
The River Temple

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Science Fiction

A DF Books NERDs Release

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Friend, you have been kind to me though I am a stranger, a sick and wild-eyed traveler from a place with a name that means little in these parts. Though I have known you but an hour, I believe you are a good man, and strong, as I myself was once. If you can bear the sight of me awhile, sit and listen. May these words of mine be like seeds that fall on glad earth, for the journey of The Book cannot end here.

They say my mother lost many children before she bore my sisters, Arain and Mera. How wonderful they must have seemed to her, for one healthy babe is treasure enough, and two at once are a miracle. My sisters came together from the womb, as much alike as two shafts of golden wheat that have sprung from the same seed. From the day of their birth, their hair was white and shining, their eyes the cool violet of river mist at dusk, and their skin like flawless ivory. In the city of Handred it was said that they were an omen sent by Feder, and that their beauty was His mark of greatness.

My sisters were but eight years old and I a child of two when our parents were killed by raiders from Nupask. We buried our mother and father ourselves, and made a burnt offering of their hair, so that Feder would smile on Handred and grant our women many children.

We were of no high blood and might well have spent the remainder of our childhood as street urchins had it not been for the pious of the city. The pious looked kindly upon Arain and Mera because their beauty was the mark of God's favor, and they looked kindly upon me because I was my sisters' brother. We never lacked food or a warm hearth.

One spring evening a tall, pale woman came from the temple. She spoke at length with Arain and Mera. Later they told me that her name was Jana, and that she was the High Colonel of the Service. I had heard of the High Colonel. I knew of her importance. And, with a child's clean wisdom, I sensed that her visit would bring a great change to our lives.

Truly it did. For not long after that Arain and Mera went off to the Great School, and I saw them much less often. Only then did I begin to understand that they were different from me. I was ordinary. I belonged and was accepted among the children in the streets as my sisters had never been. And I knew that the High Colonel would never come for me.

Instead, it was old Mathias the potter who came for me. Seeing that I was too young to be alone so much of the time, he took me in as his apprentice. I owe Mathias a great debt. Without him I might never have known the joy of a well-chosen glaze on fine clay, the satisfaction of a beautiful form turned on a familiar wheel, the comfort of a workshop warmed by a kiln. But the time for repaying debts has long since passed, and my regrets lie inside me like jagged shards.

* * *

Friend, you have been kind to me though I am a stranger. Kirth is my name, and I was born in the north, in the city of Handred beside the mighty river Umbya. Ten miles down the river from that city stands a vast edifice, the Temple of Handred. Would to Feder that it had never been built, for it has caused great sorrow.

This shabby bundle of mine, this cursed artifact from the temple, is the reason for my journey. It is The Book of the lesser god Makna, who was known to the ancients as McKenna. I swore that I would place it in the hands of the High Colonel of Padox in a land not far south of here called Uth, if there be any still alive in that hapless place. But I have failed. I am a man who has seen the sins of gods and the foolishness of men, and I am broken, and I am afraid to die.

* * *

Though I was their brother, and though I adored them, Arain and Mera shared a closeness in which I had no part. They were almost one person. They could speak to each other with their eyes. They could finish the half-expressed thoughts of one another. They not only looked alike; their minds ran on the same paths, through countries that seemed trackless to the rest of us. Yet Arain and Mera belonged to me as they did to no one else, for the blood of their veins ran in mine. My heart beat high when I met them in the street at noon and exchanged warm greetings with them while others watched in admiration.

At night Arain and Mera would often steal away from the school and run through the dark streets to the door of Mathias' workshop. There the other apprentice, Taud, and I tended the fire through the night, and slept on pallets beside the old kiln.

Arain would bring sweet cakes smuggled away from the school's kitchens, and Mera would bring wine. We four would laugh and talk for hours, far into the night. I have not forgotten those times of good company and good cheer, and the warmth of firelight on the fair and youthful faces of Arain and Mera.

Taud and I learned much. My sisters sometimes brought books with them, and in this way we learned to read. The books stirred our curiosity and made us wonder about many things that seemed strange to us, mysterious and puzzling things about Handred and the temple and the gods. To speak of these matters intrigued but frightened me, for I had a vague feeling that we would be punished if anyone heard us. Perhaps it was the retribution of Makna that I feared. I would have done better to fear Radna.

My sisters were born in good health, and they delighted in everything physical. They loved good food, and the wondrous delirium of too much wine; they excelled at sports, at hunting, at games of combat and endurance. It seemed quite natural to me when I returned early from the clay pit one evening to find them stretched before the fire with Taud, who was several years older than I. Adolescent, driven by urges that perplexed me, I envied Taud. But it was not a brother's place to speak of such desires, so I contented myself by staying out of their way so as to make it easy for them.

One night toward the end of my boyhood, my sisters came to the workshop door with books and wine. For some time, I had begun these evenings by going out to fetch firewood. There I usually dawdled, chopping more wood than we needed, in order to give them extra time alone with Taud. But this night it was chilly, and I hadn't worn a coat, so I finished more quickly than usual. I surprised them when I opened the door.

My sisters stood facing each other before the fire, Mera half dressed and Arain clad only in her boots. Taud stood in the corner near his pallet, shirtless and flushed.

"I want him again," said Arain in a low and frightening voice. "It isn't fair. He has given the seed to you

twice.”

“Be still, Arain,” said Mera softly, glancing in my direction. “Kirth has just returned. The matter is unimportant.”

But Arain remained standing with her arms bent at her sides and her body strung as tightly as a bow. I could see that she was barely able to restrain herself from striking Mera.

“But I want ... I want...” cried Arain, in a voice so full of pain that it hardly seemed to belong to her.

“But you want a child, Arain? You and I are barren,” replied Mera quietly.

I do not think that Arain's rage was meant so much for Mera as it was for the thing of which Mera had spoken. Arain was blinded by some passion that I will never fully comprehend. She raised her arm to strike Mera. But Mera caught her by the wrist. They were perfectly matched.

“Yes! I want a child. How can you say it is of no importance? How can I live with the knowledge that no man, no matter how many times I take his seed, will ever give me a child?” Then Arain's fury left her, and tears spilled down her cheeks and she sank to her knees on the earthen floor.

She wept quietly, and Mera held her for a long time, stroking her fine, white hair, her own cheeks glistening with tears as well.

I was not old enough to understand much of what I had seen. I knew that live, healthy infants were a treasure and a blessing from the gods. But I did not understand Arain's grief. I knew nothing of a woman's craving for children. And because so many of our women were barren, neither did I know that barrenness was not natural, and that made it all the more frightening.

* * *

Friend, I will tell you of that strange and distant land where I became a man. My people lived beside the Umbya for more than a thousand years. We dwelt there even before the War of Four Cities in which Makna took our part by rocking the mountains and causing the river to change its course so that it flowed nearer his temple. Since then, the river above the temple has been wide and blue, and the flood plains lush and bountiful. But below the temple the river's name is Dred. At the confluence of the Dred and the Senek there once stood three great cities. They have long since fallen to ruins, our ancestors who lived there having fled up the Senek to Nupask. For since the War of Four Cities the Dred has been a river of poison, and its banks and flood plains a desert. Nothing lives there long.

* * *

A day came when I glanced up from my digging in the pit where we foraged for potter's clay, and found Mera standing over me. It was the first time I had ever seen either of my sisters without the other.

“Kirth, would you come with me for a little while? We must take a walk,” she said.

As I looked at her, fear robbed me of strength. The clay pit lay miles from Handred, and Mera had no hat on, nothing to protect her from the noonday sun. Her hair was wild and wind-blown; perhaps she had even run. Her face and hands were burned to fiery pink already and her pale eyes were shot through with blood.

I stood up, shaking. How foreign and hostile the world seemed to me at that moment.

“Where is Arain?” I asked.

Mera smiled briefly, as if it hurt. “Arain is going away. I thought you would want to say good-bye to her.”

“Away?”

“Jana came today. Arain is going to the temple.” Mera took my hand. “We shouldn't tarry, or we will miss her.”

We started up one of the wooden ladders that stood along the edges of the pit. She climbed up first, groping for each rung and slipping often. She had been out in the sun so long that its light had nearly blinded her.

“What happened to your hat?” I asked.

“I have mislaid it,” she said.

But I doubted the truth of that. I was certain that she had forgotten it. A deadly coldness spread around my heart, deep as the snow of winter. Mera felt the coldness, too; felt it so powerfully that it had distracted her from a lifelong habit—the hat, the simple tool of survival for one with colorless skin. Our sister Arain would be celebrated. The citizens of Handred would bow to her in the streets. But when she had passed by, they would speak behind their hands. For always with the Service of Feder came early death. Arain must not go to the temple. The sun itself shouted it from the silent, blue sky.

“Why is she going? And for how long?” I asked when we reached the top. Mera held onto my arm as we started down the road.

“It is an honor, Kirth. Arain thirsts for knowledge, for the secrets of the temple. And Jana has promised them to her.”

“But ... but it's wrong. You should not be apart.” I clung to this thought as a drowning creature to a broken branch.

“We are two people. We want different things,” said Mera, but her voice shook and she did not look in my direction.

“But she will die!” I cried.

“Be still, Kirth. Why do you say such things?” she whispered. But even as she admonished me, her grip on my arm tightened.

“I am afraid,” I replied.

“Yes. Perhaps I am, too,” said Mera.

* * *

My friend, though Handred was a strange place, we were in some ways like any other folk. In the winter when the cold wind blew, we gathered about our fires, like others of our kind. Around those fires, many tales were told.

It was said that the Temple of Handred was the handiwork of Makna. It was said that he constructed it in the dim beginnings of the world, before the Great Drought, as a monument to the One God Feder and also as a prison for his evil enemy Radna. No mortal could have built the temple. Its walls are made of great sheets of smooth stone from some unknown quarry. And

beneath its upper structures lies an earthwork of incomprehensible vastness.

Before we found The Book, I believed those tales as everyone did. But the temple was not in truth built as a prison. Many affairs of the world I do not understand, but I know what it means to serve a master. Sometimes I think that great Makna was in fact the servant of Radna, that he built the temple because Radna demanded it.

* * *

Mera was ill for many weeks after Arain went to the temple. The physicians let me see her only because she asked for me often. Old Mathias understood about the work I left undone.

Mera's face and the backs of her hands were cruelly burned and covered with blisters. For a long time we did not know if she would ever see again. A raging fever seized her, and she could not eat. Far worse was the sickness of her heart, though she did not speak of it. She did not ask for Arain until delirium at last overcame her. Then in her ravings she cried out our sister's name again and again. I was afraid that she would die. I was in anguish, for it seemed to me that both of my sisters were slipping away before my very eyes. And so, after a time, I gathered my courage and went to the Temple of Handred to find Arain.

It was a very long walk for a hot summer day, and even though the road ran along the green verge of the Umbya, I was tired and drenched when at last I stood before the dark wooden gates of the temple. I had never been so close to them before, and I did not know how to gain entrance. It was a frightening place, a dead place, eerie and foreign. Nothing grew nearby; even birds seemed to shun it. There were no trees, no grasses; only bare, hard soil and black rock, with dreary, windowless buildings rearing among them like ancient gray monsters.

I could find no knocker or bell chain, and my fists made only a small sound like moths on the thick wood of the gates. But I was young, and with little enough trouble I scaled the mud brick wall and let myself down into a broad courtyard. Directly opposite me stood a smooth, gray building with a flat roof and towering doors of green, pitted copper. There was writing incised on the doors, but I could not read it. I could make no sense of the characters, though they seemed familiar in some strange way. They had been there longer than I dared to guess. Perhaps Makna himself had graven them.

Once again I found no knocker, and this time I was at a loss about how to proceed. The courtyard was deserted. There was no one to be seen.

All at once a voice came from behind me. "What do you want, boy?"

Startled, I whirled around to find a gaunt, pale man. His hair was thin and ragged, and his dark eyes had a milky film on them, like the protective eyelid of a hawk. I nearly cried out in revulsion.

"I must see Arain," I replied when I had mastered myself.

"You must be her brother, eh?" said the stranger.

"How did you know?"

"Not hard, boy. She's told me some things about herself. Told me a lot about you, for example. Kirth, isn't it?" He grinned. A row of discolored teeth sat like headstones in his raw, swollen gums.

So hideous was he that I was suddenly overcome with unreasoning fear for Arain's safety.

"What have you done with her? I want to see her!" I cried.

“Just like her, aren't you,” he muttered, spitting reddish saliva into the dust. “Don't worry yourself. I'll fetch her for you.” And he strode up the stairs, pulled open the doors and disappeared through them, still muttering.

Never have the minutes passed so slowly as they did that day while I stood in the summer sun and waited for the doors of the Temple of Handred to open again. I cannot even say what it was that I feared. If I had been an animal instead of a man, I would doubtless have heeded my instincts and left that place at once, as the birds had done. As it was, I trembled and forced myself to stay.

At last the doors swung open and Arain stepped forth from the darkness. She was dressed in the long, black cassock of the Service, against which her face and hands and hair shone like the moon.

“Kirth, why have you come here?” she said at once.

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came to me. My relief at seeing her alive and well in that terrible place made an idiot of me, and I stood dumbly struggling to make a sound.

“What's wrong, Kirth? You are shivering,” said Arain, and swiftly she ran down the steps to enfold me in her arms, a familiar gesture, and one that had often given me great comfort. We sat together on the bottom step. With my cheek pressed against the rough, warm cloth of her cassock and my ears filled with the strong and unfaltering beat of her heart, courage came back to me.

“Who was that man?” I asked.

“Dear Kirth! Did he frighten you? That was only poor Geoff, the crazy man. He meant you no harm. But tell me why you've come.”

“Mera ... Mera has been asking for you.”

At first Arain did not reply. She only looked down at the ground, and I could not see her face. When she spoke, her words came slowly. “Mera knows that I cannot come. It ... it is wrong of her to cause us this grief.”

“But she is sick. She doesn't know that she has asked for you. She did not send me. I came because I wanted to.”

I felt her heartbeat quicken beneath the black cassock. How terrible my words must have been to her; Arain and Mera had always shared in one another's jubilation and pain. The very need for a messenger in a matter of such importance was cruel evidence of their sundering.

“She's ill from the sun. When she came to get me ... to say good-bye to you. She forgot her hat. She is blind, and sometimes she does not know me. I'm afraid,” I went on.

The small lines in Arain's face deepened as she listened. She took me by the shoulders and looked into my eyes with great urgency. “Kirth, you must do just as I say. It is forbidden for a novice to leave the temple grounds. They will stop me if they see me trying to go. But if I wait until the night, I can walk in the shadows, and no one will know. We must meet somewhere after dark.”

“But where? And what if they catch you?”

“Jana is not a kind woman. If I were some other novice, I would be sent into the earthworks without the surplice. But I am stronger than Jana, and many are interested in my welfare. I do not fear her.”

Even now those words of hers fill me with love and admiration. She knew well what she gambled for

Mera's sake. So did I. The bodies of those sent unprotected into the earthworks were sometimes tied to a pole and carried through Handred. Those wretches who had been made to face Radna without the surplice emerged stiff and twisted as if from spasms of intolerable terror, smeared with their own excrements. There was no more dreadful death.

“You must leave here quickly, and you must follow my instructions,” said Arain. “Go back toward Handred. When you see tall trees and grasses beside the river again, you must stop at once and bathe, and wash your clothing.”

“But why?”

“Promise that you will do it. Then hide in the willows beside the road and wait for me. I will come. I give you my word. Now run. Run as fast as you can.”

Fear of the temple and joy at having been released from its power made my legs strong and swift, made me happy to flee with the hot wind in my face. As soon as I reached a place where the banks of the Umbya were green and heavy with willows, I undressed and swam in the cold water, then rinsed my clothes and laid them on the flat rocks to dry, wondering at these strange instructions. Long after dark, when frogs and crickets had joined the song of the mighty river, Arain came from the temple.

I asked many questions of her that night while we walked along the road to Handred. I cared nothing for the stones beneath my feet, nor for the weary distance. For Arain's answers led me to questions profounder still.

I asked her why she had told me to wash in the river.

“The temple grounds are poisoned, like the Dred,” she answered. “It is thought that the poison can be washed off.”

“Have you also washed in the river tonight?” I asked.

“I wash often where Cold Creek comes down from the hills. Don't be worried, little brother.”

But I *was* worried. If the temple were as foul and poisonous a place as it seemed, I asked her, why had she joined the Service? What honor could be worth this terrible price?

“In the glow of the evening fire, we have spoken of certain puzzles. For the good of us all, I wish to find their solutions.” Her voice was hushed as we walked in the starlight.

“The puzzles of Makna, and of the temple?” I asked.

“Yes. Puzzles about the beginnings of things. About the present state of things. Mera and I believe that the world is not as Feder meant it. Something is wrong in our land.”

I was perplexed. “Why do you think something's wrong?”

“Perhaps you recall the story of how, long ago, when Mera and I were little children, we overheard a drunken traveler in a tavern. He was from a faraway land. He had never been in Handred before. He asked a question. Do you remember what it was?”

She smiled as she asked this. The starlight did something to her eyes, turned them from pale lavender into platinum, hardened them, cooled them, and I shivered again as I had often done that day. What would a stranger have thought of my sister? Would he have thought her beautiful, or would he have shivered, too?

“He asked what the people of Handred had done to offend the gods,” I replied, in the manner of one who recites lessons.

Arain looked down at the road as she continued. “Yes. He said that he had never seen a place where there was so much sickness. He had never heard of any other river that ran with poison like the Dred. He had never seen a town with so few children. And having spied Mera and me in the corner, he said that he had never seen so many monsters.”

“But you never told me that!” I cried, though a great emptiness of guilt lurked inside me. For I myself had thought the same thing only a moment before. I hid behind indignation. “How could he have said such a thing? You're beautiful! You were a gift from Feder!”

Arain laughed without mirth. “To you, perhaps, and to the other patrons of the tavern. They beat the poor man, and threw him into the street. Nevertheless, there was truth in his words.”

“But you and Mera are not monsters!”

“We are different from others. In that way we are indeed monsters. You are too much accustomed to our appearance, Kirth. And besides, the stranger was right. The women of Handred have brought forth creatures that can hardly be called human. Too many of them. Every traveler notices it.”

“But what does it matter?”

“I wonder. We want to know why it matters, if it does. We want to know what poisoned the river. We want to know what killed the three cities, what is buried beneath our temple, what it is that Makna commanded us to guard for eternity. We believe that the answer to one great question will answer all the others. We want to know what Radna is, Kirth. Only the secret lore of the Service of Feder can provide the answer. One of us had to go.”

It was not as simple as Mera had said. They were not two people who wanted different things. I was never to know how they had decided it, by drawing straws or reading leaves, or perhaps by some game of combat in which each of them fought for the other one's life. Who could tell the winner from the loser.

Then the great wheel of the world seemed broken from its center. The stars above my head danced in chaos though I beseeched them for order, and the dark foreboding swept over me again. My ears rang with the force of blood in my frantic heart, for now I knew as my sisters did that without some miracle, Arain would die in this quest. No human being possessed the strength to delve far into Radna's secrets without forfeiting life itself. Even the little children of Handred knew that.

Later, as we sat in the candlelight beside Mera's bed, I watched Arain hold her, silken hair mingling with silken hair, pale skin with skin, as if the two women were a single creature. And it came to me that if one of my sisters died, the other would soon follow. Imagining the hollowness of a world without them, I made a compact of my own. I swore that I would die with them if matters came to such a pass.

* * *

My friend, not even Great Feder foresaw The Drought, and the fall of the civilization of the ancients. Makna endeavored to preserve the temple guard, but those descendants of the ancients were brutes in a land of famine. And there are limits even to the power of the gods.

Makna wrote that Radna is the greatest power the world has ever known, respecting no barriers, whose merest whisper slays men and beasts and green things alike, whose touch is carried on the wind, in the rain, from which there is no escape.

* * *

After Arain sat with her that night, Mera soon recovered from her illness. In time, Mera sought and was awarded a commission as an officer of the army of Handred. Her old enemy the sun might have kept her from success in that profession. But I designed and fitted her with a protective device made of colored glass for her eyes. And between the two of us, we concocted an ointment made from white clay and the oil of sheep's wool. This she smeared on her face and hands to ward off the fierce light of the day. Such a skillful warrior was she, and such a frightening picture did she make on the field of battle, that she moved up the ranks with great speed until she was soon General of the Army of Handred. So well did the soldiers love her and so well did they fight for her that for a time the Nupaskans were forced back to their own lands. Mera never forgot that Nupaskans had orphaned her. Soon they remembered it, too.

Arain pursued her goals more quietly, but with equal success. She was right about Jana. Jana was never able to punish her much for her various rebellions, and Arain made many friends among the other members of The Service. When Jana died from the long, slow sickness that always took High Colonels in the end, the election of her successor was brief and decisive. Arain became the High Colonel of the Service of Feder six years after she entered the temple.

Not long after Arain became High Colonel, I left the workshop of Mathias and took a place of my own. He had instilled in me such a love of the craft, and had taught me so well the magic of clay and fire that I soon became the most prosperous potter in Handred. The wealthy, the pious, the high of name sought me out to make beautiful pieces for them. Soon there were clays and glazes that bore my name, and whose secrets only I knew. Soon I had apprentices of my own.

Whenever we could spare a few hours, my sisters and I would gather around some hearth as we had always done, to enjoy good wine and food and the easy conversation of kin who have become old friends. Often, we met in a firelit room at Mera's great lodge, or in my workshop much as we had of old.

But now it was only Mera who seduced the apprentices. Arain came with me to fetch firewood on these occasions. Once I asked her why, for this and several other changes in her had begun to make me uneasy.

As I piled split wood into her arms she replied, "I do not desire it anymore."

"I wonder if you are well," I said. Her skin had always been very white, but now there was no ruddiness in her cheeks, and her eyes had become milky like those of an old dog. She tired easily and often lay down and fell asleep while Mera and I were still talking and laughing.

"I am well enough," she said.

"Do you still bathe often in water from Cold Creek?" I asked.

She only smiled and said, "Do not be worried, little brother."

One afternoon when Arain and I arrived at Mera's lodge laden with cheese and sweet wine and bread, we found her seated alone in the kitchen beside a dying fire. The usual retinue of servants and favorite officers was nowhere to be seen. Mera was slumped in a hard chair with her boots off and her shirt tail out, an empty wine bottle in one hand and a goblet on the floor beside her.

She did not greet us as we put down our packages. It was late autumn, and the room was so cold that our breath hung in white plumes on the air. She seemed not to notice. I set about stoking the fire at once.

The white ointment on Mera's face told an eloquent story. It bore signs of a dusty road, heavy sweat, and

tears. Yet we had heard of no raids or battles that day, and she had no wounds that we could see.

“You have brought more wine,” she said. “Shall we open a bottle?” She sounded composed. It would have been difficult for strangers to tell that she was already very drunk.

Arain opened one of our bottles. In a moment, the fire was roaring and all three of us had full goblets.

Then Arain asked, “What has happened, Mera?”

Mera laughed loudly. The harsh, bitter tone of her voice made me think of carrion birds, and I was afraid. “A month ago, I sent my friend Hald with a small patrol down the River Dred. It was selfish of me. I should not have done it. But he said that he wanted to go.” She laughed again, the kind of laugh that verges on tears, and said, “They always want to go.”

She took a long draught of her wine. “There was a rumor that the Nupaskans had discovered a way to protect themselves from the poison. I suspected that a raiding band was camped on the Dred below the temple, and that they planned to attack it by surprise.”

Mera leaned forward, clutching the arms of her chair. “Hald came back with his report today. I sat with him as he died three hours ago. He rode to the three cities and back searching for Nupaskans that existed only in my mind.”

Arain and I did not speak at first. Not even the old men by the fires told of anyone who had gone to the three cities and come back alive.

“I am sorry,” said Arain.

“But surely he knew what would happen,” I said. “Why did he go so much further than he had to?”

Mera smiled bitterly. “He thought he had found a way to protect himself and his men. A secret invention of his own. A kind of suit. Like the surplice, Arain. He should have taken my advice and gone to talk to you.”

But Arain shook her head. “You are too harsh with yourself. If he wanted to try his luck, why should anyone stop him? Besides, we need to know of the cities. Tell me. Did he find out anything?” Arain's eyes gleamed hungrily in the red light of the flames, and my fear grew like the fire. A small voice inside me asked who this unfeeling woman could be. Surely not the one who had once risked death so that she could come to Mera's sickbed.

Mera looked at her in silence more deep and piercing than any words. Then she said slowly, “He found nothing.”

Arain turned away, and without looking up said, “Try to forgive me my greed. I desire this knowledge for the good of us all. It overpowers me. The answer is so near.”

Mera did not reply, and Arain went on like a river flooded with rain. “Hald was strong, and he had a strong mind. No one could have stopped him. What could we have told him? Only that the surplice of Makna does not work. What would that have mattered to him if he had one of his own design?”

If Mera had not been so drunk, I am certain that she would not have said what she did then. “We could have told him about The Book of Makna, Arain. He didn't have to die.”

At that moment, without wishing it, I became the keeper of fearful secrets. If only I could have smoothed them from my mind as I would have smoothed blemishes from a newly turned pot. But a man's mind is

not enough like clay.

It was said that, garbed in the sacred surplice of Makna, one could brave the poison of Radna with impunity. I knew that Arain went into the earthworks, sometimes to fulfill the sacred and mysterious duties of the High Colonel, sometimes to fulfill her passion for knowledge. In those dank corridors, only the surplice of Makna stood between her and death. But Radna was strong, and the surplice was ancient. Now my greatest fears were confirmed. The surplice of Makna did not work. Arain was dying. But what of the "Book" of which Mera had spoken? If it could have saved Hald, might it not save Arain as well?

"The Book of Makna? What is that?" My words cut deep into the silence of the room.

Arain stood before the fire, lowering her head and closing her eyes as if to shut out some part of the world. "We know too little of The Book to speak of it yet."

But Mera, churlish with drink, snarled, "You are wrong, my sister. *You are wrong.*"

"Please, Mera. We are not sure yet."

Mera rose from her chair and stood swaying beside it. "I am not a god, Arain. I am a woman, with an army of mortals who bleed and die. Our enemies outnumber us five to one. Will you wait until the Nupaskans raze the temple, thinking to wrest some nonexistent power from us? Will you wait until Radna is loosed on the land and all the people of the rivers lie rotting?"

"Why should the Nupaskans fear stories from an old book, words unraveled by the high priestess of their enemy's temple? It is not as easy as you think, Mera. Wine has made you stupid," said Arain sharply.

To this exchange of anger I listened in confusion. What terrible truth did The Book of Makna contain? I could not yet guess. Whatever the secret was, my sisters stood unmoving on opposite sides of it, split in their thinking as I had never seen them before.

In her drunken rage, Mera baited Arain once more. "It's a shame, isn't it, colonel, after all you've gambled. A shame to find out that Makna was nothing but a vassal and the ancients a race of fools!"

No arrow could have pierced Arain more deeply than those bitter words of Mera's. I saw her fists tighten and the veins rise in her neck, saw the moment in which passion overcame her. Mera must have seen it as well, but she was sodden with wine and could not defend herself. Arain struck her full on the jaw, coming from below so that Mera's head was snapped back and she fell against the stone wall, and lay unmoving on the floor.

Arain steadied herself on the table. Her hands shook. Her face was as white as limestone. Her breath came quickly and raggedly and she coughed, staggering with the pain of it. Then, unspeaking, she stumbled from the room. I heard the hooves of a horse galloping away toward the temple.

When she awoke the next morning, Mera could not remember clearly what had happened. I understood Arain's wrath, even believed that it was justified. Yet when I looked at Mera, her jaw purplish, her cheek and tongue swollen, I was angry at Arain. She had not wept. She had not said that she was sorry.

Nevertheless, when I had recounted the night's events to Mera, she said that I must put anger aside, that if ever there had been a time for union among the three of us, it was now. For what she had said about the Nupaskans was true. They had raised an army far larger than ours, and their goal was to destroy the Temple of Handred.

"Because I love Arain, I will make this compromise," said Mera. "I will keep the secret of The Book a little longer, from all but you, Kirth."

Then, in words thick and slurred from her injury, she revealed to me the tale of The Book of Makna.

Arain had found it in one of the small outbuildings of the temple, among the haunted hulks of primeval machines. The door to this building was sealed by Makna when the course of the Umbya changed; but for Arain's daring, it might have remained so forever.

It is no ordinary book of paper, else because of its great age it would long ago have fallen to dust. It is made of some wondrous metal which does not rust, finely wrought into thin sheets and graven with some unknowable stylus. Strange are those words, written in the language of the ancients. Stranger yet is the story they tell, tangled and filled with names that have no meaning to us.

My sisters had not yet finished deciphering The Book. The job of translation was complex, and some of the pages were damaged while others were missing altogether. But some things were clear already. Mera was right. If Hald had known of The Book and its message, he might easily have been dissuaded from going down the Dred.

Before I left her that morning, Mera took my hand and said, "These are black thoughts, Kirth, but I cannot ignore them as Arain does. If Handred cannot stop the Nupaskans, Radna will be released into the light of day; Arain and I will be among the first to die, either by the hand of the Nupaskans or by the hand of Radna. If you have ever loved us, promise me one thing."

"What is that?" I asked.

"That you will not let the secret of The Book die with us."

I thought of that oath I had sworn long ago when first I learned of the perilous path my sisters had chosen. I had sworn that if they died I would follow them. I had sworn it for good reasons, selfish though they might have been, and I could not yet bring myself to break it. So I refused to promise. It was foolish and cruel of me.

* * *

My friend, great Makna has said that Radna was created by the ancients in the time of plenty before the Great Drought. They knew well the danger of the thing they created; they knew that it could never be destroyed. Feder commanded that the temples be built. He commanded that Radna be divided into pieces and trapped in bits of glass, poured into sacred vessels and buried deep in solid stone. But when the Drought came, Feder went away, leaving only his minion Makna. Makna helped us to remember that we must guard the temple for eternity so that Radna could never harm us.

In the tongue of the immortals Makna wrote: "God help our children if the facilities at Hanford and Paradox Basin ever begin to deteriorate, because on any human scale this material will be lethal forever. They might not even remember what it is by that time."

* * *

In the months that followed, I saw Arain and Mera seldom. Arain was busy translating The Book. She worked on it like one possessed, setting it aside only when matters of the temple demanded her attention, or when she was too sick for anything but sleep. Twice in this time Mera and I came to her in her dismal quarters at the temple.

We did not stay long, for Arain was loath to put away her work. Once, though we did not expect it, she rose and walked with us through the great copper doors and into the temple courtyard. There in the

sunlight, I saw how Arain had changed. It was no longer difficult to tell my sisters apart. Arain's beautiful face was wasted and lined, and her eyes were almost opaque. She walked like an old woman, tired of life. In the courtyard she stood up straight, and asked if I would honor her by designing her burial urn. Then Mera turned away and bowed her head to keep us from seeing her tears.

Mera, too, was busy in those last months. There were raids in the open country along the old course of the Umbya. We heard that a new and warlike leader had arisen among the Nupaskans, one who renewed the old song of vengeance, who cried out that Handred must be made to suffer for having laid waste the Nupaskans' rightful property—the lands of the Dred. There were many skirmishes, and the armies of Handred lost ground. Then, at the end of the summer, Mera's spies brought word that the Nupaskans had amassed their forces on the other side of the Umbya in preparation for an attack on the temple.

I do not know what passed between my sisters at this news. Perhaps Mera tried to tell the Nupaskans of The Book; this I knew was her plan and she intended to try it even if she had to deny Arain's wishes. Perhaps Arain was right in the end, for the Nupaskans did attack.

In the next days, messengers came and went between the town and the army, while the citizens of Handred did what they could to prepare for a siege, harvesting everything from the fields, reinforcing the high wall that surrounded the city, manufacturing arrows and spears and preparing vats of hot oil to cast down on our enemies.

At first the messengers were exultant; Mera drove the Nupaskans back, and we rejoiced. Then on the second day a messenger came who was breathless and bloody. There had been a setback. I sat on the wall that night, looking down to the southeast where the rising moon hung deep red and the torches of the legions flickered. I thought of my sisters, and I wished that I were not among those who had been left behind to protect the city.

The third day, a messenger came whose eyes were full of terror. "The Nupaskans are in the temple!" he cried. Then my heart twisted within me like a deer that bolts for its life, and I ran to the top of the wall, expecting to see the roiling dust of the approaching Nupaskan army on the road. Instead, I saw that the dust of the battle was already settling. Far in the distance rode a single horseman, galloping toward the town. The silence of doom had descended on the land.

In an hour's time the gates were thrown open and the rider entered Handred.

The horse was half-mad, its mouth flecked with foam and blood. Though the rider had no wounds, he was nearly dead, bound to his steed with a length of rope, perhaps by his own hand. The horse's neck was caked with the man's blood-filled vomit. He writhed and bellowed as we lifted him from the saddle. Tied to his breast was a bundle inscribed with my name.

It was The Book. There was a message from Mera scribbled on a piece of blood-smearred cloth.

"Our brother, a friend writes this. Arain is dead. I will be with her soon. The earthworks are opened. In the name of Feder, take The Book to Padox. Warn them of Radna. Will you promise me now?"

How I regret not having given my promise to Mera sooner. What a comfort it might have been to her in those last hours. Empty words are these now. The wrong can never be undone, though I did as she asked, though I ran away, leaving for carrion my sisters and the land where I was born. It comes to nothing, for now I go to join them. I did not run fast enough.

Rolled up with the message were two locks of shining white hair, as much alike as rays of sunlight. I wept. So bitter was I that I cursed Feder then. I made no offering of my sisters' hair, for there would be

no more children in Handred.

* * *

I will describe to you the day of doom, my friend. I see it in my mind as if I stood on the banks of the Umbya now. No birds fly there, not even vultures, though the smell of death is heavy. The animals that lived among the grasses are still. Trees stand beside the river, along the roads, in the courtyards where we laughed with the music of fountains. But all the leaves are dull, dried upon the limb. They rattle in the wind. In my workshop stand pots that will never know the kiln; the clay in the bins has hardened. Men are dead beside their plows, women beside their children. My sisters lie in the sun, unburied. Never again will we sit in joy before the fire. In a great circle, a month's journey from side to side, nothing is left alive. Life has been devoured by the dark creature Radna, bane of the gods, plague of the ancients. But it matters little now.

I have seen your land, my friend. Your people stand tall and strong. Children play before every door, and old men sit in the sun. But I say to you now, look at me, and see what you might become. Behold a shrunken creature, pallid and mangy, stinking with sores, weak to death and afraid to face the gods. Then consider the Temple of Pardox.

Take The Book, friend. I have no better way to repay your kindness. Keep it. Do not scatter it. And remember my tale. Perhaps some morning you will ask about the road to Pardox.

It is so cold today.