me fly out, carrying Himaggery. Then the mountain fell in. We thought Huld was dead.” There was a long, long pause.

“But Huld wasn’t dead,” I said, prompting him.

“No, he wasn’t,” said a deadly voice. “Not then.”

We spun around, disbelieving, all our safety, all our peace riven by that voice. She stood blocking the entrance to the little room with Dedrina close beside her and a scatter of Elators behind them. Huldra. She had figured it out, then. She knew about the Immutables, and while the seven were kept busy down below, believing they were fighting her, she had come into our stronghold to take us.

“Destruction of the caverns can wait,” she whispered, pointing one bony finger at Peter. It was a foul, slimy whisper that clung in the ears like swamp muck. “You I will have, and then we will see to the caverns.”

“Those who sent you to destroy the caverns are dead,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm and indifferent and get her attention off Peter. Mavin was behind the rock pillar. They might not know she was there. “Storm Grower is dead. Eaten out by your Sending, Huldra, which she swallowed down like a thrilp seed. Dream Miner is dead, poisoned by a yellow crystal. They are dead, Huldra.”

“They were only the Oracle’s dupes,” sneered Huldra. “The one who wanted you dead is still alive, Wizard. The Oracle is still alive and kicking about the world. Storm Grower is no more, but enmity remains.”

“Mine, Wizard,” hissed Dadrina. She was already half-transformed into her Basilisk shape, her dirty yellow claws scraping the tunnel floor. “Storm Grower may have ruled the caverns, but you are my meat, Jinian Dangle-wit, murderer of my child. Perhaps my daughter was too young and impressionable when she faced you. Perhaps you played un-Gamely, Dangle-wit. Perhaps she did not have her wits about her. But I have mine, Eller’s daughter. It was I who found the old tunnel down into these caverns; I who told the Witch where you might be found.”

The words hit me as though I had been struck with a hand, moving me to fury. Peter squeezed my hand, bringing me to myself. Of course the creature wanted me angry. Angry and unthinking. “Lizard,” snarled Peter. “Foul words are all the dirtier when they come from a filthy mouth.” His voice was full of fury, and his neck flushed. So much for self-control.

Still, it had given me a split moment in which to think. Huldra had spoken of the Oracle. I remembered my first meeting with the Oracle. It had been angry at the Basilisks. Angry enough to steal the Dagger from them. The Dagger the Oracle itself had created and given them long before. And the Oracle had set that Dagger in my hands. Playing with me. Well, let the play go on!

I was standing behind Peter, slightly to his left, holding his left hand in my right. Keeping his hand fast between our bodies, I slipped my hand into the slit in my pocket and pulled the Dagger of Daggerhawk from its scabbard strapped to my thigh. He knew what it was when I pressed it into his palm. I hoped he understood why I gave it to him. He had no art with which to fight Huldra. I could not fight Dadrina and use the art at the same time. He would have to do it for me. His anger would make the Dagger lethal.

Huldra made an imperious gesture, turning our faces toward hers as she stared at us with voracious eyes. “Let me tell you what is in store for you. For you, Jinian, the Basilisk’s claws and the long, slow dying they bring while the flesh falls away from filthy wounds that no Healer can help,” she sneered, mocking, drawing her hands up and down in a pantomime of raking claws. “And for Peter, a thousand years or so of sleep, to lie paralyzed, motionless, like ice in these caverns among those of the hundred thousand who remain here today, For when we have done with you, we will do with the caverns, not for the sake of the giants, but for our own amusement. . . .”

I heard her. I knew she would have that paralysis spell ready for immediate use. I would have had, in her shoes. Just as I had The Net of Enlees, which the other six Wize-ards had insisted be set upon me, invocable with one word. And the paralysis spell might not be the only one!

It was well I was thinking of preset spells. Dadrina was scratching at the floor, and my eyes wanted to watch her, but Murzy’s words of warning rang in my head. Peter would have to take care of Dadrina. I stared hard at Huldra, catching the gesture of binding before it was half-made. No, the paralysis spell hadn’t been the only one.

“———” I shouted, seeing for an instant a green net of fire fall around me. I wasn’t even sure it had worked, but Huldra was. She screamed in fury, then turned to make the same gesture at Peter. If she couldn’t bind me, she would paralyze him, eliminating at least one possible opponent. I couldn’t let her do that. Peter was backed against a wall, the Dagger in one hand. The sleeves of that stupid robe were too long for him. They covered the hilt of the Dagger. Ridiculously, I wanted to laugh. The Basilisk literally did not know what weapon she faced, but I had no time to gloat over that.

Instead, I bowled a ball of Witch fire at Huldra's head. She threw up a hand to ward it away, breaking the gesture she had aimed at Peter, twisting it to send a knot of boiling black cloud at my face, spitting lightning. I ducked and came up with a water spell half-done, completing it with a quick whirl to my left. As I came around, I saw Peter lunge at Dadrina, missing her by a finger width, then saw Huldra again, soaking wet. It hadn't been a very good water spell. I'd really wanted to drown her.

There weren't all that many things that could be done without paraphernalia! Missiles of various kinds. Fire, water, earth. Earth. I muttered a quick buried-in-earth spell, then changed it to water halfway. I was hoping for quicksand, but the best I got was a mud puddle. Still, she was in it up to her neck.

And out of it just as quickly, both hands weaving, weaving. What was she up to? I muttered ice at her, under her feet, and saw the weaving change frantically to a grope for the wall as she slipped and lost her balance. Screams from my right. Don't look. If Peter's dead, he's dead, but don't look!

I couldn't help myself. One quick glance. Peter was still on his feet. I couldn't tell about Dadrina. Back to Huldra, too late. Something slimy plastered itself over my eyes.

I gargled out the water spell once again, receiving a deluge. That washed the sliminess away but left me floundering. Something was happening at the top of the cave. I couldn't look up. Dadrina screamed. I remembered the sound of that kind of scream, that kind of breathless agony with a note of terrible surprise in it. So Dadrina-Lucir had sounded when she had been touched by the Dagger. If Peter had touched Dreadeve, if he had been angry when he touched her, then she was dead. Dead and gone. And he had been angry enough, I knew.

Huldra turned, confused only for a moment by what she saw, then those hands came out toward Peter and I saw her mouth open, knowing very well she would cry one word and one word only. The thousand-year spell, aimed at Peter. A thousand-year death. Aimed at Peter. I lunged forward, to be between her and him when the word was spoken, slipped, fell, rolled . . .

. . . To look up and see the ceiling fall around her, a great basket of rock, what looked like rock.

"——" Huldra cried.

I heard Peter calling, "No, oh, no, oh, no . . ."

Then I smashed into the wall with my head.

When I came to myself, the others of the seven were there. Way off, somewhere, I could hear weeping. Peter. So he was alive.

Hands tried to hold me down, but I fought my way up from the place they'd put me and followed the sound of weeping.

He was there. Knelt down, bowed down, his head on his hands, crying. Before him on the cavern floor lay Mavin, young looking, as though she were asleep, her mouth slightly tilted in surprise. Mavin. Pale and hard as stone.

She had dropped upon Huldra just as the word of enchantment had been uttered. She had contained the word, received it, been ensorcelled by it.

All I could do was sit there beside Peter and hold his hand. The tears ran as though they would never

stop, as though they came from some inexhaustible store. After many hours, someone went away and came back with someone else. A tall woman, taller than any woman I had ever seen, with a cloud of black, black hair and eyes like jet. She placed her hand on Peter's shoulder, closed her eyes for a time, then shook her head.

"He is only grieving," she said. "And I cannot cure grief." I knew then it was Mind Healer Tallev, that they had found her and raised her up at last. She gave me a long, strange look, then went away. Later they told me she had gone north, toward the Great Maze.

While I sat there, Mertyn led the Immutables into Huldra's camp in a fury of revenge and anger. Her Gamesmen, bereft of their Talents, he placed under Game bond and then released. A few he even recruited and sent southwest, toward the ruins of the Old South Road City. More than a few he killed for reasons of his own, which may have had something to do with several of them calling him "Shifter kin" in a certain tone of voice.

Riddle had found an Immutable woman to care for Bryan.

And the work of resurrection went on in the caverns while Peter wept and I sat there urging him to have a little tea, or broth, or a bit of bread, to all of which he shook his head while the tears flowed endlessly down.

I didn't cry then. Later, I cried. But not then.

When Mertyn and the seven had done everything they could at the caverns, we set out ourselves, down past the Blot toward the south, then following the coast to Hawspport, then up the Haws to Zebit, into the hills, and to the Willowater, almost the route we seven had thought of long and long ago.

We had wagons, now—enough to hold the turnips without crowding. And we had horses. Huldra had been well supplied, and we had all her beasts and equipage. She, the Witch, had been crushed beneath Mavin's huge body, that body which had taken the full brunt of the enchantment. There was little enough of Huldra left to bury, but we put what there was into a pit with the Basilisk. I had been too late to save Peter; but Mavin had been in time. I knew she would have done the same even if she had known what would happen. This did not comfort me. I did not mention it to Peter. It would not have comforted him.

It did comfort me, perhaps foolishly, that Mavin was in her own shape. Peter said her own shape had come upon her when Riddle arrived. I would have hated to think of her lying for some thousand years as a twisted, stony thing. Her body was in one of the wagons, close-wrapped in linen clothes. It was not possible to bury it, her. She looked too much alive, as though she might waken at any moment. I went to Murzy and Cat, begging them to undo Huldra's spell, but they shook their heads at me.

"We have already laid Sleep Brings a Darkening upon her, Jinian. She does not know what is happening. She is not condemned to be conscious for the thousand years which was the fate Huldra planned. She truly sleeps, without dreams. But the paralysis—that was a spell bought with lifeblood, Jinian. As was most everything Huldra did. To undo it would take the same, and not by any willing sacrifice, either, for part of the power would be lost if life were freely given. And it is the law of the art, as you know well, that causes beget causes. A thing ill done to waken Mavin would follow her like a curse afterward. As all the things Huldra did followed her to her end. It was Huldra's fate to be killed by her own enchantments. No, child. There's nothing we can do."

There was nothing we could do. Peter went several times each day to the wagon in which her body lay. As did Mertyn, weeping. As did I. As did most of us. And there was nothing we could do.

14

OLD SOUTH ROAD CITY

We came to the southern height above the Old South Road City at the end of a journey full of threats and hesitations, much of it through dead forests and across bare, ashen slopes that looked like lands long abandoned by life. Just finding food for ourselves had been a great problem. There were other groups than ours traveling the desolation. Refugees from one place or another clotted the roads and got in one another's way, some moving west toward the sea, others moving inland away from the sea's threat. There was talk of monsters from the deep; there were many dead from the yellow crystals; we were attacked several times and had to use the art.

Sometimes we had surprised great globs of shadow lying in hollows. Sometimes we found a way around; sometimes the shadows rose like a monstrous flight of vicious birds to hover above us while we cowered in the wagons. Once there was no other way for the wagons to go, and the shadow-eaters jiggled on their root hairs to the edges of the patch, sucking the dark monsters up with their roots, moving inward as they went, until at last the high-piled central shadows lifted and went away, a sinuous dark line upon the sky, as though going off to report what had happened.

We lost two watchmen. Though we heard nothing in the night, we woke to one gone the first night, one gone the second. The third night we began to sleep close together, a thick line of the shadow-eaters outside the watchmen's posts, and after that we lost no more.

Despite all this, we lost very little time, coming to the heights north of Old South Road City in a season that should have been bright and pleasant but was, in fact, chill and dismal beneath a leaden sky. I looked down into the city itself with a cry of dismay. Only after staring at it for some time could I see it had not actually suffered since I had visited it as a child. Then it had been tumbled but almost covered with a greenery that made it appear relatively whole. Now it was uncovered, all its shattered parts, its fractures and splinters, laid bare. Gamesmen sent from the caverns swarmed along its streets and among the piled stone, working beside pawns as though there were no difference between them.

Actually, much work had been done. I began to see it as we rode down the hill. Stones had been assembled in orderly stacks near the buildings they were to go into. Walls were being rebuilt. Pawns heaved at pulleys while Tragamors heaved with Talent, and the stones slid home. The street we reached at the bottom of the hill was virtually clear for much of its length, and the facades of the buildings on either side looked largely finished. A weary-looking Tragamor came toward us, holding out a hand to Mertyn.

"Dodir, Tragamor," he said. "Called Dodir of the Seven Hands. And I wish it were true!"

"Mertyn, King," Peter's thalan said, introducing all the rest of us in our turn. "There is a large troop behind us to bring you assistance, Dodir. And we bring something more valuable even than that—shadow-eaters." He pointed to the turnips, thronging in their wagons. "Can we have a council to tell us your situation?"

"Well, as to that," replied Dodir, staring curiously at the turnips, "I can tell you our situation in few words. We've made some progress, as you can see, but the heart has gone out of the Gamesmen. Often the Talent fails. There are times even the power fails. The Wizard Himaggery arrived. . . ."

"Himaggery! Here already," exclaimed Peter in a voice of hurt urgency. I knew what he was thinking.

Himagery didn't know about Mavin yet, and it would be Peter's place to tell him.

"He arrived two days ago, and he is attempting to set up a relay of power from the Bright Demesne, which he says may help our situation."

"He did that at least once before," said Peter. "Long ago. At Bannerwell."

"Well, we wish good luck to him. Unless he succeeds, I don't know what will put heart into the workers. We start each day with a plan in mind, but by noon we have drifted into despair once more. It's the shadows. Everyone says so. They lie around us like leeches, sucking up our hope."

I thought of Mind Healer Talley, wondering if she had found some key to the Maze, some clue to Lom's mind, anything that would relieve this depression. Seemingly not. I could feel it trying to swallow me, and Dodir was obviously fighting it, for he breathed heavily as he went on.

"Additionally, we've had some trouble with the blind runners. They didn't want to give up their city, and we've had to run them off by force. They keep coming back. We're trying not to hurt any of them, but it's getting difficult as they're getting more frantic with each passing day.

"And as for what's been done, well, look around you. We've found almost all the Bell. The pieces were more or less in one place, under the ruined Tower. Most of the stones are sorted out—many of them by plain muscle when Talent wouldn't work—and as soon as we can get the power situation worked out, we should move very rapidly."

"The Tower," I breathed. "The stones for the Tower of the Daylight Bell? You found them?"

Dodir nodded. "Found them. Yes. Broken, many of them. We'll need stone cutters to replace them."

"They fell from a great height," said Peter in a dull voice. It was unlike him. He had been unlike himself since the thing had happened to Mavin. He had not even looked at me, not touched me. It was as though he had shut me away, and it had gone on far too long. I had let him alone, respecting his grief, but this was too much.

"Did you find a lamp?" I asked. "It would have been under the ruined Tower. A silver lamp? And a book?" I was, quite frankly, thinking of the prophecy I had heard long since. "The Wizard holds the book, the Bell, the light. . . ." Which Wizard it might be, I couldn't guess. I wasn't even sure it was the right book and light, though the Bell part seemed self-evident.

Dodir shook his head. "Such things would have been crushed flat. However, we've not entirely cleared the place, and it may yet turn up."

"Where would we find Himagery?" I asked. If telling Himagery what had happened was part of what was eating at Peter, better have it over with.

Dodir pointed the way, through the city and up the slope at the other side toward what had been a grassy hill. "There's a stream there, lady, and Himagery's made camp, but he may be off to the east somewhere, overseeing that power system of his. He says the area around Lake Yost is yet untouched by the world's malady. I hope he is right."

We started to ride away, and he called after us, "And if these things of yours do indeed eat shadows, we will need them tonight."

“You have shadow down in the city here?”

“From dusk to dawn. As though scouting for someone. Shadow, and strange shapes upon the hills, like nothing I have seen before. Things with painted faces and ribbons.”

I’m sure he could read in our faces that this was evil news. Somehow we had hoped, senselessly perhaps, that the Oracle and all its followers were back in the Maze, kept busy by Ganver and its kin, and that we would not have to confront them. Now it seemed that hope was false, and it was with a sense of fatalistic despair that I nodded at Dodir and took the reins from Peter’s hands.

“I’ll send someone to show you where the shadows come,” he called behind us. I waved but did not answer.

As for Peter, he was slumped beside me as though he did not hear or see, looking into his folded hands as though he held everything there, everything that mattered. Or perhaps he looked on an emptiness in which nothing mattered. We went on through the ruined city, the other wagons following behind, Mertyn standing tall on the wagon seat to see that all of them were there. Behind us we heard Dodir call out, “All right. Enough of this lying about. Let’s have the first crew over here!” Then a crash of rock, an aching screech, as heavy stones shifted into place.

The farther we went, the more obvious the progress. They had started at the south side of the city. They had not even begun on the Tower, however. I looked down the avenue where it should have stood to see only piles of crumbled stone. Peter was right; it had fallen from a great height.

We came up to Himaggery’s camp. Someone had called him. He came rushing out, full of wide smiles, grasping me by the hand, Peter by the hand, rushing on to meet Mertyn, not stopping to look, to see. I saw Peter’s fingers, wet with tears again.

Enough of it. I had had enough of it. Chimmerdong had taught me that one cannot lie about in these moods, not even in grief. One must go on. I went to Himaggery and demanded he come with me into his tent, telling him I must speak to him privately. Mertyn shook his head at me warningly, but I ignored him, tugging Himaggery back as he had come, he half-irritated, half-jocular. When I had him inside, I said baldly, without any attempt at tact, “Mavin saved Peter’s life, Himaggery. She died. I’m sorry. . . .” And all the old gods knew I was.

He was angry. He accused me of making a bad joke. He accused me of pretending for some Wizardly purpose of my own. When he had said all the unforgettably forgivable things people do say in these circumstances, when he had said them several times over, he apologized to me, came down to his own feelings, and cried out her name very loudly two or three times as though his heart were broken.

I told him while he wept. “Huldra had the spell ready, Himaggery. She had to utter only one word. She turned on Peter. I doubt that Mavin even knew what was about to happen. She had gained bulk from somewhere—there were some stores in the room, back behind the pillars—and then climbed across the ceiling of the room to get above the Witch. Huldra had taken time to mock us. She had taken too long at it, enjoying it. Mavin simply dropped over Huldra like some great basket. Mavin had been doing that a lot lately, basketing Bryan, basketing the Oracles outside the Bright Demesne. She caught the spell as it was uttered. It turned her to stone. The stone crushed Huldra. Then, when Riddle came, the stony form fell away and she lay there in her own shape, still as ice. . . .”

Sometime during this tale, Peter came in. They hugged each other awkwardly, the way men do who

have not been accustomed to showing affection. Then they went out to see her, leaving me there. Murzy came in with a glass of something very warming, which half untied the cold knots of my heart. "What is it?" I asked, pointing at the cup.

"Bitter Tears Falling," she said. "We cannot cure grief, but we can postpone it and must. There is too much to do."

When I had drunk the wize-art brew, I let her lead me away to the place our own tents were being pitched.

"They'll not be thinking of anything tonight, child, and someone must. I've been asking about, and the shadows are coming through here and there, picking off a Gamesman or two every night. It's not contributing to morale."

I sighed from weariness. "Dodir said he'd send someone who knows where they come from. Has he done so, Murzy?"

She pointed over her shoulder at a meek-looking little Elator, all neat thin bones and slim small feet with a narrow bird face at the top of it all. "They call me Little Flicht, ma'am." He bowed. "Dodir put me to scouting out the shadow routes, and I'll venture I've spotted most of them."

Which I think he had. I got three or four of the men to drive the wagon with me, and we went around the city sunwise, left to right, up and over, while he showed us every pass over the surrounding hills and hole through the stone escarpments while the turnips became almost hysterical with anticipation. The last two we had left were Big-blue and Molly-my-dear, and these two planted themselves at a saddle of the hills after several sexy little minuets and suggestive remarks. Little Flicht was very taken with the whole group; he said he'd flick among them in the dark hours, keeping them apprised of what happened.

And after that, I really couldn't stay awake. I thought of Peter and Himaggery, probably drinking themselves silly beside the fire, and couldn't find it in me to go to them or try to help them. I couldn't. I had hardly known Mavin, and yet every time I thought of it, it made me want to die from sorrow and shame.

Why? Because . . . because if anyone understood the true meaning of the star-eye, it had probably been Mavin. How did I know? I simply knew. It was in her face. If anyone had been free, it had been she. If anyone had followed their own unerring choice as to the reality of what was good, it had been Mavin. She had had her sorrows, too, and her joys, but she had never blamed anyone else for either. She had not been sentimental. I had envied her. I thought of me drudging away there in Chimmerdong, doing my blasted duty for all I was worth, and I envied Mavin. I was still doing my duty and still envying her. She shouldn't have done it.

But then, if she hadn't, Peter would be lying in her place now. And perhaps that was most grievous of all, that tiny chill of joy that it had not been Peter.

And perhaps that is what was bothering him, too. Perhaps he, too, had that tiny joyful pulse that it had not been he. Oh, grievous indeed. Sighing, I left my bed and went to find them. They were drunkenly telling Mavin stories beside the fire. I sat and drank with them until the fire went out, then wrapped Himaggery and Peter warmly in blankets against the cold and staggered back to my own bed. "Mavin," I whispered to the night. "I'm still doing my duty, lady. And those you loved are safe. At least for now."

Morning came. Little Flicht made the rounds of the turnips and came back to say they had grown during

the night. I went to see for myself. When I had first met Big-blue and Molly-my-dear, they had been about the size of my head. They had grown some on the trip, not a lot, for we were constantly moving and there was little time to root and feed. This morning they looked doubled in size, quirkier than ever, full of volatile good humor that could turn in a moment into malicious games.

“Oh, Jinian, lots of shadows. Lots of thick ones, all full of juices.” So Molly-my-dear addressed me, jiggling heavily upon her root hairs. “Fat, so fat, like a moon, like the sun, I am glorious, so glorious.” She began to swing on my trouser bottom, laughing like a maniac.

“Isn’t she beautiful,” giggled Big-blue. “Like a great waterox cow, she is, bigger than big. And the seeds, you know”—giggle, nudge—“they’re *ready!*”

I didn’t know what to make of this. No such slowness on the part of Little Fritch, however, who begged them with every show of sincerity to give him their seeds, all of them, to be planted at once.

“That’s good,” said Big-blue. “If there had been many more shadows, we couldn’t have eaten them all. We need more of us, Jinian. Little Fritch can have the seed.”

“But surely,” I said, “they won’t grow in time to-” I didn’t finish, ashamed of myself. I had forgotten I was a Wise-ard. There was a spell. Of course. Hatching to Follow. A spell to make things come to fruition very quickly. They rolled about, laughing, seeming to read my mind.

“Oh, You Wizardly ones, so silly,” said Molly-my-dear. “Gardener knows how to do that. He does it all the time. You or him, makes no never mind.”

And so was our morning spent, Little Fritch’s and mine, in planting turnip seed. These two had not been the only ones *ready*, and by noon there were vast tracts of fertile soil scratched and sewn and spells muttered over. Fronds of green were showing by afternoon.

And at noon Peter and Himaggery emerged from their tent, physically somewhat the worse for the late and spirituous vigil they had held, but otherwise the better for it. And Peter came to me.

“We’re taking Mavin down to the Tower. When the Tower is raised again, we will build a catafalque for her there. Until then, it is a good place for her to lie.” He was silent then awhile, staring out with bleak eyes at the ruined city. “During the trip here, I thought it might be better to give it up. Better not to love anyone than to feel like that when they go. Better just shut all the feeling down. I really did think that, Jinian. I was even trying to do it. And I felt so guilty. She had wanted just to hold me for a time when I escaped, just for a moment or two, but I was in such a fever to get to you. I felt I didn’t deserve to live.”

So that had been it. Guilt, simple guilt, over a boyish—no, a human failing. I leaned against him, put my arms tight around him as he went on.

“I told Himaggery. He said it was a natural feeling, but silly. He wouldn’t trade his pain now for his joy then—back when he and Mavin were lovers—so he says. And I mustn’t, either. So. I won’t. And I think—well, I think we must take whatever time for love we have, and the time of your oath must be about done.”

“It will be soon,” I said, wiping several tears away surreptitiously. “Murzy says the time is probably already past.” Then I made myself get busy with something else or I would not have done anything all that day but cry.

We made a ceremony for Mavin. There had been no time back at the caverns. We lit candles. We placed her upon a temporary catafalque, one great stone that Dodir and several of the other Tragamors had moved beside the empty pool in the ruined Tower. I longed for music, but there was none. Most of the Gamesmen of Barish were there. Barish-Windlow, Hafnor, Wafnor, and Shattnir were away east, setting up the power transmission from the Bright Demesne. Trandilar was there. She wept. I kept my eyes away from Dorn the Necromancer, knowing Peter was struggling in the same way. Dorn could Raise up the dead. But Mavin was not dead. And yet she was. For a thousand years dead.

Beedie and Roges were there. When the ceremony was done, they bid me good-bye before setting out to return over the sea. "It may be we will never come to the chasm alive again," Beedie said. "Never see the children again. If you fail in what you are doing here, then all will fail. I know that. Sometimes I wish we had not come. . . ."

"Beed," said Roges. "You don't mean that."

"Well, and no, I don't," she confessed. "Mavin was my friend. She saved my life and the lives of many in the chasm. It was she brought Roges and me together. No. I would have come. But it is a sad thing, nonetheless."

I agreed with her it was a sad thing, then let them go, setting such spells of protection on them as I could, and thinking it was wise of them to get out of the city while they still could.

Vitior Vulpas Queynt was there. When I had told him about the Oracle and its followers, about Ganver and the other Eesties, he had flushed with anger. "*Evil,*" he muttered at me. "What we did, what men did, was heedless and stupid, but what they do is purposefully evil." At the ceremony he was grim-faced and said nothing.

Chance was there, of course, close beside Peter, offering his shoulder and his strong arm. Mertyn and Himaggery were both good, strong men, but I loved Chance.

When it was over, I stood looking around at the shattered stones of the floor and remembering the lamp. I had fallen over it in memory, kicking it into that corner. A large stone lay there. Finding me tugging at it, Dodir asked if he could help me, and when he moved it away the lamp was there, flattened but whole.

"Ganver said the Tower was a gift from Lom which contained three treasures," I told him. "The Bell, the book—by which he meant the music—and the lamp. Here is the lamp. Can it be repaired?"

He looked at it doubtfully. I knew they had recruited smiths among the laborers and said something to that effect. Shaking his head over it, he took it away. When I went to see Mavin the next day, the lamp stood upon its pedestal, and I could not even see where it had been mended. It glowed dimly from a candle burning within it. I wondered how the lambent light that had come from it in times past might be restored.

The metalworkers had set up their foundry just outside the Tower walls. There an artist had labored over the fragments of the Bell, piecing them together. Now it was complete, he told me, he was making a mold from it. Then he would smooth all the broken places in the mold itself so the Bell, when melted and recast, would be as perfect as it once had been.

"You were lucky to find it all," I murmured, lost in admiration for what would have seemed to me a hopeless task.

“Not quite all of it,” he complained. “Here on the rim is a line of writing, or symbols, perhaps. There is a nick. One small piece we cannot find. Perhaps one symbol or letter upon it, and no way of knowing what it was.”

I stared at the line of symbols, strangely evocative, as though I might once have known their meaning. As an Eesty I would have known what they meant, but my Talent for understanding speech did not extend to writing. “Perhaps the piece will turn up. The Tower floor isn’t completely cleared yet.”

He nodded gravely, going on with his work. “We can’t wait,” he said. “We must try to cast it soon, while there is still enough life in us to do so.”

And it was true. Life burned low in all of us. There were no smiles, no laughter. If it had not been for the turnips, we would have wept our way into silence. We were calm, too calm. Only the antics of the shadow-eaters kept us moving, irritated but alive.

We had three laborious days after that during which no attacks came. On the fourth day came an Elator to tell us of an assault of the blind runners, those who had lived in the city before we came. We seven went to the outskirts and waited for them. They had befriended me when I was a child. I thought it might be possible to talk to them. Which it might have been, had they not come hooded and blind and unhearing, running on the road itself, naked as eggs. We did the only thing we could; both Night Will Come Turning and Silence and Shadow, the two spells reinforcing one another and both invoked on all of them, leaving them sleeping in heaps by the roadside.

“How long?” I asked Murzy, for it had seemed the night spell had been done with a twist to put a very long sleep upon them.

“Until someone wins this battle,” she said flatly. “Us or the shadow. Until Lom lives or dies. If Lom dies, they are better off asleep.”

It was the first time anyone had said we were near that time. We had all known it, but it was the first time anyone had said it.

Back at the camp we met Barish-Windlow and the Gamesmen who had been with him. The linkage to the Bright Demesne was complete. “Though how it will stand up under assault, I cannot say,” Barish-Windlow commented wearily. Then he looked at me, and I knew it was Windlow seeing me, for he said in a quiet, old-sounding voice, “You know, Jinian, long ago I saw a happy future for Peter. I knew that was a true vision.” And I knew he was trying to cheer me.

That day the eye of the storm moved over us and was the last of our calm.

Toward evening two Elators arrived almost simultaneously at Dodir’s tent. Peter and I happened to be there.

“There are forms massing in the hills,” they told us. This was more ominous, in that they had come from opposite sides of the city. We were surrounded. When I questioned them, they identified what they had seen. Shadow forms, and more shadow forms. Shadows taking the forms of beasts and monsters. Shadows building themselves into siege towers. And with the shadows, those of the Oracle’s Brotherhood, hundreds of them, flapping among them in their ribbons and painted faces like great bats.

Peter and I went among the turnips. Each large one now had a train of fifty or so tiny ones at its—I was going to say heels. At its roots, I suppose one should say. The tiny ones spoke in sparrow voices, shrill

and twittering, and were no less mischievous than the big ones. We surrounded the city with a thin line of them, wishing there had been more seed. They called to one another, mocking the shadow, burying themselves, then digging themselves up again to wander about and find neighbors more to their liking. Five or six times Peter and I and Little Flitch went around the lines, straightening them out, begging them to fill holes, at which they jeered and mocked, coming out of the soil to hang on my trouser bottoms and the ends of my sash, swinging madly and screaming at one another.

Then, when we had done with the turnips what we could, the seven began its work together with Himaggery and Queynt. Nine of us Wize-ards—Wizards, trying to dam a flood or block a hurricane. We set spells and protections and traps, trying to feel they would apply to shadows, though we had no idea whether shadows were subject to the art or not. We were not sanguine about our future.

Down in the city, however, Sorcerers were storing power from the Demesne linkage. It was as though new blood had run into the city. The depression lifted somewhat. The workers felt more energetic. If the city was a focus of infection (as one of the Healers said), then the Bright Demesne was a healthy body that fought that infection.

At evening we went up to the hills, all of us Wize-ards, and Peter, and all the Great Gamesmen who could take time from their tasks in the city. As darkness began to fall, came the first assault.

We saw it as a low, breaking wave upon the hills, flowing toward us, dark under the emerging stars and the light of the half-made moon overhead. Upon the wave, the Oracle's brethren danced, ribbons fluttering, fantastic silhouettes against the sky. They howled as they came, not loudly, so that first we thought it was only our blood singing in our ears. Even the howling was mockery, war cries but in treble—ironical tones, odd words stressed. We were to have no dignity in this battle. They would mock us into the jaws of hell, and I wondered, not for the first time, what they would do with themselves when Lom was dead. I wondered if they were all as insane as the Oracle itself, busy feasting upon our deaths when our deaths meant their own, mad for destruction, avid with hate.

We had set fire spells upon the closest rim of hills, fires that blazed forth in fountains of white sparks when the shadows came near. Their structures broke before these jets of flame, broke and flowed around and reassembled again. We had set traps within the valley, triggered when the shadow came near, and these, too, were tripped when the shadow neared, broke, flowed out and around and on.

“So much for that,” murmured Murzy. “I hadn't thought it would work, but it was worth a try.”

“Where do you think Ganver is?” Peter asked me. “Why isn't Ganver here?”

“Because,” I said, counting the possibilities off on my fingers, “Ganver is in the Maze, recalling better times to Lom. Or Ganver has gone back to the grave, to die there. Or Ganver is meeting with others of his kind and they have reached no agreement. Or Ganver has been found by Mind Healer Talley and is being used as a guide. I am as perplexed as you are about Ganver, Peter, and oh, I wish Ganver had acted against the Oracle long and long ago.” I knew in my heart why it had not. I could not find it in me to blame the old Eesty too much, even now.

The shadow came on, tickling at us, advancing a little, then retreating, the Oracle's followers dancing along, watching every movement, continuing their whooping and calling, yip-yip-yip, a high, teasing call.

“I wonder if I could Beguile them,” said Trandilar from my side. “Beguile the shadow?”

Cat shook her head. “No. There is nothing there to be Beguiled, great Queen. Can one Beguile

nothingness?"

Then they reached the line of turnips. Now, for the first time, they were slowed by something. The shadow-eaters began to suck them up, making a keening noise as they did so. The Oracles leaped and danced, calling words of encouragement to the shadow, piling it higher, higher and higher. . . .

"By the old gods," Murzv gasped, "the shadow's burying the creatures."

It was true. The shadow piled around them, over them, making great lumps and protrusions of black over which the further shadow flowed as over some hilly road. We stood below them now, and nothing stood between them and us.

Then the bell sound.

For a moment I thought it truly was the Bell. For a moment I forgot we had not cast the Daylight Bell. For a moment I believed in miracles. Then I saw it was Peter, Peter Shifted into a great, brazen shape and donging out the sound, so near to the real sound I could not tell the difference.

And the shadow fled, fled away from the shadow-eaters, away from the dancing Oracles, leaving them upon the hillside still prancing, still leaping, under the pale cold light of the growing moon. And another sound under the bell sound.

Laughter.

The Oracle, high upon the hillside, laughing.

"Oh, *verypretty*, " it called to us in a voice of whetted steel. "*Veryclever*, little Shifter man. And it will work, once. Perhaps even twice. But not more than that.

"And we will be back, loves. *We* will be back!"

* * * *

We stumbled down into the camp, exhausted. Behind us the line of shadow-eaters lifted a shrill complaint into the dark.

"We can't hold them away from the city," said Dodir.

"No," Murzy agreed. "We can't hold them. The shadows left when Peter made the bell sound, but only because it suited the Oracles to let them leave. The Oracles are playing with us."

In the foundry the furnace glowed red, a strong, ruddy glow that brought us toward it like bait, as though we hungered for honest fire. "How long?" asked Himaggery.

"We'll pour at dawn," said the foundryman, his eyes distant and possessed of some vision. I knew at once he was right. The Daylight Bell must be cast at dawn. Beside him the great cauldron seethed, ruddy now, lightening as it grew hotter. "We found all but the one piece, but some of the metal will stick to the sides of the crucible. There won't be enough to fill the mold. We have to have more metal."

Trandilar took off her bracelets, dropping them into the crucible. Murzy looked long upon the glowing metal, then she took the pool fragment from her locket and dropped it in. The others did the same.

Except for me.

I stood there, hypnotized, drawn into the glowing surface of the metal. It wanted something else, more. Pool fragments, yes. Bracelets, yes.

I reached into the neck of my blouse and drew out the star-eye pendant Tess Tinder-my-hand had given me all those years ago. The most precious thing I had, really. Next to life and Peter. With death so close, precious things could not be kept. I dropped it onto the surface of the molten metal and it lay there, shining with a light brighter than the sun. I had to shut my eyes. When I opened them again, it had vanished, melted.

“For luck,” I said, and the foundryman smiled, taking note of the level of the metal.

“Enough,” he whispered. “Barely enough.”

“The star-eye held a power you might have used,” said Cat, not belligerently but matter-of-fact.

I shook my head at her. “I have not understood the lessons Ganver tried to teach me, Cat. If I had understood those lessons, I could have used their power without the amulet. In the cavern of the giants, the Oracle mocked me, saying the star-eye was only a sign, a symbol. In saying that about the pendant, it was right. The true meaning of it is more than that, but I do not understand it any more than the Oracle did.”

It was warm there. The others wandered away. Peter still stood by me in the light of the furnace. After a time he led me back into the ruined Tower, against the wall which the furnace had warmed from the other side. There was no one else there. From beyond the wall we could hear the muffled voices of the workers pumping the bellows and putting fuel onto the fire. Across the pool, Mavin’s profile stared upward at the moon. In that strange light, she appeared to be smiling. Peter was wearing a great, heavy cloak, and he spread it on the smooth floor against the warm wall near the pedestal with the lamp. We lay down upon it, covering ourselves with my own cloak, and he turned my face toward him for a kiss.

Before he kissed me I would have said we were too weary for feeling. After he kissed me there was nothing else but feeling.

Peter came to his skin much more easily than I. He merely Shifted the clothing away. I, bound about by laces and thongs and ties and belts, came to it more gradually. Still, it was not long until we lay skin to skin between the warm cloaks, forgetting where we were, not hearing the workmen from behind the wall, not seeing the cold moon staring from the sky top. My oath was over, that day or some previous day, but over.

But I did not think of that. Nor of the shadows. Those thoughts teased at the edges of my mind, but Peter drove them away. There were his hands upon me, gentle and inexorable. His strong, velvet-skinned legs moving against mine. A sweetness between us, down the whole length of us, like a pouring of honey, and him sliding into me as though a hand into a glove. . . .

A Shifter. Until that moment I had not understood the lovemaking implications of that. Human bodies are designed for many things, love-making among them, but there are elbows and knees and awkwardnesses.

But with a Shifter there is—there is nothing left undone. There can be no awkwardness. When a Shifter loves, he . . . he Shifts to a shape for that alone. There is no part left uninvolved. There is—

There is what we had.

When I opened my eyes, the moon had moved from the top of the sky. Beside us on the pedestal the lamp glowed with its own light, softly lambent, and I knew it had drawn from us a light that could not be dimmed, as it had drawn a light from the city in times long past. Dawn crept into the east. On the far side of the wall the men called encouragement to one another, and we heard the long, falling hiss of molten metal flowing into the Bell mold.

And as I lay there looking into Peter's eyes, I understood what it was Ganver had been trying to teach me. It did, yes, have something to do with lovemaking. What was it Ganver had called it, "A following of perfection."

"How long before we can use the Bell?" I asked.

He shook his head, stroking my hair back from my forehead. "A day or more, I think, Jinian love. It must cool." And then he laughed. "As I think I must."

"Not for a day or more, surely." I pressed my mouth into the hollow of his throat.

"Not that long, no."

I did not explain. The night would come soon enough. I would have to use what I thought I understood then, but I said nothing about it, merely smiling up at Peter in anticipation of what he might do next.

Which was a surprise, for he suggested breakfast.

Along about midmorning, I left him and went with the rest of the seven to the hills. Everyone in the city and outside it had been wandering about, brave smiles on their faces, making kind speech to this one and that one, just as I had done. We knew general Wize-ardrv wouldn't work. We knew the shadow-eaters couldn't stay the monstrous flow that would come at us. And those who had been shadow bit, like Himaggery and me, had been at some pains to tell others what it was like, leaving it to them whether to face the shadow or take their own lives. Not one of those in the city had suggested flight. Not one Armiger. Not one Elator. Whoever had selected the hundred thousand in that long-ago time had done well.

"You've learned something," said Cat to me, observing me closely, perhaps noting the little smile I wore.

"Yes," I said. "But I won't talk of it, Cat. It's too tenuous yet. Too uncertain. It has to do with love and children and parts contained in the whole. It has to do with weeding a garden without destroying the good plants in it. It's coming, slowly. I'm letting it come."

She nodded, not badgering me. Evidently they understood very well what this kind of feeling was, the notion that one knows something but cannot yet put it into words. "I'll need your help, though. Come night and the Oracle again, I'm going to try the final couplet."

"Jinian," Murzy breathed while Dodie looked white-eyed at me. "Dangerous."

"And fatal not to," I said, still smiling at them all.

"It can only be used once in a generation," said Cat in her most pedantic voice.

“Has it been used in mine?”

She shook her head at me, pursing her lips. “No. No, Jinian. So far as I know, it hasn’t been used in centuries.”

I laughed at her, at Murzy. “Then there are many uses stored up to use now. Don’t fret, Murzemire Hornloss, nor you, Cat Candleshy. We will or we won’t, and fretting won’t help either outcome.”

The things needed to invoke the final couplet were many, varied, involving all of us in a daylong search for this and that. It would have been easier if the land had been alive and verdant. To find certain herbs among the ash and choking smokes, amid the dead trees and fallen branches—that was more difficult than we liked. It was not until after dusk we came back to the city to find the shadow-eaters spread into their circle, not shrilling now, not making any sound, as frightened as the rest of us. It had occurred to them perhaps for the first time that we were all mortal, they and we, that they, too, could be eaten into nothingness. Thus I was not surprised when I crossed their line to hear a soft sound like a tiny growl coming from the ground.

“Courage,” I whispered. “Perhaps you will have help tonight.”

We mounted to the hilltop above Himaggery’s camp and began our preparations in a glade beside a fall that came down from the higher mountains beyond. Peter came and sat on the grass behind me.

“You’ll be more comfortable below,” I told him. “With the others.”

“I am more comfortable here,” he said. “With you. No matter what comes.”

I shut my mouth, remembering what I had asked him to do for me if the Oracle came too close. Of course he must be here. By me. I went to him and knelt there, my cheek against his. “Is the mold of the Bell cooling?”

“Not noticeably.” He made a grimace. “The foundrymen say it takes days sometimes. They dare not crack the mold until it is cool.” Then, pulling me close, “Have you seen the lamp?”

I stood tall to gaze down into the valley. The lamp in the ruined Tower glowed, shone, setting all the broken stones into silver and shade. “Did we do that?”

“Seemingly. We. Or perhaps Mind Healer Talley. Someone did.”

“There’s still the Bell and the book,” I said. “The book was long ago eaten by mice, I’m sure. Used by bunwits to line their nests.”

“It wasn’t really the book,” he said, holding me even closer. “It was the music from the book. The Shadowpeople’s singing.”

“Jinian,” whispered Sarah Shadowsox.

“Jinian,” called Margaret Foxmitten from the other side. “Shadow!” He let me go, all at once, knowing he must not detain me. I touched him once more, quickly, then turned to the work. He shouldn’t have been there. He shouldn’t have watched, but it was dark and what difference did it make?

The shadow was piled higher than before. On its fringes the Oracles danced, their mockery less treble, more angry. They tired of the game. Tonight they would come to finish us, if they could. The thought made me tremble. Peter had a sharp dagger. I had made him promise I would not come into the grip of the Oracle.

Enough. The things were laid out before me on a rough stone altar. As the shadows drove nearer, lunging upward into towers of dark across the last of the sunset glow, I wove.

I wove by forest and meadow, branch and leaf. I wove by stream and pool, by river and fall. I wove by cloud and air, by thunder and sunset glow. I wove by depths of the earth, rock and gem, glittering ores and crystals blooming in the dark, old bone and new. Beside me the others wove as well.

“Forest,” I called. “Chimmerdong. Eutras.”

“Eutras,” sang Sarah and Bets Battereye.

“Earthways,” I called. “Gobblemole, Bintomar.”

“Bintomar,” caroled Dodie, swaying.

“Wingways,” I called. “Fritchhawk, Favian.”

“Favian,” intoned Murzy and Cat in antiphony.

“Waterways,” I called. “D’bor Wife. Shielsas.”

“Shielsas,” sang Margaret, her voice soaring, reverberating in the cloud-strewn sky, making rings of color that spread outward from her voice, outward from her call, to the farther horizons.

“And all within sound of my voice or reach of the wind,” I cried, thrusting my voice after hers, like a Sending, like a magic spear, driving it upward. “And all within sound of my voice or lick of the wave, or all within sound of my voice or stretch of the soil, or all within sound of my voice or where green grows and leaf springs up. Named or unnamed, silent or speaking. Let this message be brought,

“By the Eye of the Star,

Where Old Gods Are!”

On the altar stone something blazed up, a quick blue flame, sputtering into silence. Above us our words gathered like a flock of birds, circling, making rings of color on the sky. In the center of that widening gyre something spread great wings.

“Jinian,” it called down from the height. “Jinian.”

“I am here,” I cried.

The earth shuddered beneath us, cracked, opened to admit the gigantic form of the Gobblemole. The fall opened like a curtain and D’bor Wife came forth. Around us the greenery rustled, began to burgeon upward, swallowing us in its depths. Forest. Come again.

And not only that. It would have been enough, those four. Quite enough. But I had called others as well,

the named and unnamed. Those, too, came to the final couplet.

A thing of great bones. A thing of rock. A thing of gems. A thing of wind. A thing of cloud.

A quintessence of deserts, hot as molten brass and glowing with sun. A distillation of great groles, monstrous and hungry.

A songster, multivoiced, crying in the language of the Shadowpeople with a silver flute in its hands.

These—all these.

I looked at them, mouth open, forgetting why they had been summoned. Murzy jostled me with her elbow, bringing my attention back to the rough altar before us.

“Those surrounding us are your enemies,” I said. “The shadow. The Oracles. They come to harm us, but they will also kill you all. I beg help from all the old gods. By the Eye of the Star.”

“By the Eye of the Star,” they whispered at me, a torrent of sound, like a river in spate. There was one of them—oh, I don’t remember which one. An immensity. Something so huge my senses could not encompass it. It was simply there, before me, around me, asking a simple question in a voice that could no more have been ignored than a lightning stroke could be ignored.

“Look at me, Star-eye! What do you see?”

“Bao,” I said, holding on to Murzy’s hand for all I was worth.

It was replaced by another thing, asking the same question. I made the same reply out of a dry throat, wondering if this was right, if I had guessed aright, or if we would all be swept away. The threatening shadows, the Oracles, they were out there somewhere. I wondered if they saw, if they knew what was happening, then could not wonder any longer, for a third being was around us.

“What do you see, Star-eye?”

“Bao.” Bao, yes, to them all. I felt Cat at my shoulder, trembling, proud Cat, trembling like a sapling in storm.

Then something new. A being there, before us, and with it a smaller version of itself.

“Look at my child, Star-eye. What do you see?”

Oh, what could I say? What should I say? I knew, knew the answer I had was right, but to say it. To say it . . .

“I see love, Great One. I see a following of perfection.”

“And do you see bao?”

“No, Great One, neither bao nor its lack. Until time shall show. Watch and learn.”

Storm then, a wildness of cloud. Dodie crept close to us. We were all seven gathered tight. Somewhere behind us, I could feel Peter’s presence, firm as stone, holding to the earth and waiting. Before us the sky

broke and roiled, a being half-seen vanished in its depths to reappear beside us.

Something green, then. Forest, I think. Chimmerdong. That great being, that old god we had so long invoked under the name of Eutras. It held out its hand—hand. It held out a great promontory of branch and twig and leafy swag, within which rested a flock of silly birds, twittering and hopping about. They did not see me or know me. “What do you see, Star-eye?” it asked.

“I see bao,” I croaked from a dry throat. “Part of your own, Great One.”

“In all, or each?” it asked in a great, windy whisper. “In all or each?”

“In all, Great One.”

“Will you take one for your supper?” it asked me gently.

Murzy’s hand tightened on mine. Oh, Murzy. “I will, perhaps, if there are plenty, if you will allow, sometime, though not now.”

“And if there were not plenty?”

“I would not, Chimmerdong,” I cried. “I would not. None of us would.”

And Eutras was gone and all the others, and there was only the mighty Fritchhawk there before us. “Well, Jinian,” it said. “Well, Star-eye.”

“Well, Fritchhawk,” I said, trying to get enough spit in my mouth to make a sound. “We meet again.”

“What is your wish, Star-eye? Shall we punish these shadows for you? These Oracles?”

Oh, tricky Fritchhawk. I heard Peter moving behind me, held up a hand quickly to keep him from speaking, to keep any of them from speaking.

“The star-eye knows you may not, great Favian. For they have not bao of their own, and punishment would be vicious. We do not punish what cannot learn.”

“Shall I kill them for you then, Star-eye?”

“The star-eye knows you may not, Fritchhawk. For the shadows are of the bao of Lom, and the Oracles are of the bao of the Eesties.”

“Then what may I do for you, Star-eye?”

“Drive them away for a time, Fritchhawk. If you will. We need time.” Wings then. A thunder of wings, beating down, raising a cloud of choking dust and a heart of storm.

As usual, we all ended up flattened. Whenever the Fritchhawk flew, everything around it ended up flattened. There was wind, a monstrous, howling wind that moved out from us and away. I saw it thrust the shadows before it like a mighty broom, saw the banks of darkness fade into distance. Most of the Oracle’s followers, as well, tumbled away. Behind them the Oracle stood, untouched, ribbons slapping wildly on the gale. Alone, it could not really harm us all.

It became very quiet. I heard the Oracle calling, almost laughing at me.

“Oh, very good, very good. Didn’t we say she is the heroine type? One time, Jinian Footseer. Two times, Jinian Dervish Daughter. Three times, Jinian Star-eve. And the third shall be the last! The old gods will not come to your aid again.”

I sagged, feeling Peter’s arms around me. Murzy and the others were whispering among themselves.

“They’ll be back?” Murzy said. It was only half a question. “Oh, yes,” I sobbed. “They’ll be back.”

15

THE DAGGER OF DAGGERHAWK

We went down into the windswept morning to find the city swarming with workers. There were sevens scattered among the Gamesmen; there were Gamesmen I had not seen before. Even as we watched, a new troop of them came down the hill into the city, the very last, so they said, from the caverns. So, stones screamed their way into walls; high above the street a crew was lifting rafters into place. For a moment, just a fraction of a breath, I could believe the city was as it had appeared in memory.

“An Elator came to tell me what happened,” said Dodir. “You’ve driven them away, is that it?”

“Temporarily,” I said. “Until tonight, perhaps. Not for long.”

We went on toward the Tower. I noticed the lamp was burning more brightly than it had before. Himaggery was there, sitting by Mavin, stroking her arm. Any honest feeling, it seemed, made it glow the brighter. Though Peter and I had started it glowing, it went on gathering light from everywhere it could. That is the way of the light, to gather, as it is the way of shadow.

Himaggery rose when we came in. “So, we have yet a little time?” He didn’t sound hopeful, but he wasn’t depressed about it, either. A kind of fatalistic cheer, that was it. A sense that pervaded the city and all of us who were in it.

“We have yet a little time,” I said. Privately I believed it was our last day to live, but I didn’t say so. It might just have been weariness. There had been little-enough sleep for any of us lately, and there was no point in dispiriting the others.

We went through the broken walls to the foundry. The foundryman was moving around the mold, looking at it doubtfully. “I thought perhaps it would have cooled,” he said. “An ordinary bell that size would have cooled by now. It’s still hot. Too hot to take out of the mold. I don’t understand it.”

I shared a glance with Murzy. The Bell had melted into it my star-eye and all our pool fragments dipped in the milky stuff with which crystals came. I mentioned this to the metalworker, seeing his face crease with concentration as Peter’s often did.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t know. The quantity was very small, but strange alloys can be made with very small quantities of additives. . . .”

I put out a hand toward the mold. It was too hot to touch. Far too hot to break open yet. “Perhaps by night,” I said, not believing it. “Undoubtedly by the time the Oracle returns.”

Peter and I went into the woods together. There was a glade above the camp that was untouched by the sickness of the world, a place where flowers bloomed and trees were still green. We went to have the privacy to say and do what all lovers say and do. I learned again what it is like to be loved by a Shifter. He learned again, so he said, that he loved me. I had had all the best of it and told him so. We argued about that. The day wore on. We ate meat and bread and drank wine. We laughed, even, at some silliness or other. Sun sparkled through the leaves, dappling our bare skins with coins of gold, and we spent them prodigiously on our pleasure. And night came, as we had known it would.

“I have to go,” I said.

“Where are you going, Jinian love?”

“Up there.” I pointed. “The Oracle will come up there.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No.” I pushed him down, fixing him with my fiercest glance. “No, Peter. I have the Dagger of Daggerhawk Demesne. Though I may not call on the old gods again, there are other beings I may call. If necessary, I will use the Dagger on myself. No. Don’t say anything. It will be easier for me this way.

“I’ve told Murzy and the others to stay at the Tower. I’m going to call Shadowpeople and send them there. I want you to go to the foundry. The Bell must be cooled by now. It must be! Remember the words of the Seer, Peter? Sorah, so long ago? Upon the Wastes of Bleer. She told us the Wizard had the Bell, the book, the light. There are Wize-ards here in plenty, and we must have all three. The Bell. The light. The singing.”

“There is no book,” he said stupidly, staring at me as though to memorize me. “No book to sing from.”

“They have Mavin,” I retorted. “Ask them to sing Mavin’s song. She will be their book.”

I think he knew it would hurt me if he argued, so he didn’t. I saw him holding on to his self-control as though with both hands. He left me there. Halfway down the hill he turned and stared, remembering to wave, trying not to weep, remembering at last to Shift some clothing for himself, and then he was gone.

My own clothes lay on the grasses. For this occasion I had decked myself. My gown was blue, girdled and cloaked in green and violet. They were colors Peter liked. I had worn them for him, and for myself. If I must meet death, then it would be well clad, not as some scruffy wanderer. So, these silken, lovely things. I put them on, drawing my hair high and pinning it there with jeweled combs. They had been among Mavin’s things, and Himaggery had wept when he saw them. He had given them to her long ago, before Peter was born. He had told me to take them and wear them in her memory. So I did, saying her name as I slipped them into my hair.

Then, only then, I laid out the materials for a summons. It was a simple thing. I had barely finished when I heard a trill from among the trees.

Jinian, “it said. “*Here is Proom and Proom’s people for the singing.* “ So much for the art. Why had I assumed Proom would not be perfectly aware of what was going on? He had always turned up fortuitously in the past. Why not this time?

“*Will you sing Mavin’s song in the ruined Tower, Proom?*”

“That one. Yes. And another we have, also of Mavin, and of Jinian and Peter, and of Ganver, too. “

“There is no book in the tower. “

“I have brought the book, “he said, stepping forward into the glade where I stood with my shoes in the grass beside me and all the Wize-ardly stuff spread around. He held it, a book almost too big for him, clutched to his chest. “We took it when the Tower fell. We have had it always. “

He started away down the hillside, others emerging from the trees to follow him. He turned. “Where are you going in your ceremonial dress, Jinian Star-eye?”

I gestured behind me. He shook his head sadly. “We will sing your song, too, Jinian. We will sing your song. “

Then they were gone, light as leafy shade on the grass, and I was alone with my shoes lying in the grass and my Wize-ard’s pouch and the Dagger on my thigh and Murzemire’s words in my heart.

“I have Seen,” she had said brokenly. “The Oracle and all his followers. They will come there!” And she had pointed to a low saddle of the mountain where the rocks lay bare and the soil ashen as though burned by an acid flame.

I put on my shoes and went to that place.

It was dusk when I arrived there. The place was littered with stones, great skull-shaped boulders on which the lichen had died, leaving gray scrofulous patches, like dead skin. Soon after I arrived, I saw the Oracle emerge far down the opposite slope. It stood quietly as I mounted one of the great stones. This time there was no mockery. Their ribbons were black and indigo, death colors. The shadows lay behind them in drifts, unmoving. There would be no play tonight. Nor would I have time to prepare or worry, or grieve. It saw me standing on the boulder and moved upward, toward me, its many followers behind it in a fluttering tide. Tonight they led the shadow.

I had the Dagger in my hand, the Daggerhawk blade, the wings of it curving beneath my fingers, the jewels of it glittering. Cold, so cold that blade, and coming toward me the great, gross bulk of the Oracle. Its original Eesty shape had long been overlaid with pretense and guile. The ribbons it had worn as mimicry were a part of it now. The hands it had imaged were now real; the face it had painted had become its own face. It had begun out of mockery at us pathetic human shapes; it had gone on out of stubborn, relentless anger; it had ended by losing everything it could ever have cared about, and even now it would not make an end.

“Jinian,” it called to me. “JinianFootseer. Dervish Daughter. Does it still wear the star-eye on its little bosom? My sign, human. Mine. The sign of me.”

“No,” I said, so softly it might not have heard. “No, Oracle. It is my sign. I’ve earned it.”

“You?” It laughed. I had heard a laugh like that once before in the fortress of Zale, a high chirp of mirthless sound, like a dreaming bird. Birds, who have no bao, may dream of souls? Why not. So the Oracle might dream now of what it had lost—or never had.

“I, Oracle.”

“You pity me, girl?”

“I pity you, Oracle.” I didn’t know what I said. It was too late for anything but truth, and truth is what I told.

Then came light in those painted eyes. Oh, Gamelords and all the old gods. Light in those eyes. An evil joy. A monstrous peace. And I knew why, for the Dagger seemed to tremble in my hands. The Daggerhawk blade, which would kill by a touch only when used in anger. And I had no anger left against this thing. Only Pity. Impotent pity. Which could do nothing with the Dagger, nothing at all.

It came toward me. Behind it the others, a shuffling multitude of them. Behind me, below me in the city, softened by distance, I heard the cries of the workmen struggling to hang the Bell. Hang it and ring it in order that all might be restored. I could hold these pathetic monsters off perhaps a minute or two, pretending an anger I did not feel, but my heart was lost in me. The light we had spun into the lamp of the Tower would be the world’s light, but not our own. Not Peter’s and mine. The effort we had put into the Bell would be the world’s cure, perhaps, but not ours.

“Have you thought,” I called to the Oracle, “that even now it is not too late?”

“Too late? Why, human girl, Dervish Daughter, it is not early enough. I should have killed you there in the Forest of Chimmerdong, long and long ago. I should have taken you myself and fed you to the monstrous Pig.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because we foresaw this end, Footseer. Foresaw the Dagger in your hand and you unable to use it. Because we thought it unnecessary. All your kind are so useless! We knew in the end it would come to this. More fun to play the Game out, you see. More fun to let it go on. . . .”

“But didn’t you also see the world’s death? And the death of all? Of every one of you? Of all your Brotherhood?”

Silence. As though I had uttered a curse upon them. Silence, with the Oracle dancing from side to side, laughing at me, the laugh a hollow one which the others did not echo, falling into silence as it became aware of their silence.

“We will not die!” The cry came from behind the Oracle, from that close pack that shuffled toward me. “You lie, Footseer. We will not die.”

I wanted to laugh, to laugh and cry all at the same time. “Oh, foolish children,” I called, forgetting they were not my children. “You will die. All the Brotherhood will die. I, too, perhaps, but you certainly. This, too, has been Seen!”

A wailing, then, like an angered ghost. Among those who shuffled along after the Oracle an eddy moved, a circling, as though some within that throng chose to move another way. Looking down on them, I was reminded of water as it breaks over a submerged stone, whirling darkly and without visible purpose. The Oracle had been at the front of this mob, but now it seemed to be behind the foremost rank, pulled sideways as though caught by that strange undertow.

“The Riddler told us the world died but that we would live, masters of all!” It was the same voice,

complaining bitterly. "Our bao would conquer everything!"

Pity again. So foolish, so childish, so damned. "What did you think you would do to live when the world died? When the world was only a sphere of cold stone? When there were no seas, no plants? How did you think you would live?" I called out to them, receiving no answer. "And since you have no bao, how would it conquer?" The mob was pushing against the stone I stood upon, and it rocked. I turned to leap to the safety of the hill behind me, only to find a tentacle of the throng had moved between me and that place. They pushed, and I rocked once more, staggering to keep my balance.

"You did not say we would die!" the voice was crying. Somewhere in that mass of ribboned forms, the Oracle was moving. I could not tell where. "Riddler, you did not say we would die."

The stone heaved, twisted, and I dropped to all fours, frantically snatching at the stone, dropping the Dagger as I did it, heedless, unthinking. It flew from my hands like a spark from the fire, gems glittering upon its hilt and at the top of the blade. The silvery wings shone, sparkling, drawing eyes upward. It ricocheted from the stone I teetered on, flashing outward above the mob. A hand reached up to snatch it from the air.

Ah, I said to myself. So it was you, Jinian, meant to die by the Dagger all along. You meant to die at the anger of these rebellious stars. And I crouched there, waiting, remembering how the Basilisks had died, some long ago, one only recently, almost it had seemed without pain, and I was thankful for that. Since that time upon the battlement at the fortress of Zale, I had wakened sometimes in the night, mouth dry, fearing pain. So I crouched, eyes not shut but not watching, mouth dry still, merely waiting. In a moment the Dagger would touch me, and that would be an end to it all. At the end, I would think of Peter. He might never know of it, but it would comfort me at least.

So I waited, seeing without seeing how the Dagger spun into the mob, as though it lived, as though it flew by those carved wings.

Within that throng came a clearing. A vacancy. A troubled space where the shifting bodies of the Brotherhood had twirled away. At the edge of this space the Dagger spun. I could see it in the hands of one of them. Which one? The Oracle itself? I thought at first yes, then no, for the creature spun, spun, screaming as it spun, "You did not tell us we would die!"

It spun with the Dagger in one hand, a wheel of flame, and as it spun the beribboned Eesties fell before it like grain before the scythe. Was one of them the Oracle? Cautiously, as one who has just escaped the attack of some great, sly beast, I raised my head and shoulders to see what was there. Those who had been in the crevasse behind me had poured forth once more. The shallow ditch was empty. I stepped across it to the hilltop, sinking once more to a crouch, watching.

And still they fell, by the tens, by the hundreds. Their forms littered the hillside, changing now, losing their mock-human forms, turning to Eesty shape once more, starlike upon the grass, fading as I watched, becoming mere shades of themselves which melted into the herbage and were gone. I stepped from the stones to the dried, brittle grass. Still the voice cried, or another voice like it; still the Dagger spun, and those who were left living began to flee. The Dagger did not remain behind. It pursued them yet in the hand of one of their own kind, mad with anger and frustrated purpose, furious at betrayal.

And only two were left living in that place—Jinian and one other. The Oracle.

It was shrunken. Eesty-like. The painted eyes were only painted and the bony hands mere sketches of light and shadow at the ends of its points. It had no face, and yet I knew it. I knew it no matter what

guise it took, and I spoke to it at last.

“You did not think of *their* anger, Oracle.”

“No,” it replied. The voice was an Eesty voice, and yet it hurt me like a file across my bones in its horrid intensity. “I did not think of their anger. I made the Dagger. I set it where you found it. I foresaw much. I knew you could not use it against me. I never thought of them.”

“They were betrayed, Oracle. Ganver tells me there is no anger greater than that of a zealot betrayed. Where is your strength now, Oracle?”

“So it would seem.” It hummed, like a hive of warnets. “And yet, Dervish Daughter, I have strength enough to deal with you still.”

My eyes dropped. The Eesty was larger than I, and older by far. I had no weapon. Any magics the Wize-ards knew had been known to this older race. It was true. It could deal with me still. I stroked my breast where the star-eye had lain, wishing for it. I would say what the star-eye required, whether I would die or not, crying out in a voice unlike my own.

“No. You have no strength at all, Oracle. Hear the message of the star-eye:

“A soul does not dwell in your shape, Eesty! A soul does not live in your seed. Mercy will not allow you to live. And yet, you are part of the whole, Oracle, and I may not destroy you.”

“What is my punishment?” It laughed at me, a final, bitter mockery. “What do you think you can do? Those like me will always prey on those like you, Footseer! Until you learn mercy toward us! Until you learn that not-being is more merciful than being for one like me! Where there is no belonging, no way, why do those like you always think it merciful to make us go on living?”

I started to answer, but the answer did not come. I could have told it why it had been allowed to live so long, but I did not. Instead I cried with all my heart into the silence, “Ganver! I know why you did not act in the past! I know your love for that which you gave life. But bao demands that this creature die, Ganver, and I may not take your bao. This is your duty. *This is your own child!*”

The Oracle heard me and was shocked to stillness. At least, so I thought later. Perhaps the Eesties do not know parents as we know them; perhaps they do not know who gives them life. Perhaps as the ages pass, they forget. So, perhaps, the Oracle had not known or did not remember. It had no time to remember then, for a great rolling wheel came out of the trees and the cloud, something more huge than could be imagined, more inexorable. It spun, and when it had spun away, the Oracle was gone. Ganver had found strength to do the merciful thing at last.

Then, only then, the sound came. Below me, in the valley, they were ringing the Daylight Bell.

The sound surged like a tide, washing over me, then retreating, coming forward once again, higher each time, touching the burned earth, the scabbed stone, upward into the air, into the tree branches that angled stark and graceless against the sky, upward still until tree and stone and earth lay beneath that tide, like creatures of a shore pool dried from the sun, now laved, soothed, lifted. . . .

Where the shadow lay the light came, and the great bank of shadow raised itself and fled.

I dropped to the earth, floated to the earth, sat there, hands drifting to and fro above the surface of it.

My hair flowed before my face, then back, before my face again in the wind of that ringing. It was good to sit down, inexpressibly good. I gripped the grass where I sat, holding it as though to hold myself in place upon the world or the world in place beneath me.

A shudder then, like distant thunder, felt rather than heard. As though something monstrously large had clapped its hands. I was buffeted by the silent blow, touched all over. Before me on the ash-gray soil a blade of green pushed upward, shivered, split itself into several leaves, and thrust outward at the world a cluster of buds that broke into silvery bloom.

A tree rat came out onto a branch and chattered at me. I did not understand a word. Too tired, I told myself. Too tired to listen, tree rat. Sorry. Sorry.

It took enormous effort to get to my feet. The silent blow bruised me, not visibly, and yet I could feel it in my flesh. Something had struck me. It seemed a punishment after all I had been through, and weary tears gathered at the corners of my eyes. The tree rat chattered once more, but I could not take time to figure out what it was saying. Below, in the city, those I loved must be told their efforts had succeeded. The Oracle and all its followers were gone.

I staggered down toward the city. Around me came small popping sounds, like pods of shatter-grass breaking open, as the gray trees burst into leaf all at once. The soil beneath me writhed with grass, coil after coil of fern sprang up like zeller, leaping into frond. Blossom happened. I walked on a meadow of bloom and green. The world rejoiced. The sound of the Bell fell away to silence.

And from below me, in the city, came a wail, a cry, a heartbroken lament. I stopped, unable to believe it, thinking perhaps the Oracle had done some dreadful thing there in the city before its life had ended. The lament went on, flowing toward me, coming from a clot of people clustered at the nearest gate. I stopped, confused. There was something wrong with my head. A blurry feeling.

Peter was there at the gate. I called out, a harsh, grating cry from a dry throat. He raised his head, saw me, didn't move, just stood there, his face empty. Then he raised his hand and came up the hill toward me. I waited, unwilling to go closer, afraid.

Even at the distance, I could see his face was wet and he walked as though crippled, haltingly. Behind him those at the city gate went into the city, their voices raised in sorrow, joining another lament by other voices. I began to run, stumbling, as halting as Peter. I was sore, hurt. He, too.

He caught me in his arms.

Always, always when Peter held me, the flesh of his arms *Shifted*, only a little, becoming warmer and wider, as though to touch as much of me as he could. The first time he had ever really held me, long ago, oh—longer ago than seems possible and yet only a year or two, only that. He had held me then as he did now, and I had felt that Shifting, that softening, as though his arms would cushion me against all the threats and pains of the world. And always when he had held me, it had been like that.

Yet now he held me in his arms and they were only arms. "Wiz-ardry?" he mumbled into my ear. "Some Wizardry, Jinian? Lost. All of us. Our Talents. All. Gone."

I stared at him stupidly, not hearing him. What idiocy was he talking? I couldn't understand what he meant. His Talent gone due to some Wizardry? Whose? Who was left?

Over his shoulder I could see a small figure behind him, toiling up the hill. Proom. The Shadowman,

looking at me out of great, haunted eyes. He came close to me, stared into my face, took my hand into his own soft, long-fingered one, and spoke to me. I could not understand him.

And it was then I knew.

The Talents were gone. All. Everyone's. Lom had given. Lom had judged.

And Lom had taken away.

Proom sang to me with tears in his eyes: Lolly ulla lum a lolly lom. Like a bird. All around me was the sound of mystery. A tree rat chattered. I did not know what it said. High on the hill, a fitchhawk called, and I knew it might be calling me, but I could not understand.

I cried out then, something, I forget what. Peter reached out for me. We stood there on the hillside, tight in each other's arms, weeping for what was lost, and gained.

Lom was alive. Lom the glorious, field and forest, stream and meadow, fitchhawk on the air, bunwit in the copse, all alive. And thinking. And knowing.

And all our Talents were gone. Healer and Necromancer, Sorcerer and King, Tragamor and Elator, gone. All our Talents gone. Taken away. As punishment?

And in that I took hope, for if Lom thought we had no bao, it would not have punished us. It would have done the merciful thing.

We walked down into the city. There was a body at the gate, Little Fitch, a knife between his ribs to the hilt.

"He said it was all he had," whispered Peter. "All he had."

"It is not all you had," I said firmly, choking it out. "It is not all you had, Peter."

"I keep telling myself that," he said, holding my hand so tightly it hurt. "I do, Jinian."

We came to a place where Dodir had been working. A great stone lay on the street, and he leaned against it, trembling, crying as though his life had broken before him. He looked up at me, through his tears, wiping them away as though ashamed. "Jinian?"

I shook my head at him. "They were never our gifts to begin with, Dodir. Lom gave them. And Lom has decided we will be better creatures without them."

His face turned grayer. Dodir had used his gifts well, always. All those in the city had done. Here, more than any place in the world, might this great loss be justifiably resented.

"I?" He was disbelieving. "I, too?" It was undeserved in Dodir's case. He knew it.

"All," I said. "All of us."

At first nothing, then perhaps a flash in those brown eyes. Anger. Yes. I think so. A little anger. And his shoulders straightened as he stood tall beside the great stone, and I knew of the two things, Dodir or the stone, Dodir was the stronger, for he would not be broken.

“Then we will build it without,” he said. “But build it we will.”

Beside me I felt Peter straighten, sigh. “Yes.”

And we three turned together to help others, even as the lament went on.

16

END AND BEGINNING

We live now, Peter and Bryan and I, in a pleasant glade above Old South Road City. We have a house there, one we are building with our own hands whenever we can find time away from the construction crew down in the city. Peter is becoming something of a stone mason. Though fancy carving is beyond him, so he says—and I think it is only that he lacks patience for it—he finds the laying of stones pleasant work, tiring work, work that exhausts him so he can sleep without remembering what used to be. Many Gamesmen these days would rather not remember what used to be.

The change has been hard for us all. I went up a hill in my blue gown able to speak the language of any bird or beast. I came down knowing only my own tongue. As for me, so it was for everyone. There was no time to adjust. There was no prior announcement. One moment we had the gifts Lom had given us. The next moment they were gone. Peter never Shifted again, and there are still nights I lie beside him while the bed quivers with his unconscious, dreaming effort to change. I see his hands clench, his muscles knot. To no purpose. He is still my Shifterish Peter, but Peter, Shifter, no longer.

For most of us it was as though we had lost our sight or our hearing. Though we rejoiced in a world that was healing and growing, still we mourned. Some, like Little Flicht, gave it no time but simply died. Some Gamesmen may mourn their lives away. Certainly many have not stopped grieving yet.

Peter and I, alone among all Gamesmen, know that the Talents had been Lom’s gift. We, alone among all Gamesmen, are able to explain what has happened. Those who know us well believe what we tell them. Some others do as well, seeing it as the only explanation that makes sense. Across the world, however, there are those who seek some magical solution, some application of Wizardry, some religion, some prophecy. Temples are springing up, I am told. Prophets are gaining reputation. How strange that the Gamesmen should need any other explanation than the true one! And yet their sense of themselves—so says Barish-Windlow—will not allow them to believe they had all that power by gift, that it was not their own by birthright.

Whatever one wishes to believe, we have all had to find other ways to live. Some of us are doing well, learning as quickly as any ordinary pawn might ever have done. We have Tragamors who are engineers; Elators who are messengers; Armigers who are guards. Trandilar has set up a school for weavers. It was her hobby in times long past, and she seems glad to take it up again. She is still beguiling, but it is only her natural self. There is no magic in it. Dorn, the Necromancer, says he is glad his Talent is gone. He has become a teacher of children, and his face is less lined than it was in the past. He rejoices to have done with the dead. The living need our attentions more, he says. Who can argue with that?

Not all Gamesmen have fared so well. There have been incidents of pawns rising up to dispose of former Gamesmen Rulers. In most cases, the disposal was just. Many old Demesnes are vacant now. Stoneflight rose up against Bram Ironneck, and Eller, who pretended to be my mother, is now the kitchen maid of a merchant-prince. So I am told, by Murzy. She is not a Seer any longer, so I don’t know how

she learned this. I have not asked.

Those of us with the art fare a little differently—I will not say “better.” While the Talents were a gift from Lom, the art was largely our own learning, and it has stayed with us. The art was always a matter of respectfully invoking the power of beings larger than ourselves. If we have friends among those powers, it can be done. Peter is learning something of that, too, and bids fair to turn out a respectable hedge Wizard. This pleases Himaggery, and Himaggery says it would please Mavin as well. And Lom. We all suppose it must please Lom. Otherwise it would not be allowed. So, the sevens go on as they have in the past. Most of mine is here with me, though Cat Candleshy has gone traveling to see this new world and what it makes of itself.

As for Himaggery, he has gone back to the Bright Demesne. He says the people there are no less his people because the world has changed.

We will visit there, after the baby comes, to see him and Barish-Windlow. Barish suffered most, I think, from what happened. He had based his whole life upon a strategy that is suddenly useless. Now he is mostly Windlow, and Peter says he doesn't know from day to day how to feel about that.

When it happened, so suddenly, I believed Lom's recovery was due to something Mind Healer Talley had done. She says, however, that though she did what she could, Lom began to wish to live at the ringing of the Daylight Bell. She tells me that the destruction of a certain memory may have had much to do with that, and perhaps also to the fact that the Eesties—the old Eesties—had assumed their proper role of recollection once more. Perhaps it was no one thing but all of these things together. If so, I can take pride in helping, as can Peter. When we get depressed sometimes, we try to remember that.

When the Bell came from the mold, the little missing place on its rim was filled in with the sign of the star-eye, almost as though my own talisman had been reformed in that place. When it rang, it was with the same clear, unmistakable tone I remembered from our travels in Lom's memory. Whatever the alloy was, it was correct. Foreordained? If so, by whom? Fortuitous? If so, why? Who knows? Even those I know among the Wize-ards are less likely to speculate about such things than once they were.

Soon the Daylight Bell will hang where it belongs once more. The Tower is almost finished. Only the arched windows at the top and the gently curving roof remain to be completed. Peter spends endless hours with the ex-Tragamor architects—Dodir among them—who claim the work is harder now but more satisfying. Peter and I are the only humans now alive who ever saw the Tower and the city as it was before its destruction. Thank all the old gods we remember it well enough to direct its rebuilding. The city is far-enough along that there are various kinds of people moving into it, even now. Among these are the blind runners. They still run the roads, but only as ritual, for short distances. They have taken the maintenance of the city and the roads as their task. Looking down from my window, I can see some of them now, sweeping the stones and scrubbing them to an ivory glow. They who once ran the roads blindly now look at them very carefully. Strange how things turn out. Many things are turned about to show their faces where once their backs were. I find myself wondering sometimes if any of it was real then, or if we only dreamed it.

The shadow is gone except when the Shadowbell rings, far away in the north, where the Shadow Tower stands. Almost all of the turnips have returned there with the Gardener. Big-blue and Molly-my-dear live in my garden. They still swing upon my sash ends and play wicked tricks and laugh uproariously at them, but I can no longer understand what they say. Their children bid fair to become impish reminders of times past. I can imagine ten thousand fireside stories beginning, “Long and long ago, when there were no turnips to swing upon our pant legs, the people of this world had strange powers. . . .”

Forests are green again, and the roads are being repaired, some by us and the runners, some spontaneously. Eesties run those roads. The Dervishes are their apprentices. Evidently the skill of Dervishes was like the art of the wize, a thing they learned for themselves, for they have it still. I have not seen Bartelmy of the Ban. Perhaps someday I shall. The world is so changed, I do not know what I can say to her. She will be so changed, perhaps we will have nothing to say.

Mavin lies asleep in her crystal coffin beside the pool in the Tower. The lamp glows ever more brightly upon its pedestal. The book is back where it belongs, and the Shadowpeople sing from it every day. The pool has begun to fill once more with the milk from which crystals grow. There are no crystals in it yet, but perhaps there will be, in time. Surely, Lom will have messages for its people once more. Surely, after what we have been through, we have learned to be people of Lom, people who will listen.

When Peter and I make love, he always asks if it is the same as when he was Shifter. I always say yes. It is not the same, but that doesn't matter. Himaggery said to me once that being loved by a Shifter spoiled one for any other lover. I can see how that would happen, but it is Peter I loved and summoned with nutpie and Lovers Come Calling, not merely a Shifter, so I do not dwell on that. I will admit to certain dreams from which I wake trembling, but I do not speak of those to him.

He asks me sometimes about bao, and I explain that it is something some creatures have and others do not, and that no race of creatures always has it in every individual and that no shape guarantees it. "And when one does not have it, Peter, then it is pure evil to punish that creature for its lack. It must be destroyed, quickly, without causing it fear or pain, for it lacks the quality all things must have to live together, and lacking that, has no reason to live."

And he thinks about that. Though he would be quick enough to destroy a rogue waterox, one that preyed upon its fellows, still I am not sure he understands bao or the lack of it in humans. Mavin would have understood it, I'm sure of that.

"We must not pretend to ourselves that something has bao because it shares our shape or our seed," I tell him, trying to explain. "To do so prolongs cruelty needlessly."

"But the old gods didn't destroy the shadow."

"The shadow is part of the bao of Lom."

"Or the Oracles . . ."

"The Oracles were part of the bao of the Eesties. The Oracle was Ganver's own child. Ganver had to take the final step—merciful destruction. Each of us must take responsibility for our own. No one else can do it for us, for that way lies the death of all that is good."

At the end, of course, Ganver had done it, though I have no doubt the Eesty grieves for it still.

There is a new, strange song the Shadowpeople sing. They sing that when the sleep of Mavin is over, a thousand years more or less, Lom will repent once more and restore the Talents of man. Though I no longer have the Talent of tongues, I can learn. Proom is teaching me his language, and this is how I know what they are singing. I have asked Proom whether the song is true. He says all the songs the Shadowpeople sing are true.

Sometimes I hope the Talents will return. Sometimes not. Life is better for most, now, without Gaming. But I think of Mavin and wonder if she will want to wake into a world in which she must remain one

shape always, in which she cannot Shift, become whatever she wills to become. I think of her being forced to remain only herself and believe she might rather sleep.

And, sometimes, I think of myself, having a Shifter lover. Well. Mothwings Go Spinning. End and Beginning.

And I say, as Murzy has taught me, "Time does as time wills. Live today. Tomorrow is its own mystery."

We will be having our own children, Peter and I, starting rather sooner than I might have planned, it seems. I will have midwives at the birth, for the Talent of midwives to seek bao in the newly born was the single Talent that Lom left to man. It was merciful of Lom to do so, though we may not think so now.

I must put the pen and paper away and get some sleep. Tomorrow will be busy. We are expecting visitors from the north, Peter's old friend Yarrell, whom he has not seen in years, with his wife and child.

It is full dark, and Ganver is standing upon the far hill, a great, star-shaped form silhouetted against the moon, keeping watch on us. Sometimes the old Eesty does that, and I send my love toward. And my promise to do what is right, as Ganver did, at long last, what was right.

And this book I began upon the Wastes of Bleer is ended. I can put it away until the children are old enough to read from it. Perhaps they will not care enough about the way things were to bother. In which case Peter and I will read it to one another when we are old.

I pray we may live a thousand years, Peter and I.

I pray the midwives will find bao in all our children.