



Return to
the Land of the True Game

JINIAN FOOTSEER

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THE CHRONICLES OF MAVIN MANYSHAPED

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

loward 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 Grompozzle, 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 loft, 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.

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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 this wise.

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 lease her about it sometimes, calling her Eller the Yeller - Misquick, Grommy, and I set off down along I lie 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 take 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, mid 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-told 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 gobblemole, draggling in the earth. And he asks the gobblemole what he's druggling for, and the mole says, 'I'm

drugging 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 fitchhawk 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 calle'd, 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 lor 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 ropm 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 uncom-plaining 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 case ments 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 distrains.

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 Cal-ling, 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 mys-lerious, 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.

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 De mesne. 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 Games-men 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 Kolver 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, Valdron, 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 Kelder 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 you think to ask for some thing, always ask for the best. You may not get it, but you never will if you don't ask. And you'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 shooed 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 danger

ous 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,’ Joramel 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

Kelver 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 Nego tiator would be like traveling with the dams. In which j case I would get very little rest.

We were making ready to leave the following day I 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 Grompuzzle 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 Grompuzzle, 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 Grompuzzle 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 webwil-low 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

Men-dost 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 Kelper 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 Kelper 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 Kelper 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 Kolver 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 Kelter 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 Kolver, 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 wise-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 Wise-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 starting 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. Wise-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 chattering 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 common sensical 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 chit-tered 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 fitchhawk, 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 Tmder-my-hand had learned from a woman in Betand, many years ago, and told to me? The one about Little Star and the fitchhawk? I couldn't help it. I had to say, 'What are you doing, fitchhawk, grimbling and grambling that way?'

And the fitchhawk 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, fitchhawk, and I'll grimble 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 fitchhawk 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 fitchhawk?' 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 fitchhawk 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, fitchhawk. Daylight Bell in treetop can't be. Trickys lie brings trickys 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 fitchhawk, 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 Vor-bold's House in Xammer in a manner that made my life there somewhat a problem for the next several years.

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 flichthawk. 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 flichthawk’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 flichthawk 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 Porvious, 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 flichthawk 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 flichthawk 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 Grompozzle 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 Dedrina-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 Dedrina-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 flichhawk impaled by a blade. The manner of my arrival came to Dedrina-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 flichhawks 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, Dedrina-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 Dedrina preferred, so it made no difference. What Dedrina wore became the fashion, and what Dedrina said became the rule. Dedrina, 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 Dedrina 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 Dedrina-Lucir's eyes fixed on me, her face blind with fury. Not merely ill-temper or the spiteful-ness 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 Dedrina-Lucir were not related to Porvius Bloster. Oh yes, I was told. Dedrina 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 Dedrina'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, Dedrina-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 fitchhawk, 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 fitchhawk 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 Dadrina, 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. 'Dadrina-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. 'Dadrina-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 Dadrina'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 Dadrina 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 Kelder 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? If 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 Dadrina-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 Men-dost, 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. Dadrina'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 Shadow-sox brought Surefoot back, lathered and rolling-eyed, a badly frightened horse. Somewhere there was talk ing, 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 Cholare, sent by Daggerhawk Demesne to assist in the search for Dadrina-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 Dadrina-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 Dadrina-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 Dadrina-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, peevish enough already over the whole thing, 'stop this mugging 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.

'AH 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 gobblemole, 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 fitchhawk 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 flichhawk, 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.'

Dedrina-Lucir did not know much about this; it seems to be a covert kind of arrangement. Her thalan, Porvius Bloster, and her mother, Dedrina Dreadeye, are the ones through whom the orders came. Dedrina-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. ‘Dedrina 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 Dedrina-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 fritchhawk 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, fritchhawk?’ 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, fritchhawk.’

‘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 fitchhawk 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 Kolver 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 fitchhawk 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. Fitchhawk 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 fitchhawk’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 fitchhawk 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 hosedoor 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

Dedrina-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 flitchhawk 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 flichhawk, 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 cheeked 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 twig-gish, 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 Dadrina-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 paeon of adoration for my beauty. 'Love,' grunted the pig. 'I will prove my love!' His great boar's prick wagged 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 grols 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. Dedrina 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 Dedrina-Lucir, all with that same reptilian grace. Dedrina 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 foressst, 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 Basssilisssk?’ 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?’

Dedrina 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, Men-dost, 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 venomous 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 Dedrina-Lucir before me, beneath the table. The Dagger could not reach her, but neither could she see what had happened.

'Now, my mother's sisterssss,' 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 Beguile-ment, 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 Dredaeye 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, 'Fritchhawk; 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, fritchhawk. 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, fritchhawk, 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 Dreadeye 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 Dadrina’s mother in the north, Dadrina 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. AH 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.

‘AH 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 flichhawk 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. Himaggery 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 flichhawk!'

'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 begat 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. Grompozzle. 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 dragging 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 dragged bank, remembering what Bartelmy of the Ban had said. Truth in old tales. Rituals of truth.

'What are you dragging away there for, old gobblemole?' I cried, clutching the star-eye in my hand like some luck-piece.

'Dragging 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. 'Dragging 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 fitchhawk 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 gobbles 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 grodged 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.

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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 Kelter 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 Kelter, 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 Grompuzzle of 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 trows. 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 Kelver 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 Kelver, 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 Kolver, 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 Dredaye 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 Himagery 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 herbarium 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 Ghast 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 Kolver 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 Kolver 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 flitchhawk 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.