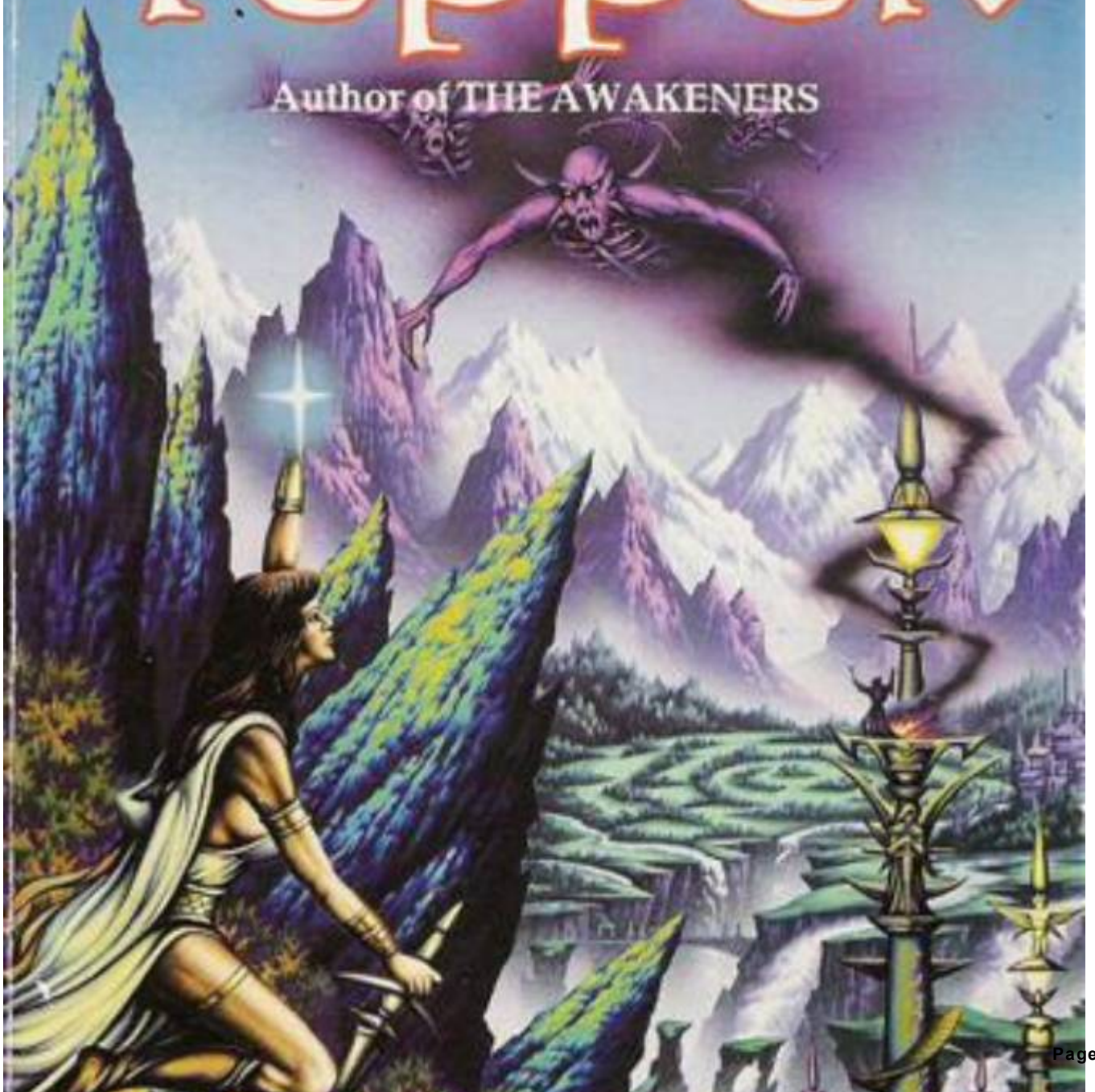




The triumphant conclusion to the Jinian trilogy

# JINIAN STAR-EYE SHERI S. TEPPER

Author of THE AWAKENERS



One

## The Great Maze

So far as one could see from the outside, the Great Maze was merely a jungle of paths and hedges, trees and bushes, a mighty entanglement lying to the south of the Pervasion of the Dervishes, stretching from there away to the distant sea. Standing on the hill above the Maze, I had looked down into it to see winding trails, clearings, pathways, even quite large open spaces with impenetrable edges of luxuriant green, and in some of these spaces the easily recognized outline of well-known plants: rainhat bush, thirilps, giant wheat. Only natural things.

I suppose if you took the top of my skull off and looked at the quivering stuff inside, you would see only flesh, only natural things. Looking at that quaking jelly, one wouldn't see ideas or fears; no dreams would leap from the pinky-gray convolutions to dance on the brain top.

So, when Peter and I stood beside the Great Maze of Lorn - which is the name the Shadowpeople give to this world - we saw no memories rising from the clearings or insinuating their way through the underbrush. And yet, according to Mind Healer Talley, who had told the Dervishes long before, the Maze holds the memories of our world.

Each time I thought of this, my mind chased about for a moment and then stopped working. It was not easy to believe, a whole world, remembering. A world actually thinking, planning. A world dreaming, perhaps. A world regretting. A world dying.

No. Not merely dying. Killing itself.

Outside the Maze were boiling fumaroles casting acid palls onto ageless forests; chasms opening to swallow mighty rivers; mountains bursting into flame and ash. Outside the Maze was a world sick unto death and with no desire for healing. And we were on it, with nowhere else to go.

Oh, yes, part of our fear and pain was for ourselves. Why deny it? And part for those we loved. I fretted, thinking of Murzy and the rest of my seven away south. Peter groaned thinking of Mavin, his mother, and Himaggery the Wizard, his father, and other kin dear to him. And both of us together thought of Queynt and Chance, fondly and with foreboding. At one point I even found myself regretting Queen Vorbold, back in Xammer, for all her unsympathetic pride. But if we went to them, there was nothing we could do to help any of them. If anything could be done, it would be done here, now.

The reason for Lom's death would be found among those memories.

The reason had to be there, somewhere in the past.

Perhaps if the reason were known, something could be done to reverse this final agony.

There seemed to be no one else to make the attempt.

We might be able to do something. If we were very lucky, it might even be the right thing.

Peter said all this to me, and then I repeated it to him with all the tone and frenzy of conviction. So we encouraged ourselves. Both of us knew that each of us was sick with anxiety and apprehension, and each of us was very busy concealing it from the other. 'Oh, yes,' we seemed to say, 'this is perfectly possible.

Of course we will get on with it at once,' while our stomachs hurt and a smelly sweat oozed on skins already damp. Even I could smell us. A fustigar could have followed us for leagues. We stank of fear, and everything we saw and heard made it clear how late it was to attempt anything at all. If we failed, we died with the world. And even if we succeeded, there was no guarantee we would survive the effort.

I had been inside the Maze once before, only just inside a shallow edge. Cernaby of the Soul had showed me one way in and one way out, and now that Peter and I were going in together, it seemed wise to start by retracing those earlier steps. To get the flavor, so to speak. Or rather, to let Peter get the flavor, since I was afraid I already had it. A flavor of confusion, mostly. Of connections just out of reach. At any rate, after an affectionate and - if we're honest about it -bravely-hiding-our-true-feelings-for-fear-of frightening-ourselves embrace, we went in hand in hand by the same path I had tried before, an easy path making a short loop into the Maze and out again, the entrance and exit only a few paces apart along the road.

We took one step . . .

... To find ourselves upon a height, sharp with wind. Below lay a cliff-edged bowl carpeted in spring green, sun glinting on the western rim of stone, the depths still in shadow. From above came an enormous screaming, mightier than any fleshy voice, metal on air, burning gasses, hot shrieking wind.

Down from above a silver spearhead, falling butt end first, buoyed on its bellowing, gas-farting rear, down into the green. I smelled the burning; trees burst into flame; the grass crisped into ash; smoke billowed into the morning. Then quiet. A feeling of dread; dread and excitement, curiosity and pain. Mixed.

A door opened high on the silver spearhead, and a strange creature came out. It was too thick through to be normal. Too thin from side to side and too thick from back to front. Not star-shaped, as would have been normal. Limbs oddly jointed. Naked-faced. Not attractive. Ugly, rather. It called with a weak little voice into the shadowed bowl. Um, um, blah, um. Uttering nonsense. Um, um, blah. I knew what it was saying but could not understand a word. A nasty little human creature, an invader, and I could not understand a word.

I shook myself, frightened, grasping Peter's arm and hanging on as though I were drowning. I had not seen that creature through my own eyes but through the eyes of- the world. Through Lom's eyes. I gasped, blinked, tried to find myself in all this.

'Jinian . . . Jinian?' He was shaking me gently, looking at me with that tender concern he showed sometimes, the kind that made my heart turn over and stop beating.

'It's all right,' I breathed. 'It's all right. Let's get out of here.' I tugged him to our left along the rim of the cliff, toward the grove of midnight trees. He followed me reluctantly, eyes turned back to watch that silvery vehicle in its patch of burned grass. Just before we reached the tree, the silver vessel disappeared from the green bowl below and we heard the howling begin high above us. As we stepped into the shadow, I looked up. It was coming down again. Below us in the valley the green meadow was untouched; the blackened scar had vanished.

'What?' Peter started to say.

'Shh,' I said. 'Just come on a few more steps, then we'll figure it out.' I was shaken. When I had been here before, I had merely observed, not been battered about by these waves of feeling.

We stepped out from the shadow of the tree onto the Wastes of Bleer. The place was unmistakable; a high plateau, barren and drear, with the contorted shapes of the Wind's Bones all around. Thorn bush and devil's spear and great Wind's Bones. There was no feeling here, only a waiting numbness.

'Quick,' I said to Peter, moving toward the crevasse I remembered from the time before. 'Before it comes down on our heads.' Above us, out of a clear sky, a moon was falling at us, burning bright, soundlessly, hideously plunging out of the east. He looked up, gasped, almost fell as I pulled him down into the hole.

Into the great, gray temple I remembered from last time. Outside the walls, the menacing roar of many voices. Above us, a great vacancy, an enormous height. Smoke rising. Somewhere doors opening and closing, the sound far away and vague, as though heard inattentively. Shadowy forms moving around us, back and forth across the immense nave. Two pedestals were toppled against the wall, the lamp that had evidently rested on one of them lay at my feet. Beside the other fallen pedestal was a great book, its leaves crumpled.

Before I could stop him, Peter broke from my side and ran to a carved stone monument that loomed beneath one of the high windows. He was up in it in a moment, neck craned to peer through the opening. I remember being surprised that he Shifted a little as he went, making spidery arms and legs for himself. Somehow I had felt our Talents would not work in the Maze. There was no time to consider it. I cried out, 'Peter, don't. ...' afraid he would through into some other place. He heard the tone of panic in my voice, if not the words, came scurrying back. My heart was pounding; every muscle was tight. I could barely breathe among the feelings of apprehension and horror. We fled around the low curbing of an empty pool toward the stairs and the altar. From high above came the dreadful breaking sound that I remembered half hearing the time before, a sound like a great tree breaking, tearing apart in an agony of ripped fibers. We stepped behind the altar and out onto the path in the Maze. It opened to our right onto the same road we had left.

'Wah.' Peter gasped, breathless. 'Gah. Oh. That wasn't what I expected.'

I tried to take a deep breath, choking myself in the effort. Horror. Sheer horror. After a time the feeling diminished. I managed to ask, 'What did you see out the window?'

'Eesties. I mean, I guess they were Eesties. I've never seen them, but Mavin has. And Queynt saw them, of course. I don't know what else they could have been. Star-shaped. Hundreds, maybe thousands of them, all roaring at the building we were in. Why did you yell at me like that?'

'I was afraid you'd slip through. Cernaby said each "place" has many ways out. That's what makes it a maze. If you'd gone somewhere else, I'm not sure I could have found you.'

'Is it all like that?'

'I think so. Places. No, not exactly places. More like events. Did you notice that first one we were in? ...'

'It was the Base. The place the Magicians called the Base. I've seen that ship before. I've been there.'

'Have you really!' Somehow this was astonishing to me. Even though I knew Peter had had a life before we met - or met again - evidence of it always had the power to surprise me, to shame me, as though I felt he could not have survived without me. 'Then you know what was happening?'

‘It was the human ship arriving. The ship with all the Magicians on it. Barish was on that ship, and Didir, and Queynt himself. It landed a thousand years ago. Didn’t you see Barish come out the door on the side of it? I wanted to get closer and see what Barish was like before - when he was just Barish.’

Barish was no longer just Barish. I knew Peter blamed himself sometimes for putting old Windlow’s mind into Barish’s body, but then at the time we all thought Barish had no mind of his own. Since then, the two of them had lived an uneasy joint tenancy, two sets of memories, two sets of opinions on everything, all in one head, and it would have been interesting to see what Barish was like, just as himself. Nonetheless, we hadn’t time to think of it now.

‘All I could see was something that didn’t look natural,’ I confessed. ‘Even though I knew it was human, I thought it was very strange. I couldn’t understand it.’

‘That’s odd.’ He thought about this, peering at me intently, then nodding. ‘Well, no, not really odd. If these are the memories of the world, as your Dervish friend told you, then you’re probably picking up how the world feels about it. Felt about it. To this world, men would have been strange. Very strange. Come from some far place, not of “itself,” so to speak.’

This made sense. At least it was no stranger than the rest of it, and it would explain the horrifying feelings I had been having.

‘The second place we got into was the Wastes of Bleer,’ mused Peter. ‘At the time the moon fell. You said Storm Grower brought the moon down, just to prove she could. Lorn must have found that traumatic, too.’ He thought for a time longer. ‘And I have no idea what the third place was.’

‘I don’t, either,’ I confessed. ‘But I do know how it’s connected to the other two things.’ It had taken me a while to figure it out, but I had come up with an answer. ‘Just as we came out, there was this sound from above, the sound of something breaking. Like a great beam of wood.’

‘I heard it.’

‘Well, after it broke, I think something fell. Something huge.’

‘So each event was about something falling?’ He sounded doubtful.

‘I think so. Each event was part of a category labeled “Something falling.” Or, more specifically, not merely “something,” but “something very big.” I’m not really sure about that last one, because we didn’t stay to see.’

‘Could we step back in and find out?’

‘I’m afraid to.’

‘Can it hurt us?’

‘Quite frankly, Peter, I haven’t any idea. Reason says no. My skin says yes. I barely made it out of there this time.’

‘You stay here,’ he said, patting me fondly on my head as he might have petted a tame fustigar. He stepped back the way we had come, leaving me with my mouth open. I swallowed, choked, started to go screaming after him, then thought better of it. Peter often did things I was afraid to do. Then my fear



for him overcame my fear for myself, and I went roaring after him, usually quite unnecessarily. Just now there was something I had wanted to do that would take a few moments alone. There might be no better time later.

Peter had Shifted inside the maze. If his Talent worked there, then mine would probably work close by. Not my Talent of understanding languages, but my Wise-ardly one. There was a spell I'd been saving, a multiple one Murzy had taught me early on, telling me not to use it save in times of great need. It was a combination spell used to find appropriate destinations. Not particular ones, you understand, but appropriate ones. Murzy called it a blood, dust, and total trust spell. Nothing needed but a drop of my own blood on a roadway and total faith that what I would ask lay in the will and purpose of the art. The problem with it would be, she had said, its tendency to pull other creatures into it with me. Just as the road would be connected to many other roads, so the spell would connect me to many other things. Considering the puzzle the Maze presented, I thought it worth the risk. Our chances of finding what we needed on our own seemed very remote. So, I plopped myself down on the green edge of the path and made myself concentrate. It was hard. Something about the place made concentration difficult, words hard to remember.

'Day or night, dark or light,' I prayed, gulping a little, shutting everything out except those words, 'lead me to the place I need to be. Bright the Sun Burning, Night Will Come Turning, Road's Dust to Find It, Heart's Blood to Bind It.' I used the edge of my star-eye to cut a finger, dropped the blood on a thirsty patch of bare road, then sat very quietly, letting the words flow through me until all my parts understood them.

It always seems to take a long time. Actually, it doesn't. Within moments, I was worrying about Peter again. There was only time for a modest fret before he emerged from the Maze, somewhat untidily. 'I Shifted,' he announced. 'To stay out of the way. Something enormous fell. It made a noise like some huge being screaming in agony, a great metallic clamor. It killed several whats-its, then after a little while it was gone and everything was just the way it had been originally. It goes on over and over, like some one-act play at a festival. Performances every few minutes.'

'Did it hurt you?' I wrapped my punctured finger in a leaf and tucked the star-eye back in my shirt.

'Oh. No. No, I couldn't even feel it.'

'Well, if you can hear it and smell it, how come you can't feel it?'

'Probably because the world . . .'

'Lorn.'

'Probably because Lom hears it and smells it but doesn't feel it. I mean, if they're memories, then they act like memories, don't you think? If I set myself to remember - oh, that time I tried to rescue you and Silkhands from the Ghoul. Remember that? -I remember the stink, and the heat of the flames, and I can still hear my own voice yelling stupid things, but I don't burn. I don't singe. I wince at the memory, but I don't end up half-asphyxiated from smoke. I remember the fire having happened, but I don't revoke it, so to speak. The stink, though, that always comes back.'

This, too, made sense. Smell, sight, and hearing happen inside one's head, but assault comes from the outside world. So the memory of smell could be the smell itself, but the memory of pain . . . Well, creatures probably survive better if they can't remember pain too well.

He nodded. 'Of course some memories are very hurtful. It would probably be prudent for us to be careful.'

Now he was talking about prudence. Peter! I didn't believe it. Agreed with it, yes; believed it, no. Peter had never been prudent in his entire life. He nodded his head a couple of times, as though he were setting that firmly in mind, then asked, 'Now. Where do we go, and what do we do?'

During the night we'd just spent together, tight-wrapped in each other's arms and chaste as two baby bunwits, both trying not to say the things that would frighten us to death or make us cry, sometimes he'd dozed off with his lips next to my throat, his breath tickling me like an owl's feather. It had been necessary then, since I couldn't sleep, to think of something unemotional, so I'd spent the time thinking about the Maze. Now I trotted out my conclusions, hoping they were correct. 'If these three events are linked, so to speak, by a single line of thought or category or index heading, then we'll have to suppose other things are linked in the same way. So. We try to find some line of thought that might logically take us where we want to go.'

'Which is?'

'Wherever Lom is thinking about dying.'

He looked depressed. There was nothing I could say to make the task seem either easier or more pleasant. I knew exactly how he felt. It's how I felt in the Forest of Chimmerdong when something vague and impossible needed doing and I seemed to be the only one around to do it. 'I know,' I commiserated. 'It's terrible sounding.'

'It's not that. You've said these events are memories. If Lom is actively thinking about dying, it won't be in memories, will it? Won't it be somewhere else? Some other part of its mind?'

I didn't know. Probably no one did. And if it were so, it was not helpful. 'They have to be linked together somewhere, Peter.'

He sighed a put-upon sigh, not offering any better suggestion. 'All right. So they must be linked. Now, what shall we look for?'

'That last place? The temple? There were creatures in it. When the thing fell in, whatever it was, you say something got killed. If I'm right, that means there's a link out of that place to the idea of things dying. We find that link if we can, and we follow it. Event by event.'

'And if nothing got killed?'

'Then we look around until we find an event where somebody did get killed.'

'Makes me feel like a Ghoul,' he said.

So did I, to tell the truth, and only the knowledge that whatever we would see had already happened and could not be changed made me feel any better about it. We took a deep breath, held hands once more, and stepped back into the temple.

Gray and huge and the roar of angry voices. This time I paid more attention. I looked straight up, trying to see what was above us, but there was only a receding immensity of stone and smoke. There was no roof. We were below a tower. Huge doors on all sides of the room opened to admit hurrying figures,



misty, dim, not fully remembered, I guessed. They might have been Eesties. I got the impression of fluttering robes or ribbons around a low curbing at the center of the place. Peter pressed me tightly against the stones, becoming a kind of wall between me and whatever was coming. The roar was louder, a furious chanting. Then a cracking noise. High above us. Huge. Like a tree coming down in a forest. That creaking again, as when something tries to remain whole but is destroyed fiber by fiber. And then it let go.

I heard it coming. An agonized scream of metal. A tumbling clangor, banging down the tower with thunderous crashes. It was only a few instants before it hit. Shattering. Shards of metal flying in all directions. One buried itself in the wall beside me. Voices crying out, weeping. The furious roaring outside suddenly stilled, as though in horror at what had happened. Then one voice raised, then another, rebelliously cheering.

Struggling gray forms on the floor, one or two. I went toward them, trying to feel where one might go out. No door. No exit. Even close beside the writhing figures, I couldn't see them clearly, and the revelation almost stopped me in my tracks. The sound was as clear as my own voice, but these figures were misty, which meant that Lom didn't remember them very well. It remembered the sound and those outside, but not these. Just something, a something dying. There was a rush of unfocused anguish, a kind of thinning in the atmosphere of the place. I grabbed Peter's hand and moved toward it, trying to find it. It was stronger beside the monument he had climbed upon earlier, shattered now. The anguish I felt was anguish at the destruction of this! Not at the death of the creature, but at this shattering. . .

I moved in the direction of the feeling, pulling Peter along by one hand, not certain where.

And came out.

We were standing in a desert. Nothing was happening. A chilly wind blew a few grains of sand restlessly across the parched soil. Bristly growths spiked here and there on the limitless flat around a jagged line of broken statues.

'Don't move,' I said, frustrated. 'I think we came in the wrong direction.' I tried to breathe, gasping, as though I had been crying. What was it?

'What were you after?'

'There was this feeling of anguish. Grief.' I stopped, unable to go on. The feeling was still there, all around me, a sadness so palpable it stopped my breath. I gritted my teeth, did a small concentration spell, and was able to breathe once more. I went on, 'At first I thought it was grief over something dying, but Lom didn't even remember the things that were dying, so it had to be the grief over something else. Maybe grief over the destruction of the carving. Perhaps it was a work of art.'

'Maybe not.' He mused over the unchanging scene. 'It could have been a monument. A cenotaph, maybe. A memorial to someone or something dead which Lom did remember. And these may be more of the same.' He gestured toward the shattered statues.

There was a funerary air to the place. Solemn. Still. No rush or fury of life. Only the barren soil, the keening wind, the stark bulk of the carved stone against a line of distant mountains. The statue nearest us looked away from me, to one side, staring into eternity. I couldn't tell what it was from this distance, but I was afraid to go closer. I didn't want to leave the place we had come in without marking it. And how did you mark something in a place like this? I tried scraping away at the sand beneath me. It scraped very nicely, then slowly filled itself up like oozy mud. Evidently I could have only a temporary influence here. I

tried breaking a branch off a thorny bush. It broke, nipped my finger with a thorn, quietly dissolved in my hand, and reappeared on the bush. The hole in my finger was still there. 'We can't make any lasting changes, Peter. It restructures itself.'

'If we can't make any changes ...' His voice trailed away as he stared at me. I knew what he was thinking. If we couldn't make any lasting changes, then how were we to have any effect on Lom's mind? He broke off the thorn branch I had broken. It dissolved in his hand and reappeared on the bush. He broke it again, stubbornly, and went on doing it while I watched, wondering what he thought he was doing.

At about the dozenth break, the branch did not dissolve right away. At about the twentieth, it stopped dissolving altogether. He stood there, holding the branch, watching it, scratches all over his fingers. 'It seems to respond to persistence,' he said, sucking his thumb.

I ventured, 'I'd like to take a look at that statue, the closest one, but I'm afraid to lose the place we came in.'

'I'll stay here,' he offered. 'Perhaps I can get some bearings.' It was true there were mountains around the edge of the place, and other monuments scattered out in several directions. One should be able to take sightings on several things and locate the spot. I left him at it and trudged away to the nearest monument.

Sad. Oh my sadness doesn't half say it. The broken stone was awash with grief. It was that same unfocused grief I had felt before. Lom's grief, not mine. I could not understand it. I could only feel it, and feeling it was more than enough. I leaned against the plinth on which the monument sat, making my lungs behave.

Chunks of the pedestal had been broken away. Great riven stones lay about, and the edges of the breaks showed no signs of weathering. When it was new it must have been an imposing thing. I'm not sure what kind of thing. Not a d'bor, but something rather like that. Something huge and majestic, solemn and marvelous. Not merely a creature, but a Creature of creatures. As the D'bor Wife had been. As Gobblemole and Flitchhawk had been. Looking on that carved face, I was quite sure it had been a wonderful being. It had the same feel to it as the Wind's Bones on Bleer. It might have been one of those mighty, ancient creatures as it had appeared when alive. And the statue wasn't a grave marker. Nothing was buried under the monument. A creature like that may be killed, but it doesn't just die and it can't be buried. No, this was a memorial to some mighty and wonderful creature that had reached its end, elsewhere, perhaps far away. I leaned against the monument to feel it pressing into my thighs, solid, like real stone. I scraped a hand across a crumbled place and stared at the palmful of gravel. It didn't dissolve. I trudged back to where Peter was waiting, notebook in hand, busy with his pen.

'I've taken sightings,' he said. 'I think we could get out again.'

'I've been taking bits of things.' I showed him my specimens. 'This place is variable. Those monuments are as real as I am. They break and stay broken.'

He shook his head over this anomaly, but there was no point in discussing it. I think we both felt it was wiser just to go on, gathering experience, learning what we could. So we tried the exit to the temple to be sure it still worked, one step back into the roaring gray space, then one step back into the desert. Both were unchanged. Each time we entered the temple, no matter where we entered from, we got there before the thing fell down.

Back in the desert, we went to the monument. ‘It feels very sad around here,’ I said, ‘So this is the direction we want to go.’

Mutter mutter. He sounded disgusted.

‘What?’ I asked him. ‘I didn’t hear you.’

‘I was just saying it was an odd direction. Go five paces angry, turn grief-stricken, and take ten paces in a generally sad direction.’

‘It may come to that.’ He meant it to be funny, but it wasn’t. ‘Can’t you feel it?’

‘Not really. I’ll take your word for it.’

‘How come I can feel it and you can’t?’

‘Because that’s your Talent. Empathy. That’s how you talk all those beast languages. You empathize and just naturally understand them. This is just another kind of language.’ He was feeling around the base of the monument, walking to and away from it, circling away from me to the left. ‘You understand these things on a nonverbal level. . . .’

He didn’t come around the other side. I waited, carefully not moving. Silence. No Peter. Only the wind. My teeth were clenched so tightly that my jaw ached. I kept telling myself he was all right, had always been all right, would always be all right. There was a small sighing, as of a door swinging open or closed, and in a moment he backed into me. ‘Found it,’ he said, taking me by the hand and tugging me forward once more.

And we came out in the village of Betand as it had been a thousand years before.

Not that I knew that right away. What we saw was so raw and strange that neither of us tried to identify it. We did, however, catalog it as we stared. One street, dirt - mud, rather - deeply rutted and hideously ugly. Two stark wooden buildings with signs saying they sold farm stock. Other wooden stores, some a little grayer, which sold equipment. Small groups of people in the street, families with children, some with a few horses or zeller, most with carts piled high with household goods. A tavern; The Blue Fustigar. Even then I didn’t identify the place.

It wasn’t until I turned to see Vitior Vulpas Queynt emerging from the tavern that I knew where I was. It was Queynt, not one whit different in height and size than when I had seen him last, and yet in some way much younger looking. It was the expression on his face. Dissatisfaction. Annoyance. His expression was less like the Queynt I knew and more like Peter, full of jittery impatience. A much less poised expression than he wore now. ‘Queynt,’ I said.

He did not see us. Did not hear me. He went past us as though we had been smoke. Behind him came a depressed-looking couple with a child, the woman calling, ‘Sir, sir.’

That’s when I knew where we were. Betand. The beginning of the city of Betand. When man was young upon Lom, scarcely come, and the rolling stars were driving him from the Shadowmarches.

Peter had already figured it out. He was busy stripping leaves from a bush, seeing whether he could make them stay off. He couldn’t. ‘Newer,’ he breathed at me, his eyes unfocused. ‘This memory is newer. The newer the memory, the less effect we can have on it. What does it have to do with grief?’

‘Not grief. Destruction.’ I waved at the forests that stretched up the northern hills toward the marches. Everywhere were the stumps of trees in cleared fields. ‘That’s the common thread, Peter. You said it yourself. You used the word “traumatic.” The world was injured during each of those episodes. Destruction in the temple. Destruction of the monuments on the desert. Destruction of the forests here.’ I was right. None of it had really been about dying at all, and I wanted to cry. This wouldn’t lead us where we needed to go.

He must have seen my face. He pulled me close and we stood there for a long, wordless minute, me with my head on his chest, both of us watching Queynt talk to the couple. Then they went away. Queynt went back into the tavern. After a while he came out. We followed him around for a while, and after what seemed to be the better part of a day, he started out of town to the north. All this time we’d been waiting for the story to start over, and it hadn’t started over yet.

‘If this is an “event,” it’s a very long one,’ Peter said.

‘Does that mean it’s important?’

‘Who’s to say? I remember some things from my childhood in complete, exquisite detail, and so far as I know, they don’t mean anything. Except to me, of course. And you, maybe. Someday I’ll tell you.’ He smiled at me, teasingly, and I knew he did it just to cheer me. ‘Do you want to go after him?’

‘Peter, I’m not sure we have enough to eat. Somehow I thought there’d be food in here. You know. Roots. Berries. I didn’t expect it all to be shadows and pictures.’

He shook his head at me, being practical as he sometimes was, most surprisingly. ‘It can’t be all shadows, Jinian. It’s substantial. The Maze is substantial. You can see things growing in it from outside. Some of it has to be real. Like your brain. If you could walk around inside your own brain, you might be able to see the ideas, but you’d still be walking on something real. Cells. Flesh. Something.’ He reached out and stripped leaves and fruit from a thrilp bush beside the path, moodily waiting for it to dissolve.

And it didn’t. It lay there in his hand, dripping juice, smelling very ripe and real. I laughed. Couldn’t help it, I guess, he looked so discomfited. Mouth open. He had just told me some of it had to be real, but he hadn’t expected it to be the tree he was working at. My strained laughter made him laugh in turn, somewhat ruefully. He picked a hatful of thrilps, stowed them in his pack, and started after Queynt’s receding form, far in the northern distance.

‘Don’t know about you, Jinian, but I’m going to see whether he told us the truth or not.’

I ran to catch up. It seemed an insane, completely random thing to do, unlikely to lead us anywhere helpful. And yet - I had done the guidance spell. Heart’s Blood, Road Dust, lead-me-where-it-would. There had been those ripe thrilps, almost like an answer to a prayer. And there had been grief in Lom’s mind, grief about something. Perhaps this road was not as unlikely as it seemed.

Two

Memory

I have in recent years often reflected upon memory. One takes it so for granted. One remembers with such facile infallibility. And one finds with such shock - at least it was a shock to me - that memory isn’t truth.

This occurred to me first when I read Peter's account of our meeting and the events around that time. The big things that happened were there, seen from a slightly different angle, perhaps, but intact. I remembered the Wind's Eye and so did he. I remembered the Battle of the Bones, and in general he remembered it as I did. But many of the small things were totally different. I did not hear things he heard, even though we stood side by side when they were said. I did not see things he saw. And conversely, of course, I saw and heard things he did not. It struck me then, an interesting reflection without particular import, and I resolved in future not to be too insistent upon the truth of my own memories. I thought of the way Murzy had recalled old events. 'I remember it this way,' she said. 'I remember it this way, but on reflection, I think so and so must have happened, and even that may not be true.'

I thought of the subject again as we followed the memory of Vitor Vulpas Queynt into the Shadow-marches. It wasn't very long since he had told us the story of that journey - what had it been? A handful of days, no more, since we had been cozy in the tower room at Bloome, listening to his reminiscences. And now we followed him upon that same journey as remembered by another mind, as remembered by the world that held him and that, for some reason, dignified this event with absolute clarity in every detail. The farther we went, the more convinced I was that we had come upon the right trail all unwittingly.

Peter kept experimenting as we went, testing which parts of our environment were real and which mere images. I gave him one clue to the nature of our surroundings when I told him somewhat impatiently to stop picking rainhat berries because I was stuffed.

'It's been hours since I gave you the last one,' he complained. He had generously given me most of them, over my objections.

'It can't have been,' I muttered, 'I can still taste them. Really, Peter. It was only a moment ago.'

'No. It was when we crossed that last stream. All the way down this slope and through that forest at the foot of it. . . .'

It struck us both, simultaneously. Memory time, subjective time, might not be the same as 'real' time, stomach time. I put a finger on my pulse and counted as we followed Queynt across several leagues of forest. A few hundred pulses, more or less, for a lengthy journey that should have taken thousands of heartbeats. Peter was counting his breaths. We shook our heads at each other in disbelief, but Peter did stop picking berries. 'Space,' he muttered at me. 'We're probably not walking as far as we think we are.'

'It certainly hasn't tired me any,' I admitted. 'All of this is probably happening in quite a small place in the Maze.'

'One would think large memories would take larger spaces,' he objected, but he didn't go on to say why. I thought privately that large memories might simply be more dense than others. Or perhaps they thin out with time. Probably a thousand years is no time at all for Lorn. Which for a human being is a fairly discouraging thought in some respects and a very encouraging one in others. One hates to think that all of existence is trivial.

It is better to be even a small part of something very large than a sizable part of nothing much.

We went along, Queynt stopping from time to time to talk with settlers, giving some of them money, waving his arms, talking persuasively. All of this was much as he had remembered it, except for the

sadness. He hadn't remembered the sadness, and Peter didn't feel it. I seemed to be the only beneficiary, and I could have done well without it. When the tears started flowing down my face like a river, Peter took time to dry my face and make tender sounds, which helped a little. After that, I held on to his hand. The fact he couldn't feel the pervasive emotion seemed to ameliorate it somewhat. There was a certain hard pragmatism about Peter - probably inherited from his mother, Mavin, since I hadn't noticed it in his father, Himaggery, very much - that cut through sentimentality like a knife. Sometimes I hated it, but now I blessed him for it.

Lorn remembered night, and night came. Lorn remembered morning, and morning came. Lorn remembered the rock height Queynt had described. There were more trees than he had mentioned, more and closer. His rendition on the wood instrument was less expert and more plaintive than he had told us, and the tears flowed down my face again. By the time three days had passed and the Shadowperson moved out of the trees to stand singing upon the moor, I was in full flood. The beauty of what ensued evidently had captured the world's attention as it did mine, enough at least to distract it from its sadness. There was no sadness in that singing, and it was more glorious in Lorn's memory than it could possibly have been in reality.

We sat upon the moor for several days, which was probably not really more than an hour or two. We saw the gift of the blue crystals from Shadowperson to Queynt. Queynt had said they were small; he had showed them to us, and they were quite small, no larger around than the nail of my little finger. Lorn remembered them as large, glowing, a sapphire radiance that the Shadowman could barely hold in his two cupped hands.

'You were right, Jinian,' Peter told me, awe-stricken. 'The world considered those blue crystals to be important. Terribly important.'

We followed Queynt and the Shadowman as they went north to meet the Eesties.

We saw the Eesties.

And Peter had to hold me to keep me from running.

Ever since my recent captivity in the cavern of the giants, I'd had this horror of the Oracle - Oracles, one or many. Every time I thought of the creature or his minions, my mouth went dry and the Dagger of Daggerhawk burned on my thigh as though it were made of hot coals. I thought of trickery and evil. I thought of pain and malice. Long ago in Chimmerdong I'd taken food from the creature's hands, and it had pretended a mocking friendship while it toyed with me. More recently it had plotted my death. In Chimmerdong it had put a dreadful weapon in my hands; in the cavern of the giants, it had set that weapon outside my reach. In short, it had played with me, trifled with me, amused itself with me, and I hated it.

So now, deep in the remembered dark of the Shadow-marches, two Eesties came out of the shade to stand before Vitor Vulpas Queynt, and I shuddered at the sight. They wore ribbons and precursive suggestions of that fanciful cloak the Oracle had worn, and they, too, had faces painted upon their upper ends. They were as like the Oracle as one thirp is like another, each unique, perhaps, but still instantly recognizable as what it was.

They didn't see me fall apart in incipient hysterics. Peter did, catching me as I was about to flee, holding me while the shivering stopped. 'Sorry,' I mumbled. 'They - they look like the Oracle.'

'They can't both be the Oracle,' he said in a reasonable voice. 'And unless they live forever - which I

suppose is remotely possible - then it's likely neither of them is.'

'You - you don't understand,' I stammered irrationally. 'I don't think it matters which individual was the Oracle. I think they all are, so to speak. All. Each. Like a hive of wasps. If one knows me, then all of them do.'

'Perfectly possible,' he said calmly, 'but not then.'

Which was true. They might all know me now, whenever now was, but they had not known me then, a thousand years ago, when Queynt had walked upon the marches. For which, in that moment, I was extremely thankful.

Queynt, on the other hand, had nothing to be thankful for. He had not told us they had trussed him up, which they had. And he had not told us what they had said to one another in their own language, because he hadn't known. I, on the other hand, looking on, could understand every word, both when they talked to him and when they talked to one another. Which meant Lorn had understood it, too.

They began by accusing him of being of a filthy race that carried destruction with it. Queynt apologized for this but said many humans were trying to rise above their destructive natures. The Eesties twitted him then, comparing him to the Shadowpeople, whom they seemed to hold in contempt. Shadowpeople, who were no more than beasts, no more than animals, who aspired to 'elevation,' who were 'above themselves.'

They wanted him to leave the world and take all mankind with him. So much was obvious. Through it all, Queynt was calm, fairly reasonable, polite. He kept trying to understand them. He didn't hear what they said to one another, however.

'How could Lom claim to find bao in this filth?'

'How could we be so little thought of that these would be set beside us?'

'This stinking thing.'

'This animal.'

'No better than a pombi.'

'No more bao than a thrilpat.'

'We should loose the shadow on them.'

The meaning conveyed by bao wouldn't translate for me. It meant something like allness or wholeness or completion, used as a noun. Bao was both a thing and a quality. Something Lom had. Something they, the Eesties, had and we, humans, did not. Presumably. At least so they shouted as they tore at Queynt with insulting words.

Back among the trees there was a great, curved shell, bright red, like the egg of some monstrous bird. Every now and then the Eesties would look nervously in that direction, as though something slept inside it. After a time, another one came out of the trees, larger than the first two, and then the three of them began to touch Queynt, fumble at him, look through his pouch and pack.



When they found the blue crystals in his pouch, they went mad. For a moment I forgot they had not killed him in reality, they seemed so likely to do so here in memory. I started looking for a rock, reaching for the Dagger, anything at all to protect Queynt from their wrath.

‘How could he have this? We had them all!’ they screamed.

‘How did it come by this? They were stored in the monsters’ cavern.’ A wrathful bellow.

‘Traitors! One of the Brotherhood [Fraternity? Society? Conspiracy?] has betrayed. ...’

All the time they were striking him, working themselves up into a fury. Though I knew they had not killed him, still I began to worry that history might be playing itself wrongly. I reached for the Dagger.

Then the cry came, enormous and aching. I understood it clearly. ‘Halt. Stop. Hold it right there.’

The Eesties froze. Queynt was rolled into a ball on the ground, still tied, hands covering his neck. The cry came again. One of the three said, ‘Ganver,’ in a strangled voice. They left Queynt, rolled away from him like naughty boys caught at mischief, running away, afraid to own what they had done, what they had almost done.

And another Eesty came from the direction of the great egg. Much larger, this one, and with no paint or ribbons. Merely a great, star-shaped thing with a suggestion of face at its center. No expression. I could not tell whether it was sad or angry. It leaned toward Queynt, moved about him, untied him. It cried again, a great, accusing cry with all the woes of the world laden in it, turned and looked directly into my eyes, itself eyeless, then rolled away toward the scarlet egg again.

And Queynt, patted into consciousness by several of the Shadowpeople who had come from the trees, was on his feet, brushing himself off, looking pale and bruised but somehow indomitable.

‘It saw me,’ I said to Peter. ‘That last Eesty, the one that yelled. It saw me.’

‘Jinian!’ He was sympathetic, pat-patting my shoulder, thinking I was losing my control once more.

‘Really, Peter. Honestly. It saw me! Let’s follow it.’ This was unlike me, but I was having a very strong hunch.

‘If we lose Queynt, we may not be able to find our way back to Betand, and from there to the desert, and from there-’

‘We’ll be able to find Betand. And if we didn’t, all we’d have to do is come back here and Queynt would show up here eventually. Again.’ I wasn’t sure of this at all. This particular ‘event’ didn’t feel like the others. It wasn’t nearly as discrete and repetitive. None of which mattered at the moment. ‘Please, Peter. Let’s follow it.’

‘Ganver,’ he said. ‘Mavin told me about Ganver. Or wrote about it, rather. She could never talk about it.’

‘I know. She showed me what she’d written. It was Ganver’s bone that stopped the Ghoul plague in Pfarb Durim. And Mavin found him in a scarlet egg, so she said. Peter, we have to try.’

‘I thought you didn’t like Eesties!’

‘I don’t like the Oracle kind. The maskers. The dressed-up ones, all full of false flourishes. One of them called themselves a - a. . .’ I tried to find a human word for it. All I could come up with was ‘Brotherhood,’ which wasn’t very close to the actual meaning. ‘They called themselves a “Brotherhood,” Peter. But Ganver isn’t part of that. Couldn’t you feel it?’

‘No,’ he said as he always did to such questions about what he could feel or not feel. ‘I’ll take your word for it.’

Guiding ourselves by that flash of brilliant color, we set off through the trees. When we came to the curving wall, both of us stood there, mouths open. It was huge. Bright. Scarlet as blood. Smooth as stone. Crystalline. Very much like the monuments outside Pfarb Durim, so Mavin had written. We circled it, warily, finding no opening at all.

‘Damn,’ I whined. ‘We can’t get in!’

‘I don’t know why not,’ said Peter, leaning himself against the egg and pushing. ‘It’s only a memory.’ He went on pushing, whistling between his teeth. I stared at him for a moment, then leaned beside him, pushing along with him. At first it was hard, stony. Gradually it changed. It felt like pushing the side of a monstrous d’bor. Rubbery. Not immovable, not impenetrable, merely very, very resistant. When we were half-buried in the wall, I began to fear we might end up smothered inside it. Peter went on whistling. Then we fell through. ‘See,’ he said in a cheerful voice as he picked himself up. ‘It yields to persistence.’

I had a feeling I would learn to hate that phrase.

The inside of the egg was as Mavin had described it.

Many star-shaped maintainers bustling about, polishing pedestals, faceting gravel in the walk, doing other things that I found mysterious and totally unfamiliar. The whirling flowers were there; the grass that cried; the gravel that repeated, ‘What, what,’ just as Mavin had said. Even the tall pedestals were there at the end of the walk, but the first one, on which Ganver should have rested in an enigmatic red globe, was empty.

We were not totally surprised when the voice addressed us from behind. ‘You followed me,’ it said accusingly. We turned, stepping back involuntarily. This Eesty was very large, larger than it had seemed when assisting Queynt. It was also very troubled. The trouble was in the tone of its voice, in the way it stood before us, almost trembling. The vague facelike structure at its center showed nothing. Its voice did not come from there. It came from the creature itself, needing no lung, no mouth, no tongue.

‘Yes,’ I replied, keeping it simple. ‘We followed you. We need you.’

‘How could you come here, into our dreams, our memories? Into our timeless place from which all times are spun? Is there no place you cannot come, you intruders, vandals, you who usurped our children’s heritage? Oh, humans, go away from here.’

I would have sworn it was crying, such a tragic weeping it put me off and I could not answer.

I heard the misery, but Peter didn’t. ‘We can’t,’ he said. ‘My mother came to you. You helped her. Now I have come to you and you must help me. You must help me help the world you live in.’

‘Why must I?’ it cried. ‘We have put that all away. We have let it go. Let come what will come!’

For some reason this made me furiously angry. ‘Oh, very nice,’ I snarled. ‘Cause this great tragedy, this death of a world, the world which bore you and nurtured you, and then simply turn your back. Go off into some dream dimension of your own. Selfish. Horrid. You’re responsible for this, Ganver. Your people did it. Your people, those Oracles, those berib-boned mischief makers. They’re killing Lom. They are the ones who are killing Lom’s bao!’ I still didn’t know what the word meant, but it was the right word to use. Before us the Eesty stiffened, became rigid, began to shake, shook for a time that seemed endless before crying out a sound.

Around us the world trembled. The great egg quivered. I felt it roll. The sky cracked, broke, and blue distance showed through rents in the scarlet shell. Black lightning struck from the blue sky. A feeling like hard smoke went through me. A sound that tasted of rotten flesh startled the air, and my skin felt sour, acid.

We were standing in the forest. The egg was gone, all its parts and contents gone, there was only the giant Eesty there, still as the light of a distant lamp, cold and far.

‘You have accused me of complicity,’ it said in a chill, tiny voice, a threat and a wounded pride so deep and massive it made me tremble, and I felt Peter’s hand shake a little in mine. That he had felt.

Never mind. We had to go on. We had come too far not to.

‘We have accused you of betraying this world,’ I said, struggling to keep the tremor out of my voice, ‘Of killing your parent.’

Silence. Silence full of danger. In my hand, Peter’s fingers changed, became covered with horn. He was preparing to Shift, to defend himself and me if need be. The moment stretched into an endless, breathless age.

‘You need not think of weapons,’ it said at last, contemptuously. ‘Ganver does not retaliate against infants, against children, against silly-beings.’ It was thinking of small chattering birds, of tree rats in their nests. All of that was implicit in its voice.

‘Silly-beings may have more good sense in their simplicity than great minds in their pride.’ I don’t know where the words came from. Out of something Murzy had said, I think. Or perhaps one of Cat Candleshy’s scholarly epigrams. Whatever their source, these words were the key. The word ‘pride’ was the key.

‘You have accused. Among our people, we treat accusation seriously. We are accused seldom. Never by . . . others,’ It meant inferiors. I was depressed. Mavin’s account of her meeting with Ganver had led me to expect something more understanding and godlike than this. It went on, ‘If you accuse, then you must judge.’

‘You let your accusers be your judges?’ asked Peter, astounded.

‘Who else should be satisfied?’ it asked. ‘If one’s accusers cannot be satisfied, what is justice?’

‘One’s accuser might be mad,’ Peter suggested, very unwisely I thought, considering where we were. ‘Mad, and incapable of being satisfied.’

This stopped it, but only for a moment. ‘We would deal otherwise with defective creatures,’ it said very

softly. 'Are you defective?'

'I believe we are not,' said Peter. 'As a matter of fact, we may be far less defective than many.'

'Of your kind,' it said. There was no sneer in its voice, but the words carried enough to shut Peter up.

'How must we judge?' I asked, eager to change the subject.

'You must see, experience, be one with the events which occurred. You must know. Feel. Only then can you judge.'

'And how do we do that?'

'Thuswise,' it said.

It began to spin, spin and sing, words I could not afterward remember. It spun, and as it did, so did I, and Peter, both, up on our toes, spinning like Dervishes.

'How?' I cried. 'How?'

'Can a human Dervish do anything which an Eesty cannot? They who were taught by us and then sought to usurp our functions? Can they do what we cannot?' There was anger there, and hurt. Even if I'd been able, I would not have pursued the subject, and I was not able. Dervishes could change the shapes and natures of other beings. I knew that. Mavin had said so. Evidently Eesties could do the same, for we were being spun, Peter and I, into Eesties, small copies of the great Eesty before us, small creatures otherwise identical to Great Ganver, who whirled and sang.

'We go,' it cried, and we rolled away, spun away, sometimes one and sometimes the other, upon a road that only Ganver could see. Scenes and events flickered by. I saw mountains in flame, heard seas in retreat, tasted monstrous creatures engaged in battle. Or was it a game? A dance? They fled at the corner of my \_ eyes? At the edge of my perception, rather. I still don't know how Eesties see or hear or speak. Peter says the organs are spread all across the skin, that the creature senses the world with all of itself. So be it, however it was, that is the way it was for me. Time sped by, space sped by, I knew we were still in the Maze, still in the memory of Lorn, and still in that place when we stopped at last.

At the edge of a city.

We stood upon our points at the top of a little hill, green with grass and decorated with flowers. Each group of blossoms had arranged itself, pink against deeper rose, blue against white, lower blooms at the outer edges, higher blooms to the center, all against a bush of glowing green. A perfection that made one's breath stick in the throat. I had no throat, but the feeling was the same. A kind of hesitation in the pulse; an inner voice crying, 'Look at me.'

The white road beneath us went down into the city, became a spider's web of roads running out in every direction. The city itself-I thought for a moment it was Pfarb Durim. Then I realized it couldn't be. There was no cliff edge to the west of it. There were no walls. Only the shape of the doors and the style of the buildings had made me think of Pfarb Durim. That and the feeling of it, the feeling of elder times, of eternal stones, of history going back and back beyond any individual memory. Old, this city. Old, and as beautiful as the flowers upon the hill.

'Look at me,' said the garden walls, carved and decorated with tiles, topped with graceful

crenel-lations. 'Look at me,' the towers calling, slender and tall as trees, girdled with mosaic brilliance. 'Here,' the buildings directed, rising on colonnades of arches, making a welcoming shade at their edges. 'Here.'

And at the center of the city one tower higher than all the rest. It made me hurt to look at it, so tall it was and so perfect. White as milk, pure, undecorated except by its own perfect lines. At the top it rounded softly above a row of pointed arches opening into some high, secret room.

It was dawn in this place. A brightness lay beneath the eastern rim of the world.

'Listen,' whispered Ganver.

A bell in the tower rang.

No. No. This was not a bell. The Bell in the Tower rang.

The sound came from it like a color, not loudly, not vividly, softly as a flute sound, pure, pervasive, running out like a hue to stain the city and the hill on which we stood, out beyond us to the forests and the mountains, and beyond, to the edges of the world, until all within the world heard the sound, bathed in the color of the Bell. The Daylight Bell, painting the world. Within me something woke, stirred, looked around at the world with a feeling of enormous recognition, something there, within, which I had never recognized before. Beside me, Peter sighed, and I knew that within him, too, the waking had come. From a door low in the beautiful Tower flew ambient flakes of light, settling onto every surface, every creature, on me, on all of us, and we glowed in that instant like angels.

'Listen,' whispered Ganver.

From the far northern reaches a sound came back, an echo, a resonance, soft as the first and as pure, slightly dissonant, pushing the color back from the north, past us upon the hill, into the city once more to leave it as it had been, and with it went the flakes of light to enter the tower once more. And at that instant, the first ray of the sun struck the Tower to shine, ivory gleaming, pure and trembling.

'The Shadowbell,' I sighed, peering into the north, from which that second sound had come. 'Shadowbell rings in the dark, Daylight Bell the dawn. In the towers hang the bells, now the Tower's gone. . . .' But it was not gone in this time, not in this memory. Here, in the mind of Lorn, the Tower still stood and the bells still

rang-----

And I stopped, distracted by a flood of recognition. I knew where I was! The line of hills was totally familiar. The way the land folded, the way the forest ran down into the valleys, the buildings before me in the city. I had seen them before; not as they were here, tall and beautiful, but as they had become: tumbled; broken.

I had seen them not far from Stoneflight Demesne in the ruined city of the Old South Road, the city of the blind runners. It was here the Daylight Tower had stood, here the Daylight Bell had rung. Here. There. Here in memory. There in reality. I wanted to cry.

'Come,' said Ganver.

We went down into the city.

I have had trouble describing that city. Among the skilled pawns there are musicians, singers, writers of tales. Some among them are called poets, and it is they who write lyrics for the singers, epics for chanting at banquets, or merely beautiful words to express things for which ordinary language is insufficient. I am no poet. I longed then for a poet, for someone to put words to what we saw. I have written these words over and over, trying to say what it was like. Any I write are not good enough. You must stretch beyond them. You must bring poet's feeling to them, knowing the words are not enough in themselves.

I had been in cities. Not many, true, but some. I was in Schooltown when I was young. And in Xammer, of course. And in our travels we had seen other cities and towns, all of them full of people and commerce of one kind or another. And in every city there is a feeling of-you see, here is where the words are hard for me - a feeling of irritation. Oh, it may not be great. But there is the need to step aside from another's way and the need to avoid being bumped by or bumping others. People move without regard for one another sometimes, or even mistakenly in the belief they are regarding others. There are bruises and confrontations, and small itches of annoyance.

There are hard places in cities. Places where cold winds flick past hard stone to catch one's clothing and blow gritty dust into one's eyes. Places where sound hits stone and reverberates more loudly than is comfortable. There are other noises, too, calls of vendors and shrieks of children, the scream of ungreased wheels, the rattle of wagons and pound of hooves. Cacophony, one might say. Not altogether unpleasant, most times. Sometimes unbearable.

There is nastiness underfoot sometimes as well. Things spilled or fallen and left to rot. There is often a smell of decay. Of drains.

Sometimes there is such crowding that there is irritation, and this makes fear or anger; and following fear comes meetings of councils to make regulations; and following regulations is further irritation at the laws that are made.

Or dwellings. Consider dwellings. They become dirty and cluttered and hard to clean. There are animals that nest in corners and walls, and the animals harbor vermin that bite. And buildings make an interior darkness, a loss of sun and light. Stairs twist upon themselves in tangled steep ascents.

Now imagine a city in which none of these things happens. A city in which the wind funnels away from the street, leaving only pleasant warmth behind. A city in which every room is light and airy, in which no vermin dwell. A city in which movement flows like water, with no eddies except purposeful ones, in which hard sounds are muted and pleasant sounds transmitted, in which the stones are as clean as grass and every wall sparkles with reflected light.

Imagine a city in which one might hear either laughter and joy or tears of grief, but never the disquiet of anger. A city in which one might find music or quiet, as one chose, in which one might rejoice or sorrow at remembrance of friends lost, but in which even the sorrow had a sweetness.

Imagine a city of angels. Imagine the city of the Daylight Tower.

You will have to imagine it. I cannot describe it, even though we were in it. i

We lived there for some time, Ganver, Peter, and I. We ate there, getting fruits and edible plants from the vendors, drinking from the fountains. We went to the concerts. We went to exhibitions of art and dance. The various creatures of Lorn do dance, beautifully, and we saw some of those dances. Shadowpeople perched on the walls and sang. Eesties were everywhere. Other creatures came into the

city sometimes, sat upon their hind legs and asked the vendors for fruit, and were given fruit or nuts or whatever they liked. There was no medium of exchange. All seemed to be carefully balanced, enough of everything but not too much. And each morning, just before dawn, the Daylight Bell rang in the Tower and everyone listened while the far, plangent sound of the Shadowbell returned. And each

evening from the far north came the sound of the Shadowbell again, and a flight of shadows coming over the city like black birds, wanting to fall upon us. Then the Daylight Bell resonated to that distant sound with a pure tone of its own, and the shadows fled. Every morning light and dark. Every evening dark and light. A rhythm, a balance. 'Tha one bell, tha two bell, that cannot ring alone.' So Murzy had said, long and long ago.

And after a time in the city, we went one morning to the Temple at the base of the Daylight Tower, through the open portals of that place, into the shadowed solemnity within. A silver lamp stood on a high pedestal, lighting the place, and I knew it was from this lamp that the light came each morning at dawn and to this lamp the light returned when the Shadowbell rang. On another pedestal lay an open book, and from this book a choir of Shadowpeople sang, their voices as clear as the Bell itself. On the tessellated pave was a pool - oh, so familiar to me. A pool like the one where I had been initiated in the Citadel of the Sevens, glowing, running with light and shadow. It was surrounded by a low curb. Around the pool were joyfully solemn Eesties, who dipped long silver spoons into the ambient liquid and drew forth gleaming crystals to lay them upon the curb. Each of us Eesties gathered there ate one of the crystals and then spun our way out upon the northern road to carry the will of Lom, which the crystals had conveyed.

We were not compelled to do so. Even as we were whirling along the northern road, busy as flood-chucks with our messages to every creature in the world, I realized that we were not compelled to carry those messages. We did it because we wanted to. It was good to do, and pleasurable, and right. We had felt that way before ever taking the crystals from the curb of the pool. We went on feeling that way. It was the Eesty feeling, the Lom feeling, the feeling of oneness. Bao.

So, Peter and Ganver and I buzzed along the white roadways of Lom, carrying messages to Shadowpeople and trees, to flowers and rivers. Some of our messages were delivered to very large creatures: to a fitchhawk, to a D'bor wife, to a gobblemole. I knew these were the spirits of very large things; the spirits of forests or rivers or seas - parts of the whole with minds and wills of their own. They touched us, and we told them of the will of Lom. There was no difficulty in translation. The message was a - I suppose it was a chemical one. Transmitted through our skins. From crystal to our bloodstreams; from our bloodstreams to the equivalent in others. Simply. Easy. Without possibility of misunderstanding.

I don't know how long this went on. Long enough to learn about it, see it, understand it. Ganver left us in no doubt as to the purpose of the exercise. 'This is how things were,' he said to us over and over. 'Before man came.'

We left the world of the Daylight Bell. I couldn't tell how we got out. At one moment we were spinning along the road, the next we were in the flickering travel that told us we were traveling among the memories. Forests, oceans, other cities. Something that looked like a huge stadium full of peculiarly shaped revelers. When we moved among the memories, time slowed. I knew we were traversing actual distance. The Maze was very large, and we were moving across it, from side to side, end to end.

Then we stopped again. Peter recognized the place.

'The Blot,' he said. We were looking down on it from a height. It lay beneath us like a clot of filth, full of noise and stinks. Iron railways with cars that ran upon them. On every side the forest had been cleared; the stumps protruded from the earth like severed fingers. We spun down the road, down - onto nothing.



The road had been broken. Torn up. Great chunks of it lay here and there. I could see no purpose to the destruction at first. Then I saw the stone of the road had been quarried to build a squat, ugly building against the mountain side. People went in and out of it, hurrying, bumping into one another. At one side a group of men screamed at another group. A dispute over some detail of the construction. The sound was ugly. The emotion was ugly.

‘Come,’ said Ganver.

We went away from there, into memory again. In and out. Always to scenes of destruction. Roads torn up. Forests leveled. River plains ignored while slopes were cleared. Cliffs of easily quarried stone neglected while roads were torn up to build ugliness.

And then we saw scenes of rebellion. Those great creatures, the spirits of the places, creatures like the Fritchhawk and the D’bor Wife, rose up. Ganver let us watch while they rose in wrath and fought against the intruder.

And we watched the intruder, man, fight back. With chemicals and fire; with sonic beams and huge machines. The Magicians from the Base fought back. Far to the west, over the sea, the people of the Chasm were driven down into the depths by that rebellion. Here in the east the people were scattered, fleeing the wrath of the facets of Lom.

But in the end the Magicians conquered. Those who had risen up were made captive in their own places. Chimmerdong was ringed with gray fire. Boughbound was dead. The spirits of Ramberlon dammed up and driven away. Only a few of the great ones roamed free still, and they roamed a saddened world.

‘Would you blame me, human?’ asked Ganver. ‘Boughbound Forest was my friend. So was River Ramberlon. Great beings, those. Lost, now, for a thousand years. Would you blame me?’

Peter answered. ‘I would not blame you if you had killed us, Ganver. We were stupid, heedless beasts, and Lom would have been better without humans. But you didn’t kill the humans. It’s Lom who’s dying.’

‘And with Lorn dies the Fritchhawk,’ I said. ‘Isn’t Fritchhawk your friend, too?’ D’bor Wife will die as well. And all the Shadowpeople. And likely you, too, Ganver, unless your scarlet egg can protect you, like some eternal womb. I agree with Peter. I could have forgiven you for killing all us humans, but why are you killing the world?’ At that time it seemed the only thing to say. At that time in my Eesty shape I cared more about the world and all its glories than I cared about myself, the human, Jinian. I knew then why the Eesties made judges out of their accusers. Having seen what we had, I hated us, even myself, though I had never cut a tree and had done more to restore the roads than anyone else I knew.

‘Let us go back to the city of the Bell,’ it said.

So we returned.

A shadow lay upon the city. There was pain in the city. The Eesties moved jerkily, there was an uncoordinated feel to things. Sound was not always pleasant. We ached with the feeling of the place.

‘Do not go to the pool,’ someone called. ‘We are not going to the pool.’

Ganver stopped. ‘What is this? What Eesty rejects the pool of bao?’

‘We,’ said the voice, ‘We of the Brotherhood.’

It came into view then. One star tip painted in the mockery of a human face. Ribbon-decked. One of those who had abused Queynt. One of the Oracle’s followers.

‘And how many of you are there, Riddler?’ Ganver’s tone was indulgent, even fond, the voice of age to the silliness of youth. The Eesty that confronted us was not large, not old. Scarcely larger than Peter and I. ‘How many? A few fives? You children? Who have only carried the will of Lorn for a season or two? And now you are a Brotherhood?’

‘We are those who protect Lorn from the interlopers,’ it asserted in a proud, impatient voice. ‘Seemingly, we are the only ones. The rest of you go on as though nothing were happening. Look around you. old star! Look what these filthies are doing to our world!’ At the sound of its voice, several others had gathered around it, all with that painted caricature of a face, all with the fluttering ribbons. Suddenly I understood these painted faces, these ribbons, The faces were a symbol; a symbol of that which was to be destroyed. The flapping ribbons were symbolic of the clothing men wore. They costumed themselves as the enemy, mocking him. Ganver’s attitude and voice did not change as he reasoned with them.

‘Do you not trust Lom to meet this challenge, Riddler? Lom has met others. Greater ones than this. Don’t you trust Lom?’

‘Lom is deluded. We waited, old one. We waited for wrath. For destruction. We waited for the mountains to flame and send these creatures into smoke, as happened in the time of the mud monsters. As in the time of the metal beasts from the farther star. Nothing. Only corrupt messages come from Lom, pitiful messages, messages which seek to bring these men into wholeness. The Brotherhood will not carry these messages.’

‘The Brotherhood may not,’ said Ganver, and his voice was like thunder in the city. ‘But Ganver will, and all the Eesties of Lom who are not witless children.’

We were in the Temple of the Bell once more. The lamp glowed with its glorious light; Shadowpeople sang from the book; dignified Eesties with solemn faces lifted crystals from the pool and laid them upon the curb. Green they were, glowing like drops of dew upon new leaves. We took them, absorbed them, then went out of that place.

‘Oh, by all the gods,’ moaned Peter, reaching for me. We had no hands to hold with, but we touched. The human parts of us could not believe the message we carried.

Lom had decided that man was destructive because he was weak. Man knew no way but’ destruction. He knew no way of quiet strength and slow building, no way of harmony and peace. He was weak and small and needed weapons and walls to protect himself. He did not believe in the kindness of others. He did not perceive the willingness of Lorn to provide, even to these foster children from some other world.

And Lorn, in response to this weakness had decided to give man Talents. The message we carried was the Talent message, to be touched to children yet unborn.

All I could think of in a dazed way was that the Gamesmen would be much less proud if they knew. I -suddenly I was much less proud. My Talent of beast talking, it had been given. My Talent of Wize-ardry. Was that, too, a gift? Peter’s Talent of Shifting. And Mavin’s. Himaggery’s Wizardry. All the Seers, the Sentinels, the Armigers. All the Sorcerers. Nothing of our own. Only what we had been

given? Tragamors and Elators, nothing of their own. In each of us it was a Lom gift.

We had stopped our travels in a space of gray nothing, a cloudy, peaceful place. Ganver confronted us here, looking into our hearts, knowing that we knew what message it was we carried. ‘How much do you need to see?’ Ganver asked. ‘How much of what we did, we Eesties? We carried the gift which Lom gave; we carried it high and low, far and near. To every place men dwelt, we carried it. Not all received it. Of those who did, most misused it. Some few learned to control it. Those you call the Immutables, they learned to do so. But most, most simply accepted it. Shall we go into the later memories, shall we see what happened then?’

I knew what had happened. More of what had already happened. Men began to use their strengths as they had used their weaknesses. To destroy.

Ganver did not show us much. It did not need to. There were more broken forests, more broken roads. There were creatures killed who should never have been killed, whom it was a monstrous arrogance to have killed. There were Great Games played upon the plains of the world, leaving them deep in blood, bones, and cold. Seldom - oh too seldom - were there places of beauty built. Too seldom were there things of beauty done.

‘Do you accuse me?’ Ganver asked. ‘Do you still accuse me?’

Peter was stubborn. ‘My question is still the same, Ganver. Why are you letting Lom die?’

‘Let us go back to the city of the Bell,’ said Ganver.

So, we went back for the third time. This time the city hummed with dissension, like a warnet hive, full of hostile rumor. The ribbon-decked young Eesties were everywhere, and those old ones of Ganver’s bulk seemed somehow diminished. ‘We go to the pool,’ called a familiar voice. ‘But we do not carry this last message of Lom.’

‘Why, Riddler?’ asked Ganver in a voice that already knew the answer. ‘Why?’

‘Lom is mad! It has chosen to set these monsters beside the Eesties. It has messaged them to become as we are. To run the roads of Lom!’

They pushed us before them, thrusting us into the Temple. The pedestal where the lamp had rested was toppled. The lamp had rolled into a corner and lay there, lightless. There were no Shadowpeople singing. The book was closed. There were young Eesties at the pool, painted ones. They were fishing blue crystals from the silver surface as fast as they rose to the top. From the low curbing they were raking them into baskets, carrying them away. Before any of the young ones could move to stop him, Ganver had seized two of the brilliant blue stone gems and passed them to us, into us.

After all that time of refusing, all that time of denying compulsion, I was compelled to know what the message had been that Lom had designed for men.

Which was only to show mankind what we had just seen and call him to run the roads of Lom, to serve as the Eesties served and to live as the Eesties lived.

Which was only to invite man to become like the angels.

Across the pool, the one they called the Riddler danced along the curbing, taking up the crystals one by

one. 'We will not carry this message, old Ganver. This message goes into a deep cavern somewhere. Let the man-beasts die of their own destruction, as they will. And when they are gone, we will carry Lom's messages once more. Until then, let Lom rest in peace, let Lom recover its senses. Until then, no messages will be carried.'

'Are you teaching rebellion, Riddler?' Oh, but Gan-ver's voice was weary and sad, carrying so much pain it made me want to weep. It did not make the Riddler weep. Instead, it posed, making a mockery of humankind of its Eesty shape.

'Oh, my dear, but of course. What could we possibly preach but rebellion? We are the true Eesties! Not witless fools with old rolling stars who should know better!'

I knew him then. Of course. How could I not have known him even among all his fellows dressed as he was? The Riddler, Rebel angel. Not one of the Oracle's followers, but the Oracle himself.

And he looked aside from Ganver at me, at Peter, seeing us, sneering at us. He knew us. This was not only memory but a time-place in which actuality existed, and the Oracle saw me not as an Eesty shape but as who I was.

### The Daylight Bell

We went out of the time-place, leaving the Oracle behind us. 'I have one more time-place to show you,' said Ganver.

I could guess what place that was. Ganver intended to show us the place we had just left, only somewhat later in time.

It had come to me as I stood there confronting the Oracle beside that pool with its low coping, feeling the echoes in the tower that lofted above us and the purposeful activity all around. The Temple of the Bell and the place we had seen at the edge of the Maze - the place with the roaring, angry crowd - were one and the same. I would have realized the connection sooner except that the Temple of the Bell was bright and joyful, full of purpose, while the place we had seen at the edge of the Maze had been colorless, dim, full of horrid shouting.

'You want to show us the Bell being destroyed,' I said. 'We have already seen it happen. Several times. We don't want to see it again.'

'That place where the metal thing fell down?' asked Peter. 'The gray place where all the Eesties were yelling?'

'That place. Yes.' Ganver still sounded sad, anguish in its voice. The poor old thing was grieving. I knew why it had retreated to the scarlet egg - what had Mavin called it? 'Ganver's Grave.' It had gone there to bury itself away from the destruction.

'Why did they destroy the Bell, Ganver? I suppose it was the Oracle and his crew. The one you call Riddler.'

Three

### The Daylight Bell

‘The Oracle, yes. The Brotherhood. The rebellious young Eesties. Only a few of that generation stayed with us, allied with us, with the elders. Come. You have not seen all that I have to show you. It is painful, but you must see it.’

And we were off into the flickering twilight of memory travel once more, never a pause, light as blown leaves, until at last we came to the place. This time, however, we did not arrive inside the Temple. This time we were outside, watching the multitude gathered there.

Dim that city. Gray and chill. Walls were dirty and buildings smoke-stained. There were no Shadow-people there. While none of the huge old Eesties were there, there was a great mob of the Oracle’s Brotherhood, dancing in their ribbons, chanting and shouting in a zealot’s parody of purpose, a frantic anarchy that could see no farther than the next bit of inflammatory oratory being shouted on every corner. Ganver remained with us where we were, hidden behind a partly fallen wall near the Temple. ‘Watch,’ it said sadly. ‘Watch and learn.’

A flight of white stone stairs led to the Temple entrance, wide and gentle as the Eesties preferred them, like a shallow fall of frozen water in their polished perfection. The Oracle stood on the broad terrace at the top, speaking to its assembled minions. The painted face was more detailed, and it wore a garment that was more robelike than the mere ribbons it had worn before. Cressets burned beside it, stinking of grease-soaked wood, and I thought of Pfarb Durim. Pfarb Durim must once have been as beautiful as this city once had been; and yet in my lifetime it smelled as this one did now, of smoke and sick violence. The Oracle’s voice and the smoke rose upward, equally oily, equally black.

‘These man-animals have the luck of beasts and the weapons of devils. They wage Great Games upon one another, but still they breed faster than death can take them. They survive their own malice, their own stupidity. They do not fall to their own destruction, and they will not fall to those who hunt them. Still they bask in Lom’s favor, but the time of that favor is done. . . .’

The Oracle’s voice rose in a brazen, monstrous shout:

‘Let loose the shadows!’

‘Shut out the light\_\_\_

‘Let them die in the darkness. . . .’

‘And when they are dead, we will build the Tower up again and cast the Bell once more. . . .’

‘Let loose the shadows!’

The assembled multitude screamed, howled, babbled. I looked around. There were no older Eesties, none like Ganver, none there to speak against what was being done by this mob.

‘Where were you?’ I cried, horrified. ‘Why weren’t you here?’

‘We had tried,’ it said wearily. ‘We had tried and been rebuffed. We could have destroyed them utterly, but we did not do so. Many of us had grown weary. Some of us ... felt a kind of sympathy for them, for our pride had been hurt as well. Who can say? I was not here. I had gone away. I had told myself I could not bear it.’

From high in the Tower came that sound of agonized breaking we had heard before. When the Bell

came down, it was with a great shattering, as though the heart of the world broke in pieces. Stupefaction greeted this at first, then rebellious, impudent cheering, which built to a clamorous roar.

Which faded almost at once into horrified silence. The sound of that roaring was still in our heads. Only very gradually did we perceive the other sound, the sound the mob had heard, reverberating, growing, a vibration loosed upon the city. From the north. The sound of the Shadowbell, going on, and on, and on, not dying but growing, louder with each moment, the dissonance keening in a knife-edge of noise, drowning the Eesties' voices until it became the only sound, the only reality, driving the light before it as clean water is driven before the muddy flood. We watched as the light ran out of the city before the flood of shadow, as the white stairs crumbled, as the Tower shattered before that sound and fell.

And those who had cheered were crushed under stones, sprawled onto rippling pavement suddenly full of chasms. Roofs cracked and swayed, crumbled into shards and dust. Walls tumbled. Shadow filled the streets, fluttering, deadly shadow. Many of the Brotherhood fled, stupidly shrieking, leaving behind one figure to stand at the top of the stairs, swaying as the city died, its painted clown's face staring down at Ganver, at me. What was it thinking? What had it really thought would happen? Was it so misled by its own ambition it could not have known what would occur here? I did not have long to wonder about it.

Some trick of the light made its painted face seem real, made the malice there seem to move. No matter whether the face was real or not, the thing itself was real enough, and it came for us, whirling down the shattering stairs like an avalanche of fury. It knew us. I clutched at Ganver and we went away, into the gray nothing.

'It saw you,' said Ganver. 'As it saw me.'

'Were we there or not?' Peter asked in a breathless voice. 'Sometimes we seem only to be watching history, sometimes we seem to be involved in it. How long ago was the Tower destroyed?'

'The Daylight Bell was destroyed some centuries ago,' it said as though beginning a chronicle. 'First was the arrival of your people; then destruction and pain followed by the Battle of the Great Ones against your people, in which many of the great ones were destroyed; then the giving of the Talents; all these in a narrow space of years. Within one lifetime of your people, from the time you came, all these things occurred. . . .

'Much later came the blue crystals; then the destruction of the Tower. There were three irreplaceable treasures in the Tower of the Bell: the book from which the Shadowpeople sang; the lamp from which the light was spread; and the Bell itself. All destroyed when the Tower fell, as the great ones had been destroyed. Destruction and destruction. In my own memory, all these events were not long apart. In the eternal time of Lorn, they were close indeed. . . .

'And since that time, the shadow has gathered with each ringing of the Shadowbell. It gathers most deeply here in the recollection of Lorn, gathers here and flows from here. As for your being part of what you saw, yes, you were there. There are eddies in time. We Eesties move among memories, along the lines of thought. Sometimes we observe, sometimes we are there. Sometimes we participate. It is our movement in the Maze which recalls memory to Lom. It was your movement into the mind of Lom which recalled those memories. Our dance is the dance of recollection.

This seemed to me to be more poetry than practicality, but the sense of it was clear enough. The usual rules of cause and effect didn't apply. This world we were in, this Maze, existed outside normal time. It had its own rules which even Ganver might not totally understand.

‘There is one thing I do not perceive,’ Ganver was saying to me now. ‘The Riddler, the Oracle, it wants to destroy you particularly, Jinian. Why?’

‘I don’t know why! But I know you mustn’t let it happen, Ganver. If it wants to get me, it must have a reason connected with this evil thing it’s doing. And if you want to stop the evil, then you have to help me. That’s all there is to it.’ I was as sure of that as I was of my own name.

‘Ah, ah,’ it said. ‘So I must help you. I have been told this by another of you, by others of you. I helped the one called Queynt. I helped the one called Mavin. I helped the one called Bartelmy, though she did not know it.’

‘Bartelmy is my mother,’ I said. ‘Mavin is Peter’s mother. Fate, Ganver. Do you believe in fate?’

‘I have believed only in Lorn. Is there something other than Lorn?’

‘I don’t know, Ganver. Truly I don’t. But at this moment, I think it would be wise for us to assume there is at least something else we can call upon. Call it fate or what-you-will, still we had better believe.’

The big old Eesty was silent so long I thought we had offended it mortally and it might not speak to us again. Finally, however, it said, ‘You accused me of complicity. Before we go further, tell me if you accuse me still?’

I couldn’t say anything. The old being was obviously so shattered by it all, it was hard for me to tell it what I really thought. Peter, however, seemed to have it well in hand. Of course, Peter was impervious to some of the feelings that had been floating around, which had cushioned him somewhat. Now he stood very straight on a heap of gray vacancy. I could visualize him in his own shape, his thumbs hooked into his belt as he sometimes posed when he was being judicious.

‘I would not judge you wrong to have killed every man, woman, and child upon Lorn for the destruction we did,’ he said once more. ‘That would have been self-defense. Nor would I have blamed you if you had killed the Eesties who rebelled against you and against Lom and against all that was good in following the Oracle. But I judge that you have betrayed Lom also, for you retreated from the fray and did not move to assist and had to be winkled out by me and Jinian. If you had done nothing else, you could have struck at them when the Bell fell in. All the beribboned ones were frightened then and in disarray. But you didn’t. So you are culpable, and so are we, and that’s my judgment.’

I thought of Mavin’s story in which she had said, ‘Once you’ve interfered, you simply have to go on. You can’t say it isn’t your responsibility.’ I wanted to laugh, somehow, even though there was nothing at all to laugh about and Ganver would probably get angry and do something drastic to us at any moment for what we’d said already.

But that didn’t happen. It simply stood there looking inward at something we would never see, in a sadness too deep to measure. And at last it said, ‘Then I must atone. If it is not too late for atonement. And your safety must come first because the Oracle threatens you, Jinian Star-eye.’

‘Why do you call me that?’ I asked, curious.

‘Because of the Eesty sign you wear upon your body. The sign of the eye. The sign we taught to some of your people early in their lives upon Lom, trying to teach them other ways than the way of destruction.’

‘It was you who taught the sevens?’



‘It was we who taught them some things. And we who taught the Dervishes some things. And I who laid myself upon Queynt to teach him some things also, after he had been abused by those....’

‘The Dervishes believe you are one of the old gods, Ganver. Is that true?’

The being before us was silent. Perhaps stunned? Perhaps offended. ‘I am to the old gods as you are to me, Jinian,’ it said at last in a voice that shook a little. ‘We are not unlike, and yet we are not equal in what we are.’

Ah, so it would at least allow we were not unlike. ‘I thought you hated us.’

‘We hated what you did. In some of you we could find no bao at all. Some of you did not have it. Would never have it. You have a type of person who assists at birthing. . . .’

‘Midwives.’

‘Your midwives. One of the Talents given by Lom allowed them to seek bao in your children, to let only those young live who had it. Perhaps, if the midwives had been more respected . . .’

I took the pendant out of the neck of my shirt, staring at it. I had worn it ever since Tess-Tinder-my-hand had given it to me when I was a child. Tess the midwife. Who had, evidently, found some bao in me. Something about the shape tickled at my memory. Someone had said something about it. Someone else had called me Star-eye recently. The memory fled away, refusing to be caught, leaving a trail I sniffed at. The memory was important. Why couldn’t I hold it? ‘What does the star-eye mean?’ I asked.

‘It is a lesson which must be learned from observation,’ it said. ‘We say, “Watch and learn.” It is a knowledge with five parts. Though we have no midwives, it is a knowledge we have always believed all Eesties have at birth, as the warnet knows the meaning of his hive and the gnarlibar the meaning of his teeth.’ Ganver spoke in a grieving voice, and yet there seemed no reason for sadness in what it had said.

We hung there in the haze, nowhere. At the edges of vision were roiling movements as though something struggled to shape itself. Inside my head - or what passed for my head in the Eesty shape - there was similar roiling. It was Peter who broke the lengthy silence.

‘It is profitless to discuss this now,’ Peter said. ‘We must do something, Ganver. The Oracle is hunting Jinian. Is she safe here?’

‘We are between forevers here,’ the star replied. ‘The gray land in which nothing changes. Though the Oracle cannot find us, we can do nothing here. Of such a space was Ganver’s Grave created. It is a space in which nothing may occur.’

We hung there a time longer, saying nothing, meditating, I suppose, on all we had seen and heard. It would do no good to stay where we were. At last I sighed.

‘Take us out of here, Ganver. If we can do nothing here, we must leave the place.’

It nodded. We spun once more, out through the flickering lights of memory travel. Ganver gasped, and I glimpsed a pursuing shape, wildly flapping. In an instant we were in the gray once more.

‘The Oracle?’ I asked hopelessly. ‘Did it find us?’

‘It caught sight of us.’ A pause, the silence of thought. I perceived in Ganver a slight red flush, as of the merest hint of anger. ‘The Oracle seeks these shapes we wear. So, we will shape ourselves differently.’ Ganver turned to Peter. ‘You, I will take to the edge of the Maze, where you may go away before it knows you are gone. The Oracle seeks three, not two.’ Ganver turned to me. ‘I will return to hide you away where it will not find you, then I will trick the Oracle away, far away, to a place from which it cannot return quickly.’

‘But . . . but,’ said Peter.

‘It’s all right,’ I murmured at him, feeling something inside me melt like hot sugar, a flood of bittersweet anguish. ‘It’s all right, Peter. Go, get out of here. One of us has to get back to Himaggery and Mavin and the rest. They have to know about the Daylight Bell. About the Tower in Old South Road City. About the Oracle and the blue crystals and how all this started. See if you can find Murzy. Tell her I need her.’

‘But, but,’ he said again, his body slumped into a tragic pose, like a clown’s. ‘Where will I find you? I can’t leave you. Jinian, I just can’t!’

‘Meet me in Old South Road City, Peter. Where the fragments of the Bell will still be, buried there under the ruins. Oh, they must be there. We must see to recasting the Bell, Peter. Meet me there. With all the help you can bring, and as soon as you can.’ Privately I thought I might not live to meet him. If the Oracle was after me, it would find me eventually. As though I were a Seer. I knew we would fight, the Oracle and I, and I had no hope of the battle between us coming out in my favor. Even if I were defeated, we might not lose everything if Peter had a chance to get away. So I thought, glad of the Eesty shape which did not show my emotions. The shape was calm. Inside was a whirling pool of fear and love, loathing and longing.

I had the feeling that Ganver was looking at me closely, though nothing in that enigmatic Eesty shape actually seemed to peer. Never mind. I leaned against Peter, star to star, every part of my body pressed against him. For a moment there was this ecstatic flow, then he was pulled away.

‘We have no time for mating now,’ said Ganver in a tone of prissy concern. ‘And you are only two.’

I laughed to keep from weeping. ‘We were not mating, Ganver. And among our kind, it only takes two. Take him away. And keep him safe.’

I turned away so Peter could not see me crying, forgetting for a moment that this shape didn’t cry. And in a moment I was alone in the gray, watching the roiling shapes at the edge of my sight, trying not to feel utterly alone.

Four

Peter’s Story: The Flichthawk

At sunset, Ganver brought me out of the Maze at its southern edge, which would be to the north of the Shadowmarches, somewhere west of the River Haws in its upper reaches. The creature took pains to tell me where I was and point the best direction of travel before releasing me from its enchantment to my own Peter-shape once more.

I stood back from it and bowed in as courtly a manner as I could manage, considering the sudden

acquisition of arms and legs which felt quite foreign to me. It stood there looking at me. I suppose one may say 'looking,' though when I had been inside that shape it had been rather more like tasting. Can one taste a shape? A color? Certainly I had done so as an Eesty. 'My thanks,' I said at last, realizing it expected something from me. 'Will you try to protect her? Please.'

It nodded. I knew enough of Eestiness to realize there was no promise more binding than this nod. It agreed to do what it could, and no documents or oaths were necessary.

'I'm going to fly,' I said. 'As fast as possible. Tell her I'll be waiting.'

It sighed. When it spoke, the voice was breathy and sad once more, without any of that anger it had displayed recently. 'Your Talent is of Lorn,' said Ganver. Then it pointed down the hill we were standing on. I looked, at first not seeing what was indicated, then realizing that great stretches of the forest were dead. 'Your Talent is of Lorn,' it repeated. 'And Lom dies.'

Experimentally, I Shifted an arm. It went into the shape I wanted for it, feeling about the same as usual. 'I'll be careful,' I said.

'Husband your power,' Ganver directed. 'Use it carefully. Go in the day, where there are sun-warmed places. Remember the Shadowbell has rung.'

I considered this. Power from the sun wouldn't be influenced by Lom's weakness, though my Talent might. If there were dangerous shadows about, they could only be seen in daylight. Ganver had given me good advice, for which I was grateful. I bowed again before turning to make my way down the hill. It was evening, and I needed to find somewhere safe to hole up until morning.

There were shadows, not many. Until I came out of the Maze, there had been nothing much to attract them. They seemed undisturbed by my passing, rising in my wake to flutter gently in the air before settling again. I wondered, as Himaggery must have wondered in his time, as I know Mavin had wondered, what it was the shadows wanted, what it was that shadows felt.

There was a rocky wall above a small stream halfway down the slope of the forest. The wall had a hole in it large enough to sleep in. We might have been in the Maze for days or for a season. However long it had been, we had not slept in that time. Now I felt the need for sleep, and something about the place reminded me of my travels in Schlaizy Noithn. As a wanderer in that strange place, needing rest and peace, I had found both in pombi shape in a hollow tree. I found both again in similar shape on this evening. A pombi with weapons on his paws and fangs in his jaws, a pombi who could fit into a hole, leaving no room for shadows.

It was warm in the hollow. The air breathed coolly upon my face. The agonies of the world slipped away in the comfort of the moment. Sleep tugged at me, but so did thoughts of Jinian. I did not want to sleep for fear I would dream of something else.

When I was young, in Schooltown, I had not much considered love. The first love I'd believed in had been Mandor's for me, and that had proved false. The first true love I'd seen had been Mertyn's for me, and I had not thought of it as love at all. Mertyn was my thalan, of course, Mavin's full brother, but I hadn't known of the relationship until after leaving Schooltown so did not much regard it when I found out. The next love I saw was the love of Yarrel for his long-lost sister, Izia, taken by a Shifter, so it was said. That I believed in well enough, for when he learned I was Shifter, too, it had cost me his friendship. In the meantime, I had lusted after the Immutable girl, Tossa, the one who had died. And after Silkhands, in a sort of brotherly way. And after Izia herself, though I think it was really Yarrel I longed for.

At last I had taken up with Jinian, without any intention of loving her at all. And yet I had dreamed about her sometimes. I dreamed she was sitting in a window, leaning down to hand me something marvelous. I dreamed she was in danger and needed me. I could not escape thinking of her. Oh, yes, she irritated me. From the first times we were together, she chivied me this way and that. But it got so I could not think of myself without thinking also of Jinian. I wanted her near. Wanted to argue with her. Wanted to touch her. Wanted to tease her. Wanted to make love to her -wanted to.

And couldn't, of course, because of that damn oath of hers. I had come close to breaking that oath, telling myself I'd do it by force if necessary, but good sense prevailed. Mavin had said it often enough. A man who forces a woman is no true man. He is only a thing. Without soul, said Mavin, 'Without bao,' I said to myself. Jinian would not love one without bao, I supposed. Better wait than woe.

Sol thought, half-dreaming, letting the dream come at last. I slept, and when I woke I could not remember what the dream had been.

I came down to sit upon sun-warmed rock thinking of Jinian once more with an accustomed degree of frustration. I would go south because it needed doing, but also because Jinian said go south. I would wait in the Old South Road City because there would be work there to do, but also because Jinian had said she would meet me there. My body did not move, however, and I did not Shift wings, for I was closest to her where I was and did not want to leave her. If this is love, then love is what it is. If love is something worse than this, I do not care to know about it.

The rock wall faced east. It heated quickly under the morning sun. Shaking myself back into a sense of duty, I took that heat to change myself into a flying thing, sleek and shapely, blue below and dark above, like a fish with wings. I had a quick, unreasonable longing for Chance. 'Brother Chance,' I would have said, 'get yourself on my back and we'll go find that sportive widow of yours in Mip.' Or had it been Pouws or some other place? 'Brother Chance, get yourself on my back and clutch tight with your legs, because I'm scared to death.' Fine thing for a Gamesman, a Shifter, fine thing for the son of a Wizard. I was scared, and it took a bit of time before I realized it wasn't me - or certainly not only me - I was frightened for.

At last it was the shadows that moved me. I saw them trembling beneath the trees, fluttering as though about to fly. I did not want to encounter them in the air so thrust downward with wings long warmed in the morning sun and launched myself to spiral above the stone, where an updraft lifted me higher and higher.

From above, I could see how the world died. Throughout the Shadowmarches were leprous patches of dead forest. All down the River Haws were mud slides and eruptions of red and yellow smoke, as though great pustules had broken from beneath the skin of the world. So suddenly. So long hidden, and now so suddenly the illness broke forth. And yet it is the way of some sicknesses, so Healer Silkhands used to say, to give no sign while they eat away inside, then break through when it is almost too late to do anything about them.

It was the filthy smokes that had killed the trees. Looking down from my height, I could see creatures fleeing from shadow to light, from dead to living. Tree rats in little bunches, darting like bats across clearings. Bunwits, large and small. A follow of wild fustigars and a prowl of pombis moved into my sight and away again as I circled, and even from the height I could hear the cries of birds driven from their nests by shadows.

'Brother Chance,' I said to my absent friend, 'this is a rotten bad place we've come to.'

‘Then best get out of it. boy,’ he absently replied.

Which I did, winging away to the south over the blotched forests and the rising humors of decay. I’d had some practice with wings in that last trip, and a Dragon at the Bright Demesne had given me a few pointers. In my whole life, I’d done wings only briefly once or twice before. I hadn’t really understood the proper proportion of wing to body, the way wings could lift almost by themselves, the length-to-width ratio necessary for endless soaring flight. On the way back from visiting Mertyn, I’d experimented as the Dragon had suggested. This shape was a good one, one that could well have carried me over the Western Sea. Since I was not permitted to be with Jinian anyhow, I might as well have gone over the Western Sea. This thought upset me; I lost the proper structure at the ends of my wings and dropped a good part of a league before I got it right again.

I did have sense enough to stick to the places where warm updrafts gave me the lift I needed. Far ahead, jagged against the southern sky, lay the southern mountain rim of the Shadowmarches. From above those peaks I could look down on Cagihiggy Creek, upon what little was left of the Blot, on Schlaizy Noithn.

Upon the ice caverns, where lay one hundred thousand frozen men and women.

I tilted a wing to steer a little west. The cavern was the closest place where I might find someone, and whether anyone was there or not, it would make good sense to check the caverns before I went farther.

Below me the land was in ferment. Shadow bulks rose upon it, bubbling upward, subsiding once more. I circled, looking behind me. The air held roiling wings of shadow. Not near me, particularly, simply there, both high and low. I could see places that looked as though the air trembled, quivered, where a kind of grayness was. Once having seen them, I made a circle every few leagues, being sure that none of the patches was near me.

Noon came above the Shadowmarch mountains. Below, the land sloped down in a long basin, east to where Hell’s Maw had been, where Pfarb Durim still stood - unless it had vanished in the years I had been gone. I had not flown above it on my return to Jinian. West the basin bent to run both north and south; north into a cul-de-sac rumored to be the site of a Bamfug Demesne, southward to the Blot. The cavern lay north of the Blot, hidden in a curl of broken mountain, the way to it blocked by falls from the time the mountain had exploded, when the Magicians were destroyed. My doing, at least partly. And mother Mavin’s. I found myself glad that Quench and some of the other techs had escaped, but I was not generally sorry the place was gone. An evil place; based on an evil custom.

Ahead and to my right a swimming dot plunged about the sky in erratic flight. I Shifted eyes to see it, making telescopic lenses, wondering what would make any flier dodge about so.

It was the Flichthawk! Jinian’s Flichthawk, coming from the west, carrying something large, pursued by shadow!

It dropped and darted, dived and soared, mighty wings pumping hard as it fought to gain altitude. Behind it the shadow came, effortlessly, fluttering, dropping as the Flichthawk dropped, soaring as the Flichthawk soared. I beat my way toward it, hurrying, wondering even as I did so what possible help I might be, answering myself immediately that I might carry part of the Flichthawk’s burden, for it was very heavily laden.

I came beneath it, calling to it as I came. ‘Flichthawk! I will carry one of your baskets!’ It had two, one

in each mighty set of talons. I beat upward, slipping sideways to avoid a flicker of shadow at my side, then the other way as it closed on me. Gamelords, but his shadow was persistent, and fast.

I came just beneath the mighty bird, heard its heaving breath, heard the thunder of its heart. There was something almost like panic in its eyes.

I don't know what made me do it. It wasn't reasoned out at all. Just memory and instinct working together. I saw the shadow. I remembered how the Daylight Bell had driven it away, how at dusk the Daylight Bell's sweet resonance had cleared the city. I changed the chords of my throat and cried out, cried with the voice of the Bell \_\_\_\_

Once, twice, and the shadows fled.

We dropped from the sky, Fritchhawk losing one of his baskets as he fell. It tumbled down and down, breaking upon the earth to shed a sapphire radiance far upon the dusty ground. When we landed, I stood near him, panting. I heard the thunder of my own heart. I had never flown so high.

'Where did you hear the Bell?' cried the Fritchhawk in a voice of heartbreaking woe.

'In the Maze,' I mumbled. 'In the Great Maze, from a time very long ago.'

'I had never thought to hear it again.'

'You will hear it again,' I promised. 'We will recast it in the Old South Road City. We will build the Tower once more.' I was not at all certain of this, but it seemed a comforting thing to say.

'We will build little unless we can gather up again what I have spilled,' it cried. I remembered the crystals then and began wandering aimlessly about, looking for them. There must have been thousands of them in the basket.

And as we were wandering all futile in the underbrush, trying to pick up the crystals, we heard voices coming through the trees. I faded into the shrubbery. Fritchhawk somehow vanished. I crouched.

'I heard your voice, Peter, Mavin's son,' cried the voice. 'Come out of there.'

Someone else was mumbling, a rhythmic kind of chant. It ended with four words spoken loudly, clearly. 'Where Old Gods Are.' Abruptly the Fritchhawk stood forth, looking surprised, as though unable to help himself. The bushes shook at the edge of the clearing, and six women came through. Two old ones. Two middle-aged. One not much older than I, one younger. They did not need to introduce themselves. I knew at once who they were. The other members of Jinian's seven.

'Well,' said one of the middle-aged ones with some asperity in a clear, demanding voice. 'What were you hiding from? Ghosts?'

I bowed. This could only have been Cat Candleshy. 'We have just escaped the shadow, ma'am. And dropped a valuable cargo in doing so. Now we are faced with gathering up thousands of the blue crystals, scattered over leagues of earth, no doubt.'

'A well-spoken thing,' said the beautiful one, who was little older than I. Margaret Foxmitten. It had to be. 'Is this flying thing really Jinian's Peter?'

‘Should you call him a thing?’ This was the shy one, Sarah Shadowsox.

‘Why not? It looks like a thing.’ The other older one, Bets Battereye, with the no-nonsense braids across her head. Indeed I was a winged thing, so I did not take offense.

The white-haired one had said nothing as yet. When she did, I knew it was Murzemire Hornloss. Murzy. ‘Where’s Jinian, Peter? Is she all right?’

I nodded. ‘Ganver’s looking after her. She’s still in the Maze, trying to stay clear of the Oracle.’

‘What was that ringing sound we heard?’ This was the youngest, scarcely more than a child, still with baby fat on her arms. Dodie.

It was the Fritchhawk who answered. ‘That was Peter, pretending to be the Daylight Bell. For which I owe him a boon.’

‘Did you really do that, Peter? How clever.’ This was Murzy. ‘I suppose you heard it in the Maze? Is it true, as Mind Healer Talley says, that the Maze is the memory of Lorn?’

‘Is it true that there are guides?’

‘Is it true that space and time are changed inside?’

‘Is it true . . .’

I waved them silent. ‘Murzy. Madam Hornloss. We have a precious load scattered wide. I am no Wizard, but it seems we need help.

‘Surely not,’ said Murzy. ‘Not with a lord of the birds at your side.’ She bowed deeply. ‘I have long known your name, but only recently your identity, great Favian.’

The Fritchhawk inclined its mighty head. ‘Perhaps Favian is still great lord of the birds, ma’am. If the sickness is not too close. If the shadow is not nigh.’ It called into the sky and was answered in a moment by a twittering from every side. Small birds began to gather by dozens, then hundreds, hopping about, darting here and there, their bright eyes seeking, their beaks opening to pick up crystals as though they were grains of giant wheat. It was not long before the contents of the broken basket were heaped before us. Murzy shook out a tablecloth, and we piled the crystals upon it, knotting the corners, while I answered the questions they had asked about the Great Maze. They asked a great many, and it was some time before they were satisfied.

‘Where are you going, Mavin’s son?’ Murzy asked. ‘Up to the ice caverns where the Gamesmen sleep?’

I nodded, wondering how she had known about that. Mavin, Himaggery, and I had not broadcast knowledge about the caverns, though there were a number who knew of it. ‘I thought I would stop there, yes. Then I would have come hunting you. Jinian asked me to find you, to tell you she needs you.’

‘Ah, well, we thought perhaps that was the case,’ said Cat Candleshy. ‘Some time ago Murzy suspected it might be true. And Bartelmy said something of the sort, also. Your confirmation of it now makes us glad we left Xammer when we did.’ Until that moment I had forgotten that Murzemire Hornloss was a Seer.

‘We’ll go on north to her, boy. You get on your way. Don’t try that bell sound again unless you must. It will only work when it comes as a surprise. It could not have been the sound of the Daylight Bell alone which kept the shadow at bay, but then you probably know that.’

They nodded at me then and went on toward the north, across the Shadowmarches, as though they were out for an afternoon stroll. ‘So that’s a seven,’ I said. There had been no opportunity for me to meet them before Jinian and I had set out two years before, but I had heard much about them since, of course. ‘So that’s a seven.’

‘Only part of one,’ murmured the Flichthawk. ‘They are more impressive when they are complete.’

I don’t know that ‘impressive’ was quite the word I would have used. ‘Indomitable,’ perhaps. I did not worry about them further; they needed none of my concern. Instead, I faced south and asked, ‘Are you strong enough to go on? We can get to the cavern before dark. I will watch if you will carry. Or I’ll carry and you can watch.’

The Flichthawk said something about meeting the terms of the boon, which meant it had to carry. I watched, therefore, from above him, or under him, or off to one side or the other. Several times I saw roiling air away in the distance, but nothing approached us. Evidently the surprise of the Bell sound had been enough for a temporary surcease.

We came to the cavern before dusk, slipping in along the fold of hills to find it, spotting it at last by the firelight gleam in the cavern’s mouth. I started to lose my shape and knew that one of the Immutables must be present, so I turned and landed some distance away, coming the remaining distance on my own two feet, naked as a fish.

The governor of the Immutables, Riddle, was there with Mertyn and Quench and a smallish crowd of men and women who could have been techs or pawns or Immutables. When they saw the Flichthawk slanting down out of the evening sky, there was a great hoorah, and Mertyn came running to the rock shelf, where he landed just about the time I arrived, puffing. He hugged me, and I him, and someone fetched me some clothing. Then we stood merely looking at one another until an outcry aroused our attention.

The Flichthawk had set down its burdens, knocked several dozen of the workmen down with its wings, then taken off again. I saw it circling high above me, moving off to the south while the workmen exclaimed and shouted. It was going toward Chimmerdong, I supposed. Jinian had said it preferred to live in Chimmerdong. I waved, not knowing whether it saw the gesture or not. Then they were all around me, pulling me along toward the tents and barracks they had set up just inside the cavern, invisible from above.

‘We’ve been waiting for you, boy,’ said Quench. ‘Waiting for those crystals, rather. Didn’t want to start until we had them. Important things, those.’

‘Very,’ affirmed Riddle, punching me lightly on one arm. ‘Good to see you, Peter. We didn’t really expect you just yet, but we’re glad to have you here. A matter has come up. ...’

‘It’s the resurrection machine,’ said Mertyn. ‘It’s in good repair, and they can start using it anytime, but the best they can do is bring back twenty-five or thirty a day. At that rate, it will take twelve years to get all the frozen Gamesmen awake, and yet the crystals you gave us urge haste.’



‘It’s more than mere urging, Mertyn,’ I said, trying not to sound too panicky about it. ‘We don’t have twelve years. It is questionable if we have even a season left.’ And I told them about the deadly yellow crystals and the tragedy of the Maze while they exclaimed and sighed and shook their heads. ‘We’ll have to do something faster,’ I concluded.

‘It seems to me that something was mentioned about using Demons? Demons and Healers, wasn’t that what you did on the Wastes of Bleer? I couldn’t quite remember.’ This was Mertyn.

Of course they could use Demons and Healers. Silkhands the Healer and Didir the Demon had wakened Thandbar. After which Didir and Dealpas - also a Healer - had wakened others. ‘Didir should have remembered,’ I said half-angrily. ‘She did it, and it wasn’t that long ago.’

‘I’m sure she would have remembered, Peter, but she’s down at the High Demesne. It’s something any Demon and any Healer could do, do you think?’ This was Riddle, sounding very uncomfortable about something.

‘I should think so.’

‘Then I think our strategy is obvious,’ said Quench. ‘Sort out the bodies in there, use the machine to wake the Healers and Demons first - Gamelords, what a job it will be to sort out both bodies and blues and be sure they match - then get teams of them resurrecting the others.’

‘I would have thought Didir would have been here to help you. She and Dealpas.’ The last time I had seen her, she had been at the Bright Demesne, with Barish-Windlow.

They looked at one another, shifting from foot to foot very uncomfortably. It was Mertyn who sighed at last and invited me into his tent. ‘Come in, my boy. I’m afraid we have bad news.’

He hummed and hawed until I was half-crazy with it. I don’t know what it was about Mertyn that made him so irritating; perhaps because he was so cautious not to use Beguilement (which was the Talent of Rulers) on me that he went the other way. He could not even be normally sympathetic without worrying whether he was being manipulative. After a time I grew weary of it and said, ‘Mertyn, quit being diplomatic and tell me. Something’s happened to Mavin?’

‘No. No, not Mavin.’

‘Himaggery then. He’s dead.’

‘Gamelords, boy! What would make you think that?’

‘You would! You’re dodging all over the place, not telling me what’s happened. What has happened?’

‘It’s the Bright Demesne. It seems to be under siege.’

I sagged. Bad enough, but not as bad as I’d feared. ‘How did you find out? Who’s doing it? Is it a Game?’

‘In a manner of speaking, yes. We sent an Elator with a message for Himaggery, and he came back saying he couldn’t deliver it. Game has been declared, and the place is shut off. The two main players seem to be a Witch named Huldra and a Basilisk named Dedrina Dreadeye. Ah. I see you know them.’

‘I do, yes. Yes, Mertyn. Indeed I do.’ As I did. Huldra was, I hoped, the last of her family. I had done away with all the others, one way or another. As for Dadrina Dreadeye, she was Jinian’s enemy, which made her mine also. ‘Who’s in the Bright Demesne?’

‘Himagery. Barish. I think all the Gamesmen of Barish as well, though some of them could have left before the siege was laid. Oh, that girl, the one Jinian sent from a place called Fangel. The Elator did manage a few shouted messages before the besiegers came too close.’

‘Sylbie? And the baby?’

Mertyn blushed. ‘According to the Elator who saw her on the walls with the child. Do I understand the baby is yours?’

‘It is, and honorably got, Mertyn, so don’t make faces. Jinian fully understands the situation. So who else is there? How about Mavin?’

‘Mavin had gone before the siege, I think. I still haven’t heard from Mavin. She left another of those enigmatic clues of hers, and there’s been no time to figure it out. Something about the best apples to bake upon the hearth are those from one’s own orchard. She’s really quite maddening at times.’

‘No reason given for the siege?’

‘We have no idea why the siege, but the Gamesmen have turned up in overwhelming numbers and with an unfair advantage as well. They’re using shadows. Which is why my Elator couldn’t get in and none of the people in the Demesne can get out.’

I smiled. The three who were watching me looked at one another, wondering if I’d lost my mind. ‘My expression isn’t one of joy.’ I said. ‘It’s just that you seem at a loss for an explanation, and I can give you one. Huldra and Dadrina were sent south to dose us all with poisonous purple crystals. You, Mertyn, and Quench and Riddle. Everyone at the Bright Demesne. However, that could be done easily enough through spies and Elators without need for a siege. So, it’s obvious the siege is for some other reason, probably to do precisely what it is doing, which is to keep Himagery and Barish bottled up. To keep them from coming here,’ I laughed. ‘Huldra was instructed to come here and destroy everything, but she doesn’t know about you, Riddle. With you here, no Seer can

peer into the cavern. So, they don’t know the resurrection is already beginning. Make sure they don’t find out!’

The Immutable frowned. It was his Talent to form a barrier against the use of any other Talent. Barish and Queynt were said to have bred his people long ago in the early years of the millennium as a kind of defense against the unlimited Talents of the Gamesmen. Now he objected, ‘If Demons and Healers are to be used to raise the frozen Gamesmen, we Immutables must withdraw. Else their Talents will not work.’

‘Withdraw, Riddle, but only so far as you must, and let a good rank of you camp between the cavern and Lake Yost, where the Bright Demesne is. Let Huldra’s Seers struggle to get a vision through your people. Let them try to get an Elator through. They won’t be able to penetrate the barrier you’ll make. They’ll continue to try, however, so be on your guard. Sooner or later they’ll send a force to try and destroy the place.’

‘Why does this Witch want the resurrection stopped?’ Mertyn was puzzled by this, as he should have been.

I had thought about this for many hours during the flight from the Maze. ‘She cares nothing for the resurrection, thalan. But the one who gives her orders, that one cares that the resurrection should not take place. Huldra thinks she is doing this for the giants in the northlands, giants who are dead, though Huldra probably doesn’t know it. Dead or not, I do not think it was ever the giants who decided upon this. They were huge and powerful, but they were not subtle. They were cruel but not amused at their cruelty. No, they were guided by another mind, a mind more subtle and more depraved, though they never knew it.’

I told them about the Oracle.

There were expressions of consternation, vows of retaliation, loud expostulations from Quench, mut-terings from Riddle. When all their exclamations and posturing were done, however, the truth was still there before us. Lom was dying, and avenging ourselves against the Oracle had to take second place to that. When that understanding finally came, also came silence.

‘You must get the frozen Gamesmen moving,’ I said gently. ‘The Demons and Healers to raise the others. To raise Tragamors to move the stones of the Ancient Roads and set them in place again. To raise Sorcerers to hold power for them. Sentinels to keep watch against the shadows. Armigers and Elators to carry word across the breadth of Lom. Even the Necromancers, Seers, and the Gamesmen of mixed Talents. All who can must go south, to the site of the Old South Road City,’ and I told them where it could be located, using Stoneflight Demesne as a guide. ‘The city must be raised up again. The Tower must be rebuilt. It must be done as soon as possible, and even that may be too late.’

‘All beneath the mountain were chosen because they were good,’ I said. ‘By which is meant, I suppose, that they were unselfish persons of perception. And the lords of fate know we need those qualities now.’

‘I have not heard that oath,’ said Mertyn, ‘What lords are those?’

I laughed, perhaps a little shrilly, for I was very tired. ‘The lords of fate? Those we pray are larger than Lom. If nothing is larger than Lom, then whom shall we swear by if Lom dies?’ They smiled at this, as I had intended, though not much.

‘That is all we have to do, then?’ asked Riddle.

Mertyn answered, shaking his head. ‘Yes, that’s all. To undo every wrong man has done. Rebuild every road. Replant every forest. Clean every river. Send the message that is in these crystals to every being who walks, swims, flies upon the world. ...’

‘Stretch the crystals as far as they will go,’ I advised them. ‘Have Healers try laying their hands upon other creatures. The Eesties convey messages in this way, and Healers may be able to do it also.’

I sighed. The sleep that my pombi self had had the night before seemed very long ago. And I was worried about Jinian. I seemed to see her face before me, that troubled, slightly concentrated expression she so often wore. ‘Danger,’ her vision face said. ‘Danger, Peter.’ I took a handful of the blue crystals from the basket and secreted them in a pocket. Something told me I would need them.

‘Well, then, we’ll be at it,’ said Riddle. ‘And what about you, boy?’

‘Why,’ I said, ‘I have no choice, really. Someone must carry this word to the Bright Demesne.’

Five

### Jinian's Story: The First Lesson

Time in the gray spaces between memories was not an easy thing to judge. I might have been there for a season, or perhaps for a few breaths. However long it may have been, there seemed to be a good amount of thinking time. About the time I had decided to count my pulse as a way of measuring - realizing with a panicky sense of loss that the Eesty shape had no pulse I could detect - Ganver came back, sliding through the gray walls of the place like a fish into a shallow.

'Is Peter out?' I asked.

'Out of the Maze, yes. It is evening in the world. He will fly in the morning, south to the lands of your people.'

I must have shown some emotion at that, though how it could be perceived in that Eesty shape I don't know.

'He is in your bao?' Ganver asked. 'Your wholeness, your ubiety?' Wholeness and whereness. I had not thought of it in those terms, but it was true.

'Yes,' I said. 'Peter is my . . .'

'Bao-lus,' said Ganver, giving me the right Eesty word for it. 'I, too, have experienced this. Once. Among our kind, it takes five to become bao-lus. And only from the perfection of bao-lus does a new form come. You have no child as yet? No. There is an oath among the sevens. I had forgotten. Well, we five had a child. Among our people we say "a following of perfection."'

It was silent, then, for a very long time. I did not want to interrupt its thoughts. Finally, Ganver shivered and turned to and fro, as though shaking its head. 'I will take you now where you may be safely hidden while I lead the Oracle away. ...'

I shook my top end. 'Before we do that, Ganver, there's something else we can do.'

'Do?' it asked, as though 'doing' anything were foreign to its ability. Well, in a sense, I suppose that was true of Eesties. They had never really 'done' much except buzz about carrying messages. At least those of Ganver's generation hadn't.

'There are a great many things which might be done,' I said, not wanting to give it any time to think the matter over. 'The first one that comes to mind concerns how memory works. From what you've said, I don't suppose Lorn is remembering everything all the time, simultaneously. At least my mind doesn't work that way.'

'No,' said Ganver stiffly, not unbending but condescending to explain. 'As we messengers move through memory, Lorn remembers. Part of the duty of the Eesties is to move through memory, wandering, dancing through every part, recalling all past time to Lom's consciousness.'

'Well, since you've been holed up in your grave there, Ganver, who's been doing the remembering? Don't tell me. I already know. The Oracle and his friends, right?'

It nodded. If an inclination of the top three points can be considered a nod, that's what it did, and it did

it in that superior manner that made me very angry.

I stamped one point of me. ‘You know,’ I said in a conversational tone, ‘mankind is no great shakes in the holiness department. I think the Shadowpeople have it all over us, quite frankly. But I’ll stack us against your people any day, great Ganver. Half of you are fanatics and the other half are quitters.’

This was not really a very diplomatic thing to say, nor was it at all kind. I repented of it immediately but was angry enough to go on in dogged fashion, ‘If the Oracle is in the Maze with its brethren, Ganver, we can take it for granted it is circulating repeatedly among the worst possible memories. It is undoubtedly recalling everything it can of destruction. Of pain. Of the fall of the Bell. All that. And while that is going on, how many of you elder Eesties are sequestered away, not doing anything?’

‘Too many,’ the Eesty said. It was said so humbly I was ashamed of myself for the outburst. ‘It seems even one is too many.’

‘Well, the point is, of course, that if there are enough of your generation - enough who aren’t “Brotherhood” - I’d suggest a thing you might do immediately is to start circulating among the pleasanter events of history. Recall to Lom’s memory some pleasanter times. Cheer it up a bit.’

Ganver did not reply. Even I had to admit to myself that when talking about an entire world, ‘cheering up a bit’ did sound undignified.

‘And another thing,’ I went on stubbornly, ‘is to figure out whether any particular memory can be destroyed.’

‘Destroyed!’ The Eesty was aghast. You’d think I’d suggested murdering its entire race.

‘Yes, damn it, Ganver. The memory in which the Bell is destroyed. If we could just get rid of that one! If Lorn didn’t remember it was gone - don’t you see, if it didn’t know the Bell was gone, it might act as though it weren’t.’

‘But the Bell is gone!’

‘Where did it come from in the first place? Lorn made it, didn’t it? Constructed it? Eesties didn’t make it, did they? I thought not. I think it’s like newts, I really do.’

‘Newts?’ Ganver evidently didn’t know the word. Well, why should the Eesty know about newts? Newts aren’t exactly prepossessing, and they certainly aren’t native to this world because they have tails.

‘Newts. If you cut off a newt’s foot, it grows another one. I think it’s because a newt is so stupid it doesn’t know the foot is gone, so another one just pops out. Somewhere inside the newt is the idea of footness, and footness takes over when it is needed. You cut off my foot, on the other hand, and I know very well it’s gone, so another one just doesn’t grow. Well, if Lorn didn’t know the Bell was gone ...’

‘You think another one might pop out?’ Ganver sounded exactly like Murzy, that same tone of slightly outraged elder dignity.

‘I think it’s worth the chance, whether it does or not. Even if another Bell didn’t pop out, it would make Lorn feel better not to remember the actual act of destruction.’

The thing I was remembering really had nothing to do with newts. It had to do with that time in

Chimmer-dong when I had grodged with the D'Bor Wife, pretending to find the Daylight Bell, only to see the Bell itself, golden and glorious, sinking beneath the waves of the lake. That was the idea of the Daylight Bell, I knew it. The idea, the model, whatever. If I had seen a Daylight Bell in that distant lake, there might be more or could be more than one. If I had seen another, it must mean that Lorn could make another, several, many. If it felt like it. If it felt better!

'And if Lorn felt better, maybe it would stop making those yellow crystals that are killing everyone,' I finished, knowing I had not been particularly persuasive. Ah, well, it was mostly hunch, intuition, not reason. Still, to do that would be better than doing nothing.

'How?' asked Ganver, much to the point.

'I'm not sure whether it would work or not, but I'd start by getting some flood-chucks in, and we'd cut all the hedge away from the outside until we got to the place the memory is, then we'd tunnel underneath and collapse it and dig it all out and carry it away. I mean, Ganver, I don't know how Lom's mind works, but I do know that part of it is material. Real. Lom-flesh, so to speak. So if we take the real flesh part away, then the memory will have to go with it, won't it?'

Ganver did not indicate comprehension. I decided to try again. 'Look, sometimes a Gamesman will get whacked on the head. After which, at least once in a while, that Gamesman forgets things because part of its brain has been injured or destroyed. So if Lom's memory is at all like other creatures' memories, and if we're very careful about it, why couldn't we remove just this one memory?'

Ganver breathed a word that I could only translate as 'Sacrilege' though what it said was, 'Corruption of the holy reality greatly to the discomfiture of those whose job it is to maintain the status quo.'

Really, this old Eesty did make me peevisish. 'Well, the real sacrilege was when young Oracle and his friends brought the Bell down, Ganver. After that, anything else that is done can't be called anything but helpful. If we could find Mind Healer Talley, she might have a better idea, but short of that, I don't know what else to do.'

'We could go to that place, to that time,' it said with a certain chill reserve. 'The Oracle would not expect to find us there soon again.'

'Yes, let's go there. Let's go outside the Maze, onto the road. I'd like to have my own shape back and eat humanish food.'

It took me to the road below the Dervishes' Pervasion, standing silent at the edge of the trees while I in my Jinian shape built a fire and made myself tea. I was fully clothed, as though I had never changed, with my pack still on my back. While I drank, it stood. While I toasted bread, it stood. Finally, it said, 'This thought of yours. This destroying of memory. It could do great damage.'

'It could. Yes. But quite frankly, I can't think of anything which would make things much worse. I don't know if you've noticed, but there's shadow all over the hillside behind us.'

'I don't know if you've noticed,' it replied, 'but the forest on the mountain to the east is dead. It would have been alive when you entered the Maze.'

Ganver was right, and so was I. I wondered how much time we had actually spent in the Maze. I remembered there had been widow's bush in bloom back at the little lake when I called up its dweller. If I wanted to hike back there, I could see how far it had come toward setting seed, which would give a

measure of the time. If it hadn't merely died. Hardly worth it. It didn't matter how much time; the fact was sufficient unto itself. There had been enough time for a forest to die. Enough time for shadow to come flowing along in a gray carpet.

'I can't think of any good reason not to,' Ganver said at last, sounding almost personlike.

I got out my things. A summons. An easy, any-first-year-Wize-ard-can-do-it summons. I couldn't. It took me three tries before I could even remember the words. 'Gamelords,' I whispered. 'Something terrible is happening.'

'Of course,' Ganver said gently. 'As Lom dies, so all our senses and skills die. Both yours and ours. Remember.'

Well, of course then I remembered. Remembered, gritted my teeth, and did the summons. Did it right, too, even though it was like wading through deep mud. Every word was an effort. This close to the bad memories, this close to the shadow, the life-force had to be at an absolute minimum.

In a few minutes, however, I heard a chirruping call from the top of the hill and saw three worried-looking chucks threading their way down the path, staying well clear of the shadow. We bowed halfheartedly. I began talking. They were the ones who had been given the blue crystal before, so they understood at once what I was talking about. Still, they conferred for a long time before agreeing. One of them went back up the trail, even more carefully, for the shadows were thicker than ever, and returned after a long while with six or seven more of them. Meantime, I'd gone back into the Maze and found the edge of the memory place.

The chucks and I decided to clear all the growth between the road and the path so we could get at the edge of the memory place. I explained carefully that they must not get onto the path itself, and if that accidentally happened, they were to stay very still in one place and I would come in after them.

They set to work. I would have liked to help, but I had brought no tools at all, and my teeth were not up to the job. By nightfall, they had all the brush cleared along the edge of the path, cleared and carried away. I asked if they could bring gobbles on the morrow, and they said yes. After which they went carefully away while Ganver took me somewhere else for the night. I don't know where, and it didn't matter. I was asleep by the time we got there.

The next day we dug out the memory. That is, I think we dug it out. The gobbles went under the path from the cleared space, tunneled it all out underneath, then let it collapse. After which Ganver and I went in at the other end of the path, watched the ship arrive, watched the moon fall, and then ducked into the crevasse, which should have brought us out into the Temple of the Bell just in time for the destruction. Instead, we came out in the bottom of the gobbles' pit. No destruction of the Bell.

Which might have meant it was gone. Which might have meant it had moved. Which might have meant nothing except that we had no access to it any more. I thanked the creatures, explaining as much as I could, and they departed.

Coincident with their departure, we heard a threatening sound, rumbling, like a mutter of thunder. 'The Oracle knows we're here,' breathed Ganver, scooping me up. I heard the sound again. A fluttering roar. Above Ganver's shoulder I could see the slope behind it. The shadows rose from it like a flock of monstrous birds. It was their fluttering we heard. 'They are controlling the shadow,' Ganver said, horrified. 'No one has controlled the shadow before.'

They were around us before Ganver could move. It did something, a kind of shifting of space. The gray, formless place was all around us, but some of the shadows had come through as well. Ganver dropped me, spun, roared, picked me up, and did the thing -whatever it was - again. We were somewhere else, only a few shadows now, fluttering madly. One of them brushed by me, so closely I felt it and shuddered, remembering being shadow bit from that time in Chimmerdong.

‘Pfowgrowl,’ snarled Ganver. ‘Would that I had a dozen of the Gardener’s shadow-eaters and I would teach these shades to leave Eesties alone.’ We fled once more, Ganver muttering as we went. ‘I’m going to leave you, Jinian, Dervish Daughter. Stay until I come for you. If you would know the meaning of the star-eye, watch and learn.’

The Eesty dropped me again; I felt it go, the shadows in close pursuit. Anger burned behind them like a lightning track through the gray. I was alone in a place, making a great crackle of broken shrubbery as I picked myself up.

A quiet glade. No sign of anything dying, not here. Dark stone buildings half-sheltered by the trees. Zell-ers grazing on the sward. Evening? Dawn? Lamplight in the windows of the place. A door opened and someone, evidently attracted by the noise I was making, called into the half-light, ‘Hello? Hello? Can we help you?’

I stepped out onto the meadow, adjusting my pack and keeping a pleasantly neutral expression on my face as I approached. ‘Hello. Yes. I seem to have lost my way.’ It was a young woman in a smock, hair drawn back in a sensible braid. Something about her reminded me of Silkhands.

I said, ‘My name is Jinian.’

‘Jinny. Do come in. I was just about to put the kettles on for the children’s wash-up, and for our tea, of course. Come into the kitchen.’ She bustled off ahead of me, down a stone-floored corridor. The ceilings of the place were low, no more than a foot or so over her head. A tall man would have had to stoop. Perhaps there were no tall men here. The place looked clean enough, and yet there was a smell . . . like a latrine. A urine smell. I twitched my nose and tried to ignore it.

She opened a heavy door, closed it behind me, and gestured me to a chair as she began rilling heavy kettles with water and hanging them on hooks above the fire. There were dozens of them, great iron things that looked heavy. She grunted when she heaved them, and I went to help her, curious. ‘Are you doing this all alone?’

She smiled at me, a tired smile. ‘Well, it’s all part of the dedication, isn’t it. Part of the saintly work. Thank you for your help, though. Since I’ve had this flux, it’s been hard to lift them.’ Her hands on the kettle handle were raw, with chapped, bleeding places.

There was a smaller kettle hung closer to the flames. I laid more wood upon the fire as she filled it, wondering who it was who cut all that wood. If she heated so much water every morning, it would take a forest full of trees to provide the heat. Before long the small kettle began to steam, and she poured water into a teapot, setting a cup before me. ‘We’ve time for a cup before wash-up.’ She sighed. ‘Now, what brings you to the Sanctuary?’

‘That’s what this place is called? The Sanctuary?’

‘Oh, yes. The Sanctuary and Church of St. Phallus. The monastery of those in service to the Sacred Seed.’ She smiled as though these words had some particular meaning to her, face glowing briefly as in



firelight. 'I'm Sister Servant Rejoice.'

'Rejoice,' I murmured.

'Just call me Sister Servant,' she corrected me. 'We don't use individual designations much. Father says we don't need them.'

'Father says that, does he,' I murmured again, sipping at my tea. I was all adrift. I understood the words she had said, but the sense of them escaped me. 'Ah, Sister Servant, can you tell me how long the . . . Sanctuary and church have been here? Historically speaking?'

She was confused by this. 'Always, Jinny. Always, since arrival. Since our Holy Founders broke with the evil under the mountain and brought away St. Phallus.'

'Evil under the mountain?'

'The monster makers. The triflers with the holy fruit. Some called them ...' She looked at the closed door before whispering, 'Magicians.'

Well. That placed it somewhat. This was evidently some offshoot from early times. 'How long ago was that, do you know?'

She shook her head. The count of years evidently didn't concern her, though the kettles did. She was watching them intently, waiting for steam to emerge from each one. As soon as the first was hot, she took it down from its hook and substituted another before tugging on a bell rope beside the door. Far off I could hear the jangle, insistent in the silence. Then voices. Approaching footsteps.

Those who came in were much like Sister Servant -were Sister Servants. Smocks, braids, tired-looking faces, chapped and bleeding hands. They took the steaming kettles and went out, leaving the last to boil for Rejoice. 'You can come with me,' she whispered. 'To see the work.'

I was too curious not to. We went down the echoing hallway to one of the rooms. In the room were half a dozen beds. On the beds were children.

So I thought. Well. An orphanage. A foundling home. I had seen such before. There was one in Xammer. We students of Vorbold's House had borrowed babies from it from time to time in order to learn child care. I knew about babies, and my heart cheered. 'I'll help you,' I said, turning to the first bed. 'I've bathed babies before.'

I started by trying to tickle it awake. It lay there, drool streaming in a gelatinous rope from the corner of its mouth, eyes open. It did not seem to see me. I turned its head toward me, and the body rolled, stiffly. This wasn't a baby. It was a child, seven or eight years old, perhaps.

I smelled it then. Dirty diapers. Making a face, I drew the covers back. 'What's the matter with . . . her? Is she sick?'

Rejoice shook her head, an expression of disapproval on her face. 'Of course not. She's perfectly all right.'

'If she isn't sick, she seems a little old to be dirtying her pants.'

‘A little slow to be toilet-trained. That’s all. Otherwise, perfectly fine. See, she’s smiling at you.’

I looked at the child. Its mouth was twisted in a grimace of pain. I started to say something, then stopped. The source of the pain was all too evident. Sores. Sores on its buttocks and between its legs. ‘It has sores,’ I said, carefully neutral. ‘Do you have medicine or a Healer for those?’

She shuddered, whispered, ‘Do not say “Healer.” Father would not have a Healer here. As bad as midwives, Healers. There’s powder on the shelf. Clean linen on the shelf. Washcloths on the shelf.’ She herself was busy with another, even older. It seemed to be a boy - man, really a man, with hair on his face. Lying in his own excrement, on a soaked bed, his face turned upward without expression.

I went back to my work. I had done worse. Not often, but on occasion. Burying was cleaner. Corpses were cleaner, even those half-decayed. When we were through, the six bodies in the beds were clean, too, and the filthy linens were piled high in a basket by the door. I leaned against a sill and thrust a window wide.

‘What are you doing!’

‘Airing out, Sister Servant. Getting rid of a little of the smell.’

‘It’s the smell of service. Nothing to repudiate. Revel in it, Jinny, for it is a holy smell.’

Holy shit, I thought to myself, wondering what madhouse Ganver had brought me to. Holy pee? - ‘How old is he?’ I asked, pointing at the man she had worked on first.

‘Bobby? Why, Bobby’s just a wee baby.’

‘He’s large for a baby.’

‘Oh, in years perhaps he is. Thirty or forty, I suppose. But he’s just a wee baby nonetheless. Slow. A tiny bit slow.’

‘When will he grow up, this Bobby?’

‘Oh, every day and every day. The therapist says he’s growing up all the time.’

‘The therapist says that?’

‘Oh, yes. You’ll have to meet Sister Servant Therapist. Well see her over breakfast. Now that the babies are all clean, we’ll feed them, then we can have our own breakfast.’

We could have our breakfast. When we had carried out the dirty linens, rinsed them in a stream, put them in kettles to be boiled over the fire, and spent an endless time spooning gruel into mouths or into gaping tubes that led into stomachs, we could have our breakfast. We assembled in the kitchen, all the Sister Servants and me. The smell of the dirty linens in the kettles was overwhelming. I could not eat. They did. I was introduced. I nodded at them over my teacup, pretending I had eaten earlier. Well, I had, sometime earlier.

‘Sister Servant says you’re interested in Bobby.’ This Sister was a little older, deep lines graven from nose to the corners of her lips, lips curved in a constant, meaningless smile. Habit held her face in that expression. She did not know how her face looked.

I nodded, noncommittal. She took it for assent. 'He's making such progress.' She made enthusiastic noises. 'We're working on toilet training.'

'Ah,' I said.

'Teaching him to make a noise when he needs to. I sit by him, and then when he does, I make a noise. Eventually, he will learn to mimic the noise, then he'll associate it with doing it, don't you know, and that will be a help. If we have a little warning, we can get a pan under him.'

'How long have you been working at this?'

'On, only about ten years - isn't it about ten, Sister Servant Rejoice? Ten years. Bobby hasn't quite got the hang of it, but he will.'

'Do you really feel there is sufficient intelligence there? To ... ah, get the hang of it?' I had seen only a shell, a body without a mind. I wondered if my eyes had tricked me.

'He makes progress,' she said stiffly. 'Every day. It doesn't matter that he's a little slow. He's a unique, valuable fruit of St. Phallus. Father says it doesn't matter whether it takes one year or a hundred. Every fruit of St. Phallus is sacred.'

I smiled, nodded. They were all looking at me intently, too intently. Sister Servant Rejoice was holding a bread knife, turning it and turning it in her hands as she looked at me, something deep and violent in her eyes. 'Of course,' I said. 'That's very true.' Sister Servant Rejoice laid down the knife. I breathed a silent sigh. 'I'd love to hear Father talk. He sounds very eloquent.'

This was the right thing to have said. They told me about Father, about the several Fathers. A few of whom were present in the priory. The rest of whom were out in the world, seeking out special fruits of St. Phallus to bring them to the Sanctuary. 'And more Sister Servants,' sighed Rejoice. 'We need more of us.'

'Don't presume,' said Sister Therapist. 'Father says don't presume. We don't need any more of us than there are, Father says. "Sufficient unto the duty are the Sisters thereof." That's what Father says.'

'I suppose the Fathers could always help,' I said innocently.

'That would not be fitting,' said Sister Therapist. 'They have higher duties than ours.'

I went again with Sister Rejoice, from room to room, place to place. I talked with Sister Therapist.

'It is my duty to structure the children's day,' she said, her voice wavering between pride and exhaustion. 'Each of the holy fruits of St. Phallus has his own program. The children in this building are being toilet-trained.'

'Can any of them walk? Crawl?'

She shook her head, making a sour mouth at me. 'Each thing in its time. After they learn one thing, then we will teach another. Those in the next building are learning to crawl.'

'Ah. And when they have learned to crawl, what then?'

She seemed doubtful. ‘We have one or two in the building by the stream. They learned to crawl long ago and now are learning to feed themselves with their hands. It would be easier if they were not so frail.’

‘Frail?’

‘Well . . .’ She looked around herself, whispering, ‘There are only two. And one of them is over eighty years old. She has forgotten her toilet training now, but

I have refused to bring her back here.’ One evidently did not discuss the age of their charges; to do so required a whisper.

I said nothing. I could say nothing. Back in Stoneflight Demesne I had had a neutered fustigar named Grompozzle. Grommy for short. It had taken me exactly six days to house-train him. He had known how to feed himself from birth. I looked at the beds around me, stinking again, the odor permeating the very stones of the place. I thought I very much wished to meet Father.

The day went on. It went on in the same way. Sister Therapist sat by Bobby, grunting whenever she smelled him. Sister Rejoice cleaned shit and pee out of endless bedsheets. Sister Someone Else spooned gruel into mouths that would not open or would not shut, down throats that would not swallow. I watched as long as I could, then went out into the forest to hit trees. I waited for Ganver, but Ganver didn’t come.

Nighttime did. Along toward dusk, a bell rang, and the Sisters left the buildings in procession, single file, winding through the woods toward a tall lamplit building with an arrangement of bell tower and chapel to one side. I followed them and filed in behind them, me being invisible as taught by the seven. To no avail, for one of the hawk-eyed men who sat in the tall chair at the front of the place saw me in the instant. His face was lean, very handsome, very stern. His eyes gleamed like a were-owl’s sighting prey when he sighted me.

The Sisters sang, not very tunefully. I couldn’t blame them. They were tired, dispirited, and they smelled. No matter how clean they tried to be, the poor things couldn’t help it. They did smell.

The tallest Father preached. He stood before us in robes of gleaming white, surrounded by the smoke of sweet incense, fondling his groin from time to time as he talked of St. Phallus. St. Phallus loomed behind the altar, erect, massive, as though ready to rape the world.

It was not the first such monument I had seen. Wherever men were ignorant and hungry for power, I had seen these things, though never one as large as this. Father fondled his groin and preached.

‘Holy fruit of St. Phallus,’ he said.

‘Clean seed planted in filthy ground,’ he said.

‘Corrupted by dirty woman-wombs,’ he said.

‘Sisters atone for being women by being Servants,’ he said. The Sisters nodded, a few of them weeping. I wondered how old they had been when they were brought here. After the service, I asked Sister Servant Rejoice. She thought she had been around eight years old.

‘Why did you decide to come to the Sanctuary?’ I asked, wondering why anyone would.

‘I didn’t decide,’ she said, astonished. ‘Oh, no, I was only a filthy woman-child. Father decided. He took me from my people; he brought me here. He saved me. Oh, I fought him, too. Threatened to run away. Father had to tie me up for a long, long time. He had to whip me before I would settle to my duty. Bless Father.’

‘Oh, yes,’ I agreed. ‘Bless Father indeed.’

From behind us in the clean, sweet-smelling place. Father watched me walk away, his intention clear in his face. I went in the front door of the other building, down to the kitchen to get my pack, and out the back door. Jinian was young and strong. Jinian could be tied up and whipped until she, too, settled to her duty. Jinian had no intention of allowing that to happen.

In the woods, from a high ridge of stone behind some bushes, I watched the place. Sure enough, it was not long before Father and two or three of his ilk came along, one of them carrying what looked very much like shackles. What was it Ganver had said, ‘Watch and learn’?

Learn what? What question had I asked? Ah, yes. I had asked what the star-eye means.

So I settled there upon the ridge, listening with some curiosity to the shouting going on below, the running about, the muffled scream of some Sister as she was slapped for letting me get away. I sat staring at the star pendant Tess Tinder-my-hand had given me. A star. With an eye in the center.

An eye. Looking out.

A star shape. With an eye, looking out.

Looking away.

Away from its own shape.

Toward ... ?

For a moment I thought I had it, but then it eluded me. I knew it was there, in the shape, in the lesson, but I couldn’t quite reach it. I struggled for a long time, chasing the thought as I might a fish in shallows, but each time it slipped through my fingers.

Then, because I felt great sorrow for the Sister Servants and pity for the flesh they tended, which mercy would not have kept alive, I did Inward Is Quiet upon all the mindless creatures that lay in the beds in those buildings below. Inward Is Quiet in the imperative mode. Forever. They would not need to be cleaned or fed again. I wondered how the Fathers would react to that. Almost I wanted to stay to find out, but Ganver returned about that time. I looked up from my work to find the Eesty watching me.

‘Have you seen?’ asked Ganver.

‘I’ve seen what’s down there, yes. I’m afraid it doesn’t explain the star-eye to me, Ganver. And I can tell you, I hate this memory.’

‘Oh,’ said Ganver. ‘This place is not part of the Maze. This place is real. It has been thus for a thousand years. These genital worshipers live well, and they are not encumbered by too much work. They have

their Servants.’

‘It need not be thus much longer,’ I told the Eesty, ‘I can set a few spells upon it to try the philosophy of those who enslave these women.’

Ganver looked at me very keenly. ‘You may punish these men, surely, for what it is they do, but they will not profit from it. Think what you do!’

Without answering, I opened my pack, took out certain things I needed. I was not truly listening to Ganver. The evil of the place was too much with me. I could not bear it.

I made a little image with a little phallus, dressed it in a bit of white fabric from my shirt, incensed it with sweet gum and resin. I named it. ‘Father,’ I called it, bathing it in the sweet smoke. Then I melted its little phallus away in the fire. I did Dream Chains to Bind It to include all the Fathers, no matter where they were. ‘You must find another saint to worship, Fathers. You no longer have the symbol of St. Phallus to comfort you.’ I wondered how they would handle that.

I put things away in my pack, suddenly uncomfortably aware that Ganver still stood there, staring at me, saying nothing. It made me self-conscious, embarrassed, and for the first time I began to consider what I had done, casting about for an explanation.

‘Think, Jinian,’ Ganver murmured at me. The voice was hypnotic, compelling. ‘Think what you do, how you feel, what you have just done. You have been angry. You sought something which was not there. Because it was not there, you punished certain creatures for its lack. Why, Jinian? Will you punish a gnat because it cannot sing? You will not have the power of the star-eye until you understand these things.’

It came back to me then, all in a flash, standing there in that dark forest with the scent of the resins still in my nostrils. I remembered where I had heard the star-eye mentioned recently before. By the Oracle. In the cave of the giants. The Seer had looked at the star-eye on my chest and had suggested the Oracle take it from me. The Oracle had refused, saying it was only a symbol, that it had no real power. I mumbled something about this, trying to put that notion together with what had just happened. Ganver, hearing me, gave a high, keening sound, like weeping - or terrible laughter.

I tried to comfort it. ‘Ganver, Ganver, do not grieve so. The Oracle is only a foolish thing. ...’ Which seemed only to make the matter worse. I could not tell what it was that grieved Ganver so. It was all part of that star-eye puzzle which it kept trying to teach me without telling me anything helpful at all.

After a long time, we left the place and went elsewhere.

Six

Peter’s Story: The Bright Demesne

I used the flying shape - which had worked quite well previously - to get as far as the mountainous scarps south of Bannerwell, stopping for the night when dark, weariness, and the chill air of evening made it imperative. There were farms along the shelving mesa lands, and I bought my dinner at one of them with civil words and appropriate coin. The shape I took was a nothing-much minor functionary type; harmless, as I thought that would do best and be least threatening in this isolated place. They fed me middling well and offered me a bed, but the pawnish farmer had a glint to his eye that boded ill for a sleeper’s safety, so I smiled and made conversation and got myself off into the forest. I had been gone but a half league and was well hidden in the brush when he came sneaking along after with a bludgeon on

his shoulder. I spent a little effort to Shift and gave him a pombi scare to last him some years. He may have stopped running in Bannerwell.

Next day took me a little south of southeast down the range to the cliffs above Long Valley and a dinner hunted by me in fustigar shape and eaten raw. From there it was a mere skip of the wings over the hills to Lake Yost. A high scarp lay at the northwestern end of the lake, and from it I could see the Bright Demesne across the waters. It was a good vantage point, but not good enough to make out details. Also, I did not wish to make any decisions until full day, considering what Mertyn had said about shadows.

When time came for the last lap, I flew slow and low and careful, among trees or down canyons, glad I had done so when I came out at last on the eastern edge of the hills. I thought at first a thunderstorm had gathered over the lake, so gray and dismal it was, then understood what I saw with some dismay. Before spying it out, I spent some time arranging myself to be unobserved: finding a rock nest set behind foliage and with a good overhang and camouflaging myself to discourage detection. Not that they were looking for me, but one could not be too careful. That was a Jinian thought. Three years ago I might not have considered it.

The Bright Demesne lies on the shore of Lake Yost. Middle River flows into the lake slightly to the north of the Demesne, and there is a bridge there. East are forests and the meetings of the roads to Vestertown and Xammer. South are farmlands reaching away for leagues until the forests begin again, and other ranges of mountains.

The Demesne is surrounded by hot springs. Even the hills behind me showed the remnants of old cones. This place had once been alive with fire pots and volcanoes, many thousand thousand years ago, so had said Windlow, the old Seer and teacher. Now only the hot springs remained, they and an occasional wisp of smoke or steam rising from a cone to the south of the High Demesne, where King Prionde and the Ogress had reigned.

So, one expected the Bright Demesne to be surrounded by clouds of waving mist; it is one of the charms of the place. In the cold seasons it is more than charming, for then the great house and the dormitories are pleasantly warm while elsewhere people go shivering about their business. The steam is white, however, and the cloud that now seemed to cover the Demesne was gray as ash.

Until recent years the Demesne had had no walls. It was Barish who had convinced Himaggery they were needed, and the Tragamors of the Demesne—who had built them - together with a hundred or so skilled pawnish craftsmen recruited from the countryside around and well paid for their work. Now the walls stretched in a loop from the lake eastward, southward, and then west to the lake again, including all the hot springs except one small one that steamed away to itself in isolation quite far to the north east. I had always called that one the ‘Porridge Pot,’ for it plopped and mumbled away to itself as the morning grain did over the kitchen fire. (Forgive me for going on and on about the setting, but you will not understand the siege unless I tell you.)

Along the lakefront a bastion of stone had been built, a kind of high quay with a crenellated wall, broken in several places by wooden gates above stairs that went down to the jetties. Thus the Demesne was surrounded on all sides by walls or heavy gates. As you will know, walls are no protection against Elators, who may flick in or out where they will. Himaggery had met this threat by channeling the power of the hot springs into a network of glowing fire which hung above the Demesne like a great inverted colander. He had used this power first at the Battle of Bannerwell, as I had good reason to remember. It was kept in place by the concentration of linked Sorcerers and Tragamors, working in shifts, or it may be by some Wizardry Himmagery and Barish had worked up between them. That is, if they were speaking to one another. They had not been when I had come to the Demesne last.

Outside these walls, above this net of fire, the shadow lay over everything, including the surface of the lake. Even in the sky there were shadows, rippling masses of gray, like wind-torn storm clouds. There were shadows everywhere except along the level lands to the southeast, where stood the tents of the besieging army.

I Shifted vision, creating telescopic eyes to spy out Huldra's tent; she was flying her dead brother's banner.

I recognized the colors and ensign from my captivity in Bannerwell. At some distance was another high pavilion; this one belonging to Dedrina Dreadeye. I did not recognize the ensign of Daggerhawk Demesne - now vacant and home for were-owls, according to Jinian -but I recognized the Basilisk herself. She had not improved in appearance during the seasons since we had encountered her in Fangel. Along with these two were a great horde of Durables and Ephemera, major and minor Gamesmen. I recognized a few banners; players all, whom Himaggery had not much respected, and there was one tall tent with no device or banners at all.

So, it appeared the Demesne was safe enough. Those outside could not get in. However, neither could those inside get out, and in time food would run short, even though there were stores in the cellars below the great house and fertile gardens inside the wall. They produced crops in all seasons beneath the gentle benison of the steams. I wanted to get in, mostly to tell those inside that others were aware of the difficulty and ready to assist. However, the fact that Himaggery had not struck at those camped at his gates when he had the power to do so troubled me and gave me another reason for the attempt.

I lay there the better part of the day. There was no activity in either camp. When night came, I decided to try to get in. If shadows could not exist underwater, my maneuver would probably work. If they did - well, if they did, I would be in considerable difficulty.

Dark came. I slipped down to the lakeshore under cover of the night and into the water. Snake shapes were easy to take. Eel shapes were no more difficult. A fish might have been easier yet, but the water gates that let the water of the hot springs run out through the base of the bastion were covered with grills too small for a large fish to enter.

It was a long cold slither from the western shore, warming as I went farther, becoming quite warm, rather too warm, near the jetties. I thickened the eel's skin, building in a layer of insulation below it. I hadn't thought about the heat, which made me divert my path from the northernmost water gate to the one farther south. The water there was cooler since it had been used to warm the buildings before flowing out into its own drainage ditches.

No shadows could be seen on the surface of the lake, but they could be felt. There was a tingling discomfort on my eel's skin, that same feeling one gets sometimes when being watched, not palpable but discernible. I slithered and was silent, wriggling among the water weeds and ooze, up current, finding my way to the gate.

It was hotter than any human could have withstood. As it was, there was a good deal of discomfort when I snaked through the grill and plunged madly upward into the familiar tunnel, seizing its rough rock roof with spider claws to pull myself out of the hot water and hang panting from that slimy vault, gasping, putting out feathery gills to shed heat, waving them madly. I suppose it was a fairly noisy process,

'Who goes there?' came the bellow, then the lantern light peering down the tunnel at me like some huge eye. 'Who goes there?'



For a moment it was so surprising, I couldn't remember how to Shift vocal organs, and it was only in the nick of time I managed to gargle, 'Himaggery's son, Peter,' before someone decided to launch a flaming spear at me. Mumble, mumble. 'Didn't look like a person at all.' Mumble, mumble. 'Heard he was a Shifter!' 'Shifter? That's right. Child to that Mavin.' Mumble, mumble. 'Best thing would be to kill'm.' Mumble, mumble. 'Not if he's who he says. Come out slowly.'

'I'm not in man-shape,' I called. Mumble, mumble, in which 'Get rid of m,' and 'Come out slowly' were equally voiced.

So I came out, pincer foot by pincer foot, then Shifted very slowly while they watched. They made faces. I don't know why other Gamesmen always make faces, but most of them don't like Shifters, and that's all there is to it. So far as I can tell - and I've watched in a mirror -there's nothing particularly repulsive about it. Oh, an occasional inside-outness, perhaps, but guts are guts, after all. We all have them.

I stood there, decently dressed though dripping. 'If one of you will be kind enough to inform Himaggery I am here, he can identify me.' I said. All the guardsmen were strangers, and they looked nervous. Being under siege had done nothing to improve their equanimity. 'Or, if Barish is available, he can identify me.' Some of their faces smoothed somewhat. Uh-oh, I said to myself. There's factionalism here. It occurred to me an excellent time to try the Eesty way of message transmission. I stepped forward and laid my bare hand on the hand of one of the guardsmen. 'I would appreciate your bringing word to either one of them,' I said, concentrating on my skin, 'pushing' the blue crystal message through. It had worked when I was an Eesty.

It worked here, also. The man's face was slightly hostile when I approached him and touched him. Then less so. Then conciliatory. 'Brog,' he said to one of his fellows. 'Go tell the boy's father he's here.'

Ah. So it did work. I offered my hand to another of the guardsmen, and then the others, one by one.-'Cooperation,' that was the message. All of them got it but one. Him, I had no initial success with, a blank-faced, squint-eyed fellow who nodded at me but would not take my hand. 'My name is Peter,' I said to him, smiling. 'And yours is?' This was the one who had wanted to kill me. I was sure of it.

He would not answer me. An officer told him sharply to mend his manners. 'This's Shaggan, sir. Joined us just recently. Came down from the north. About the time the Lady Sylbie came.'

I smiled at Shaggan once more. 'A difficult time to come to the Bright Demesne. Was it a pleasant journey?'

He looked around him, shifty-eyed, trapped into talking though he obviously didn't want to. I reached out and brushed at his face. 'Spiderweb,' I said pushing the blue crystal message for all I was worth. 'It badly needs cleaning down here.'

He stepped back, mouth open, confused looking. He had received the message I was carrying. But then, I had received a jolt of what he was carrying as well. I covered up as well as I could. 'He's been spider bit. Look at his face, pale as ice.' Which was better than saying, 'He's a spy sent here by the Witch, Huldra.' The picture had come through my skin, clear as though an artist had drawn it. The man had been dosed with a crystal and was no more aware of what he was doing than the citizens of Fangel had known what they were doing, day by day. I wondered how many more spies the Witch had sent, and then I remembered what the officer had said. This fellow had come down from the north. Where he had been recruited, undoubtedly. And he had come at about the same time as 'the Lady Sylbie'?

Interesting. How had Sylbie come to arrive near the same time as a man like this?

I murmured something soothing and told them to take the man to the Healer. He was struggling in the grip of half a dozen of them at the same time he was trying to remember why he was here. I left him to it. If the blue crystal I'd pushed at him didn't make him forget why he'd come, Himaggery's Demons might find out something interesting by Reading it out of his head.

We went out into the cellars; Himaggery came and embraced me. As soon as we were private, I told him about the spy, and he shook his head angrily. He knew as well as I that if there were one, there might be more, and it would be no easy job to find them. There were thousands of men within the Demesne, many of them

recently recruited, and though I could go about touching them all, it could not be done quickly. He would have to set his Demons to Reading the men, and that couldn't be done quickly, either.

I told him once more about message crystals and for the first time about the shadow and the Shadowbell and my having to leave Jinian behind. I did not mention the fact that Mertyn, Quench, and Riddle were busy raising the hundred thousand. There was at least one spy in the Demesne; I could not know who might be listening; and this was something that should not be widely known. At any rate, without mentioning that particular stop on my journey, I told him everything else. He was open, sympathetic, and warm, which was both surprising and gratifying. When I had been here before, neither he nor Barish had been able to talk except in peevish monosyllables and not at all to each other, which was the reason I'd slipped blue crystals into their food. It had had a salutary effect as far as his relationship with me went. I wondered if it had solved the other problem.

'How are you and Barish getting along?' I asked.

He had the grace to blush. 'You got the message to us one way or another, didn't you, my boy? Well, so far as that goes, we've made up our differences. Trouble is, we made them up just before the siege set in, so it's been little noticeable good to us.'

'There's a good deal of factionalism among the men,' I said.

'Well, Peter, you know how it's been. We hadn't been able to agree on anything, and though most of our disagreement was in private, word got out and sides were taken. It was simply a case of my men championing me and Barish's men championing him, and who cared what the truth was? Now it all seems foolish. Still, it's hard to undo several years of conflict all in one strike. That's why we've thought it unwise to try countermeasures against Huldra until we've had

time to sell the men on one plan. At the moment, we're not sure they'd act as a unified army. Quite frankly, Barish's men might sell me to Huldra, or vice versa. I wish we had more of those message crystals.'

'We do,' I said, showing him the contents of my pocket. 'But I can push some cooperation into them without using these up if I have enough time.' I told him then about the Eesty method of message transmission, which he then tried on one of his servitors with no success at all. I sighed. I had known it wouldn't work for him. I was pretty sure a Healer could do it. Otherwise, it would have to be someone who had had the experience of being an Eesty. Probably no one but me could do it at all.

About that time Barish came in. Or, I should say, Barish-Windlow or Windlow-Barish. Last time I'd seen him, it had been Barish-Windlow, with poor old Windlow very much eclipsed, and I had been quite

saddened thereby. I blamed myself often for having put them both in one body, though it had been all unwitting and with the best intentions. At any rate, he came in, embraced me, looked me squarely in the face, and said, 'I want to thank you, Peter. I know you tricked me, but it was wisely done. The message you brought may have been a good thing to others, to me it was salvation.' He didn't say anything more. He didn't need to. I understood in the instant. The two warring halves of himself were now at peace, brought into alignment by the same message meant to align mankind to Lom. It was the best thing that had happened in quite a long time, and I was pathetically grateful for anything good.

We talked a long time, sitting in the comfortable firelight as the evening wore on while I told them about leaving Jinian in the Maze. Small scuttling noises spoke of creatures in the walls, a sound I always associated with the Bright Demesne, though once Barish went to the door and looked sharply outside as though he had heard someone lurking there. If anyone had been there, they had fled at his approach. All our nerves were a bit on edge from the siege and the discovery of the spy and the possibility of conflict among the men. I told them about the giants then, and they exclaimed at Jinian's luck and level-headedness in getting free of the monsters. When it was very late, I went off to bed, knowing I'd see the others in the morning.

Queynt and Chance and the rest had been at the Bright Demesne for about fifty days, almost half a season. Roges and Beedie were still with them, though the giant Fritchhawk had shown up a day or two after they had arrived and carried the strange, dual-minded Sticky creature in the basket away over the sea.

'It said it owed a boon to Jinian,' Queynt explained, 'that it needed the Sticky in order to complete the mission.'

'The Mirtylon part of the Sticky was a bit apprehensive,' Beedie confided, 'but the Mercald part was in ecstasy. To have been a bird worshiper all his life and then to be going off with the very god of all the birds made him believe he was in heaven. I assume the Fritchhawk was going after more blue crystals?'

'That's the mission it was sent on,' I replied. 'And given the fact that the Fritchhawk is probably one of the old gods, he will undoubtedly complete the mission with satisfaction. Though it is a very great distance, as I understand it, and he may not return for quite a long time.' That sounded incredibly pompous, even to me, but I've never been able to lie in a casual voice. I was still resolved not to tell Queynt or Chance or anyone that the Fritchhawk had already returned and that Mertyn and his crew were busy at the caverns. With spies about, it was better if no one knew.

'Where's Sylbie then?' I asked, changing the subject, 'She should have arrived only a few days after you did. Jinian said she sent Sylbie off not more than seven or eight days after the rest of you left.'

'She didn't arrive until twenty days ago,' drawled Chance. 'And when I twitted her for being a slow-grole on the road, she flounced me.'

'Her manner was odd,' agreed Beedie. 'And it's continued to be.'

'Now Beed,' said Roges.

'Don't now Beed me,' she said. 'The girl was very pleasant on the way down from Fangel, after we all escaped from the Duke. Very well spoken. Excitable, but reasonable. Now she's . . . well, she's different.'

I, too, thought it curious that it had taken Sylbie so long to arrive but did not pursue the matter just then.

‘Where have you put her?’ I asked, wondering why I had not heard the baby.

Himaggery made an embarrassed face. ‘We put her in the little gatehouse, Peter. Her and the baby. That baby - well, it’s got this habit of changing into a howling something-or-other, which it does whenever it’s peevish or doesn’t get fed on time. It happens less frequently if it’s kept quietly off to itself where Sylbie can devote her full time to it. Not that she’s fond of the isolation, but she does understand the problem. Being under siege from the outside is quite enough without being under siege from inside as well. Last time, we almost lost the gate guards and the Demesne. I must confess, I didn’t realize Shifter babies manifested Talent quite that early. Or so violently.’

‘They don’t,’ I said. ‘This one is exceptional. There was some prenatal interference, you’ll remember.’

‘Ah,’ he murmured. ‘Of course. It seems the little creature needs discipline, but none of us here are capable of arranging it. Thank heaven it always changes back to baby shape when it gets hungry enough, or the whole matter would be quite hopeless. I kept thinking Mavin would show up, or that Thandbar would come back from his trip - he went off just before the siege, he, Trandilar, and Dorn, to set a guard over the cavern where the frozen Gamesmen are, and don’t mention it, Peter, I don’t want anyone to know. At any rate, there’s no one here to provide guidance for the baby. Something he much needs.’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ I promised, privately thinking that it would take Mavin or Thandbar or more likely both to do what needed doing. Nonetheless, I did want to find out what Sylbie had been doing on the road for so long, so I trotted through the pear orchard and one of the smaller vineyards to the gatehouse, taking along some fresh fruit tarts from the kitchen, which I thought she and the baby might enjoy. High over the walls of the Demesne the sky showed blue and gray, a patchwork of shadow and clear air between the meshes of fire. It looked safe, but depressing. We couldn’t stay penned up here forever. I put it out of my mind for the moment and knocked on her door.

She had Bryan in her arms, and he came to me in a moment, babbling on about something or other, getting his face all covered with berry juice as he happily gobbled tarts. She smiled and smiled, exclaiming over the tarts, telling me they’d go so well with tea. While she went to get it, I jiggled the baby on my knee, commenting loudly at how much he’d grown since Fangel. He seemed happy enough, though if the tarts gave him bellyache, I supposed we might be in for a haunting. After a time Sylbie was back, bearing a steaming pot with various accouterments, and we sat comfortably on either side of the fire while Bryan finished his share of tarts on the rug.

The little gatehouse is actually set into the wall of the Demesne, or rather into the bases of two great buttresses of those walls. There is a small gate that opens from the gatehouse - from the room in which I sat - through the wall itself, though it is always kept heavily barred from the inside. I noticed the heavy chains across it and nodded to myself, thinking that she and the baby were secure enough here while still being private. There were parapets upon the buttresses and Sentinels keeping watch not more than two or three manheights above that door.

‘However did you get through the siege, Peter?’ she wanted to know, peering up at me from under her lashes. Since I didn’t want to talk about the spy just yet, I equivocated and said I’d come in on the lakeside, leaving her with the impression I’d done it in a boat. Though Sylbie knew I was a Shifter, I’d learned she didn’t like to think about it. She did not think of me in any shape but my own.

She wanted to know if I had ‘seen anyone’ on my way south. It seemed an odd question.

‘Who do you mean by anyone, Sylbie? There were lots of people about, as a matter of fact. I had supper with a farmer and his wife just a night or two ago.’

‘Oh, Peter, that’s not what I mean. Anyone you know? Umm. Your thalan? Or your mother, for example? Have you seen Mavin?’

I chose to answer only the last question, replying honestly enough that I had not.

‘Jinian told me Mavin would especially want to see her grandson.’ Sylbie sighed. ‘But she isn’t here. No one seems to know where she is. Do you know, Peter?’

I shook my head, distracted by Bryan’s antics. He had finished with the tarts and was now trying to share my tea. He was very strong for his size, which was fairly large for his age. I wasn’t paying too much attention to Sylbie, wondering rather if there were some progenitor back in my line or Sylbie’s who would account for the baby’s stalwart build. ‘Was your father large?’ I asked, to her surprise.

‘Not very, no.’

I mused on this. Himaggery was sizable, of course, though I would not have called him a really big man.

‘Do you know where Jinian is, Peter?’ It was a sweet little voice uttering harmless words, not words to have drawn my close attention except for the repetition of the question.

I looked at her, scrutinizing her for the first time, to surprise something sly in her expression, something covert. It was only a fleeting thing, and I didn’t let my perception of it show. ‘No,’ I answered. ‘I really don’t. I left her in the northlands. She was going off somewhere at the time, and I honestly don’t know where.’ Her questions were odd enough to remind me why I had come in the first place. ‘Sylbie, Himaggery says you didn’t arrive here until long after the others, though you left only a few days later. Did you have trouble on the road?’ I watched her, waiting for any sign of confusion or embarrassment. Instead, I saw her stamp her foot in anger.

‘Trouble on the road? Indeed I did have trouble on the road, and no thanks to your Jinian, who sent me off alone in that way. I had to leave the farmer she sent me with, for good-enough reason. And then it took time to find another wagon coming this way. It’s a wonder I got here at all!’ She turned away with a petulant moue, while I made sympathetic noises. It was all very likely, and she sounded genuinely angry about the whole thing.

It took her a while to settle down. She was quiet for a time, thinking something over. ‘I wanted to meet that Trandilar. They say she’s gone away, however. I wonder where she went?’

I knew well enough where she had gone. Himaggery had been quite clear about it and had asked me not to mention it. By now they were at the cavern of the hundred thousand, being welcomed by those working there. I didn’t say so. Instead, I lied. ‘Trandilar’s gone off south, Sylbie. With one or two others.’

‘Someone said they saw them headed west.’ This in an annoyed voice.

‘Oh, only far enough to confuse any possible watchers,’ I said offhandedly. ‘Then they turned south. There are settled areas along the Southern Sea they had never seen. A short journey of exploration. I’m sure they’ll be back.’

I was beginning to suspect what it was that made Sylbie act in this odd manner. Jealousy. Here she was with the baby, off to herself, in a Demesne under siege, not having any fun at all - and as I recalled the

Sylbie I had known so briefly in Betand, she had talked a good deal about her enjoyment of clothes and balls and splendid court events - while the rest of the world went on without her. She had no lover, no suitor, and so her thoughts had tended back to me. Which is why she wanted to know where Jinian was, and where Mavin was, and where others might be who might have some influence on me. So I thought, not without some degree of preening satisfaction. Oh, I knew well enough it was Trandilar's skill at lovemaking that had confused Sylbie about me, Peter, but still I did not totally discount my own considerable charms.

She nodded, not quite satisfied. 'I suppose your thalan is still at Schooltown?'

I nodded, playing with Bryan, not looking at her. 'Where else would he be? He certainly can't visit here with a siege on.' Another question about someone close to me. Was she making some kind of plans? Did she intend to try to woo me away from Jinian? Or try to get Mavin to do it? It was all most curious and quite uncomfortable.

As soon as I could, I got away from there, giving Bryan a pat as I left. He was sleepily contented on the rug and didn't mind my going. I got back to Himagery and Barish as quickly as I might.

We talked over plans for locating spies, plans for rebuilding morale among the men, plans for countermoves against Huldra. They had some plan for some Wizardly contrivance that might be used against the shadow. All the time I was wondering what Sylbie was really up to and how I would handle it when she finally came out with it. I wished for Mavin, or Jinian, knowing either of them would handle it - whatever it was - better than I.

Eventually, I left the two Wizards, tired of it all. Jinian and I had been doing a great deal of sneaking and slying recently, fleeing from Oracles and dodging Sendings and generally creeping about like the bottom side of a mudsnake. Out of sheer frustration I was working myself up to a face-to-face battle with almost anyone, something trumpety and overt, even though that might be very unwise. I felt the same annoyance I had always felt at the Bright Demesne. Other people were making all the decisions, telling me to be patient when patience was the last thing I wanted. I wanted action. I wanted to know what was happening in the northlands, what was happening at the cavern. I wanted Jinian.

There was a small, walled orchard high above the lake which had always been a special favorite of mine. I went there and lay down upon the grasses to smell the blossoms and pretend Jinian was beside me. Speaking to her made it seem more real.

'I miss you,' I told her, my eyes shut, visualizing her as I had seen her last. 'I miss the lines you get between your eyes, Jinian Footseer, when you are concentrating upon some problem. I miss your peevishness when we stumbling men say something particularly egregious. I miss the way you smile at me when you forget to keep me at a distance. Oh, Jinian, I wish the time of your oath were over and you here beside me.'

'Very pretty,' said the tree I was under.

I leapt to my feet, claws forming on both hands, fangs halfway to my chin.

'Very, very pretty,' said the tree, turning itself slowly into my mother. Mavin. Mavin Manyshaped.

I retracted the fangs. 'When did you get here?' I snarled. There was simply no privacy in this place. 'No one knew where you were. Mertyn said he couldn't find you.'

‘Actually,’ she said, stretching, ‘I never left. I simply grew weary of the constant arguments and decided to take a rest. Trees are an excellent vacation. Birds are good, too, of course, but trees have an elemental quality which is restorative.’ She chucked me under the chin with one hand, as I suppose she had done when I was an infant before turning me over to Mertyn’s to raise. ‘What’s going on, love? I take it Jinian’s not with you? Or have you had a lovers’ quarrel?’

‘We have not had a lovers’ quarrel,’ I said impatiently, almost angrily. ‘She’s somewhere in the Great Maze, being shepherded by Ganver the Eesty, who’s trying to save her life. The Oracle is after her. And I’m here because she sent me here, and I don’t like being separated from her one bit. And, a little thing you wouldn’t know because you’ve been so occupied with treeishness, the Demesne is under siege.’

‘It is?’ She sounded interested but not at all distressed. ‘Who? Let me see. It would be Huldra, wouldn’t it. It would have to be Huldra. Tosh. I should have done her in long, long ago when I was only a log she sat upon. Have I told you of that time, Peter?’ She had, of course, more than once. It was long ago, when I Mertyn was only a child. She went on. ‘I could have Shifted long, long teeth and eaten her, bottom first. Shame that I didn’t. An opportunity lost. Ah, well, I suppose we shall have to get out of it somehow.’

‘And you haven’t had a lovers’ quarrel? Ah, Peter, Peter. I’m so sorry, child. I didn’t mean to tease. Come now. Sit back down and tell me all about it.’ She plumped herself down on the grasses. ‘Have some fruit. I seem to have shed a good deal.’

It was true. She had shed fruit widely over the orchard grass, and it smelled like all the honeycombs of the forest, rich as perfume. So we sat eating Mavin fruit while I told her everything, including all the things I had not mentioned to Himaggery - being careful to say I had not. ‘If we get out of here,’ I told her, ‘we must head straight for the Old South Road City, not to the Ice Caverns. Things are already moving well there, and I don’t think they need help. But the Old South Road City must be rebuilt.’ We talked about this for some time, she nodding and nodding, seeming to understand exactly what was needed. Well, she had seen the Shadow Tower, after all. When we had finished, she brushed off her skirt and told me to go along. ‘I want you to go fetch your son,’ she said. ‘Tell his mama you are taking him for a walk. To get better acquainted. Then bring him straight to me. What nonsense, trying to rear a Shifter child somewhere other than behind a p’natti. Though, I must remember, you turned out well enough reared elsewhere though you were.’

‘You didn’t like it behind the p’natti much yourself!’ A p’natti, according to Mavin, was a kind of ritual obstacle course the Shifters used during their holidays.

‘I didn’t like Danderbat Keep, my boy. I didn’t like Danderbat of the Old Shuffle, that’s the truth. But Battlefox the Bright Day was a good place for Swolwys and Dolwys.’ She was speaking of my cousins. ‘And there’s Bothercat the Rude Rock and Fretowl and Dark Wood, and Watchhawk Keep and Fustigar Mountain Keep as well as a half hundred others. But I wasn’t thinking of that. I was only going to look him over, for now. From what you tell me, we’ve no time to be running weanlings off to a Shifter keep. There’s too much else to do.’

I went off to collect Bryan, finding Sylbie still full of questions about where people were but quite willing to have the baby gone for a while. I took him down to the orchard and left him there with Mavin for a time while I went back to see what Himaggery and Barish had decided. I didn’t tell them Mavin was back- or that she had never left. She preferred not, so she said. I have never understood my mother or her relationship with my father. I thought I was unlikely to understand it in my lifetime and would be wise to give up trying. Better to leave it alone, which I did.

## Seven

### Jinian's Story: Further Lessons

We two came out on a hill overlooking a long, fertile valley, Ganver whirling as we came into the place, whirling us into other shapes, other sizes. When Ganver had done, we began to walk down the winding road, Ganver in the guise of a statuesque woman clad in an Elator's dress and I a page, smaller than myself, with a face I knew was changed though I could not see it. 'Do you think the Oracle will follow us here?' 'I think not. The Oracle will cool, in time. It will stop this flapping pursuit and start to think. It will not consider this place. Why would it seek meaning in what it thinks merely symbolic?'

The bitterness in Ganver's voice was deep and harsh, but I knew it was not directed at me. 'Watch and learn,' it said to me again, so I turned face forward and watched where I was going, Evidently there were more lessons in store. More lessons that would make no sense and from which I would draw no meaning. Who had said that? The Oracle. In the giants' stronghold. The Oracle had looked at my unconscious body and mocked the meaning of star-eye. Remembering it infuriated me. I resolved to find meaning or die, then set that resolution aside as I saw what awaited us.

Two fortresses stood on opposite sides of the road, tall and strong with mighty walls, facing one another like two Gamesmen in the lists during a contest of skill.

'Watch,' said Ganver again. 'And learn.'

As we approached the two fortresses, Armigers detached themselves from the opposing walls and there, and I don't think they need help. But the Old South Road City must be rebuilt.' We talked about this for some time, she nodding and nodding, seeming to understand exactly what was needed. Well, she had seen the Shadow Tower, after all. When we had finished, she brushed off her skirt and told me to go along. 'I want you to go fetch your son,' she said. 'Tell his mama you are taking him for a walk. To get better acquainted. Then bring him straight to me. What nonsense, trying to rear a Shifter child somewhere other than behind a p'natti. Though, I must remember, you turned out well enough reared elsewhere though you were.'

'You didn't like it behind the p'natti much yourself!' A p'natti, according to Mavin, was a kind of ritual obstacle course the Shifters used during their holidays.

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'Watch,' said Ganver again. 'And learn.'

As we approached the two fortresses, Armigers detached themselves from the opposing walls and stalked toward us, one from each side like fighting birds in a pit, plumes high and spurs glittering, a yellow-clad one on the left, a black-dressed one from the right. Ganver stopped. 'My name is - well, what should it be, Jinian, Dervish Daughter?'

It - she looked very militant, and I bethought me of Gamemistress Joumerie at Vorbold's House back in Xammer, a time that seemed long ago indeed. 'Joumerie,' I said, giving Ganver my old gamemistress' name. 'You are, ah - you are Gameswoman Elator Joumerie.'

'Very well,' she said. 'Now keep a modest face on you.'

The Armigers stalked, pace on pace, posing and posturing, lifting their feet high, plumes nodding on their helms, keeping in step with one another until they came up on us at either side. The one from the left-hand fortress spoke first, leaving the other fuming a bit, red in the face.

'What business have you here?'

'None at all,' said Ganver. 'We but pass through on our way north.'

'Your names and station?' demanded the other.

'I am Gameswoman Elator Joumerie,' it - she said. 'Passing quietly with one servant, opposing none, asking no Game.'

Left hand sneered. 'We accept none such in this valley, Gameswoman. You must choose left or right, right or left, the fortress of Zyle or the fortress of Zale.'

'I have heard of two brothers styled Zyle and Zale,' said Ganver in a mild voice. 'Could these be they?'

‘Who or what they are is no business of yours. You have only to choose which you will follow.’

‘And if I choose to follow neither?’

‘Then you will go no farther on this road.’

‘Then we will return the way we came.’

‘You will neither go forward nor return.’

I looked over my shoulder to see the Armigers ranked behind us, interspersed with Sorcerers to Hold Power for them and a few Tragamors for depth of attack. Half of them were in yellow and half in black, standing well apart, alike in intent though not in allegiance.

‘Well then,’ said Ganver, ‘I will let my page choose, for it matters nothing to me.’

I had had enough of blackness, blackness of shadows and grayness of spaces where nothing happened. The yellow reminded me of the Daylight Bell, so I moved a step to the left.

‘Zyle it is,’ said Ganver. There was a low growl from the black-clad Armiger, and he stalked off toward his fortress with the others after him. We, surrounded by a yellow-clad escort, went toward the left-hand fortress. As we drew near, I saw they were much alike, these two bastions, both with high, crenellated walls and fangy portcullises, both decked with banners that hung slack in the quiet morning air. When we came through the barbican gate, we were confronted by a pale, slender man wearing the shabby cloak of a Prophet and walking with the aid of a cane.

‘Accept my apologies for delaying you, Games-woman. It is my way of saving travelers the inconvenience of serving Castle Zale. If you will accept a meal, rest perhaps a day, there are tunnels which will take you into the forests north and safe away. . . .’

Ganver mimed confusion, modest outrage. ‘And what if my page had chosen Castle Zale?’

The Prophet dug into the paving with his cane, seeming unconcerned at the question. ‘Few do. They find the black garb of my ... of the Dragon Zale forbidding. Also - I am able with some degree of certainty to See if that is a likelihood. . . .’

I remembered then that Prophets have the Talents of Flying, Fire, and Seeing. If the Dragon of Zale was indeed this one’s brother, they shared family Talent. If I remembered the Index aright, both Prophets and Dragons were Armigerians; Zale would lack Seeing and have a limited power of Shifting instead.

Ganver was asking in a cold voice, ‘And if you had Seen that likelihood?’

‘I... ah, I would much have regretted it. The Dragon of Zale does not treat travelers well. We do what we can to assure fairness.’ He looked at us with dead eyes that did not seem to see us, glancing always away toward the other keep across the valley as though whatever he could feel was housed there, not in this place at all. As though, I told myself, his heart were there, with his enemy.

Ganver did not press further; we accepted the hospitality of the place, I wondered all the time what this was about. Evening came. Ganver asked to see the Prophet Zyle, and we were escorted into his presence. As we went, Ganver whispered once more, ‘Watch and learn.’

The Prophet was on the walls, and we went to him there. As we came up to him, I heard a sound, far and far to the north, like a reverberation from memory, quiet as evening and yet with a plangent hush that flooded the world. The Shadowbell. In a moment the echo returned from the south. The Daylight Bell, resonating softly to keep the shadow in check.

Both Ganver and the Prophet stood facing me. In Ganver's face I saw the brightening, the awakening, the hearing that I knew was on my own. On the Prophet's face nothing, no consciousness. He turned from me impatiently, peering at the keep across the valley, and I thought again it was as though his being dwelt there and not here where we were.

This one lacked something. If he did not lighten at the Daylight Bell, however soft and far its sound might be, it meant something within him was missing. My heart was sick within me, and I could not understand. He had treated us well, though coldly. He had not seemed a soulless wight. The Eesty caught my eye, shaking like a garment the Elator head it wore.

'We came to express our thanks, Prophet. If it is convenient for you to show us the tunnels to the north, we will take our leave. We go on a matter of some urgency.'

And we went, to come out far to the north under the early stars. 'Now we will return,' said Ganver, 'in yet another guise.' Ganver whirled, whirled, and it was afternoon. In new forms we were coming down the long hill to the valley from the north, seeing the castles of Zyle and Zale on our right hand and our left. Ganver was in the likeness of a crowned Sorcerer, and I at his back in the black frock and white collar of an Exorcist.

This time we chose the black-garbed Armiger and were taken before the Dragon of Zale.

He was charming. Full of humor and gaiety, sudden quips and outrageous jests. He invited us to eat with him, listened to Ganver's fictitious tale of a Great Game to the north, and when the meal was done he invited us to walk with him upon the battlements.

There were men there, Divulgers and other torturers, busy with braziers of hot coals and devices to rend and tear. There was a chuffing of a little bellows and the shrill cry of a wheel on which knives were sharpened. I stopped short. Ganver stopped also.

And beside these horrors the Dragon of Zale turned toward us with a charming smile as he offered to cast lots with us to see which of the two of us would be tortured to death where we stood.

I could not believe the words coming from that smiling mouth. As he spoke, the Bell rang as it had the evening before. And his eyes did not hear it, neither the Bell of the dusk nor the Bell of the day, and I knew that in this one, too, some necessary part was missing.

'Why would you say such an outrageous thing?' asked Ganver. 'We have no Game with you, nor was Game announced to us. You have treated us hospitably. Why would you now take one of our lives?'

'Oh, I will take both,' said the Dragon of Zale off-handedly, with a twinkling smile and a charming shrug. 'One today and one on the morrow. As to why, it

a Game I play with my brother. He dislikes it very much, to see me at my play. He does all that he can to forestall me, but in the end I always win.' And the

Dragon laughed, a high-pitched wail of amusement, like a wind-soul lost in chasms of dark. My skin

crawled as though slimy things moved there, testing

their barbed feet. Ganver was looking at me, urging me to do something, and I caught my lip between my teeth, thinking furiously. This was a lesson, and I had no idea what it was I should learn.

‘I will die first, Master Sorcerer,’ I said, surprising myself immensely.

‘Ah, faithful one,’ said Ganver in an odd tone. ‘I call upon the Rules of the Game, Dragon. I claim the Victim’s Interrogation.’

Well, I had forgotten. It isn’t often one is threatened with terminal torture - I should imagine once in a lifetime would be about the limit. However, the Rules of Play did allow the Victim’s Interrogation, the three questions that must be answered honestly. I wondered if the Dragon of Zale would allow it.

He merely smiled, without objection, and we stood there in the dusk on the battlement as his Divulgers and Invigilators readied the irons and the knives and I tried not to look at them. I did Inward Is Quiet very softly to myself in the passive mode, hoping it would help me understand what was happening. I concentrated, not helped by the sizzling noises behind me as the Invigilators spat upon hot irons.

‘Dragon Zale,’ intoned Ganver, ‘were there midwives at your brother’s birth?’

The Dragon stared at us with empty eyes. ‘There were,’

‘And were there midwives at your birth?’ ‘There were not. You have one question more.’ Across the road, only a little way, I could see a knot of men assembled upon the battlements of Zyle Keep and knew the prophet of Zyle stood there, peering away with his cold, empty face. Ganver was speaking again.

‘Dragon of Zale, have there been times when your brother might have killed you but did not?’

He stared at us then with a bleak, unholy joy in his face. ‘Many times he might have killed me, traveler. And each time he withheld his hand. For love of me, he said. For hate of me, I think. And now to the rack, Exorcist, unless you would like to try to drive out the devil that dwells here.’ He tapped himself upon the breast, smiling at me with lively malice.

‘No,’ said Ganver in a great, Eesty voice, whirling and whirling. ‘There is no devil there, Dragon. There is only yourself.’ The world went still; I saw the Dragon’s face fall apart like shards of glass, the fortress crumble beneath him like a sand castle, built in an hour, washed away in moments. Ganver whirled while the world remained motionless and the castle melted beneath Ganver’s tide, finer and finer, to flow away in silver dust. Rain came to pock the dust with the world’s tears, and it was gone.

Across the way Zyle Keep still stood. ‘Look,’ said Ganver, turning my head so that I saw the face of the Prophet. It stared at the place where Zale had been with hopeless intensity and a longing so great I had no name for it. ‘Come,’ beckoned the Eesty, and we were gone.

‘That was long ago,’ I said when I was able to breathe once more. ‘Long ago, Ganver. Before the Daylight Be was broken. Perhaps it was not even real.’

‘I remember it,’ Ganver said. ‘Lorn remembers it, now you remember it. Which makes it real enough

‘Was it you destroyed the Dragon then, Ganver? Or did he go on and on?’

‘He went on,’ breathed the Eesty without expressic ‘for many years. Until the Prophet of Zyle died, a there was no reason to go on after that.’

‘I am trying to understand the lesson,’ I mused.

‘Ah.’

‘There were midwives at the Prophet of Zyle’s birth, and they would not have let him live if his future had not shown him to have a soul. There were no midwives at the birth of the Dragon of Zale, and he may have been soulless. I think perhaps he was.’

‘And?’

‘And they hated one another. The one for what the other had; the other for what his brother had not. And in the hate, the one lost what he had had while the other gained nothing. At the end was only emptiness.’

‘And so?’

‘And so, Ganver, I will think on it. Perhaps the lesson will mean something to me as I consider it.’ Privately, I thought I might never perceive it. So far, it was only a tangle of Sanctuary, Dragons, Prophets.

‘Perhaps.’ Ganver mused in the gray place where we were. ‘Come, we will go elsewhere.’

We came out of the grayness this time on a shore where a silver river ran laughing into the sea, Ganver in his own shape and I in mine. My shape, my own Jinian shape, was ravenously hungry and thirsty, as though it had not eaten for many days - and indeed, perhaps that was true. Who knew what time was like in the gray spacesbetweenmemories, or whether meals eaten there were real or only remembered? Ganver, perhaps, but it did not tell me. I ran across the sands to drape myself across a stone and suck water into me like a great empty jug. After a time I was sloshingly restored but as hungry as ever. There were silver fishes playing in the pool beneath me, delicious-looking fishes, and I knew I could catch them with my hands if I drove a few of them into one of the shallow pools along the stream.

‘Look, Ganver,’ I called. ‘Fish. I’ll catch a few for my supper!’

The Eesty strolled over to me, stood peering down into the water. ‘Jewel fish,’ it said at last. ‘The only breeding population of jewel fish on Lorn. Rare and few.’

I was hardly listening, full of plans for filling my belly. Still, there was something in the tone in which Ganver had said, ‘Rare and few. ...’

I tried speaking to the fishes. Nothing. Their language was a flip of the tail, the feel of a splash of water on the skin, four or five words, no more. Food. Fight. Flee. Breed. Chemical words, running quick hormonal ringers along their spines and fins.

‘Ganver,’ I said, ‘the fish have no souls.’

‘Ah,’ said Ganver. I knew that ‘ah’ and disliked it. ‘Is that so?’ the Eesty asked.

‘They have no awareness even.’

‘True.’

I sat there watching those damn fish, mouth watering until I thought I would die. There were some table roots near the stream. A sharp stick dug them out, and I sat looking at the fish while washing them clean and peeling them one by one before crunching their unsatisfying bland sweetness. They were not bad baked or boiled as an accompaniment to other things: roasts, stews, broiled fish. . .

A flower clump moved in the wind, and I thought of Chimmerdong. The Forest of Chimmerdong, where every flower seemed aware of itself. No. No, where the forest seemed aware of every flower.

‘What place is this?’ I asked.

‘Boughbound Forest,’ said Ganver. ‘Long ago.’

‘Tricky, Ganver,’ I remarked in a conversational tone. ‘Very tricky. And undoubtedly the being which was Boughbound knew of these fish, as I know of my toenail or little finger or hair?’

‘Possibly.’

‘If I catch a few of them to eat, there won’t be enough of them to guarantee reproduction, is that it?’

‘Likely.’

‘They are - ah, how would we say this. They are part of the soul of something greater?’

‘Possibly.’

‘And while it wouldn’t be wrong for me to take nuts from a tree or roast a bun wit for my lunch - there are plenty of nuts and plenty of bunwits . . .’

‘True.’

‘It would be wrong to take these.’

The implications of this were so provoking that I forgot to be hungry. ‘There are plenty of men,’ I said at last. ‘If a man had a soul, it would be wrong to kill him. If he had awareness but no soul, it would be less wrong. If he had neither, it would not be wrong at all?’

‘What did you do at the Sanctuary?’

‘I let those pitiful creatures go to sleep forever.’

‘Why?’

‘Out of mercy, Ganver.’

‘But you did not do the same for the Fathers of the Place.’

I thought on this. ‘But they had awareness, Ganver. I did not want them to get off so easily. I wanted

‘You wanted to punish them.’

It was true. I had wanted to punish them.

‘Why did you not let them go mercifully as well?’

Why? Why, indeed. Why had I sought to punish, to hurt, rather than merely let them go? Did the Fathers of the Sanctuary have *bao*? I thought not. They had had no sense of fitness. They had shown no mercy. They had prolonged pain and caused it, to no purpose. Out of *seed ego*. Out of worship for St. Phallus.

But I had been no more merciful than they! Out of *shape ego*. I had told myself the Fathers were aware, therefore - therefore they should have known better. They were aware, therefore they should have understood. They were aware. *Shape ego*. My own kind, therefore . . . therefore nothing.

It slipped away from me. ‘Ganver, I’m too tired and too hungry to concentrate on this lesson. Are you finished with your teaching?’

‘There are five points on the star,’ it said. ‘Five lessons to learn, five parts to understanding. I have given you what I can.’

‘Then feed me, *Eesty*, or take me somewhere there is something I can feed myself. And when I have eaten, perhaps it will all make sense. Are you sure you can’t explain it to me in simple language?’

‘There are certain lessons which are not difficult to explain but which are very difficult to live by,’ said Ganver, moving away once more into the gray, the roiling, the smoke place between time. ‘And one who has not tried to live by the lesson of the star-eye cannot yet understand it. And one who thought it did live by that lesson may learn it did not do so. Come, *Jinian*, it is safe to let you leave the Maze now. The Oracle has gone elsewhere, and I must follow.’

We slipped between places and came out at the edge of a forest, the sun high overhead, a dusty road stretching south before me. Far down that road, six little figures trudged along, coming in my direction. I knew them. Oh, yes, I knew them. A noise came from behind me, half a sigh, half the sound of a door closing. I knew without looking that Ganver had gone and suspected I would never see the *Eesty* again. In that moment I was so joyous to see *Murzy* and *Cat* and *Bets* and *Sarah* and *Margaret* and *Dodie* that I did not take time to care. Later, when I understood the lesson it had tried so hard to teach me, and the reason it had not lived by that lesson itself, I grieved for Ganver’s grief.

Eight

Peter’s Story: The Spy

*Himagery* and *Barish* had decided that our first and most important problem was the one of spies. *Huldra* and *Dedrina* had set out from the north with quantities of the amethyst crystals, and we had to expect they would use the vile things. If there were a spy in the kitchen, any meal might contain an unpleasant surprise. If there were a spy in the wine cellar, the shock could be equally unexpected and even more widespread. So, we very methodically set about determining whether those employed in sensitive positions were trustworthy, using me for part of the task and well-trusted Demons for the rest.

‘It would be a good deal easier,’ *Barish* fussed, ‘if we could do the whole thing openly, just line them all up against a wall and have at them, but the way the men are feeling just now, full of suspicion and ill will,

it wouldn't take much to have a rebellion on our hands. No. Better take a little longer and do it quietly.'

So we took longer and did it quietly, with me pushing the idea of cooperation to everyone I encountered, remembering how the Eesty shape had done it. It was hard, tiring work, frustrating because we found nothing. It made no sense! Why put one not-very-clever spy into the Demesne when they could have planted a dozen?

I went down to the dungeons to have a word with Shaggan, the one spy we knew of.

'I don't know,' he kept babbling in answer to my questions. 'I haven't any idea how I got here. The last thing I knew, I was on the road from Fangel, south to Betand, with a few friends, all of us making for Pfarb Durim for the Harvest Festival, and the next thing I knew I was here.'

'He came shortly before the siege, Lord Peter,' said another of the guards. 'I remember it well enough. He came knocking at the gates saying he was out of coin and out of patience and needed something to keep himself for the next season or so. Well, we'd been recruiting right along, so I saw no reason not to take him.'

'No one else presented himself at that same time, or around that time?'

'Nobody. Later on, the Lady Sylbie came, of course, but those who escorted her simply left her at the gates and went on south. And then only a few days after that, here came the besiegers with enough baggage to last them two seasons.'

Shaggan wasn't lying. He really didn't know what he'd been supposed to do as a spy, so after a time he returned to duty - or, shall I say, enlisted for duty since he couldn't remember having been on duty before. I took the time to search his cubby down in the guardsmen's dormitory, and it had nothing in it but what one would expect. No amethyst crystals lurking in the bottom of his weapons chest or the hems of his tunics.

It occurred to me then he might have been a decoy, someone for us to discover to keep our minds off some other, more important one. Yes. It really did occur to me. And I did little or nothing about it!

Barish shared my suspicion, however, so the Demons kept doggedly at it, and so did I. Several days went by, and the feeling in the place grew noticeably better. Little cliques of men who had spent their time twitting one another a few days before, hands on knives and false smiles on lips, were now sitting side by side at their meals, talking over old battles and more recent conquests, laughing behind their hands. I followed one of the Demons into the bathhouse, I'd known him for several years, a good, reliable man - to ask him if he'd found anything at all, and he merely shrugged. 'Nothing except what you'd expect, Peter. Many of them had bets riding on who would come out on top, Himmaggery or Barish, but they're starting to feel sheepish about it.'

I went down to the orchard to roust Mavin out of her tree shape, which she had reassumed immediately after meeting and approving of Bryan. 'Take him back now,' she'd said, 'and come rouse me if anything significant happens. I'll want to take the boy to Battlefox the Bright Day when it's safe to do so, and I'll wager that girl will be glad to see him go.' I wasn't so sure of that. Sylbie seemed to dote on Bryan, though she never mentioned his Shifter Talent. It was almost as though if she didn't admit it existed, it wouldn't exist.

'Himmaggery's getting ready for some countermove,' I told Mavin. 'Don't get too deep into your bark because I think they're going to need you.' She promised to come out of tree shape each morning and



evening, just to check on what was going on, and then went back to fruiting. These days, when I remember her doing that, I think it must have had some symbolic value for her. It certainly didn't look very exciting to me, but it seemed to have some essential meaning for her.

The next morning Barish said he felt secure enough about the men to tell them at least some of the truth. He addressed them, twenty or so at a time, in the practice yard, telling them to be on the lookout for poisonous crystals and report any suspicious activity. Aside from a little muttering, the men took it well enough. The blowup we'd been afraid of didn't happen. No Barish follower began conniving against Himaggery; no Himaggery man started fulminating against Barish. We took a deep breath, figuratively speaking, and began to plan countermeasures.

Himaggery had heard from me everything that Jinian or I knew about the shadow, and Mavin had undoubtedly told him long since what she knew. He did not tell me what he planned - as was probably wise. The fewer who knew the better - but I knew he and Barish had some plan to use against the shadow.

Thus it was with a quite unwarranted feeling of security that I answered a knock at my door late that evening to find Sylbie in tears. 'Oh, Peter, Bryan's gone and I can't find him anywhere.'

I tisked and there-thered, thinking the baby had turned into a gorbline and would be back as soon as he got hungry enough, but Sylbie said no. 'He wasn't hungry, or tired, or wet. He just toddled off. I went in to get a hot cup of tea - we were sitting in the garden near the gatehouse enjoying the evening - and when I came out he was gone. Oh, Peter, do come help find him.'

So I hemmed and hawed and put on a cloak against the evening chill and pulled my boots back on and went yawning off beside her, never for a moment thinking that the baby was into anything more serious than an infant's exploration. We searched the garden, then Sylbie put her hand on my shoulder saying, 'What's that?'

At first I heard nothing, then a far-off whine, like a lost cat. I shifted bat ears inconspicuously, glad of the darkness, and heard it again. It was coming from a drainage ditch that wound back under the wall to let the water from the distant Porridge Pot hot spring warm this end of the garden. It was a low, narrow ditch about Bryan's size but certainly not Sylbie's or mine. She started to cry, and I told her firmly to go inside.

'I'll get him,' I said. She said something strange about coming with me. 'You can't,' I said in a no-nonsense voice. 'You won't fit in there.'

At which point her mouth pursed the way it did whenever she had to think of my being a Shifter, and she turned and walked off toward the gatehouse. I

remember thinking at that moment that when I returned later with Bryan, I wanted to check the locks on the gate. There were parapets with watchmen on both the buttresses. Anyone approaching the gate would be seen long before he came close. Still I remember thinking of it even as I slithered down into eel shape and entered the ditch.

The thin whine came intermittently, strangely echoing. I wondered how the boy could have come this far. The water was uncomfortably warm, not really hot but not at all pleasant, and the ditch reeked of chemicals. Then I saw light ahead and realized he must have actually come out beneath the wall. Remarkable. Quite remarkable.

Once out from under the wall, the ditch ran through a swale of low bushes, and I took my own shape to slog through this morass, following the sound, very close now.

I had no idea where the smoke came from, or the chanting, or the strange lights that seemed to go off inside my head. I tried to Shift and couldn't, tried to move and couldn't, tried to speak and couldn't. From behind me on the parapets I heard a guard shouting something that seemed senseless at the time: 'Lady Sylbie, Lady Sylbie, do not leave the Demesne!' A sentinel's horn went tara-tara-tara whoop-whoop-whoop, as it does to raise the alarm. A voice was chanting something about the dark betraying and the blood holding fast. The last thought I had before everything went very dark and quiet was that we had looked in all the wrong places for the real spy.

I woke in a tent. The canvas flapped in a night wind, and little gusts of smoke came to my nose like warning signals. I lay quiet, not letting anyone know I was conscious, trying very hard to Shift the nails of my hands to claws. The hands were tied behind me. I didn't need to see them to know that the Shift wasn't happening. Some geas had been laid on me, some preventive enchantment or binding spell. There was a low, bubbling noise in the place, and it was some time before I realized it was Sylbie's voice.

'You're sure he won't ever Shift again?' she was saying. 'You promised me he'd never be able to Shift again.'

The voice that answered was amused, sinister. It was the Witch, Huldra. 'Oh, I assure you, girl. He'll not Shift again.'

'And you promised he'd not see that Jinian anymore. Just me. Just me and Bryan.' Her voice was a little petulant, more than a little confused.

'I'm sure he'll not see Jinian ever again.' My heart almost stopped as the sense of the words came through. This was the Witch Huldra telling the absolute, literal truth. What had Jinian called the technique? Truth spelling! Twisting what the listener wanted to hear so that one could promise in words without promising in fact. Truth spelling. That was what had occupied Sylbie's time on the road, why she had been so late in arriving at the Bright Demesne. She had been truth spelled into betraying me!

Now a new voice, Dedrina, the Basilisk. 'In return for our services in this matter, we asked you to find out where certain people are. You recall?'

'Of course. I asked Peter and he told me. Mertyn is in schooltown. No one knows where Mavin is. She went off somewhere, and no one knows how to find her.'

Dedrina made a spitting noise.

'It's true,' said Sylbie. 'Evidently she's always done that. Sometimes she goes away for years. Who else? Oh, yes. Jinian is up north near the Maze. Peter doesn't know exactly where she is now. That's true, too. I listened outside the door when Peter was telling Himaggery all about it, and he really doesn't know.'

'How did she escape from Storm Grower?' asked the Witch.

'Storm Grower? Oh, the giants. I don't know. Perhaps Peter told them when he was here last, but he hasn't spoken of it this time. At least not when I've been able to hear. Perhaps she and Peter have had a falling-out.' Sylbie seemed very satisfied at this thought.

‘I would think you might have more gratitude to one who saved you from the hunt in Fangel,’ said the Witch. ‘You do not seem to care much for Jinian.’

‘It wasn’t her who saved me, it was Bryan,’ Sylbie answered. ‘Bryan gorbled the Ogress when she tried to bite him.’

Jinian had told me of that hunt. I thought Sylbie’s account of it was rather oversimplified. Though it was true that Bryan had dispatched the Ogress, the Ogress had been only one of a considerable hunting party. If it had not been for Jinian, both Sylbie and Bryan would likely have perished along with an assortment of other prey. I sweated, snarling internal reproaches at myself. There was a new voice, a chill voice with an icy sibilance in it.

‘You were supposed to plant the amethyst crystals in the wine stores. I suppose you did that?’ Dedrina’s voice.

‘No. I’ll do that when I go back. I-‘

‘When you go back! What makes you think they will let you in, stupid girl?’

‘They’ll let me in,’ she said doubtfully. ‘I’ll have to be there or Bryan will have a fit. . . .’

‘Where’s the girl Jinian?’ Dedrina asked.

‘No one knows where Jinian is,’ said Sylbie. ‘And I for one don’t care.’

‘Shut your mouth, girl. You’ve done your part and are finished. Comes our part now, to use that young buck Shifter in there as bait for the girl. Then Huldra gets him and I get her.’

‘No!’ Sylbie, very sharp, frightened. ‘I get Peter. That’s what Huldra promised me.’

‘Stupid chit. She promised you he would never Shift again, never see Jinian again. Quite true. He will neither Shift nor see when he is dead.’ The Basilisk laughed.

Silence, a wail, a tantrum wail. Though I was nowhere near I could visualize it. Sylbie throwing herself at the Basilisk, nails scratching. So a kitten might launch at a gnarlibar, hissing and scratching, and like a kitten she was thrown across the enclosure to land against the main tent pole. The canvas shivered. There was a crack, as though something had broken, and then a breathless sobbing. The voices grew nearer. Eyelids half-shut over eyeballs rolled well back, shallowly breathing, I let them come. They looked at me, kicked my presumably unconscious body, and went away again.

Sounds outside. Shouts, the crack of a whip, a quick tuppa, tuppa, tuppa on a drum calling some work party or other. Someone came in and got me, packing me in a wagon like so much luggage, me never quivering. Lords, but I wanted to open my eyes and look. Where was Sylbie? Where was Bryan? Evidently I had not really heard Bryan, there under the wall. That had been all mockery done by Huldra and her cronies. I tried for the Shifting - nothing. Tried again, tried - nothing. Still again. Gave up trying with my whole self wet with sweat and stinking from the effort. Lay quietly, quietly, trying to think while wheels creaked and the entourage began to move away. Then I risked half opening my eyes. I could peer out the back of the wagon to see a great part of the camp trailed out behind it in the predawn gray, all making a great dust with feet and wheels as we came away north on the Great Road. At least half the besiegers were in the train. So much the easier for Himaggery and Barish. So much the worse for me.

So, we were going away. What was it Jinian had told me? Huldra and her companions had been instructed to distribute amethyst crystals in the southlands and then to go to the Ice Caverns and destroy all there.

Which was undoubtedly where we were going. They were going. Moving on to the second part of the duty, leaving the first undone. I thanked all the old gods that Sylbie had been so eager to betray me she had delayed betrayal of the Demesne. Those at the Bright Demesne were safe, at least. For a time.

As for me, I was being taken away like a sack of roots, like a stack of wood, like nothing living or thinking, like bait for a trap. If I could have wept, I would have done so. Beside me a lumpy sack was breathing in a harsh, irregular way, gasps with too long silences between. I tried to say ‘Sylbie?’ but my voice wouldn’t work. Still, I knew it was Sylbie. The breathing was that of someone badly injured, and I thought of Bryan, wondering where he was. Likely sleeping peacefully back in the little gatehouse. It had all been a trick and a deceit.

The reeking smoke of the spell casting had made my head hurt quite badly. I gave up pretending to be unconscious and actually became so for a protracted time.

When I came to myself again, it was in the tent once more. The train had stopped along the road to make camp. From where I lay on a pile of packs and rolled rugs, I could see past the tent flap to an open space with a cookfire and another tent. Shadows lay close and tight at its base. Noontime. The smell of the food made my stomach clench, and I realized I could move, though only a little. My hands and feet were still tied and no amount of Shifting did me any good. It was as though I had never been able to do it, as though I had only dreamed the Talent and it had never actually existed.

The ropes that tied me were deadly black, wound with a thread of silver fire that glittered and flowed like water along the cords. I thought of Shifting my feet and the silver flame blazed toward my feet. I thought of Shifting hip joints and the fire spun upward, surrounding my loins in a steely embrace. So. Fire was one of the attributes of Witches, along with Power Holding and

Beguilement, though I had seen no Beguilement from Huldra. Her Talent had set this fire upon me, and her Talent held it there. I preferred it to be a matter of Talent rather than of enchantment. If she had enchanted it, many lives would have been spent on it. Jinian had spoken of Huldra’s willingness to spend lives upon Sendings and enchantments.

I was thinking so deeply of this when I raised my head to look out through the tent flaps once more that the sight there seemed only a continuation of the thought. They had Sylbie trussed up like a zeller for the butcher, lying close beside the cookfire. Her eyes were open, rolled back into her head, the whites staring at me blindly. There was blood on her forehead, probably where she had hit the tent pole. A lock of hair lay across her face, and it moved slightly with her breath. She was alive, then, though barely. I wanted to cry out, ‘Get a Healer for her!’ but I could not speak.

Oh, Sylbie, Sylbie, foolish, silly girl. First rule of the Game, Sylbie. Put not yourself into another’s hands. First rule. And you put yourself in Huldra’s hands completely, holding nothing back, no motivation, no emotion, nothing you could use to fight with. And you put me in Huldra’s hands as well, making me impotent to help you. Because you didn’t like my being Shifter. You destroyed us both, Sylbie, because you did not like my being Shifter.

The waves of smoky black still came over me from time to time. I closed my eyes for a moment. When I opened them again, the hair across her face lay quiet and there was blood on her chest, soaking her shirt. Beside the fire Huldra chuckled as she dropped something into her cauldron.

‘Rise Gambelor. Rise Gundegor. Rise Gurnasham!’ She shrieked at the cauldron, stirring it, steam coming out of it in a great rush as though it had been one of the hot springs. ‘Rise Boldam, Burwar, Bass!’ The steam coalesced, began to roil and eddy, making faces and forms in an endless succession, mouths that opened and shut, teeth that gaped, eyes that stared through shadow holes at the Witch, Huldra. On the other side of the fire, Dadrina sat, smiling, watching.

‘Rise Sorfut, Sarbat, Shandyapas!’ screamed the witch. ‘Bring her whose heart I fed you to do my will!’

The horror of it clutched me. When Dorn the Necromancer had been my companion, I had seen Mandor, many days dead, rise up from his grave to answer my questions, and I had seen the ghosts of Bannerwell march to war. But I had not seen the newly dead called forth before, still grieving over life, rising from the cauldron in which her heart’s blood boiled. Oh, Sylbie, Sylbie.

She was there, weeping, shadow hands reaching out. I saw her mouth moving and could read the words on her lips. ‘Bryan! Bryan!’ Calling for the baby she had left, her child and mine. Silently calling, ‘Bryan!’

Helpless, hopeless, I swore vengeance against Huldra. ‘Mavin,’ I pled, ‘if I am dead, venge me against this Witch. Himaggery, if I am gone and the world goes soon after, still requite me against this hag.’ All this horror and pain while still unable to move more than a muscle, tied tight by enchanted bonds and knowing nothing of what the Witch intended.

That was soon obvious. She beckoned the ghost, waving her hands in an endless dance, fingers making quick signs of fire, like letters in the air. Almost I thought I could read those signs. The ghost seemed able, also, for it wept and pled.

‘What are you doing?’ growled the Basilisk.

‘Telling this unwilling Sending what it must do,’ replied the Witch. ‘I tell it the child is forfeit if its mother does not do my bidding. It knows the man is forfeit if she does. So. It hangs there, quivering, in agony. Aha. Amusing, is it not, great lizard? So caught in their little feelings of goodness and badness, of love against love. Foolish, to care so much for any creature. . . .’

‘Still, I remember the love of a child. I had a son once. Mandor, his name was, as beautiful as the sun itself. That one inside there, that Peter, killed him - or as good as, though Mandor took his own life in the end. My son declared Game against King Mertyn of School-town, using Peter as Talisman in the play. Perhaps he knew Mertyn was thalan to the boy, perhaps not. It no longer matters what he knew or did not know. There was a hidden Sorcerer in play, and Mandor was burned with sorcerer’s fire. Even I could not bear to look at my son after that. He was hideous who had been so beautiful. Well, my vengeance has been slow in coming, but it will be all the better for that. Watch now. The Sending is ready to depart.’

The Witch stood taller, reaching toward the sky as though to summon something hideous from beyond the clouds. ‘Find Jinian,’ she cried. ‘Tell her I hold Peter the Shifter in my care. Soon he will begin to die if she does not come to me, and his dying will be long. If she will come to the caverns where the hundred thousand lie, if she will come there and submit to me, I will release him from his bondage.’

Ah, so and so she would release me. At the point of a knife, perhaps, or in the new heart of a fire, or only to bind me again in some new and more stringent chains. I begged silently that Jinian would not listen to this Sending, this screaming ghost that fled upward now into the sky, a streak of bloody gray, leaving the two hags behind to stare after it.

‘I thank you for your cooperation,’ Basilisk was saying. ‘So we will be alike in vengeance. For your son, Mandor. For my daughter, Dedrina-Lucir. What avengement is in your mind?’

‘I had thought to freeze him yet alive in the ice of the caverns where we go. It can be done with an ensorcell-ment to leave him alive and thinking for every moment of a thousand years. We will leave him so and seal the caverns behind him. Let him lie there and think of Mandor, and of Huld, my brother-husband, whom he also killed. Let him think of them until he dies at last, after a millennium, in the lonely cold.’

‘This seems good to me.’ The Basilisk stretched, talons forming at the ends of her fingers, scrabbling at the ground on which she sat to leave long furrows there. ‘As with him, so with Jinian also. Let them both lie a thousand years in the ice before they die,’ and she began to laugh, choking herself with her mirth. ‘Except that I will scratch her first, only a little.’

In a moment the Witch summoned someone to drag Sylbie’s body away.

The day wore on. I heard the cries of carrion birds and knew they feasted upon Sylbie’s flesh. A servant came in to press bites of food into my mouth, food that I chewed and swallowed stubbornly, keeping my strength for the moment in which it might do me some good. Huldra did not come to gloat over my captivity, unusual for her family. Both Mandor and Huld had been gloaters.

Late in the evening we began to move once more, leaving the road to wend our way north and west across the fertile valley toward the mountain wall to the west. If we kept on in this same direction we would come to Bannerwell, and from Bannerwell we could drop westward to the River Haws. North along that river would bring us to Cagihiggy Creek, and upward along that creek would bring us eventually to the ruins of the Blot and the Ice Caverns. How many days? Ten or twelve at the least. With wagons, probably longer than that. And Jinian, alone there in the north, travelling to that place. For she would, I knew she would. Though she feared Huldra and Dedrina Dreadeye, still she would come for me.

And for the first time in years, I gave way to slow, impotent tears, unable to hold them back.

It was then Huldra came to punish me for the fact that Mandor had died.

Nine

Jinian’s Story: The Seven

I greeted the six with a good deal of grabbing and squeezing and exclamations of joy. Cat shook me, wagging her head from side to side. ‘You’re all bones, girl! What’ve you been up to?’ Then hugged me when I tried to tell her.

We went no farther than a few hundred paces to a grassy hollow among a dozen great trees, there to build a fire for the making of tea while the words poured out of me like wine from a cask, bubbling and frothing and spilling somewhat as I tried to make sense of it all. Ganver and the Great Maze and everything that had gone before.

‘And I have failed,’ I cried. ‘Ganver tried to teach me the meaning of star-eye, but I have not learned it.’

Five of them drew in their breath, in awe, their eyes wide. Dodie did not know enough to do it, but she

watched them with her mouth open. ‘What does that mean?’ she whispered to them, to me.

‘To have been taught by an Eesty!’ Murzy marveled. ‘Why, if you could learn it,’ she said, ‘you could do the final couplet. It is said no Wize-ard has done so since the time of Tindel the Marvelous.’

‘The final couplet?’ Dodie asked.

‘Eye of the Star, Where Old Gods Are,’ I told her. ‘To summon up the old gods, one and all. I have used Eye of the Star to fasten the Dervishes down while I spoke to them. They did not like it much. I wonder if the old gods would like it at all, being summoned up.’

‘That spell would be worth having, considering what we are facing,’ said Cat. ‘Can you tell us of the lessons? Or did you take an oath of secrecy?’

‘No oath, no nothing,’ I told her. ‘And I’ll tell you everything. Perhaps you can make more sense of it than I. But let me tell you as we go. We must move ourselves. We must go to the Old South Road City and build it up again.’

They looked at one another, like so many owls. ‘Build it up again?’ asked Sarah Shadowsox at last. ‘That seems rather a large job for one seven, Jinian.’

‘Of course,’ I cried. ‘Of course it’s too large for us alone. There must be more. Other sevens beside us. And Dervishes. The Immutables, all the Great Games-men from the Ice Caverns. The hundred thousand.’

‘There should be,’ murmured Murzy, shaking her head. ‘Indeed there should be, Jinian. The question is, can there be? Can there be any at all?’

‘I don’t understand,’ I faltered, afraid that I understood all too well.

‘Shadow,’ said Bets. ‘Murzemire Hornloss, Seer that she is, has done a bit of peering and prying. She Sees shadow and more shadow. Everywhere. The Bright Demesne under siege by shadow. Great drifts of it cutting the road south of Lake Yost. Xammer cut off. Schooltown cut off. Betand surrounded - at some distance, true, and there is still travel in and out - but Pfarb Durim is completely isolated. Most of the cities and Demesnes had some warning; most of them brought in stores and prepared for siege; but still, travel is becoming very difficult, Jinian. The question is whether anyone can get to the Old South Road City at all.’

‘Gamelords,’ I whispered. ‘Ganver said the Oracle had learned to control the shadow, but I had not thought of this. Are you sure that what you saw is now?’

They shook their heads. No, they weren’t sure it had happened yet, but it would be soon if not now.

‘No matter,’ I said. ‘We must get there. There is no other way. Somehow we must reach Old South Road City; we and all the others needed there. Tragamors to rebuild the city and the towers. Sorcerers to Hold Power for them. Elators to carry messages. Armigers to Fly aloft and see where ancient walls and roadways ran. Perhaps even Necromancers to Rise up the ghosts of that place to learn how the Bell was cast in the first place.’

‘We have spread the word as widely as we could, Jinian. And the Dervishes tell us they have carried word to the seven as well as the other Wize-ards everywhere. If we can get to Old South Road City,

there will be others come to help - such as can.'

'What are the Dervishes doing?' I cried, thinking mostly of Bartelmy of the Ban, my mother.

'Running the roads of the world,' said Cat. 'In their hundreds and thousands. They seem proof enough against shadows, at least when they are moving, and have taken up this work as though it were some kind of penance for an old guilt. Do you know why?'

I shivered and mumbled something about it being better late than not at all, which was enough for them to guess the rest. I really didn't want to talk about Bartelmy. 'So, shouldn't we start south?'

'Yes, we will go south,' said Murzy firmly. 'Dealing with what comes as it comes.'

Which we did, in new clothes they had brought for me and a new pair of boots. The old ones had holes through the soles, and I'd been slipping pieces of bark into them for days. 'Did you see my boots had holes in them?' I demanded of Murzy, half-exasperated at the lack of privacy her Seeing seemed to grant me. 'Did you actually see my trousers were ripped in the seat?'

'Common sense,' barked Bets Battereye. 'Your boots have always had holes since you were three. And if you ever had trousers which weren't ripped in the seat, none of us can remember when.'

Which was somewhat comforting. It's preferable, I think, merely to be known for one's peculiarities than to have them constantly peered at. More familial, somehow. I put on the new clothes without further comment, and we headed south.

The Great Maze lay north of the Shadowmarches. Peter and I had approached the Maze from the east, having come there by a long, torturous route that had taken us far to the east and north before coming to Bloome and Fangel. From the Maze, the land sloped generally southward, ending at the widely separated peaks that marked the edge of the marches and fell away on the other side to the wide valley of Cagihiggy Creek. By following the creek west and south to its source and then striking west into the tumbled mountains, one could come to the Ice Caverns, where Peter had been headed. This was not the most direct route to the Old South Road City, but we discussed going there nonetheless. If Shifters or Dragons had been awakened from among the hundred thousand, we might find someone willing to carry us to our destination, thus saving much time.

If, on the other hand, we were to attempt to go straight to Old South Road City - which I knew well from my childhood, as it was not far from Stoneflight Demesne - then the shortest route would lie down the River Haws to Zebit, then up into the hills to the Willowater, a smallish river that ran from among the mountains into River Banner, south along Willowater to its source, then southwest along the curve of the mountain to the canyon lands north of Stoneflight. I wondered if Stoneflight was still there. And this made me wonder if my un-mother, Eller, and her son, Mendost, were still alive. I didn't ask if anyone knew, telling myself I didn't care whether they were or not.

At this point it didn't matter which route we might eventually choose. We were still high north in the Shadowmarches with a long way to go before we decided

east or west.

So we trudged south, me unable to put shadow out of my mind. I was simply scared to death of the stuff. Mavin had said it made people eat themselves sometimes. Or freeze themselves into a kind of black haze. Or it could make people chew themselves up from inside, as it had done with me. Whichever or



whatever, I hated the idea of shadow. Even Ganver had hated shadow. I remembered the Eesty flailing about inside the Maze, trying to get away from the flapping flakes. 'Would I had a dozen of the Gardener's shadow-eaters. . . .' I repeated, remembering Ganver's growl.

'What was that?' asked Cat, quick as a fritchhawk stoop.

I repeated it, shaking my head. 'Something Ganver said when the shadows pursued us into the Maze.'

Cat looked at Murzy, then both of them at Sarah, who shrugged. 'Don't look at me. I never heard of it.'

Bets denied any knowledge of shadow-eaters, as did Margaret Foxmitten, but Dodie spoke up - she who had said little or nothing until now, youngest of the seven as she was - 'The Gardener? Oh, I've heard of the Gardener.'

'Well, tell, child. Don't be mysterious!' Bets was as impatient as ever. The two years or so I'd been gone hadn't changed her.

'I'm n-not being mysterious,' Dodie stuttered. 'It's just I don't know what to say. My grandda, that's my mum's da, he used to tell tales of the Gardener. Tales he had from his grandda and he from his, way back, before all the people left the marches.'

'Well? Well?'

'Do you want me to tell you all the tales? There's dozens.'

'Why don't you start with one exemplary one.' This was Cat, being academic. 'Start with one you heard frequently.'

'Well, let's see.' Dodie thought for a moment. 'There's the one about the three bunwits trying to steal the Gardener's greens and losing their fur on the fence, so the Gardener turned them into fish. And there was the one about the Gardener fooling the tree rats into eating webwillow instead of table roots and how they got so sick they never came near the garden again. And the one about the Gardener feeding shadow to his turnips. ...'

'The one about what?' asked Murzy, amazed.

'The one about the Gardener feeding shadow to his turnips?'

'Tell us that one,' said Murzy, moving toward a circle of stones, where we all sat down like a coven of crows, looking expectantly at Dodie. She cleared her throat nervously, smoothed her shirt down over her trows, folded her hands as though about to sing, and told us.

'The Gardener, he had a line crop of turnips growing along in the hot time, burgeoning big and getting somewhat ahead of themselves in the growth department, beginning to push at each other in the rows and get argumentative over root space. Every morning the Gardener would come down to the garden to look them over, and every morning what did he see but more of them limping about with their roots all twisted and bruises on their cheeks.

'Enough is enough,' said the Gardener. 'What's the matter with all you turnips, you can't get along?'

'It's crowded we are,' said the turnips, 'so crowded there's no air to breathe or sun to gollop up or

dark, fertile wet dirt to suck. Time we was thinned out, I say.”

‘But there was an uproar over that, you may be sure, for none of the turnips planned to be the ones thinned. And sure as sure, the Gardener hadn’t planned to thin them, either, for he wasn’t one to eat his garden stuff. He was more in the nature of an experimenter, trying this thing and then that thing, and some he’d turn loose in the world and some he’d root out entirely, because that was his job to do for the whole world. So far he’d been very satisfied with the turnips and wasn’t inclined to thin them at all, but he had to admit the space was running short to put them. There was dark wet dirt in the forest, but no sun, and good sun on the mountain, but no dirt. Air was no particular problem, but finding all three together, that was something else.

“You could clear some of these trees,” said the turnips, “to make space.”

“No,” said the Gardener. “The trees are some I’ve been growing since they were seeds, a new kind I’m mighty fond of.”

“Well, you could knock down that rocky mountain there to the north with the three poky peaks on top. It’s an ugly thing and it would make good gardening there.”

“No,” said the Gardener. “That mountain has seven whole tribes of mushrooms growing on it I’ve been working on for a hundred or so years. There’s just no space to be had unless I move out of the marches and start another garden down in a valley somewhere.” Everyone in the garden knew the Gardener wouldn’t want to do that. He was a mighty secretive fellow and didn’t have much truck with other beings, except for my great-great-great- a hundred times great-grandda, who showed him a new way to prune fruit trees flat against a sunny wall.

‘So he thought and he thought. There wasn’t any space in the forest, and no space on the roads, but there was the Shadow Tower back in the marches, and there was space around that. So the Gardener said to the turnips, “Whyn’t we go off through the trees here to the space around the Shadow Tower? Every evening the Bell rings the shadows out, and they’re dark as any dirt and full of whatever they’ve sucked up around the world. They’ll be lying thick on the ground, there, and maybe you can catch a few.”

‘So that’s what the turnips did. They walked themselves a little way through the woods to the place near the Shadow Tower where all the trees stood back away from it. And they plunked themselves down around the Tower, their leaves spread out, and when the Shadowbell rang and all the shadows came out thick as leaves falling in the cold time, well, those turnips moved all their little hairy roots into the shadow and sucked all the dark, moist stuff in them up.

‘And that’s how the Gardener’s turnips grew and grew, but he didn’t let them out into the world for fear they’d eat all the shadow that was, so he kept them there in his garden except for every dusktime when the Shadowbell rang.’

Dodie unfolded her hands, wiped a few beads of perspiration from her forehead, and plumped herself down, grinning.

‘Well,’ said Murzy. ‘Isn’t that interesting.’

‘Myth survival?’ asked Cat in her usual teacherish voice. ‘Or something real turned legend, do you think?’

‘Whichever! It’s worth our time to find out!’

I gathered from this they perceived a kernel of truth in the story Dodie had told. ‘How. . .’ I started to ask, only to shut my mouth, for the others were already digging into their lockets or boots for the pool fragments each had been given at oath-taking time. I hadn’t had mine out of my locket in the last two years, and the locket was in my pouch. By the time I had my pie-shaped fragment ready, the others had laid theirs upon a flat stone, and only mine was needed to make a circle. ‘Do you know what the pool stuff is?’ I asked pedantically, ready to lecture on the subject. ‘I found out. . . .’

‘Yes, dear. Of course,’ said Sarah in her soft voice. ‘Of course we know. Now do put your piece in so we can look.’

Abashed, I pushed my piece into the circle and sat down with the others, peering into the silvery circle that began to shimmer once the pool was completed.

‘A mountain,’ said Murzy in a firm voice. ‘A mountain with three peaks. In the Shadowmarches.’

Darkness swam across the pool, then light, then darkness once again. Something flapped horribly within the pool, seemed to look out at us, then fled. We seven reached out to take hands, making a circle around the pool, bending our will to Murzy’s in order that she might See.

‘A three-peaked mountain,’ she repeated insistently. ‘A mountain in the Shadowmarches, with three peaks. . . .’

Something floated up at us; not a mountain. A Tower. Black and tall. Except for the color, I knew it. It was the Tower of the Daylight Bell in reverse image. Dark as coal. Shadow swarmed at its base, around its walls, poured from the arched openings at its top. Something seemed to peer out at us from those openings.

Patently, Murzy repeated, ‘A mountain with three peaks.’

The Tower dwindled. We were looking down on it from above. It dwindled still further, and I could see the fold of valley that held it, the road spur that ran to it, the road that ran past it farther down the hill. Against the sky was the mountain with three peaks. This, too, diminished until we were looking down on it. There was the sea, to the west, and the line of road east and west through the marches, and to the north of the road a faint glimmering, as though a star burned there. ‘Enough,’ said Murzy in a weak voice. ‘Enough for now. We have the general direction. Let’s get closer before we try to see in greater detail.’

As it was, it was morning before we set out. Murzy was in no condition to travel until then. Seeing takes a great deal out of one, particularly when it is done purposefully in this way, not merely allowing any random vision to happen into one’s head. One does it at cost, and one weighs the risk first, as Murzy had done.

The starlight glimmering on the envisioned map had marked our own position relative to the three-peaked mountain. We needed to go on south until we encountered the remains of an Old Road. Cat estimated two days’ travel, and about noon the second day I took off my shoes. It had been some time since I’d done any footseeing - and longer since I’d gone barefoot for any period of time, so my feet were sore by evening. We struck Old Road early the next morning and turned west upon it, me leading, for it was virtually invisible under drifted soil and leaves and the growth of centuries. We would need to go a day’s travel west, Cat said, rubbing salve into my feet, which made them look even dirtier. If Footseer had not already been my proper Wize-ard nickname, I would have been called Jinian

Dustboots by the end of that day. As it was, Dodie found she, too, could feel the road in her toes, so she was given the sobriquet. Dodie Dustboots. She seemed very proud of it.

In midafternoon we stopped to use the fragments again. The glimmer that was us was almost due south of the three-peaked mountain, and when the clouds lifted along about evening, we could see it. 'Show us the garden of the Gardener,' Murzy demanded, and the fragment flowed up and down the slopes, stopping at last on the southern slope, about halfway up. Sighing, she let the image go, and we wearily prepared a sensible meal before curling into our blankets for the night.

'Do you think it's really there?' Dodie asked me in a whisper, the firelight making a specter's face of her, all black and orange.

'Who knows. The fragment showed us something.'

'Maybe it's only ruins.'

'Maybe.' Possible, I thought. If it were really there, why hadn't the Gardener done something about the ever-encroaching shadow? Even as I thought the question, I knew the answer. Because whoever or whatever the Gardener was, it hadn't been his job. Just as it hadn't been the Eesties' job. Just as it hadn't been anyone's. This started to make me angry and tense, so I set the thought aside and thought of Peter instead. 'At the Old South Road City,' I said to him, wherever he might be. 'My oath's about run out, Peter Shifter. Please be at the Old South Road City.'

Silence and the stars. No point in crying about it. I put Peter out of my mind - mocking laughter from certain parts of my body - and went off to sleep.

We climbed north from the road the next morning. After a time we came upon a flattened, twisty trail through the trees, a place animals had walked for many years, zigzagging first east then west but always northward. We followed along it, noticing how it avoided the steep places and the rock outcroppings and how it made clever crossing use of narrow places in the streamlets. We had just stopped next to a fringe of tall trees to catch our breath when we all heard a tiny, shrill voice crying, 'I tell you, the ground is shaking. There are feet coming, and not feet that belong here. No zeller is trying to get through your fence, Gardener. People feet!'

At least that's what I heard. The others, so they told me, heard only a shrill piping, rather like a bird's inconsequent whistle. When they started to move on, I stopped them, whispering what I had heard into their cupped ears.

'Just behind this fringe of trees,' I said. 'Shall I creep through to see what's there?'

They clasped hands, all at once, without even conferring, and began to do Egg in the Hollow for me, making me as invisible as they could on short notice. I took this for an affirmative answer to my question and began sneaking through the underbrush, wishing I were Peter so that I could slither without making a sound.

As it was, things whipped about just a bit. I came out on the other side looking down into a small, flat-floored valley, trees all around and the three-peaked mountain staring down upon it from the north. Garden filled the entire valley, from rail fence on the north to rail fence on the south, fruit trees espaliered along a wall, great pots of flowers here and there, orderly rows of this and that. No. Mostly orderly rows of this and that. On the near side of the garden was a perfect jumble of plants, some with only their tufty leaves showing and the others walking about on their roots complaining in high, shrill voices about the

overcrowding.

Now 'turnip' is a word we use for any kind of bulbous-rooted edible plant. There's no one plant called 'turnip,' just as there's no one tree called 'willow.' It's either webwillow or gray willow or grease willow or some other kind. So it's either blood turnip or sour turnip or swamp turnip. These turnips weren't any of those. They were big, fat, white with a blue belt and with great fluffy tufts of leaves coming out of their tops. At the bottom they were bifurcated, trifurcated, multifurcated into rooty legs or leggy roots on which they wandered about in a rather desultory way, sometimes tripping each other out of what seemed to be sheer ill nature.

One of them stood at the feet of a very tall being wearing a green robe, shrilling out, 'Feet I tell you, Gardener. People feet.' A slit in one side of the turnip seemed to serve for a mouth, and there were several eyelike protuberances on its body.

'Well, and so?' said a deep bass voice, rumbling like a distant roll of thunder. 'People feet. So?'

The Gardener was half again as tall as I, not so slender as to seem unnatural but still quite skinny. He had a gaunt, blank face which looked as though he did not often use it for anything. And when I stood up, brushing the leaves off my shirt and undoing the invisibility spell with one gesture, he did not seem at all surprised. 'People feet,' he repeated as though it had been some kind of incantation. 'Well.' His face had no expression at all.

'I am one of the people,' I shrilled in close approximation of turnip talk, then lowering my voice and addressing the Gardener in common language. 'Can you understand me?'

He confronted me with no change in his face, not so much as a furrow between his eyes indicating he had heard me. 'Can you understand me?' I asked again in the vegetable language.

He nodded, rather distantly, as though acknowledging a stroke of wind. There, I heard that, he seemed to indicate, without giving any appearance of intending to continue the conversation.

'People, people,' shrilled the turnip, rushing away among his fellows, shrieking as he went. 'Come see, come see. It's people.'

Murzy came through the trees, the others following, and we all stood there in various states of amazement as the turnips gathered. I looked about curiously to see whether there were any other talking roots or ambulatory bushes, but these seemed to be the only ones. Which seemed a good-enough fact with which to start a conversation, I thought.

'Can you tell me how these beings came by the power of speech?' I shrilled in turnip talk.

The Gardener said not a word, but all the turnips began talking at once. They had always had it. No, they had not had it until after they started eating shadow. No, they had had it since the enchantress gave it to them, many centuries ago. The outcry was so great it was some time before I noticed that the Gardener was shaking his head, over and over. I gestured for silence, quelling the outcry by threatening to roast and eat several of them if they didn't hush. They subsided with a grumpy babble.

'I gave them speech,' said the Gardener in his tumbling voice. 'I crossbred them with the Sensible plant.'

'I don't know the Sensible plant,' said Cat wonderingly. 'Where may it be found?'

‘It cannot be found,’ the Gardener replied. ‘It is extinct. Sensibly. It was parasitic upon other plants, and when it became conscious of its own nature, it chose to become extinct rather than continue to be what it was. A pity, I felt, though exemplary from an ethical point of view. So I preserved some of its qualities in these turnips, though their parasitism has been carefully controlled. They eat only soil and shadow. Not foreseen, precisely, but useful nonetheless. Actually, shadow makes quite good mulch. For them.’

I considered that while shadow seemed lethal to animal life, it had not, in fact, seemed to have any effect upon plants.

‘Have you come to get us?’ cried a turnip. ‘It was foretold that people would come to get us and when that time came, we could go to seed!’ There were cheers, cries of encouragement, and three of the turnips began a dance that I could only interpret as frankly erotic.

‘I have forbidden them to seed,’ said the Gardener, ‘As it would have upset the ecological balance between light and shadow to have them sucking up shadow at every turn. They’re greedy, as you can see. Despite the overcrowding, still they insist on overeating and becoming fat. If I were not who I am, I would be tempted to eat them myself.’

‘Who are you?’ said Murzy, coming closer to him. ‘Who are you, Gardener? Are you creature of Lom? Son of mankind? What are you?’

‘Ah.’ He drew a long, gnarly hand across his face, seeming to be in some confusion. ‘After all this time, who can say, person? Does it matter? I am here. The garden is my task. To grow and hybridize and combine. To seek out new things and try them. To set out into the world those things which seem advantageous. To destroy the others.’

‘And the turnips? Are they advantageous?’

He was given no time to reply. A tumult broke out among the turnips as one called, ‘Shadow. Shadow by the fruit trees!’

We looked up to see several questing flakes settling along the wall, around the roots of the trees there. A mob of turnips began to rush toward them. Once at the shadow’s edge, they dug themselves in, roots flipping into the dirt like little corkscrews. Soon nothing was to be seen except the tufts of leaves, and every inch of the shadow perimeter had a turnip planted adjacent.

‘By Towering Tamor,’ whispered Bets. ‘The shadow’s shrinking.’

So it was. Fading. Shrinking. Dwindling. Within moments it was gone and the turnips began to uproot themselves once more with an air of complete though somewhat petulant satisfaction.

The Gardener had regarded this display with no change of expression. Now he reverted to Murzy’s earlier question. ‘Advantageous? I really don’t know. They are company of a sort.’

‘Would you mind dreadfully if we borrowed some of them?’ I asked. ‘We would find them most advantageous. There is rather more of the shadow about than is generally considered useful.’

The Gardener seemed puzzled by this. ‘There has seemed to be more than usual. However, that may be only a local phenomenon. The Shadow Tower is close by. I had wondered if perhaps there were a leak.’

Cat, with her usual passion for both getting and giving information, set about bringing the Gardener up to

date while I wandered off among the turnips, recruiting several hundred of them with ridiculous ease. They tumbled over one another in their eagerness, and I had some trouble choosing the stoutest and strongest as those best suited to the trip. Since their power of locomotion was not of a protracted or speedy kind, we considered how to get them where we were going and decided on a kind of narrow-wheeled vehicle halfway between a barrow and a cart. The Gardener very kindly helped us build two of these which I resolved to exchange for a well-built wagon and some wateroxen at the earliest opportunity - and helped load the volunteer turnips into these conveyances.

‘Would you mind,’ he asked when we were ready to depart, ‘if I came with you? I haven’t been outside for some time. If there is indeed an imbalance, as your teacher person suggests, I should be aware of it.’

I thought ‘imbalance’ was rather a slight word for the threat that hovered over us all but could see no reason why this strange being should not come with us. Soon we were returning the way we had come, with the turnips riding at ease in the barrows, exclaiming shrilly at every turn in the trail. When we rested for the night, it was in a circle of them with still others dotted among us, ready to suck up any shadow that came upon us in the night. And so our travels went, with us staying to the sunny valleys where we could for the turnips’ sake, stopping at every streamlet for a good drink, and making more progress than one might suppose, given the awkward nature of the barrows.

Two nights later, the Sending came.

We heard it casting about in the sky, crying my name like a lost child, high and far in the star-pierced dark, ‘Jinian, Jinian.’ I knew it was Sylbie’s voice almost immediately, though the timbre was nothing like. Something in the intonation, perhaps. I told the others who it was, and their faces turned cold and stern. We gathered ourselves promptly, setting up Wize-ardly defenses and protections. The turnips were planted away from us, the Gardener set to stand among the trees. The rest of us set ourselves in a fire-centered circle with seven little fires burning around us, awaiting what would come.

‘Jinian,’ it called, still casting east and west, high above us in the northern air. It had gone far to the north in seeking me and was now on our trail of return. ‘Jinian.’

‘Only a girl, isn’t that what you said?’ Margaret asked. ‘Little more than a child herself?’

‘A year younger than I,’ I answered. ‘She bore Peter’s baby in Betand, a Shifter baby who had been haunting the town. Bryan is the baby’s name.’

‘Bryan is a motherless child,’ whispered Murzy. ‘No live creature casts about so among the clouds, riding the moonlight in that way. No, she is dead, poor Sylbie, sent by an evil creature to find you, Jinian.’

‘I know who is responsible for this Sending,’ I told them. ‘Huldra, the Witch. More than a Witch, however. One who has studied the art.’

They shivered, as I had known they would. There are things the sevens hate, among them those who study the art for evil’s sake, spilling blood as if by right.

‘She is more Peter’s enemy than mine, but Dedrina Dreadeye is mine, and she stands beside Huldra,’ I went on.

At this there was general consternation, for it was the seven who had captured the daughter, Dedrina-Lucir, the one I killed with the Dagger of Daggerhawk. We had no further time to think about it. High above, the Sending called out triumphantly, ‘Jinian,’ and plummeted down upon us only to recoil

from the circle of fire and land wearily outside it on the meadow grass.

‘Jinian Footseer,’ it cried in a high, inhuman voice. ‘I bring word from Huldra, sister-wife of Huld, mother of Mandor. Peter is held fast and will shortly begin to die a long death if you come not to the Ice Caverns where the hundred thousand lie and submit you there to Huldra.’ The specter drooped in the starlight, white as a peeled branch, its voice becoming human once more. ‘Bryan,’ it wept. ‘Bryan.’

Cat had already started Dream Chains to Bind It to hold the Sending where it was. Bets was busy with her book of charts, judging where we were and how long it might take us to come south. We had figured it several times before, but we had been farther north and east then. I simply stood there in a state of shock, unable to move or think or say anything. Peter. Did they really hold Peter? How could they? My loving, Shifterish Peter. Murzy put one hand on my shoulder and said three hard, sharp names. The world steadied and I became icy calm.

I waited until Dream Chains to Bind It was finished, then asked the wraith, ‘Where is Bryan? Where did you leave him?’

‘Sleeping,’ cried the wraith. ‘Sleeping in his crib in the gatehouse of the Bright Demesne. The crying we used to decoy Peter outside was only pretense. Bryan lies sleeping.’

I found myself coldly hoping that either Mavin or Thandbar had been at the Bright Demesne and had been conveniently located when Bryan had wakened.

‘We’re going to have to use her to carry the message back,’ said Murzy. ‘There’s no way to get around it.’

‘Can we limit it!’ asked Sarah. ‘Dissolve her as soon as the return message is given?’

‘Limit it, and send her by a route north of here,’ said Cat. ‘So that the Witch cannot find where we are.’

‘Why limit her suffering?’ I asked. ‘She betrayed Peter!’ Immediately there was a pain in my head and I gasped with it. ‘No. No, I didn’t mean that,’ I said. There’d been a sharp, revelatory gleam in my mind, like a sword of light. Oh, Gamelords, I had been acting as though there were some bao here, something that could be taught. There was nothing, only a wraith. It could suffer, but it could not learn, and to impose suffering on something that could not learn was . . . was a bad thing, I told myself, wondering where I had learned it. Evil. The purest kind of evil. ‘Let us do as Cat suggests. Let’s limit it.’

So they began to weave Dream Chains to Bind It into a complex thing, a fabric, a basket, a holding that would untie all knots as soon as the return message was delivered. They ended the spell with Inward Is Quiet, the same one I had used on the creatures at the Sanctuary, and I felt ashamed to have felt anger toward the pathetic thing.

‘What message?’ I asked. ‘Don’t let Huldra hurt him!’

‘I think it unlikely she’ll hurt him much, girl. Not until you arrive. Then, likely, she’ll try to kill you both, but we won’t allow that. Come now. Don’t fall apart like this. You’ve been endangered before and known him to be endangered without going to pieces. Stand yourself up to her and deliver the message. It must be in your voice; you can trust Huldra to check whether you sent the reply yourself, and she must not know we are with you.’

So I stood and delivered. ‘The Sending finds me fourteen or fifteen days’ travel from the Ice Caverns.



Jinian will come as she is bid.' Actually, we felt the distance was something like ten to twelve days' travel, but we had decided to overstate the time it would take, both to mislead the Witch and to allow for accidents on the way.

Then we let the Sending go. It rose into the sky, still crying, this time, 'Bryan, Bryan. . . .' to flee first toward the southeast, then turn sharply toward the north. It would go some distance that way before turning southeast once more. We had done all that we could to mislead the one who had sent it. However, we had first seen the direction it would go to meet Huldra.

'Ah,' said Cat, who had tracked its southeastern flight against the stars. 'Then Huldra is not yet at the caverns. Let me see your charts, Bets.' They bent over them, measuring and nodding. 'That line of flight will intersect a line between the Bright Demesne and Bannerwell at about . . . here. It may be she is as far from her destination as we are. So. If we speed ourselves, we may come there two to five days before them.'

We went as quick as we might along the rolling road, among live forests and dead ones, smelling the stinks of distant fumaroles as though they had been the stinks of a body decaying, waking sadly in the mornings and walking the day through no happier, urgently going, driven by our own need to do whatever it was needed doing without any real hope that it would do any good at all.

As we went, I did as I had promised and told them about Ganver's teaching, not once but many, many times. They tried, as I had tried, to unravel it, with as little success. Whatever the secret truth of the star-eye might be, thus far the Oracle had been right about it. Its power, if any, was beyond me. It might as well have been merely symbolic, as the creature had said. Only stubbornness and respect for Ganver's pain made me continue to believe otherwise.

Ten

Peter's Story: Huldra

While the Sending was away, Huidra had amused herself by making me acutely uncomfortable. This was mostly by way of mockery and jeering, accompanied by some rough cruelty without much subtlety to it. It was enough to make me sweat, nonetheless; sweat and fear for the future. After a day or so of it, she tired of her amusement and left me in the care of a warder, who sat beside me, took me out among the bushes from time to time, and fed me twice each day. They did not even loosen the cords that bound me, and the pain of muscles that could not move became torture enough after a time.

It was evening of the second or third day - third. I had been in the warder's care for a full day at that point - when Sylbie's ghost returned. I heard it crying far off in the northwestern sky, 'Bryan, Bryan.'

The warder had me just inside an open tent flap, mostly because he liked seeing what was going on. I saw Huidra and Dadrina move toward the fire, Hul-dra's hands making endless weaving motions as though knotting a net. The motions burned in the air, leaving a trace of fire behind. By the time the Sending came down, however, she was still, waiting.

'Tell me the answer to my Sending and who gave it,' she called imperiously, beckoning the Sending to come nearer.

'Jinian is fourteen or fifteen days to the north. She^ comes to the Ice Caverns now, to meet you there.' So cried Sylbie's ghost.

Huldra made an impatient motion. ‘Tell me where she is, now, precisely!’

But the ghost did not reply. Instead, it began to fade, raveling away like something knitted of smoke.

‘Hold!’ Huldra cried, busy with her hands. ‘Hold, I say.’

But there was no holding it. It moved on the wind like a column of smoke and was gone. I heard only the whisper of sound. ‘Bryan.’

Huldra raged, burning and howling in her fury. ‘That bitch. That serpent. That Wize-ard filth. She has taken my own Sending and unknotted it against my will. It wa’s to have told me where she was, but it told me nothing!’

‘She said she will meet you at the caverns. It is what you asked.’ Dedrina gazed at the Witch slantwise from the corners of her eyes. ‘Why this fury?’

‘Because it was my will to come upon her while she was yet a distance away and unsuspecting. Now she will be prepared, and it may be more troublesome. That is all, snake, that is all. Mind your own business and I will mind mine.’

‘Who do you call ssssnake?’ hissed the Basilisk. ‘Careful, Huldra, Witch. Let usss continue as friendsss.’

The Witch was in no mood to temporize. She snarled her way out of my sight, leaving the Basilisk beside the fire. I could see the lizard hands as they made long, scaled talons and scabbled at the earth, a dangerous sound, one betokening great anger.

Huldra returned shortly with two Elators to sit muttering with them. Though I tried, I could not hear what was said, and I did not really need to hear. She was sending them in search of Jinian. I saw her gesturing toward the sky, motioning the direction from which the Sending had come. Her voice rose. ‘Fourteen or fifteen days’ travel to the caverns.’

One of them murmured to the other and flicked out of sight. In a moment the second one also disappeared, and Huldra returned to the fire. After a time she twisted her lips into a mockery of a smile and said, ‘Do not ever threaten me, Dreadeye. Do not ever grow so angry with me that you presume to threaten me. We are allies, but there is no question as to preeminence between us. You are a mere Talent of no particular distinction. It would be unwise to press your fortune.’

Dedrina looked at her with a long, lizardlike stare, then rose and left the fireside. I did not see them together again in the days that followed, and I thought it unwise of Huldra to have so gratuitously made an unfriend on the eve of battle. It cheered me a little. Enmities among one’s enemies are always comforting.

I was comforted, too, by the Sending’s vanishment. This spoke of an older mind than Jinian’s, one more subtle because more experienced. I thought it likely my love was part of her seven once more, and I had hope for her and therefore for myself.

The Elators did not return. This made me more hopeful still. Days went by as we traveled toward the caverns, and they did not appear. Days went by, and Huldra grew more furious and violent with each one that passed. Whenever she looked in upon me, I pretended to be asleep or unconscious, offering no target for her frenzy. Withal, I was careful to eat everything the warder offered and to strain every muscle once each hour or so, pushing against the cords since I could have no other exercise. I knew something Huldra did not; if she kept on in the direction she was going, she would come within the range of the

Immutables. Then - if the cords that bound me were Talent made - then might well be an opportunity for me, and I was determined to be in condition to take it if it arose.

While my days wore wearily on, behind me in the Bright Demesne, things were happening that Huldra had not intended and did not yet suspect. I learned of

them later, a few words from Mavin, mostly from Himaggery, and can tell of them here.

The Sentinel had not seen me leaving the Demesne, but he did see Sylbie creeping away from the walls. She had opened the little door out of the gatehouse and was sneaking along the buttresses, making for Huldra's camp, the shadows heaped at either side of her path, as though commanded to clear a way. He cried out to her, those cries I had heard during my enchantment, then he saw the smoke and fire rising from the besiegers' camp, and this caused him to set up the alarm. In a moment the walls were swarming; men had secured the little gatehouse, and Himaggery was on the walls staring across at the besiegers, wondering what had set off the scare.

It was only when a servant said she had seen me leaving the main house with Sylbie and when the Sentinel said he had seen Sylbie sneaking away to the camp, confirmed by their finding evidence of my passage through the ditch, that they realized what had happened. Barish was wise enough to realize I had been decoyed away; he even suspected they had used the baby to do it. The baby, however, was found sleeping in his crib, and with a total lack of foresight, they left him there, unattended except for a half-wit serving man, who promptly fell asleep and was still asleep when the baby later awakened.

Barish and Himaggery immediately went into conference with all Barish's Gamesmen who were present to plan an attack against the besiegers in order to rescue me. Barish and Himaggery had been working on a Wizardly stratagem against the shadow; they decided it must be tried immediately, did so with a minimum of fanfare and found it would not work. It had to do with sucking the shadows down with a great fan, chopping them up with the blade, and compressing them somehow. The shadow sucked up nicely but refused either to be chopped or compressed. It merely flowed up again, against the wind, as it were, and resumed its patrol. All this went on during the night, you understand, and then Bryan woke early.

Bryan's mother was not present. The serving man was asleep, possibly drunk, for he did not awaken even when Bryan turned into his most monstrous gorbiling form and fled the tiny gatehouse to wreak havoc in the Demesne. According to Himaggery, people were fleeing every which way, the place was like a hive of warnets that had been overset, and there was serious danger of the inhabitants breaching the gates in their panic and falling straight into Huldra's hands. Huldra, however, had departed before dawn, leaving only half her strength behind. Otherwise, the story of the Bright Demesne might have ended at that point.

The noise brought Mavin out of the orchard, blossoms in her hair and apples growing from her ears. She did not wait to be told what had happened but went straight to the place Bryan was gorbiling and boiling, howling like a monstrous siren. There she began to take bulk, screaming at Barish and Himaggery to bring her bread. Afterward, it became a kind of joke. 'Twenty more loaves,' she cried. Only they two and some of the Gamesmen could withstand Bryan's howling. All the others in the Demesne had fled as far away as possible, and only the loyalty and training of Himaggery's men kept the walls manned.

When Mavin had gobbled enough bread to give her the bulk she needed, she Shifted into the form of a giant basket, which snatched up the gorbiling ghost. Then she closed, compressing what was within into smaller and smaller shapes, compressing even more, and more, until baby Bryan was uncomfortably pressed into his own shape, no other, and had learned he could not terrorize the Demesne with impunity

any longer.

‘It was quite a horrid sight,’ said Himaggery thoughtfully. ‘In some respects, it is not easy to love a Shifter.’

‘I quite frankly thought I would be ill,’ said Baiish. Thandbar never did anything like that in all the time I knew him.’

‘I found it interesting to watch,’ said Dealpas the Healer. ‘I thought she’d squash the baby, but she didn’t. Bryan was perfectly all right, though less temperamental subsequently.’

‘The part that interests me is that taking on of bulk,’ said Shattnir the Sorceress. ‘Theoretically, at least, it should provide additional power to . . .’

Well, you get the idea. Other Gamesmen find Shifters either repulsive or odd, for the most part. Himaggery told me all this much later, including the comments of those present, laughing over it in genuine amusement, and I suppose I laughed as well. Mavin would not have been offended. She had come past the time of being hurt over what others think of us Shifters. One thing Jinian never said to me was that it was difficult to love a Shifter. Perhaps that is why I loved her so much when I finally decided that I loved her at all.

Which is beside the point. All of this happened by midmorning of the day I had been carted away.

Not content, then, with merely having squelched the baby and restored general order, Mavin decided to get into the besiegers’ camp and see to my rescue herself. She did this just as I had, eeling herself along the drainage ditch from the Porridge Pot, slything out onto the bank among some bushes, then creeping silently as any wraith - avoiding the shadow meantime - into the camp. While there was shadow plastered over every possible exit from the Demesne, there was none at the drainage ditch. I was known to be the only Shifter present; everyone thought Mavin was far away. It is a mistake ordinary Gamesmen often make: assuming we’re far away when we’re not. In the camp there were scattered tents for the Gamesmen, a rather large contingent of Armigers and Armigerian types, along with any number of Tragamorians. No Elators. Huldra had taken them all with her. No Seers or Demonics or Healers. No Rulers, of course. Huldra would not have wanted her own sway threatened by any other’s Beguilement. There were, however, several Sorcerers and Sentinels, ready to assist an assault on the Demesne if and whenever its defenses failed.

Mavin noticed all these and ticked them off as of no importance once she knew I was no longer there. Her interest focused on that other tall tent at the midst of the camp, a tent with closed flaps and guards set close around it. Though I had never seen her do it, Mavin had told me of her practice at moling and weaseling, a skill that took her underground, beneath the guarded tent, and allowed an extruded eye to protrude inside at the canvas edge.

There were two beribboned forms within the tent, forms with painted faces and a strange way of moving. ‘Like Eesties,’ she said, ‘trying to move like humans, waving their points first here, then there.’ She watched for a time, not betraying her presence, and was horrified to realize that the creatures were controlling the shadow.

‘It made me peevish,’ she said with her typically Mavinish understatement. ‘They were so silly looking; so much a travesty of humanity. Making a parody of us in order to mock us; waving and weaving their points to make the shadows flow first here, then there. Well, those two will not mock again.’

She told us later what she did to the Eesties, leaving the tent empty. 'For the mystification of the guardsmen. Mystification is always good for guardsmen,' she remarked. 'It makes them watchful.'

She returned to the Demesne in time to supervise Bryan's supper and bedtime. She did not bother to tell Himaggery what she had done until afterward, by which time he had already noticed great rents and vacancies in the shadow. The fluttering menace seemed no longer organized by malicious will; though

dangerous still, it was patchy rather than ubiquitous. Waiting for a propitious conformation, Himaggery and Barish made a sortie in force from the main gates, shadow or no shadow. Good fortune may have had something to do with it. They were not shadow eaten, and they left very little of the besiegers for the were-owls.

'We will go after Peter,' Himaggery announced, furiously ordering horses and wagons and equipage for the road while the Gamesmen ran hither and thither and Barish gave similar orders to his own men.

'No,' said Mavin. 'You must go to the Old South Road City,' and she told them why. She says they were very stubborn about it, almost disbelieving. It was only when she threatened to turn Bryan loose on them that they began to listen seriously to her. And, at last, she had her way - and mine. Himaggery, Barish, and all but a small garrison of the inhabitants of the Bright Demesne set out for Old South Road City, while Mavin, somewhat slowed by being burdened by Bryan, came after me. Often I wonder what might have happened had she gone with Himaggery instead. Often now I wish she had done so.

Eleven

Jinian's Story: The Caverns

Murzy had been right. By moving swiftly, calmly - and by trading the barrows for a farm wagon on the third day of our trek - we managed to reach the Ice Caverns before Huldra did. The old codger living at the edge of the marches had not been at all willing to let his only wagon go, but between Cat's talking and Margaret's Beguiling, he couldn't hold out against us. He was well paid for the wagon, and we left half a dozen of the shadow-eaters with him as lagniappe. When we left him, he had begun telling them the story of his life, and one of the turnips had a sprout out its top that looked suspiciously like a flower head to me.

'They'll seed, you know,' said the Gardener in his gloomy, uninflected voice. 'Soon they'll be all over everything.'

'I can think of worse things,' said Sarah. 'Wildthorns, for example. Or purple briar. Or shadow.'

'True,' murmured the Gardener. 'Except that wild-thorn extract cures heaves in wateroxen. And split purple briar makes the best sieves in the world.'

'I didn't know that,' said Cat, showing immediate interest. 'What else are they good for?'

He told her, for the better part of a day. Everyone else walked away from the wagon, tiring of his voice, but Cat sat up there on the seat, taking it all in, and the turnips babbled to one another about every cloud in the sky and every new flower or stone along the way. I was beginning to see differences among them, differences in their markings and the locations of their eyes. I

named them to myself; Bulgy and Flop-top and Big-blue, who had the widest, bluest belt. Pasty, all white with yellowish leaves; Fringes, who had at least ten or twelve root legs; Molly-my-dear, slender -

relatively speaking - and coy, with an almost supersonic giggle. They had no names for themselves and were delighted when I began to name them, after a time beginning to think up titles for themselves, some of which made them collapse into the bottom of the wagon, full of mysterious, vegetable mirth. I could understand the words well enough, but not what they really meant. It was not a humor I could share, though that fact seemed to frustrate no one but me.

The Gardener had been right. More than a few of them were sending up flower stalks and casting meaningful looks at one another. I had not thought of pollination as an erotic exercise before, but these hybrid creatures did not regard it as routine, so much was obvious. They were full of devious, volatile pranks, reminding me rather of the deep dwellers I had summoned up in Fangel. Devious or not, they were more interesting than the Gardener. I had yet to see him display any interest in anything whatsoever.

All of which was a mere distraction, to keep my mind off Peter. When I thought of him, I thought of him being tortured, maimed, savaged by Huldra's wanton evil or Dadrina's casual brutality. Once or twice I had fallen into shivering fits, and Cat or Murzy had had to recall me to myself with an utterance of names. Not for the first time, I found myself wondering whose names we uttered and why they made any difference. Who, or what, was Eutras? Who, or what, was Favian?

At any rate, we came down Cagihiggy Creek at some speed. The way is level along there, not precisely a road but without major impediments to travel. As we neared the place where we thought the caverns were, we made camp while Murzy, Cat, and Bets sent up some kind of Wize-ardly signal, a tall, blue smoke with

sparkly bits in it. They went on making it for some hours. Along about dusk, it was answered by a cautious call from behind some rocks, then by a tall, serious-faced man, who stepped out and approached us with visible trepidation.

I went to him, showing my empty hands. 'I'm Jinian Footseer,' I told him. 'A friend of Peter, Mavin's son. He may have stopped by here fairly recently? I'm also known to Mertyn and a man named Quench, and I know the name Riddle, Governor of the Immutables, though we have not met.'

He gestured vaguely at the others of us. 'And these?' He was staring at the turnips, frankly staring, as though he could not believe what he saw.

'The vegetables are shadow-eaters,' I told him. 'And the women are Wize-ards, friends of mine. The man is simply called the Gardener. I'm afraid I know very little about him.'

'They're real,' he said with plaintive satisfaction. 'As I approached, I thought they were a Beguilement of some kind; a mind image, perhaps. But they stayed, even when I came quite close and watched them for a long time, so they're real!'

'You must be an Immutable, then,' said Cat, coming up behind me. 'I tried to Read you and could not, nor anyone else who's here.'

He bowed. 'Riddle,' he said. 'As you put it, Governor of the Immutables, though there is little governance involved these days.' He showed us a trail, hidden behind a line of transplanted bushes, and suggested we go on up to the caverns, not waiting until morning. 'There's a threat coming.'

'We received a Sending from Huldra, the Witch,' said Murzy. 'She is holding Peter captive to assure Jinian's compliance in some scheme of hers. Is there more threat than that?'

He shook his head as if to say that was quite threat enough. ‘Witchness I can quell,’ he said. ‘As with all other Talents of the Gamesmen.’

‘What about the wize-art?’ I asked him. ‘Can you quell that?’

He looked slightly confused for a moment. ‘The wize-art? That isn’t a Talent, is it?’

‘It is and it isn’t,’ said Murzy. ‘Some can do it and some can’t, so to that extent it’s a Talent. However, it doesn’t come all at once as a Talent does. It must be learned. Come. I’ve always wondered. Do the Immutables quell wize-artry?’

‘Let’s see,’ I said, picking up a pebble from the ground and putting it in my palm. ‘Mothwings Go Spinning,’ I murmured, making the gestures with my other hand. ‘By Eutras. By Bintomar, by Favian, by Shielsas, go spinning.’ The pebble lifted and began to twirl. I let it drop. ‘So, wize-artry is something else.’

Riddle nodded, his face gloomy. ‘Do I understand this Huldra is not merely a Witch but has also studied the art?’

I sighed deeply. ‘You understand aright, Riddle. She is, however, first a Witch. She may have built her Talent into her study of the art, scarcely remembering which part is which. Witches have Firestarting, and Power Holding and Beguilement. If she relies upon one of these, you may well quench her. At least, we will hope so.’

‘If you can quell her Talent,’ said Cat, more cheerfully than I would have thought proper under the circumstances, ‘we seven will take care of her artistry.’ Cat did not call it the wize-art when speaking of Huldra. When done for evil purposes, it was not the wize-art so far as the seven were concerned.

We went up behind the bushes onto the trail, through the Immutables’ lines, and thence upward to the caverns. About halfway there the trail thinned to the point the wagon would go no farther, so we hobbled the oxen and told the turnips to find themselves root space up the little side canyons. There were many windy

arroyos thereabout, most with patches of deep, sunny earth washed into rock hollows. All of the shadow-eaters went off except Molly-my-dear and Big-blue. Those two stayed close to my ankles, begging to be taken up to see the caverns. So I perched them in the top of my pack and carried them the rest of the way.

A good deal had been done since Peter had stopped there. Some twenty or thirty teams of Demons and Healers were scattered throughout the caverns, directing Tragamors at unpling the bodies. Sorcerers stood about, feeding them power as they needed it. Far off to one side, that strange, hollow-cheeked man from under the mountain, Quench, worked with a group of techs at a monstrous machine. I had seen it before, on the Wastes of Bleer. Peter had very nearly killed himself trying to repair it. The resurrection machine! It was working now, making a horrid scream and flicker of lights as it joined the bodies and minds of the frozen ones. Every few moments, some Gamesman would be newly awakened, either by the machine or by a Demon-Healer team, would stagger to his or her feet, and would be taken off to be fed and clothed. Whenever five or ten of them were ready, Mertyn spoke to them, his hoarseness betraying how often he had done it over the past few days. He spoke of history, current circumstances, the need for rebuilding Old South Road City; he covered it all in a very short time.

‘I couldn’t do it except for the crystals,’ he confessed, gulping hot tea liberally laced with wineghost.

‘We’re putting a crystal in the mouth of every Gamesman before he’s wakened - thanks to the Fritchhawk, who brought them. Almost all of them waken with some helpful ideas already in their heads. From that point on, it’s merely a matter of channeling. Trying to bring them up to date without getting bogged down in ancient history. They’re so curious. Gamelords, wouldn’t you be! Frozen dead for hundreds of years and suddenly wakened into a world they’ve never seen before! So far we’ve only lost a dozen, a dozen out of hundreds!’

‘Lost?’ Murzy asked.

‘Lost. I suppose lost. They weren’t interested in helping, put it that way. Not even the crystals seemed to make any difference. . . .’

I shivered. What kind of Gamesman would not care whether the world died? Those without bao wouldn’t want to help. Crystals wouldn’t make any difference to them. Crystals such as the blue ones spoke to bao. Those without bao could not hear the message. ‘Where did they go, Mertyn?’

‘Away north. I had to think of something to get them out of the way. Some of those who wouldn’t help were starting to cause trouble, so I told them about a Great Game north of here. I felt the best I could hope for was they’d stay out of the way. . . .’

‘Mertyn,’ I said softly. ‘Are there any midwives here in the caverns?’

‘I suppose so. The old gods know there are everyr thing else. We even found a Warbler yesterday. And a Thaumaturge.’

‘Waken one or two midwives, Mertyn. Have them look into the frozen Gamesmen before you wake them. If the midwives find no ... if they do not find in the frozen Gamesmen that which they seek in newborn children, then do not wake those Gamesmen. Yet.’

He gave me a strange, straight look, as did Murzy and Cat, but I would not be stared down. ‘Please,’ I begged. ‘Do it, just for now. If I cannot explain, perhaps time will do so.’ I was beginning to understand something, rather dimly. It had to do with a pathetic Sending, and with the Sanctuary I had seen. And with the Dragon of Zale. And perhaps, perhaps with what Ganver had been trying to teach me.

But I had no time to pursue the thought. Far to the back of the caverns was a clean-swept tunnel off which opened several quiet, twisty rooms, rock-walled but

clean. We were given one of these to make our camp in, with a supply of firewood ready cut. Out in the caverns the murmur and clatter of activity continued, though muted by distance; an occasional shout, once in a while a voice raised in tired anger or expostulation. In general, however, it was the busy hum of a thing happening, a properness occurring.

‘Bintomar,’ said Murzy when the blankets were spread, laying her hand on my forehead. ‘By Shielsas and Eutras, sleep.’ I slept.

There was only that one peaceful night. The next morning came one of Mertyn’s Elators from the back side of the mountain - flicking his way to us in vast, zigzaggy steps to avoid the Immutable line - to say that Huldra and her train were not a full day’s journey from the Immutables. According to the Elator, there was no shadow with the train, only Huldra, Dedrina, and a vast crowd of Elators and Tragamors. It was obviously her intention to tumble the entire mountain down into the caverns, filling them so deep with rubble that the hundred thousand would be buried forever.



Mertyn went down to Riddle and conferred there a while. At the end of the conference, Riddle moved up toward the caverns with almost all his men, staying just beyond the line that would have stopped the Demon-Healer-midwife teams working to raise the hundred thousand. If Huldra's Gamesmen got past Mertyn's men, then Riddle was to move further toward the caverns, protecting them from Talents of any kind. The resurrection machine would go on working under all circumstances; Quench and the other techs were working each day and night around even now.

The remaining few Immutables came to the bottom of the canyon with the seven, with Mertyn, and Mertyn's men. He had not brought many with him of a warlike kind, but we made such display as we could. Surprise is always useful, if one can pull it off. We did not want Huldra thinking about Immutables, and had

she seen no Gamesmen at all, it might have made her wonder.

We set ourselves in a thin line along a low bluff that knelt at the foot of the mountain, Sentinels and Heralds spotted along the line to make a show, we seven clustered at the center behind a twisted dike of red stone. It had a gap in it in which I could show myself without disclosing the others. There were some spare banners and whatnot in the caverns, surprisingly unfaded considering they had probably been there for hundreds of years, part of the gear of the Gamesmen who had been frozen. These we spaced to show above the dike, making an appearance of an army several times our real size.

Huldra, the Elator said, had several thousand men. We had at best a hundred or so. Of course, seven of us were wize-arads.

And we seven worked like pawns. There is a saying in the art, 'Slow spells make sure spells.' It means simply that taking time repays the time taken, in sureness, in thoroughness, in calm consideration. We set spells throughout the valley Huldra would traverse, spells that could be released with one word spoken or one gesture. A clump of leaves or a lump of rock concealed symbols and signs already in place. The bluff extended outward from the mountain, leaving only a narrow way between its edge and the little ravine cut by the creek. On the other side of the creek, there was only a narrow path between the edge of the ravine and a soaring cliff edge. Riddle's damping power extended up to the cliff edge and over it, down beyond the bluff for several hundred paces, and up the mountain slopes on the near side. If the Witch came close enough to see me clearly, she would have no Talent. If an Elator of hers tried to flick up to the cliff edge to get above us, he would drop from midair partway there. No Tragamor would be able to move anything against us. And we were hoping against hope

she would believe it was all art and would not think of Immutables. If we could get her busy working up counterspells against nonexistent Wizardry, it would use up her strength and power, giving us a definite advantage.

After I thought we were finished, Murzy and the others gathered around me, sat me down on a convenient stone, and proceeded to lay a very complex spell that I had never heard of before. Dodie only watched, showing she had not learned this, either. It was called, so they said, The Net of Enlees, and when it was finished they wrote the word that would release it on a piece of bark, told me to learn it without saying it, then burned the bark carefully until it was completely gone.

'Huldra spell-bound you in the giants' cave,' said Murzy. 'Binding you against any use of the art. Probably she did the same to Peter, binding his Talent so it could not be used. Since spell-binding has worked for her before, likely she will attempt to use it again. If she does, she will have to make the binding gesture, you know.' Murzy illustrated abortively, being sure I understood. 'Watch for that. Don't

let her finish it. At the first sign of it, call out that word in a loud, firm voice, and you will be enclosed in The Net of Enlees. It won't prevent her doing any other rotten thing she can think of, but it will leave you free to fight back.'

They were frightening me, though I'm sure they didn't know it. Somehow, since we had met in the Shadowmarches, I had assumed we would be together if anything dreadful happened. This advance spell casting to protect me, as an individual, made me very nervous.

'Murzy? Have you - have you Seen anything? To make you think Huldra would . . . will try it again?'

'I have Seen enough to make me careful,' she replied in her stiff, no-nonsense voice. 'I have not Seen Huldra dancing on your recumbent body, but that is hardly an indication we are all safe. The Talent of Seeing, as you very well know, is not as reliable as most Seers like to pretend it is.' And that is all she would say on that subject.

When we had done everything we could think of, some things twice, we went back to the caverns to await Huldra's coming. A Sentinel posted on the high cliffs to the north would give us plenty of warning. The hum of activity had increased, if anything, and the piles of frozen bodies were definitely smaller. Three Seers went by me, carrying in their hands a dozen or so of the little 'blues' - the tiny images that contained the memories and minds of those frozen in the caverns. Blues had to be matched to bodies, and the Seers were arguing violently over the quickest way to do it since these blues had been found in a cupboard, separated from the bodies they belonged to. Luckily, most of the blues had been laid on the bodies they went with. Otherwise, we might still be sorting out the hundred thousand today.

Murzy went over to them staring curiously at the blues. They looked like miniature Gamesmen, like little carvings made of ice. Murzy reached for one of them with an exclamation, calling to Cat. 'Mind Healer Talley. Cat, come quickly. It's Mind Healer Talley!'

Within moments she was the center of a gesticulating mob of Gamesmen and techs, all talking at once. Mertyn made his way to the center of the mob, said a few words in his best Beguilement voice, and everyone hushed. Murzy beckoned to me, and I went to join them.

'The only Gamesman ever to Heal sick and wandering minds was Mind Healer Talley. She had a special Talent, unlike other Healers. Jinian, the Dervishes spoke of her in connection with the Great Maze, did they not?'

I replied, 'The Dervish told me it was Mind Healer Talley who said the Great Maze contained the memories of the world. Which is true, by the way.'

'You have said Lom is sick to death, Jinian. Could Mind Healer Talley ...' Her voice trailed away into uncertainty.

I thought of that vast maze we had traversed with Ganver and of ourselves lost in it, motes on an ocean. I shook my head sadly. 'I doubt it, Murzy. Oh, I think she could understand it, but it's so big. It would take a lifetime merely to explore a small corner.'

'But if the sickness emanated from only a small corner?'

Privately, I thought the sickness of Lom was pervasive, all-encompassing, and mostly our fault - ours and the Eesties - but I did not say so. 'Raise her up, certainly, and ask her. Who are we to say what she can and cannot do?'

So they went back to trying to locate the body that went with the blue, and I went back to my corner to worry about Peter. Murzy hadn't used any words on me today. My head had had to be clear, my intentions firm. As long as we had kept working, I'd been all right, but now the thoughts of Peter held captive chipped away at me until I was ready to scream. When I could stand it no longer, I put on my pack, wrapped myself in a cloak and two blankets, and went out of the cavern, telling Murzy I'd be down on the bluff waiting for something to happen. I went through Riddle's lines halfway down the mountain, hearing a turnip complain bitterly that I had almost stepped on him. Her. It. The path was steep and rocky down to the knoll where the remaining Immutables stood guard. Once there I sat down, wrapped in my blankets, staring into the north, where Huldra's army would come from. Somehow, it seemed to bring me nearer to him.

Sometime deep in the night we heard a yelping scream from the sky, followed by a dull, squishing thud. Torchlight found the source, an Armiger, dead as a Ghoul fetch. He had been Flying some fifty or a hundred manheights up and run abruptly into the Immutables' screen. We moved the body behind some rocks, heaping some others over it. He had been a scout. Huldra wouldn't be far behind.

Before dawn, Murzy and the others joined me, together with Mertyn and his men. When the sun rose, we saw them, all drawn up in battle array from wall to wall of the valley, with some Armigers floating high in the air and others just above the creekbed to keep the lines straight. They had a Herald out front, floating importantly along. He stopped just short of the place the Immutable screen would have touched him and gave voice.

'All within sound of my voice, give ear; Huldra, Witch, Student of the High Arts, having taken the person of the Shifter, Peter, offers him now in exchange for the insignificant person of one Jinian, so-called Wize-ard, named Footseer. Let her come forward and the Exchange be made.'

Huldra was standing at some distance behind the Herald. The person next to her did look like Peter. Murzy sighed and did Bright the Sun Burning in the affirmative mode, a disclosing spell. The person next to Huldra no longer looked like Peter. Shit. Huldra wasn't going to let Peter go. Even from this distance I could see the creature was a mere semblance, not unlike a Sending or a wraith. She'd spent some poor fool's blood on it, but it wasn't worth the trouble. We had a quick conference, and our Herald jumped up on the rock.

'All within sound of my voice, give ear. Mertyn, King, most powerful, most Puissant, calls the Witch Huldra to account for her un-Gamely abduction of Mertyn's thalan, Peter, Shifter, friend of Wizards. Let Huldra make her camp where she stands, and then between the lines will her accounting be heard.'

Where was Peter? Back at the rear of the battle, no doubt. In one of those tents pitched far back along the flat. I hiked back to the Immutable lines and found one of Riddle's men, then pointed out the tents. 'Could you get close?' I asked him. 'Not close enough to be noticed, just close enough to damp any Talent in those tents?'

The man nodded, grinning at me. I rather like Immutables. They are so very secure in everything they do, knowing we Gamesmen are utterly harmless when they are around. 'Any price you ask, Sir Immutable,' I said. 'My love is in one of those tents, and your presence may help him escape.'

'No price, lady,' he whispered, putting down his banner and preparing to slip away along the mountainside among the trees. 'Your love is Peter, and it was Peter who broke the evil at Bannerwell, and Peter who destroyed the evil of the Magicians. Any small assistance I can give, I am only too willing to provide.' And he took himself off, still grinning, at what, I had no idea.

Behind the ledge of rock, other Immutables were marching to and fro with banners in their hands, first one banner, then another, giving the appearance of an army. From the canyons above the knoll I heard shrill cheering. The turnips had half planted themselves along a ridge to watch the battle. I thought of Big-blue and Molly-my-dear, wondering where they were. The last I had seen of them, they had been squirming into the earth outside the cavern entrance, and I had not thought of them since. There was no time now, for Huldra's ranks surged forward. She had no intention of camping and negotiating anything. The Peter semblance at her side stood in idiot confusion. She had forgotten to tell it what to do.

No time to think about that. Armigers darted forward through the air, arching high to get a sight behind our rock parapet before releasing their arrows. Elators flicked out of existence at Huldra's side. A line of Tragamors stepped forward, Sorcerers just behind, their eyes fixed on the rock wall that protected us and on which the other six members of the seven leaned, casually, as though watching a display of horsemanship or a class in cooking.

Armigers screamed, fell, thrashing about like wing-clipped birds. They had encountered the Immutable barrier. Elators appeared halfway to the wall, their faces bloody, battered. Most of them fell at once, one or two staggered about, shrieking. The Tragamors were holding their heads, and a Sorcerer blew up all at once in a flash of violet flame.

'Snakes,' said Murzy to Dodie casually, and Dodie nodded, beginning to make a complex set of gestures, her face set in concentration. From the rocky slopes of the mountain to the left of the approaching army, snakes appeared, as big around as two men, heads reared high and eyes fixed on the approaching men. Some hundreds of Huldra's minions dropped their weapons and fled as the snakes reared even higher and hissed with a harsh, venomous breath that seemed to choke all those before it.

Huldra's voice was raised in fury, screaming words I had not heard before. The snakes vanished, all at once.

'Oh, quite good,' said Murzy to Cat. 'She did that very quickly.'

They were designed to be easy to disperse,' said Cat. 'We want her lulled into a false sense of security.'

'Still,' Murzy murmured, 'she was quick. I think deep dwellers next, Dodie, if you don't mind.'

This was only one word. Everything else had been done ahead of time. Dodie spoke the word, and the stones before the approaching army lifted from the ground to disclose endless lines of deep dwellers, popping out like corks, just as they had in Fangel. Fangy monsters, virtually impossible to kill, they launched themselves at Huldra's myrmidons, jaws gaping and claws fully extended, dancing, leaping, among the ranks before Huldra could react.

She was close enough now that I could see her turn pale with fury. Thinking, thinking. Twice she reached out to make a gesture, aborted it each time. I could almost read her mind. She thought we had rigged a wall of enchantment across the valley. She knew she would encounter it in a moment. If she stopped to deal with the deep dwellers, the army might encounter the wall. If she dealt with the wall, the dwellers would make chopped meat of her men. She did the only thing she could do, signaled abruptly to a sentinel at her left, who struck his drum three great whacks while a trumpeter blew taratta taratta tara tara. Retreat.

'She hasn't thought of Immutables yet,' muttered Murzy in my ear. 'Why are you carrying those turnips about with you?'

I turned my head, catching only a glimpse of a floppy leaf at the edge of vision. Growling, I took off my pack. Big-blue and Molly-my-dear had hidden in it and accompanied me to battle, peering over either shoulder. Shrill cheering came from the ridge behind me. It had not been us they had been cheering for. No wonder the Immutable had been grinning.

Twelve

Peter's Story: A Shift in Time

I heard the Herald. I'm sure Huldra wanted me to hear the Herald. I'd seen the semblance of me she intended to trade for Jinian, and I knew it wouldn't fool Jinian for a moment. From what glimpses I could get of the country outside the wagon and then outside the tent, I thought we were in Cagihiggy valley north of the Blot. Not that the Blot was there anymore, but north of where it once had been. I drifted into that unpleasant dreamy state that was the best I could manage in the way of sleep and gave myself a few nasty minutes' dreaming about the Blot. Izia. I had rescued Izia at the Blot. Yarrel's sister. My friend Yarrel. Something terrible was to happen to Izia, and I woke up choking back a scream.

'Wozzer rampin?' the warder demanded with his usual elegant articulation. 'Wozzer imperashun.'

'Nothing,' I said. 'Nothing.' There were screams from outside: running feet fled past the tent.

'Wozzer rampin?' demanded the warder from those who fled past. 'Somin atterus?'

He received no answer, which seemed to make him nervous. He went outside and stood there, scratching his groin and rubbing the back of one leg with a boot. He was one of the itchiest men I had ever had the misfortune to meet, and the fact that he itched and I could not scratch was one of the most refined tortures of which mankind is capable. I wanted to scream.

More running feet. He took one quick look at me, then went around the tent and away, after the runners.

Now I could not even ask him to scratch my nose. Not that he would have done. I thought of scratching my nose, thought deeply and lovingly of it, and found one hand doing exactly that. The cords that had bound me were sliding toward my ankles. I knew at once what had happened. The cords had been made at least partly through Talent, and there was an Immutable near. I prayed he was going or gone, as quickly as may be. I needed my own Talent to escape.

'Taratta taratta tara tara!' Retreat screamed through the air, sounded by a Sentinel. No time to worry about how or why. I Shifted, frantically, gasping as waves of pain punished every part of me. Nothing worked right. I tried a claw and achieved a feathery thing that looked vaguely like a duster. Memory. Gamelords, I couldn't remember how!

Voices. Huldra approaching the tent. No time, no time to do anything. Panic lent strength, and I flowed up the tent pole, coating it with a round smooth layer of Peter, hard and brown as itself, appearing no different at all, not at all. Where I came through the tent top, an extruded eye peered forth at the world, an ear listened, invisible from below.

'Warder?' she screamed. 'Warder!'

Then she found the cords. Fury. Rage. Summoning of this one and that. Dedrina summoned. Could not be found. The warder searched for. Could not be found.

‘He’s a Shifter!’ she screamed. ‘He could still be here. Bring everything out and throw it on the fire.’

They built up the fire and began to haul stuff out of the tent. Pillows, chests, rugs, mattresses, costumes and paraphernalia. All fed to the fire until it was put out by the sheer volume of fuel. More screaming, other fires started and fed more gingerly. Everything Huldra owned fed into the flames to make a stinking smoke that swirled around my top, making me want to sneeze. All. Everything that had been in that tent. But not the tent itself, and not the tent pole. Thank all the gods.

After a very long time, they went away. Huldra went flouncing off to some other tent, still screaming; the men seemed to be gathering for some kind of assault. It was getting dark. The fire glimmered into coals and went out. At which point I slid down the pole and crept away, flat as a leaf upon the ground, flowing like a tide of melted sugar out of the camp and up toward the hills.

Abruptly losing my Shifted shape and finding myself nakedly in my own.

‘Ah, there he is,’ said Mavin.

She was seated comfortably beneath a tree, dandling Bryan on one knee and talking contentedly to an Immutable, one who tugged his forelock, grinned at me, and unceremoniously took his leave. When he was far enough away for Talent to work once more, I Shifted some clothing.

‘Worked did it?’ asked my mother. ‘I told him to go close to the tent for just a brief time, then withdraw. Close, to get you loose - assuming it was Talent which held you, which it seemed to have been - and then far enough away to let you use your own Talent to escape. Clever, wasn’t it. Not my idea, actually. Jinian sent him.’

‘Where is she?’ I begged.

‘Just up the hill, boy. Don’t fume so. She’s quite all right, but she’s surrounded by Immutables, so your clothes won’t last.’ She put Bryan down to burrow in her pack. ‘I have a sort of robe kind of thing here. You might like to have it before you go haring off.’

I had it in a moment and tarried only long enough for her to hug me. Only that long. She let go of me reluctantly; there was a tear in her eye. I knew she wanted to hold me for a time, knew she had longed for my escape as a thirsty man for water, that she had ached and agonized over me - I knew that, but I was telling myself there was plenty of time later, and I was halfway up the hill before she could say anything more.

I found Jinian behind a rock on a knoll kind of place.

Surrounded, as Mavin had said, by Immutables. Mertyn was there as well, and some men I recognized from Schooltown. I saw none of them until later. Jinian was all I saw. She caught sight of me then, and a kind of light came over her face. I forget what happened next; there were some things said as I recall - and I do, really recall. When we had done hanging on to each other for all our lives were worth, I settled down a little. Mertyn was shaking his head at me. Mavin was standing there smiling that outrageous smile of hers, her face quite clear of the longing that had been in it down the hill -almost as though she had set that need aside for the time. I remember feeling grateful to her and resolving to do something exceptionally nice for her soon. One of Mertyn’s serving men was waiting patiently with some trousers over his arm. Jinian’s and my greeting had evidently taken some time.

‘How did you get out of the Bright Demesne?’ I demanded of Mavin, hugging Jinian to me. ‘Huldra left half her army there, and all the shadows.’

Mavin shook her head, making a face. ‘The shadows were not following Huldra. No. There were Oracles there. At least I suppose they were Oracles, for they looked as Jinian described.’

Jinian gaped. ‘What did you do?’

Mavin laughed uncomfortably and described the technique she had developed to control Bryan. ‘A kind of basket,’ she said, making a face. ‘Baskets were used for discipline back in the place I grew up. The only way to control a Shifter, really, though I never appreciated that fact until your son came along, Peter. At any rate, when Bryan misbehaves, I make a basket of myself, scoop him up, squeeze him into his own shape, and then hold him till he settles down.’ She jiggled the baby, he crowing at her. Evidently he bore no ill will for having been basketed.

‘And that’s what you did to the . . . Oracles?’

‘Basketed and squeezed, yes. Only this time rather smaller than their natural shape. I’m afraid they were quite squashed. I buried everything under the tent to cause mystery and confusion among the troops. Evidently it worked.’ She told us a few more details of what had happened at the Bright Demesne, concluding, ‘The shadows fell into disarray, and Himaggery managed the rest.’ She spoke with a kind of weary pride, and I knew that despite everything, she continued to love Himaggery. Those two! I had never understood them.

‘I wish it had been the real Oracle,’ whispered Jinian. ‘Though I’m afraid they were only followers.’

‘Well, there are two fewer followers now,’ Mavin said, hugging her. I was struck, not for the first time, by how well these two seemed to get along.

Evidently there had been enough time for Huldra to regroup, for we heard trumpet and drum sounds from her lines, and everyone behind the stone became suddenly very busy.

The oldest member of the seven, Murzemire, materialized at my elbow and suggested in a kindly voice that I go with Jinian up to the caverns. ‘We’ve put everything in place already, everything a seven can do, Peter. Jinian’ll not be needed here for a while, at least. Your mother, too. I’m sure she’s tired from the journey’ - not seeing or perhaps purposely not noticing Mavin’s outraged face at this presumption- ‘and there are more comfortable quarters up there.’

We were rather a cynosure at the moment, and I could understand her wanting us out of the way. Mertyn was shouting commands. Great pillars of flame had erupted from Huldra’s lines, fire elementals, as Murzy said in a horrified voice. ‘I really didn’t think she’d dare.’

‘It’s all right,’ said the one with braids, Cat. ‘We’ve prepared for it with water elementals of our own. Do get out of the way, Jinian.’

So we went up the hill, hand in hand, through the Immutable lines, on to the caverns.

Thirteen

Jinian’s Story: Witch and Basilisk

After all my longing and agony, Peter's escape was almost anticlimactic. He simply showed up, wearing some kind of lounging robe, having escaped when the Immutable came near the tent, then hidden when the Immutable left again. Mavin, it seemed, had suggested that refinement of my original plan, and she told us about it in a chuckling voice as she followed us up to the Ice Caverns.

'Immutables,' she mused while Bryan burred and chortled at her. 'Now that's the answer for you, grandson. You may try to gorbly all you like, but with Immutables around, it won't work. I think a few days spent among the Immutables would train you very nicely, and all the Gamelords know I'm tired of basketing you.' She sounded lively and jolly, rather more contented than I had ever thought of Mavin as being. Seeing her face as she played with Bryan, I realized she must have enjoyed Peter when he was a babe. And I thought I knew why, too. That time must have been the only time in her life when she did not Shift, was not Shifter, did not think about Shifterish things, but merely was, womanlike, rejoicing in the flow of life through her and on. Seeing her, my eyes teared up, and I thought again of bearing Peter's children. If there should ever be time.

There was a jostling on my shoulders. The turnips had tired of my pack and were trying to get out, so I let them loose at the entrance to the caverns, introducing them to both Peter and Mavin. Both these Shifters had seen many strange things in their lives, but they stood there with their mouths open when they were introduced to Big-blue and Molly-my-dear. Both turnips were in full flower, much given to nodding their tops at one another in an obviously lubricious way. I was a little embarrassed, frankly, but Peter and Mavin seemed to pay no attention to that.

'Shadow-eaters?' Mavin asked. 'Really, Jinian? Have you seen them do it?'

I told her that I had.

'By all the old gods. How marvelous. Oh, how I wish I'd had some of these that time long ago when I brought Himaggery down from the north in the shape of a singlehorn and the shadows tracked us, league on league. What a wonder. I'd been wondering how we'd -well, from what Peter has said, it seems likely there will be a force to oppose us when we reach Old South Road City. A shadow force, likely. It's not something I was eager to face.' And I saw in her expression again that woman longing, that desire to be at peace, playing with the baby, if only for a time, rather than risking her life as we all risked ours in some great endeavor. She shook her head, stating firmly, 'From my prior experience

I shuddered. From my own prior experience, a shadow force would be unopposable. The best one could do was hide from it, and little construction got done while builders cowered in caves or huts. 'I know,' I said. 'That's why we brought them. There are more on the ridge out there, watching the battle.'

At the word 'battle,' Big-blue cried in an excited voice, 'Snakes. Snakes and fire and trumpets. Tara tara.'

'Taratta tara,' echoed Molly-my-dear, waving her root-legs. 'And people feet.'

'Settle down,' I said. 'If you'll plant yourselves here by the door, I'll take you back down when I leave.'

The Gardener was already by the cavern entrance, peering out in his dispirited way at the fireworks in the valley. 'How goes the battle?' he asked as though it did not matter.

'As well as can be expected,' I said, and he nodded gloomily as we went on into the hum and babble inside and through that to the distant, twisty little room off the tunnel where we had slept.



‘I remember this place,’ said Mavin, staring about with eyes full of recollection. ‘You and I were here, Peter. In this very place. Gamelords, that seems long and long ago. . . .’

‘We had just saved Himaggery, remember? We came into the cavern through that tunnel, there. It goes back and back into the mountain and out to that Base place.’ She touched Peter’s face with a tender gesture, patting him, flushing a little, then wandering off to disappear with Bryan behind a pillar, obviously intent upon reminiscences she did not intend to share.

Peter looked after her, his face sober. ‘She’s right. We were here. I remember all too well. The fool Magicians, without any idea what they were doing, had set off some kind of infernal device which was going to blow the mountains up. Mavin and I were trying to escape, with Himaggery. The resurrection machine had failed when we tried to put Windlow back together. I had his blue in my pocket with the other blues, the Gamesmen of Barish. We came on the railway, through that tunnel.’ He pointed down the twisty way, shaking his head at the memory, musing for a time as we moved deeper into the room. ‘Huld was out there in the cavern. He had some kind of firebolt shooter. If it hadn’t been for the Gamesmen of Barish, I’d have been cooked.’ He stared at nothing, remembering. I came close and took his hand as he went on, ‘The entrances were all sealed. I used Shattnir the Sorcerer to clear a way to the sky. Tamor and Armiger helped me fly out, carrying Himaggery. Then the mountain fell in. We thought Huld was dead.’ There was a long, long pause.

‘But Huld wasn’t dead,’ I said, prompting him.

‘No, he wasn’t,’ said a deadly voice. ‘Not then.’

We spun around, disbelieving, all our safety, all our peace riven by that voice. She stood blocking the entrance to the little room with Dedrina close beside her and a scatter of Elators behind them. Huldra. She had figured it out, then. She knew about the Immu-tables, and while the others of the seven were kept busy down below, believing they were fighting her, she had come into our stronghold to take us.

‘Destruction of the caverns can wait,’ she whispered, pointing one bony finger at Peter. It was a foul, slimy whisper that clung in the ears like swamp muck. ‘You I will have, and then we will see to the caverns.’

‘Those who sent you to destroy the caverns are dead,’ I said, trying to keep my voice calm and indifferent and get her attention off Peter. Mavin was behind the rock pillar. They might not know she was there. ‘Storm Grower is dead. Eaten out by your Sending, Huldra, which she swallowed down like a thrip seed. Dream Miner is dead, poisoned by a yellow crystal. They are dead, Huldra.’

‘They were only the Oracle’s dupes,’ sneered Huldra. ‘The one who wanted you dead is still alive, Wizard. The Oracle is still alive and kicking about the world. Storm Grower is no more, but enmity remains.’

‘Mine, Wizard,’ hissed Dedrina. She was already half-transformed into her Basilisk shape, her dirty yellow claws scraping the tunnel floor. ‘Storm Grower may have ruled the caverns, but you are my meat, Jinian Dangle-wit, murderer of my child. Perhaps my daughter was too young and impressionable when she faced you. Perhaps you played un-Gamely, Dangle-wit. Perhaps she did not have her wits about her. But I have mine, Eller’s daughter. It was I who found the old tunnel down into these caverns; I who told the Witch where you might be found.’

The words hit me as though I had been struck with a hand, moving me to fury. Peter squeezed my hand, bringing me to myself. Of course the creature wanted me angry. Angry and unthinking. ‘Lizard,’ snarled

Peter. 'Foul words are all the dirtier when they come from a filthy mouth.' His voice was full of fury, and his neck flushed. So much for self-control.

Still, it had given me a split moment in which to think. Huldra had spoken of the Oracle. I remembered my first meeting with the Oracle. It had been angry at the Basilisks. Angry enough to steal the Dagger from them. The Dagger the Oracle itself had created and given them long before. And the Oracle had set that Dagger in my hands. Playing with me. Well, let the play go on!

I was standing behind Peter, slightly to his left, holding his left hand in my right. Keeping his hand fast between our bodies, I slipped my hand into the slit in my pocket and pulled the Dagger of Daggerhawk from its scabbard strapped to my thigh. He knew what it was when I pressed it into his palm. I hoped he understood why I gave it to him. He had no art with which to fight Huldra. I could not fight Dadrina and use the art at the same time. He would have to do it for me. His anger would make the Dagger lethal.

Huldra made an imperious gesture, turning our faces toward hers as she stared at us with voracious eyes. 'Let me tell you what is in store for you. For you, Jinian, the Basilisk's claws and the long, slow dying they bring while the flesh falls away from filthy wounds that no Healer can help,' she sneered, mocking, drawing her hands up and down in a pantomime of raking claws. 'And for Peter, a thousand years or so of sleep, to lie paralyzed, motionless, like ice in these caverns among those of the hundred thousand who remain here today. For when we have done with you, we will do with the caverns, not for the sake of the giants, but for our own amusement. . . .'

I heard her. I knew she would have that paralysis spell ready for immediate use. I would have had, in her shoes. Just as I had The Net of Enlees, which the other six Wize-ards had insisted be set upon me, invocable with one word. And the paralysis spell might not be the only one!

It was well I was thinking of present spells. Dadrina was scratching at the floor, and my eyes wanted to watch her, but Murzy's words of warning rang in my head. Peter would have to take care of Dadrina. I stared hard at Huldra, catching the gesture of binding before it was half-made. No, the paralysis spell hadn't been the only one.

'-----,' I shouted, seeing for an instant a green net of fire fall around me. I wasn't even sure it had worked, but Huldra was. She screamed in fury, then turned to make the same gesture at Peter. If she couldn't bind me, she would paralyze him, eliminating at least one possible opponent. I couldn't let her do that. Peter was backed against a wall, the Dagger in one hand. The sleeves of that stupid robe were too long for him. They covered the hilt of the Dagger. Ridiculously, I wanted to laugh. The Basilisk literally did not know what weapon she faced, but I had no time to gloat over that.

Instead, I bowled a ball of Witch fire at Huldra's head. She threw up a hand to ward it away, breaking the gesture she had aimed at Peter, twisting it to send a knot of boiling black cloud at my face, spitting lightning. I ducked and came up with a water spell half-done, completing it with a quick whirl to my left. As I came around, I saw Peter lunge at Dadrina, missing her by a finger width, then saw Huldra "again, soaking wet. It hadn't been a very good water spell. I'd really wanted to drown her.

There weren't all that many things that could be done without paraphernalia! Missiles of various kinds. Fire, water, earth. Earth. I muttered a quick buried-in-earth spell, then changed it to water halfway. I was hoping for quicksand, but the best I got was a mud puddle. Still, she was in it up to her neck.

And out of it just as quickly, both hands weaving, weaving. What was she up to? I muttered ice at her, under her feet, and saw the weaving change frantically to a grope for the wall as she slipped and lost her balance. Screams from my right. Don't look. If Peter's dead, he's dead, but don't look!

I couldn't help myself. One quick glance. Peter was still on his feet. I couldn't tell about Dadrina. Back to Huldra, too late. Something slimy plastered itself over my eyes.

I gargled out the water spell once again, receiving a deluge. That washed the sliminess away but left me floundering. Something was happening at the top of the cave. I couldn't look up. Dadrina screamed. I remembered the sound of that kind of scream, that kind of breathless agony with a note of terrible surprise in it. So Dadrina-Lucir had sounded when she had been touched by the Dagger. If Peter had touched Dredaye, if he had been angry when he touched her, then she was dead. Dead and gone. And he had been angry enough, I knew.

Huldra turned, confused only for a moment by what she saw, then those hands came out toward Peter and I saw her mouth open, knowing very well she would cry one word and one word only. The thousand-year spell, aimed at Peter. A thousand-year death. Aimed at Peter. I lunged forward, to be between her and him when the word was spoken, slipped, fell, rolled . . .

... To look up and see the ceiling fall around her, a great basket of rock, what looked like rock.

'-----,' Huldra cried.

I heard Peter calling, 'No, oh, no, oh, no. . . .'

Then I smashed into the wall with my head.

When I came to myself, the others of the seven were there. Way off, somewhere, I could hear weeping. Peter. So he was alive.

Hands tried to hold me down, but I fought my way up from the place they'd put me and followed the sound of weeping. \*

He was there. Knelt down, bowed down, his head on his hands, crying. Before him on the cavern floor lay Mavin, young looking, as though she were asleep, her mouth slightly tilted in surprise. Mavin. Pale and hard as stone.

She had dropped upon Huldra just as the word of enchantment had been uttered. She had contained the word, received it, been ensorcelled by it. '

All I could do was sit there beside Peter and hold his hand. The tears ran as though they would never stop, as though they came from some inexhaustible store. After many hours, someone went away and came back with someone else. A tall woman, taller than any woman I had ever seen, with a cloud of black, black hair and eyes like jet. She placed her hand on Peter's shoulder, closed her eyes for a time, then shook her head.

'He is only grieving,' she said. 'And I cannot cure grief.' I knew then it was Mind Healer Talley, that they had found her and raised her up at last. She gave me a long, strange look, then went away. Later they told me she had gone north, toward the Great Maze.

While I sat there, Mertyn led the Immutables into Huldra's camp in a fury of revenge and anger. Her Gamesmen, bereft of their Talents, he placed under Game bond and then released. A few he even recruited and sent southwest, toward the ruins of the Old South Road City. More than a few he killed for reasons of his own, which may have had something to do with several of them calling him 'Shifter kin' in

a certain tone of voice.

Riddle had found an Immutable woman to care for Bryan.

And the work of resurrection went on in the caverns while Peter wept and I sat there urging him to have a little tea, or broth, or a bit of bread, to all of which he shook his head while the tears flowed endlessly down. I didn't cry then. Later, I cried. But not then.

When Mertyn and the seven had done everything they could at the caverns, we set out ourselves, down past the Blot toward the south, then following the coast to Hawsport, then up the Haws to Zebit, into the hills, and to the Willowater, almost the route we seven had thought of long and long ago.

We had wagons, now - enough to hold the turnips without crowding. And we had horses. Huldra had been well supplied, and we had all her beasts and equipage. She, the Witch, had been crushed beneath Mavin's huge body, that body which had taken the full brunt of the enchantment. There was little enough of Huldra left to bury, but we put what there was into a pit with the Basilisk. I had been too late to save Peter; but Mavin had been in time. I knew she would have done the same even if she had known what would happen. This did not comfort me. I did not mention it to Peter. It would not have comforted him.

It did comfort me, perhaps foolishly, that Mavin was in her own shape. Peter said her own shape had come upon her when Riddle arrived. I would have hated to think of her lying for some thousand years as a twisted, stony thing. Her body was in one of the wagons, close-wrapped in linen clothes. It was not possible to bury it, her. She looked too much alive, as though she might waken at any moment. I went to Murzy and Cat, begging them to undo Huldra's spell, but they shook their heads at me.

'We have already laid Sleep Brings a Darkening upon her, Jinian. She does not know what is happening. She is not condemned to be conscious for the thousand years which was the fate Huldra planned. She truly sleeps, without dreams. But the paralysis - that was a spell bought with lifeblood, Jinian. As was most everything Huldra did. To undo it would take the same, and not by any willing sacrifice, either, for part of the power would be lost if life were freely given. And it is the law of the art, as you know well, that causes beget causes. A thing ill done to waken Mavin would follow her like a curse afterward. As all the things Huldra did followed her to her end. It was Huldra's fate to be killed by her own enchantments. No, child. There's nothing we can do.'

There was nothing we could do. Peter went several times each day to the wagon in which her body lay. As did Mertyn, weeping. As did I. As did most of us. And there was nothing we could do.

Fourteen

Old South Road City

We came to the southern height above the Old South Road City at the end of a journey full of threats and hesitations, much of it through dead forests and across bare, ashen slopes that looked like lands long abandoned by life. Just finding food for ourselves had been a great problem. There were other groups than ours traveling the desolation. Refugees from one place or another clotted the roads and got in one another's way, some moving west toward the sea, others moving inland away from the sea's threat. There was talk of monsters from the deep; there were many dead from the yellow crystals; we were attacked several times and had to use the art.

Sometimes we had surprised great globs of shadow lying in hollows. Sometimes we found a way around; sometimes the shadows rose like a monstrous flight of vicious birds to hover above us while we

cowered in the wagons. Once there was no other way for the wagons to go, and the shadow-eaters jiggled on their root hairs to the edges of the patch, sucking the dark monsters up with their roots, moving inward as they went, until at last the high-piled central shadows lifted and went away, a sinuous dark line upon the sky, as though going off to report what had happened.

We lost two watchmen. Though we heard nothing in the night, we woke to one gone the first night, one gone the second. The third night we began to sleep close together, a thick line of the shadow-eaters outside the watchmen's posts, and after that we lost no more.

Despite all this, we lost very little time, coming to the heights north of Old South Road City in a season that should have been bright and pleasant but was, in fact, chill and dismal beneath a leaden sky. I looked down into the city itself with a cry of dismay. Only after staring at it for some time could I see it had not actually suffered since I had visited it as a child. Then it had been tumbled but almost covered with a greenery that made it appear relatively whole. Now it was uncovered, all its shattered parts, its fractures and splinters, laid bare. Gamesmen sent from the caverns swarmed along its streets and among the piled stone, working beside pawns as though there were no difference between them.

Actually, much work had been done. I began to see it as we rode down the hill. Stones had been assembled in orderly stacks near the buildings they were to go into. Walls were being rebuilt. Pawns heaved at pulleys while Tragamors heaved with Talent, and the stones slid home. The street we reached at the bottom of the hill was virtually clear for much of its length, and the fagades of the buildings on either side looked largely finished. A weary-looking Tragamor came toward us, holding out a hand to Mertyn.

'Dodir, Tragamor,' he said. 'Called Dodir of the Seven Hands. And I wish it were true!'

'Mertyn, King,' Peter's thalan said, introducing all the rest of us in our turn. 'There is a large troop behind us to bring you assistance, Dodir. And we bring something more valuable even than that - shadow-eaters.' He pointed to the turnips, thronging in their wagons. 'Can we have a council to tell us your situation?'

'Well, as to that,' replied Dodir, staring curiously at the turnips, 'I can tell you our situation in few words. We've made some progress, as you can see, but the heart has gone out of the Gamesmen. Often the Talent fails. There are times even the power fails. The Wizard Himaggery arrived....'

'Himaggery! Here already,' exclaimed Peter in a voice of hurt urgency. I knew what he was thinking. Himaggery didn't know about Mavin yet, and it would be Peter's place to tell him.

'He arrived two days ago, and he is attempting to set up a relay of power from the Bright Demesne, which he says may help our situation.'

'He did that at least once before,' said Peter. 'Long ago. At Bannerwell.'

'Well, we wish good luck to him. Unless he succeeds, I don't know what will put heart into the workers. We start each day with a plan in mind, but by noon we have drifted into despair once more. It's the shadows. Everyone says so. They lie around us like leeches, sucking up our hope.'

I thought of Mind Healer Talley, wondering if she had found some key to the Maze, some clue to Lom's mind, anything that would relieve this depression. Seemingly not. I could feel it trying to swallow me, and Dodir was obviously fighting it, for he breathed heavily as he went on.

'Additionally, we've had some trouble with the blind runners. They didn't want to give up their city, and

we've had to run them off by force. They keep coming back. We're trying not to hurt any of them, but it's getting difficult as they're getting more frantic with each passing day.

'And as for what's been done, well, look around you. We've found almost all the Bell. The pieces were more or less in one place, under the ruined Tower. Most of the stones are sorted out - many of them by plain muscle when Talent wouldn't work - and as soon as we can get the power situation worked out, we should move very rapidly.'

'The Tower,' I breathed. 'The stones for the Tower of the Daylight Bell? You found them?'

Dodir nodded. 'Found them. Yes. Broken, many of them. We'll need stone cutters to replace them.'

'They fell from a great height,' said Peter in a dull voice. It was unlike him. He had been unlike himself since the thing had happened to Mavin. He had not even looked at me, not touched me. It was as though he had shut me away, and it had gone on far too long. I had let him alone, respecting his grief, but this was too much.

'Did you find a lamp?' I asked. 'It would have been under the ruined tower. A silver lamp? And a book?' I was, quite frankly, thinking of the prophecy I had heard long since. 'The Wizard holds the book, the Bell, the light. ...' Which Wizard it might be, I couldn't guess. I wasn't even sure it was the right book and light, though the Bell part seemed self-evident.

Dodir shook his head. 'Such things would have been crushed flat. However, we've not entirely cleared the place, and it may yet turn up.'

'Where would we find Himaggery?' I asked. If telling Himaggery what had happened was part of what was eating at Peter, better have it over with.

Dodir pointed the way, through the city and up the slope at the other side toward what had been a grassy hill. 'There's a stream there, lady, and Himaggery's made camp, but he may be off to the east somewhere, overseeing that power system of his. He says the area around Lake Yost is yet untouched by the world's malady. I hope he is right.'

We started to ride away, and he called after us, 'And if these things of yours do indeed eat shadows, we will need them tonight.'

'You have shadow down in the city here?'

'From dusk to dawn. As though scouting for someone. Shadow, and strange shapes upon the hills, like nothing I have seen before. Things with painted faces and ribbons.'

I'm sure he could read in our faces that this was evil news. Somehow we had hoped, senselessly perhaps, that the Oracle and all its followers were back in the Maze, kept busy by Ganver and its kin, and that we would not have to confront them. Now it seemed that hope was false, and it was with a sense of fatalistic despair that I nodded at Dodir and took the reins from Peter's hands.

'I'll send someone to show you where the shadows come,' he called behind us. I waved but did not answer.

As for Peter, he was slumped beside me as though he did not hear or see, looking into his folded hands as though he held everything there, everything that mattered. Or perhaps he looked on an emptiness in

which nothing mattered. We went on through the ruined city. the other wagons following behind, Mertyn standing tall on the wagon seat to see that all of them were there. Behind us we heard Dodir call out, 'All right. Enough of this lying about. Let's have the first crew over here!' Then a crash of rock, an aching screech, as heavy stones shifted into place.

The farther we went, the more obvious the progress. They had started at the south side of the city. They had not even begun on the Tower, however. I looked down the avenue where it should have stood to see only piles of crumbled stone. Peter was right; it had fallen from a great height.

We came up to Himaggery's camp. Someone had called him. He came rushing out, full of wide smiles, grasping me by the hand, Peter by the hand, rushing on to meet Mertyn, not stopping to look, to see. I saw Peter's fingers, wet with tears again.

Enough of it. I had had enough of it. Chimmerdong had taught me that one cannot lie about in these moods, not even in grief. One must go on. I went to Himaggery and demanded he come with me into his tent, telling him I must speak to him privately. Mertyn shook his head at me warningly, but I ignored him, tugging Himaggery back as he had come, he half-irritated, half-jocular. When I had him inside, I said baldly, without any attempt at tact, 'Mavin saved Peter's life, Himaggery. She died. I'm sorry... .' And all the old gods knew I was.

He was angry. He accused me of making a bad joke. He accused me of pretending for some Wizardly purpose of my own. When he had said all the unforgettably forgivable things people do say in these circumstances, when he had said them several times over, he apologized to me, came down to his own feelings, and cried out her name very loudly two or three times as though his heart were broken.

I told him while he wept. 'Huldra had the spell ready, Himaggery. She had to utter only one word. She turned on Peter. I doubt that Mavin even knew what was about to happen. She had gained bulk from somewhere - there were some stores in the room, back behind the pillars - and then climbed across the ceiling of the room to get above the Witch. Huldra had taken time to mock us. She had taken too long at it, enjoying it. Mavin simply dropped over Huldra like some great basket. Mavin had been doing that a lot lately, basketing Bryan, basketing the Oracles outside the Bright Demesne. She caught the spell as it was uttered. It turned her to stone. The stone crushed Huldra. Then, when Riddle came, the stony form fell away and she lay there in her own shape, still as ice. ...'

Sometime during this tale, Peter came in. They hugged each other awkwardly, the way men do who have not been accustomed to showing affection. Then they went out to see her, leaving me there. Murzy came in with a glass of something very warming, which half untied the cold knots of my heart. 'What is it?' I asked, pointing at the cup.

'Bitter Tears Falling,' she said. 'We cannot cure grief, but we can postpone it and must. There is too much to do.'

When I had drunk the wise-art brew, I let her lead me away to the place our own tents were being pitched.

'They'll not be thinking of anything tonight, child, and someone must. I've been asking about, and the shadows are coming through here and there, picking off a Gamesman or two every night. It's not contributing to morale.'

I sighed from weariness. 'Dodir said he'd send someone who knows where they come from. Has he done so, Murzy?'

She pointed over her shoulder at a meek-looking little Elator, all neat thin bones and slim small feet with a narrow bird face at the top of it all. 'They call me Little Fritch, ma'am.' He bowed. 'Dodir put me to scouting out the shadow routes, and I'll venture I've spotted most of them.'

Which I think he had. I got three or four of the men to drive the wagon with me, and we went around the city sunwise, left to right, up and over, while he showed us every pass over the surrounding hills and hole through the stone escarpments while the turnips became almost hysterical with anticipation. The last two we had left were Big-blue and Molly-my-dear, and these two planted themselves at a saddle of the hills after several sexy little minuets and suggestive remarks. Little Fritch was very taken with the whole group; he said he'd flick among them in the dark hours, keeping them apprised of what happened.

And after that, I really couldn't stay awake. I thought of Peter and Himaggery, probably drinking themselves silly beside the fire, and couldn't find it in me to go to them or try to help them. I couldn't. I had hardly known Mavin, and yet every time I thought of it, it made me want to die from sorrow and shame.

Why? because . . . because if anyone understood the true meaning of the star-eye, it had probably been Mavin. How did I know? I simply knew. It was in her face. If anyone had been free, it had been she. If anyone had followed their own unerring choice as to the reality of what was good, it had been Mavin. She had had her sorrows, too, and her joys, but she had never blamed anyone else for either. She had not been sentimental. I had envied her. I thought of me drudging

away there in Chimmerdong, doing my blasted duty for all I was worth, and I envied Mavin. I was still doing my duty and still envying her. She shouldn't have done it.

But then, if she hadn't, Peter would be lying in her place now. And perhaps that was most grievous of all, that tiny chill of joy that it had not been Peter.

And perhaps that is what was bothering him, too. Perhaps he, too, had that tiny joyful pulse that it had not been he. Oh, grievous indeed.

Sighing, I left my bed and went to find them. They were drunkenly telling Mavin stories beside the fire. I sat and drank with them until the fire went out, then wrapped Himaggery and Peter warmly in blankets against the cold and staggered back to my own bed. 'Mavin,' I whispered to the night. 'I'm still doing my duty, lady. And those you loved are safe. At least for now.'

Morning came. Little Fritch made the rounds of the turnips and came back to say they had grown during the night. I went to see for myself. When I had first met Big-blue and Molly-my-dear, they had been about the size of my head. They had grown some on the trip, not a lot, for we were constantly moving and there was little time to root and feed. This morning they looked doubled in size, quirkier than ever, full of volatile good humor that could turn in a moment into malicious games.

'Oh, Jinian, lots of shadows. Lots of thick ones, all full of juices.' So Molly-my-dear addressed me, jiggling heavily upon her root hairs. 'Fat, so fat, like a moon, like the sun, I am glorious, so glorious.' She began to swing on my trouser bottom, laughing like a maniac.

'Isn't she beautiful,' giggled Big-blue. 'Like a great waterox cow, she is, bigger than big. And the seeds, you know' - giggle, nudge - 'they're ready!'

I didn't know what to make of this. No such slowness on the part of Little Fritch, however, who begged



them with every show of sincerity to give him their seeds, all of them, to be planted at once.

‘That’s good,’ said Big-blue. ‘If there had been many more shadows, we couldn’t have eaten them all. We need more of us, Jinian. Little Fitch can have the seed.’

‘But surely,’ I said, ‘they won’t grow in time to -’ I didn’t finish, ashamed of myself. I had forgotten I was a Wize-ard. There was a spell. Of course. Hatching to Follow. A spell to make things come to fruition very quickly. They rolled about, laughing, seeming to read my mind.

‘Oh, you Wizardly ones, so silly,’ said Molly-my-dear. ‘Gardener knows how to do that. He does it all the time. You or him, makes no never mind,’

And so was our morning spent, Little Fitch’s and mine, in planting turnip seed. These two had not been the only ones ready, and by noon there were vast tracts of fertile soil scratched and sown and spells muttered over. Fronds of green were showing by afternoon.

And at noon Peter and Himaggery emerged from their tent, physically somewhat the worse for the late and spirituous vigil they had held, but otherwise the better for it. And Peter came to me.

‘We’re taking Mavin down to the Tower. When the Tower is raised again, we will build a catafalque for her there. Until then, it is a good place for her to lie.’ He was silent then awhile, staring out with bleak eyes at the ruined city. ‘During my trip here, I thought it might be better to give it up. Better not to love anyone than to feel like that when they go. Better just shut all the feeling down. I really did think that, Jinian. I was even trying to do it. And I felt so guilty. She had wanted just to hold me for a time when I escaped, just for a moment or two, but I was in such a fever to get to you. I felt I didn’t deserve to live.’

So that had been it. Guilt, simple guilt, over a boyish - no a human failing. I leaned against him, put my arms tight around him as he went on.

‘I told Himaggery. He said it was a natural feeling, but silly. He wouldn’t trade his pain now for his joy then - back when he and Mavin were lovers - so he says. And I mustn’t, either. So. I won’t. And I think -well, I think we must take whatever time for love we have, and the time of your oath must be about done.’

‘It will be soon,’ I said, wiping several tears away surreptitiously. ‘Murzy says the time is probably already past.’ Then I made myself get busy with something else or I would not have done anything all that day but cry.

We made a ceremony for Mavin. There had been no time back at the caverns. We lit candles. We placed her upon a temporary catafalque, one great stone that Dodir and several of the other Tragamors had moved beside the empty pool in the ruined Tower. I longed for music, but there was none. Most of the Gamesmen of Barish were there. Barish-Windlow, Hafnor, Wafnor, and Shattnir were away east, setting up the power transmission from the Bright Demesne. Trandilar was there. She wept. I kept my eyes away from Dorn the Necromancer, knowing Peter was struggling in the same way. Dorn could Raise up the dead. But Mavin was not dead. And yet she was. For a thousand years dead.

Beedie and Roges were there. When the ceremony was done, they bid me good-bye before setting out to return over the sea. ‘It may be we will never come to the chasm alive again,’ Beedie said. ‘Never see the children again. If you fail in what you are doing here, then all will fail. I know that. Sometimes I wish we had not come. ...’

‘Beed,’ said Roges. ‘You don’t mean that.’

‘Well, and no, I don’t,’ she confessed. ‘Mavin was my friend. She saved my life and the lives of many in the chasm. It was she brought Roges and me together. No. I would have come. But it is a sad thing, nonetheless.’

I agreed with her it was a sad thing, then let them go, setting such spells of protection on them as I could, and thinking it was wise of them to get out of the city while they still could.

Vitior Vulpas Queynt was there. When I had told him about the Oracle and its followers, about Ganver and the other Eesties, he had flushed with anger. ‘Evil,’ he muttered to me. ‘What we did, what men did, was heedless and stupid, but what they do is purposefully evil.’ At the ceremony he was grim-faced and said nothing.

Chance was there, of course, close beside Peter, offering his shoulder and his strong arm. Mertyn and Himaggery were both good, strong men, but I loved Chance.

When it was over, I stood looking around at the shattered stones of the floor and remembering the lamp. I had fallen over it in memory, kicking it into that corner. A large stone lay there. Finding me tugging at it, Dodir asked if he could help me, and when he moved it away the lamp was there, flattened but whole.

‘Ganver said the Tower was a gift from Lorn which contained three treasures,’ I told him. ‘The Bell, the book - by which he meant the music - and the lamp. Here is the lamp. Can it be repaired?’

He looked at it doubtfully. I knew they had recruited smiths among the laborers and said something to that effect. Shaking his head over it, he took it away. When I went to see Mavin the next day, the lamp stood upon its pedestal, and I could not even see where it had been mended. It glowed dimly from a candle burning within it. I wondered how the lambent light that had come from it in times past might be restored.

The metalworkers had set up their foundry just outside the Tower walls. There an artist had labored over the fragments of the Bell, piecing them together. Now it was complete, he told me, he was making a mold from it. Then he would smooth all the broken places in the mold itself so the Bell, when melted and recast, would be as perfect as it once had been.

‘You were lucky to find it all,’ I murmured, lost in admiration for what would have seemed to me a hopeless task.

‘Not quite all of it,’ he complained. ‘Here on the rim is a line of writing, or symbols, perhaps. There is a nick. One small piece we cannot find. Perhaps one symbol or letter upon it, and no way of knowing what it was.’

I stared at the line of symbols,” strangely evocative, as though I might once have known their meaning. As an Eesty I would have known what they meant, but my Talent for understanding speech did not extend to writing. ‘Perhaps the piece will turn up. The Tower floor isn’t completely cleared yet.’

He nodded gravely, going on with his work. ‘We can’t wait,’ he said. ‘We must try to cast it soon, while there is still enough life in us to do so.’

And it was true. Life burned low in all of us. There were no smiles, no laughter. If it had not been for the turnips, we would have wept our way into silence. We were calm, too calm. Only the antics of the

shadow-eaters kept us moving, irritated but alive.

We had three laborious days after that during which no attacks came. On the fourth day came an Elator to tell us of an assault of the blind runners, those who had lived in the city before we came. We seven went to the outskirts and waited for them. They had befriended me when I was a child. I thought it might be possible to talk to them.

Which it might have been, had they not come hooded and blind and unhearing, running on the road itself, naked as eggs. We did the only thing we could; both Night Will Come Turning and Silence and Shadow, the two spells reinforcing one another and both invoked on all of them, leaving them sleeping in heaps by the roadside.

‘How long?’ I asked Murzy, for it had seemed the night spell had been done with a twist to put a very long sleep upon them.

‘Until someone wins this battle,’ she said flatly. ‘Us or the shadow. Until Lorn lives or dies. If Lorn dies, they are better off asleep.’

It was the first time anyone had said we were near that time. We had all known it, but it was the first time anyone had said it.

Back at the camp we met Barish-Windlow and the Gamesmen who had been with him. The linkage to the Bright Demesne was complete. ‘Though how it will stand up under assault, I cannot say,’ Barish-Windlow commented wearily. Then he looked at me, and I knew it was Windlow seeing me, for he said in a quiet, old-sounding voice, ‘You know, Jinian, long ago I saw a happy future for Peter. I knew that was a true vision.’ And I knew he was trying to cheer me.

That day the eye of the storm moved over us and was the last of our calm.

Toward evening two Elators arrived almost simultaneously at Dodir’s tent. Peter and I happened to be there.

‘There are forms massing in the hills,’ they told us. This was more ominous, in that they had come from opposite sides of the city. We were surrounded. When I questioned them, they identified what they had seen. Shadow forms, and more shadow forms. Shadows taking the forms of beasts and monsters. Shadows building themselves into siege towers. And with the shadows, those of the Oracle’s Brotherhood, hundreds of them, flapping among them in their ribbons and painted faces like great bats.

Peter and I went among the turnips. Each large one now had a train of fifty or so tiny ones at its - I was going to say heels. At its roots, I suppose one should say. The tiny ones spoke in sparrow voices, shrill and twittering, and were no less mischievous than the big ones. We surrounded the city with a thin line of them, wishing there had been more seed. They called to one another, mocking the shadow, burying themselves, then digging themselves up again to wander about and find neighbors more to their liking. Five or six times Peter and I and Little Flich went around the lines, straightening them out, begging them to fill holes, at which they jeered and mocked, coming out of the soil to hang on my trouser bottoms and the ends of my sash, swinging madly and screaming at one another.

Then, when we had done with the turnips what we could, the seven began its work together with Himag-gery and Queynt. Nine of us Wize-ards - Wizards, trying to dam a flood or block a hurricane. We set spells and protections and traps, trying to feel they would apply to shadows, though we had no idea whether shadows were subject to the art or not. We were not sanguine about our future.

Down in the city, however, Sorcerers were storing power from the Demesne linkage. It was as though new blood had run into the city. The depression lifted somewhat. The workers felt more energetic. If the city was a focus of infection (as one of the Healers said), then the Bright Demense was a healthy body that fought that infection.

At evening we went up to the hills, all of us Wize-ards, and Peter, and all the Great Gamesmen who could take time from their tasks in the city. As darkness began to fall, came the first assault.

We saw it as a low, breaking wave upon the hills, flowing toward us, dark under the emerging stars and the light of the half-made moon overhead. Upon the wave, the Oracle's brethren danced, ribbons fluttering, fantastic silhouettes against the sky. They howled as they came, not loudly, so that first we thought it was only our blood singing in our ears. Even the howling was mockery, war cries but in treble-ironical tones, odd words stressed. We were to have no dignity in this battle. They would mock us into the jaws of hell, and I wondered, not for the first time, what they would do with themselves when Lorn was dead. I wondered if they were all as insane as the Oracle itself, busy feasting upon our deaths when our deaths meant their own, mad for destruction, avid with hate.

We had set fire spells upon the closest rim of hills, fires that blazed forth in fountains of white sparks when the shadows came near. Their structures broke before these jets of flame, broke and flowed around and reassembled again. We had set traps within the valley, triggered when the shadow came near, and these, too, were tripped when the shadow neared, broke, flowed out and around and on.

'So much for that,' murmured Murzy. 'I hadn't thought it would work, but it was worth a try.'

'Where do you think Ganver is?' Peter asked me. 'Why isn't Ganver here?'

'Because, 'I said, counting the possibilities off on my fingers, 'Ganver is in the Maze, recalling better times to Lorn. Or Ganver has gone back to the grave, to die there.. Or Ganver is meeting with others of his kind and they have reached no agreement. Or Ganver has been found by Mind Healer Talley and is being used as a guide. I am as perplexed as you are about Ganver, Peter, and oh, I wish Ganver had acted against the Oracle long and long ago.' I knew in my heart why it had not. I could not find it in me to blame the old Eesty too much, even now.

The shadow came on, tickling at us, advancing a little, then retreating, the Oracle's followers dancing along, watching every movement, continuing their whooping and calling, yip-yip-yip, a high, teasing call.

'I wonder if I could Beguile them,' said Trandilar from my side. 'Beguile the shadow?'

Cat shook her head. 'No. There is nothing there to be Beguiled, great Queen. Can one Beguile nothingness?'

Then they reached the line of turnips. Now, for the first time, they were slowed by something. The shadow-eaters began to suck them up, making a keening noise as they did so. The Oracles leaped and danced, calling words of encouragement to the shadow, piling it higher, higher and higher. . . .

'By the old gods,' Murzy gasped, 'the shadow's burying the creatures.'

It was true. The shadow piled around them, over them, making great lumps and protrusions of black over which the further shadow flowed as over some hilly road. We stood below them now, and nothing stood between them and us.

Then the bell sound.

For a moment I thought it truly was the Bell. For a moment I forgot we had not cast the Daylight Bell. For a moment I believed in miracles. Then I saw it was Peter, Peter Shifted into a great, brazen shape and donging out the sound, so near the real sound I could not tell the difference.

And the shadow fled, fled away from the shadow-eaters, away from the dancing Oracles, leaving them upon the hillside still prancing, still leaping, under the pale cold light of the growing moon. And another sound under the bell sound.

Laughter.

The Oracle, high upon the hillside, laughing.

‘Oh, very pretty,’ it called to us in a voice of whetted steel. ‘Very clever, little Shifter man. And it will work, once. Perhaps even twice. But not more than that.’

‘And we will be back, loves. We will be back!’

We stumbled down into the camp, exhausted. Behind us the line of shadow-eaters lifted a shrill complaint into the dark.

‘We can’t hold them away from the city,’ said Dodir.

‘No,’ Murzy agreed. ‘We can’t hold them. The shadows left when Peter made the bell sound, but only because it suited the Oracles to let them leave. The Oracles are playing with us.’

In the foundry the furnace glowed red, a strong, ruddy glow that brought us toward it like bait, as though we hungered for honest fire.

‘How long?’ asked Himaggery.

‘We’ll pour at dawn,’ said the foundryman, his eyes distant and possessed of some vision. I knew at once he was right. The Daylight Bell must be cast at dawn. Beside him the great cauldron seethed, ruddy now, lightening as it grew hotter. ‘We found all but the one piece, but some of the metal will stick to the sides of the crucible. There won’t be enough to fill the mold. We have to have more metal.’

Trandilar took off her bracelets, dropping them into the crucible. Murzy looked long upon the flowing metal, then she took the pool fragment from her locket and dropped it in. The others did the same. Except for me.

I stood there, hypnotized, drawn into the flowing surface of the metal. It wanted something else, more. Pool fragments, yes. Bracelets, yes.

I reached into the neck of my blouse and drew out the star-eye pendant Tess Tinder-my-hand had given me all those years ago. The most precious thing I had, really. Next to life and Peter. With death so close, precious things could not be kept. I dropped it onto the surface of the molten metal and it lay there, shining with a light brighter than the sun. I had to shut my eyes. When I opened them again, it had vanished, melted.

‘For luck,’ I said, and the foundryman smiled, taking note of the level of the metal.

‘Enough,’ he whispered. ‘Barely enough.’

‘The star-eye held a power you might have used,’ said Cat, not belligerently but matter-of-fact.

I shook my head at her. ‘I have not understood the lessons Ganver tried to teach me, Cat. If I had understood those lessons, I could have used their power without the amulet. In the cavern of the giants, the Oracle mocked me, saying the star-eye was only a sign, a symbol. In saying that about the pendant, it was right. The true meaning of it is more than that, but I do not understand it any more than the Oracle did.’

It was warm there. The others wandered away. Peter still stood by me in the light of the furnace. After a time he led me back into the ruined Tower, against the wall which the furnace had warmed from the other side. There was no one else there. From beyond the wall we could hear the muffled voices of the workers pumping the bellows and putting fuel onto the fire. Across the pool, Mavin’s profile stared upward at the moon. In that strange light, she appeared to be smiling. Peter was wearing a great, heavy cloak, and he spread it on the smooth floor against the warm wall near the pedestal with the lamp. We lay down upon it, covering ourselves with my own cloak, and he turned my face toward him for a kiss.

Before he kissed me I would have said we were too weary for feeling. After he kissed me there was nothing else but feeling.

Peter came to his skin much more easily than I. He merely Shifted the clothing away. I, bound about by laces and thongs and ties and belts, came to it more gradually. Still, it was not long until we lay skin to skin between the warm cloaks, forgetting where we were, not hearing the workmen from behind the wall, not seeing the cold moon staring from the sky top. My oath was over, that day or some previous day, but over.

But I did not think of that. Nor of the shadows. Those thoughts teased at the edges of my mind, but Peter drove them away. There were his hands upon me, gentle and inexorable. His strong, velvet-skinned legs moving against mine. A sweetness between us, down the whole length of us, like a pouring of honey, and him sliding into me as though a hand into a glove. . . .

A Shifter. Until that moment I had not understood the lovemaking implications of that. Human bodies are designed for many things, lovemaking among them,

but there are elbows and knees and awkwardnesses?

But with a Shifter there is - there is nothing left undone. There can be no awkwardness. When a Shifter loves, he ... he Shifts to a shape for that alone. There is no part left uninvolved. There is-

There is what we had.

When I opened my eyes, the moon had moved from the top of the sky. Beside us on the pedestal the lamp glowed with its own light, softly lambent, and-I knew it had drawn from us a light that could not be dimmed, as it had drawn a light from the city in times long past. Dawn crept into the east. On the far side of the wall the men called encouragement to one another, and we heard the long, falling hiss of molten metal flowing into the Bell mold.

As I lay there looking into Peter’s eyes, I understood what it was Ganver had been trying to teach me. It

did, yes, have something to do with lovemaking. What was it Ganver had called it? ‘A following of perfection.’

‘How long before we can use the Bell?’ I asked.

He shook his head, stroking my hair back from my forehead. ‘A day or more, I think, Jinian love. It must cool.’ And then he laughed. ‘As I think I must.’

‘Not for a day or more, surely.’ I pressed my mouth into the hollow of his throat.

‘Not that long, no.’

I did not explain. The night would come soon enough. I would have to use what I thought I understood then, but I said nothing about it, merely smiling up at Peter in anticipation of what he might do next.

Which was a surprise, for he suggested breakfast.

Along about midmorning, I left him and went with the rest of the seven to the hills. Everyone in the city and outside it had been wandering about, brave smiles on their faces, making kind speech to this one and that one, just as I had done. We knew general Wize-ardry wouldn’t work. We knew the shadow-eaters couldn’t stay the monstrous flow that would come at us. And those who had been shadow bit, like Himaggery and me, had been at some pains to tell others what it was like, leaving it to them whether to face the shadow or take their own lives. Not one of those in the city had suggested flight. Not one Armiger. Not one Elator. Whoever had selected the hundred thousand in that long-ago time had done well.

‘You’ve learned something,’ said Cat to me, observing me closely, perhaps noting the little smile I wore.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘But I won’t talk of it, Cat. It’s too tenuous yet. Too uncertain. It has to do with love and children and parts contained in the whole. It has to do with weeding a garden without destroying the good plants in it. It’s coming, slowly. I’m letting it come.’

She nodded, not badgering me. Evidently they understood very well what this kind of feeling was, the notion that one knows something but cannot yet put it into words. ‘I’ll need your help, though. Come night and the Oracle again, I’m going to try the final couplet.’

‘Jinian,’ Murzy breathed while Dodie looked white-eyed at me. ‘Dangerous.’

‘And fatal not to,’ I said, still smiling at them all.

‘It can only be used once in a generation,’ said Cat in her most pedantic voice.

‘Has it been used in mine?’

She shook her head at me, pursing her lips. ‘No. No, Jinian. So far as I know, it hasn’t been used in centuries.’

I laughed at her, at Murzy. ‘Then there are many uses stored up to use now. Don’t fret, Murzemire Hornloss, nor you, Cat Candleshy. We will or we won’t, and fretting won’t help either outcome.’

The things needed to invoke the final couplet were many, varied, involving all of us in a daylong search

for this and that. It would have been easier if the land had been alive and verdant. To find certain herbs among the ash and choking smokes, amid the dead trees and fallen branches - that was more difficult than we liked.

It was not until after dusk we came back to the city to find the shadow-eaters spread into their circle, not shrilling now, not making any sound, as frightened as the rest of us. It had occurred to them perhaps for the first time that we were all mortal, they and we, that they, too, could be eaten into nothingness. Thus I was not surprised when I crossed their line to hear a soft sound like a tiny growl coming from the ground.

‘Courage,’ I whispered. ‘Perhaps you will have help tonight.’

We mounted to the hilltop above Himaggery’s camp and began our preparations in a glade beside a fall that came down from the higher mountains beyond. Peter came and sat on the grass behind me.

‘You’ll be more comfortable below,’ I told him. ‘With the others.’

‘I am more comfortable here,’ he said. ‘With you. No matter what comes.’

I shut my mouth, remembering what I had asked him to do for me if the Oracle came too close. Of course he must be here. By me. I went to him and knelt there, my cheek against his. ‘Is the mold of the Bell cooling?’

‘Not noticeably.’ He made a grimace. ‘The foundry-men say it takes days sometimes. They dare not crack the mold until it is cool.’ Then, pulling me close, ‘Have you seen the lamp?’

I stood tall to gaze down into the valley. The lamp in the ruined Tower glowed, shone, setting all the broken stones into silver and shade. ‘Did we do that?’

‘Seemingly. We. Or perhaps Mind Healer Talley. Someone did.’

‘There’s still the Bell and the book,’ I said. ‘The book was long ago eaten by mice, I’m sure. Used by bunwits to line their nests.’

‘It wasn’t really the book,’ he said, holding me even closer. ‘It was the music from the book. The Shadow-people’s singing.’

‘Jinian,’ whispered Sarah Shadowsox.

‘Jinian,’ called Margaret Foxmitten from the other side. ‘Shadow!’

He let me go, all at once, knowing he must not detain me. I touched him once more, quickly, then turned to the work. He shouldn’t have been there. He shouldn’t have watched, but it was dark and what difference did it make?

The shadow was piled higher than before. On its fringes the Oracles danced, their mockery less treble, more angry. They tired of the game. Tonight they would come to finish us, if they could. The thought made me tremble. Peter had a sharp dagger. I had made him promise I would not come into the grip of the Oracle.

Enough. The things were laid out before me on a rough stone altar. As the shadows drove nearer,



lunging upward into towers of dark across the last of the sunset glow, I wove.

I wove by forest and meadow, branch and leaf. I wove by stream and pool, by river and fall. I wove by cloud and air, by thunder and sunset glow. I wove by depths of the earth, rock and gem, glittering ores and crystals blooming in the dark, old bone and new. Beside me the others wove as well. 'Forest,' I called. 'Chimmerdong. Eutras.' 'Eutras,' sang Sarah and Bets Battereye. 'Earthways,' I called. 'Gobblemole, Bintomar.' 'Bintomar,' caroled Dodie, swaying. 'Wingways,' I called. 'Fritchhawk, Favian.' 'Favian,' intoned Murzy and Cat in antiphony. 'Waterways,' I called. 'D'bor Wife. Shielsas.' 'Shielsas,' sang Margaret, her voice soaring, reverberating in the cloud-strewn sky, making rings of color that spread outward from her voice, outward from her call, to the farther horizons.

'And all within sound of my voice or reach of the wind,' I cried, thrusting my voice after hers, like a Sending, like a magic spear, driving it upward. 'And all within sound of my voice or lick of the wave, or all within sound of my voice or stretch of the soil, or all within sound of my voice or where green grows and leaf springs up. Named or unnamed, silent or speaking. Let this message be brought,

'By the Eye of the Star, Where Old Gods Are!'

On the altar stone something blazed up, a quick blue flame, sputtering into silence. Above us our words gathered like a flock of birds, circling, making rings of color on the sky. In the center of that widening gyre something spread great wings.

'Jinian,' it called down from the height. 'Jinian.'

'I am here,' I cried.

The earth shuddered beneath us, cracked, opened to admit the gigantic form of the Gobblemole. The fall opened like a curtain and D'bor Wife came forth. Around us the greenery rustled, began to burgeon upward, swallowing us in its depths. Forest. Come again.

And not only that. It would have been enough, those four. Quite enough. But I had called others as well, the named and unnamed. Those, too, came to the final couplet.

A thing of great bones. A thing of rock. A thing of gems. A thing of wind. A thing of cloud.

A quintessence of deserts, hot as molten brass and glowing with sun. A distillation of great goles, monstrous and hungry.

A songster, multivoiced, crying in the language of the Shadowpeople with a silver flute in its hands.

These - all these.

I looked at them, mouth open, forgetting why they had been summoned. Murzy jostled me with her elbow, bringing my attention back to the rough altar before us.

'Those surrounding us are your enemies,' I said. 'The shadow. The Oracles. They come to harm us, but they will also kill you all. I beg help from all the old gods. By the Eye of the Star.'

'By the Eye of the Star,' they whispered at me, a torrent of sound, like a river in spate. There was one of them - oh, I don't remember which one. An immensity. Something so huge my senses could not encompass it. It was simply there, before me, around me, asking a simple question in a voice that could

no more have been ignored than a lightning stroke could be ignored.

‘Look at me, Star-eye! What do you see?’

‘Bao,’ I said, holding on to Murzy’s hand for all I was worth.

It was replaced by another thing, asking the same question. I made the same reply out of a dry throat, wondering if this was right, if I had guessed aright, or if we would all be swept away. The threatening shadows, the Oracles, they were out there somewhere. I wondered if they saw, if they knew what was happening, then could not wonder any longer, for a third being was around us.

‘What do you see, Star-eye?’

‘Bao.’ Bao, yes, to them all. I felt Cat at my shoulder, trembling, proud Cat, trembling like a sapling in storm.

Then something new. A being there, before us, and with it a smaller version of itself.

‘Look at my child, Star-eye. What do you see?’

Oh, what could I say? What should I say? I knew, knew the answer I had was right, but to say it. To say it. . .

‘I see love, Great One. I see a following of perfection.’

‘And do you see bao?’

‘No, Great One, neither bao nor its lack. Until time shall show. Watch and learn.’

Storm then, a wildness of cloud. Dodie crept close to us. We were all seven gathered tight. Somewhere behind us, I could feel Peter’s presence, firm as stone, holding to the earth and waiting. Before us the sky broke and roiled, a being half-seen vanished in its depths to reappear beside us. Something green, then. Forest, I think. Chimmerdong. That great being, that old god we had so long invoked under the name of Eutras. It held out its hand -hand. It held out a great promontory of branch and twig and leafy swag, within which rested a flock of silly birds, twittering and hopping about. They did not see me or know me. ‘What do you see, Star-eye?’ it asked. ‘I see bao,’ I croaked from a dry throat. ‘Part of your own, Great One.’

‘In all, or each?’ it asked in a great, windy whisper. ‘In all or each?’ ‘In all, Great One.’

‘Will you take one for your supper?’ it asked me gently.

Murzy’s hand tightened on mine. Oh, Murzy. ‘I will, perhaps, if there are plenty, if you will allow, sometime, though not now.’

‘And if there were not plenty?’ ‘I would not, Chimmerdong,’ I cried. ‘I would not. None of us would.’

And Eutras was gone and all the others, and there was only the mighty Fritchhawk there before us. ‘Well, Jinian,’ it said. ‘Well, Star-eye.’

‘Well Fritchhawk,’ I said, trying to get enough spit in my mouth to make a sound. ‘We meet again.’

‘What is your wish, Star-eye? Shall we punish these shadows for you? These Oracles?’

Oh, tricky Flichthawk. I heard Peter moving behind me, held up a hand quickly to keep him from speaking, to keep any of them from speaking.

‘The star-eye knows you may not, great Favian. For they have not bao of their own, and punishment would be vicious. We do not punish what cannot learn.’ ‘Shall I kill them for you then, Star-eye?’ ‘The star-eye knows you may not, Flichthawk. For the shadows are of the bao of Lorn, and the Oracles are of the bao of the Eesties.’

‘Then what may I do for you, Star-eye?’

‘Drive them away for a time, Flichthawk. If you will. We need time.’

Wings then. A thunder of wings, beating down, raising a cloud of choking dust and a heart of storm.

As usual, we all ended up flattened. Whenever the Flichthawk flew, everything around it ended up flattened. There was wind, a monstrous, howling wind that moved out from us and away. I saw it thrust the shadows before it like a mighty broom, saw the banks of darkness fade into distance. Most of the Oracle’s followers, as well, tumbled away. Behind them the Oracle stood, untouched, ribbons slapping wildly on the gale. Alone, it could not really harm us all.

It became very quiet. I heard the Oracle calling, almost laughing at me.

‘Oh, very good, very good. Didn’t we say she is the heroine type? One time, Jinian Footseer. Two times, Jinian Dervish Daughter. Three times, Jinian Star-eye. And the third shall be the last! The old gods will not come to your aid again.’

I sagged, feeling Peter’s arms around me. Murzy and the others were whispering among themselves.

‘They’ll be back?’ Murzy said. It was only half a question.

‘Oh, yes,’ I sobbed. ‘They’ll be back.’

Fifteen

The Dagger of Daggerhawk

We went down into the windswept morning to find the city swarming with workers. There were sevens scattered among the Gamesmen; there were Gamesmen I had not seen before. Even as we watched, a new troop of them came down the hill into the city, the very last, so they said, from the caverns. So, stones screamed their way into walls; high above the street a crew was lifting rafters into place. For a moment, just a fraction of a breath, I could believe the city was as it had appeared in memory.

‘An Elator came to tell me what happened,’ said Dodir. ‘You’ve driven them away, is that it?’

‘Temporarily,’ I said. ‘Until tonight, perhaps. Not for long.’

We went on toward the Tower. I noticed the lamp was burning more brightly than it had before. Himag-gery was there, sitting by Mavin, stroking her arm. Any honest feeling, it seemed, made it glow

the brighter. Though Peter and I had started it glowing, it went on gathering light from everywhere it could. That is the way of the light, to gather, as it is the way of shadow.

Himagery rose when we came in. 'So, we have yet a little time?' He didn't sound hopeful, but he wasn't depressed about it, either. A kind of fatalistic cheer, that was it. A sense that pervaded the city and all of us who were in it.

'We have yet a little time,' I said. Privately I believed it was our last day to live, but I didn't say so. It might just have been weariness, There had been little-enough sleep for all of us lately, and there was no point in dispiriting the others.

We went through the broken walls to the foundry. The foundryman was moving around the mold, looking at it doubtfully. 'I thought perhaps it would have cooled,' he said. 'An ordinary bell that size would have cooled by now. It's still hot. Too hot to take out of the mold. I don't understand it.'

I shared a glance with Murzy. The Bell had melted into it my star-eye and all our pool fragments dipped in the milky stuff with which crystals came. I mentioned this to the metalworker, seeing his face crease with concentration as Peter's often did.

'I don't know,' he said, shaking his head. 'I don't know. The quantity was very small, but strange alloys can be made with very small quantities of additives. ...'

I put out a hand toward the mold. It was too hot to touch. Far too hot to break open yet. 'Perhaps by night,' I said, not believing it. 'Undoubtedly by the time the Oracle returns.'

Peter and I went into the woods together. There was a glade above the camp that was untouched by the sickness of the world, a place where flowers bloomed and trees were still green. We went to have the privacy to say and do what all lovers say and do. I learned again what it is like to be loved by a Shifter. He learned again, so he said, that he loved me. I had had all the best of it and told him so. We argued about that. The day wore on. We ate meat and bread and drank wine. We laughed, even, at some silliness or other. Sun sparkled through the leaves, dappling our bare skins with coins of gold, and we spent them prodigiously on our pleasure. And night came, as we had known it would.

'I have to go,' I said.

'Where are you going, Jinian love?'

'Up there.' I pointed. 'The Oracle will come up there.'

'I'll come with you.'

'No.' I pushed him down, fixing him with my fiercest glance. 'No, Peter. I have the Dagger of Daggerhawk Demesne. Though I may not call on the old gods again, there are other beings I may call. If necessary, I will use the Dagger on myself. No. Don't say anything. It will be easier for me this way.'

'I've told Murzy and the others to stay at the Tower. I'm going to call Shadowpeople and send them there. I want you to go to the foundry. The Bell must be cooled by now. It must be! Remember the words of the Seer, Peter? Sorah, so long ago? Upon the Wastes of Bleer. She told us the Wizard had the Bell, the book, the light. There are Wize-ards here in plenty, and we must have all three. The Bell. The light. The singing.'

‘There is no book,’ he said stupidly, staring at me as though to memorize me. ‘No book to sing from.’

‘They have Mavin,’ I retorted. ‘Ask them to sing Mavin’s song. She will be their book.’

I think he knew it would hurt me if he argued, so he didn’t. I saw him holding on to his self-control as though with both hands. He left me there. Halfway down the hill he turned and stared, remembering to wave, trying not to weep, remembering at last to Shift some clothing for himself, and then he was gone.

My own clothes lay on the grasses. For this occasion I had decked myself. My gown was blue, girdled and cloaked in green and violet. They were colors Peter liked. I had worn them for him, and for myself. If I must meet death, then it would be well clad, not as some scruffy wanderer. So, these silken, lovely things. I put them on, drawing my hair high and pinning it there with jeweled combs. They had been among Mavin’s things, and Himaggery had wept when he saw them. He had given them to her long ago, before Peter was born. He had told me to take them and wear them in her memory. So I did, saying her name as I slipped them into my hair.

Then, only then, I laid out the materials for a summons. It was a simple thing. I had barely finished when I heard a trill from among the trees.

‘Jinian,’ it said. ‘Here is Proom and Proom’s people for the singing.’

So much for the art. Why had I assumed Proom would not be perfectly aware of what was going on? He had always turned up fortuitously in the past. Why not this time?

‘Will you sing Mavin’s song in the ruined Tower, Proom?’

‘That one. Yes. And another we have, also of Mavin, and of Jinian and Peter, and of Ganver, too.’

‘There is no book in the tower.’

‘I have brought the book,’ he said, stepping forward into the glade where I stood with my shoes in the grass beside me and all the Wize-ardly stuff spread around. He held it, a book almost too big for him, clutched to his chest. ‘We took it when the Tower fell. We have had it always.’

He started away down the hillside, others emerging from the trees to follow him. He turned. ‘Where are you going in your ceremonial dress, Jinian Star-eye?’

I gestured behind me. He shook his head sadly. ‘We will sing your song, too, Jinian. We will sing your song.’

Then they were gone, light as leafy shade on the grass, and I was alone with my shoes lying in the grass and my Wize-ard’s pouch and the Dagger on my thigh and Murzemire’s words in my heart.

‘I have Seen,’ she had said brokenly. ‘The Oracle and all his followers. They will come there!’ And she had pointed to a low saddle of the mountain where the rocks lay bare and the soil ashen as though burned by an acid flame.

I put on my shoes and went to that place.

It was dusk when I arrived there. The place was littered with stones, great skull-shaped boulders on which the lichen had died, leaving gray scrofulous patches, like dead skin. Soon after I arrived, I saw the

Oracle emerge far down the opposite slope. It stood quietly as I mounted one of the great stones. This time there was no mockery. Their ribbons were black and indigo, death colors. The shadows lay behind them in drifts, unmoving. There would be no play tonight. Nor would I have time to prepare or worry, or grieve. It saw me standing on the boulder and moved upward, toward me, its many followers behind it in a fluttering tide. Tonight they led the shadow.

I had the Dagger in my hand, the Daggerhawk blade, the wings of it curving beneath my fingers, the jewels of it glittering. Cold, so cold that blade, and coming toward me the great, gross bulk of the Oracle. Its original Eesty shape had long been overlaid with pretense and guile. The ribbons it had worn as mimicry were a part of it now. The hands it had imaged were now real; the face it had painted had become its own face. It had begun out of mockery at us pathetic human shapes; it had gone on out of stubborn, relentless anger; it had ended by losing everything it could ever have cared about, and even now it would not make an end.

‘Jinian,’ it called to me. ‘Jinian Footseer. Dervish Daughter. Does it still wear the star-eye on its little bosom? My sign, human. Mine. The sign of me.’

‘No,’ I said, so softly it might not have heard. ‘No, Oracle. It is my sign. I’ve earned it.’

‘You?’ It laughed. I had heard a laugh like that once before in the fortress of Zale, a high chirp of mirthless sound, like a dreaming bird. Birds, who have no bao, may dream of souls? Why not. So the Oracle might dream now of what it had lost - or never had.

‘I, Oracle.’

‘You pity me, girl?’

‘I pity you, Oracle.’ I didn’t know what I said. It was too late for anything but truth, and truth is what I told.

Then came light in those painted eyes. Oh, Gamelords and all the old gods. Light in those eyes. An evil joy. A monstrous peace. And I knew why, for the Dagger seemed to tremble in my hands. The Daggerhawk blade, which would kill by a touch only when used in anger. And I had no anger left against this thing. Only pity. Impotent pity. Which could do nothing with the Dagger, nothing at all.

It came toward me. Behind it the others, a shuffling multitude of them. Behind me, below me in the city, softened by distance, I heard the cries of the workmen struggling to hang the Bell. Hang it and ring it in order that all might be restored. I could hold these pathetic monsters off perhaps a minute or two, pretending an answer I did not feel, but my heart was lost in me. The light we had spun into the lamp of the Tower would be the world’s light, but not our own. Not Peter’s and mine. The effort we had put into the Bell would be the world’s cure, perhaps, but not ours.

‘Have you thought,’ I called to the Oracle, ‘that even now it is not too late?’

‘Too late? Why, human girl, Dervish Daughter, it is not early enough. I should have killed you there in the Forest of Chimmerdong, long and long ago. I should have taken you myself and fed you to the monstrous

Pig-‘

‘Why didn’t you?’

‘Because we foresaw this end, Footseer. Foresaw the Dagger in your hand and you unable to use it. Because we thought it unnecessary. All your kind are so useless! We knew in the end it would come to this. More fun to play the Game out, you see. More fun to let it go on. . . .’

‘But didn’t you also see the world’s death? And the death of all? Of every one of you? Of all your Brotherhood?’

Silence. As though I had uttered a curse upon them. Silence, with the Oracle dancing from side to side, laughing at me, the laugh a hollow one which the

others did not echo, falling into silence as it became aware of their silence.

‘We will not die!’ The cry came from behind the Oracle, from that close pack that shuffled toward me. ‘You lie, Footseer. We must not die.’

I wanted to laugh, to laugh and cry all at the same time. ‘Oh, foolish children,’ I called, forgetting they were not my children, ‘You will die. All the Brotherhood will die. I, too, perhaps, but you certainly. This, too, has been Seen!’

A wailing, then, like an angered ghost. Among those who shuffled along after the Oracle an eddy moved, a circling, as though some within that throng chose to move another way. Looking down on them, I was reminded of water as it breaks over a submerged stone, whirling darkly and without visible purpose. The Oracle had been at the front of this mob, but now it seemed to be behind the foremost rank, pulled sideways as though caught by that strange undertow.

‘The Riddler told us the world died but that we would live, masters of all!’ It was the same voice, complaining bitterly. ‘Our bao would conquer everything!’

Pity again. So foolish, so childish, so damned. ‘What did you think you would do to live when the world died? When the world was only a sphere of cold stone? When there were no seas, no plants? How did you think you would live?’ I called out to them, receiving no answer. ‘And since you have no bao, how would it conquer?’ The mob was pushing against the stone I stood upon, and it rocked. I turned to leap to the safety of the hill behind me, only to find a tentacle of the throng had moved between me and that place. They pushed, and I rocked once more, staggering to keep my balance.

‘You did not say we would die!’ the voice was crying. Somewhere in that mass of ribboned forms, the Oracle was moving. I could not tell where. ‘Riddler, you did not say we would die.’

The stone heaved, twisted, and I dropped to all fours, frantically snatching at the stone, dropping the Dagger as I did it, heedless, unthinking. It flew from my hands like a spark from the fire, gems glittering upon its hilt and at the top of the blade. The silvery wings shone, sparkling, drawing eyes upward. It ricocheted from the stone I teetered on, flashing outward above the mob. A hand reached up to snatch it from the air.

Ah, I said to myself. So it was you, Jinian, meant to die by the Dagger all along. You meant to die at the anger of these rebellious stars. And I crouched there, waiting, remembering how the Basilisks had died, some long ago, one only recently, almost it had seemed without pain, and I was thankful for that. Since that time upon the battlement at the fortress of Zale, I had wakened sometimes in the night, mouth dry, fearing pain. So I crouched, eyes not shut but not watching, mouth dry still, merely waiting. In a moment the Dagger would touch me, and that would be an end to it all. At the end, I would think of Peter. He

might never know of it, but it would comfort me at least.

So I waited, seeing without seeing how the dagger spun into the mob, as though it lived, as though it flew by those carved wings.

Within that throng came a clearing. A vacancy. A troubled space where the shifting bodies of the Brotherhood had twirled away. At the edge of this space the Dagger spun. I could see it in the hands of one of them. Which one? The Oracle itself? I thought at first yes, then no, for the creature spun, spun, screaming as it spun, 'You did not tell us we would die!'

It spun with the Dagger in one hand, a wheel of flame, and as it spun the beribboned Eesties fell before it like grain before the scythe. Was one of them the Oracle? Cautiously, as one who has just escaped the attack of some great, sly beast, I raised my head and shoulders to see what was there. Those who had been in the crevasse behind me had poured forth once more.

The shallow ditch was empty. I stepped across it to the hilltop, sinking once more to a crouch, watching.

And still they fell, by the tens, by the hundreds. Their forms littered the hillside, changing now, losing their mock-human forms, turning to Eesty shape once more, starlike upon the grass, fading as I watched, becoming mere shades of themselves which melted into the herbage and were gone. I stepped from the stones to the dried, brittle grass. Still the voice cried, or another voice like it; still the Dagger spun, and those who were left living began to flee. The Dagger did not remain behind. It pursued them yet in the hand of one of their own kind, and with anger and frustrated purpose, furious at betrayal.

And only two were left living in that place - Jinian and one other. The Oracle.

It was shrunken. Eesty-like. The painted eyes were only painted and the bony hands mere sketches of light and shadow at the ends of its points. It had no face, and yet I knew it. I knew it no matter what guise it took, and I spoke to it at last.

'You did not think of their anger, Oracle.'

'No,' it replied. The voice was an Eesty voice, and yet it hurt me like a file across my bones in its horrid intensity. 'I did not think of their anger. I made the Dagger. I set it where you found it. I foresaw much. I knew you could not use it against me. I never thought of them.'

'They were betrayed, Oracle. Ganver tells me there is no anger greater than that of a zealot betrayed. Where is your strength now, Oracle?'

'So it would seem.' It hummed, like a hive of warnets. 'And yet, Dervish Daughter, I have strength enough to deal with you still.'

My eyes dropped. The Eesty was larger than I, and older by far. I had no weapon. Any magics the Wize-ards knew had been known to this older race. It was true. It could deal with me still. I stroked my breast where the star-eye had lain, wishing for it. I would say what the star-eye required, whether I would die or not, crying out in a voice unlike my own.

'No. You have no strength at all, Oracle. Hear the message of the star-eye:

'A soul does not dwell in your shape, Eesty! A soul does not live in your seed. Mercy will not allow you to live. And yet, you are part of the whole, Oracle, and I may not destroy you.'



‘What is my punishment?’ It laughed at me, a final, bitter mockery. ‘What do you think you can do? Those like me will always prey on those like you, Footseer! Until you learn mercy toward us! Until you learn that not-being is more merciful than being for one like me! Where there is no belonging, no way, why do those like you always think it merciful to make us go on living?’

I started to answer, but the answer did not come. I could have told it why it had been allowed to live so long, but I did not. Instead I cried with all my heart into the silence, ‘Ganver! I know why you did not act in the past! I know your love for that which you gave life. But bao demands that this creature die, Ganver, and I may not take our bao. This is your duty. This is your own child!’

The Oracle heard me and was shocked to stillness. At least, so I thought later. Perhaps the Eesties do not know parents as we know them; perhaps they do not know who gives them life. Perhaps as the ages pass, they forget. So, perhaps, the Oracle had not known or did not remember. It had no time to remember then, for a great rolling wheel came out of the trees and the cloud, something more huge than could be imagined, more inexorable. It spun, and when it had spun away, the Oracle was gone. Ganver had found strength to do the merciful thing at last.

Then, only then, the sound came. Below me, in the valley, they were ringing the Daylight Bell.

The sound surged like a tide, washing over me, then retreating, coming forward once again, higher each time, touching the burned earth, the scabbed stone, upward into the air, into the tree branches that angled stark and graceless against the sky, upward still until tree and stone and earth lay beneath that tide, like creatures of a shore pool dried from the sun, now laved, soothed, lifted. . . .

Where the shadow lay the light came, and the great bank of shadow raised itself and fled.

I dropped to the earth, floated to the earth, sat there, hands drifting to and fro above the surface of it. My hair flowed before my face, then back, before my face again in the wind of that ringing. It was good to sit down, inexpressibly good. I gripped the grass where I sat, holding it as though to hold myself in place upon the world or the world in place beneath me.

A shudder then, like distant thunder, felt rather than heard. As though something monstrously large had clapped its hands. I was buffeted by the silent blow, touched all over. Before me on the ash-gray soil a blade of green pushed upward, shivered, split itself into several leaves, and thrust outward at the world a cluster of buds that broke into silvery bloom.

A tree rat came out onto a branch and chattered at me. I did not understand a word. Too tired, I told myself. Too tired to listen, tree rat. Sorry. Sorry.

It took enormous effort to get to my feet. The silent blow bruised me, not visibly, and yet I could feel it in my flesh. Something had struck me. It seemed a punishment after all I had been through, and weary tears gathered at the corners of my eyes. The tree rat chattered once more, but I could not take time to figure out what it was saying. Below, in the city, those I loved must be told their efforts had succeeded. The Oracle and all its followers were gone.

I staggered down toward the city. Around me came small popping sounds, like pods of shatter-grass breaking open, as the gray trees burst into leaf all at once. The soil beneath me writhed with grass, coil after coil of fern sprang up like zeller, leaping into frond. Blossom happened. I walked on a meadow of bloom and green. The world rejoiced. The sound of the Bell fell away to silence.

And from below me, in the city, came a wail, a cry, a heartbroken lament. I stopped, unable to believe it, thinking perhaps the Oracle had done some dreadful thing there in the city before its life had ended. The lament went on, flowing toward me, coming from a clot of people clustered at the nearest gate. I stopped, confused. There was something wrong with my head. A blurry feeling.

Peter was there at the gate. I called out, a harsh, grating cry from a dry throat. He raised his head, saw me, didn't move, just stood there, his face empty. Then he raised his hand and came up the hill toward me. I waited, unwilling to go closer, afraid.

Even at the distance, I could see his face was wet and he walked as though crippled, haltingly. Behind him those at the city gate went into the city, their voices raised in sorrow, joining another lament by other voices. I began to run, stumbling, as halting as Peter. I was sore, hurt. He, too.

He caught me in his arms.

Always, always when Peter held me, the flesh of his arms Shifted, only a little, becoming warmer and wider, as though to touch as much of me as he could. The first time he had ever really held me, long ago, oh - longer ago than seems possible and yet only a year or two, only that. He had held me then as he did now, and I had felt that Shifting, that softening, as though his arms would cushion me against all the threats and pains of the world. And always when he had held me, it had been like that.

Yet now he held me in his arms and they were only arms. 'Wizardry?' he mumbled into my ear. 'Some Wizardry, Jinian? Lost. All of us. Our Talents. All. Gone.'

I stared at him stupidly, not hearing him. What idiocy was he talking? I couldn't understand what he meant. His Talent gone due to some Wizardry? Whose? Who was left?

Over his shoulder I could see a small figure behind him, toiling up the hill. Proom. The Shadowman, looking at me out of great, haunted eyes. He came close to me, stared into my face, took my hand into his own soft, long-fingered one, and spoke to me. I could not understand him.

And it was then I knew.

The Talents were gone. All. Everyone's.

Lorn had given. Lorn had judged.

And Lorn had taken away.

Proom sang to me with tears in his eyes: Lolly ulla lum a lolly lom. Like a bird. All around me was the sound of mystery. A tree rat chattered. I did not know what it said. High on the hill, a flichthawk called, and I knew it might be calling me, but I could not understand.

I cried out then, something, I forget what. Peter reached out for me. We stood there on the hillside, tight in each other's arms, weeping for what was lost, and gained.

Lom was alive. Lom the glorious, field and forest, stream and meadow, flichthawk on the air, bunwit in the copse, all alive. And thinking. And knowing.

And all our Talents were gone. Healer and Necromancer, Sorcerer and King, Tragamor and Elator, gone. All our Talents gone. Taken away. As punishment?

And in that I took hope, for if Lorn thought we had no bao, it would not have punished us. It would have done the merciful thing.

We walked down into the city. There was a body at the gate, Little Flicht, a knife between his ribs to the hilt.

‘He said it was all he had,’ whispered Peter. ‘All he had.’

‘It is not all you had,’ I said firmly, choking it out. ‘It is not all you had, Peter.’

‘I keep telling myself that,’ he said, holding my hand so tightly it hurt. ‘I do, Jinian.’

We came to a place where Dodir had been working. A great stone lay on the street, and he leaned against it, trembling, crying as though his life had broken before him. He looked up at me, through his tears, wiping them away as though ashamed. ‘Jinian?’

I shook my head at him. ‘They were never our gifts to begin with, Dodir. Lorn gave them. And Lorn has decided we will be better creatures without them.’

His face turned grayer. Dodir had used his gifts well, always. All those in the city had done. Here, more than any place in the world, might this great loss be justifiably resented.

‘I?’ He was disbelieving. ‘I, too?’ It was undeserved in Dodir’s case. He knew it.

‘All.’ I said. ‘All of us.’

At first nothing, then perhaps a flash in those brown eyes. Anger. Yes. I think so. A little anger. And his shoulders straightened as he stood tall beside the great stone, and I knew of the two things, Dodir or the stone, Dodir was the stronger, for he would not be broken.

‘Then we will build it without,’ he said. ‘But build it we will.’

Beside me I felt Peter straighten, sigh. ‘Yes.’

And we three turned together to help others, even as the lament went on.

Sixteen

End and Beginning

We live now, Peter and Bryan and I, in a pleasant glade above Old South Road City. We have a house there, one we are building with our own hands whenever we can find time away from the construction crew down in the city. Peter is becoming something of a stone mason. Though fancy carving is beyond him, so he says - and I think it is only that he lacks patience for it - he finds the laying of stones pleasant work, tiring work, work that exhausts him so he can sleep without remembering what used to be. Many Gamesmen these days would rather not remember what used to be.

The change has been hard for us all. I went up a hill in my blue gown able to speak the language of any bird or beast. I came down knowing only my own tongue. As for me, so it was for everyone. There was no time to adjust. There was no prior announcement. One moment we had the gifts Lorn had given us.

The next moment they were gone. Peter never Shifted again, and there are still nights I lie beside him while the bed quivers with his unconscious, dreaming effort to change. I see his hands clench, his muscles knot. To no purpose. He is still my Shifterish Peter, but Peter, Shifter, no longer.

For most of us it was as though we had lost our sight or our hearing. Though we rejoiced in a world that was healing and growing, still we mourned. Some, like Little Fitch, gave it no time but simply died. Some Gamesmen may mourn their lives away. Certainly many have not stopped grieving yet.

Peter and I, alone among all Gamesmen, know that the talents had been Lom's gift. We, alone among all Gamesmen, are able to explain what has happened. Those who know us well believe what we tell them. Some others do as well, seeing it as the only explanation that makes sense. Across the world, however, there are those who seek some magical solution, some application of Wizardry, some religion, some prophecy. Temples are springing up, I am told. Prophets are gaining reputation. How strange that the Gamesmen should need any other explanation than the true one! And yet their sense of themselves - so says Barish-Windlow - will not allow them to believe they had all that power by gift, that it was not their own by birthright.

Whatever one wishes to believe, we have all had to find other ways to live. Some of us are doing well, learning as quickly as any ordinary pawn might ever have done. We have Tragamors who are engineers; Elators who are messengers; Armigers who are guards. Trandilar has set up a school for weavers. It was her hobby in times long past, and she seems glad to take it up again. She is still beguiling, but it is only her natural self. There is no magic in it. Dorn, the Necromancer, says he is glad his talent is gone. He has become a teacher of children, and his face is less lined than it was in the past. He rejoices to have done with the dead. The living need our attentions more, he says. Who can argue with that?

Not all Gamesmen have fared so well. There have been incidents of pawns rising up to dispose of former Gamesmen Rulers. In most cases, the disposal was just. Many old Demesnes are vacant now. Stoneflight rose up against Bram Ironneck, and Eller, who pretended to be my mother, is now the kitchen maid of a merchant-prince. So I am told, by Murzy. She is not a Seer any longer, so I don't know how she learned this. I have not asked.

Those of us with the art fare a little differently -I will not say 'better.' While the Talents were a gift from Lom, the art was largely our own learning, and it has stayed with us. The art was always a matter of respectfully invoking the power of beings larger than ourselves. If we have friends among those powers, it can be done. Peter is learning something of that, too, and bids fair to turn out a respectable hedge Wizard. This pleases Himaggery, and Himaggery says it would please Mavin as well. And Lom. We all suppose it must please Lom. Otherwise it would not be allowed. So, the sevens go on as they have in the past. Most of mine is here with me, though Cat Candleshy has gone traveling to see this new world and what it makes of itself.

As for Himaggery, he has gone back to the Bright Demesne. He says the people there are no less his people because the world has changed. We will visit there, after the baby comes, to see him and Barish-Windlow. Barish suffered most, I think, from what happened. He had based his whole life upon a strategy that is suddenly useless. Now he is mostly Windlow, and Peter says he doesn't know from day to day how to feel about that.

When it happened, so suddenly, I believed Lom's recovery was due to something Mind Healer Talley had done. She says, however, that though she did what she could, Lom began to wish to live at the ringing of the Daylight Bell. She tells me that the destruction of a certain memory may have had much to do with that, and perhaps also to the fact that the Eesties - the old Eesties - had assumed their proper role of recollection once more. Perhaps it was no one thing but all of these together. If so, I can take

pride in helping, as can Peter. When we get depressed sometimes, we try to remember that.

When the Bell came from the mold, the little missing place on its rim was filled in with the sign of the star-eye, almost as though my own talisman had been reformed in that place. When it rang, it was with the same clear, unmistakable tone I remembered from our travels in Lom's memory. Whatever the alloy was, it was correct. Foreordained? If so, by whom? Fortuitous? If so, why? Who knows? Even those I know among the Wize-ards are less likely to speculate about such things than once they were.

Soon the Daylight Bell will hang where it belongs once more. The Tower is almost finished. Only the arched windows at the top and the gently curving roof remains to be completed. Peter spends endless hours with the ex-Tragamor architects - Dodir among them -who claim the work is harder now but more satisfying. Peter and I are the only humans now alive who ever saw the tower and the city as it was before its destruction. Thank all the old gods we remember it well enough to direct its rebuilding. The city is far enough along that there are various kinds of people moving into it, even now. Among these are the blind runners. They still run the roads, but only as ritual, for short distances. They have taken the maintenance of the city and the roads as their task. Looking down from my window, I can see some of them now, sweeping the stones and scrubbing them to an ivory glow. They who once ran the roads blindly now look at them very carefully. Strange how things turn out. Many things are turned about to show their faces where once their backs were. I find myself wondering sometimes if any of it was real then, or if we only dreamed it.

The shadow is gone except when the Shadowbell rings, far away in the north, where the Shadow Tower stands. Almost all of the turnips have returned there with the Gardener. Big-blue and Molly-my-dear live in my garden. They still swing upon my sash ends and play wicked tricks and laugh uproariously at them, but I can no longer understand what they say. Their children bid fair to become impish reminders of times past. I can imagine ten thousand fireside stories beginning, 'Long and long ago, when there were no turnips to swing upon our pant legs, the people of this world had strange powers.

Forests are green again, and the roads are being repaired, some by us and the runners, some spontaneously. Eesties run those roads. The Dervishes are their apprentices. Evidently the skill of Dervishes was like the art of the wize, a thing they learned for themselves, for they have it still. I have not seen Bartelmy of the Ban. Perhaps someday I shall. The world is so changed, I do not know what I can say to her. She will be so changed, perhaps we will have nothing to say.

Mavin lies asleep in her crystal coffin beside the pool in the Tower. The lamp glows ever more brightly upon its pedestal. The book is back where it belongs, and the Shadowpeople sing from it every day. The pool has begun to fill once more with the milk from which crystals grow. There are no crystals in it yet, but perhaps there will be, in time. Surely, Lom will have messages for its people once more. Surely, after what we have been through, we have learned to be people of Lom, people who will listen.

When Peter and I make love, he always asks if it is the same as when he was Shifter. I always say yes. It is not the same, but that doesn't matter. Himaggery said to me once that being loved by a Shifter spoiled one for any other lover. I can see how that would happen, but it is Peter I loved and summoned with nutpie and Lovers Come Calling, not merely a Shifter, so I do not dwell on that. I will admit to certain dreams from which I wake trembling, but I do not speak of those to him.

He asks me sometimes about bao, and I explain that it is something some creatures have and others do not, and that no race of creatures always has it in every individual and that no shape guarantees it. 'And when one does not have it, Peter, then it is pure evil to punish that creature for its lack. It must be destroyed, quickly, without causing it fear or pain, for it lacks the quality all things must have to live together, and lacking that, has no reason to live.'

And he thinks about that. Though he would be quick enough to destroy a rogue waterox, one that preyed upon its fellows, still I am not sure he understands bao or the lack of it in humans. Mavin would have understood it, I'm sure of that.

'We must not pretend to ourselves that something has bao because it shares our shape or our seed,' I tell him, trying to explain. 'To do so prolongs cruelty needlessly.'

'But the old gods didn't destroy the shadow.'

The shadow is part of the bao of Lorn.'

'Or the Oracles

'The Oracles were part of the bao of the Eesties. The Oracle was Ganver's own child. Ganver had to take the final step - merciful destruction. Each of us must take responsibility for our own. No one else can do it for us, for that way lies the death of all that is good.'

At the end, of course, Ganver had done it, though I have no doubt the Eesty grieves for it still.

There is a new, strange song the Shadowpeople sing. They sing that when the sleep of Mavin is over, a thousand years more or less, Lom will repent once more and restore the Talents of man. Though I no longer have the Talent of tongues, I can learn. Proom is teaching me his language, and this is how I know what they are singing. I have asked Proom whether the song is true. He says all the songs the Shadowpeople sing are true.

Sometimes I hope the Talents will return. Sometimes not. Life is better for most, now, without Gaming. But I think of Mavin and wonder if she will want to

wake into a world in which she must remain one shap always, in which she cannot Shift, become whatever she wills to become. I think of her being forced to remain only herself and believe she might rather sleep.

And, sometimes, I think of myself, having a Shifte lover.

Well. Mothwings Go Spinning. End and Beginning,

And I say, as Murzy has taught me, 'Time does as time wills. Live today. Tomorrow is its own mystery.'

We will be having our own children. Peter and I, starting rather sooner than I might have planned, it seems. I will have midwives at the birth, for the Talent of mid wives to seek bao in the newly born was the single Talent that Lom left to man. It was merciful of Lom to do so, though we may not think so now.

I must put the pen and paper away and get some sleep. Tomorrow will be busy. We are expecting visitors from the north, Peter's old friend Yarrell, whom he has not seen in years, with his wife and child.

It is full dark, and Ganver is standing upon the far hill, a great, star-shaped form silhouetted against the moon, keeping watch on us. Sometimes the old Eesty does that, and I send my love toward. And my promise to do what is right, as Ganver did, at long last, what was right.

And this book I began upon the Wastes of Bleer is ended. I can put it away until the children are old

enough to read from it. Perhaps they will not care enough about the way things were to bother. In which case Peter and I will read it to one another when we are old.

I pray we may live a thousand years, Peter and I. I pray the midwives will find bao in all our children.

THE END