

The Chronicles of Mavin Manyshaped by Sheri S. Tepper

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THE SONG OF MAVIN MANYSHAPED

CHAPTER ONE

Around the inner maze of Danderbat keep—with its hidden places for the elders, its sleeping chambers, kitchens and nurseries—lay the vaster labyrinth of the outer p'natti: slything walls interrupted by square-form doors, an endless array of narrowing pillars, climbing ups and slithering downs, launch platforms so low as to require only leaping legs and others so high that wings would be the only guarantee of no injury.

Through the p'natti the shifters of all the Xhindi clans came each year at Assembly time, processions of them, stiff selves marching into the outer avenues only to melt into liquid serpentines which poured through the holes in the slything walls; into tall wands of flesh sliding through the narrowing doors; into pneumatic billows bounding over the platforms and up onto the heights; all in a flurry of wings, feathers, hides, scales, conceits and frenzies which dazzled the eyes and the senses so that the children became hysterical with it and hopped about on the citadel roof as though an act of will could force them all at once and beforetime into that Talent they wanted more than any other. Every year the family Danderbat changed the p'natti; new shaped obstacles were invented; new requirements placed upon the shifting flesh which would pass through it to the inner maze, and every year at Assembly the shifters came, foaming at the outer reaches like surf, then plunging through the reefs and cliffs of the p'natti to the shore of the keep, the central place where there were none who were not shifters—save those younglings who were not sure yet what it was they were.

Among these was Mavin, a daughter of the shapewise Xhindi, form-family of Danderbat the Old Shuffle, a girl of some twelve or fourteen years. She was a forty-season child, and expected to show something pretty soon, for shifters came to it young and she was already older than some. There were those who had begun to doubt she would ever come through the p'natti along the she-road reserved for females not yet at or through their child-bearing time. Progeny of the shifters who turned out not to have the Talent were sent away to be fostered elsewhere as soon as that lack was known, and the possibility of such a journey was beginning to be rumored for Mavin.

She had grown up as shifter children do when raised in a shifter place, full of wild images and fluttering dreams of the things she would become when her Talent flowered. As it happened, Mavin was the only girl child behind the p'natti during that decade, for Handbright Ogbone, her sister, was a full decade older and in possession of her Talent before Mavin was seven. There were boys aplenty and overmuch, some saying with voices of dire prophecy that it was a plague of males they had, but the Ogbone daughters were the only females born to be reared behind the Danderbat p'natti since Throsset of Dowes, and Throsset had fled the keep as long as four years before. Since there were no other girls, the dreams which Mavin shared were boyish dreams. Handbright no longer dreamed, or if she did, she did not speak of it.

Mavin's own mother, Abrara Ogbone, had died bearing the boy child, Mertyn—caught by the shift-devil, some said, because she had experimented with forbidden shapes while she was pregnant. No one was so heartless as to say this to Mavin directly, but she had overheard it without in the least understanding it several times during her early years. Now at an age where her own physical maturity was imminent, she understood better what they had been speaking of, but she had not yet made the jump of intuition which applied this knowledge to herself. She had a kind of stubborn naivete about her which resisted learning some of the things which other girls got with their mother's milk. It was an Ogbone trait, though she did not know it. She had not before now understood flirting, for example, or the reasons why the men were always the winners of the processional competitions, or why Handbright so often cried in corners or was so weary and sharp-tongued. It wasn't that she could not have understood these things, but more that she was so busy apprehending everything in the world that she had not had time before to make the connections among them.

She might have been enlightened by overhearing a conversation between two hangers-on of the Old Shuffle—two of the guards cum hunters known as “the Danderbats” after Theobald Danderbat, forefather and tribal god, direct line descendent, so it was said, from Thandbar, the forefather of all shifters—who kept themselves around the keep to watch it, they said, and look after its provisioning. So much time was actually spent in the provisioning of their drinking and lechery that little enough energy was left for else.

“Everytime I flex a little, I feel eyes,” Gormier Graywing was saying. “She's everywhere. Anytime I've a mind to shift my fingers to get a better grip on something, there she is with her eyes on my hands and, like as not, her hand on mine to feel how the change goes. If there's such a thing as a' everywhere shifter child, it's this she-child, Mavin.” Gormier was a virile, salacious old man thing, father of a half-dozen non-shifter whelps and three true-bred members of the clan. He ran a boneless ripple now, down from shoulders

through fingers, a single tentacle wriggle before coming back to bone shape in order to explain how he felt. Some of the Danderbats would carry on whole conversations in muscle talk without ever opening their mouths. “Still, there’s never a sign she knows she’s female and I’m male, her not noticing she gives me a bit of tickle.”

“ ‘Tisn’t child flirtiness.” The other speaker was Haribald Halfmad, so named in his years in Schlaizy Noithn and never, to his own satisfaction, renamed. “There’s no sexy mockery there. Just that wide-eyed kind of oh-my look what you’d get from a baby with its first noisy toy. She hasn’t changed that look since she was a nursling, and that’s what’s discomfiting about her. When she was a toddler, there was some wonder if she was all there in the brain net, and she was taken out to a Healer when she was six or so, just to see.”

“I didn’t know that! Well then, it must have been taken serious; we Old Shuffle Xhindi don’t seek Healers for naught.”

“We Danderbats don’t seek Healers at all, Graywing, as you well know, old ox. It was her sister Handbright took her, for they’re both Ogbones, daughter of Abrara Ogbone—she that has a brother up Battlefox way. But that was soon after the childer’s mother died, so it was forgiven as a kind of upset, though normally the Elders would have had Handbright in a basket for it. Handbright brought her back saying the Healer found nothing wrong with the child save sadness, which would go away of itself with time. Since then the thought’s been that she’s a mite slow but otherwise tribal as the rest of us. I wish she’d get on with it, for I’ve a mind to try her soon as her Talent’s set.” And he licked his lips, nudging his fellow with a lubricious elbow. “If she doesn’t get on with it, I may hurry things a bit.”

The object of this conversation was sitting at the foot of a slything column in the p’natti, in full sight of the two old man things but as unconscious of them as though she had been on another world. Mavin had just discovered that she could change the length of her toes.

The feeling was rather but not entirely like pain. There was a kind of itchy delight in it as well, not unlike the delight which could be evoked by stroking and manipulating certain body parts, but without that restless urgency. There was something in it, as well, of the fear of falling, a kind of breathless gap at the center of things as though a misstep might bring sudden misfortune. Despite all this, Mavin went on with what she was doing, which was to grow her toes a hand’s-width longer and then make them shorter again, all hidden in the shadow of her skirts. She had a horrible suspicion that this bending and extending of them might make them fall off, and in her head she could see them wriggling away like so many worms, blind and headless, burrowing themselves down into the ground at the bottom of the column, to be found there a century hence, still squirming, unmistakably Mavin’s toes. After a long time of this, she brought her toes back to a length which would fit her shoes and put them on, standing up to smooth her apron and noticing for the first time the distant surveillance offered by the two granders on the citadel high porch. She made a little face, as she had seen Handbright do, remotely aware of what the two old things usually chatted about but still not making any connection between that and herself. She was off to tell

Handbright about her toes, and there was room for nothing else in her head at the moment, though she knew at the edges of her consciousness the oldsters had been talking man-woman stuff.

But then everyone was into man-woman stuff that year. Some years it was fur, and some years it was feathers. Some years it was vegetable-seeming which was the fad, and other years no one cared for anything except jewels. This year was sex form changing, and it was somewhat titillating for the children, seeing their elder relatives twisting themselves into odd contorted shapes with nerve ends pushed out or tucked in in all sorts of original ways. Despite the fact that shifters had no feeling of shame over certain parts—those parts being changed day to day in suchwise that little of the original topography could still be attached to them—the younglings who had not become shifters yet were tied to old, non-shifter forebear emotions which had to do with the intimate connections between things excretory and things erotic. It could not be helped. It was in the body shape they were born with and in the language and in the old stories children were told, and in the things all children did and thought and said, ancient as apes and true as time. So the children, looking upon all this changing about, found a kind of giggly prurience in it despite the fact that they were shifter children every one, or hoped they were soon to be.

All this lewd, itchy stuff to do with man and woman made Mavin uncomfortable in a deep troublesome way. It was by no means maidenly modesty, which at one time it would have been called. It was a deeper thing than that—a feeling that something indecent was being done. The same feeling she had when she saw boys pulling the wings off zip-birds and taunting them as they flopped in the dust, trying, trying, trying to fly. It was that same sick feeling, and since it seemed to be part and parcel of being shifter, Mavin decided she wouldn't tell anyone except Handbright she was shifter, not just yet.

Instead, she smoothed her apron, pointedly ignored the speculative stares of old Graywing and Haribald, and walked around the line of slything pillars to a she-door. At noon would be a catechism class, and though Mavin made it a practice to avoid many things which went on in Danderbat keep, it was not wise to avoid those. Particularly inasmuch as Handbright was teaching it and Mavin's absence could not pass unnoticed. Since she was the only girl, it would not pass unnoticed no matter who was teaching, but she did not need to remind herself of that.

Almost everyone was there when she arrived, so she slipped into a seat at the side of the room, attracting little attention. Some of the boys were beginning to practice shifter sign, vying with one another who could grow the most hair on the backs of their hands and arms, who could give the best boneless wriggle in the manner of the Danderbats. Handbright told them once to pay attention, then struck hard at the offending arms with her rod, at which all recoiled but Tolerable Titdance, who had grown shell over his arms in the split second it had taken Handbright to hit at him. He laughed in delight, and Handbright smiled a tired little smile at him. It was always good to see a boy so quick, and she ruffled his hair and whispered in his ear to make him blush red and settle down.

"I'm nye finished with you bunch," said Handbright, making her hair stand out from her head in a tangly bush which wriggled like a million little vines. "You're all coming along in one talent or another. I have to

tell you today that it looks like Leggy Bartiban will be going off to Schooltown to be fostered. Seems he's showing signs of being Tragamor. Not unexpected, eh Leggy?"

The boy ducked his head, tried to smile through what were suspiciously like tears. True, it wasn't unexpected. His father had been a Tragamor, able to move great boulders or pull down mountains by just looking at them, but it was still hard for him to accept that he must forget the shifters, forget the Danderbat citadel, go off to a strange place and become something else again when all he knew was shifter. He could take comfort from the fact that he wouldn't grieve. He wouldn't even remember a week hence when the Forgetters had done with him. Still, looking at it from this end, it must seem dreadful. Mavin ducked her head to hide her own tears, feeling for him. It could have been her. She might not have been shifter, either. No one knew she was, not yet.

"All right, childer. I'm not keeping you long today. Elder Garbat Grimsby is coming in for a minute, just to ask a few simple questions, see how you're coming. Since two of you are off to Schlaizy Noithn in the morning, he'll just review two or three little shifter things and let you all go. Sit up straight and don't go boneless at the Elder, it isn't considered polite. Remember, to show politeness to elders and honored guests, you hold your own shape hard. Keep that in mind. ..." She broke off, turning to the door, as she heard the whirring hum of something coming.

It came into the room like a huge top, spinning, full of colors and sounds, screaming its way across the room, bumping chairs away, full of its own force, circling to stop before them all and slowly, slowly, change into old Garbat, hugely satisfied with himself, fixing them all with his shifter eyes to see if they were impressed. All of them were. It was a new trick to Mavin, and when reared in a shifter stronghold those were few and seldom, with every shifter challenging every other to think of new things day on day. The Elders came infrequently out of their secret place deep within the keep, or at least so it was said. Mavin thought that if she were an Elder, she would be around the keep all day every day, as a bit of rock wall, a chair, a table in some dusty corner, watching what went on, hearing what was said. It was this thought which kept her behavior moderately circumspect, and she looked hard at the Elder now. He might have been the very pillar she had sat under to shift her toes. She shivered, crouching a little so as not to make him look at her.

Handbright managed some words of welcome. Old Garbat folded his hands on his fat stomach and fixed his eyes on Janjiver. "What about you, Janjiver. You tell me what shapes shifters can take, and when."

The boy Janjiver was a lazy lout, most thought, with a long, strong body and a good Talent which went largely unused. There were those who said he would never come out of Schlaizy Noithn, and indeed there were some young shifters who never did. If one wanted to take the shape of a pombi or a great owl or some other thing which could live well off the land, one might live in Schlaizy Noithn for all one's life without turning a hand.

“A shifter worth his net,” said Janjiver in his lazy voice, “can take any shape at all. He can bulk himself up to twenty times bigger, given a little time, or more if the shape is fairly simple. He can conserve bulk and take shape a quarter size, though it takes practice. The shape he cannot take is the shape of another real person.”

“And why can’t he do that, Janjiver?”

“Because it’s not in our nature, Elder. The wicked Mirrormen may mock mankind but we shifters do not. All the Danderbats back to the time of Xhindi forbid it.”

“And you, Thrillfoot. What is the shifter’s honor?”

“It is a shifter’s honor to brook no stay, be stopped by no barrier, halted by no wall, enclosed by no fence. A shifter goes where a shifter will.” Thrillfoot threw his hair back with a toss of his head, grinning broadly. He was looking forward to Schlaizy Noithn. In the citadel he was befamilied to death, and the desire for freedom was hot in him. He rejoiced to answer, knowing it was the last answering he would do for many a year.

“And what is a shifter to the rest of the world, Janjiver?”

“A shifter to the rest of the world, Elder, is what a shifter says he is, and a shifter always says less than he is.”

“Always,” agreed Thrillfoot, smiling.

This was just good sense and was taught to every shifter child from the time he was weaned. The shapes a shifter could take and the shapes he would let the outside world think he could take were two different things. Shifters were too sly to let all they could do become general knowledge, for in that shiftiness lay the shifters’ safety. One wouldn’t look for a tree-shaped shifter if one thought shifters couldn’t shift into trees. So it was that most of the world had been led to believe shifters could become pombis or fustigars or owls, and nothing much more than that. Indeed for some shifters it was true. It was possible to fall in love with a special shape and ever after be able to take only that shape besides one’s true one—or for a few, only that shape forever. It had been known to happen. Shifter children were warned about it, and those who indulged themselves by staying pombis or fustigars for a whole season or more were pointed

out as horrible examples. So now in the classroom everyone nodded in agreement.

Garbat manifested himself as pleased, gave each of the boys who were off to Schlaizy Noithn a handmade Danderbat token—at which they showed considerable pleasure, intricate handmade things being the only things shifters ever bothered to carry—and then took himself away, soon followed by most of the others.

Leggy Bartiban did not go out with them. He had tears running down his cheeks openly now. “That’s a shifter secret, teacher, not letting the world know what shapes we can do. How do you know for sure I won’t tell all the shifter secrets when I’m gone away from you?”

“Ah, lad,” Handbright came to hug him, drawing him tight into the circle of her arms. “You’ll not remember. Truly. I have never lied to you, Leggy, and I’ll not lie now. It is sad for you to go, and sad for us to lose you, but you will not suffer it. We have contract with the good Forgetter, Methlees of Glen, who has been our Forgetter for more seasons than anyone remembers. You’ll go to her house, and the people from the school will be there, and she’ll take your hand, like this, and you’ll know the people, and remember them, and will forget us like a dream. And that’s the way of it, Leggy, the whole way of it. You’ll be a Tragamor child born, always friendly to the shifters, but not grieving over them a bit.”

“Do they need to forget me my mother?” The boy was crying openly now.

“Shush. What silliness. Of course they’ll not forget you your mother. You’ll remember her name and face and the sound of her voice, and you’ll welcome her happily to visit you at Festival. You’ll see her as often as you do now, and most of the other boys at school will be the same, except for those who came to the Schoolhouses as infants and do not know their mothers at all. Now go along. Go ask anyone if that isn’t so, and if anyone tells you otherwise, send them to me. Go on, now, and stop crying. I’ve got things to do.”

Then all had gone but Mavin, who sat in her seat and was still, watching the back of Handbright’s head until Handbright turned to see those keen eyes looking into her as though she had been a well of water. “Well, little sister, and you still here?”

“It was a lie, wasn’t it, Handbright, about his mother?” Her voice was not accusing.

Handbright started to deny it, then stopped, fixed by that birdlike gaze. “It was and it wasn’t, she-child.

He will remember her name, and her face, and the sound of her voice. He'll welcome her at Festival, if she chooses to visit him. But all the detail, the little memories, the places and times surrounding the two of them will be gone, so there'll be little loving feeling left. Now that may build again, and I've seen it happen time after time."

"And you've seen the other, too. Where no one cares, after."

After a long weary silence, Handbright said, "Yes, I can't deny it, Mavin. I've seen that, too. But he doesn't see his mother now but once or twice a year, at Assembly time. So it's not such a great loss."

"So why can't he stay here, with us. I like Leggy."

"We all like him, child. But he's not shifter. He has to learn how to use his own Talent or he'll be a zip-bird with wings off, all life long, flopping in the dust and trying to fly. That'd be hateful, surely, and not something you'd wish for him?"

Mavin twirled hair around one finger, shook her head from side to side, thinking, then laid her hand upon Handbright's own and made her fingers curl bonelessly around Handbright's wrist. Handbright stiffened in acknowledgement, her face showing gladness mixed with something so like shame that Mavin did not understand it and drew her hand away.

"Lords, child! How long?"

Mavin shrugged. "A little while."

"How marvelous. Wonderful." Handbright's voice did not rejoice; it was oddly flat and without enthusiasm. "I have to tell the Elders so we can plan your Talent party ..."

"No!" It came out firmly, a command, in a voice almost adult. "No, Handbright. I'm not ready for you to do that. It hasn't been long enough yet ... to get used to the idea. Give me ... some time yet, please, sister. Don't do me like Leggy, throwing me into something all unprepared for it." She laughed, unsteadily, keeping her eyes pleading and saying not half of the things she was feeling.

“Well...” Handbright was acquiescent, doubtful, seeming of two minds. “You know the Elders like to know as soon as one of us shows Talent, Mavin. They’ve been worried about you. I’ve been worried about you. It isn’t a thing one can hide for very long. As your Talent gets stronger, any shifter will be able to tell.”

“Not hide. Not exactly. Just have time to get used to the ideas. A few days to think about it is all. It won’t make any difference to anyone.” And she saw the dull flush mounting on Handbright’s cheeks, taking this to mean that yes, it did make a difference, but not understanding just what that difference might be.

“All right. I won’t tell anyone yet. But everyone will have to know soon. You tell me when you’re ready, but it can’t be long, Mavin. Really. Not long.” She leaned forward to hug the younger girl, then turned away to the corridor as though more deeply troubled than Mavin could account for. Mavin remained a long time in the room thinking of what had happened there that day. The tears of Leggy, sent away to forget. The words of Janjiver, in answer to the question of the Elder, what is a shifter, to the world?

“A shifter to the rest of the world, Elder, is what a shifter says he is, and a shifter always says less than he is.”

“I, too,” she said to herself, “could be wise to follow the words of the catechism. I could say less than I am.”

She went out into the day, back to the alleys of the p’natti, fairly sure that though Handbright would be upset and worried for a time, she would say nothing about Mavin’s Talent until Mavin told her yes. And Mavin had begun to feel that perhaps she did not want to tell her yes. Not today. Not tomorrow. Perhaps, though she did not know why, not ever.

CHAPTER TWO

Had it not been for the fact that Assembly time was only days away, Handbright would have worried more over Mavin, would have been more insistent that the Elders be told that Mavin had shown Talent, was indeed shifter, might now be admitted to full membership in the clan Danderbat and begin to relieve some of the endless demands made upon Handbright for the past half-dozen years. Though she was fond of Mavin—and of eight-year-old Mertyn, too, if it came to that—it did not occur to her that Mavin knew no more than Mertyn did about what would be expected of a new shifter girl by Gormier and Haribald,

and by the others. Though Handbright had never told Mavin any of the facts of life of shifter girl existence, she assumed that Mavin had picked it up somewhere, perhaps as she herself had done, from another young she-person. In making the assumption, she forgot that there were no other shifter girls to have giggled with Mavin in the corners, that Handbright could have been the only source of this information unless one of the old crones had seen fit to enlighten the child, an unlikely possibility.

Indeed, if she had had time to think about it, she would have known that Mavin was as innocent as her little brother of any knowledge of what would happen when it became known she was shifter. Who could she have observed in that role except Handbright herself? Who else was there behind the p'natti to share responsibility or provide company? Had there been a dozen or so girls growing up together, as there should be in a clan the size of Danderbat, Handbright herself would have been far less weary and put upon for she would have been sought out by the old man things no more often than she could have found bearable. Part of the problem, of course, was that she had not conceived. If she had been pregnant, now, or had a child at the breast. ... Or better yet, if she had borne three or four, then she could have gone away, have left the keep and fled to Schlaizy Noithn or out into the world. Any such realization made her uncomfortable. It was easier simply not to think of it, so she did not consider Mavin's ignorance, did not consider the matter at all except to think without thinking that with Mavin coming to a proper age, the demands on herself might be less. When Handbright had been a forty-season child there had been others near in age. Throsset of Doves. The twin daughters of old Gormier, Zabatine and Sambeline. At least three or four others. But the twins had soon had twin children, two sets of sons, had left them in the nursery and fled. And Throsset had simply gone, with a word to no one and no one knowing where. And all the others had had their children and gone into the world, one by one, so that for four years Handbright had been alone behind the p'natti—alone except for a few crones and homebound types who were too lazy to do else than linger in the keep, and the Danderbat granders who were there to keep watch. That was all except for peripatetic clan members who visited from time to time. Well, at least the last of the babies was now out of loincloths and into trowsies. And Mertyn was eight. And Mavin now would be available to help ... help. So she thought, in the back of her head, not taking time to worry it because Assembly was so near and there was so much to do. Of course more hands were assembled to do it, too, for the Danderbat were beginning to gather. The kitchens were getting hot from fires kept burning under the ovens. Foods were being brought by wagon from as far away as Zebit and Betand. All during the year shifters might eat grass in the fields or meat off the bone, but at Assembly time they wanted cookery and were even willing to hire to get it done. That was the true sign that Assembly was near, when the cooks arrived by wagon from Hawspport, all wide-eyed at being surrounded by shifters. Of course the kitchens were underground and there were guards on them from morn to night so they didn't see what non-shifters shouldn't see, but the gold they were paid was good gold and more of it than a pawnish chef might make in a season otherwise.

Mavin, aware that Handbright was distracted by all this flutter, decided it would be best to lose herself in the confusion. She knew a half-hundred places in the keep in which one might crouch or lie totally unobserved and watch what went on. Now with the Danderbat gathering from all the world, and sensing that it was a time of great change for herself whether she wished to change or no, she took to hiding herself, watching, staring, learning from a distance rather than being ever present and handy as old Gormier had noticed her being. But he was now so mightily enthralled by gossip from a hundred places in a hundred voices, so distracted by the clan members gathering in their beast-headed cloaks of fur, full of tall tales and babble, that he forgot about Mavin or any intentions he may have had toward her. Mavin, however, had merely exchanged ubiquity for invisibility, hiding herself in any available cubby to see what it was that went on as the Danderbat clansmen came home. As Gormier was a man of restless, lecherous

energy, full of talk, a good one to watch if one wanted to learn things, she followed him about as she had done for years, peering down on him from odd corners above rafters or from rain spouts. It was thuswise she finally lost her stubborn naivete.

Gormier and Haribald were helping unload a wagon of vegetables which had been hauled all the way from Zebit up the River Haws and the windy trail to the top of the table mountain on which the keep sat, just east of the range of firehills which separated it from Schlaizy Noithn. As they were about this business, they heard a drumming noise and looked out through the p'natti to see a vast brown ball, leathery hard, with arms at either edge, cudgeling itself to make a thunder roar. They set up a hail which Mavin heard, hid as she was under the edge of the keep roof in a gutter, and the drum ceased pounding upon itself to make a trial run at the p'natti. It assaulted the launching ramps, rolling upward at increasing speed, propelling itself by hand pushes along its circumference, to take projectile form as it left the ramp, then a winged form which snagged the top of a slything pillar with a hooked talon only to change again into a fluid serpent which slythed down the pillar before launching upward once more in a flurry of bright veils which floated upon the sky, the veils forming a brilliant parachute against the blue. Even Mavin gasped, and the granders made drum chests for themselves, beating with their arms, an answering thunder of applause. So the falling parachute, making itself into a neat bundle as it dropped, became a shifter man on the ground before them, the parachute veils gathering in and disappearing into the general hard shape. Mavin recognized him then as Wurstery Wimpole, for he had won the tournament in a previous year and been much glorified then by the Danderbat.

“Damfine, Wurstery. Damfine. Like that parachute thingy, soft as down.” Gormier, pounding him on his hard shape back, shaking his hand in sudden pain as Wurstery made a shell back there to take the blows. “Haribald was just saying he hadn't seen veils used so—or such a color!—in a dozen years. Amblevail Dassnt used to do some parachute thing, but his was pale stuff beside yours. You going to use that coming in during procession?”

“Oh, might, might. Have another trick or two I've been practicing. Might use them instead. Anyhow, that's days away and there's days between! I've been bringing myself eager cross country thinking of the drink and the cookery and the Danderbat girls.”

Gormier shook his head, sadly, Mavin peering down on him from the height and hearing him breathe. “No girls, Wustery. Not a one save Handbright, and she's tired of it. Hardly worth the effort. She doesn't make it enjoyable. I've been at her bed this past two, three years, and Haribald, too, seeing she's of breeding age, but there's no good of it at all.”

“You don't mean it! Only one girl shifter behind the p'natti? Lords, lords, what are the Danderbat coming to. Last time I was here, there were a dozen—two dozen.”

“Naa. Last time you was here was four years—twelve seasons ago, and there weren’t all that many. Throsset was here then. And my daughters, but they were just weaning the twins, one set each. And there was a flock of visitors, of course, but right after Assembly they left. After that there wasn’t another girlchild behind the p’natti save Mavin, and she’s only now maybe coming of age or maybe not. Lately the Danderbats’ve borne nothing but boys. Who would have thought there could be too many boys! There’s talk among the Elders that the Danderbats may be done, Wurstery. Talk of that, or of bringing back the women who’ve gone out, whether they’re willing or no ...”

“So how come Handbright’s stayed so long? What is she, twenty-four or so?”

“She doesn’t bear. Never been pregnant once, so far as we know. One of these days, she’ll give up hope and take off for Schlaizy Noithn, I doubt not. She’s thought of it before, but we’ve discouraged her, Haribald and me.” Gormier gave his head a ponderous shake at the pity of it all. “So if you’re looking for female flesh, best ask a friend to shift for you, old Wurstery, or visit some other keep of some other clan, for there’s naught here for you save one old girl not worth the trouble and one new one not come to it yet.”

And it was in this wise that Mavin realized what Handbright’s flushed face had meant and why it was that Mavin’s being a shifter would make a difference. The truth of it came to her all at once, a complete picture, in vivid detail and coloring. She went inside to the privy and lost her lunch.

There was no time to steam over it then, for Wurstery had been only one of the latest batch of Danderbats who were flowing in from all directions, laughing and shouting in the Assembly rooms downstairs, drifting up and down to the cellars to see what the cooks were preparing and whether the wine was in proper supply, taking their chances on the lottery which told them off into food service crews day by day during Assembly. Mavin, no longer invisible, was hugged, kissed, hauled about by the shoulders, congratulated on her growth, questioned as to her Talent, and sent on a thousand errands. It was impossible to escape. There were eyes everywhere, Danderbats everywhere, both grown ones and childer ones, for some Danderbat shes chose to take their childer with them rather than leave them in the nurseries of the keep. And a good thing, too, thought Mavin exhaustedly as she counted their numbers and went for the twentieth time escorting a small one to the privy. It was only that night, long after darkness had come and the keep had fallen into an almost quiet that she went to find Handbright, waking her from an exhausted drowse.

“Mavin? What’s wrong? What do you want?”

“Sister. I need to ask things.”

“Oh, Mavin, not now! I’ve been standing on my own feet since before dawn, and weariness has me by the throat. You’ve asked questions since you were born, and I can’t imagine what’s left to ask!” Handbright pulled a shawl around her shoulders and sat up in her narrow bed. This room at the top of the keep was her own, seldom visited, mostly undisturbed, and it was rare for anyone, Mavin included, to come there. Handbright herself usually slept near the nurseries, and she had sought this cubby now only because there were visitors aplenty to care for the children. Mavin, slightly ashamed but undeterred, drifted to the window of the room and looked out across the p’natti to the line of fire hills upon the western horizon. Beyond them was Schlaizy Noithn, the ground of freedom where her schoolmates had gone to try their Talent and learn their way. Of course, she ones could go there too, if they liked, after they had had a lot of childer, or when they knew they could not. This had never been important before. She had known that fact as well as she knew her own name, or the sight of Handbright’s face, or the feel of a fellow shifter through a changed hide, knowing this was shifter kin even though he looked or smelled nothing like himself. But it had never really meant anything to her until now.

“Handbright, I want to go to Schlaizy Noithn.” And she waited to hear the proof of all her assumptions.

“You can’t do that, child. You’re a she-child. Danderbat womb keepers don’t go. You know that.”

“Of course I know it. But I said, I want to go to Schlaizy Noithn. I want to go regardless of what the Danderbats say. Suppose I go to a Healer in the Outside and ask her to take my womb away.”

“She wouldn’t do it. If she did, the Elders would kill her.”

“Suppose I changed me, so that I don’t have a womb at all.”

Handbright made the ward of evil sign, her face turning hard and wooden at the thought. Her voice was no longer kindly when she replied. “That’s a disgusting thought. How could you think such a thing?”

“Ah. Well, as to that, sister, answer me this. If I have my Talent party in a day or so, or say right after Assembly, when the visitors are gone, how long before I have to do man-woman stuff with old Gormier? Or Haribald? Or maybe old Garbat himself?”

The older girl turned away, face pale. “Ah, Mavin. I don’t want to talk about it. You’ll learn to manage. It’s part of being a shifter girl, that’s all. You’ll live through it. Besides, you’ve known all about that ...

you've known. ..." Seeing Mavin's face, she stopped, reddening. "You didn't know?"

"No. I didn't know. Not until this morning. I should have known, maybe, but I didn't. I need to understand all this, Handbright. I have to know what this change is going to mean to me. Suddenly it's me the old Danderbats are leching for. Now if I'd been Tragamor, you'd have turned me over to the Forgetter to take all my memories and send me out in a minute. Wouldn't you?"

"Yes. It's necessary. We always do that."

"Even if I was a she-child Tragamor, you'd do the same. Womb or no womb, you'd turn a Tragamor she-child away to Schooltown in a minute."

Handbright nodded, stiffly, seeing where the argument was going.

"But because I'm shifter, a she-child shifter, the Elders have said I have to womb-carry for them. I can shift my legs and arms, grow fur or feathers, make me wings for my shoulders, but I can't fly or leap or turn into any other thing, for it might change womb and make it unfavorable for carrying baby shifters. If I'm biddable, though, after I've had three or four or so, or once I can't have any more, they'll let me go to Schlaizy Noithn. Or out into the world. Isn't that right?"

"You know it is. You've known those who went."

"Oh, yes. I've seen them when they went, Handbright, and I've seen them when they come back. They say Throsset fled, and there's a penalty on her if she comes back. She's gone away far, and none have seen her."

"Throsset was in love with a Demon, and he took her with him into the Western Sea. That's what's said."

"She went. That's what I mean. She didn't stay here in the keep and carry babies for the Elders."

“The word is she couldn’t. She had no proper parts to do it.”

“Then maybe I’m not the first to think of disposing of the proper parts,” Mavin said angrily. “Handbright, remember how you used to tell me you’d shift into a great sea bird when you had your Talent? You’d be a great white bird, you said, and explore all the reaches of the western sea. You used to say that. But here you are, teaching, baby watching, cooking and carrying for the Elders, and I know for a fact that there’s been much breeding done on you and no end of it planned, for I heard old Gormier talking of it and of how he’d discouraged your leaving ...”

The older girl turned away, face flaming, half angry, half shamed. Undaunted, Mavin went on.

“You stayed here, and let yourself be used by old Gormier, and Haribald, and I don’t know how many others—and because you didn’t have childer, they kept at you. And the years go by, and it gets later and later. You don’t shift, you don’t do processions, you don’t go to Schlaizy Noithn to learn your Talent, you don’t practice, and it still gets later. And maybe it’s too late to dream of becoming a great bird and going exploring, too.”

“Don’t you understand!” Handbright shouting at her, face red, tears flowing freely down the sides of her tired face. “I stayed because of Mertyn ... and you. I stayed because our mother died. I stayed because there wasn’t anyone else!” She turned, hand out, warning Mavin not to say another word, and then she was out the door and away, so much anger in her face that Mavin knew it was the keep angered her, the world, the Elders, the place, the time, not Mavin alone. And yet Mavin felt small and wicked to have put this extra hardship upon Handbright just now during Assembly, when she must be bearing so much else. Even so, she did not regret it, for now she knew the truth of it. It was a hard bit of wisdom for the day, but it came to Mavin as a better thing than the fog she had been wandering about in until the overheard conversation of the morning. “Still,” she whispered to herself, “I have doubts, Handbright. For you may have stayed out of grief for our mother, and out of care for baby Mertyn ... and me. But there have been eight long years since then. And four long years since Throsset left. And I have been strong and able for at least four or five of those years. So why not have gone, Handbright? Why not have taken us with you? There must be some other reason.”

“Perhaps,” said the clear voice which had spoken to her from within her own mind that morning, “She is afraid or too tired or believes that it is her duty to stay in the Danderbat keep, oldest of the Xhindi keeps. Or because she believes she is needed here.”

Mavin left the room thoughtfully, and went down the long stairs past the childer’s playground. Mertyn was there, sitting on the wall as he so often did, arms wrapped around his legs, cheek lying on his knees while he thought deep thoughts or invented things, a dark blot of shadow against the stars. Mavin considered, not for the first time, that he did not look like a shifter child. But then, Mavin had not thought

of herself resembling a shifter child either and had grieved over that. Perhaps Mertyn was not and she could rejoice. She sat beside him to watch the stars prick out, darkness lying above the fireglow in the west. "You're sad looking, Mertyn child."

"I was thinking about Leggy Bartiban. He was teaching me to play wands and rings, and now he's gone. They took him to the Forgetter, and he's gone. If I see him again ever, he won't know me." The child wiped tears, snuffling against his sleeve, face already stained. She hugged him to her, smelling the fresh bread smell of him, salt sweat and clean breath.

"Ah. He may know us both, Mertyn. Handbright says they don't forget everyone. He'll know us. He'll just forget the shifter things it's better he forgets, anyhow, if he's not shifter. Why clutter up your mind with all stuff no good to it? Hmm? Besides, I can teach you to play wand-catch."

He looked at her in surprise. "Well if you can, why didn't you? I should've learned last year. I'm getting old fast, Mavin. Everyone says so."

"Ah. Do you think you're getting older than I am? If you could manage that, it would be fine, Mertyn. Then you could take me with you and we'd go travel the world."

"I'm not catching up to you, Mavin," he said seriously. The boy had little humor in him, and she despaired sometimes that he would ever understand any of her little jokes. It upset him if she told him she had been teasing so she pretended serious regard.

"No, of course you're not. I was just wishing, thinking it would be nice to go traveling and shifting."

"Oh, it would. If you go, you mustn't leave me all alone here, Mavin. I had Leggy, and he's gone, and there's only Handbright except you. I want to go traveling and shifting more than anything. I dream about it sometimes, when I'm asleep and when I'm awake. I want to go. But you can't go until you've had childer, Mavin. Girls aren't supposed to. Janjiver says it messes up their insides."

Mavin bit her lip, wanting to laugh at his tone of voice, unable to do so for the tears running inside her throat. "Tell me, Mertyn, why it is it doesn't mess up a boy shifter's insides? Boys have baby-making parts, too, don't they? But I've seen them shift their parts all over themselves and then put them back and make a baby the same day. So why is it only she-shifters have to be so careful?"

The boy looked doubtful, then thoughtful in that way he sometimes had. "I don't know. That would be very interesting to know, wouldn't it. What the difference is. I'll ask Gormier Graywing ..."

"Don't," she said harshly. "Let me find out, brother child, I'd rather." She left him sitting there under the stars, went out only to return and whisper to his shadow crouching dark against the wall, "Mertyn, if I were to figure out a way to go traveling, would you go with me?"

His voice when he replied was all child. "Oh, Mavin, could you? That would be fun!"

Could she? Could she? Could she do what Throsset of Dowes was said to have done? Leave in the dark of night, slipping away in silence, losing herself in the fire hills or the roads away north to Pfarb Durim. Oh, the mystery and wonder of Pfarb Durni, city of the ancients!

This was only dream stuff, only thoughts and ruminations, not intentions. She was not yet at the point of intention. Meantime it was Old Shuffle time, Assembly time, and she no less than any in the keep would watch the processions on the morrow.

For it was tomorrow that the visitors would come, tomorrow that the first procession would come through the p'natti, through Gormier's new pillars and doors. Even now those of the younger clans were probably roaming about in the fire hills in pombi shape or fustigar shape or flying high overhead, endlessly circling like great waroo owls, ready to assemble with first light, making themselves a great drum orchestra to beat the sun up out of bed. She went to sleep in a cubby which faced the sunrise, so that the coming of the shifters should not take her by surprise.

They began before dawn, drumming, hooting, whistling, a cacophonous hooraw which woke every person in the keep and brought them all to the roof where today's kitchen crew gave them hot spiced tea and biscuits made of ox-root, all nibbling quietly in the pre-morn darkness while out in the firehills that un-gamish hooraw went on and on, rising and falling. Mavin huddled in her blanket, perched within the rainspout once more, out of sight and therefore out of anyone's mind at all, she told herself. She did not want to see Handbright's face.

It came toward dawn, and the Elders put their score pads on their laps, ready to note what it was they liked about the procession, already seeing shifting shapes out beyond the p'natti, high tossed plumes, lifted wings, whirlings and leapings just at the edge of the light. Mavin waited, holding her breath. She had told herself that she was not so childish as to be excited, but the breath stuck in her throat nonetheless.

Full light. Out at the edge of the p'natti a hedge of prised spears arose, shattering light in a thousand directions, then broke into shapes which came forward to the music of their own drumming. They came low, then upward to fly, to catch, to slide down, to rear upward again, to sparkle in jeweled greens and blues, fiery reds and ambers, scales like emerald and sapphire—the mythical jewels of heaven—and eyes which glowed a hundred shades of gold. Beyond the narrowing pillars they thrust upward into trees of gems, glittering from a million leaves, slid forward between the pillars and confronted the square-form portals in contracting shapes of bulked steel, gleaming gray and shiny. Around the slither-downs they came, erupting now into different shapes, some winged, some coiled like leaping springs, some vaporous as mist, all to break like water upon the barrier of the slything walls and take the shapes of fustigars and pombis and owls, tumbling and leaping over the walls and the ways until they were at the walls of the keep itself where they became whirling pools of light and shadow, towering higher and higher, drawing up, up, up to meet at the zenith above the keep in a dome, a shining lattice of drawn flesh, all the time the drumming going on and on, louder and louder, until a crash came to make their ears fall deaf.

And in that moment the high lattice fell, drew in upon itself like shadow to become the visitors from Bothercat the Rude Rock and Fretowl the Dark Wood and a dozen other Xhindi keeps, laughing outside the walls and demanding entrance. So was the first proces-sional ended. Mavin sat in the high hidey hole, mouth open, so full of wonder at it that she could not wake herself from the dream.

Still there were some hundreds to be fed, and it would have taken advance planning and great determination to hide from so many. She was winkled out and set to carrying plates within the hour, and thereafter was not let alone for so much as a moment during the days or nights.

It was on the last day of Assembly that one of the Xhindi from Battlefox the Bright Day sought her, making a special thing of asking after her and begging her company for a walk in the p'natti. He told her his name was Plandybast Ogbone. “Your thalan, child. Do you know what that is?”

She looked at him mouth open. “Full brother of my mother? But she was Danderbat! Not Battlefox!”

“Oh, and yes, yes, child. True. But your grandma, her mother, was Battlefox right enough. Bore six for Battlefox, she did, before taking herself away into the deep world for time on her own. And it was here she met a scarfulous fellow called young Theobald, so it seems she told Battlefox Elders. And he got twins on her, which was your mama and me, and then she died. And young Theobald, he took the girl child and brought her back to the Danderbats knowing their deep scarcity of females, but me he kept with the Battlefoxes, reminding me frequent that I was thalan to any of her childer. He died some time back. And so I am thalan to Handbright, and to you, and to young Mertyn.

“Time ago I invited Handbright to come visit Battlefox the Bright Day, but she pled she could not leave young Mertyn. Today I asked her to bring him, and you, if she would, but these here have convinced her the walls of Danderbat keep are Xhindi gold. It seems a slavey in Danderbat is equal to an Elder in Battlefox—or so she believes. No, no, I lie if I say that’s true, for I’ve talked with her and talked with her, and it’s something other than that. Something is awry with her, and she seems unable to decide anything. She simply does and does and tries not to think about it. Well, you know the old saying, ‘Vary thought, vary shape.’ Since we do not take the same shapes, it is silly to expect us to think alike.” He shook his head. “Though, weary as she looks, I would expect her to have accepted my invitation. Though I have a kinsman or so there who may be a bit difficult—most particularly one kinswoman, of whom the least said the best—she would have companions and help at Battlefox.”

“She’s the only girl behind the p’natti,” whispered Mavin, so moved by this intelligence that she forgot to be wary of telling anyone, and him a stranger man for that. “Until she tells them about me.” So Plandybast Ogbone looked at her, and she at him, sharing a wordless kind of sympathy which she had not felt from any of the Danderbats.

“So that’s the way of it. And when they are told about you, all the oldsters will be at your bedroom door night on night, won’t they? Ah, surely Danderbat keep may be the oldest and the original, but it has fallen into a nasty sort of decay. We do not so treat our she-children at Battlefox and would have you welcome there. Or are you too convinced that the keep walls are Xhindi gold?”

“No,” she whispered. “I want out.”

“Ah. Well. There’s young Mertyn. He’d miss you no doubt.”

“Bring him with me,” she said. “I would. Couldn’t leave him here. To hear unkind things. About me, as I have heard about mother.”

“What is it they say about my sister Abrara?”

“That she shifted forbiddens while she carried Mertyn, and died from it.”

“Oh, Gamelords, what nonsense. I’ve known many who shifted before and during and didn’t die of it, though the Healers do say the child does best which isn’t shifted in the womb. This all reminds me of my

other sister, Itter, going on and on about Abrara whom she never knew and knows little enough about. There are some who must find fault somewhere, among the dead if they cannot find enough among the living. Abrara died because she was never strong, shifter or no. That's the truth. They should have had a Healer for her when she was young, as they did for me, but they didn't, for the Danderbat Xhindi set themselves above Healing. Lucky I was the Battlefoxes are no such reactionary old persons, or like I'd have died, too. She should have been let alone, not made to have childer, but the Danderbats are so short of females these two generations, and she had had daughters. She should have been let alone."

"At the Old Shuffle, we are not let alone."

He looked at her seriously, walked around in a circle, as though he circled in his thoughts. "You know, child, if I took you away from Danderbat with me, there'd be fits and consternation by the Elders. Particularly since Danderbat is so short of females just now. There'd be hearings and meetings and no doubt unpleasant things for me and you both. That's if I took you. Stole you, so they'd say, like a sack of grain or a basket of ripe thirilps. If you came to me, however, at Battlefox the Bright Day, you might have a few nasty words from Itter, but I'd not send you away empty-handed or hungry. You've seen maps of the place? You know where it is?"

She stared at him, but he did not meet her eyes, merely seeking the sky with a thoughtful face as though he had said nothing at all of importance.

"Yes," she said finally in a voice as casual as his own. "I know where it is. It lies high upon the Shadowmarches, northwest of Pfarb Durim. If I came to visit you some day, you'd be glad to see me?" she offered. "More or less."

"Oh. Surely. More or less. I would be very glad to see you. And Mertyn."

"Ah," she said. "I'll remember that, my thalan, and I thank you." She turned to leave him, full of dignity, then turned to hug him briefly, smearing his face with unregarded tears. "Thank you for telling me about my mother." Her gait as she left was perfectly controlled, and he looked after her, aware of a kind of envy at her composure. It was better done than he had seen from many twice her age.

CHAPTER THREE

The Assembly was concluded. The visitors left. The cooks departed in their wagon looking weary and

half drunk, for they had had their own celebration when the last banquet was over. Up in the small room at the top of the tower, Handbright slept in total exhaustion, and for once the old ones were so surfeited with food and frolic that they left her alone. Mavin, watching, made sure of this. She had set herself to be Handbright's watchdog for the time Mavin remained at the keep. That would not be long. She had resolved upon it. But she was still too untried a shifter to take child Mertyn into the wide world trusting only on her own abilities to keep him safe. As the shifter children were often told, there were child markets operating in the Gameworld, and whether a child might be shifter or no, the bodies of the young were saleable.

She knew that when they went safety would depend on covert, quiet travel over many leagues, for the way to Battlefox the Bright Day lay a distance well beyond Pfarb Durim through the Shadow-marches. And covert travel would be totally dependent upon Mavin's Talent, child Mertyn having none of his own save a sensible and thoughtful disposition. Her Talent had to be tried, and exercised, and practiced. Each night when the place was still, Mavin went beyond the p'natti into the woods—a forbidden excursion—or deep into the cellars—empty now—to try what it was she could do with herself.

It took her several nights to learn to damp the pain of shifting, to subdue it so that it did not distract her from what she was attempting. She spent those nights copying herd beasts from the surrounding fields, laying her hands upon them and feeling her way into their shapes, hide first as it were, the innards coming along as a consequence of the outer form. She learned to let discomfort guide her. If there was a feeling of itchy wrongness, then she could let the miraculous net within her sort it out, reach for a kind of Tightness which felt both comfortable and holdable. There were parts which were difficult. Hooves were troublesome. And horns. They had no living texture to them, and making the hard surfaces took practice. She learned the shape of her own stomach by the forms it took in shifting, the fineness and texture of her own skin, the shape and function of her own female parts, for she had determined to ignore the proscription against shifting placed upon females by the Danderbat. Reason said that if men could do it and still produce progeny, then women could do it also. And if not, then not. She would do without childer. Whatever she might do or not do, she would not end like Handbright.

Each morning she woke Handbright with a cup of tea—aware that this sudden solicitude evoked a certain suspicion—and repeated that she did not want the Elders told, not just yet. Each day Handbright would reluctantly agree, and Mavin would go to sleep for a few hours before finding some deserted place to practice in. Day succeeded day. Gormer and Haribald were gone from the keep on a long hunting expedition, for the food storage rooms were virtually depleted. In their absence Handbright stopped insisting that the Elders must be told, and Mavin relaxed a trifle, sleeping a few more hours than she would have done otherwise.

She developed her own systems for rapid acquisition of Talent, reminding herself how quickly the babies in the nursery learned to talk once they had begun. If one spent hours every day at it, it came fast. Even the boys who began to show Talent were not usually allowed as many free hours for practice as Mavin took for herself, for they had to attend classes and spend time with the Elders listening to history tales. With the Assembly so recently over, however, everyone was tired. The Elders themselves were off in the woods in easy shapes which required no thought. The children were left to their own devices and seemed

to spend endless days playing Wizards and Shifters. In a few days the keep would pull itself together to resume its usual schedule, but just now it was open and relaxed, ideal for Mavin's purposes. She thanked the Gamelords, prayed to Thandbar it would last as long as she needed, and practiced.

She knew she did not have time to learn many different things. She could not trifle with herself, learning the shape of a whirlwind or a cloud. She must take what time she had to learn a few things well, learning even those few shapes in wonder and occasional chagrin. She worked endlessly at her horse shape, believing that a boy the size of Mertyn could best be carried farthest on some ordinary, acceptable animal. Besides, horses could fight. Horses with hooves honed to razor sharpness could fight particularly well, and she spent prodigious hours rearing and wheeling herself, striking with forefeet and back ones, all in absolute silence so that no one would hear and come to investigate. She practiced gaining bulk, all the bulk one needed to become a horse, practiced doing it quickly and leaving it just as quickly. Taking bulk was not an easy thing. One had to absorb the extra bulk, water or grain or grass—organic things were best. Then one had to pull the net out of the extra bulk to return to one's own shape, quickly, neatly, with no agonizing tugs or caught bits of oneself lingering. It was not an easy thing, but she learned to do it well. Not knowing what she could not do, she did everything differently than other shifters would have done it, comforted herself by naming herself "Mavin Manyshaped," and did little dances of victory all alone.

She began to pay attention to other shifters, to the way she knew them, could identify them, even inside other shapes, and discovered at last a kind of organ within herself which trembled in recognition when another shifter with a similar organ was near. It was small, no bigger than a finger, but it was growing. A few days before, she would not have known it was there. Desperately, she set about shifting that organ itself, veiling it, muffling it, so that it could not betray her. She wanted to be horse, only horse, with no shifter unmasking her as anything else. The difficulty lay in the strange identifier organ, for when she muffled it directly, it was as though she had become deaf and blind, unable to walk without losing her balance. Not knowing that it was impossible—as any Elder of the Xhindi would have told her—she invented a bony plate to grow around it which allowed it to function inside her body without betraying itself outside. The plate was bulky. She could not contain it in a small shape or a narrow one, but she could do it as a horse, and the night she achieved it she slept for hours, so drowned in sleep that it was like waking from an eternity.

Waking to find that Gormier and Haribald had returned, and with them Wurstery and half a dozen others. The hunt had been successful; the kitchen courtyard was full of butchery, with smoke fires under the racks of meat, drying it for storage. And Handbright was there with great black rings around her eyes, looking cowed and beaten, as though she had not slept for days.

"I told them," she said to Mavin, not meeting her eyes. "I had I to. I can't go on."

Mavin looked up to find Gormier's eyes upon her, full of a gloating expectation. Ah, well. She had had more time than she had expected. "When?" She did not reproach Handbright. The strange identifier organ would have betrayed her sooner or later, and what she intended to do would be reproach enough.

“They want to have your Talent party today. They’re drawing lots who stays with you first tonight. Well, it’s time for you, Mavin. You’ll live through it, though. We all have.”

“I’m sure I will. Of course I will. Don’t fret. Come with me to the kitchen and have a cup of something hot. You look exhausted.”

“They woke me in the middle of the night, the three of them. They ... they put ... I ... I had to tell them.”

“Of course.” Soothing, kindly, hypocritical, Mavin led her to the kitchen. “Handbright, listen to me. I want you to go to Battlefox keep in the Bright Day demesne. Our thalan, Plandybast Ogbone, wants you to come. Promise me?”

Handbright shook her head, a frantic denial. “Mertyn. Mertyn needs me.”

Mavin thought it was only habit and a weary inertia which made Handbright speak so. “He doesn’t need you, Handbright. He’s fine. The youngest child in the nursery is five years old, and you’ve spent long enough taking care of them. You should know by now you’re not going to conceive, and you’d have been long gone if you had conceived. So you must go. There are lots of Danderbats can come in to take care of the childer. Besides, I’ll be here.”

“But ... alone. It’s so hard alone ... and Mertyn ...”

“You did it alone. After you have some rest, you can come back and help me if you like. But I want you to go, Handbright. Either to Plandybast, or to the sea, as you once said you would do. Today.” She bent all her concentration upon her sister, willed her to respond. “Now, Handbright.”

“Now?” Hope bloomed on her face as though this had been the secret word of release; but there was a wild look in her eyes. “Now?”

Mavin wondered what had happened to make the woman respond in this way. It could not be her own

pleading, for she had pled before and nothing had happened. No. Something else had happened. She did not take time to worry about what it might have been.

“Now. Become a white bird, Handbright! Fly from the tallest tower. From your bedroom, up there in the heights. Nothing carried, nothing needed—to Battlefox. Or to the sea.”

Handbright rose, a look almost of madness in her face, eyes darting, hands patting at herself. “Now. Mavin. Now. I’ll go. Someday, I’ll... you’ll come. Mertyn’s all right. He’s a big boy. He’ll be fine. Now.” And she fled away up the stairs, Mavin close behind but unseen, as though she had been a ghost.

Clothes fell on the stone floor. Handbright stood in the window, naked. From the doorway Mavin gasped, seeing bruises and bloody stripes on the naked form which changed, shifted, wavered in out-line to stand where it had stood but feathered, long neck curled on white back, beak turned toward Mavin, eyes still wild and seeking.

“Fly, sister,” she commanded, fixing the maddened eyes with her own. “Fly, Handbright. Go.”

The wings unfurled slowly, the neck stretched out tentatively, cautiously, then all at once darted forward as the wings thrust down, once, twice, and the great bird launched itself into the air, falling, falling, catching itself upon those wide wings at the last possible moment to soar up, out, out, away toward the west.

Mavin found herself crying. She flung herself down on Handbright’s narrow bed, aware for the first time of the basket in the corner, the ropes, the little whip carelessly thrown down upon the stones. It was a punishment basket, the only true punishment for a shifter, to be confined, close confined, unable to move, to speak, to change into any other shape. The baskets were woven in Kyquo, tightly woven, tightly lidded. And this one had been used on Handbright, or she had been threatened with it.

So. Threatened or used; what did it matter. Handbright was gone. Mavin wiped her face in a cold, unreasoning fury and without knowing how she did it, or even that she had done it, took on the very face and features of Handbright; the well known expression, the tumbled hair, the tall, slender form bent with work and abuse, the eyes dark-ringed with pain to look upon herself reflected there—Handbright’s own form and face.

“Everyone knows,” she whispered, “that it is impossible for a shifter to take the form of another living

person. Everyone knows that it lies outside our nature, that it is forbidden. Everyone knows that. But—but, someone has done it.” She smiled at herself in the mirror, a cold smile, and went slowly, with fearful anticipation, down into the smoke of the kitchen court to confront Gormier’s truculent stare.

“Well?” he demanded. “She’s been told there’s been enough of this holding back, has she? Celebration for her this day and for me this night. I’ve won the draw.” And he grinned widely at her as he displayed the red-tipped stick he had drawn. “Time I had a little luck after too long of your dead body, old girl. Time we had some fresh blood behind the p’natti.”

“She doesn’t want a celebration.” This in the very tone and substance of Handbright’s own voice, dull and without emotion. “She’s sick to her stomach. She’s up in my room, and you can go up there, come dark, but she’ll have no celebration.”

“Well, and go up I will. And after me Wurstery, and after him Haribald, for that’s the way it falls.”

Still in Handbright’s voice Mavin let her curiosity free to find the limits of the old ones’ abuse. “Couldn’t you have pity on her this night? Make it only one of you?”

Wurstery had overheard this from his drying rack duties and intervened to make his own demands. “We’ve been days in the woods, old girl. Make a nice homecoming for us. Besides, best begin as we mean to go on.”

“Well then,” Mavin said in Handbright’s voice, “she’ll have to bear it, I suppose.”

“Let’s hope she bears better’n you’ve borne, old girl.” And they went back to their smoky work in a mood of general self-righteousness and satisfaction. Mavin went back into the keep, into a shadowy place, and leaned against the wall, weeping. When she had done, the Handbright shape had dropped away, and though she tried, she could not bring it back. She went to find Mertyn to tell the boy they would leave Danderbat keep that night.

She went over it with him several times, though the boy understood well enough even at first. “The horse will come to the corner of the p’natti wall farthest toward the fire hills. You’ll have all your clothes and things in this sack, everything you treasure, lad, for you’ll not be back. And I will meet you on the road ...”

“And I must not say anything about it to anyone,” he concluded for her, puzzled but willing. “Especially not to any of the Danderbats.”

“That’s right. Especially not to the Danderbats. And you’re to wait. Even if it gets very late and scary, and you hear owls or fustigars howling. Promise.”

“Promise.” He put his small hand in hers, cold but steady. “I’ll wait, Mavin. No matter how late.”

She left him, trusting him. Then to the cellars for two more of the punishment baskets, thick with dust, hardly ever used. Except by shifters like Gormier, for Mavin had no doubt it had been his idea—to spice things a bit. Then to the kitchens for a sack of grain. Then to Handbright’s room. She would have to be ready by dark, and it would take that much time to gain the bulk she would need to become a horse—to become a horse, but first to become something else indeed, only a part of which would resemble Mavin.

She did not know that what she was doing was impossible. She knew only that she would not rest and could not go until Gormier and Haribald and Wurstery knew what Handbright had known, the sureness of pain, the tightness of confinement. And another thing. One other thing. When they knew that, it would not matter that there were no Danderbat girls behind the p’natti in future.

In the deep middle of the night her horse shape came to Mertyn, exactly where she had told him to be. She whinnied at him, pushing at him with a soft nose, letting him feel her ears and neck to reassure him that all was well. He scrambled clumsily onto the low wall, and from that to Mavin’s back, the sack of possessions balanced in a lump before him.

“Nice horse,” he said doubtfully. “Are you going to take me to Mavin?”

The horse’s head nodded, and the beast stepped away from the wall, into the forest which Mavin knew as few others of the keep had ever known. By dawn they would need to be leagues away, down the cliff road which led to Haws Valley and well buried in the woods which lay along the upper stretches of the River Haws. She could not let the boy know she was shifter. His mind would be open to any Demon riding along who might choose to Read him, and it was better if he simply did not know. So, there would be play acting aplenty in the hours and days to come.

They would be safe from pursuit for at least this day. The three in the tower room would not be found for hours, perhaps not for days. Each one of them had struggled, frightened half out of his wits and mad with the pain of missing vital parts of himself. Struggle had been useless. Mavin had prepared for the encounter by taking more bulk than the three of them put together, part of that bulk a Mavin-shaped piece, and the rest a huge, tentacled thing which swumbled them up and thrust them into the baskets no matter how they howled, pushing and squashing until they were forced to take the shape of the basket, without lungs or lips or eyes. Gormier had been first, arriving full of explicit, lewd instructions for the cowering girl, ready to force them upon her, only to be thrust into agonized silence by the hugeness that was Mavin. Then Wurstery, then Haribald, each coming into the dark room expecting nothing more than a bit of the usual. Well, usual they now had. Handbright's usual. They would probably live, if they were found before they starved, but they would not father any more Danderbats. A shifter might shift as he would: once that part of his self was gone, it was gone forever. He might shift him a part which looked similar, but he would take no pleasure from it. Beneath Mertyn's drowsing form the horse shuddered, half in horror, half in satisfaction.

Now that the boy was soundly asleep, Mavin grew tentacles again, small ones to hold him securely on her back, and began to run. The horse shape was well and fully practiced, constructed for fleetness with eyes that could spy through the dark to see every hollow or bit of broken ground. Night fled past.

Behind them in the keep a hysterical Wurstery managed a hair-thin tentacle to lift the latch of his basket. Behind them in the keep was consternation, fury. The Elders were summoned out of their inner privacies by bells.

"Handbright," they said. "It was Handbright!" No one was thinking to look for Mavin or for Mertyn. A shifter girl only just come to Talent could not have done this thing. It could only possibly have been done by someone older, someone who had practiced secretly. Ah, yes, that is why she never conceived. Surely it was Handbright. The Danderbats had only thought the creature looked like Mavin. The room had been dark. It had been Handbright, shifting shape, desirous of protecting (protecting?) her little sister.

Jealous, Gormier offered. Jealous that the younger girl would get all their attention. At which there was much clucking of agreement, save among the crones who looked knowingly at one another but said nothing.

The Xhindi did not believe in Healers, but one was sent for nonetheless. The three Danderbats were in too much pain to let nature heal them. Pain and fury.

Far off to the north, the horse ran on, the boy cushioned soft on its wide back, as dawn leaked milky into the edges of the sky. She stopped, laid him down, went off into the woods to give up bulk and clothe herself. When she came out into the clearing, he was rubbing his eyes, looking up at her in gladness.

“Mavin. You said you’d be here, but I thought maybe you’d forget.”

She took him in her arms, glad that he could not fully see her face. “Oh, no, Mertyn,” she said. “Never fear that about Mavin. Mavin does not forget.”

He slept curled in her arms, as secure as though he had been in the childer’s rooms at the keep, waking full of deep thoughts about the day. Mavin had brought with her a handful of the seeds of the fruit of the rainhat bush, used by the crones in the keep whenever shallow, quiet sleep was needed by someone ill or wounded. She fed half a dozen of these to Mertyn with his stewed grain, and then made him up to look like quite another boy. She had brought dye for his hair and bits of false hair to tuft his eyebrows out and a brush to make freckle spots on his clear skin. When she had done, he smiled at her in his sleep, quite content, looking utterly unlike himself. She wanted him passive, unable to take fright or betray them by recognizing someone, for they would need to travel part of the day on the Hawsport Road which led along the River Haws all the way from the far northern lands over Calihiggy Creek and down to the sea. Later, when there was time, she would explain it all and trust to his own good sense, but there was no time now for any explanation, and she dared not trust his guile.

The horse form she took was sway-backed and old, with splayed hooves which turned up at the edges. A horse ridden by an unaccompanied child might be coveted by someone stronger, but this horse could be coveted by no one. So she took bulk and changed, scooping the sack and the child onto her back with a long, temporary tentacle and holding them in place with nearly invisible ones thereafter. Then they wandered down through the woods to the road, empty in either direction. She began to plod along it, heading north, the river on her right and on both right and left, leagues away, the crumbly cliffs of Haws Valley. On that western height, well behind her, lay Danderbat keep. It was from that height that search would come, if search came, but it did not cross Mavin’s mind that the search might be for Handbright.

The sway-backed horse shape was unbearable. It was inefficient and it ached. Without in the least meaning to do so, Mavin changed herself to remove the aches and make it easier to move along the road, only to come to herself with a sense of impending danger at the sounds of something coming along the road after her. A quick self check—she thought of it as a kind of patting the pockets of herself to see what she had in them—showed her a form so unnatural and strange as to have evoked immediate interest in anyone except a blind man. Hastily, and barely in time, she shifted back into the old horse form, plodded off the road and into a clump of bushes to let the travelers pass her by. She knew them for shifter the moment they came into view as dark, moving splotches against the moon-grayed loom of the forest. She even knew which shifters they were, Barfod Bartiban, thalan to Leggy Bartiban, and Torben Naffleloose. She knew them by the fustigar shapes they had taken, ones often seen in processions at the Danderbat keep, as familiar in their way as the actual shapes of the two shifter men. The two shapes were hard run, panting, lagging feet in the dust to stir up a nose-tickling cloud. Mavin repressed a sneeze and tightened her grip on Mertyn, praying they would not see her, know her, somehow spy her out in the horse shape with the bony plate around her shifter organ.

They did not. Instead, they slowed to a dragging walk, and then into a breath-gulping halt, sagging into the dust of the road with heaving moans of exhaustion.

“No way Handbright could have come so far north lugging two younglings,” panted Barfod. “So we’ve got to figure we’re in front of her if she came north. Not that I think she did.”

“Think she went west? On no more than that crone’s say so?”

“Only place she ever talked of going. Beyond Schlaizy Noithn to the sea. Wanted to do a bird thingy over the ocean. Fool idea, but that’s what the crone said.”

“What’d she expect to do with the childer? Put them in a nest on a cliff and feed them fish?” Torben Naffleoose chuckled, hawking through the dust phlegm of his shifted throat. “Take a big bird to carry a girl the size of Mavin.”

“Well now, you’re forgetting Mavin had turned shifter herself. Wasn’t that what all the ruckus was about?”

“Oh, well, still. A just turned shifter is useless, Barfod, useless as tits on a owl. All they do for the first half year or so is fiddle with fingers and toes. You know that.”

“I remember that. Fingers, toes, and some other interesting parts, eh, Torben. Remember when you was a forty-season child? Out behind the p’natti? Hah. All the shifter boys seeing who could ...” He paused, listening. Mavin had shifted her weight, rustling some branches. “What was that?”

“Owl, prob’ly. No shifters around. I could feel ‘em if there were. No. Just night noises. Owls. Maybe a shadowman, sneaking around behind the bushes like they do. This is the kind of mild night they like, I hear. They come out and sing on nights like this. Did you ever hear ‘em?”

“Oh, sure, when I was in Schlaizy Noithn. Playing flutes, playing little bells, singing like birds. There’s lots of them around the Schlaizy Noithn hills. There was one or two shifters when I was there claimed they could talk the shadowman talk. All full of babble-pabble it is, goes on and on. They’ll sing for a half night, words and words, and then you ask what it was all about and get told it was shadowman talk for

‘Look at the pretty moon.’ Ah, well. Now that we’re as far north as Handbright could have come, what’s the next thing, old Barfod?’

There was a moment’s silence while the two sat quiet, thinking, then Bartiban replied, “Now I think we start off through the woods heading south again, you on one side of the road and me on the other, casting back and forth to see can we smell hide nor fang of whatever Handbright is up to. There’s others gone away west, and I’m betting my coin that they find her there. She’s an unpracticed female, Torben, and unpracticed females aren’t up to much, as you well know. Which is why we keep ‘em unpracticed, right?” And he chuckled in a liquid gurgle before rising once more to take another, more forest ready shape. The two went off into the underbrush, and Mavin stayed silent, hardly breathing, to let them get clear of her. So. They were seeking Handbright, a shifter burdened with two children. They were not seeking Mavin. Then so much for the horse shape, not-Mavin shape of the journey. She laid Mertyn upon the shadowed grasses and went away a little to give up the bulk she had taken, most of it, keeping some, for she wanted not to appear a child. There were child hunters, child takers in the world, and it would be better not to appear a child. Better not to appear a woman, either, for that. So. Well, first she would need to explain to Mertyn, and after that they would decide. She lay down beside him and let the night move over her like a blanket, quiet and peaceful, with no harm in it except the little harms of night-hunting birds doing away with legions of small beasties between their burrows; the slaughter of beetle by night-stalking lizard; the trickle of melody running through the forest signifying of shadowmen, shadowmen unheard for Mavin was asleep.

In the morning she woke to the child stirring in her arms, woke to a crystal, glorious morning, so full of freedom that her heart sang with it and she thought of Handbright wonderingly. How could she have waited so long? How could she have given up all this to stay prisoned within the p’natti, within the keep, prey to those old granders and their salacious whims? It was a puzzle to her. She, Mavin, would not, ever, could not, ever. She tickled Mertyn awake and fed him from their small stock of foodstuffs, knowing she would have to hunt meat for them soon, or gather road fruits, or come to some place where such things could be worked for.

“Where are we going, Mavin? You never said.”

“Because I didn’t have time, Mertyn. You see, you and I are running away from Danderbat keep.”

“Running away! Why are we doing that? I didn’t know that! You mean we can’t ever go back?” The child sounded crushed, or perhaps only surprised into a sense of loss.

“You said you wanted to go traveling more than anything, Mertyn child.”

“I know. I just—just thought I’d come back to Danderbat keep and tell everyone where I’d been and what I’d been doing. Like the shifters do at Assembly. Like that.”

“Unlikely for us, Mertyn. We are going to Battlefox the Bright Day, high on the Shadowmarches, for there is your thalan and mine. Plandybast Ogbone.” She patted the boy while he thought on this, chewing away at the tough dried meat they had brought with them.

“He was at Assembly. He gave me a thingy.” The boy rummaged in a pocket, coming up at last with a tiny carving of two frogs grinning at one another on a leaf. It was the kind of intricate handwork which the shifters loved, tiny and marvelous, done with fanatical care and endless time in the long, dark hours of the keep nights of the cold season. “He told me he had brought it for Handbright, but that I looked as though I needed it. What did he mean by that, Mavin?”

“He meant that he thought you were still young enough to be tickled by it, child, and to keep it in your pocket forever. He could see that Handbright was beyond such things, beyond hope, beyond saving, perhaps. Perhaps not.”

He looked questions at her, started to ask, bit his lip and did not. Mavin, sighing, took up the story. He would need to know, after all, child or not. “You see, Mertyn child,” she said, “this was the way of it with Handbright. ...” So she told him, everything, he flushing at the harsh telling of it but knowing well enough what it was she meant. Once in a while she said, “You know what that is? You understand?” to which he nodded shamefaced knowledge.

When she had done, he whispered, “You know, the boys ... they say ... the ones like Leggy and Janjiver ... they say the girls like it. That’s what they say. They say that the girls may say no, but they really like it.”

Mavin thought a time. “Mertyn child, you like sweet cakes, don’t you?”

He nodded, cocking his head at this change of subject.

“Let us suppose I put a basket of sweet cakes here, a big one, and I held your mouth open and I crumbled a cake into your mouth and pushed it down your throat with a piece of wood, the way the crones push corn down the goose’s neck to fatten it, so that your throat bled and you choked and gasped, but I went on pushing the crumbled cakes down your throat until they were gone. You could not

chew them, or taste them. When I was done and your throat was full of blood and you half dead from it all, I would take the stick away and laugh at you and tell you I would be back on the morrow to do it all again. Then, suppose you came crying to someone and that someone said, 'But Mertyn, you like sweet cakes, you really like sweet cakes... ?' "

The boy thought of this, red-faced, eyes filling with quick tears. "Oh, Mavin. Mavin. Oh, poor Handbright. I hope she has gone far away, far away ..."

Mavin nodded. "Yes. She was bruised and the blood had spotted her skin, Mertyn. She had had no joy of the granders, nor they of her except the ugly joy of power and violence and the despising of women that they do. So. We have run from Danderbat keep, but they do not know that we are gone one way and Handbright another. So, we will stop going as boy and horse and go as boy and something else. For I am a shifter, Mertyn, and shift I will to keep us safe and fed and warm of nights."

"But Mavin, you are only a beginning shifter. Everyone says they are not up to much."

"Well. Perhaps they are right. So, I will not shift much. I will only be your big brother instead of your big sister, and that only so that no one disturbs us as we walk along."

"What will we do with the poor horse?" he asked gravely.

She began to laugh, then stopped herself. No. Let him go on believing there had been a horse. "I turned it loose back in the woods. It will graze there happily all the rest of its life, so we will leave it. Come, now. Let's pack all this stuff and be on our way. We have spent long enough in one spot, and it is many such spots before we come to the Shadowmarches."

She pulled him to his feet and busied him about the camp, burying the scraps and packing all the rest. Then, when she had changed herself under his wondering eyes into something not unlike herself but indisputably male, they went out onto the road to take the way north.

CHAPTER FOUR

The road was thick with dust of a soft, pinky color, powdered rose as it fluffed upward in small clouds

around their feet, coating them to the knees with a blushing glow and velvety texture. At the sides of the road grew luxuriant stands of rainhat bush, the conical leaves as stiff as funnels, furry tan fruit nestling in each. The fruit was blue-fleshed and sweet beneath the furry, itchy skin, and they amused themselves as they went, spiking the fruit out without touching it and slitting the skin away to reveal the turquoise juiciness beneath. Small boys considered it great fun to hide rainhat fruit skins in one another's beds or clothing, laughing uproariously at the frenzied scratching which would ensue. Mavin warned Mertyn with a glance when she saw him furtively hiding a fingerlength of skin, and he flushed as he threw it away.

Beyond the stands of bushes to the west the forest began, first a fringing growth of yellow webwillow, then the dark conifers building gloom against the bronze red cliffs which reached upward at their left. The cliffs were crumbly-piers eaten away by ages of rain and sun into angled blocks stacked far upward to the ivory rimrock where the brows of the forest peered down into the valley. To their right the river ran silver, silent, slithery as a great snake, making no murmur save at the edges where it chuckled quietly under the grassy banks, telling its own story. Small froggy things polluped into the pools as they passed. Reeds swayed as though lurkers traveled there, though nothing emerged from the green fastnesses but stalking birds, high on their stilts, peering and poking into the mire with lancelike beaks. Sun glittered, spun, wove, twisted into a fabric of light and air and shining water, and they walked as though at the center of a jewel to the muffled plopping of their own steps.

Beside the river were hayfields, few and narrow between the water and the road. Across the river were more fields, with twisty trails leading onto the high ridge where villages perched upon the rocks like roosting owls, windows staring at them as they passed. That was the Ridge of Wicking, between the River Haws and the Westfork, which lay in a great trough north of Betand. Not far ahead, to the east, the high plateau at the north end of the Ridge bulked vastly against the sky, its black stone and hard outline menacing, the bare rocky top fisting the sky like a blow. There was supposed to be a Wizard's Demesne on Blacktop, but Mavin thought it unlikely anyone would nest there save Armigers, perhaps, or other Gamesmen who flew. Dragons or Cold-drakes, perhaps. Gamesmen of that kind. There appeared to be no comfort in the place, no kindness of wood or water. She preferred it where they were and said as much to Mertyn, who sighed, hummed, trudged along the road not talking and seeming unthinking in the warm and the light.

"Elators, maybe," she mused. "Perhaps they are initiated by being taken up there on some long, climby trail, and then once they have seen the place and can remember it, they flick up onto the high rock from the far places, flick, and there they are, the place full of Elators as a thrilp is full of seeds ..."

"I think Seers," Mertyn offered. "It would be nice for Seers, up there, where they could really see for a thousand leagues in every direction." He hummed again, smiled up at her as though drugged, and trudged on once more. She thought that she herself must seem as drugged as he on the sunlight and the quiet, for she was in a mood of strange and marvelous contentment, so quietly peaceful that she almost missed the sound of hooves behind them on the road.

Mavin moved into the bushes at the side of the road, pulling Mertyn along with her. “Remember,” she cautioned him. “I am your older brother. You may still call me Mavin, for that could be man or woman, but do not for the love of all the powers and freedom call me ‘sister’.” It was easy enough for her to seem male, the changes were superficial and easy; and if Mertyn did not forget, she would pass well enough. The horse sounds came on, more than one animal, and she turned at last to see what moved toward them in the morning.

They were two Tragamors, one male and one female peering through their fanged half helmets, and a rough-looking man dressed in a strange garb which Mavin did not recognize. She had been told that the school in Danderbat keep was not good for much except teaching some shifterish skills and policies, and she knew that they had paid little enough attention to the Index. She wished at the moment that they had spent more time upon it, enough time at least to recognize what he might be. Not Tragamor—their fanged helmets were unmistakable—therefore probably not having the Tragamor skill of moving things from a distance or tossing mountains about at will. It would probably be some complementary talent. The man was clad in skins and furs, and he had a long glass slung at his shoulder. She had barely time to look him over before the horses pulled up and the male Tragamor leaned from his saddle to hail them in a voice both unpleasant and challenging.

“Hey there, fellow. We are told there is a way into the highlands along this River. Would you know how far?”

Just as Mavin was readying herself to reply, Mertyn spoke, his childish treble firm and positive. “Just before you come to Calihiggy Creek, Gamesman, there is a trail leading back to the southeast onto the heights. Or, if you need a better road than that, there is one which goes south from Pfarb Durim to Betand, but that is many leagues to the north.”

“Ah, a scholarly scut, isn’t it,” drawled the skin-clad man. “And where did you learn so much about the world, small one.” He seemed to be struggling with his face, attempting to keep it in its frowning mold.

“I studied maps ... sir. I’m sorry, but I don’t know what your title should be, Sir Gamesman. I mean no offense ...” Mavin looked at the boy, fascinated, for he was smiling up at the man, a kind of light in his face, and they all smiled back, kindly, with no hint of trouble.

Mavin shook herself, drew herself into the persona she had adopted and said, “Indeed, we mean no offense, Gamesmen. We are country people and see few travelers.”

The skin-clad one turned his eyes from the child to Mavin, face still kindly and happy. “No offense,

young man. No offense. I am an Explorer, and there are few enough of my kind among all the Gamesmen in these lands. We go into the high country in search of fabled mines, and we must find a way the wagons can come after, for why should Tragamors delve when pawns can dig? Eh?"

"Why, indeed," caroled Mertyn. "Well, it is more than one day's journey to the trail, Gamesmen. We wish you speedy journey and comfortable rest." And he smiled, and the Gamesmen smiled and rode away, and Mavin was once more trudging in the dust which had been so full of sparkling light and peace.

She shook herself. "What did you do to them?"

"Do?" He was all innocence. "Do?"

"Do, Mertyn. When that Tragamor spoke to us first, his fanged helm practically dripped menace at us, ready to bite us up in one gulp if we did not tell him what he wanted to know. Then, in moments, in a breath, he was all kindly thalan to us both, full of good will as a new keg is of air."

The boy frowned, seemed to concentrate. "I don't know, Mavin. It's just something that happens sometimes when I don't want people to be cross. It's nicer to be happy and contented, so I do the thing and everyone feels better." He stared at his feet, flushed. "I guess I make them love me."

For a moment she did not understand what he had said. She confused it in her mind with something natural and childish he might have said, "I guess I make them love me. ..." What could he have meant? Some childish game? Some pretend magic? Then came a sickening combination of horror and understanding as she understood what he meant, a kind of nausea, yet with fascination in it. "Did you ... did you do that to Handbright, Mertyn?"

He nodded guiltily. "Otherwise she would have gone away. I would have been lonely. That's the real reason she stayed, Mavin. I made her stay."

She could not keep the words inside. They spilled out. "I wonder if you have any idea how horrible that was for her ..." Her anger went away as quickly as it had come at the response she saw. The boy wept, his face flushed and red, tears flowing in a stream, his thin chest heaving with the pain of it, all at once bereft and cast down by tragedy, lost to it.

“I’m so sorry, Mavin. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know, really until you told me. They said ... they said it wasn’t so bad, not really. They said women just complained to be complaining. When I saw her so sad, I should have known better, Mavin. Truly. Shall we find her and tell her? Will she forgive me?”

She was distressed at his grief, as distressed as she had been at what he had said. A child. Eight years, perhaps twenty-five seasons in all? Certainly no more than that. And yet, to have bewitched Handbright, kept her behind the p’natti to be abused, used, beaten ... She pulled herself together. “There, child. There. No one really expects that you should have known better. I don’t myself. Handbright is gone. I told her she must go away ... as soon as we were gone. She isn’t there any more, so we needn’t go back. I’m all adrift, Mertyn. I don’t know what to say to you. I’m just amazed that you can do this thing. But I’ve never felt you do it to me, Mertyn.”

“I wouldn’t do it to you, Mavin. You’re childer, like me. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“Ah. Do you know what it means, Mertyn child? It means you’re probably not shifter. It means you must be Ruler, King or Prince or one of those high-up Beguilers. But you only eight years old? A twenty-four or -five season child, and showing Talent already? I’ve never heard of that.”

“I didn’t think it was Talent. I thought it was just something I could do.”

“Well, that’s what Talent is, boychild. That’s all Talent is, something we can do. Well.” She looked at him in amazement, seeing that the world around them had become less shining, less marvelous, less peaceful. “You were doing it this morning.”

“Not to you. Just to me, to the world. To make it prettier for us. You know.”

“What I know, Mertyn, is that you’d better keep that thing you can do very quiet to yourself. Don’t use it unless there’s need. I’m worried now that those men may begin to think, there on the road, of how sweet a child you were, and thinking may lead them to more thinking, which might lead them to deciding you have a Talent. And there’s a market for any child, much more a child with Talent. I worry they may start thinking and come back for us. Me they’d hit over the head and leave for dead, but you they’d sell, I think.”

He considered this, thinking it over gravely before saying, “I don’t think so, Mavin. Truly. No one has

ever thought it was Talent. Not in all this time ...”

“All this time? How long have you been doing this thing?”

“Oh, since I was a fifteen-season child, at least. I used to do it at Assembly, to the cooks, to get sweets. They didn’t mind. And I did it to the shifters, too, and to the granders when I wanted something. And to Handbright.”

A fifteen-season child. Five years old. And already with a Talent seeming so natural that no one knew he had it. Mavin tried this thought in a dozen different ways, but it made no sense to her. Children did not have talent. That was one of the things that made them children. And yet here was Mertyn. Slowly, hesitantly, she moved them on their way. “It will still be best to use it only when we must. Elsewise you may do some unconsidered damage with it. So. Agreed?”

He nodded at her, rather wanly, and they went on their way, Mavin cautioning herself the while. “He is only a child. Because he seems to have this Talent, you will begin to think that he is more than a child, that he understands more than a child can understand. You will make demands upon him, you will expect things from him. He will make childish mistakes, and you will blame him. Don’t do it, Mavin. He is child, only child, and that is quite enough for the time being. Let him live with his thalan, Plandybast, at least for a little time. Let him not have to make people love him ...”

Shaking her head the while, impressing it upon herself, demanding that she remember. The light had gone out of the day, and she longed for it, longed to have Mertyn bring it back, but would not allow him to do it even if he would. “Child,” she said to herself yet again. “A child.” She had the feeling that she herself had never been a child, having to remind herself what she had been until the past few days. Before the Assembly she had been a child. Before she overheard the granders she had been a child. Before she had seen Handbright’s body striped with the whip, before she had known what it would be not to be a child

...

“Don’t worry, Mavin,” he whispered to her. “It’s really a good thing to have. You’ll see. I’ll only use it to help us.”

They went on toward the north for that day and most of the day following. The latter part of that day they accepted a ride on a farm wagon hauling hay from the fields along the river to the campground at Calihiggy Creek. Mavin had grown used to her boyish shape, had managed to hold it constant even while sleeping. Mertyn nagged at her from time to time. “I thought shifters couldn’t take other people shapes, Mavin. They taught us that. Handbright taught us that.”

To which she replied variously, as the mood struck her. “I think most shifters can’t,” or “It was a lie,” or “I think it’s only other real people we can’t shift into,” knowing that this last was as much a lie, at least, as any other thing he had been told.

“You need a fur cloak,” he said seriously to her. “With a beast head. Barfod had one with a great wide head on it, he said it was a monstrous creature from the north. I like pombi heads best. Let’s get you one of those.”

“Mertyn, child, I don’t want anyone to know I am shifter. I don’t want anyone to know that either one of us are anything except—just people.”

“Pawns?” he asked in a disgusted voice.

“Well, maybe not pawns. But whatever is next to pawns that would make the least problems. I don’t want anyone carrying tales about us back to Danderbat keep. I don’t want any child stealers coming after you. I don’t want any woman stealers to be taking me. So, we’re just two—whats?”

He began to think about this, laying himself back in the haywagon and staring at the sky. It was growing toward evening, and the lights of the campground were showing far ahead of them on the road. “I know,” he whispered to her at last. “You shall be a servant to a Wizard. No one wants to upset a Wizard or trifle with a Wizard’s man. I shall be the Wizard’s thalan, son to his sister. That way no one will trifle with me either.”

She considered it. It had a certain audacious simplicity which was attractive. “Which Wizard? We’d have to say which Wizard?”

“It couldn’t be a real one with a Demesne around here, or we might get caught. I heard of one. There’s one called Haggelfree who has a Demesne along the River Dourt.”

“You know some very strange things,” she said.

“There are lots of old books and maps at the keep that no one paid any attention to,” he replied. “We should have learned all about them at school. Someone must have learned about them long ago, or they wouldn’t have been there.”

“We had become decadent,” she said. “That’s what Plandybast said to someone at the last dinner. That Danderbat keep was decadent. That we hadn’t any juice anymore.”

He nodded solemnly. “So. If he’s still alive, Hagglegree, I mean, then we should be all right.”

“If he had a sister. If she had a boy. If he keeps servants, for some do not. We might be better to make up a name, Mertyn. Make one up.”

He thought for a moment, said, “The Wizard Himaggery. That’s who we are connected with.”

“And where is his Demesne?”

“Ah ... let’s see. His Demesne is down the middle river some-where, toward the southern seas. There’s lots of blank space on the maps down there. No one knows what’s there, really.” He put his hand in hers, “Shall we swear it, Mavin? Shall it be our Game?”

“Let it be our game, brother. The campground is ahead, and we will see how it sits with the people there when I buy us supper and a bed.”

“Do you have money, Mavin? I brought a little. I didn’t have much.”

“I didn’t have much either, brother boy, but I took some from the cooks’ cache before they left. It will get us to Battlefox the Bright Day—if we are careful.”

The wagon driver leaned back toward them, gesturing toward the firelights down the road. "That the place you were going, young sirs? There it is. Calihiggy Campground. I'll take the wagon no further, for I've no mind to have my hay stolen during the dark hours. I'll sell it to the campmaster come morning."

They thanked him and left him, then wandered out of the gloaming into the firelight before a half hundred pairs of eyes, both curious and incurious.

It was the first time Mavin had been anywhere outside the keep of the Danderbats where she had needed to speak, bargain, purchase, seem a traveler more widely experienced than in fact she was. She did it rather creditably, she thought, then noticed that the man to whom she spoke smiled frequently at Mertyn with a glazed expression. Shaking her head ruefully, she accepted the bedding she was offered and allowed them to be guided to a tent pitched near the western edge of the ground, near Calihiggy Creek and a distance from the privies.

"I thought I told you not to do that," she hissed.

"I had to," he said sulkily. "The man was beginning to think you were a runaway pawn from some Demesne or other. You stuttered."

"Well. I haven't practiced this."

"You've got to seem very sure of yourself," he said. "If you seem very sure of yourself, everyone believes you. If you stutter or worry, then everyone else begins to stutter and worry inside their heads."

"I thought you had Ruler Talent, not Demon Talent to go reading what's in people's heads."

"It isn't like that. I can just feel it is all. Anyhow, it didn't hurt anything. Now you've got to practice walking as though you knew just where you were going, and when you talk, do it slowly. As though you didn't care whether you talked or not. And don't smile, until they do. I'm tired. What did you get us to eat?"

“I got hot meat pies, three of them, and some fruit. You can have thrilps or rainhat berries.”

He had both, and two of the pies. Mavin contented herself with one. They weren't bad. Evidently some family from a little village along the road brought a wagonload of them to the camp every day or so, and the campmaster heated them in his own oven. When they had done, they wandered a bit through the camp, trying to identify all the Gamesmen they saw, and then went back to their tent.

“No one is looking for us,” Mavin said. “No one at all. They've all gone back to Danderbat keep. And likely we will not see Handbright again until we come to Battlefox. Well, it's less adventurous than I'd thought.”

“It's adventurous enough,” the child responded, voice half dazed with sleep. “Enough. Lie down, Mavin.”

She sat down, then lay down, then pulled the blankets up to her chin. They were only three days away from the place she had lived all her life, and already the memory of it was beginning to dim and fade. She was no longer very angry, she realized in a kind of panic. The anger had fueled her all this way, and now it was dwindled, lost somewhere in the leagues they had traveled. Something else would have to take its place.

She thought about this, but not long before the dark crawled into her head and made everything quiet there.

When morning came, she went out into it, telling herself what Mertyn had told her the night before. She watched how the men of the camp walked, and walked as they did, watched their faces as they talked and made her face take the same expression. She went first to the campmaster to ask whether he knew of a wagon going to Pfarb Durim, following his laconic directions to a large encampment among the trees in the river bottom. There she confronted a dozen faces neither hostile nor welcoming and had to take tight control in order that her voice not tremble.

“I greet you, Gamesmen,” she began, safely enough, for there were a good many Gamesdresses in the group. “My young charge and I travel toward Pfarb Durim. Our mounts were lost in a storm in the mountains through which we have come, and we seek transport and company for the remaining way.”

There was among the group a gray-headed one, still strong and virile-looking, but with something sad

and questioning about his face. He looked up from his plate—for they were all occupied with breakfast—and said, “As do we all, young man. You have not told us who you are?” He set his plate down beside him, the motion leading Mavin’s eyes to the spot, and she saw a Seer’s gauze mask lying there, the moth wings painted upon it bright in the morning light.

“Sir Seer.” She bowed. “I am servant of one Wizard, Himaggery of the Wetlands and I have in my care thalan to the Wizard, the child Mertyn.”

“So. Would you have us escort you against future favors from your Wizardry master? Can you bargain on his behalf?” This was shrewdly said, as though he tested her, but Mavin was equal to this.

“Indeed no, sir. He would have me in ... have my head off me if I pretended such a thing. I ask only such assistance as my master’s purse will bear, such part of it as he entrusts to me.” She felt a small hand creep into her own, and realized that Mertyn had come up beside her. A quick glance showed that he was simply standing there, very quietly, with a trusting expression on his face.

“Ah.” The Seer seemed to think this over. He had a knotty face, a strong face, but with a kind of strangeness in it as though it were hard for him to decide what expression that face would wear. His hair was a little long, thrust back over his ears in white wings, and he had laid the cloak of the Seer aside to sit in his shirt and vest. The others around the fire watched him, made no effort to offer any suggestion. These were mostly young men, no more than nineteen or twenty, with a few among them obviously servants. The horses at the picket line were blanketed in crimson and black, obviously the colors of some high Demesne around which Gamesmen gathered. At last one of the young men walked over to them to stand an arm’s-length from Mavin and look her over from toe to head, his own head cocked and his expression curious and friendly.

“Windlow, our teacher, does not make up his mind in any sudden way. You still have not told him who you are—your name.”

“His name is Mavin,” said Mertyn in his most childlike voice. “He is very nice, and you would like him very much.”

“My name is Mavin,” she agreed, bowing, and pinching Mertyn’s arm a good tweak as she did so. “A harmless person, offering no Game.” She glared at Mertyn covertly.

The man who had been named Windlow spoke again from the fire. “There is always Game, youngster. The very bunwits play, and the flichhawks in the air. There is no owl without his game, nor any fustigar. You cannot live and offer no game.”

“He means ...” began Mertyn.

“I meant,” she said firmly, “that I seek only transport, sirs. Nothing more.”

“Surely we can accommodate them, Windlow?” the young man said. “After all, we’re going there. And we have extra horses. And neither of them weighs enough for a horse to notice, even if we had to carry them double.”

“Oh, ah,” said Windlow. “It isn’t the horses, Twizzledale. It’s the vision. Concerning these—this. I had it the moment they walked into view. Curious. It seems to have nothing at all to do with anything happening soon, or even for quite a while. And it wasn’t this one at all”—he pointed to Mavin—“but what seemed to be his sister. Looked very much like his sister. And this child grown up and teaching school somewhere. Most unlikely. But you were in it, too, Twizzledale, and you didn’t seem unhappy about it, so one can only hope it is for the best.”

The young man laughed and turned back to offer his hand, which Mavin took in her own, grasping it with as manish a pressure as she could, so that he winced and shook his own in pretended pain. “So. Then it is settled. You will come with us the day or two to Pfarb Durim. I am Fon Twizzledale, like to be, so they tell me, Wizardly in persuasion. Yon is Prince Valdon Duymit, thalan of High King Prionde of the High Demesne. Our teacher, Seer Windlow, you have met. These are our people, all as kindly in intent as you yourself claim to be. Welcome, and will you join us for breakfast?”

Mertyn let his childish treble soar in enthusiasm. “Oh, yes sirs. I am very tired of smoky meat.” And more quietly to Fon Twizzledale, “Did he truly have a vision about us?”

“He truly did,” the young man asserted, “if he said he did. I have never known Windlow to say anything which is not strictly and literally true.”

“I thank you for your kindness,” Mavin interjected, “but you have not yet told me what price you place upon your company.”

Windlow shook his gray head impatiently, as though the idea were one which did not matter and distracted him from some other idea which did matter. "Oh, come along, come along. There is no payment necessary. The Fon is quite right. We have extra mounts, and neither of you appears to be a glutton. Have you eaten? Did they say they had eaten?" he appealed to Prince Valdon, saturnine in his dress of red and black.

That one's mouth twisted in a prideful sneer of distaste. "The child seems ready to eat, Gamesmaster. Children usually are, if I remember rightly."

"Yes, please," said Mertyn, casting his grave smile at Valdon's face, on his best behavior, edging away from Mavin's clutching fingers toward the Seer. "I would like some of whatever you are having. It smells very good."

The Seer's face lightened, an expression of surprising sweetness which drove away the slightly peevish expression of concentration he had worn since they had walked into the camp. Mavin thought, "He was having a vision, but he couldn't quite get it, and it was like a dream he was fishing for. Now it is gone." In which she was quite correct, for Windlow had had a vivid flash of Seeing somehow wrapped around the two of them, but it had eluded him like a slippery fish in the stream of his thoughts. Now it was gone, and he turned from it almost in relief. Too often the Seeings were of future terror and pain.

"Well, come fill a bowl, then," he said to Mertyn. "And tell your sister—no. No. How stupid of me. Tell your ... cicerone to join us, too." He turned to Mavin. "Forgive me, young sir. Sometimes vision and reality confuse themselves and I am not certain what I have seen and am seeing. I seemed to see the boy's sister. ..."

Mavin bowed slightly, face carefully calm. Across the fire she could see Twizzledale's face fixed on her own, an expression of bemusement there, of thoughtful calculation. "No forgiveness necessary," she said. "The boy's sister is far from here." And that, she thought, is very true. She accepted a bowl of the food. It was indeed very savory smelling.

"My good servant, Jonathan Went, that scowling old fellow over there by the wagon, saves all the bones from the bunwits whenever we have a feast. I'm talking about you, Jonathan! Well, he saves the bones and cooks them up into a marvelous broth with onions and lovely little bulblets from the tulecky plant and bits of this and that. Then he uses the broth to cook our morning gram, and sometimes he puts eggs and bits of zeller bacon into it as well. Remarkable. Then we are all very complimentary and cheerful, and he goes over by the wagon and pretends he does not hear us. Modest fellow. The best cook between here and the High Demesne. King Prionde himself made the fellow an offer, but he would not leave me and

the King was kind enough not to press the matter. Ah. Good, isn't it?"

"Very," gasped Mertyn, his mouth full.

"It is delicious," agreed Mavin. The grain was tender, rich with broth and bunwit fat, and she could taste wood mushrooms in it as well. She sighed, for the moment heavily content. Across the fire Fon Twizzledale stared at her, his head cocked to one side. Farther away the proud Prince sat looking toward her but across her shoulder as though she did not exist, his small crown glittering in the early sun. She found herself liking the one, wary of the other. "Careful," she warned herself. "There was a time you liked old Graywing, too."

The meal was soon done. In her role of servant, Mavin moved to help those who were packing the wagons and loading the pack animals. There were indeed many extra mounts, and she found herself atop one of them with no very clear idea what to do next. Being a horse and riding a horse were two different things, but she kept her face impassive and paid careful attention to those around her. With Mertyn on the pad before her she clucked to the horse as others around her were doing, and it moved off after them, head nodding in time to its steps in an appearance of bored colloquy. Mertyn leaned comfortably against her and whispered, "You won't need to do anything, Mavin. This horse will follow that one's tail. I heard some of the visitors talking at Assembly time, too. About riding horses, I mean. They say you're supposed to hold on with your legs. Can you hold on with your legs?"

"Brother mine," she whispered in return, "remember that I am the well schooled servant—upper servant—of a Wizard. Of course I can ride a horse. Didn't you tell me I can do anything I think I can?"

He giggled, then lapsed into silence, rolling his head from side to side on her chest to see the country they were traveling through.

Calihiggy Creek was a sizeable flow, emptying into the River Haws at the conjunction of two valleys, the narrow north-south one of the Haws, the wide, desolate east-west one of the Creek. Here the waters had cut deep ravines into the flat valley bottom so that the water flowed deep below the surface of the soil. What plants grew there were dry and dusty looking, more suited to a desert than a river valley, though at the edges of the cliffs there were scattered groves of dark trees. They clattered briefly over a long wooden bridge, high above the Haws.

"Why is it so high up?" Mertyn wanted to know.

The Fbn had ridden alongside and answered him promptly. "Are they not built so high in your country? Here it is built high to escape the spring rains which come in flood down those barren gullies. The water is so low now that we might have waded over, as it always is at the turn of the seasons, but when the spring rains come it will be a muddy flood once more. I have seen it almost at the floor of such bridges after the rains." He adjusted the flowing sleeve of his Wizardly robe, burnishing the embroidered stars at the cuff with a quick rub and breath from his lips.

Mertyn, remembering that he was supposed to be thalan of a Wizard of the Wetlands, very sensibly shut his mouth and merely smiled his understanding.

"Why do you go to Pfarb Durim?" the Fon went on. "Does the Wizard travel there?"

Mavin had been prepared for this question. "We are to await further instructions in Pfarb Durim. Young Mertyn has been visiting his mother."

"Ah," said the Fon. Mavin had the distinct impression that he did not believe her. "A very small entourage for a Wizard's thalan. If the boy were my thalan, I would not send him so little accompanied."

"Mavin is quite enough," said Mertyn in a firm voice. "It isn't nice for you to say he isn't. Besides, what is a Fon, anyhow?"

"Sorry," laughed Twizzledale. "I withdraw my comment, young sir. As for Fon, it is only a word used in my southernish Demesne for eldest-important-offspring. It means I will inherit certain treasures and lands held by my family and learn if I can hold them in my turn. Good travel to us all." And with that he was off at top speed, raising the rosy dust in a great cloud as he sped past the other riders and dwindled away on the northern road between the two lines of cliffs, Prince Valdun in pursuit.

Now the Seer Windlow was riding beside them, his gauze mask draped on the saddle before him, casually picking his teeth with a bit of wood. "A bit along the road here," he remarked, "where the woods begin to thicken once again, we will need to climb the cliffs. If we stay on this road along the valley it will take us to the place called Poffle, below Pfarb Durim, and it is my understanding that one would do well to avoid the place."

"Why is that, sir?" Mavin asked politely.

“Ah, well, the place has a bad name. Said to be a den of Ghouls. Old Blourbast rules there, and he is not a Gamesman others speak of with friendship.”

“Is that the place called Hell’s Maw?” piped Mertyn. “I saw it on a map.”

“Shhhh, my boy. Not a name which is generally spoken aloud. However, yes. You’re right. People speak of Poffle, but they mean Hell’s Maw. At any rate, it will not matter. We will not come near the place except to look down on it from the walls of Pfarb Durim, for it lies in the chasm below those walls, shut away from light and sun as it properly should be if all that is said of it is even half true.

“I heard you say to Twizzledale you will be met in the city. I think that is well. Travel is safer in larger numbers. Not that you are not fully competent, I’m sure. Merely that ... well, you are young.” He smiled to take the sting from what he said. “Forgive my mentioning it. If you are like most young men, you hate having it mentioned.”

Mavin could not help laughing. “I hate having it mentioned. Yes. Perhaps ...” She paused a moment before going on, “it is because young people are not that sure they are competent.”

“There is always that,” agreed the Seer. “But that feeling does not necessarily diminish with age. It is merely challenged less frequently. When one has over sixty years, as I do, then the world assumes we would not have survived without competence. With someone your age, it could always be sheer luck.” He patted Mavin’s arm and nodded at her. Mavin soberly thought it over. Next time she shifted, it would be into something more bulky and older-looking. Why tempt fate?

“May I ask why your group travels to Pfarb Durim, Sir Seer? Do I understand you are Gamesmaster to the young men in your party?”

“Ah, well yes, in a manner of speaking. At the moment I am sworn to the High King, Prionde, he of the High Demesne away south in the mountains near the high lakes of Tarnoch. Prince Valdun Duymit is son of Valearn Duymit, full sister to the King, therefore thalan to the King. The boy riding off there to the left is his full brother, Boldery Duymit. We call him Boldery the Brash, for his thirty seasons have been full of troubles as a cage of thirlpats. You have met the Fon, offspring of some great Demesne away south where I have never traveled though I would much like to go. He says he is a Wizard, and one does not ask too many questions of Wizards, as you know. I am inclined to believe much of what he says although

he is given to flowery passages and glittering nothings. A good boy, though. I like him.

“There are two other young men awaiting our group in Pfarb Durim, thalani of Demesnes to the north and west high in the Shadowmarches, and a youngster named Huld whose schooling has been arranged through negotiators with the King. I know nothing about him save that he shows early signs of becoming a Demon. Well, when we have all the students there, we will swing down through Betand—Betand? Yes. That is where the Strange Monuments are. You know of the Monuments? Ah. One of the wonders, so it is said, of the world. No one knows who built them or what their purpose is. Some hint that they were not built by men at all. Well, then we go on to the south picking up another student in Vestertown and then up into the mountains to the High Demesne to my newly built school. A small school. Only a dozen young men and a few boys. The young men have mostly shown Talent already, so much of the confusion and exasperation of teaching is eliminated thereby. I remember ... seem to remember my own schooldays. What a time, wondering whether there would be any Talent at all, wondering whether it might be some horrible kind one would rather not have, some Ghoulishness or other ... Though, come to think of it, I have never known one who would be repelled by Ghoulishness to receive that Talent. It is almost as if our Talents prepare us for their coming. Well, all that is of no import. It will be a small school, as I said, mostly for the benefit of the King’s thalani with a few others to keep them company. This trip to Pfarb Durim is likely one of the last few I will make.”

All of this was explained in a slow, ruminative fashion which Mavin could hear with half her attention while her busy mind attended to the road and the river and the canyon at either side. Valdón and Twizzledale were still far ahead, Boldery the Brash riding back from time to time to inspect the face of the sleeping Mertyn and inquire whether they might ride and play together, at which Windlow shook his gray head and warned him away. “Let the boy sleep, Boldery. Time enough for your games when he wakes. Likely he slept little enough last night. Campground beds are hard as stone.” Then, to Mavin, “It would probably do your charge good to have some boyish company, even of such mischievous kind as this. I have no doubt they will be deep into trouble before supper.” And he nodded to himself as if in considerable satisfaction at this prediction.

The canyon walls, which had been close upon their right, began to retreat into the east; they had come to a widening of the river bottom, and fields began to appear once more between the river and the cliffs to the east of the river even as the cliffs drew closer to the river on the west. Boldery came riding back toward them in a cloud of pink, his face and short cloak liberally dusted, only his eyes shining at them in the rosy fog. “The trail to the top is only a little way on. Valdón says we need not take it. There is a road between Poffle and Pfarb Durim we can pick up beneath the walls of the city ...”

“No,” Windlow said firmly. “We do not wish to approach ... Poffle ... so closely. We have allowed time for the extra leagues, and we are not short of either energy or provisions.”

“But Valdón says ...”

“I am Gamesmaster here, Boldery. We know that Valdon seeks adventure, always, believing that the name of the High King is enough to protect him. It may not always be so. The Ghoul Blourbast holds ... Poffle. He may care little for the High King “

“Everyone fears the name of the High King,” the boy asserted, flushed skin showing through the pink dust.

“Not everyone, lad.” Windlow patted him gently. “I mean no disrespect to your thalan to say so. You have not been so far from the High Demesne before or you would know. If you think I am telling you fibs, then go ask Twizzledale. He will tell you aright, for he has traveled far enough to know that what I say is the truth.”

“Valdon says he’s a pawnish churl, no Wizard at all.”

“If Valdon said that, then Valdon was either silly or drunk.” Windlow’s voice held anger, and the boy flushed again as he turned away.

“He was drunk, Gamesmaster. He would be angry I told you. Please don’t tell him.”

“I won’t mention it. You might remember it, however. It is never wise to drink so much that you say things others remember to your discredit. Now—ride on back to the young Gamesmen and tell them we take the cliff trail.”

Mavin had been somewhat embarrassed by this interchange, not knowing where to look, whether to seem interested or not to notice, though it would have been impossible not to hear. Windlow shook his head as the boy rode away. “Do not attach too much importance to that, Mavin. The boy worships his older brother, as is often the case. The brother is not worthy of such worship, as is often the case. Valdon is prideful. Over prideful. It would have been better had he not known since childhood that he would be a Prince.”

“Known since childhood?” She was startled. “How could anyone know in childhood what Talent they would manifest later? Why even in ... the places I have been, they have not ...” Her voice trailed away into betraying silence. She had almost spoken of Danderbat keep.

“I will tell you,” he said, seeming not to notice her confusion. “Prionde, when he was no older than Valdon is now, took his own full sister to wife, she being Queen in her own right and talent. My studies of history lead me to believe that such breeding is often unwise. It is true that traits—perhaps Talents—are intensified by such breeding. It is also true that dangerous and deadly tendencies are also intensified. There is a certain rashness in Prionde and in his sister-wife, Valearn, as well. It is amplified, greatly, in both Valdon and Boldery. I fear for them sometimes.”

“And so, the King was sure his children—his thalani would have the Talent of Ruling, Beguilement?” Within her arms she felt Mertyn stir and knew that he had heard the conversation. “He knew it when they were children and let them know it?”

“He was so sure that if they had not, I think he would have sent them away and not have seen them ever again.”

Mavin gulped, possessed by a frantic curiosity which she did not attempt to find reason for. “What did she think about it. Her. His sister?”

“She has not spoken of it in the High Demesne. She seemed to like her life well enough. However, she had complained of illness since bearing Boldery, and the Healers have been unable to cure her. Which makes me believe it is not her body which ails her.” He fell silent, biting his lip, then adopted a more casual tone. “Well, what a conversation to be holding with a casual acquaintance. I would appreciate it if you did not repeat what I have said. I am a loquacious old man, and on occasion I forget myself.”

Mavin nodded her agreement, feeling Mertyn tense against her, then relax. A shout from close ahead drew their eyes forward, and there at the beginning of the cliff trail Twizzledale waited for them. One of the wagons had already turned behind him and was lurching upward on the narrow way.

“We cannot get by the wagon,” he called. “The way is too narrow. Shall we have tea to give them time to get to the top?” His laughing eyes met Mavin’s. She flushed and looked away, though she did not know why.

From between her arms Mertyn spoke calmly, his shrill voice carrying over the sound of hooves and wheels. “Thank you, Wizard, sir. I am very thirsty. Besides, I have to get off this horse.”

And as Mavin followed him to the ground she thought that she, too, had to get off the horse. The world seemed to move beneath her feet, and she was hard put to it to seem balanced and secure upon her legs. Still, she managed a manly smile of thanks for Twizzledale's hand and a cheerful offer to collect some wood along the slope to make them a fire. Once away from them all, she sighed deeply and let her face sag into its own girlish shape, just for a moment, just to know who and what she was. This role-playing demanded more of her than she had guessed it might, and the strain of it tugged at her muscles, tugged at the shifter net within her, making concentration difficult. She breathed deeply, heard Mertyn call, "Mavin? Where are you?" and managed to find both an armload of wood and a feeling of calm before she walked back toward the group, waving to the child with one hand.

CHAPTER FIVE

They came to the city of Pfarb Durim at noon of the day following, for they had lingered on the road to investigate the Strange Monuments which the Seer Windlow had longed to see. The wagons had taken some time to get up the narrow path, and Valdon had been throwing unpleasant glances at the Seer long before the way was clear, sprinkling his displeasure with remarks made just loudly enough to be heard concerning the width and smoothness of the road along the valley floor. Perhaps Windlow did not hear them, but at the least he gave no evidence of hearing the sneering remarks, and when the trail to the highlands was clear, they made their way upward in some appearance of amity. The first of the Monuments stood over the road within spitting distance as they came over the lip of the cliffs, and from that time on the journey was one of continual expostulation and wonder.

"I had no idea they were this close to Pfarb Durim," marveled Windlow. "I had always thought they were further south, nearer Betand. Though, as I think of it, some of the authorities—if any are to be considered authorities on such subjects as this—have said that these Monuments have a strange tendency to wander, seeming first nearer and then farther away."

"Oh, come, Gamesmaster." Twizzledale laughed. "You do not expect us to believe that. The things are ten man-heights above the road, anchored on pedestals which appear to be part of the mountain we ride upon. Surely you don't take such stories seriously."

The older man shrugged, eyebrows high to indicate his own wonder at the idea. "I repeat only what I have read, Gamesman. At certain seasons, these arches glow. All authors agree to that. At certain seasons, those who live hereabouts are in agreement that it is wise to avoid this road. Since that season coincides with the time of storms, during which wise persons avoid travel in any case, perhaps no one has seriously tested the notion that the arches are dangerous then. Or, if not dangerous, something else. Something stranger, perhaps."

Mavin was following along behind, marveling as much as the two riding ahead, but less vocal about it. "Did you know these things were here?" she whispered to Mertyn.

"I read about them," he answered. "But the book didn't say much. Just that no one knows who built them or why. I can't even figure out how anyone could have put them here."

Mavin agreed. The arches might have been made of green stone, or metal, though they seemed more crystalline than metallic, giving an impression of translucence without actually letting any light through. Two man-heights broad at the base, they narrowed as they rose, dwindling to a knife's edge straight above the road. Where the shadow of the arches lay upon the way, the horses hopped and skipped like zeller kids, sidling across the shadow as though it formed some mazy barrier which only they could see and only such frolicking progress could penetrate. Each transit of the shadow made Mavin think she heard twanging chords of music, rapidly blending, echoing briefly on her skin when they had come through, and—most interesting she thought—each passage of shadow seemed to take time totally out of keeping with the actual width of the shadow on the road.

"Remarkable," breathed Windlow, trying to stay on his jiggling horse. "I hear music. Quite remarkable."

"Shadowpeople," breathed Mertyn to Mavin. "Shadowpeople are supposed to have all kinds of musical magic, Mavin. Could the shadowpeople have built these?"

"Shadowpeople aren't builders, are they? I thought they just sang in the wilderness and made music and ate a few travelers now and then."

"I don't think so. I don't think they eat travelers, I mean. They trick people. Lead them over cliffs, or into bogs, but only if the people are doing something bad to them."

"Children's tales, brother boy."

"Maybe. There's some truth in children's tales, though, or they wouldn't go on being told. You're right, though. No children's tale I ever heard mentioned the shadowpeople building anything. Just the same, whenever the horse dances through one of those shadows, I think of shadowpeople."

“Wise beyond your years, young one,” said Windlow, coming up from behind where he had stopped yet again to inspect one of the Monuments. “I, too, think of shadowpeople. As a Seer, I have learned thinking of some oddity is often prelude to other oddity following. It is tempting to wonder what actually does happen here in the season of storms.”

“I’d like to know where the road goes,” said Mavin.

“Why, it goes to Pfarb Durim.”

“No, I mean the other end.”

“To Betand?”

“Betand is just a human city. If the Monuments were built on a road, then it must have been important where the road went. It couldn’t have gone to a human city, because the human city wasn’t there. So it must have gone somewhere else.” She fell silent, noting that Windlow had fixed her with a somehow calculating eye, as though she had surprised him. Before he could reply, however, a cry came from before them.

“Pfarb Durim!” A cloud of dust bustled toward them, full of hoof clatter. It was Boldery. “Pfarb Durim is just down the hill.”

They jiggled through the last of the arches to see the city spread before them, its high walls bulking hugely in the center of a saucerlike depression resulting from some long ago subsidence of the cliffs edge. Around the rim of this saucer the road ran, making a wide circle to the east before turning north once more. To their left they could see a narrow road winding up from the valley, from Poffle, and from the circling road several broad avenues ran downward to the city which gulped them in through strangely shaped gates. These gates and the many doors made tall keyholes of black against the lighter stone. Vast iron braziers stood on the wall at each corner, twisted iron baskets hung before the gates, all stuffed full of grease-soaked wood which would be lit at nightfall to send a smoky pillar hovering over the place. The smell of burned fat reached them first, then the smell of the markets outside the gates, spices and fish, raw hides and incense, the stench of commerce carrying a wild babble of voices which rose and fell as the sound of moving water.

“Pfarb Durim,” said Windlow. “City of legends. Here, so it is said, when our forefathers came to this place a thousand years ago, they found the city already built by other than we, by not-men, perhaps by those who built the arches.”

“It smells very human to me,” said Mertyn, wrinkling his nose.

“It has been occupied by humans for some time,” he replied.

They led their animals through the market, fascinated to see so many things being bought and sold, hearing the cries of the merchants as they would have heard strange birds in a forest, with as little understanding. The gate was guarded by several red-nosed men who looked them over casually, inquired whence they had come, and seemed inclined to accept Mavin and Mertyn as part of Windlow’s group without any special inquisition as to their origins. Once inside the walls, Mavin handed the reins of her horse to Twizzledale, who was riding a bit behind the others, and bowed to him from the street.

“We appreciate your kindness, Gamesman. Now we must leave you with our thanks.”

“Where are you meeting your ... whoever?” he asked, looking more closely at her than she found comfortable. “You’re welcome to stay with us until you are met.” Giving the lie to this, Prince Valdon shouted from the street corner.

“Leave the pawnstuff, Wizard! There’s wine waiting!”

Twizzledale flushed, but did not move. Mavin said, “Thank you again, Gamesman. But we will not inflict ourselves upon you further. I must obey the instructions I was given.” She smiled, more warmly than she had intended, backed away from him, and set out around the corner, Mertyn’s hand clutched firmly in her own. There she took refuge in a deep doorway while she tried to decide where to go next.

“Brother child, we need some cheap lodging to roost in while we find the best road to the Shadowmarches and Battlefox.”

“If you don’t want to run into the Seer and his students, we’d better see where they go,” said Mertyn, leaning around the corner, his voice betraying the sadness he felt. He had been looking forward to a few

more hours with Boldery in pursuit of some form of exciting mischief. "It would have been nice to ..."

"Yes, it would have been nice to. But I didn't dare. That Twizzledale kept looking at me as though he could see through to my smalls. I don't think I made a convincing man. There's something more to it than shape, and he was suspicious of something the whole time. I could smell it."

"But he liked you."

"That might have been the trouble," she answered. "If he'd despised me, as Prince Valdon does, he would not have looked at me so closely."

The boy was peering around the corner still, then turned to her, sighing. "They've gone into a big inn right at the wall. I guess we should go on into the city. Should we ask someone?"

"We should," she agreed, and set about doing so. Within a few moments she had the names of three cheap lodging houses, all within a short distance of one another, as well as three sets of instructions how to reach them. They set off in a hopeful frame of mind which changed to a kind of dismay as they left the open ways near the gate and began to wend down damp alleys, shadowed by protruding stories in the buildings to either side and threatened by a constant shower of debris from the windows and roofs. "Gamelords, what a warren," she said. "I had no idea."

As they made a last turn, Mertyn ran full into a staggering man who gurgled ominously, supporting himself against the wall. Mertyn reached out to catch him, then drew back, fastidiously wiping his face where the man had drooled on him. "Play ... play ..." the man gasped, his eyes protruding with the effort. "Play ... ch'owt ..." And then he crumpled onto the stones, fingers scrabbling weakly at the slimy cobbles.

"Come on!" ordered Mavin. "We can't help him, but we can send help." And they ran on, coming into a wider area in which the lodging houses they had sought all stood, one bearing a sign THE BALD BADGER near at hand.

The door jangled as they opened it, and a voice screamed at them from some other room. "Wait! Don't move, now, just wait and I'll get to ya. A minute. That's all. I swear, only a minute, and I'll get to ya. Are you there?"

“We’re here,” Mavin replied in a doubtful voice.

“A minute. I’ll get to ya. Everybody’s so impatient. Run, run. I’ll get to ya.” There was no sign of the person getting to them immediately. They looked at one another, then turned as a soft footfall whispered on the stairs behind them.

“Sirs,” said a gray voice. “You desire lodging?”

“Just a minute,” screamed the other voice. “Run, run.”

“A thrilpat,” exclaimed the colorless woman who owned the gray voice. “Over trained. A vocabulary of over twenty phrases, none of which are in the least useful. I’d sell it, except it has the mange.”

“Are you there?” screamed the voice hysterically. “Everyone is so impatient.”

“We need a room,” said Mertyn. “And there’s a man down the alley who fell down. I think he’s sick.”

The gray woman smoothed her tightly knotted hair, slick upon her skull as paint. “A room I can provide. Assistance for men who fall ill in alleys is outside my competence, young sir. When I have shown you what we have—little enough, but cheap. Lords, yes, cheap is the name of the house—when I have shown you, I’ll get the kitchen girl to run tell the watch about the sick man. Will that satisfy your sense of the appropriate? The honorable? The kindly? This way. Watch the step, second from the top. It wants nailing down.”

They followed through half darkness until a door opened, flood-ing the corridor with light. “Step in. You’ll need to share the bed, there’s only one, but it’s fresh straw and linens washed only last week.” The slant-roofed room peaked over the open window which let in the turmoil of the street. The bed was low, wide, and the place smelled clean.

“How much?” asked Mavin, in her bargaining voice.

“Coin or trade? Three minimunt in coin. If you were a Healer, I’d give it to you for a bit of work. You’re not, though, nor anything else useful to me at the moment. Well, then, three minimunt. With a bit of supper thrown in. Nothing fancy, a cup of this and that and some beer. By the by, my name is Pantiquod Palmfast. They call me Panty. Nothing to do with intimate trousering, young sir, so do not giggle in that unfortunate way. No, it has to do with breath, with breathing, with climbing these ghastly flights of stairs. Well, enough. Three minimunt, is it?” She smiled, a smile as gray as her voice, and went away, closing the door behind her. Mertyn was already on the bed.

“Will you remind her about the sick man, Mavin. I think she’ll probably forget it.”

“I think you’d better not worry about it, brother child. I’ve a feeling there are more unfortunates in Pfarb Durim than you could possibly give worrying time to. Still, I’ll remind her, for what good it may do. Next thing is to see where we might get some maps, don’t you think?”

“Shadowpeople, too,” he said drowsily, burrowing into the bed. “I’ll pull the latchstring in behind you and take a nap.”

“It isn’t like you to sleep in the bright day, child.”

“Well, Boldery was telling stories last night, about ghost pieces. Boldery tells good stories, but I didn’t get much sleep.”

“All right then,” she agreed. “But I’ll hammer on the door when I come back, so be ready. And you’re not to go out by yourself, even if I’m late.” She did not leave the door until she saw the end of the latchstring slide through the hole, then she went down the way they had come, stopping for a moment to speak to the gray woman who emerged, like a phantom out of smoke, at the bottom of the stairs.

“Yes, I’ve sent the girl to tell the watch, young sir. Not that it will do much good. They’ll send a wagon after him, sooner or later, and it will take him to the infirmary of the Healers—though with all the Healers gone, who knows what good that will do.”

“Healers gone? Why?”

She put on a mysterious face. “There is talk in the marketplace of a dispute between the Healers and a certain inhabitant of ... Poffle. You know of Poffle?”

“I’ve heard of it,” she admitted.

“Ah. Well, Healers were summoned there from Pfarb Durim. Evidently they did not go or would not heal, it is uncertain which. Then others were sought and brought—some say involuntarily, which is a mistake in dealing with Healers—and something unfortunate happened, so it is alleged, which caused all the Healers to leave Pfarb Durim and set a ban on the city.”

“But if the dispute is with Poffle, why set a ban on this city?”

“The connection is always assumed, young sir. The place below is somewise dependent upon Pfarb Durim. Or, other end up, possibly. Whatever. May I offer you any help or direction?” she added, looking curiously at Mavin’s cloak. And, upon Mavin’s telling her that she needed a mapmaker or guide or geographer or any combination of them, the lodging keeper gave her directions to Chart Street.

It was almost dusk when she returned, the lights of the city were being lit and the great firebaskets upon the walls had been set ablaze. In the red, smoky glare, ordinary citizens began to assume the guise of devils. Every face seemed either frightened or menacing or closed around some ominous secret. Laughing at herself for these fantasies, Mavin nonetheless hurried to return to the lodging house, thinking of Mertyn and dinner with about equal intensity. She had purchased half a dozen cheap maps of the Shadowmarches, from different chartmakers, on the theory that the features common to all might be assumed—only might be assumed—to indicate a close approximation to reality. On the other hand, she told herself, it might not be wise to discount the odd, dangerous feature shown on only one. That one might have been the result of an exploration while the others were only popular fiction or speculation.

She knocked at the door of their room for a long time before Mertyn dragged it open. He stood peering at her blearily, eyes and face swollen and red. She touched his forehead and cheeks and felt a feverish heat. He seemed unable to focus on her.

“Brother child, what’s the matter with you?”

“I feel—all sort of sick,” he said. “Everything keeps fading.”

“Have you been asleep since I left?”

“I slept a long time,” he said, staggering back toward the bed. “Then I woke up feeling funny, and it comes and goes.”

“Stay here,” she instructed him, though he showed no inclination to go anywhere. “I’ll get you some broth from the kitchen and see where the nearest Healers are to be found.”

“Danderbats don’t seek Healing ...” he murmured.

“Battlefoxes do,” she said grimly, remembering her conversation with her thalan. As she went down the stairs, however, she remembered a more recent conversation, the one with Pantiquod. The woman came out of her hidey hole as though summoned.

“You’ll be wanting supper, young sirs,” she began.

“I’ll be wanting some broth for Mertyn,” Mavin cut her off. “He’s sick. Did you tell me true, earlier, when you said there were no Healers in Pfarb Durim?”

“According to the tittle-tattle of the marketplace, there is not one Healer left in Pfarb Durim. Healers are clanny, young sir, and if one of them was injured in Poffle, why—I suppose none would come near us after that. ‘Who injures a Healer goes without Healing.’ Isn’t that the old saw? Well, perhaps not. Maybe it’s only something I thought I had heard somewhere.”

“But the end of all this is what you said earlier. No Healers in Pfarb Durim. Where would the closest ones be, then?”

The gray-faced woman nodded in mixed sympathy and satisfaction. “He’s truly ill, then. I thought that might be coming. We seem to have ghoul-plague in the city. So rumor hath.”

“Ghoul-plague? I have never heard of it.”

“I thought of it when the boy spoke of the sick man in the alley. I was almost certain of it when the wagon came suspiciously soon. Plague has been muttered of for days. They say it began in Poffle. The Healers were summoned and would not—some say could not—heal. An attempt was made to force them. Now the plague has come to Pfarb Durim, and the Healers are gone.” Then, seeing the horror on Mavin’s face, she relented. “Let us not be so quick. Come, I’ll get you some broth. Perhaps he is only weary from his journey.”

But when they returned to the room, Mavin could not get Mertyn’s attention at all. He was in some deep well of delirium from which she could not arouse him.

“It’s too quick,” complained Mavin. “We only arrived today.”

“The disease is sudden in those it takes,” said Pantiquod from where she hovered in the doorway, not coming any closer than she needed to see the boy’s face. “And he said he touched the man in the alley.”

“Do they recover?” Mavin whispered. “Does it kill many?”

“Some recover,” Pantiquod said. “Most die. It is said that the shadowpeople can cure it, which is like saying a flask of sun will gild thrilps. First one has to fill one’s flask.” The woman left her, turning in the doorway to say, “Do not try to move him. Sometimes, so I have heard, persons ill with ghoul-plague are transported, perhaps in search of a Healer, or some more salubrious air. If they are moved, they invariably die. So I am told. Do not move him. In any case, you could not. The gates will soon be locked against any leaving.” And the door swung shut behind her, leaving an impression upon its surface as though she stood there still, dim and smokelike, inhabiting the lodging house like mist, a smile almost of satisfaction upon her face.

It did no good to feed Mertyn the broth. It ran out of his mouth. She could not get him to swallow. She sat with him cradled against her, terrified and helpless, not knowing what to do next. When she began to pull herself together, it was fully dark outside.

She did not know whether to believe the woman or not, but for the time being she would not attempt to move Mertyn. He was hot, unconscious, but he breathed steadily and when she put her ear to his chest, his heart thudded away evenly. So. She covered him warmly, set herself frantically to make some sensible plan.

First she must determine whether what the woman said was true. She left the room, wedging the door shut behind her. At the foot of the stairs, she looked inside Pantiquod's hidey hole. It was empty, more than merely empty. It had an air of vacancy about it. Suddenly suspicious, she found her way to the rear of the place. The kitchen was empty also, and the little area way opening from it. She went back up the stairs, opening each room she came to. Empty. So. If there had been plague rumored for the past days, then those who heard the rumor would have left the city. The woman herself? Had she stayed? Or did she have some secret way out?

No matter where she might be, Mertyn and Mavin were alone in the place now, and the street outside was quieter than it had been since she had entered the city. She opened the heavy door onto the street. It creaked, and the wall torch showed her the crudely painted words, "Plague here," on its rough outer surface. The warning had been painted after she had returned, within moments, perhaps of that time. Mavin found some curse phrases she had not remembered knowing and used them freely, harshly, whispering into the silent street. She would have to leave Mertyn alone in the place while she sought some kind of help. Perhaps the sign on the door would protect him as well as anything could. She closed the door softly behind her and went back down the dark alley, the way they had originally come, unaware until she was halfway to the city wall that she was going to find the Seer Windlow. Then she realized that it was the only sensible thing to do.

She found the inn at the city wall without trouble, could not have avoided finding it, for there was a great mob gathered around it full of threats and brandished weapons, like a gathering of devils in the light of the great braziers and the torches. Above them the city walls were crowded with people looking outward, shouting down to those below. "It's King Frogmott from the north. He has Armigers and Elators with him." And these cries were contradicted by others, "No, they come from the Graywater Demesne of the Sorcerer Lanuzh!" Mavin forced her way through the crowd, tucking in a rib here and bending a shoulder there. Everyone was so full of panic that they paid her no attention. From the wall she looked out to see the City gates guarded from some distance by an array of warriors and Gamesmen, torches flickering along their lines, lighting the pennants flickering over their heads.

"Why are they here?" she asked the nearest watcher. "Who are they?"

"I've heard six people say six different things about who they are," her informant muttered. "As to why, well, young man, that should be obvious to anyone. We've plague in the city, and those out there are determined we shall not bring it out of these walls."

“Surely there are Elators within the walls who could transport themselves away in an instant? Armigers who could fly over their lines? Others, perhaps, who escape such sieges as this every day of their lives? The place cannot be closed tight!” Mavin was beginning to feel the crowd’s panic as her own. Her heart pounded and her muscles twitched with the need to do something.

“Well, and if it gets bad enough, they’ll probably try. The Healers have set a proscription on all who leave the city, however, and not many will risk that until they must. Even an Elator must come out somewhere, and it is said they have the countryside for leagues around under watch.”

“It’s true, then? What someone told me. A Healer was injured—forced, down in Poffle.”

“So the story goes. There is plague there, in Poffle. And now there is plague here.”

“Has anyone approached the Healers? Surely they know there are people here innocent of any involvement with Poffle. Travelers.”

“Young man, ask someone who knows. I am a merchant, here doing trade, and as innocent of involvement as yourself. Wait! See there. A Herald comes. Now you will have some answer, and so will I.”

A knot of glaring light had separated from the flaming line along the hill and was coming toward them, lighting the upper half of a Herald’s body so that he seemed a half person, floating upon the dark. The light came from a large, shallow brazier floating between two Tragamors, and its evident purpose was to light the Herald’s face so that he could be recognized. He stopped outside the walls, far enough away that all could see, yet close enough to be heard. Mavin had been told of Heralds’ Talent, but she had never heard the trumpet voice with which Gamesmen of this persuasion made their pronouncements. When the voice came, it startled her as well as others along the wall so that they moved as one with a reflexive grunt.

“People of Pfarb Durim give ear,” the Herald cried. “I am the Herald Dumarch-don, servant of the great King, Frogmott of the Marshes, and of his allies in this endeavor, the Sorcerer Lanuzh, the mighty Armiger, Galesbreath of Rockwind Demesne, and other Gamelords and men of unquestioned honor and unlimited might. I cry siege upon the city of Pfarb Durim and upon that pit of Hell which lies at its feet. Siege shall be maintained until all within have died or until a cure has come. Let none within seek to escape, for our vengeance will be dreadful upon him and upon his house, his Demesne, and his kindred.” The Herald wore a tabard of jewels. His face was proud and high-nosed, and his voice like an orchestra

of brass, mellow and challenging at once. Mavin could not get her fill of looking at him, so marvelous he was, but he turned his back on all within the city and rode away, back to that flickering line of light along the mountain.

When she turned back to ask yet another question, the man had gone, and she stood for long moments upon the wall staring out at the gathered host. Even as she watched, a hilltop was crowned with moving figures, newly arrived besiegers tightening the grip upon the city. She fought her way down the stairs and through the crowd gathered around the inn. Huge, burly men guarded the door, pretending not to hear her as she asked for the Seer Windlow. Giving up in frustration, she slipped away, around the side of the place and into a narrow, blank alleyway where the trash from the place was dumped. There was a small window, high above. She looked around to see that she was not observed, then lengthened an arm and used it to pull herself up and through the narrow opening. She came down into the place, casually, stopping a scurrying servant in the hall.

“I am seeking the Seer Windlow. I carry an important message for him. Can you tell me where he is?”

“There’s no Seer here, young sir. Was you wanting that one with the young men and the boy? He was here eating a meal, but then he went with the others. To the Mudgery Mont, so they said at dinner. And sensible it was of them, too, for the Mont is above all this clamor.” And she was off down the hallway, answering a screamed summons from below.

Mavin used the same window to leave the place and set about finding the Mudgery Mont, growing more frantic by the moment as she thought of Mertyn left alone.

Now it was necessary to fight her way through the streets, packed from wall to wall with the inhabitants of the inner city as they tried to get to the walls, to the gates, to learn for themselves that the city had been closed like a trap with themselves inside. She gave it up before she had gone two streets, melting into a dark sideway and from that swarming up the side of a building and onto the roofs. When she had come to a less crowded place, she descended, picking out a small group who seemed disinclined to join the general pack.

“The Mudgery Mont? Surely. At the top of the hill which caps the cliffs, young man. They’ll never let you in there, though. It’s guarded like a treasury.”

Mavin nodded her thanks and was off again, swarming onto the roofs once more to lope across them in some long legged form more usual in forests than in such a place as this. She could see the hill against the western sky, crowned with squat towers and another set of walls. It was closer, actually, to the place she

had left Mertyn than the gateway inn had been, and she wasted some small breath giving thanks for this as she ran and climbed and swung across gaping chasms of street.

Behind her came the hooting of a great horn, an outcry of bells, a welling shout as from a thousand throats. Something had happened where the mob was gathered, but she did not look back. Soon she was at the foot of the hill where streets widened to sweep upward around mansions and palaces and one brightly lit and elegant hotel. Before it stood a dozen Gamesmen in livery, Heralds and Tragamors, leaping to do the bidding of those who went in and out. Mavin came to ground and walked into the light, approaching the door as though she had business there. They did not let her go by unchallenged.

“Just hold a minute there, young man,” said one of the Tragamors, moving toward her purposefully. “What business have you here?”

“I have come to Mudgery Mont to find the Seer Windlow. I have ... a message for him.”

“Does he expect you?”

“I think—yes, he may well. Can you tell me if he is here?”

“Give me your name. Wait here. It may be he will receive you, and it may be he will not.”

“Tell him, please, that Mavin waits without. With news which he should have.”

She waited. The Tragamor showed no indication of passing on her message or of going himself. Time passed. She fidgeted from foot to foot, strode back and forth. Then she saw another petitioner approach the Tragamor, give him money, and the man went within on the moment.

“Gamelords,” she said to herself. “I have no coin to pay the man. What I have must be kept for Mertyn’s sake.” She melted back into the darkness, into the shadows of the streets and up to the roofs once more. Trees grew in the gardens of the Mont, and she was able to go across to the roof of the hotel itself, leaping like some great thrilpat among the branches. From there it was only a few moments to find a stairway leading down, and from there only a matter of time until she encountered a servant.

“I seem to have lost my way,” she said, trying to give an appearance of puzzled calm. “I am looking for the Seer Windlow, or any of his party.”

“Certainly, young sir,” she replied. “Will you follow me.” She trotted away, down a flight of stairs, to knock on a door and beckon Mavin forward. The door opened and she said, “This young man wandering about the hotel, sir, looking for a guest.” Before she could react, Mavin found herself held fast by yet another Tragamor in the livery of the place confronting an irritable-looking Armiger who held a glass of wine in one hand and a sword in the other.

“A spy,” he grated. “The hotel is full of them. They gather in closets and leap out at one from under the stairs. And who are you working for, young spy?”

She had no time to invent anything new. Taken by surprise, she fell back upon the story she knew. “I am the servant of the Wizard Himaggery, sir. I traveled here in company with the Seer Windlow and his group of students. I seek him now, with a message.” She tried to keep the face which she wore calm, slightly aloof, not dismayed, even though her nerves screamed at the thought of Mertyn, alone in the empty lodging house, burning with fever.

“Humph,” the Armiger snorted. “A silly tale, but silly enough to be true. How did you get in?”

“The guards were busy talking with someone, sir. I just came in.” She tried to sound surprised at this. Evidently the propensity of the guards for unguardly behavior was sufficiently well understood that they believed her.

“Raif, go up and get someone from the Seer’s party to come down here and vouch for this youngster.

“You’d better be telling the absolute truth, young man, for if you are not we’ll have a Demon delving into your skull within the hour, and he’ll not rest till he knows who spies upon the guests of Mudgery Mont.” He went grumpily to his chair, taking the wine with him, but sheathing the sword. Mavin breathed a bit more freely, and the two men who held her relaxed somewhat. It was not long before the door opened, and the Tragamor called Raif returned with a youth, scarcely more than a boy, whom Mavin had not seen before.

“Gamesman Huld offered to take a look at him,” said Raif, standing aside. Behind him the youth paused, posed in the doorway, and fingered the jeweled dagger hung at his golden belt. He was elegantly, almost foppishly dressed, wearing a Demon’s half helm so over ornamented that it appeared top heavy. Beneath it a narrow, white face looked out through swollen-lidded eyes, a lizard’s look, calculating, without warmth.

“Who does he say he is?” The voice was as chill as the eyes, as uncaring. “Who does the pawnish churl say he is?”

Mavin took tight rein on her temper, recoiled within herself as if she had seen a serpent rearing before her, and spoke quietly, without emphasis. “I am the servant of the Wizard Himaggery, Gamesman. I seek the Seer Windlow to give him a message.”

“You can give it to me,” he said carelessly. “The Seer is occupied.”

She breathed deeply, aware of danger. “My deepest apologies, Gamesman. I may give the message only to the Seer.”

Anger flared in the pale youth’s face, turning it into a livid mask. He turned to the Armiger, sneered, “It does not know its place, does it, Armiger? I suggest you teach it its place, and bring it to me when it is ready to give me its so-called message. This is no Wizard’s servant, for Wizards have better taste ...” His hand began to play with his dagger, half drawing it from its sheath, and Mavin knew he was about to read her to find the truth.

“Do they, now?” The drawling voice came from the doorway, which still stood open. Seeing the tall figure which lounged there brought sudden tears of relief to Mavin’s eyes. It was Twizzledale. “Do Wizards indeed have better taste? The youth told you, I suppose, that he is the servant of the Wizard Himaggery. Did he not, Huld?”

“Nonsense,” spat the Demon. “Lies and trickery. Likely there is no Wizard Himaggery ...”

“Oh, indeed there is, Huld, and I am he.” Twizzledale strolled into the room, one hand playing with the knife at his own belt, almost in mockery of the Demon.

The pale youth barked laughter. "You? You are the Fon, whatever a Fon may be, of some place no one has ever heard of."

"Am I a Wizard, Huld?" Twizzledale's voice purred, all the mockery gone from it, menace dripping from every sound.

"So you say!"

"Would you care to test the notion, Huld?"

The bulky Tragamor crossed the room in one heaving motion. "My lord, Huld. The revered Ghoul Blourbast, your thalan, would not forgive us if some misunderstanding were to result in any injury to you, or even any discomfort. Surely the matter is not worth a major confrontation. The Seer is here under the protection of the High King Prionde. The High King's sons travel with him. This Wizard is with them, also, and it is said that you will join the group ..."

"I will not," the Demon sneered. "I have looked it over. I have smelled it. It was my thalan's wish that I be educated at some advanced school, but this Seer is no Gamesmaster. He is a charlatan, a fake. I will have nothing to do with it." He turned and stalked from the room, leaving the Armiger still mumbling.

"Raif, go with him. No doubt he'll leave the city by way of the tunnel. Let him go. But double the guard behind him." Baring his teeth, he frowned at the man's back, then turned back to Twizzledale and Mavin. "You say you're this man's master? Well, then get him out of here, and I don't want to find him wandering about the hotel again. You've just put me between the jaws of a cracker, and I like not the feel of it. Do you know who he is?" And he pointed the way Huld had gone.

"I learned," said the Fon. "Tonight. When the Seer learned. We had not been told that the young Demon, Huld, was ward or thalan or what have you of the Archghoul, Blourbast, holder of Hell's Maw."

The Armiger lifted off the ground, hung in the air, burning with annoyance. "Don't say that. Don't say that word."

“Hell’s Maw,” repeated Twizzledale. “From which no good thing comes. Is that not the saying here in Pfarb Durim? I have heard it seven times since entering the city, Guardmaster. Come now. Settle. You are using power to no purpose. We will leave you in peace.”

He took Mavin by the shoulder and led her out of the room. “Mavin, what possessed you to try that here? The place is guarded like an old pombi’s one kit.”

“I know,” she whispered, reaching for his hand. “Listen, Fon. There’s plague in Pfarb Durim ...” And as they walked she murmured rapidly of all that had brought her to Mudgery Mont.

When they came to the door of the suite of chambers which were occupied by the Seer and his students, Twizzledale opened the door softly, peering around it before entering. He drew her into a side room, shut the door behind them, and then went to still another door, half hidden behind a hanging. “I didn’t want Valdon to see you,” he explained. “It was he who sent Huld down to identify you. There was much sympathetic feeling between the two.” He passed through the door, leaving it ajar, and she heard a rapid murmur of voices, Windlow saying “No! Here!” and more rustling of clothing as the voices went on. The Seer came into the room, belting a robe around him.

“Where is the place young Mertyn lies ill?” he demanded.

She went to the window, oriented herself by the slope of the hill and the line of distant towers, pointed. “There. Near the round-roofed building. Perhaps six or seven streets over. The woman who runs the place—who ran the place. She left—said not to move him.”

“I doubt it would hurt him to be wrapped well and carried here, if it were done quickly. Twizzledale will go, and I’ll send men from the Mont.”

“Valdon won’t like it,” said the Fon. “He grows more annoyed with every passing hour.”

“Valdon is frustrated that the world has not yet lain at his feet,” said Windlow. “His expectations of this journey were unrealistic. He awaited some great event, some recognition of himself. He must blame someone. Well, we will not speak of it to him.”

“What will they think?” Mavin murmured. “About your going out to get a boy, just a boy.”

“Why, Mavin.” Windlow was surprised. “What would they think if the Wizard Himaggery did not go out to rescue his thalan? Since the Fon has said he is the Wizard Himaggery—and who am I to say he is not, particularly if both you and he say he—and since everyone, including Boldery, knows that Mertyn is the Wizard Himaggery’s thalan, why then of course he must be rescued.” He turned to Twizzledale, frowning. “Though how you will explain it all to Valdon, I do not know. I leave it to your necessarily fertile imagination.”

And from that moment it was only a short time before they came to the empty lodging house with a troop of the Mont’s guards and carried Mertyn back to that place, up the back way, quietly, into a room separated from the body of the hotel, where the Seer awaited them. Only Twizzledale had touched him, though the Seer now laid a hand upon his forehead and sighed.

“The woman said ghoul-plague, did she? And that is what the host outside the gate is besieging us for? Then I am deeply worried, lad.”

“What is this disease?” Mavin asked. “I had never heard of it.”

“It begins, some say, with the eating of human flesh. For this reason it is called ghoul-plague. In my reading of history, however, I have found that it may not be human flesh but the flesh of shadowpeople which causes the disease. Once begun, it is like other plagues, crossing from those who have eaten the forbidden flesh to those who have not. It is carried from place to place, and none know how.”

“Mertyn touched the sick man, in the alley. The man drooled on him. On his face.”

“That may have been enough. A very ancient book spoke of disease being spread by the bites of small creatures, little blood suckers or flitter bats. I have seen plagues of similar kind. Some do recover.” He did not sound hopeful.

“The woman said the shadowpeople are said to cure this plague,” said Mavin. For the past hour she had been making plans, moving pieces of information about in her head. “I’m going to go find them, Gamesmaster.”

“Find the shadowpeople?” The Fon was amazed. “They can’t be found by anyone wishing to do so.”

“Perhaps not. But I must try. Will you care for Mertyn while I am gone? I would not ask this thing of you, except that you are kindly and good, and you cannot leave the city anyhow.”

“And you,” murmured Windlow. “How will you leave the city?”

“The way that Demon did,” she said. “The Armiger said he went through tunnels.”

“By all the Gamegods, child. Those tunnels lead to Hell’s Maw. And I do not know, nor do any in this city know for all I can tell, whether there is any way out of Hell’s Maw at all.”

CHAPTER SIX

Though both of them tried to dissuade her, speaking quietly so as not to disturb Mertyn, she would not be moved.

“I must go. Never mind about Poffle. I’ll get through Poffle. Never mind about shadowpeople, I’ll...”
And still they argued.

Until suddenly old Windlow stiffened where he stood, his face turning rigid and pale, his hands stretching out as though to touch something the others could not see.

“He’s having a vision,” whispered the Fon. “Quiet. It affects him in this way sometimes when he is very upset.” They watched, not touching him, as he swayed upon his feet, his eyes darting from side to side as though watching some wild movement or affray they could not see. Then his eyes shut, he swayed, caught at the bed to keep himself from falling, and gasped deeply, like a man coming from under water and desperate for air.

“We must let her go, Twizzledale,” he said at last.

“Let ... her go? Mavin? Oh, come now, Windlow. Or have I been unwizardly?” He turned to give Mavin a keen look, swiftly up and down.

Mavin, staring at the Seer, knew that the Fon had penetrated at least part of her identity, but let the feminine identification go by without protest. “You saw something. What was it?”

“I’m not sure,” he sighed. “It was dark and there was a great deal of confusion. But Mertyn was there, and his sister, Mavin. And Mavin had a trick or two in her left ear, or so Mertyn said. There was something evil. Valdon was involved. Something ter-rible, huge. Lords, Twizzledale, but at times I hate being a Seer.” He grabbed at his head with both hands as though he would tear it off. “Sometimes I think I am not a Seer at all, but something else.”

The Fon accused her, quoting Windlow. “His sister Mavin, eh? What are you, young person? Charlatan, as Huld accused us of being? Or something else?”

“Hush,” said Windlow distractedly. “Don’t snarl at her, Wizard. Whatever she has done, she’s done for the boy. Go with her. Help her if you can. But don’t snarl. Don’t worry about Mertyn more than you can help, Mavin. Whatever can be done for the boy, I’ll do.”

“You won’t move him, Seer?”

“No farther than he’s been moved, child. Go with Twizzledale. Take what you need from our goods, food, whatever. There’s a puzzle about you that my Seeing didn’t do a thing to solve, you know. Until we meet in happier times, then.” He embraced her. She felt a dew of clammy perspiration on his cheeks, a trembling in his hands, but his mouth was firm as he turned her out the door, Twizzledale following, still in his mood of irritation.

“I don’t like it when people don’t tell me things,” he grumbled. “Particularly important things.”

She sighed, moved by his exasperation, not to an answering anger but to some soothing words, some kindness. He looked so spiky, hands rooting at his hair, eyes sparking with annoyance.

“Wizard. I know you are angry with me, but how could I trust you? Someone just met on the road? I barely felt I could trust the Seer, and I wouldn’t have come to him if I had had any choice. Please.” She stopped, holding him by his arm. “Where are we going?”

“Back to our rooms. To pack you some—whatever you need. Food, I suppose. A change of clothing.”

“I won’t need any of that. Wizard, if you want to help me, come with me to the entrance, the tunnels, the way to go through that place ... Poffle. Don’t go on being angry. It has nothing to do with you, truly.”

They stood in confrontation, he clenching and unclenching his fists, shifting his weight as though he wanted to hit her; she, head cocked, poised, prepared for flight if he decided to grab her. So they stared, glared, until he began to smile, then to laugh. “I’d like to strangle you.” He coughed. “You’re impossible.”

She smiled warily. “I’m really doing the only thing I can.”

“You’re shifter, aren’t you? I should have guessed. The minute Windlow said ‘sister,’ I should have guessed. I did guess. Except that ...”

“Except that you don’t like shifters,” she said in a flat, emotionless tone. “Other Gamesmen, yes. But not shifters.”

“Hold! I’ve never known a shifter. Surely, shifters are supposed to be—well, what are they supposed to be. Stranger than the rest of us? Less understandable?”

“Less trustworthy?” Her smile was sweet, poisonous. “Less reliable? Less honorable?”

“More tricky,” he said, amused again. “More devious, more challenging, more entertaining.”

“Less destructible,” she said in a firm voice, putting an end to the catalogue. “Which is why I think I can

get through Poffle to the outside world. Which is why I think maybe I can find shadow-people, though others possibly have been unable to do so.”

“How old are you?” he asked, apropos of nothing.

“Fifteen,” she said, before she thought.

“Young. Have you had talent long? I mean ...”

“You mean, have I had it long enough to learn to use it. Yes, Wizard, I have. Probably better than you have learned to use your own. I had to.” And she turned away from him to march out into the dark through a side door, he following mutely, feeling it a better idea to hide his curiosity than to annoy her with any more questions. Once outside he led her in a circuitous route through the grounds of the Mont and onto a narrow walkway curving along the rim of the escarpment. The way was unfrequented, littered with small trash, ending in a parapet surrounded by a low wall.

“Down there.” He pointed.

She looked over to see the narrow crevasse which fell below the wall, a walkway there lined with needled, misshapen trees. At the end of the walkway a lonely lantern burned beside a grilled arch, and outside the grill a platoon of guardsmen moved restlessly back and forth. The archway led into darkness.

“This is the Ghoul Blourbast’s private highway into Pfarb Durim,” said the Fon. “It was pointed out to us by Huld. The Seer was not happy to learn of that young man’s true identity.”

“How was it that you did not know?”

“The arrangements were made through third parties, Negotiators and Ambassadors. That alone should have warned Windlow that something was amiss. What use has an honest Gamesman for Ambassadors!”

“It seems Huld didn’t care much for the arrangement either.”

“Valdon is an example of humility compared to Huld. After some time in Valdon’s company I thought him the epitome of arrogance, but I was wrong. I believe Huld has never asked for anything, no matter how outrageous, which he has not been given. Who is he, really? No one seems to know, except that Blourbast holds him dear. And he went back down that hell hole, Mavin, so watch out for him.”

“He will not see me,” she said soberly, then, taking him by the arm, “Fon, can you help me? With the shadowpeople? What language do they speak? What would they ask of me in return for healing Mertyn?”

He shook his head. “I wish I knew, Mavin. I would help you in any way I could, if only because you tricked me and teased me and made my mind work in odd ways. You must find them first and then try to do them a service, as you would for anyone, Gamesman or pawn. If they are peoplelike—and I have heard that they are in some ways—then they will seek to do you a service in repayment. How you will speak with them, I do not know. I have never seen one of them. At times I have doubted they exist.” He pulled her to him and squeezed her, quickly releasing her, so that she felt only breathless and wondering at the suddenness of it. “Let us make a pact, however. If you have need of me, you will send word—let me think! The word shall be the name of that place you stayed, BALD BADGER. Or, if there is no way to send word, then the first letter of your name in fire or smoke or stone or whatever. Given that word, that signal, I’ll get to you somehow.”

“You can’t get out,” she said. “The city is closed.”

“You can’t get out either,” he replied. “And yet you are going. So. Strange are the Talents of Wizards. Leave the way of it to me.” And he released her, standing away from her, and looking at her in a way no one had looked at her before. Mavin shook her head, trying to clear it, then gave it up and turned from him to slide over the low parapet at the edge of the declivity. She cast one look over her shoulder to see him walking steadily away. She had not wanted him to watch her as she changed. Seemingly he had understood that.

She shifted into something which could climb walls, rather spiderlike if she had thought about it, which she had no time to do. At the bottom of the ditch, she skulked along behind the twisted trees until the light of the torches splashed amber on the stones before her. She had already decided what to do next. Using an arm much stronger than her own, she heaved a paving stone high onto the opposite bank, some distance behind her. It crashed through the branches with a satisfactory sound of someone thrashing about. The guards ran toward it, not looking behind them, and she slipped through the bars of the gate into darkness, resuming her own shape once hidden in shadow. Only a shifter could have come through the gate—a shifter or a serpent. The bars had been set close together.

There was no light in the tunnel. Far ahead she thought she could see a faint grayness in the black. She fumbled her way forward, stopping close to the walkway, feeling a slimy dampness on her hands where they touched the walls or floor. Furred feet made no sound. Soon she was walking four-footed, making a nose which would smell out trails and paths. A sharp sound broke the silence, echoed briefly like a shout into a well, and was gone. Still, it had given her direction in the darkness. The grayness grew more light. She turned toward it, out of the widened corridor and into a side way. It was torchlight, reflected off wet walls around several sinuous turns. The torch burned outside another barred gate which was no more trouble than the first had been. Now the corridor was lighted, badly, with smoky torches at infrequent intervals.

She became aware of sound, a far, indefinite clanging, an echoing clamor, a whumping sound as though something heavy fell repeatedly into something soft. Through it all came a thin cry of song, high, birdlike, quickly silenced. She shivered, not knowing why. The sounds were not ugly or threatening, and yet heard together they made her want to weep. She sneaked along the way, now finding windows cut into the stone which looked out into black pits. As she went, she tossed bits of gravel through the openings, listening for the sound. Her ears told her some were merely small rooms or closets while others were bottomless. The sounds came closer, and suddenly—

“Wait a minute, will ya. I’ll be with you. Run, run, So impatient. Wait a minute!” The voice screeched, whined, almost at her shoulder, and Mavin fell against the wall, crouched, ready to be attacked.

“I’ll be right with ya,” the voice screamed.

She reached out, patting the air around her. Another of the openings was just above her head, and hung inside it, far enough inside that no light struck it at all, was a cage. Mavin found the ring on which it was hung, drew it down and into the light. Inside it crouched a ragged-looking beast, eyes dilated into great, brown orbs, teeth bared, patches of its hide missing as though they had been burned away. “Run,” it screamed at her. “Run, run.”

Without thinking, Mavin opened the cage and shook the creature out onto the stones where it lay for a moment, too shocked to move. Then in one enormous leap, it crossed the corridor and disappeared down a side way, shrieking as it went. Thoughtfully, Mavin hung the open cage back where she had found it and followed. “Run, run,” it screamed, fleeing at top speed into darkness. “I’ll get to ya.”

“I hope you do,” she muttered. “To one Pantiquod, one strange, gray woman. To one someone who talks, who can be overheard, who knows the way out of here.”

She had need of her nose again, for the little animal lost itself in darkness. The stench of it—part illness, part dirty cage, part the beastly itself—lingered on the stones, however, and Mavin tracked the little animal through dark ways into lighter ones to a heavy door upon which the little creature hung, still trying to shriek, though its voice had wearied to a whisper. “Run,” it whimpered. “Run. I’ll get to ya.”

Mavin stood to one side, pressed down upon the latch and let the door swing open. The thrilpat was through it in an instant. Hearing no alarms, Mavin followed. She was now in a well lit corridor ending in a broad flight of stairs. A small balcony protruded to her left, half hidden behind embroidered draperies. She oozed into the cover of these, hearing voices from below.

“I thought I told you to get rid of that animal!” The voice was heavy gasping, full of malice and ill humor. Peering between the railings, Mavin could see where the voice came from—a vast, billowy form lying in a canopied bed. Only the bottom half of the form was visible to her. She could see all of the other persons in the room, however, and was unsurprised to recognize the gray woman from the lodging house, now dressed in an odd, winged cap with a feathered cape at her shoulders. It was Pantiquod, the mangy animal now clinging to her ankle as it sobbed and pled.

“I gave it to one of your servants, brother, and told him to dispose of it.”

“Which servant was that?”

“I don’t really know. One of those who stand outside this room from time to time.”

“Well, find out which one. Have him chained to the long wall in the tunnel. If you can’t find out which one, have the whole lot of them chained. Let them hang there till they rot.”

“Which they assuredly will. Have you not had enough of rottenness, brother Ghoul? Has it not brought you to this pass? Perhaps it would be well to dwell less on rottenness for a time?”

“Shall a trifle of sickness make me forsake my life’s work?” The bulk upon the bed heaved with laughter, and Mavin, watching it, found a kind of fascinated nausea in the sight. The figure heaved itself upright, and the sight of its face made her stomach heave, for it was covered with hideous growths from which a vile ichor oozed. The hands which stroked an amulet at the creature’s throat were as badly

afflicted. "My bone pits are not yet full, Panty, my sister, my dove. Panty, my dear one, mother of my delicious twins, Huld and Huldra, my dear boy and his delightful sister. And though she has obviously learned aplenty about the world—and will soon enough bear us yet another generation—my dear boy is not yet fully educated. Though it seems he does not want to go into the world to mix with his inferiors."

"It was a foolish idea," she said calmly, seemingly unafraid of this monster on the bed. "You have not reared him to care what others do, or think, or say. How then should he care for education, for is that not the study of what others care about? Hmmm?"

"He says we have taught him enough, you and I. Har, ahrah, enough, he says. Enough that he can use what we have taught him to conquer the world. Harar, aha." The vast figure shivered with obscene laughter, and Mavin trembled upon the balcony.

"I have taught him to dissemble, my lord. To pretend. To play the Gamesman of honor. To mock the manners of others, if it seems wise—or amusing—to do so. What have you taught him?"

"To care for nothing, my love. To be sickened by nothing, repelled by nothing, to be capable of anything at all. Between us, he has been well educated."

"Well then, why this mockery? Why all this effort expended to put him in the company of Prionde's sons? He cared not for them. Should he have?"

"Softly, my dove, my cherub. He did all that was needed. He found in Valdon's mind the way to the King, to Prionde. That was all he needed to do for now. It will be useful for some future Game. They will not suspect him of plotting, not at his age. But he and I—we have planned, sister. We have planned."

"But does it not seem now all those plans are for naught?"

"Araugh," the man screamed in rage. "Beware, sister. Do not be quick to condemn me to death. Blourbast does not die of ghoul-plague. My thalan made me immune to ghoul-plague when I was younger than Huld. I have eaten forbidden meat all my life, and the plague has not touched me!" The bulk heaved, quivered, drew itself upright, then collapsed once more.

“It has not touched you until now,” she said, her face as cold and empty of emotion as a mask. “Until now. It amused you to hold the shadowpeople to ransom for their relic. So they came at your command. I told you they were sick, but you sent them to your kitchens nonetheless. You gave the meat to those destined to be sent above, to Pfarb Durim. Well enough. But it was foolish to dine from the same dish, brother. You have not had ghoul-plague before, but you had not used the disease to empty a city before, either. In fact,” she turned an ironic glance upon him, “there had been no ghoul-plague for some tens of years. For most of our lifetimes, yours and mine, Blourbast. Now the disease comes again. Perhaps it is a new strain to which you are not immune.”

“Ghoul-plague is ghoul-plague,” he growled. “I am immune, I say. I ate only what was necessary so that they should not suspect what meat I fed them. I have eaten this meat many times before.”

“No,” she contradicted him. “You have not. I tell you again, brother, this is not any disease which has come upon us before. You are not immune, and now the Healers have spread the ban against you. You should not have tried to force healing out of them.”

“In Hell’s Maw, Gamesmen play as I will.”

“But in Hell’s Maw they did not. I told you that shadowpeople are reputed to cure this disease. What have you done to learn the truth of this?”

“I have a few dozens in my cellars, madame. Since they speak no tongue I can understand, what good to question them? I had a little man once who spoke their tongue, but he is dead now. My Demons have attempted to Read their little minds, to no end. So let them hang there and starve.”

“You have given up eating them, then? You do not fatten them in their cages?”

“Let them starve, I say. I hold their relic here,” and he stroked his breast once again, the motion of those horrid hands holding Mavin’s eyes fixed. “Here. So let them starve. Let them all die. It is nothing to me.”

“Nothing? What if you are ill to death, Blourbast?”

“I will recover, woman. I will recover, shadowpeople or no. This is only a temporary inconvenience.”

“But there is Huld, brother. If he sickens, will he recover?”

“You are late with your motherly concern, sister. He is gone to the far reaches of Poffle where the ways open upon the woodlands. I sent him thence, with his lovely sister-wife. He will be served only by his own people. Then, when Pfarb Durim is emptied and the winds have washed it clean, I will give it to him for a gift, as I promised him. He may fill it with his Mowers, and the revenues will be his and his fortune great, for no city garners more from trade than Pforb Durim.” Exhausted by this speech the bulky form seemed to collapse in upon itself. “Leave me, woman. You were ever contentious.”

The woman bowed, moved out of the chamber through a door at the far side, taking one of the torches with her as she went. A kind of gloom fell in the chamber, a heaving dusk, the thick breathing of Blourbast filling it as might the petulant waves of a foul and polluted sea.

Mavin waited for that breathing to soften before creeping down the stairs and into the chamber. She was invisible against the shadows, silent as a shadow herself, as she crept around the chamber and to the door Pantiquod had left through. She eased it open, but it shrieked at her, and she found herself confronting the mad eyes of the little thrilpat, shut in with the Ghoul and dying on the floor.

“Harrah?” from the bed. “Who’s there? Come into the light, you vermin.”

She did not wait, but oozed through the crack and pulled it shut behind her, hearing the whisper, “Run, run, run,” as she ran indeed, down the long way which arched into emptiness before her. What she had heard had been enough to give her an idea. Now she had only to find the place the shadowpeople were kept. After all, had not the Fon told her to do some service for them? What better service than to save them from this place?

Which was easier thought of than accomplished. Pantiquod walked for a great distance, through balconies which stretched over vast audience halls, down twisting corridors, up curved flights of stairs and down similar ones, but at the end of it she came only to a wing of the place devoted to suites of ordinary rooms, small kitchens, servants’ quarters, more luxuriously furnished bedrooms and sitting rooms among them. Here there was a certain amount of coming and going, and Mavin’s journey was interrupted by the constant need to hide. After the fifth or sixth such occasion, she decided that too much time was being wasted. It took only a little creeping and spying to see what livery the servants of the place wore, and then only a brief time more of experimentation to shift into that livery and guise. Thereafter she walked as a servant, obsequious and quiet, so ordinary about the face as to be anonymous. Pantiquod entered a set of rooms which were evidently set aside for her use, and did not

emerge from them. She was obviously alone, and there was nothing Mavin could overhear or oversee to her advantage.

Well then, one must risk something. She returned the way she had come, stopping at the first large hall in which there was any appreciable traffic. "I have taken a wrong turning," she said to an approaching servant. "I was told by the woman, Pantiquod, to carry a message to the guard of the chambers ... below. Where the shadowpeople are."

The servant stopped, stared, at last opened his mouth to show a tongueless cavity there. Mavin's first reaction was to run, or to vomit. She restrained herself, however, and grasped the man firmly by one shoulder. "Do you understand what I say?"

He nodded, terrified.

"Do you know the place, the door?"

He nodded again.

"Then lead me there. You may return here and none know the difference."

Still fearful, shivering, the man set out at a run, Mavin striding alongside. They twisted, turned, then the man stopped just before coming to a corner and pointed around it, keeping well back, face white and contorted. Though she had no Demon's talent for reading minds, his was easy to read. "You were down there? That's where they cut out your tongue? I understand. Go." And he scurried back the way they had come, in such frantic haste that he stumbled, almost falling.

Mavin lay down upon the floor, peeked around the corner from floor level. At the end of the hallway was another of the guarded grills like those at the tunnel entrance to Hell's Maw. Before this gate however, was no casual assembly of guardsmen but an armed line of Armigers, shoulder to shoulder, naked swords gleaming in their hands, a line of lounging Sorcerers behind them, blazing with power in that silent place.

"Oh, pombi piss," she muttered. "Filth and rot and foul disaster." Then she simply lay against the wall,

exhausted, unable to think what to do next. How long had it been since she had had anything to eat? How long since she had slept? Probably a full day. They had had breakfast the day they entered Pfarb Durim. She had not eaten after that. Nor slept. She sighed. Well enough to know the way into the dungeons, but no help if one were too weak to go there. "Food," she murmured. "Food first. Then whatever comes next."

CHAPTER SEVEN

She cursed herself tiredly for not having brought the food which Windlow had offered. What food she might find here in the depths of Hell's Maw had little likelihood of being healthful. "You are too rash, my girl," she lectured herself in silence. "You have done well so far, but what have you had to oppose you? A few old lechers in Danderbat keep, that's all. Now, here you are, run off in a sudden frenzy without any thought at all." Sighing, she rose and went skulking off in search of something to fill her empty belly.

The woman Pantiquod had looked more or less normal, that is, unghoulish, and she had seemed to live in a part of the caves and tunnels which was cleanly, not smelling of rot and mold. Mavin returned there, staying out of sight, poking about until she found a larder with fruit in it and loaves of bread smelling of the sun. Evidently not all those who lived in Hell's Maw were of Blourbast's persuasion. Perhaps only a few were, or none except the Ghoul himself. She wondered what diet the arrogant Huld had eaten, whether he had been cossetted with dainties from Pfarb Durim or fed from childhood on the horrors of the pit. None of this wondering did anything to destroy her appetite, which was ravenous. The tunnels were chill, and her shifting had drawn what power she carried with her, leaving her weary and weak. After a short rest, she began to feel stronger. "Able to shift for yourself again, girl," she said. "Able to shift." She created a capacious pocket to carry some of the food with her, knowing it might well be a long time before she would find more. She thought longingly of sleep, then rejected the idea. There was no time, not with Mertyn lying sick in Pfarb Durim and the image of Blourbast's ravaged face before her as a threat. Mertyn might come to this if she did not find help for him.

When she returned to the guarded hall it was to find the entrance to the lower realms unchanged. The line of Armigers still stood shoulder to shoulder; the Sorcerers behind them still lounged against the wall. They seemed not to have moved while she had been gone, as though some power she could not sense kept them in that utter stillness and concentration, entranced to their duty. It did no good to speculate. She had to get past them, preferably without alerting the warren to her presence.

Nothing came to her. She peered down the sides of the cor-ridor, searching for any gap in the line. There was none. None. Except above the guardsmen's heads where the corridor arched into gloom above the glare of the shaded lanterns. Stretching from side to side below the vaulted ceiling was a line of wooden beams which tied the walls together, knobby and convoluted in the shadow, for they had been carved into likenesses of thick vines and bulbous fruits with pendant sprays of leaves fanning across the stone walls at either end. She examined them, then began to thin herself, to flow upward, to draw in upon herself while stretching out, becoming limbless, earless, hairless, softly scaled and quiet as a dream,

relentlessly pouring up and onto the beam where she twisted about it in a bulky knot no different in outline from the carved vines.

The beam on which she rested was in the cross corridor. Now her serpent's head reached out into the guarded corridor, hidden in the gloom above the light, weaving out a little, silent, silent, until it rested on the next beam and anchored there. A long loop of body followed, knotting and unknotting slowly, moving forward as the sinuous body bridged the shadowy space, beam by beam. At last she lay above the guardsmen, twined onto the last of the beams, her endless neck reaching into the shadow behind them, over the Sorcerers heads. There was nothing to hold her there except the lintel of the arch itself, and she descended by tiny tentacles sent deep into the mortar between the stones, holding herself to the wall as a vine holds, pulled tight to the rock until her serpent's head could pass through the iron grill, fingerlength by fingerlength. She lay at last beyond the grill and behind the guards, they not having moved during all that time. When the last scale of her tail slipped through the grill, her head was halfway down the flight of stairs behind, body stretched between the two points like a single reaching arm. Now she heard again the sounds she had heard on first entering Hell's Maw, the clangor, the heavy pounding, the fragment of birdlike song, cut off abruptly. The stairs wound around a pit, down onto the floor of a well from which more of the arched corridors spread in all directions. The place was lit by the omnipresent torches. There were torches and lanterns everywhere in Hell's Maw, an insufficiency of light in all those depths, a gelid half shade thick with fumes and smoke. After a time she had stopped noticing the light, had only moved through its dusky inadequacy like a fish moving through water, not noticing the medium. Now, however, as she came to the bottom of the well, she saw that one of the tunnels to her left was lit in a stranger way, by a flickering which receded and advanced, receded and advanced, accompanied by a sound as of clattering wooden twigs upon stone. She stared toward this way, then stopped as a stench poured out of the tunnel toward her, an effluvium so dense as to seem impenetrable. The wisp of birdlike sound came from behind her, and she turned, seeking the sound, finding any excuse not to go toward that flickering light.

Song led her into a darker way, one smelling of soil, but a cleaner stench than the corruption behind her. Roots dangled through the ceiling stones, brushes of dense hairy fiber dragging across the lean furred form she had taken. Snakes were all very well, she told herself, but stone was cold upon belly scales and the placement of the eyes left something to be desired. A twitter sounded ahead, and she melted into the darkness behind a pillar, searching. Nothing. No, perhaps a tiny movement. A scampering. Song again, a single, disconsolate trill. Then again. Silence. She snaked out a lengthened arm and grabbed into the gloom, then bit back a howl as needle teeth sank into her hand. Fighting down her instinct to drop whatever it was and run, Mavin toughened the flesh around the small thing she had caught and dragged it into the half light.

To stare in wonder, for it was like nothing she had ever seen before. Huge, fragile ears; wide lipless mouth; large dark eyes wild with fury and fear; teeth bared, slender form fluffed with soft fur, crying, crying words ... words. She knew in an instant that it was no mere animal she held. The eyes, while frantic, were full of alert intelligence, and the sounds were too consecutive, too varied to be mere animal cries of panic. She sat down on the chill stone and crooned to it, without thinking, using the same tone she had used to Mertyn when he had hurt himself. "Ahh, ahh, it's all right. I won't hurt you. Shh. Shh. See, I'll hardly hold you at all. Now, who are you?"

She asked the question with an interrogative lilt and a cock of her head, waiting for an answer. The little creature stopped shaking and regarded her quietly, chest heaving with enormous sobs, quieting until only an occasional tremor ran through the muscular limbs she held so gently. “Mavin,” she used one hand to point at herself. “Mavin.” Then she pointed to her captive and cocked her head once more. “Who?”

“Puh-leedle-addle-proom-room-room,” it warbled. “Puh-leedle-addle-proom-room-room.”

Mavin shook her head, laughing. “Proom!” she pointed to him, relaxing her grip. “Mavin. Proom.” This matter settled, she sat with the manikin on her lap, wondering what to do next. A final, sobbing breath passed through the creature, then it collapsed into her lap, sighing, such a sigh of despair and sadness as she had never heard. “What’s the matter, little one?” she asked. “Are you as lost in this terrible place as I am?”

Proom tilted his head—Mavin was sure it was a “he,” though she could not have said why—and thought about this for a moment. Then he reached up to lay one slender, three-fingered hand across her lips. The other he held behind his ear, the delicate pink nails curved above it. More clearly than with words he said, be still and listen. Then he sang, birdlike, a clear warble of sound in the ponderous dusk of the cavern. Mavin held her breath. She thought she heard a reply, or was it only an echo? No, it was a reply, for Proom’s hand whipped away from her ear to point into the dark. A reply. There were others here, others in this place, and she knew already that they were not here by chance. Something tickled at her mind, fled away.

Proom started to leap away, but she held him, placing him on her shoulder as she stood and moved in the direction he indicated. “I’ll help you,” she said, forgetting everything for the moment except the longing and despair in the little one’s voice. “This way?” And she strode into the darkness. Torches were fewer along this way, but she compensated for the lack of light by making her eyes larger, her ears wider, not noticing Proom’s astonishment at this, nor his obvious interest as she brought her reaching arms back to a more normal length. “Andibar, bar, bar,” he murmured.

She paid no attention. She was busy listening. They came to a fork in the way and she paused, looking to Proom for guidance. He warbled again, and again she heard a ghostly reply, thin, almost directionless, but Proom seemed to have no trouble knowing where it had come from, for he pointed down one of the branching ways without hesitation. They went on in this way, turn after turn, branch after branch, until Mavin had lost all sense of direction or place. Still, the answering voice grew more distinct each time they turned, and Proom’s excitement was manifest as they went into the almost total dark. So it was Mavin almost impaled herself upon the spiked gate before she saw it. It was another of the ubiquitous grilled gates, this one with a mesh so small even a creature the size of Proom could not get through. He had pressed himself against it with a piteous cry, fingers thrust through the mesh as though he would pull himself through by an act of will. She knew he had been this far before. His despair could mean nothing

else.

“Shh, shh,” she said, tugging him away. Pressing herself against the mesh, making her eyes wide to gain all the available light, she could see the latch, high inside the gate. “Nothing to it,” she murmured to the little one. “Nothing at all.” A finger extended into a tentacle which wove its boneless way through the mesh, pushed upward and outward until the latch opened with a satisfying tlock. At first the gate would not move, but then as she threw her full weight against it, it screamed at her and sagged open on rusty hinges. Mavin stopped pushing to listen. Proom pushed past her and ran on down the corridor, the quick birdsong running before him in greeting. This time she heard the answer clearly, no mistake about it and no confusing echoes. Whoever sang in reply sang close before them.

She followed the sound, the two sounds, call and reply, as they grew louder, rounding a dim corner to find herself in a room hung with cages like that one which had held the unfortunate thrilpat, cages hung high on slender chains. They were out of reach of little Proom, no matter how he jumped and warbled to reach his imprisoned kin, and all the cavernous room thrilled with their birdsong twittering until Mavin was dizzy with it.

The song was interrupted by a monstrous clanging, as though from a gong unimaginably huge. All the little people writhed in pain on the bottom of their cages, tiny hands clamped across their ears. The clanging stopped, but the little creatures still cowered, sobbing, Proom also from his place on the stones. From some distance came a burst of evil laughter and the word “Silence ...” shouted in a great voice. Then there was quiet, broken only by despairing whimpers from dozens of throats.

Mavin, at first confused by the noise, was now angry. Without stopping to think about it she began to stork upward, taller and thinner, so that she teetered to the height of the cages, then above them where they were fastened to rings in the high ceiling. She began to lower them, one, two, a dozen, twenty. Some of the cages held only one of Proom’s people while others held two or three. She let them all down into the troubled quiet, and Proom gathered himself up to move among the cages, whispering, gesturing. He tugged at her ankle, pointing high where the ring of keys hung, and she passed them down to him, almost falling, for she had forgotten what a stiltwalker she had become. She folded into herself, suddenly weak and wan, aware that she had used up her strength and power again, depleted as it was in this chill place. She fished a piece of fruit from her pocket, bit into it, then saw some dozens pairs of eyes focused hungrily upon her. She gave them the other food she carried, watched with amazement as each creature took a single bite before passing it on. The food circled quickly, came back to her to be urged upon her again. She took her single bite and gave it back once more. Proom climbed into her lap and patted her on the head. “Mavin,” he said. “Mavin, vin, vin.”

“Introductions are all very nice,” she said, “but I assume what you really want is to get out of here.” She staggered to her feet and went back into the corridor, turning the way they had come. At once a dozen hands patted at her, pushing her in the opposite direction. Proom chattered, sniffed at the air, then agreed, following the others in their scamper toward a break in the corridor wall, thence into root-hung

tunnels, and finally between two great knobby tree roots into a rocky cavern of a different kind. Sunlight came upon them from above, the warm amber light of a distant afternoon. Around them hung icicles of stone, bulging buttresses of rock, walls of ochre and red and a long, straight path leading upward into leafy forests. She found strength she did not know she had to follow them up and out into a clearing among great trees. On a distant hill she could see the bulk of Pfarb Durim rising beyond its walls.

“Ahh?” called the little ones. “Ahh? Ahh?” They looked around, jiggled uncertainly, called again and again, in some distress. It was obvious they did not know where they were. They had smelled their way out, but could not identify this location. Mavin hoisted Proom high on her shoulder where he could see the city through the trees. “Durim, rim, rim,” he called, leaning down to give a hand up to others of his kindred. Mavin staggered under the load as twenty of them climbed her like a tree. There was pointing, argument, finally agreement, and most of the burden dropped away and vanished in the brush. Proom waited with her, regarding her with thoughtful eyes. After a time he beckoned, vanishing like the others in the shadow of the trees. The answer came then, simply, as if she had known it for some time. “Shadowpeople,” disbelieving, yet knowing it was so. “These are the shadowpeople, and I have already done as the Fon suggested. I have done them a service. Now, shall I follow to see if they will do one for me?”

They traveled for a time in an arc, a long, curving line which kept Pfarb Durim always visible, high on its cliffs to their left. Once Mavin heard water, the sound of a considerable flow, making her believe that the River Haws ran no great distance from them in the forest. Others came back to them from time to time, bringing nuts and fruit and loaves of bread. Others came with messages, after some of which they changed direction. Mavin followed, uncomplaining, telling herself that now was a time for patience, for waiting to see what might happen next of its own accord, without her intervention. This patience was about to be exhausted when they arrived. The place of assembly was a hollow in the woods with a straight, tall tree at one side. The shadowpeople were gathered near it, staring upward. Mavin could see nothing from where she stood except a lumpish blob hanging high among the branches, swaying a little in the wind.

“Agirul,” the shadowmen sang, dancing below the tree with its pendant form, swaying their bodies in time to the swaying of whatever it was above them. “Agirul, nil, nil.”

Slowly, so slowly that she was not sure she saw it move at all, the lump turned its head over so that it faced downward, showing a tiny, three-cornered mouth, a shiny, licked-looking nose, two dark lines behind which eyes might be hiding. The mouth opened. “Ahhh, shuuush,” it said with great finality. “Shuuuush.”

“Ahh shuuuush,” sang the shadowmen, laughing, falling down in their laughter. Several of them ran off into the forest to return bearing slender bundles of long grass, the top of each stem tassled like a feather. They began to splice these together, making long, fragile lengths with which they tried to tickle the pendant creature, fluttering the tassled ends around its invisible ears, over its hidden eyes. One

shadowman, more venturesome or inventive than the rest, concentrated his attention on the creature's rear, evidently touching some sensitive spot for the creature opened its tiny mouth once more and roared.

At this sound every one of the shadowpeople, down to the smallest cub, sat down at once with expressions of severity and solemnity sitting awkwardly upon their cheerful faces. Above them the creature went on roaring as it swung to the trunk of the tree and began to descend, ponderously, long leg after long arm, like a pendulum swinging on its way downward, tic by toe, to slump at last on the ground at the roots of the tree, long legs and arms sprawled wide and helpless. It began to draw itself into some more coordinated posture, and two of the shadowpeople ran to help, murmuring, patting, easing the creature onto its haunches with its monstrosly long arms folded neatly into its lap.

"Naiii shuuush," it complained, scratching its head with two curved nails, "Mumph, mumph, who is this person?"

A warbled answer came from the assembly. The beast considered, then turned its head to Mavin.

"I suppose you'll insist that this wasn't your idea," it bellowed at her in a petulant voice. "The little beasts won't let me alone."

"No—it was not my idea. Not letting you alone, I mean. Since I didn't know that you exist, I could hardly ..."

"No. No, of course not. No one has any idea, not ever. Don't they teach languages in the benighted schools you people attend? Why shouldn't you learn to speak shadow-talk? Why shouldn't they speak whatever ugly tongue we are speaking now? But no. No, it's always come to Agirul for translation, because that's easier. Shush. Get away, you," and it pushed ineffectually at the crowd of shadowpeople who were still busy propping it up and cushioning its back with leafy twigs. It did not look comfortable. Its arms and legs were not designed for living on the ground, sprawling uncontrolled as though the muscles would not work out of the trees. One look at its hands told Mavin that it was a tree liver which never came to the ground of its own will, for it had curved hooks of bone growing from each palm.

"They didn't hurt you, did they?" she asked.

"Of course they didn't hurt me. They woke me! They know I dislike being wakened. It has been sleeping weather recently, good sleeping weather, and I hate having it interrupted. I'm not unwilling to

accede to emergency, however, and these little people always seem to have one. I suppose it's you they want to talk with?"

Mavin cast a wondering glance around. "I suppose so. I helped them get out of Hell's Maw. I want to talk to them, very much. I need their help."

The Agirul sighed. "Hell's Maw. Blourbast the Ghoul. I heard he had ghoul-plague. Why isn't he dead?"

"I don't know. He looks half dead. His hands and face are covered with sores, but he claims he will recover. Does it always kill? The plague, I mean?"

"Obviously not always. Ah, you brighten at that? It means something to you that some recover? Well, we will explore the notion soon. Just now it seems that Proom is ready to explain why I was awakened."

There was a brief colloquy, then the Agirul murmured to Mavin that it would attempt to make a simultaneous translation of the explanation which was about to follow. "Woman, it may be you will understand nothing at all, in which case I will explain when they have finished. It is the desire of Proom that you be honored by a song—and since his people are quite decent in the matter of gifts, fruits, you know, and nuts, and even a bit of roast meat from time to time—I will accommodate them. Sit comfortably now, this may take some time."

The hooked hand drew her gently close, and she squirmed about until her head lay near the Agirul's mouth. For a moment, she feared she would go to sleep, thus disgracing herself, but once the singing started, she did not think of sleep again.

"Hear the song of Proom!" It was a solo voice which sang this phrase, each syllable dropped into the clearing as a stone may be dropped into still water. The echoes of it ran in ripples across the gathered faces, gathering force, returning from the edges to the center amplified. Agirul murmured the words, but she did not hear the words, only the song. When the echoes had died, the voice sang again.

"Summoned, Proom, by those who live forever. Summoned, Proom, on a great journey. Far to go. Many seasons spent. Doubt shall he return. Ah, Proom, Proom, keeper of Ganver's Bone." Now those gathered in the clearing took up the song, a full chorus. Some of these little ones had deeper voices than she had heard before, and these deeper voices set up a drone beneath the song, dragging, ominous.

“Shall the Bone go? Far from the people? Shall the Bone travel far from its own place? Shall the Bone depart from Ganver who gave it?” Three voices sang alone, joined by flutes and bells. “Leave the Bone, Proom, before answering the summons. Leave the holy thing among its people. If Proom does not return, the Bone remains.” Now there were drums, little and big, cymbals ringing, and a solo voice, awe filled, chanting. “Now see, listen all, Proom left it in the high place. In the sacred place. Forbidden place. Guarded place. Farewell, Proom. Go with song around you.” Now a solo drum, high-pitched, frenetic, full of panic, one voice, very agitated.

“See who comes. Blourbast the Ghoul. Riding. Riding. Blourbast does not see the things which guard. Blourbast does not feel forbidden place. Blourbast cannot tell sacred from his excrement hole.” Full chorus once again, full of wrath. “The Ghoul sees it. The Ghoul takes it. Ganver’s Bone, Bone, Bone, Gone, gone, gone, alas.” Now the voices lamented, high, keening.

“Terror, tenor, monstrous this evil. The holy thing lost in dreadful’s hands. One must go recover what is lost.”

Now drums, fifes, cymbals clashing, something that sounded suspiciously like a trumpet, though Mavin thought it was a voice. “Come to the place, the evil place. Call out for the return of Ganver’s Bone!”

Now an old, old female rose, her voice a whispery chant in the clearing, barely heard over the humming of the multitude. “Comes one from Hell’s Maw, An old, gray man, Servant of Blourbast, Lo, he sings the words of Blourbast. Lo, he sings them in the people’s song. ‘Let twelve of the people come or Ganver’s Bone will be destroyed!’ “ Now a quartet of strong voices, in harmony.

“Ah, ah, Proom, thou art far away. Ah. Ah. Aloom is old, is sick, Aloom sings. “I will go, I will go, that Ganver’s Bone shall never be destroyed.”

Aloom goes, and behind her others go. Twelve gone. Old ones, sick ones, twelve gone. This is one time. Time passes.”

There was a moment’s silence, then the voices went on. “The old, gray man sang once more, ‘Let twelve come. Ah, ah, Proom, thou art far away. Ah. Ah. Duvoon is quiet, is loving, Duvoon sings. 7 will go, I will go, that Ganver’s Bone shall never be destroyed.’

Duvoon goes, and behind him others go. Twelve gone. Male ones, female ones, twelve gone. This is two times. Time passes.” Again silence, again the voices.

“The old, gray man sang once more, ‘Let twelve come.’ Ah, ah, Proom, thou art far away. Ah. Ah. Shoomdu is Proom’s child. Shoomdu sings. “I will go, I will go, that Ganver’s Bone shall never be destroyed.” Shoomdu goes, and behind her others go. Twelve gone. Children ones, little ones. This is three times. Time passes.”

Now the chorus again, ugly in wrath, full of fury, quickly, almost shouting.

“Of, behold, plague conies on Blourbast. Oh, behold, Ghoul has eaten our flesh. Oh, behold, he is maddened, he kills the old gray man. Oh, behold, Proom, Proom, Proom returns.” Hearing his name sung, Proom stood up and began to chant, waving his arms high, leading the chorus and the drums.

“Hear the song of Proom, Voice of the Songmakers. ‘No more shall go to Hell’s Maw. All who went shall come again to us if yet they live. Holy Ganver will forgive us this.’ Hear the song of Proom, ‘I will go in.’ “

“Daroo, roo, roo,” sang the multitude. “Daroo, roo, roo, pandillio lallo lie, daroo.”

“So he went, wandered, wandered, wandered, i n the dark, the smell, the pain, Lost, he wandered into the very hands of her Mavin who takes many forms. Now of her we sing. Now we sing the song of Mavin.”

“I suggest you make yourself comfortable,” said the Agirul. “They are about to begin singing.”

“Gamelords,” whispered Mavin. “What do you call what they have been doing?”

“Oh, that was just getting warmed up,” it replied. “They have sung their song. Now they will sing the song of Mavin who ...”

“Mavin Manyshaped,” she said to the beast. “Mavin Manyshaped.” He did not hear her. The chorus was already in full cry. Afterwards, Mavin supposed it had been a kind of enchantment. Certainly while it was going on there was nothing she could do about it or herself. She was the center of a whirlpool of song, drawn down into it, drowned in it, surfacing at last with a feeling that some heavy, nonessential part of her had been washed away leaving her as light and agile as the shadowpeople themselves. When they had finished their song, they went away into the forest, leaving only a few behind.

“I could translate for you the words of the song they have just sung, Mavin Manyshaped, but the words do not matter.” The Agirul nodded to itself. “They have, made a song of you, and that is what matters, for they do not make songs of every little happening or every chance encounter. Quite frankly, I do not know why they have honored you in this way. You were at little risk of your life in that place, so far as I can tell. Whatever their reason, you are now brought into their history, and your song will be sung at the great convocations on the high places until you are known to all the tribes wherever they may be. You may call upon the people for help, and they will be with you in your times of need.

“I trust that now I may be allowed to go back to sleep.” And with that, the Agirul turned to begin climbing back up the tree.

Mavin cried out, “No. Don’t go. I came for a reason, Agirul. I have need now. I must talk to them.”

Proom had heard the tone of her voice, and he came to her with brow furrowed. Mavin reached out to him even as she began speaking, hastily, words tumbling over one another. “Mertyn,” she said. “Brother ... sick ... woman said shadowpeople ... cure ... graywoman ... Pantiquod ...”

“Hush,” said Agirul. “Start again. Slowly. What is the trouble?”

So she began again, telling it more slowly, giving Agirul time between thoughts to translate her meaning. Proom’s face changed, gave way to horror, then despair. When Mavin said that Mertyn lay ill with ghoul-plague, he cried out, tearing at his fur with both hands. Others ran toward him, questions trilling on their tongues, only to begin keening when he explained.

“What is it?” cried Mavin. “What’s the matter?”

Agirul shook its narrow head. “Mavin Manyshaped, you have come on a fruitless quest. The disease you

speak of is one which long ago took great toll of their lives. Then came Ganver, Ganver the Great, Ganver of the Eesties, to tell the people he would give them a gift in return for a song. So they made a song for Ganver, and he gave them his Bone. It is only by using the Bone they may cure the illness, and the Bone is gone—gone down there, in Blourbast's hands, where you may have seen it yourself."

"Is that the thing Blourbast took? The thing he wears around his neck? The thing he was holding for ransom?"

"It is. And Proom believes that when Blourbast found the shadowpeople had escaped, he probably destroyed the Bone as he threatened to do. Proom says he could not leave his people, his own child, to be eaten, not even for Ganver's Bone, but now he is unable to repay his debt to Mavin Manyshaped. He says he will kill himself at once."

"No!" she shrieked. "Tell him no. Mavin forbids it. Ganver forbids it. Tell him whoever forbids it so that he won't do it. That's terrible. Oh, Gamelords, what a mess."

She set herself to think. It did not come easily. There was too much in her head, too many squirming thoughts, Blourbast and Pantiquod, the caverns below, the flickering lights and horrible smells, Pfarb Durim high on the cliff surrounded by the host, the song of the little people, the face of Agirul. Too much. "I want the Fon," she said, not even knowing she had said it.

"The Fon?" asked Agirul.

"A Wizard. But he's shut up in Pfarb Durim, so even if I sent the message we agreed upon, it would do no good."

"A Wizard? I would not be too sure about that. If I were you, I would send the message and leave it to the Wizard to decide whether it will do any good or not. Is there not a saying among your people? 'Strange are the Talents of Wizards?' What was the message?"

"The letter M, in any form, set so he could see it."

"Well then. Dark comes soon. We will send him a message he cannot fail to see."

Though she fumed at the delay, she could think of nothing else to do. She had not slept since leaving Pfarb Durim, and when the Agirul suggested she do so, and when Proom's people made her a leafy nest cradled in the roots of a great tree, she told herself that she would need to sleep sooner or later, so it might as well be done now. Though she was sure worry would keep her awake, the shadowpeople were singing a slow, calm song which reminded her of wind, or water running over stones, and she sank into sleep to the sound of it as though she had been drugged. She went down and down into dreamless black, and did not come up until the stars shone on her through windwoven trees.

"Be still," said the Agirul from a branch above her. "Look through the trees to your right." She sat up, stretching, seeing through the branches a long slope of meadow on which dozens of tiny fires burned in long lines.

"You cannot see it from where you are," the lazy voice from above her mused, "but the fires make your name letter on a slope which faces the city. They have been burning since dusk, half a night's length. The shadowpeople have been bustling about dragging branches out of the forest for hours. They will keep the fires alight until dawn."

"No need," said a firm voice from the trees. "They may let the fires die."

"Twizzledale!" cried Mavin. "How did you get out? How did you find me? How ..."

"Ah," as he came silently across the grass, a moving blackness across the burning stars, "it took much longer than it should have done. However, when I went to one of the watchtowers, I found that the watchmen had gone—for tea, perhaps, or to quell some disturbance in the city. They had left a rope ladder there, useful for climbing down walls."

"But the armies? The besiegers?"

"Evidently there had been some attempt to leave the city by some half-score merchants, and a group of the besiegers had gone to drive them back, leaving the road unguarded. Quite coincidental, of course, but fortuitous ..."

“Fortuitous,” murmured the Agirul. “Coincidental.”

“Whom have I the honor of addressing?” asked the Fon in measured tones, as though he were a Herald preparing to announce Game.

“The Agirul hangs in the trees above you,” said Mavin. “It is a translator of languages. The shadowpeople wakened it so that they might talk with me.”

“And kept me awake,” said Agirul in an aggrieved tone. “I will not catch up on my sleep for a season or more.”

“I have great honor in speaking with you,” said the Fon, “though I would not have wished your discomfort for any purpose of my own convenience ...”

The Agirul tittered. “Wizards. They all talk like that. Unless they are involved in some Game or other.” The titter turned into a gurgle, then into a half snore.

“Well, Mavin,” said the Fon, seating himself close beside her in the nest. “What have you been up to?” As she spoke, the fires died. Proom returned to sit beside them, ashy and disconsolate. The Agirul was roused from time to time to ask a question or translate a response. Night wore on and the stars wheeled above them, in and out of the leaves like lantern bugs. At last the Fon had asked every question which could be asked and had set to brewing tea over a handful of coals, humming to himself as he did so. Proom crouched by the fire, humming a descant, and soon a full dozen of the shadowpeople were gathered at the fire in full contrapuntal hum, which seemed to disturb the Fon not at all. When he had the tea brewed to his satisfaction, he shared a cup round with them then brought a full one to share with Mavin.

“Blourbast has not destroyed the Bone,” he said.

Over his head, Agirul murmured, and a sigh went round the fire.

“He would not. He would think that a thing held in such reverence by the shadowpeople must be a thing of power or value. Blourbast would not destroy anything which might be a source of power. He is

vicious, wantonly cruel, irredeemably depraved, but he is not stupid. He would not discard a thing of value merely to avenge himself upon those he despises. He would keep it, study it, perhaps even seek out those who might know of such things. Now I have heard of Eesties, as have we all. Myths, I thought. Legends. Stories out of olden time. This thing, whatever it may be, whether Eesty bone or artifact or some natural thing, must be obtained if we are to work a cure upon your brother and the others who lie ill and dying in Pfarb Durim. There are some hundred of them in the city. Mertyn is no worse than he was, but he is no better either. So a cure is needed, and if not for him then for the others. The Healers will not relent. Heralds have been sent to them—even Ambassadors, with promises of magnificent gifts—but they stand adamant. Until Blourbast is dead they will bring no healing to Pfarb Durim.”

“Why?” cried Mavin. “Pfarb Durim is not Hell’s Maw. Why hold the city ransom for what Blourbast has done?”

“Because the city profits from what Blourbast does,” replied Twizzledale. “It stands aloof, pretends it does not share in Blourbast’s depravity, murmurs repudiation of his horrors, but sells to Hell’s Maw what Hell’s Maw buys and takes in return the coin Blourbast has stolen or extorted or melted out of the bones of those he eats. The Healers lay guilt where guilt is due. No. Pfarb Durim is not innocent, nor are those who trade there innocent.”

“And we,” mumbled Mavin, white-lipped, “we who came there unknowing, but still spent our coin on lodging, on food? Are we guilty?”

The Fon shook his head, smiling, reached out to touch her face—then thought better of it, for she was close to tears. “Mavin, did you know of all this before entering the city? Well, neither did I, nor Windlow either. I do not hold us guilty of anything but ignorance, though we will be guilty indeed if we come this way again or buy anything which comes from Pfarb Durim. Enough of this conscience searching. We must find this thing, this Bone.”

“Blourbast had a thing around his neck, something long and white, which he stroked. He spoke of it to that woman, his sister, stroking it with his awful-looking hand, covered with sores. She wore a kind of cap with birds wings at the side, and there were feathers on her shoulders. I don’t know what Talent she has ...”

“Harpy,” he replied. “His sister, a Harpy, mother of that Huld whom we so much enjoyed meeting. Not only Blourbast’s sister, seemingly, but his emissary as well. She who arranged for the plague to be spread in the city. Did she assume herself immune?”

“Probably she was simply careful not to touch anything, not to become infected. But Blourbast thought himself immune. Even now he thinks he will recover.”

“Perhaps,” mused the Fon while the Agirul translated what they said to the shadowpeople amid much twittering and warbling. “And perhaps he only blusters. If what you say is true, however, if he wears it upon him, touches it, then we may not think of your going to fetch it. You would become ill and we would be no better off. No, we must get him to bring it out, find a way to use it without touching it ...”

The Wizard got up to stride to and fro, rooting his hair up into spiky locks with both hands, as though he dug in his brain for answers he could not find. “He sought to compel healing from the shadowpeople, what would happen if it were offered to him? Can Proom tell us in what way the Bone is used in preparing the cure?” He waited for the usual twittering exchange before the beast replied in a sleepy voice.

“It is a matter of music, Wizard. One note of which is summoned from Ganver’s Bone.”

“Need the Bone be in Proom’s hands? Could any person holding it summon the note as needed?”

This time there was a lengthy colloquy, argument, expostulation, before the beast said, “Proom acknowledges that the note could be struck by any. He denies that any has that right except himself, but it is not a matter of impossibility.”

“Ah,” said the Fon with satisfaction, “Then, then ...” And his hands waved as he sketched a plan, improvising, leaping from one point to the next as the Agirul muttered along and Mavin watched in fascination.

When he had finished, Mavin said, “But ... but, your plans call for several shifters. Three, four, more perhaps.”

“That is true,” he murmured. “No help for it. We must have them. Well, shifter girl? Have you no kin to call upon?”

“Danderbat keep, from which I came, is not within a day’s travel,” she replied. “I was traveling to

Battlefox keep, somewhere in the Shadowmarches to the north. My thalan is there, and my kindred and Mertyn's. Is it within hours of travel? I do not know. Shall I run there seeking help which may arrive too late?"

The Agirul began its murmuring and twittering while the little people chattered and trilled. "Battlefox is within a few hours, Mavin," it said at last. "One or more of the people will go with you as your guide."

The Fon was staring at the ground where his busy hands made drawings in the dust. At the edge of the world dawn crept into the sky. "When must it be done?" he asked of Proom. "What time of day or night?"

"In the deep of night," replied the beast. "When the blue star burns in the horns of Zanbee. Do I say that right?"

"You do." The Fon smiled. "Were you translating, or did you think of that yourself? It is an odd bit of esoterica for you to know. Well then, Mavin, you must return to that road south of Pfarb Durim which we have traveled once before. Beneath the Strange Monuments there, at midnight, we will find a cure. Come with whatever help you can muster. You do understand the plan?"

"As well as I may," she said distractedly, "having heard it only once. You will probably change it, too, as the day wears on. Nonetheless, I will do what I can. Do you, also, Fon, for my hope rests in you." She was very sober about this, and the tears in the corners of her eyes threatened to spill.

He took her hand in his to draw her up but then did not release her. Instead he pulled her tight to him. At first she struggled, fighting against the strength of his arms as she would have fought the constraints of a basket in Danderbat keep, full of panic and sudden fear. Then something within her weakened, perhaps broke, and she found herself pressed against his chest, hearing the throb of his heart beneath her ear, aware for the first time that he was seeing her, holding her, in her own shape, in her essential Mavin-ness. He did so only for a moment, then let her go with a whisper.

"Go, then. Trust in me so far as you may, Mavin. It is your Wizard, Himaggery, who promises it after all. Bring what help you can and we will put an end to this."

She did not trust herself to say anything more, but turned to run from him in that instant. From him, or in order to return to him, but she did not really think of that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I run,” she said between her teeth, putting one foot before another on her long-legged form, feeling the clutch of shadowperson knees behind her shoulders where the little creature rode astride, whooping its pleasure at the speed of their movement. “I run,” concentrating on that, trying not to think of the plan the Fon—Himagery—had sketched before them, vaporous now, too many details missing, too many things that could go wrong. “I run,” chanting it like an incantation, moving in the direction the little heels kicked her, up long slopes under the leaves spangled with sun, out into green glades where flowers bloomed higher than her head, then into shade again and down, down into gullies where gnarled black branches brooded against the sky, making a cold shade over the wet moss. The way tended always upward, coming at last to a leg-stunning climb beside a tumbling fell of water, all white spray and wet, slick rock where ferns nodded in time to the splashes. “I run,” she panted, trying to convince herself, making the back legs longer to kick herself up with and the front ones clawed to scratch at the slippery rock. It was not a run, more like a scrambling climb. At the top, however, the land leveled into long shadowy rides among the groves of sky-topped trees, and the little heels kicked her into a lope once more.

“Away northwest,” the voice on her back trilled, and she needed no Agirul to translate the song. It sang of sky, tree, and direction, and she understood it in her bones. The shadows dwindled but it was still short of noon when she topped a long ridge to look downward upon Battlefox keep sprawled wide in the center of its p’natti. And here she was, come to Plandybast’s place—not with a modest appeal for lodging and food, perhaps for friendship if kinship should not be enough. No, here she was to beg followers, warriors, fighters, shifters to shift for something they had probably not heard of and would not care for.

Well then. How did a shifter enter a keep? Or, how best might Mavin enter a keep to make such demands upon short acquaintance?

She urged the little one down from her back so that she might sit herself down, back against tree, to eat a bit and think. The shadowperson sat comfortably beside her, snuggled close for warmth, but making no protestations at the sight of the place before her. After all, she told herself, the creature had guided her here. It probably knew as much about the place as Mavin did. Once it trilled, but her hand stilled it, and it merely hummed quietly like a kettle boiling.

Suppose that Battlefox Demesne was not so hidebound as Danderbat keep. Still, they were shifters, full of shifterish Talent and seeming. Would they respect her need? Could they offer help where they did not respect? Could she ask from weakness what she could not demand from strength? How did Plandybast stand within the walls? Was he high up in the way of things, or a mere follower after? All in all, well—all in all, would it be better to do something shifterish and fail at it or to do nothing shifterish at all and leave

them wondering? She chewed and ruminated, unable to make up her mind, wishing the Wizard were there to give her some firm instructions to take the doubt away.

Finally she swallowed, sighed, pointed firmly at the base of the tree where they sat and said to the shadowperson, "You stay here."

The little head cocked. A narrow hand was placed on the trunk of the tree, and a voice warbled, "Quirril?"

"I suppose," she said. "Quirril. Until I come back."

She stood long upon the hill, remembering the way Wurstery Wimpole had come into Danderbat Keep, the drumming, the rolling, launching, flying, slything down, then up once more into veils which fell as soft as down. She sighed. She had never flown, had no idea how. Serpent forms were easy, but those immediate transitions were something she had never practiced. Better not to try anything of the sort.

And there was always the she-road, cutting through the p'natti straight as a shadow line. But if Plandybast had been correct, then only pregnant women used that road coming into Battlefox. What to do, to do, to do?

"Well, girl," she said to herself. "What would you have done if you and Mertyn had come here as you planned? You'd have walked up to the gate in your own shape, holding Mertyn by the hand. For aren't you the thalani of Plandybast, and hasn't he invited you to come? There's no time for anything else, no time for making a show of yourself, so go, go, go." And before she could talk herself out of it or think of anything else to worry about, she stepped out into the light of the sun and began walking toward the keep.

The drum sounded when she was only halfway there. It boomed once, then once again, not in any panic sound, more as a warning to let those in the keep know that someone was on the road. She did not hurry, merely kept walking, her eyes upon the walls. Forms materialized there as she watched, dozens of them, still as stone and as full of eyes as an oxroot. No sound. No welcome, only those eyes. What were they looking at? Nothing to see upon the road but one girl, dressed in whatever old thing she had shaped around herself. Mavin stopped suspiciously. They were entirely too silent. She turned her head slowly. There, behind her, was her guide—her guide and two or three dozen of his kindred.

“Gamelords,” she said. “What have I done now?”

The shadowperson who had ridden her shoulders so happily came forward to take her dangling hand. “Quirril?” it asked. “Quirril?”

For a moment she could not think what to do. Then she shrugged and hoisted the little one onto her shoulders, beckoning the others to come on. “Come,” she cried aloud, “Let us visit my thalan, Plandybast.”

She stopped within a few man-heights of the gate, peering upward at the watchers along the wall. “Plandybast,” she cried, making her voice a trumpet, full of sonority, dignified and pleading at once. “Plandybast, I come at your invitation, I, your sister’s child, Mavin.” Then she waited, ready, so she told herself, for someone to call down in a cold voice that Plandybast was not at home, or had never lived here, or was long dead.

Instead the gate began to creak, and she saw the almost familiar face peering at her from around the corner. “Mavin? May I come out? Will I frighten them? Some are saying they are ... shadowpeople? Could that be true?”

She wanted to giggle. All her worry and concern, and here was her thalan as full of wonder as some child seeing Assembly for the first time. “Come out, Plandybast. I don’t think they’ll frighten, not so long as I am here.”

He came to her, put his hand out to her, watching the little rider on her shoulder the while. “Where’s Mertyn?” he asked. “What’s happened?”

“Thalan, there is no time to tell you everything that has happened. I can only tell you two important things. Mertyn lies ill of ghoul-plague in Pfarb Durim. That is the first thing. The second is that a cure may be wrought by these little ones, if I bring some of my kindred to help. I need you, you and some others.”

Plandybast looked up, called to the watchers, “It is as we heard. Ghoul-plague. In Pfarb Durim.”

There was an immediate outcry, a kind of stifled protest or moan, and he turned back to her; shaking his

head in a kind of fussy sympathy which hid his curiosity only a little.

“You must be frantic with worry,” he said. “I can see that. You say there’s little time? Surely you have time to come in? To eat a little something? Have a warming drink?”

She shook her head, looking sideways at the shadows, seeing how they stretched now a little east, a little past high noon. “We must be there by midnight. The Agirul said when the blue star burns in the horns of Zanbee. A Wizardly saying, evidently. Midnight. No later than that, and it is a way from here. As far as I have run since dawn, and farther. We must be there. Will some of you come, Plandybast? Do we have other kin here who will help us?”

“I will come with you if you need me, of course. But to ask others—we must at least tell them where. And what the plan may be. And why they are needed. They will be so curious, so delighted to see you. Can you come in?”

She moved toward the gate, a bit uneasily, at which all the assembled shadowpeople began to cry out, moving away from her, and her shoulder rider began to scramble down, bleating.

“They won’t come in,” she sighed. “They have no good experience of walls. If I come in, they may all go—and I need them to guide me back. No. Better I stay out here. Could you bring us something to eat? I had some food with me, but not enough ...”

“Don’t distress yourself, child. Or them. This is so great a wonder, why should we spoil it with ordinary behavior. If they will not come in, we will come out.” He called up to the watchers again, and there was a bustling among them as some went off at his request. It was not long before two or three of the shifters came out of the gate carrying baskets laden with fresh loaves split open and filled with roasted meat. There was no need for the shadowpeople to pass the food about or share it for each of them had both hands full. By that time a dozen of the Battlefox shifters had gathered at Plandybast’s side, and Mavin found herself trying to explain once more.

There were long looks from the Battlefoxes. Long looks and pursed lips, shaken heads and skeptical eyes. Among the most doubtful-looking was one Itter, a narrow-faced woman introduced as Plandybast’s sister—at which Plandybast merely looked uncomfortable, saying nothing to confirm or deny this claim. “Who is he?” the woman asked when Mavin spoke of the Fon.

“A Wizard,” she replied for the third time. “From the southlands.”

“A Wizard,” the questioner repeated after her, making the words sound slick and unreliable. “From the south.”

“Yes,” Mavin said, beginning to be angry. Everything the woman said was an accusation, an allegation of dishonesty or stupidity, unspoken but most explicitly conveyed in her words. “A Wizard. A young Wizard. Perhaps too young to be much regarded by the dwellers of Battlefox. As I am young. As Mertyn, who will die if a cure is not found, is young.” She clenched her fist, turning from them to her thalan who stood shifting from one foot to the other at the edge of the group. “It comes to that in the end, doesn’t it, Plandybast? The Fon and I are young enough to need help, therefore too young to be trusted when we ask for it.”

“Now, child,” he objected, “don’t be so quick with blame. Itter didn’t mean to sound ...”

“Oh, but I did,” said Itter sweetly. “Your other sister, Plandybast, was known for her eccentricity, her individuality. Are we to assume that her child—her children—are any less ... individual?” In the woman’s mouth the word became a curse, an indictment.

“Now, now, no need to rake up old troubles. Let’s take a little time to talk this out.”

“There’s no time!” Mavin cried. “Tonight it will be done. The little people will be there, and the Fon, and old Blourbast with his armies and his foul sister. And I am supposed to be there, too, with help from the shifter kindred. They will expect me, and I will not fail them no matter what the people of Battlefox do or don’t do.”

“Why not let the Ghoul alone?” the woman asked in her sharp, accusing voice. Her eyes were calculating and cold. Her mouth curved but her eyes were chilly, and the shadowperson cringed away from her when she stepped closer. “The Ghoul does no more than any Gamesman. He plays in accordance with his Talent. From what you say, the Wizard’s plan will work well enough without shifters. The cure will be wrought. The people will be healed. What matter that the Ghoul returns to his tunnels? What business is it of ours? Our business is the education of our young, not interfering with Ghouls. When he is cured, you bring Mertyn here to be educated, and forget the Ghoul. All will be as it was before.”

“But it will not be as it was before,” said Mavin, gritting her teeth. She had already said this twice. “The disease is one which afflicts the shadowpeople from time to time. They have always been able to cure it before, with the Bone. If Blourbast is left alive, if he returns to his tunnels with the Bone, then the disease will strike again, and again. As it returned again and again in the ancient time.” The little creature on her shoulder trilled, and Mavin understood the meaning. “My friend says it may strike next time at you, Madam Itter, and at the children you are so eager to see educated, perhaps your own. It would not be wise to return to that ancient time, before Ganver.”

Hearing this name the shadowpeople began to sing, a lamenting song, full of runs and aching sadness, so engaging a song that they put down the food they held to put their arms about one another and sway as they sang.

“What are they doing?” asked the woman in sudden apprehension.

“They sing of Ganver. A god to them. Perhaps Ganver would have been a god to us as well. It is Ganver’s Bone the Ghoul has. Listen to them, woman! Listen to them, Plandybast! To you they were legends? Myths? Now they are here before you, singing, and you owl me with those doubtful eyes and will not promise to help me.” She flung her arms wide in a despairing gesture and moved away from them toward the shadowpeople.

Plandybast came after her. “Some of them will probably come, Mavin. Just give them a little time. Itter is a kind of sister to me. At least, her mother said she was my father’s child. But you’ve heard her. She always assumes that others are stupid, or evil, or both. It isn’t only you, she behaves so to all of us. And she does have a point, you know. There seem to be a lot of details you’re not sure of. And none of us relish the idea of having anything to do with the plague, or with the Ghoul, come to that. We don’t really interfere in the business of the world that much, we Battlefoxes. Oh, we hire ourselves out for Game from time to time, but there seems to be no fee and no honor in this ...”

“Fee! Honor! I have seen these little ones so frightened that their faces run with tears and shuddering so hard with sobs they can scarcely stand, and they go on while they are crying! I call that honor, Plandybast. You would respond better to a call to Game? If I had come with a Herald, announcing challenge, would that have made it easier? I could have done that! Watch, now, thalan. See the Herald come?” She was angry and tired. She shifted without thinking as she had done once before in Danderbat keep, without planning it, letting her shape become that of the Herald she had seen outside the walls of Pfarb Durim. She made her voice a bugle, let it ring across the walls of Battlefox keep. “Give ear, oh people of Battlefox Demesne, for I come at the behest of the Wizard Himaggery, most wise, most puissant, to bring challenge to the sluggards of this keep that they stay within their walls while Game moves about them!” Then she trembled, and the shape fell away. There was only silence from them, and astonishment, and—fear.

“Impossible,” Plandybast quavered. “Shifters cannot take the form of other Gamesmen. But your face was the face of the Herald Dumarch-don. I know him. Your voice was his voice. Impossible. You’re only a child.”

“I’m a forty-six-season child,” she agreed. “It is said to be impossible, but I can do it. Sometimes. You have not asked how we escaped from Danderbat keep, thalan. You have not asked how I came out of Pfarb Durim, a city under siege. It is better, perhaps, that you do not know, but I made use of this Talent to do it. I have been long on the road to you, coming to you at your invitation. Now look to your kin. They are all fainting with shock.” And she turned away bitterly, knowing that fear had done what politeness might have prevented—made them refuse to help her.

Itter was already cawing at the group. “You see! What did I tell you! She is no true shifter! Can a true shifter take the shape of other Gamesmen? Can they? I said her mother was guilty of individuality, and so she was. Now will you believe me?”

“Go with them,” Mavin said wearily to Plandybast. “I will wait out here for an hour, perhaps two. I will sleep here on this sun-warmed hill and make strength for the journey back, among my small friends who account themselves my kindred while my kindred sort out whether they are my friends or not. Any who will come with me will be welcome. If none will come—well, so be it.” And she turned away from him to move into the welcoming arms of the shadowpeople who snuggled about her on the slope, a small hillock of eyes watching the walls of Battlefox Demesne.

A voice spoke calmly from above her head. “They are not eager in your aid, your kinsmen.”

She looked up. The Agirul hung above her head. “How did you get here?” she cried. Around her the little people twittered and laughed.

“I have been here,” said the Agirul. “All along.”

“Then you’re not ... the one who ... you don’t know ...”

“What the Agirul knows, the Agirul knows,” said the creature in a voice of great complacency. “Which means all of it, wherever its parts may be.” It released one long, clawed arm to scratch itself reflectively, coughing a little, then twittering a remark to the shadowpeople which made them all sigh. “I said that you

are saddened by your reception in this place.”

“Old Gormier would have been biting on the bit by now,” she said. “Him and Wurstery and the others. They may be evil old lechers, but they would have been full of fire and ready to move.” Then she added, more honestly, “Of course, I don’t really know that to be true. They might have been willing to be involved, but might not have responded to a plea from me, or Handbright, or any girl from behind the p’natti.”

“Wisdom,” growled the Agirul. “Painful, isn’t it? We assume so much and resist learning to the contrary. Well, neither Danderbat nor Battlefox meets our needs at the moment. Shall we consider other alternatives?”

“Our needs, Agirul? I didn’t know you were involved.”

The beast swung, side by side, a furry pendulum, head weaving on its heavy neck. “Well, girl person, if we were to speak strictly of the matter, I am not involved. If we speak of curiosity, however, and of philosophy, and of being wakened and not allowed to go back to sleep—there are consequences of such things, wouldn’t you agree? And consequence breeds consequence, dragging outsiders in and thrusting insiders out, will we or nil we, making new concatenations out of old dissimilitudes. Doesn’t that express it?”

She shook her head in confusion, not sure what had been expres-sed. “Are you saying I shouldn’t bother to wait for Plandybast?”

“Leave him a note. Tell him to meet you on the road south of Pfarb Durim tonight with any of his people who will assist or to go to Himaggery and offer himself if you are not there. In that way, you need not linger, wasting tune, and it is indeed a waste. If one may not sleep and one may not act, then what use is there sitting about?”

After a moment’s thought, she did as the Agirul suggested, finding a bit of flat stone on which a charcoaled message could be left. He could not fail to see it. The letters were as tall as her hand, and the Agirul assured her there would be no rain, no storm to wipe them away in the next few hours. “Where, then?” she asked him. “Back to Pfarb Durim?”

“I thought we might seek assistance from some other source,” the Agirul replied, lapsing into

shadowperson talk while the little ones gathered around in a mood of growing excitement. "I have suggested they take you to Ganver's Grave. It is not far from here, and the trip may prove helpful."

"Ganver's Grave? We have no dead raisers among us, Agirul. And truth to tell, after Hell's Maw, I have no desire to see or smell any such."

"Tush. The place may be called Ganver's Grave, girl, but I did not say he is dead. Go along. It is not far, but there is no time to spend in idle chat."

"Are you coming?" she inquired, offering to help it down from the branch it hung upon.

"I'll be there," it said, humming, still swinging. "More or less."

Shaking her head she allowed herself to be led away, following the multitude which scampered ahead of her into the trees. A tug at her hand reminded her that a small person waited to be carried, and she lifted him onto her shoulder once more. He kicked her, and she shifted, making it easier for him and herself to catch up to the fleeing shadows before them. They led east, back toward the River, she thought, and the long valley in which it ran. The land was flat, easy to move across, with little brush or fallen wood to make the way difficult. After they had run for some little time, Mavin began to wonder at the ease of the travel and to look at the land about her with more questioning eyes. It looked like—like park land. Like the land at the edge of the p'natti, where all the dead wood had been cut for cook fires and all noxious weeds killed. It looked used, tended. "Who lives here?" she panted, receiving awarble which conveyed no meaning in answer. "Someone," she said to herself. "Something. Not shadowpeople. They would not cut brush or clear out thorns." Someone else. Something else. "Maybe some Demesne or other. Some great Gamesman's private preserve." But, if so, where were the thousand gardeners and woodsmen it would take? She had run many leagues, and the way was still carefully tended and groomed and empty. "If there are workers, where are they?"

She heard a warbling song from far ahead, one which grew louder as she ran. The shadowpeople had stopped, had perhaps arrived at their goal. She ran on, feeling the warmth of her hindquarters as the sun rolled west. There through the trees loomed a wall of color, a towering structure which became more and more visible, wider and wider, until she emerged from the trees and saw all of it, an impossibility, glowing in the light. "Ooof," she whispered, not believing it.

"Ooof," carolled the shadowpeople in sympathy, coming back to pat her with their narrow hands and bring her forward.

It was stone, she thought. Like the stone of which the strange arches were made. Although they were green and this was red as blood, both had the same crystalline feel, the misleading look of translucence. The wall bulged toward her out of the earth, then its glittering pate arched upward at the sky. "A ball," she marveled. "A huge ball, sunk a bit in the ground. What is it? Some kind of monument? A memorial? Agirul called it Ganver's Grave. Is Ganver buried here?"

"Unlikely," said the Agirul from a tree behind her. "I don't think the Eesties bury their dead. I don't think Eesties die, come to think of it. At least I never heard one of them saying anything to indicate that they might. Not that I've been privileged to hear them say that much. No, I've probably not heard a word from an Eesty more than a dozen times in the last two or three thousand years."

"You're that old! Two or three thousand years!"

The beast shifted, as though uncomfortable at her vehemence. "Only in a sense, Mavin. What the Agirul knows, the Agirul knows. It may not have been precisely I who spoke with the Eesties, but then it was in a sense. The concept is somewhat confusing, I realize. It has to do with extracorporeal memory and rather depends upon what filing system one uses. None of which has any bearing on the current situation at all. We came, I believe, to seek some help, and should be getting at it." The Agirul came painfully out of its tree and began dragging itself toward the red ball, moving with so much effort and obvious discomfort that Mavin leaned over and picked it up, gasping at the effort. The Agirul was far heavier than its size indicated, though she was able to bear the weight once it had positioned itself upon her back. She would need more bulk if she were to bear this one far, but the creature gave her no time to seek it. "Around to the side, to your left. There's a gateway there. It will probably take all of us to get it open."

The gateway would have taken all of them and a hundred or so more to open, had it not stood open already, a curved section a man-height thick, peeled back like the skin of a thrip to show a dark, pointed doorway leading inside. "You want us to go in there?" she asked. "In the dark?"

"Not we," said the Agirul. "You. Mavin. Don't worry about translation. If you meet an Eesty, you'll be able to understand him. Or her. Or thir. Or fle. Or san. Whichever. The polite form of address is 'aged one.' And the polite stance is attentive. Don't miss anything, or you may find you've missed it all. Go on now. Not much time left." It dropped from her back and gave her an enormous shove, one which propelled her to the edge of the black gateway, over which she tripped, to fell sprawling within, within, within ... There was no within.

She stood on a shifting plain beside a row of columns. Upon each column rested a red ball, tiny in comparison to the great one she had entered, and translucent, for she could see shapes within, moving

gently as though swayed by a quiet sea. A gravel path ran beside the column, gemmy blue and green and violet stones, smoothly raked. Mavin turned to see a small creature pick up a round stone from the side of the path, nibble at it experimentally, then nip it quickly with his teeth, faceting the stone, polishing it with a raspy black tongue before raking it to the path with its claws. It moved on to another stone, taking no notice of her. When she knelt to look at it more closely, it did not react in any way. It had no eyes that she could see, no ears, only two pale, clawed hands, a mouth like a pair of steel wedges, and two pudgy legs on which to move about. It faceted another stone, then extended its neck and its hands to roll rapidly away on its feet, its hands, and the top of its head, like a wheel, disappearing into the distance.

This drew her eyes to the horizon, a very close one, as though the ground beneath her curved more than what she was used to. On that horizon marched a line of towers, each tower topped by a red ball, in each ball a hint of movement as of something moving slightly in its sleep or a watchman shirting restlessly upon a parapet. Between these towers giant wheels were rolling, creature wheels, stopping now and then to polish one of the towers with great, soft hands or trim the grassy verge with wide, scissory teeth before rolling on like huge children turning endless handsprings. Mavin moved toward them, noticing the sound her feet made on the jeweled gravel, an abrupt, questioning sound, as of someone saying "what" over and over again. She moved to the grass, only to leap back again, for the grass screamed when she stepped upon it, a thin wailing of pain and outraged dignity. So she went on, the gravel saying "what" beneath her feet, the grass weeping at her side, each section taking up the complaint as she passed.

Flowers began to appear along the verge, gray blossoms the size of her hands, five-petaled, turning upon their stems like windmills with a shrill, determined humming. Creeping, grublike things lay upon the stems of the flowers. Mavin watched as the creepers extended long, sharp tusks into the whirling petals, cutting them into fragments which floated upon the air only an instant before opening like tiny books and flying away.

Bushes along the road began to lash their branches, each branch splitting into a bundle of narrow whips which exploded outward into a net. The nets cast almost to the road, missing her, though not by much. Some of the flower creepers were caught and dragged back toward the bushes while they plied their tusks frantically, trying to cut free. The gravel went on saying "what". She came near to the first of the towers, stepping aside to avoid the nets, paying no more attention to the crying grass. The gravel fell silent beneath her feet, and she stood gazing upward at the ruby globe, twice her own height in diameter, with something moving in it. Was this an Eesty? Was it alive? How did one attract its attention? There was nothing in this place to tell her the time, to tell her how many hours there might be between now and midnight. How many of these globes dared she knock upon, if knocking was the thing to do?

Then she remembered what Agirul had said. Remembered, stood back from the globe, and cried in a voice which would have broken rock had any been present to be broken, "Aged one. Oh, oho, aged one! I cry for assistance!"

At first there was only an agitation within the globe, as though a bubble of air had burst or some small

thing whipped around in its shadowed interior, but then lines began to glow down the sides of it, golden lines, from the apex down the sides, running beneath the globe where it sat on its pillar, glowing, brightly and more brightly until she could see that they were actually lines graven into the globe, pressing down into its mirror-smooth surface. The lines darkened, deepened, turned black with a sudden cracking sound as of breaking glass. Then the sections began to fold outward, five of them, opening like a flower's petals to the sky, crisp and hard at first, turning soft, beginning to droop over the pillar to disclose what sat within.

Which was a star-shaped mound, one leg drooping over each opened petal, the center pulsating slowly as though breathing, the whole studded with small, ivory projections. As she watched, the thing began to draw itself upright, one limb rising, two more pushing upright, until what faced her was a five-pointed semblance of her own shape, two lower limbs, two upper ones with a protrusion between them containing what might be interpreted as a face. At least it had a slit in it which could be a mouth. Or could equally well be something—anything else.

She waited. Nothing further happened. Taking a stance which she defined in her own mind as attentive, she tried once more. "Aged one. Most honorable and revered aged one. I cry for help."

The voice formed in her brain, not outside it, a whispery voice, like wind, or the slow gurgle of a stream over stones, without emphasis, constantly changing yet unchanging. "Who calls Ganver for help? Ganver who gives no help? Ganver who does not interfere?"

"I was sent," she said. "Agirul sent me." There was no response to this. She tried again. "My name is Mavin. I am a shifter girl, from the world"—she waved vaguely behind her—"out there. The Ghoul Blourbast has stolen Ganver's Bone."

There was nothing, nothing. Beyond the pillar she could see another of the little jewel cutters, or perhaps the same one, burrowing into a pile of stones at the side of a branching path. It nibbled and scurried, paying no attention to her or to the star-shaped creature which confronted her. Finally the voice shaped in her mind once more.

"What is a Ghoul?"

"A Ghoul—well, a Ghoul is a person with the Talent of dead raising. Not only that. Most Ghouls eat dead flesh. And they kidnap people and kill them. And Blourbast is particularly horrible, because it is said he fastens live people to the walls of his burrows and leaves them there forever, animating the bones. And ..."

“Such a creature, how did it come by Ganver’s Bone?”

“Proom had the Bone. Do you know Proom? No, probably not. Well, Proom is a shadowperson. It is he who had the—what would you say—the custody of Ganver’s Bone. But someone, someone very powerful, I think perhaps some one of you, that is of the Eesties, sent Proom on a journey, and he didn’t want to take the Bone. So he put it in a safe place—an old, sacred, guarded place. But Blourbast came riding, and he didn’t care whether it was sacred or not, so he took it. And the little people went to sacrifice themselves to get it back, but it didn’t do any good. He won’t give it back. And if he doesn’t they’ll all die of disease. Of ghoulish-plague.” She ran out of words, unable to go on without a response. She did not know whether the thing before her had even heard her. Again she waited. Again it was long, long before the voice formed in her head.

“It is not ghoulish-plague. It is a disease of the shadowpeople.

“Long before there was any such thing as Ghoul, there were shadowpeople.

“Long before Ghoul ate shadowperson flesh, shadowpeople ate shadowperson flesh. Small creatures, beasts, with such aspirations, such longing for holiness.

“Ah. Sad. So sad, such longing for holiness. So it was Ganver came to them and made them a bargain. If they would stop eating flesh, Ganver would give them a Bone, a part of Ganver, a thing to call a note from the universal song that they might sing. And holiness would follow. In time. In forever. But you say the sickness is returned.”

“We call it ghoulish-plague, because Ghouls get it. Some of the shadowpeople were sick, but not with the plague.”

“So. Then they have kept their bargain. How long? Do you know how long ago I bargained with Proom’s people?”

She tried to think. What had Agirul said, that there had been no plague among the little people for what? A thousand years? More, perhaps? “A thousand years,” she said. “Since Proom’s many times

great-grand-father. But they still do eat meat.”

“True,” whispered the voice. “Their bodies require it. But they do not eat each other. That is good. Good. Thank you for coming. I will relish this news of the shadowpeople, for it has been a thousand years or more since I have seen them.”

The petals on the pillar began to harden, to draw upward. Mavin cried out in a voice of outrage: “No. You can’t go. Don’t you understand, the Bone is in Blourbast’s hands. The little people believe they cannot cure the illness without it.”

“They cannot,” said the voice unemotionally. “What matter is that? If they do not eat one another, they will not become sick with it.”

“The Ghoul ate shadowpeople, the Ghoul became sick with it,” she cried. “And he has given the sickness to my brother, a boy, only a child. And others. Others who have done nothing wrong. Innocent people ...”

“We do not interfere,” whispered the voice.

“You did interfere,” she shouted, stamping her foot on the gravel so that it shrieked, kicking at the grass until it wailed beneath her feet. “You gave them the Bone in the first place. That’s interference. If you hadn’t given it to them, they’d all have died. Then they wouldn’t have been around for Blourbast to eat, and he wouldn’t have gotten sick, and Mertyn wouldn’t be lying in Pfarb Durim, dying, my own brother. You did interfere!”

This time there was a long silence. One of the wheel things rolled up to the pillar, lowered itself onto four limbs and polished at the pillar with the fifth before standing up once more and rolling away. As it rolled, it made a whipping sound, like the wings of a crow, receding into the distance.

“It is hard to do good,” the voice whispered.

“Nonsense,” she muttered. “You have only to do it.”

“Shhhh,” the voice hissed, sounding rather like Agirul. “Think. Ganver heard the music of the shadowpeople and saw them dying. Ganver longed to help them. Ganver gave them his Bone. Was that good? At first, perhaps. Then the Bone was stolen, the shadowpeople were sacrificed, now they are in danger of their lives once more—and so is another people who were not even there when the Bone was given. If the Bone had not been given, you have said what would have happened.”

“They would have died,” she said, mourning. “They would all have died then.”

“And their song with them. All their songs. The song of Ganver, the Song of Morning, the Song of Zanbee, the Song of Mavin Manyshaped.”

“But if they die, the songs will die,” she argued. “We must save them. We must save Mertyn.”

“A good thing. Of course. And what evil thing will come of that? Oh, persons of the world, why do you pursue the Eesties? Have we not yet learned to do nothing, not to interfere?”

“It seems to me,” she said, “if you ever interfere at all, you just have to go on. You can’t just say, ‘Well, it isn’t my fault,’ and let it go at that. It is your fault. You admitted it. And aged one or not, you’ve just got to do something about it.”

There was a feeling of sighing, a feeling beside which any other sigh which might ever be felt was only a minor thing, a momentary discomfort. This sigh was the quintessential sigh, the ultimate sigh, and Mavin knew it as she heard it. She had asked more than she had any right to do, and she knew that as well. Gritting her teeth, she confronted the drooping Eesty and said it again.

“It’s up to you to fix it.”

“Tell me,” whispered the voice, “what is to be done.”

So she told, for the manyeth time, what was to be done. The armies of King Frogmott assembled to confront the armies of Blourbast. Blourbast himself led beneath the monuments on the road, settled there

with his immediate retinue. The ritual—whatever that might be—conducted by the shadowpeople. The cure wrought—Mavin had no idea how; presumably the Eesty did, since it was the Eesty's bone which was involved. Then, when the cure was wrought and Blourbast tried to leave, then the shifters would rise up about him from their disguise as stone and tree and earth, rise up and consume him, all but Ganver's Bone. Which would be returned to the shadowpeople ...

“Which will be returned to me ...” whispered the voice. “I did not intend it to be used in these games of back and forth. I am not a bakklewheep to be used in this way, cast between players in a Game I do not choose. Oh, I have been long asleep, Mavin Manyshaped, but I know of your Game world. Tell me, if I gave you my Bone, would your people cease their Game of eating one another as Proom's people stopped their own?”

She bowed her head in shame. “I do not know, aged one. Truly I do not know.”

“No,” it said sadly. “You do not know. Perhaps in time. There are some of you who talk with some of us. Perhaps in time. Now I have interfered once, and my holiness is dwindled thereby. I may not take myself away from it all but must continue in the way my foolishness led me. So. We will come to your place of monuments, which is also my place of monuments—for they are my people as well—when the blue star burns in the horns of Zanbee. And later, Mavin Manyshaped, I will regret what I have done, and you must pray peace for me.”

The thing came down from its pillar, all at once, so quickly that she did not see it move. It rolled, as the smaller creatures had rolled, and it made a music in its rolling, a humming series of harmonic chords which caught her up into them so that she could not tell where she was. She felt herself move, or the world move beneath her. It was impossible to tell which. There were stars overhead, and a sound of singing, and she heard Himaggery's voice crying like a mighty horn.

CHAPTER NINE

It was dark. She could hear Himaggery shouting at someone, his voice carrying fitfully on the shifting wind which whipped her hair into her eyes. There were stars blooming above her, and Zanbee, the crescent moon, sailed upon the western edge of the sky. She searched for the blue star, finding it just below the moon. Soon it would hang upon the moon's horns, or appear to do so, and she had no idea where the hours had gone since afternoon.

She stared into the dark, making her eyes huge to take in the light, blinding herself at first on the arcing rim of fire which burned at one side until she identified it as the torches of King Frogmott's army gathered

on the high rim about Pfarb Durim, between her and the city. Soon her eyes and mind began to interpret what she saw, and she located the place she stood upon, a small hill just west of the road where the Strange Monuments loomed among lights which moved and darted, hither and thither, and from which the Wizard's voice seemed to emanate.

“The Agirul says they've left the place below. It will take them almost till midnight to get here. Help the shadowpeople with that cauldron. ...”

She couldn't see enough through the flickering lights to know what was going on. But the closer she came the more confused things became, and when she stood at Himaggery's side while he fumed over some drawing in the dust, she knew less than she had to begin with. She laid a hand upon his shoulder and was surprised to feel him leap as though he had been burned.

“Mavin,” he shouted at her. “You ... where have you ... they said you might not...” Then as she was about to make soothing sounds, he said more quietly “Sorry. Things have been a bit hectic. I had word that you probably wouldn't make it back, and that you wouldn't bring any of your kin to help. Except the fellow who brought the message, of course. Your thalan, is it? Handybast? Nice enough fellow. A bit too apologetic, but then it doesn't seem that the Battlefox branch of your family has much to recommend it outside himself, so perhaps he has aplenty to apologize for.”

“Plandybast came then,” she said in wonder. “I really didn't think he would.” She leaned over the dirt where he had been draw-ing diagrams. “What are we doing? Have you changed the plan?”

“Of course. Not once or twice, but at least six times. At first we couldn't find a Herald, but then I managed to locate one I knew slightly. Subborned him, I suppose one might say, right out of Frogmott's array.”

“And you sent him to Blourbast.”

“To the front door. What there is of it. Most of Poffle is underground, as you well know, and what shows above ground isn't exactly prepossessing. Well, the fellow went off to Blourbast full of Heraldish dignity and made his move, cried challenge on the Ghoul to bring the amulet—that's what we decided to call it, an amulet. Why let the Ghoul know what he's holding?—to the Monuments at midnight tonight to assist in preparing a cure for the plague. We didn't let on that we know he has the disease himself. The Herald just went on about honor and Gamesmanship and all the rest.”

“Was there a reply?”

“Not at first. We thought there’s wasn’t going to be, and I’d started to re-plan the whole thing. Then this woman came out. It must be his sister, the Harpy ...”

“Pantiquod.”

“Right. She came out and gave us a lot of double talk which meant that Blourbast would show up but that he didn’t trust us. So he would come with a retinue. That’s what she called it. A retinue. By that time it was getting on evening, and Proom showed up with the Agirul. Or rather Proom showed up and we found the Agirul hanging in a tree by the side of the road. Fortuitous.”

“Fortuitous,” repeated Mavin, not believing it.

“Among the three of us, we decided that ‘retinue’ probably means the entire army of Hell’s Maw as well as a few close kin and men sworn to the Ghoul. And about that time your thalan arrived to tell us you probably wouldn’t be coming if you weren’t here already. You’d left him a note or something?”

“Or something, yes.”

“Which meant I had to plan it again. And then Proom’s been busy with his kindred. Evidently this ritual hasn’t been performed for a thousand years, and there’s only a song to guide them in the proper procedures, so it’s been sing and run, run and sing every moment since dark. Now we’ve just received word that Blourbast and his retinue—we were right, it is the army—are on the road coming up from Hell’s Maw. So. Now here you are.”

“I’m sorry I’m late,” she said, starting to tell him about the Eesty, wondering why the Agirul and Proom had not already done so, only to find that she could say nothing about it at all. The words stuck. She thought them clearly, but her throat and tongue simply didn’t move. She did not choke or gasp or feel that she was being throttled. There was not any sense of pain, but the words would not come.

Then for the first time she wondered about the Eesty and looked around for it. Nothing. Dark and stars

and the flicker of torches: shouting, fragments of song from the area around the arches, nothing more. And yet the darkness was not empty. She could feel it boiling around her, something living, running its quick tentacles through her hair, its sharp teeth along her spine. She shivered with a sharp, anticipatory hunger, a hunger for action, for resolution, a desire to make something episodic out of the tumbled events of her recent past.

“You’re forgiven,” he said distractedly. “Some day you must tell me all about it. But right now we’ve got to figure out how to accomplish everything that needs doing in this one final do.”

She crouched beside his diagram. “Show me.”

“King Frogmott’s army is here,” he said, retracing a wide circle just inside the line that was the arc of road outside Pfarb Durim. “From the cliffs edge south of the city, all along the inner edge of the road, curving around and then over to the cliff at the north side of the city. On high ground, all the way, able to see everything.”

“Except a Wizard who may want to get out,” she remarked in a quiet voice, not expecting the hand he raised to stroke her face.

“Except that,” he agreed in a satisfied voice. “There’s another line back a few leagues, one which encloses Pfarb Durim and Poffle, but those besiegers cannot see what is going on. Now, the road which comes up from Poffle to the top of the cliff is outside Frogmott’s lines, so Blourbast can bring his ghoulish multitude up and along toward the Monuments. The Agirul and I believe he will marshall his own army in a long array between him and King Frogmott’s men. He will want to be protected against the besiegers, for they have threatened anyone who comes out carrying the plague. Then, having protected himself against King Frogmott, he will bring a considerable group with him to the Monuments—to protect himself against whoever is here. The Herald challenged him in my name. Huld may have mentioned me to him. I don’t know who else he expects to find here, but he certainly won’t come alone.”

“I was supposed to shift ... where he’d be.”

“You were supposed to shift. Right. You and a dozen more just like you. Well, two of you just aren’t enough, that’s all. I had hoped we could make a very natural-looking setting, one he wouldn’t hesitate to sit himself down in comfortably, but with only two of you, what could we manage? A couple of rocks, trees?”

“I’ve never tried a tree,” she said in a small voice. “Or a rock either. I haven’t had much time for practice.”

“Rocks aren’t easy,” said a voice from behind them. “I hate to do them myself. Trees are easier, but they do take practice. I could probably show Mavin how in an hour or so. ...”

“Plandybast.” She turned to him gladly. “I didn’t think you’d come. I really didn’t. I thought Itter would talk you out of it.”

“Itter is always perfectly logical,” said Plandybast, rather sadly. “But she’s frequently wrong, and after a while I just get very tired of listening to her. The others haven’t been disillusioned, not yet, but the time will come. Until then I’ll just have to do what I think is right and let her fuss if she wishes. And she will.”

“What are the shadowpeople doing?” she asked. “Is it anything we could help with?”

“I think not,” said Himaggery. “They located an ancient cairn near the road and moved it to disclose a huge old cauldron underneath. They rolled that over to the middle of the road under the arches, dragged in a huge pile of wood for a fire, and now they’re out on the hills gathering herbs and blossoms and who knows what. Meantime they’ve assembled an orchestra all over the hills—I have never seen so many drums in my life—and what seems to be the greater part of several other tribes. For a creature that I have always considered to be mythical, it seems to be extremely numerous.”

“I doubt we’d ever have seen them in the ordinary way of life,” Mavin said. “If it hadn’t been for Blourbast and the plague.”

“And Mertyn,” he said, touching her face again. “And Mavin.”

She flushed and turned away toward the dark to hide it. She wanted, didn’t want him to touch her again; wanted, didn’t want him to look at her in that particularly half-hungry fashion; wanted, didn’t want the time to wear on and things to happen which would take him from her side and throw them both into violent, unthink-ing action. “Why should I feel safer fighting Ghouls,” she asked herself, rhetorically, not seeking an answer, not wanting an answer.

“You’ll have to give me something to do,” she said. “I can’t have run all this way just to sit and do nothing.”

He sighed, looked for a moment older than his years as the firelight flickered across his face. She could imagine him as he would be at age forty, tall, strong, but with the lines deep between his eyes and at the sides of his mouth, lines of both laughter and concentration. And some of anger, she told herself. Some of anger, too. He said, “Whenever Blourbast and his crew get themselves settled, try to get close to him, as close as you can. Then when the cure is done or made or created, if you can do it without getting hurt—remember, there are no Healers closer than Betand—if you can do it without getting hurt, try to get the Bone. Then get away from him.”

“You don’t want us to try to dispatch him?” asked Plandybast.

“If there were a dozen of you, yes. With two of you, no. Just get the Bone and get out. The dispatching of Blourbast will have to wait for another time.”

They sat, the three of them, staring down at the lines in the dirt, the curving arc of the road, the waving line of the cliffs edge, the x’s marking the army of the King. The Strange Monuments loomed beside them, and on the road the shadowpeople scampered and sang to one another, short bursts of music which sounded harsh and dissonant.

“One of Proom’s people says the Ghoul is almost at the cliffs top,” said the Agirul from behind them. Mavin had not known it was there, and she tried to see it, but saw only the massed bulk of foliage against the lighter sky.

“Who does he have with him?” asked the Fon.

“In addition to the army, there is his sister and her twins, Huld and Huldra. Then there are a few guards, a Sorcerer, two Armigers, two Tragamors.”

“And here, with us?”

“Me,” said Himaggery. “And you two shifters. Proom and his people. The Agirul. And my friend the Herald. He is waiting in the trees to make whatever announcements may seem most useful.

“Windlow?” she asked. “Mertyn?”

“I haven’t been back in the city,” he said softly. “I don’t know, Mavin. Believe me, Windlow will have done everything possible for him.”

“I know,” she admitted. “Except that it is hard to let someone else do it while I am out here, not knowing.”

“We’d better get out of the light,” he said. “I’ll go down near the road. We found some logs to use as seats for Blourbast, arranged where we want him, in the middle of the road. We’ll try to get him there. Once he is there, do what you can ...”

He left the two shifters, taking the torch with him. They sat for a moment silent, then Mavin said, “A log should be easier than a tree.”

“It is,” Plandybast admitted. “Much.”

“We couldn’t be much closer than to have him sitting on us.”

“If the small ones do not make the cure ...” Plandybast said, “and he is sitting on us ...”

“They’ll make it. Plandybast, I’ve seen them do wonderful things. Don’t doubt it for a moment.” And she drew him up to follow her down into the darkness of the road where the shadowpeople had lighted the fire beneath their cauldron and a pungent smoke poured into the night sky, making her dizzy yet at the same time less troubled. It was not difficult to become a log. She slumped once or twice, then simply lay there and let the smoke wreath her around, driven as it was by a downdraft of the fitful wind.

She heard Huld’s voice first, a petulant whine, a sneering tone, “They have made a place for you, dear

thalan. The seats are not what you are accustomed to, I fear. There is no velvet cushion.”

“Hush, dear boy. I have no need for velvet cushions. Does one need a velvet cushion to witness a wonder? Hmmm? And are we not to witness a wonder tonight? The making of a plague cure? Who has heard of such a thing? The Healers will be frantic with embarrassment and envy. Not a bad thing, either. I am not fond of Healers.”

Another voice, so like Huld’s that it might have been mistaken for his, yet higher, lighter. “Dear brother, dear thalan, indeed we would all dispense with cushions to see this thing. And to take—what may I say?—advantage of it.”

“Be silent, girl,” said Pantiquod, following them down onto the road where they clustered around the logs with their guardsmen, all staring suspiciously into the darkness. “Say nothing you would not like to have overheard. The dark is all around us, and it trembles with ears.”

“Of course, mother,” said the voice sweetly. “One would not wish to be overheard saying that a cure of the plague is of great interest to us.”

“Your mother said hush,” grated the Ghoul. “Now I say to you hush, Huldra. You may think that child in you protects you from my displeasure, but I have no care for that. If you trouble me, girl, both you and the child may go into hell for all me.”

“Not so quick, thalan,” purred Huld. “I am thalan to the child in her womb, you know. Mine own. And mine own child, too—as is the teaching of the High King, away there in the south—a child linked to me doubly if not to you at all. So, Blourbast, go quietly with my gentle sister or I will make your sickness seem a day’s walk in the sun.”

“Let us all be still,” said Pantiquod. “We are here for a reason. Let the reason be manifest. I see nothing except fitful torches and scampering shadows. Is this a mockery?”

“No mockery, madam,” came Himaggery’s voice from the dark. “The blue star moves towards the horns of Zanbee. The little people of the forests have lit their fires beneath the great cauldron. They will begin to sing soon. There will be drums, voices, manifestations. At some point in the ritual, I will call to you to strike the ... amulet you carry. Strike it then, and the cure will be made.”

“I will return in time. Until then, seat yourselves and do not disrupt what must occur.” They heard him moving away into the shadows.

“Where will this cure be made?” asked Huldra, seating herself on Mavin’s back with a moue of discontent. “What form will it take?”

“They have spoken of a cauldron,” said the Harpy Pantiquod. “Undoubtedly the cure will be therein. When it is made, we must move quickly to take it. If the cauldron is too heavy to be carried, then we will take what we can in our flasks and dump the rest upon the ground.”

“How dreadful for Pfarb Durim,” said Huld. “They will not receive their portion.”

“I have promised you Pfarb Durim,” said the Ghoul. “When it is empty.”

“I am glad you remember that promise,” said Huld, fingering the dagger at his side. “It is a promise I hope much upon. There are some in that city who may not die of plague, and I wish to be first among them like a fustigar among the bunwits. They have not pleased me.”

“Did the old Seer speak nastily to my dear brother?” the woman beside him drawled. “Did the little Wizard make him unhappy?”

“Be still, girl. There are things I could do to you which would not affect the child, so do not count too much upon my forbearance. Hush. What is that?”

The sound was of many drums throughout the hills near the road, drum heads roaring to the tumbling thump of a thousand little hands, like soft thunder far among mountains. Flutes came then, softly, a dawn birdsong of flutes, then gentle bells, music to wake one who had slept a long sleep.

The fire beneath the cauldron blazed up, and they could see the tiny shadows which crossed before it, black against the amber light, some dragging more wood to the fire, others tossing their burdens into the cauldron. Steam rose from the cauldron to join the smoke of the fire, and this moist, woody mist waved

back and forth across the road, wreathing the bases of the Monuments, seeming to soak into the crystalline material of which they were made, making them appear soft and porous. One could almost see the mists sucked up into them, the softness moving upward on each arch, out of the firelight into the high darkness.

The smell of the mist reached them at the same time the voices began to sing, taking up the bell song and repeating it, close, far, close again, first the highest voices and then the deeper, again and again. A lone trumpet began to ride high upon the song, higher yet, impossibly treble above the singing, while some bass horn or some great stone windpipe blew notes almost below their hearing so that the ground trembled with it.

The earth trembled, trembled, then moaned.

Beside them the base of the Strange Monument shivered in the earth. The pedestal beneath it shifted, groaned, and then was still. Mavin created eyes in the top of her log shape and looked up. The arch was glowing green: diagonally across the width of it a dark line appeared, deeper with each moment. Then the sound of breaking glass cracked through the music and the top of the arch split in two lengthwise, each part coiling upward like a serpent to stand high above its base, each arch becoming two tapered pillars which waved in the music like reeds in wind.

The watchers shivered. The Monuments danced, reaching toward one another across the road, beside the road, bowing and touching their tips, two great rows of tapered towers, dancing green in the night as the drums went on and on and the mists from the cauldron rose more thickly upon the shifting wind.

“Keep your eyes on that cauldron,” hissed the Ghoul. “Move to capture it as soon as I strike the amulet.” The men behind him murmured assent even as they shifted uneasily, feeling the earth teeter beneath them.

Now the contents of the cauldron began to glow, a pillar of ruby light rising out of the vessel toward the zenith. The singers had moved closer to the road, their voices rising now in an almost unbearable crescendo. Mavin held herself rigid, though she wanted to weep, feint, curl up where she lay into as tiny a space as she could. She heard the voice of Himaggery calling from the sidelines. “Be ready, Blourbast.”

Then all that had gone before faded in a hurricane of sound, a storm of music, a shattering climax in which there were sounds of organs and trumpets and bells so huge that the world shivered. “Now, Blourbast!” came Himaggery’s voice, barely audible over the tumult, and the Ghoul held up the amulet and struck it with his dagger.

One sound.

One sound, piercing sweet in silence.

Tumult over, singing over, all the terrible riot of drum and trumpet over, and only that one sound singing on and on and on into the quiet of night. The cauldron blazed up in response, the red light pouring out to spread like an ointment across the sky, into every face, onto every surface, high and low, hidden or visible, like water which could run everywhere, over the drawn battle lines of the armies, over the walls of Pfarb Durim, onto every roof, down every chimney, into every window and door, closed or open, through every wall. Only Mavin heard the whip, whip, whip as of great wings and only Mavin saw the huge, cloudy wheel flick through their midst in an instant, taking Ganver's Bone with it and leaving the Ghoul standing, his mouth open, his hands empty except for the dagger he had used to strike that note.

And Mavin knew why the Eesty had taken its Bone back again. It would not have done to leave that note in the hands of Gamesmen. Among the shadowpeople, perhaps, for they were attempting to be holy, though they failed from time to tune, but not among the Gamesmen.

In the silent flicker of the distant fire, they saw the shadowpeople tip the cauldron over and let it empty itself on the roadway.

The Ghoul roared, spitting curses. From the roadside, Himaggery said, "You need not threaten and bluster, Ghoul. The bargain was kept. You are cured."

And Huld's voice, hissing with a scarce concealed fury, "And are those in Pfarb Durim cured as well?"

"All," said Himaggery. "All within reach of the light, and it spread as far as my eyes could see."

Huld turned on the Ghoul, dagger flicking in his hand, "Then you have not kept your promise, thalan. You have undone what you promised me."

“But, but...” blustered the Ghoul, the only words he had time to say, for the dagger stood full in his throat and the blood rushed behind it in a flood, soaking his chest and belly, spurting upon those who sat near him so that they recoiled, Mavin recoiled, becoming herself near the place that Himaggery stood, both to stand with shocked eyes while Huld drew his dagger out again and turned toward Himaggery with madness in his eyes.

“Your fault, Wizard. You tempted him with this cure. Pfarb Durim would have been mine except for you.” And he came rushing toward Himaggery, dagger high, and Himaggery with no protection at all—save Mavin, before him, furious, suddenly taking the shape of another Gamesman, without thinking, without planning, so it was Blourbast stood before Huld’s onrush and roared into his face like some mighty beast with such ferocious aspect and horrible, bleeding gash of throat that Huld stopped, eyes glazed, screamed, and turned to stumble away into the night. The others, also, Pantiquod and Huldra and the guardsmen, frantic, overwrought, driven half mad by the music and then fully mad to see Blourbast’s body stand before them again.

The shape dropped away. Mavin found herself standing bare in the roadway, covered with Blourbast’s blood, too weary to shift a covering for herself. She felt Himaggery’s cloak swing around her, his arms draw her close. A quivering voice asked, “Is it all right to change now?” and Himaggery replied, “Yes, Plandybast. It’s all over. You can unlog yourself.”

“I’m glad there wasn’t any real violence,” said Plandybast. “I’ve never been able to handle violence.”

“I’m glad, too,” said Himaggery, lifting her up and carrying her away to the comfortable shelter of the trees.

“Is she all right?” asked the Agirul.

“She’s covered with blood,” said Himaggery. “See if you can get someone to bring water.” Then he sat beneath the tree, cuddling her close in his arms. She could not remember being so held, not ever, not even by Handbright in the long ago. She sighed, a sigh very like the Eesty’s sigh, and let all of it fade away into dark.

CHAPTER TEN

When morning came, they went into Pfarb Durim. The armies of King Frogmott were no barrier. The

sickness had been spreading among the besiegers, and the cure was as evident to them as it was to those in the city. Indeed, when Mavin and Himaggery passed, they were already taking down the tents and putting out the fires, preparatory to the long march back to the marshes of the upper Graywater, to the northeast.

They found Mertyn still in the room in which they had left him, Windlow still by his side, though both were sound asleep on the same bed, and Himaggery forbore to wake them. Instead, he ordered a room for Mavin, and a bathtub, and various wares from clothiers and makers of unguents. By the time Mertyn wakened, she was more mistress of herself than she had ever been in Danderbat keep or since.

All of this had gone to make her a little shy, not least by the fact that she knew things the others did not, and could not tell them. She had been unable to speak of them even to the Agirul when she had wakened beneath his tree that morning. She had tried, and the Agirul had opened one slitlike eye to peer at her as though it had never seen her before and would not see her again.

“Many of us,” it said at last, “remember things that cannot be shared. Sometimes we remember things that did not really happen. Does that make them less true? An interesting philosophical point which you may enjoy thinking about at odd times.” Then it had gone back to sleep, and she had given up. She did not for one moment believe that she remembered a thing which had not happened, but she was realist enough to know that it would be her own story, her own memory, and only that.

Now she sat at Mertyn’s side in her luxurious room—he had been moved as soon as he woke—looking out across the cliff edge to the far west. “Schlaizy Noithn is there,” she said to him. “South-west, there beyond the firehills. Perhaps Handbright is there.”

“There was more to her leaving Danderbat keep than you told me, wasn’t there?” He was still pale and weak from not having eaten for some days, but his eyes were alert and sparkling. “Are you going to tell me?”

“Perhaps someday,” she said. “Not now.”

“That Wizard is in love with you,” he said. “I can tell. Besides, he was talking to Windlow about it.”

She didn’t answer, merely sat looking at the horizon. The sea was there, beyond the firehills. She wondered if she could find her way back to Ganver’s Grave. She wondered if Ganver’s Grave had not

been moved elsewhere.

“He’ll probably ask you to go with them.”

“Where are they going?”

“Windlow has a school at the High Demesne, near the Lakes of Tarnoch. That’s far to the south, west of Lake Yost.”

“That’s right,” she mused. “Valdon is the King’s son. And Boldery. Windlow is to educate them both.”

“Not Valdon,” Mertyn went on, a little cocky, as though he had had something to do with it. “Valdon and that Huld got along so well that Windlow had words with Valdon about it, and that made Valdon mad, so he took the servants and went riding out at dawn. He says Windlow may school Boldery all he likes, but Valdon will have none of it.”

“That’s too bad,” she said. “If he follows Huld, it will be the death of him.” She turned to find the boy’s eyes fixed on her in wonder.

“That’s what Windlow says. He had a vision about it,” he said.

“It doesn’t take a vision. Anyone would know. Huld is walking death to anyone who comes near him. Well, he’s gone, for a time at least.”

“And the plague is cured. And Windlow says so long as no one eats shadowpeople—yech, I wouldn’t—no one will ever get the plague again. You don’t think anyone ever will, do you?”

She shrugged. “Many strange things happen, Mertyn, brother boy.”

There was a light knock on the door. She opened it to let Windlow and the Fon come in, Boldery close behind them bearing a wrapped gift. "I brought it for Mertyn," he said. "Really, it's for us both." Then, "It's a game," he announced proudly to Mertyn. "I came to play it with you."

"The Seer and I thought—that is, we felt the boys might like to play together for a time while we have a meal downstairs." The Fon held out his hand to her, but she only smiled at him, using her own hands to gather her skirts. They had not been much for skirts at Danderbat-keep. She rather liked the feel, the luxurious sway of the heavy material at her ankles and the warmth around her legs, but they still took a bit of managing.

"I'd like that." She smiled at them both, going out the door and preceding them down the stairs. There was a table set for them on a paved terrace beside a fountain, and the servants of the Mont were busy in attendance. There was fruit and wine already on the table. She sat and stared at it, smiling faintly, not seeing it.

"Mavin." She did not reply. "Mavin, what are you thinking about? Are you troubled by the Ghoul's death?" She looked up to find Windlow's eyes fixed on her, his face full of concern.

Briskly she shook her head, clearing it, giving up the dreamy fog she had moved in since waking. "I'm sorry, Seer," she said. "Today has been ... today has been like a dream. It is hard to wake up."

"It's the first time in days you have not had to do something outrageous," he replied, spooning thrilp slices into his mouth. "Quite frankly, it's the first such day for me, too, in a very long while. Prince Valdon was not an easy traveling companion. Huld was worse, of course, but not by much. I understand he made off into the woods?"

"No doubt he is back in Poffle by now," she said. "His sister is pregnant. By him, he says. Their mother the Harpy is with them. I would say Huld is master in Hell's Maw now."

"I had hoped the place was empty."

"Not now, not soon," she said. "Though it is bound to come, one day."

“Aha,” he laughed. “So now you are a Seer.”

“No.” She frowned. “Now I am beginning to learn to use my brain.” She laughed in return. “It is like Seeing in one way. It, also, can be wrong from time to time.”

The Fon sat while they talked, watching her hungrily, eating little. When the waiters had brought fresh bread and bits of grilled sausage, he said, “Mavin, will you be going to Battlefox keep, now that you have been there once and seen the people?”

“No. No, our thalan, Plandybast, is a good fellow, as you yourself said, Fon. But that is not what I want for Mertyn. Mertyn has Talent, you know. Beguilement. He has had it since he was a fifteen-season child. It is a large Talent, and he must learn to manage it. They could do nothing for him in Battlefox save savage him and make him vicious with it. No. He must have a good teacher.” She was looking at Windlow as she said it, half smiling. “I spoke with him about it, and he told me what teacher he would prefer. Of course, I cannot pay much in the way of fees.”

“I will pay the fees,” choked the Fon. “In return for saving my life, Mavin. Huld would have killed me.”

“He would have tried. I think you might have stopped him quite successfully.”

“And you, Mavin?” asked Windlow, quietly, softly, like a child trying to capture a wild bunwit without scaring it. “You?”

“Will you come with Mertyn?” The Fon, less wary, too eager.

“No,” she said.

“No? Never?”

She shook her head, biting her lip over an expression which might have been part smile. “I did not say never. I only said no, I will not come with Mertyn.” She folded her napkin as she had seen other diners

do, reached out to take their hands, one on each side.

“I am Mavin of Danderbat keep? What is a Mavin of Danderbat keep? What shape is it? What color is it? What does it feel and know in its bones? Does it fly? Crawl? Does it grow feathers or fur?”

“What places has it seen? What Assemblies has it attended? You who are not shifters do not know what an assembly is, and neither really does a shifter girl who has not left her keep to go into the wide world.

“What is in Schlaizy Noithn? For me?”

“No, Fon. I will not come with Mertyn now. Though I may, some day. Some day.”

And she would not let them try to dissuade her, nor would she let the Fon be near her with the two of them alone, for she knew what her blood would do and how little her head could manage it. Instead, a day or two later, she stood beside the parapet with him, with Boldery and Mertyn playing at wands and rings nearby, and told him farewell.

“My sister is out there somewhere. I would like to find her, see if I can help her. She may need my help. As for you, Fon, you do not need my help, not now.”

“Do not call me Fon. You named me before. I am the Wizard Himaggery, and I will be that Wizard until you name me else.”

“The Fon is dead.” She laughed shakily. “Long live the Himaggery.”

“So be it.” He was not laughing at all. “Will you make a bargain with me, Mavin?”

“What sort of bargain?”

“If you go out into the world, and if the world is exciting, and you forget me, and time spins as time does, and the world passes as the world does, will you return to this place twenty years from now and meet me here if you have not seen me before then?”

“Twenty years? So long? Do you think I will not seek my friends out long before that?”

“Well, and if you do, better yet. But will you promise me, Mavin?”

“I’ll be old, wrinkled.”

“It will not matter. Will you promise me?”

“Oh, that I’ll promise!” She laughed up into his unlaughing face.

“On your honor?”

“On my honor. On my Talent. On my word.”

“Twenty years?”

“Twenty years.” She turned away, biting her lip, afraid that her calm might break and the tears spill over. “Now. I am going west, my friend. I have made my farewells to Mertyn.” She reached out to stroke his face as he had done so many times to hers, then turned down the stairs and away down the street of the city, without looking back.

Windlow came to him where he stood, looking after her. “Did she make the promise?”

“Yes.”

“Did she know it was a Seeing of mine?”

“I didn’t tell her.”

“Does she know she will not see you again until then?”

“I didn’t tell her,”* he said. “I could not bear to say it. I can not bear to think of it now.”

The road south of Pfarb Durim is arched by great, strange monuments. Mavin Manyshaped walked that way, seeing the arches with new eyes. She felt eyes from the branches of the trees watching her pass. On the hills, voices added to a song, spinning it into a lazy chant which made small echoes off the Strange Monuments, almost like an answer.

As for her, her eyes were fixed on the horizon where Schlaizy Noithn lay, and the western sea. There was something in her mind of wings. And something of places no other eyes than hers had ever seen. “I am the servant of the Wizard Himaggery,” she sang, quoting the Mavin of a younger time. “Perhaps,” she sang, making a joyful shout at the sky. “But not yet!”

THE FLIGHT OF MAVIN MANYSHAPED

CHAPTER ONE

From her perch on the side of the mainroot, Beedie could lean back at minor peril to her life and look up the Wall, the mainroot dwindling away in perspective until the solid, armspan width of it had shrunk down to a mere hair’s breadth line at the rim of the chasm. So much height above was dizzying, and she slapped at the right piton to hear the comforting thwunging sound which indicated it was solidly set. Setting her spurs more deeply into the bark, she thrust back against the strap to look up once more at the light falling through the leaves of the flattrees, huge even at this distance, a ten-day climb from the rim. She didn’t want to miss the noonglow, that vivid, emerald moment when the light came directly down through the leaves, making the whole chasm shine with the same verdant light it now shed on the western, morning-light, wall. Sometimes birds could be seen in the noonglow, enormous white ones, messengers—so the Birders said—of the Boundless.

It was in the noonglow that the birdwoman had come, slanting down in the green rays, white plumes streaming from the edges of her wings, to alight on the bridge rail of Topbridge, almost within the arms of Mercald the Birder. And Mercald had had her ever since, ever since he caged her that day only to find a girl in the cage the following morning. It had been either bird or girl every day since, with no one able to say for sure what it meant or why she had come in the first place. Still, the Birder caste had gained more status from that event than they had in all the history of the bridges—so much so that there was serious consideration of elevating them to the same high status as the Bridgers, Beedie's own caste. Not that she cared. "Not that I care," she advised herself. "It makes no difference to me," knowing that it made considerable difference to some. There were three Bridger families in the chasm, and while the Beeds and the Chafers were not jealous of caste status, the Banders certainly were. She would bet that old Slysaw Bander would do everything in his power to prevent any Birder being considered his equal. "Thank the Boundless he isn't the eldest," she reflected. "If old Slysaw were the eldest, the whole chasm would regret it."

Judging noonglow to be some time off yet, she dug in her spurs and began climbing upward; chuff, heave, chuff, heave, chuff. The roll of measuring cord at her belt had unreeled almost to its end. Chuff, heave, chuff. Left, right, heave the strap, left, right, heave the strap. The measuring cord began to tug. She leaned out on her strap once more, judging how close she had come to her starting mark. Immodest self-congratulations. Within an arm's reach; not bad. She began to set pitons on the mark, right and left. Might as well set them deep. She would be back to this place with others of the Bridgers soon, getting ready to set the lines, tackle and winches. Topbridge had become crowded, too crowded, many thought, and the elders wanted the bridgetown widened. Even from this distance she could hear the sounds of the crowd from Topbridge, cries from the market, the rasp of a saw from the middle of the bridge where the Grafters House stood, hammers banging on anvils. She took up her own hammer, concentrating on the job. When the pitons were set deeply she leaned on her strap once more, waiting for the noonglow.

High above the bridgetowns the rim of the chasm was edged with flattrees, wider than they were high, one set of roots anchoring the trees to the rock of the plain, another set dropping down the chasm wall into the dark pit of the bottom with its unseen mysterious waters. Here and there the mainroots bulged into swollen, spherical water-bellies, sole source of water for the bridge people. At intervals the mainroots sent out side roots, smaller though still huge, which grew horizontally along the wall before plummeting downward. The side roots put out ropey, smaller roots of their own, and the ropey roots were heavily furred in hair roots, the whole gigantic mass curtaining the sides of the chasm like a monstrous combed pelt, a matted shag of roots so dense that none of the chasm wall could be seen. In shadow, the roots appeared dark and impenetrable, but now in the emerald light of glorious noonglow the shaggy mass blazed out of shadow in jeweled greens as bright as the high glowing leaves, each strand an individual shining line. A chorus of floppers began to honk somewhere in the mass; flocks of birds from the distant rim to circle in the light like devotees circling the altar of the Boundless. All the noises of Topbridge ceased—the other cities were too far down to be heard except as a murmur—the sound of the bell and the call to prayer coming from the Birder's tower in a thin, cutting cry, sharp as broken glass.

Below her right foot she could see the Bridger house of Topbridge and the bridge itself, wide and solid, diminishing into a long wedge stretching across the chasm to the far wall, 2000 paces away. On either

side of it were nets looking like lace, dotted with the fallen flattree leaves they were put there to catch.

Below her left foot she could see the narrower wedge of Nextdown, too tiny to seem real, and beyond it to the left, up-chasm, the thin line of Midwall. Down there somewhere lay Bottommost, barely visible, shining sometimes at noonglow as the merest thread. Potter's bridge and Miner's bridge were up-chasm, hidden by the bulk of Topbridge, but she could see Harvester's far off to her right, just at the place the chasm began to turn away west. Seven cities of the chasm. And the broken one above. And the lost one below. The lost one which had disappeared, so it was said, all in one night into the depths of the chasm together with all its people and all its fabled treasure—punished, the Birders said, because of some insult to the Boundless. Lately, though, there had been talk of other reasons, perhaps other bridgetowns in jeopardy—talk of something down in the depths which threatened them all. She made a religious gesture, a ritual shiver at the thought of the lost bridge, then put it out of mind.

The Birder had finished calling prayers. Already the glow had moved from morning wall to evening wall. Time to get on with the task.

She had begun the job the day before by climbing the great mainroot which supported Topbridge in order to measure it from midpoint to the place it left the wall in its long catenary. She had started early in the morning, shivering a little in the mists at the edge of Topbridge commons as she fastened on her belt and spurs. None of the Bridgers had been out and about yet. She had touched the bell outside the Maintainer's door as she came by, and a 'Tainer had come running—or giving that appearance. Hairroot Chafer gave as his opinion that 'Tainers were bred for slowness, like the slow-girules the Harvesters used to gather root nodules, and only gave the impression of running by leaning forward, wherever they went—to give her a cup of nodule broth and a crisp cake of wall moss.

“A fine morning, Bridger.” It was the Maintainer called Roges, a tall, strong man, who seemed often to be the one available when Beedie needed something.

“Fine enough,” she had answered shortly. It did not do, she had been told, to become too friendly with the Maintainers. Pity. This one seemed to have good sense and he was not slow, no matter what Hairroot Chafer said. “I seem to be about the business early.”

“It was the Birder feast last night,” the Maintainer murmured, looking politely away while she finished the broth. “To discuss the elevation of the Birder caste. Everyone drank a great deal. You had not yet returned from the mainroot, Bridger.” Though he did not breach courtesy, she could tell he was curious about that. She toyed with the idea of making up some story to keep the 'Tainers occupied in myth-building for a day or two—everyone knew they were frightfully superstitious—but her sense of fairness prevented.

“I broke a spur, ‘Tainer. Unfortunately, I also broke the strap. I had a spare spur, as what Bridger would not, but not a spare strap, and it took a little time to braid one out of root hair.” She was a little embarrassed at his look of concern. A broken strap was nothing. “True, I was late returning. Was it you put the meat and moss cake by my bed?”

He nodded. “I saw you had not returned. It is difficult to sleep if one is hungry.”

“And difficult to sleep if a hungry Bridger comes hammering on your door,” she said, grinning. Roges must have been thinking of his own sleep as much as of hers. She handed him the cup, checked the fastening on her belt, then began to climb the side root. The great mainroot of the city was only a little above her head at this point.

“May the roots support you as they do the city,” the ‘Tainer called from below, looking up after her for longer than necessary before moving away toward his house. Beedie did not reply. Getting from the side root to the mainroot took a bit of tricky maneuver, and she wanted her attention on her work. Once on the top of the mainroot, she fastened the end of her measuring cord to the root just over the bulge that marked the center point and then began to walk along the root toward the evening-light wall, slightly uphill.

When the curve grew steeper she threw her strap around the root, dug in her spurs and started to climb, the measuring cord unreeling from its container at her waist. It was a good climb, steeper the closer to the wall she came, higher and higher above the bridgetown, until at last she could reach out and touch the wall through the tangle of rope roots and hairs. She marked the place.

Now she had to locate a new mainroot, one straight and supple, with no soft spots or water-bellies, and measure it downward from a place on the wall even with her mark, her own white-painted signs which showed bright even against the shadow. She had spent the rest of the day prospecting among the likely mainroots for the best possible one as close to the existing bridge as possible. That had been yesterday’s work.

Today she had started early again, climbing to the mainroot she had selected and marking it carefully. She fastened her measuring cord at that point, then climbed down as she checked each arm-length of the root for imperfections. Sometimes a mainroot would look solid, with unblemished bark, but there would be soft spots hidden away. One tapped with the hammer while listening for the telltale dullness, the soggy sound which would hint at rot. One tapped and listened, tapped and listened, and then one prayed anyhow, for there were rots set so deep no Bridger could find them except by luck and the help of the Boundless. The root she had chosen seemed good throughout its length. She had fastened her cord at the

bottom and climbed back up the root, measuring once more to come to her present perch. "Measure twice, cut once," she told herself wearily. Bridger youngsters were reared on the story of Amblebee Bridger who measured once, cut once, and found he had cut too short the only mainroot near enough to use. "Measure twice, cut once." Well, she had measured twice, and tomorrow she would start preparing for the cut. She thwapped the pitons with her hand one final time, then started the climb down. On the far side of the chasm, Byle Bander should have completed his own measurement today. Likely he would be preparing to cut soon as well.

After they were cut, the two great roots would be hauled up, the cut ends rising, coming closer and closer in the middle of the chasm until they almost touched. Then one end would be shaped into a socket, the other into a join, the join would be doused with plant glue, the two would be hauled together and secured with lines while they grew together. In a couple of seasons the join would be callused over, bulging a little, stronger than the mainroot itself.

She hoped Byle Bander would cut his mainroot long enough to make a good socket. Last time he hadn't left enough to allow chopping away all the wood they had set hooks into, and roots made a better join if all the hook-damaged wood was cut away before socketing. Last time had only been a side root, one meant to carry a footbridge and stairs between Topbridge and Nextdown. It hadn't had to carry much weight. Still—it would have been better to cut a little longer. And a mainroot, one meant to carry a city, well—she just hoped he cut it long enough. It wouldn't do to suggest it to him. Though Byle Bander had received his tools and titles in the same season Beedie had, to hear him talk he'd been rootwalking two lifetimes at least. Any thought of Byle Bander made her uncomfortable and brought back a memory of the summer that the root broke, one she would rather not have recalled.

The summer the root broke, Beedie had been about ten, living in the Bridger House on Nextdown with her father, Hookset, her mother, Rootwalker, and assorted aunts, uncles, cousins and remoter kin. Uncle Highspurs was the eldest Bridger on Nextdown, which made the Beed family head of caste and main occupiers of Bridgers House. The other Bridger family on Nextdown was the Bander family who said they preferred to live by themselves in a wallhouse at the far, evening-light, side of the chasm. They had moved up from Midwall, some said, though others thought it was from Bottommost itself, and they did not talk as the Nextdowners did. There were only half a dozen Banders in the family: Slysaw and his wife, two grown sons, one old aunt and a boy Beedie's age, Byle. There were known to be many more members of the Bander family at Topbridge, and still more at Miner's bridge, but the family at Nextdown was neither numerous nor considered very important. Beedie thought about that sometimes, how common and unimportant the Banders had seemed.

The elders had decided to expand Nextdown on the up-chasm side. The discussions about it had gone on for a long time, at least a season, with a good deal of exploration among the mainroots to locate proper candidates to carry the new part of the bridgetown. Beed had even been allowed to try her own little spurs up and down the roots, being shown the water-bellies and how to find soft spots, learning how to judge the direction of side roots. Both the first and second pair of support roots had been located, and the first pair was due to be cut, morning-light side first, then the evening-light side. The Beed family had made the decisions, but they'd invited old Bander, him they called Slysaw, to be part of the

cutting crew. He'd told them no thank you very much, but his family had planned to visit kin downstairs at Potters' bridge that day and some days to follow.

"Besides, you Beeders have plenty hands," the man had said, sneering a little, the way he always did. "Mighty prolific family, the Beeders. You've got hands aplenty. Just take Highspurs and Hookset and a few uncles and you've got the job done in a jiffy." Then he and his family had gone off to the stairs, seeming eager to make the two-day climb it would take with the old woman, though the younger ones might have made it in a day, going down.

"Well," said Beedie's dad. "We offered, 'Walker. You heard me make the offer. The old fart won't cooperate worth a flopper's honk. We try and make work for him to earn his space and he goes to visit kin. We don't make work for him and he complains to the elders we're shutting him out. Don't worry what would satisfy the Bander family, tell true, and I'm about tired of trying to find out."

Beedie remembered it, all of it, the conversation around the hearth where the deadroot fire gleamed and the 'Tainers were stirring the soup pot. Next morning six of the Beeds, including Uncle Highspurs and Beedie's parents, went down-root to make the cut, and that was the last anyone saw of them, ever. Hookset and Rootwalker. Uncle Cleancut, Uncle Highspurs, Cousin Rootcutter, Cousin Highclimb, the one who had gone all the way to the rim and brought back most of a fresh leaf from a flattree to astonish them all with the color of it when she unfolded it and it covered the bridgetown from side to side.

All the elders of the family were gone, including the eldest Bridger. They had started the cut right enough, but seemingly the root had broken, broken away while they were working, and carried them all to the bottom, into the dark and mystery of the Bounded, among the rejected dead but without the ceremony of the flopper-skin kites, the memorial clothes. Six of them, gone, gone with all the tools and the hooks and the Unes. All but one rootsaw that Aunt Six found wedged in the cut and brought back to Beedie, for it had been her mother's.

"Something wrong there, Beedie," she had mourned. "That root is all black up inside, as though it had been burned. Looky here at what I found. . . ." She had shown the black lumps. "Charcoal. I took that right out of the root at the back, next to the wall, down a little lower than they started the cut. Oh, from the cut side it looks solid, but from the back, it's only a shell ..."

"Daddy wouldn't have cut burning wood," Beedie had objected. "Mother wouldn't. It isn't safe."

"Oh, no, child, they wouldn't have done it. Not if they'd known. If it was burning up inside when they got there there'd be no smoke to smell. Not until the saw cut through to the center, where the fire was,

and then the smoke ..." She didn't need to say anything more. Greenroot smoke was lethal. Everyone knew that.

A day later, Beedie had put on her spurs and climbed down against all custom and allowances, for she was too young to be allowed on a mainroot by herself. Still she went, chuff and heave until she thought her arms would drop off, to come at last to the end of the mainroot and see for herself. Someone had been there in the meantime. Someone had chopped away all the char with an adze, leaving only clean root, but Beedie went on down a side root and found pieces of the char caught in the root hairs, back near the wall. She looked down, sick and dizzy from a climb considerably above her strength, seeing not far below her the stair to Potter's bridge. It would have been easy to climb onto the stair from the mainroot. Easy to get to the mainroot from the stair, come to that. Easy. She cut the thought off. Why would anyone burn a mainroot? Greenroot made poisonous smoke. Deadroot was always dried for a long time before burning. Besides, Nextdown needed that root. Meddling with it was unthinkable, so she resolutely did not think it.

The Potter's bridge stairs were so close, so easy in comparison to the long climb upward on spurs that she almost decided to get back to Nextdown that way, but something dissuaded her. Afterward, it was hard to remember what the reason had been, but she connected it to the return of the Bander family that night. Nothing was the same after that. Slysaw was now the eldest Bridger on Nextdown, which meant he held Bridgers House. He wasn't the most even-handed of holders, either, though elders weren't supposed to play favorites, and it wasn't long before the remaining Beed cousins were moving up to Topbridge or down to Potter's or Midwall. Finally, there had been only Beedie and Aunt Six left, and when old Slysaw told Aunt Six she had to move out of her old rooms because he meant to give them to a Bander cousin from Midwall, Aunt Six decided to leave. The two of them moved up to Topbridge next day, carrying what they could on their backs and leaving the rest for the Banders. "Ill-wished on them," said Aunt Six. "Every table and chair ill-wished on them, and may those who sit there have the eternal trots."

On Topbridge the Bridgers were more mixed; there were some Banders, true, but there were more Seeds and more Chafers and plenty of housing for them all. The Bridgers House was held by Greenfire Chafer—who was killed soon after, some said by a rogue flopper — and Beedie and Aunt Six were given rooms in the Bridgers House at the morning-light end of the bridge right away. Then Beedie got on with her schooling. Still, every now and then she would wake in the chasm night to the sound of floppers honking in the root mat, half dreaming about hiding on the rootwall, lumps of charcoal in her hands, looking up at the adze-cut end of the mainroot while hearing from below that phlegmy chuckle as Slysaw Bander came climbing up the stairs.

And now it was a Bander again, Slysaw's son Byle, come to work on Topbridge, cutting the roots too short, putting his hands on Beedie every chance he got, and bragging as though he were a Firstbridger himself. Beedie wondered, not for the first time, if she and Aunt Six moved to Bottommost whether they might escape from Banders once and for all.

The bridgetown grew larger and louder as she climbed down toward it, chunk, chunk, chunk, the spurs biting into the bark. She felt lucky to have found a mainroot right where it was wanted, with good, clean length and no water-bellies. Sometimes, so she had heard, there were no suitable mainroots within a great distance of the existing bridge. Then it was necessary to build elsewhere, or haul a distant root closer with hooks and ropes, a procedure which took half a lifetime and was as deadly as it was dull. Well, it wouldn't be necessary. As one of the youngest Bridgers, prospecting had been assigned to her, and she had found a good root. That one and the one Byle Bander had found would make up the first pair. After the haulers were started, she'd have to start looking for her half of the second pair. From what the elders had said, this could be a four or five pair job. They wanted the expansion built wide, they said. Enough to absorb all the growth Topbridge might make for the next several lifetimes. Of course, to hear Aunt Six tell it, elders were always like that, always planning more than other people could build. Since the elders didn't actually have to do the job, it was always easy to plan large.

She amused herself going over the steps it would take to make the cut on the morrow, how the Bridgers would ring the root with hatchets, then fit the loop saw into the groove, two of them braced against the root as they pulled alternately, cutting through the main-root until the whole massive weight of it fell away into the chasm with roaring echoes which seemed to go on forever. It would be the first town root Beedie had helped cut, but she well remembered the sound from the time the root fell at Nextdown. What happened to the roots that fell, she wondered? Did they end up propped against the chasm wall? Or fallen over into the bottom river? Did they rot? Or dry? Did floppers build nests in them? No matter, really. They ended up far below Bottommost, and whatever might happen below Bottommost could not be reckoned with at all. Except, she reminded herself, for whatever this new worry was. Though whether that was coming up from below Bottommost was anyone's guess.

After cutting the root, the Bridgers would bore hook holes in the end of it, set the great hardwood hooks in place, then run rope from the hooks back and forth through the tackle and across the chasm to the hooks set deep in the other root end there. After which everyone on Topbridge would spend a span of their days hauling at the windlass. Everyone, that is, but the Bridgers.

The Bridgers would be making a detailed chart of every side root on the mainroots, every bud, every ropey growth. Once the mainroot was hauled into its long supporting curve, the Bridgers would use many of the verticals hanging from it to support the base of the new bridge. There would have to be other verticals reaching all the way to the distant Bottom and its nourishing waters if the mainroot was to be kept alive and healthy. Still other side roots would be needed for the stairs which were planned to link Topbridge directly to Potter's bridge, replacing the current link by way of Nextdown. Any side roots that didn't fit the plan would have to be trimmed away as they budded; otherwise the mainroot would turn into an unmanageable tangle which could never be maintained properly.

"Hey, skinny girl," came a call from below. She looked down to see Byle Bander leaning from the bridge rail, staring up at her with the half sneer he always wore. "Hey, Beedie, slow-girule. What are you doing, girl? Harvesting nodutes?"

There were several slow-girules in the roots nearby, their hooked hands tight around the side roots, moving now and then to clip root nodules from the root with the sharp edges of their claws, like scissors. One just below her had a pouch almost full, and she whispered to it, "Nice giruley. Give us? Give us, hmmm?"

"Hnnn," it growled at her, half in complaint. "Hnnno. Minnnne." *

"Ah, come on, giruley. Give us one little root mouse to tide us until supper time. One little juicy one. Hmmm?" She reached out to scratch the creature in the one place its own claws could not reach, the middle of its back. The whine turned into a purr, and the creature handed her a green, furry nodule. She leaned against her belt once more to peel it with her Bridger's knife. Anything for delay's sake. She didn't want to descend with Byle there.

"The Harvesters' caste will be fining you, Beedie," Byle Bander called. "You know you're not supposed to fool with the 'rulies."

"I'm not fooling, I'm hungry," she replied, her mouth half full of the juicy, crunchy root nodule. "I could have picked it myself." If she had behaved in accordance with the rules, she would have picked it for herself. It was uncastely for a Bridger to receive food except from a Maintainer's hands, though the rules did permit harvesting from the roots if one was kept past meal time. The rules did not allow Bridgers to invade Harvesters' caste by taking food from the slow-girules, however, and Beedie flushed. Though it was something all the Bridgers did from time to time, it was precisely the kind of thing Byle Bander would make an issue of, or harass her about until she would be heartily sorry for having done it. He liked to couple his attempts at fondling with threats, and neither were welcome. His presence on the walkway below her made her uncomfortable. Still, delaying any longer wouldn't help. She finished the nodule and wiped her hands on her trousers, moving on down the root to the edge of the bridge. Bander reached out a hand to her, which she ignored. He had the habit of pulling one off balance and then laughing, or, worse, grabbing parts of her she didn't want grabbed.

As she stepped onto the bridge, she saw a group of Bridgers striding toward her at the same time she saw the expression of amused superiority on Byle Bander's face. All of the Bridgers in the group were Banders, interesting in itself. What were they up to?

She waited little time for an answer. One of the Bridgers, a ruddy, fussy little man called Wetwedge, bustled up, peered at her as though he had never seen her before, then said, "You getting ready for the cut, girly?"

“That’s what I’ve been doing,” she replied, wondering what this was all about. Certainly it was no chance encounter. It had the feeling of a delegation.

“Not today, girly. No. Big business, this. Got to have it checked at least twice, you know. Can’t cut until we check it twice.”

“I did,” she said, amazed at his open-faced stupidity. What did the man think? That she was witless?

“No, no. I mean you got to have it checked by someone else. Gotcher measuring cord?”

Something deep inside Beedie sat up and looked around with sharp eyes and a sharper nose. Something smelled. “My measuring cord is put away safe, yes.”

“Well, trot it out, girly, and we’ll check it. Old lady Slicksaw here will climb it down for you, down to your mark, just to check.”

“That’s not the way it’s done,” she said, somehow keeping her voice from shaking with anger. “If you want Slicksaw Bander to check my measure, go ahead with my blessing. But she’ll use her own cord and compare it to mine before witnesses from Bridgers House, and any difference will be checked by an impartial eye. That’s the way it’s done, Wetwedge Bander-Bridger, and I’m surprised you should suggest anything different.”

The man looked quickly from side to side, seeking support from one or another of them, but they shifted feet uncomfortably, not looking at him. He laughed, trying to put a good face on it. “Well then, takes more time that way, but it’s according to rule. So, take a day off, then, Beedie.”

She saw deceit on his face, an evil intention which she couldn’t read but one made clear in those shifty eyes, darting up and down like a flooper’s wings. Besides, he wasn’t enough elder to her to tell her to take a day off, and him not even from her own family.

“My mark is sealed with my knot,” she announced loudly. “Slicksaw can’t mistake it.” Or alter it, she

said to herself. One might mistake an accidental scarring for a hatchet mark, but one would not mistake any accidental tangle in the hair roots for an individual Bridger's own knot, complicated as an alphabet, tied and then doused with paint to make it stand out. "It's tied once at each side, top and bottom," she said. Then, as they began to turn away, "Of course, I'm going to Bridgers House to see that they check Byle Bander's measure as well. Otherwise it would be unfair, wouldn't it, and not something the elders would tolerate. Since you're all Banders checking a Beed, I'll ask the Bridgers House to send Chafers or Beed to check Bander. Fair's fair, after all."

She had the satisfaction of seeing Byle Bander's face full of anger as she stalked away. Nor did she miss the hesitation among the other Banders, the glances, the stuttering lips as one or another of them tried to think of something to say. She did not look back, contenting herself with a call. "Good day to you, Bridgers."

As she walked away to Bridgers House, she could hear their whispers behind her. Well, what had they thought? That she would let a clutter of Bander hangers-on presume to double-check her competence without having some Beed fellows check on Byle's ability as well? Did they think if they called her girly, as they would some curvy Maintainer wench, wriggling her hips between the tables at dinner, that she would not hear what it was they were really saying? Not likely.

She went directly to Bridgers House. She wanted to talk to Rootweaver Beed, second eldest, a white-haired woman with young eyes whom Beedie admired for her good sense and friendly demeanor toward the younger Bridgers. The woman was curled up on a windowseat, weaving carded hairroot fibers to make a new climbing belt.

"Checking you, are they?" Though Rootweaver was not young, she was straight and supple as a side root, and Beedie had seen her using spurs not four days before. Rootweaver considered the matter now, frowning a little. At last her face cleared and she said, "With all the troubles from below we have to worry us just now, leave it to the Banders to come up with something fretting. Well, it's never a bad idea to check a measure, 'specially when it's a mainroot in question. We'll take it as though it were friendly meant and send a crew along to check the Bander whelp as well. Have a day off, Beedie. You might help your Aunt Six with the moving. She's found a place she likes better than Bridgers House again." The woman laughed, not least at Beedie's expression of dismay.

Aunt Six had moved house at least two or three times a year since they had come to Topbridge, never able to settle into the same comfort she had known in the Bridgers House on Nextdown. She had moved into and out of Bridgers House on Topbridge seven times—this would make eight. Having Aunt Six behaving as usual made the day somehow merely annoying, an almost customary irritation taking the place of that extraordinary discomfort she had been feeling since she had been hailed by Byle Bander. If Aunt Six was moving house, it must be assumed the world was much as usual.

So she spent the afternoon with a cart, hauling Aunt Six's bedding and pots and bits and pieces from the pleasant rooms in Bridgers House to some equally pleasant ones on the far edge of Topbridge, about mid-chasm, from which the latticed windows looked out toward Harvester's bridge, a lumpy line against the bend of the chasm wall behind it. Beedie wondered what the view was like from Harvester's. Since it was at the turn of the chasm, could the chasm end be seen from there? Was there a chasm end? Odd. She'd never wondered about that until this very minute.

"Beedie! What are you dreaming about, Bridger-girl? You'll only have this one day to help me, so help me! I've got all the rugs yet to bring."

"Aunt Six, do you think this place will suit you? Will you stay here for a while? Now that I've got my tools and tides, I'd like to get some things of my own for this room, but not if you're just going to move us again."

"Girl, you get your own things and make it your place, you can stay whether I go or not. For Boundless' sake, Beedie. You're a grown-up girl." She compressed her lips into a thin and disapproving line and began to bustle, accomplishing little but giving a fine appearance of activity.

Beedie smiled to herself. The only time Aunt Six referred to Beedie as a grown-up girl was when there was moving to be done, or something else equally boring or heavy. Still, the new place did have that marvelous view of the chasm, being right at the edge this way. Shaking her head, she went to fetch the rugs.

Slicksaw Bander said she found no fault with Beedie's measure. Rootweaver Beed was not so favorable about Byle's. The Seeds found him marked short, as Beedie had feared, and told him so in front of half the Bridgers and a full dozen Maintainers with their ears flapping. Byle was so angry he turned white. Beedie tried not to look superior, failing miserably. Perhaps now he would keep himself to himself and pay attention to his own Bridger business rather than hers. It had a consequence she had not foreseen, however, when she was called to Bridgers House for conference. "Byle's root was marked short, Beedie," said Rootweaver, the half-dozen assembled Bridger elders behind her nodding and frowning. They had summoned her without warning, always a slightly ominous occurrence, but this time there had been nothing discomforting in it for her. "Not merely a little short," Rootweaver went on, "but far short. As though he had not measured at all, and certainly not twice—or got his cord tangled up on the climb, and that's a child's trick. So we're going to go down there with him tomorrow, check his measuring technique and check his axe work, too. Short in one thing, short in all, isn't that the saying? So. You can go ahead and start cutting a groove on the root you've measured, but we've no one to help you cut root. After we get young Byle straightened out, you'll get your crew. Do what you can alone, and we'll send the crew next day."

“Byle’s in the classroom right now,” said one of the other elders, indignantly. “Fulminating and fussing. We’re keeping him here tonight, doing a little review of technique, and he’s mad as a hooked flopper. Madder than he should be. You’d think he’d been planning a lovers’ meeting or something the way he’s carrying on. Demands to be let go home.”

“Bridgers House is home for all Bridgers,” said Rootweaver calmly. “Let him go get a change of clothing if he pleases, but I want him to stay here tonight. We’ll see if we can’t talk some sense into him.” All of this made Beedie quite uncomfortable, and she was glad Byle hadn’t seen her with the elders. If he thought she had been privy to his embarrassment, he’d never have permitted her a peaceful day. Since she thought he didn’t know, she had a peaceful night. Come morning, though, she thought he had probably found out, for she was visited by a Harvester elder with an annoying sniff and his pen ready to record her words.

“It’s been reported you’ve been interfering with the slow-girules, girl,” he pinch-mouthed at her, pulling his nose back as though she smelled.

“You may call me Bridger,” she said, holding her fury carefully in check. “And I have never interfered with a slow-girule in my life. I did take a nodule from one, yesterday, when I was delayed on the root and missed a meal.”

“Report is you interfered with it. Rassled it about. Maybe bothered it in its work.”

“I scratched its furry back, and it purred at me. So much for your ‘interference.’ ”

“You could have injured it.” The man was white around the mouth, wanting to storm and yell at her, but afraid to do so seeing her own anger and knowing what Bridger wrath meant.

“Nonsense,” snapped Aunt Six from behind her. “You can’t injure a slow-girule with an axe. Be done, Harvester. Beedie took a nodule from one of your beasties and she must pay a fine for it, for it’s against the rules. So impose your fine and be done. It’s no large thing, and you’d best remember it. The good will of Bridgers is given freely, but it’s taken freely, too, when there’s cause.”

The Harvester did not reply, merely threw the piece of paper at them and stalked away. “Parasites,” hissed Aunt Six, just loud enough that he could not help to hear. “No skills of their own, so they must live

by preventing others from using common sense. Sorry the day the Harvesters ever became a caste, Beedie. And sorry the day any Bridger takes one like that seriously.”

The man heard. He turned and made a threatening gesture, mouthing something they could not hear.

“Still,” Beedie said, “I did break the rule, Aunt Six. It was seeing that Byle Bander waiting for me on the bridge, like some old crawly-claw, hiding in a root hole. I didn’t want to come down where he was, so I played with the ‘rulie instead. They like it.”

“Of course they like it, child. The Harvesters may think they own the slow-girules, but no one has ever convinced a slow-girule of that yet. It’s that which makes the Harvesters so angry. They’d like nothing better than to have the ‘rulies turn clipper-claws on all except the Harvesters. That would suit them right to the bridge floor. And what kind of a Bridger is Byle Bander to report one of his own caste.”

“A miserable one,” Beedie replied in a grim voice. “A miserable bit of flopper flub, for all he’s a Bridger.”

All this caused Beedie some delay, and it was late in the morning before she started down, chuff, heave, chuff, humming to herself, throwing a glance upward now and then to see if there were birds. It would be wonderful, she thought, to fly like that, up to the flattrees and the plain—not even dangerous for a bird. A bird wouldn’t have to fear the gnarlibars, the giant pombis, the ubiquitous d’bor hiding in every pool and stream, the poison bats, the were owls. A bird wouldn’t be bothered by the monsters of the plain, the monsters who had almost wiped out the people, would have wiped them out if they hadn’t moved down into the chasm to build the bridgetowns where the monsters couldn’t get at them. Not the Firstbridge, of course. That hadn’t been built far enough down the chasm, and the monstrous forest pombis had climbed down the mainroots to it as they would have climbed a tree. The site of that disaster was the broken city, still hanging high against the light, a network of black in the up-chasm sky. Then there had been the lost bridge, the one that had disappeared one night, never to be seen again—disappeared between dark and dawn without a sound. Built too low, some said, though legend said it had been built only slightly lower than Bottommost. Trouble in the depths, they said. Then and now, they said. Well, all this conjecture wouldn’t help get the job done. She spotted her marks, moved beyond them, readied her hatchet to make the groove, then clung to the root with a sudden, giddy disquietude, overcome by a wave of tamiyar horror. She had felt like this before. There was something. Something wrong? Something not as usual? Uneasily she shifted on the root, moving around it as a flopper moves when hiding from the hunters, listening to silence, tasting the air, smelling... smelling.

What was it? An odor so feint she could hardly detect it? But what? She wished for the crew, the other Bridgers, suddenly aware of her solitude.

She began to move lower on the root, sniffing, tapping at the root with her hammer. The sound was wrong, wrong. She moved lower still, still tapping, then abruptly astonished, feeling the heat beneath her palms as a hallucination, an unreality, outrageous and impossible. Roots were cold, her mind said, and therefore ... therefore ...

Even as her mind toyed with a dozen irrelevant notions, her body reacted, leaping upward in three quick movements of arms and legs, chuff, heave, chuff, heave, chuff, hands frantically feeling for cool, not sure they had found it, upward once more in that same panic-ridden gallop, until there was no possibility of mistake. She smelled it then for the first time, that harsh scent of poison smoke, barely detectable. She longed in an instant to be one of the slow-girules, able to turn head down on the root, able somehow to see below her feet. And yet she didn't need to look. She could smell it. The mainroot was burning.

Back in the old times, she had heard, this was the way roots were severed. A Bridger would climb in between the root and the wall, hack away a hole in the root, then put burning charcoal in there to burn away and burn away until the thing dropped. Sometimes the fire didn't go out, however. Sometimes it got into the heartwood and kept on going, poisoning the air, no matter how one cut at it and chopped at it. So the Bridgers had stopped burning roots and began cutting them. But someone had burned a mainroot at Nextdown, and someone had set fire to this one Beedie sat upon, the one Beedie should have arrived at with a full crew of Bridgers, earlier than this. If she went back and told about it the fire would have burned the root away by the time they returned, burned it too high, and it was the only useful one in the right place on this side.

So—so what? So cut it off before it went any further. Cut it off right below the mark, working against time, trying to get it cut through before the fire reached the saw cut and the smoke killed her. Her body began it, even while her mind was thinking through the right procedures. She was high on the root in a moment, setting her pitons and hooks for safety tines, one after the other, running the lines through and down to her belt, checking the buckle, checking the lines, setting them high above the mark, so high that no matter if the root fell, she would be left hanging—if a side root didn't lash her head off, or a tangle tear her away from where she hung.

The axe in her hand flew at the bark, making the first cuts, up and down, overhand, underhand, chips flying out into the chasms to flutter away like crippled birds, down and out of sight forever. The pungent smell of the milky root juice made her nose burn, a corrosive stench. She shifted rapidly to the right, cutting around, keeping her tines straight. When the root was ringed, she went back, doing it again, cutting deep so the saw loop wouldn't slip. Then the hatchet went into the belt, the saw loop came out. She had to throw it from behind the root, with free space all around. She held one handle in her right hand, whipped the length of the saw out and left, praying it would wrap around the root, smacking the handle into her left hand.

No. The saw tangled in a mass of root hairs, dangling. She moved down a little, lashed the saw outward again. The loop spun out, around the root, came back into her waiting left hand with a solid thwack. She eased the blade into the groove, dug her spurs deep and began to pull, right, left, tugging against the saw line with its myriad diamond teeth, seeing the puffs of sawdust fly into the air.

The sawline resisted her for a moment, then bit deep, cutting its own groove deeper, dust puffing at either side. At first she thought the amount of sawdust ridiculously large, then saw that it was mixed with smoke, smoke rising in little clouds from the cut, making her eyes stream, her throat burn. It was deadly. Deadly. Everything in her urged her to get away, to climb outward, away from that hideous smoke, but instead she moved around the root to find an updraft of clean air and went on heaving at the saw. It was well used, supple, only recently reglued with jeweled teeth for which she had paid a pretty price, the supply of gems being so short. Aunt Six had always said that good tools repaid their keeper, and she chanted this to herself as she went on heaving, feeling the root beneath her spurs begin to grow warm. The fire was eating its way up, toward the mark.

“Bite teeth, cut deep, saw line chew, job to do, pull, Bridger, pull ...” then six deep breaths and chant again, over and over. This was not a job for one Bridger! She should have had a full crew, spelling one another as they tired, encouraging one another. “Bite teeth ...” It was getting a little easier as the groove bit deeper, there was less surface to pull against. “Bite teeth, cut deep, saw line chew ...” In older days, there had been plenty of gems, plenty of saw gravel. Maybe she should have paid for another dipping. Pull. Pull. The root quivered.

Quickly she shifted her feet upward, bracing out above the groove, lying almost horizontally from the root as she heaved the line, heaved, heaved, feeling her shoulders start to burn and bind, beginning to choke in the smoke once more, unable to move from this stance, unable to shift her position, trying to hold her breath against that one too many which would bring the poison full strength deep into her lungs.

A quiver again, this time a mighty one, a shaking, a groaning sound, a rending as the world began to drop from beneath her. The root below her fell away—but only a finger’s width, whipping the entire root to one side as it did so, throwing her to the end of her lines, breaking two of them with lashing side roots. She hung, nose dripping blood, suspended between her remaining two lines, turning like a hooked flopper, gagging at the smoke. One incredibly strong cable of fiber held the root, kept it from falling away, one bundle no thicker than her leg, groaning as though it had human voice, toward which the fire crept, upward, upward—taking what seemed an eternity to burn it through.

She fainted, came to herself, began to go in and out of blackness as though it were a garment put on and took off. Through a veil of swimming gray she saw the mass of the mainroot dropped away down the endless depth of the chasm, lashing side roots as it went so that they twitched and recoiled, knocking Beedie against their rough sides. She swung still at the end of her lines, thrashed into semiconsciousness, eyes staring upward at the rim.

Far above the noonglow came, through emerald light, a kind of singing. Was it the Birder on Topbridge or the singing of her own blood? High in the light she saw wings, white wings, circling down and down, huge and mysterious, wonderful as a myth, beautiful as a song.

“It will stop at Topbridge,” she told herself in her dream, “like the other one.” But it did not. It came down and down until it perched on a side root spur just beside her and turned into something else. Something with a woman’s face, but with hands and arms like a slow-girule, arms to hold fast, and legs to reach out and pick Beedie from her lines as though she had been no heavier than a baby. Then the bird person wiped the blood from her face and cradled her, cradled her there on the root and whispered to her.

“My name is Mavin, little root climber. It seems to me you need some help here, whatever strange wonderful thing it is you are so determined to do.”

CHAPTER TWO

After a time Beedie came to herself lying on a horizontal shelf of side root, carefully fastened to it with her own belt and pitons, having the blood washed from her face and neck with something that looked suspiciously like a furry, wet paw. The paw owner went away. There was a sound of water near by, splashing and trickling, then Beedie’s head was lifted and a cup thrust at her lip. She drank, trying not to look at the cup, for it had appeared magically where the paw had been. When the paw/cup/person retreated from her side again, she turned her head to follow the creature/woman/bird as it went to the water-belly and burrowed into it through a sizeable hole in the tough shell which had not been there when Beedie had passed it earlier in the day.

“How did you cut it?” she asked, her voice a mere croak in the sound-deadening mat of the rootwall. “It takes a drill, and a blade saw ...”

“Or a sharp beak and determination,” said the bird/person/creature. “You reached toward this place when I carried you past, mumbling something or other about being thirsty, so I figured there was water inside this what you call it ...”

“It’s a water-belly,” Beedie murmured. “It stores the water the root brings up from the bottom, down there. ...”

“Down there, eh? A very long way, root climber. Do you go down there often?”

“Never.” She shook her head and was frozen into immobility by the resultant pain. “Never. No. Too far. Too dark. The Boundless punished the Lostbridgers by sending them down there, so they say. Maybe for greed, because of the gemstones. We’re running out, you know. All the ones left from that time have been used up. Dangerous. Dangerous creatures on the Bottom, they say. As dangerous as the plain, up top, where you come from.”

“Plenty of creatures up there, all right. Gnarlifers. Bambis bigger than any I’ve seen elsewhere. There’s a kind of giant bunwit with horns on its rear feet, did you know that? Strangest-looking thing I’ve ever seen. And I’ve seen wonders, oh, root dangler, but I’ve seen wonders. Oceans and lands, lakes and forests, all and everything in a wide world full of wonders. Among which, may I say, is this place of yours, what you call it?”

“The chasm? We just call it the chasm, that’s all.” If Beedie lay perfectly still, she could speak without really feeling discomfort. So she assured herself, at least.

“Do you know what it looks like from up there?” the bird/woman/person asked. “Let me tell you, it’s a remarkable sight. To start with, the roots from those trees extend out onto the plain like great cables, bare as pipes. I saw them from up there, my soaring place, and had to come down just to see my eyes didn’t lie to me. Leagues and leagues of these great roots laid out side by side, like the warp threads of some giant loom all ready for the weaving. Then, after leagues of nothing but bare root, a few little stalks pop up; short, stubby things, with one leaf, maybe, or two, gossamer leaves, spread to the sun like the wings of something bigger than you can imagine. Then the stalks grow higher, higher yet, bigger and bigger, until all you can see is the leaves, overlapping each other like scales on a fish, thin as tissue, and green—Gamelords, girl, but it’s a lovely green.”

“I know,” murmured Beedie, entranced by the rough music of that voice. “We see it every day, at noonglow.”

“And then a shadow in the green, slightly darker, with a mist rising up through it. At first I thought it was only a river under there, but then I saw how wide the shadow was, a long, dark stripe on the forest, going away north to tall, white-iced mountains; bending away to the south west into a desert hot and hard as brass, and that mist coming up full of food smells and people smells.

“Well, I came down, girl, working my way down through those gossamer leaves, eyes all sharpened to see what I could see far down, and what should I see but this great root thrashing about and a small girl person hung on it being smoked like a sausage, the smoke roiling nasty to my nose.”

“I saw you coming down,” said Beedie. “At first I thought I was dreaming it, that you were the other one.”

There was a long silence, then the bird/creature/person said, in a voice even Beedie recognized as carefully noncommittal, “What other one is that?”

“The white bird. The great white bird who came down, oh, a long time ago. A year, almost. It came down in the noonglow, and it perched on the railing of Topbridge commons. Mercald was there, Mercald the Birder?” She started to make an inquiring gesture, to move her head questioningly, but desisted at the swimming nausea she felt. The expression on the bird/person’s face had already told her it did not know what Birders were. “White birds are the messengers of the Boundless, you know?” Beedie tried again. The bird/person nodded helpfully, indicating this was not impossible. “And the Birders are the servants of the Boundless. They do our judging, and our rituals, and dedicate the festivals, things like that. So, birds being sacred, and Mercald being a Birder, naturally, he took the white bird to the Birders House. Only later on it changed into a person, a woman. Like you did.”

“Ah,” said the bird/person in a flat, incurious voice. “Tell me your name, will you girl? And call me by mine. It will make it easier on us both. I’m Mavin.”

“Mavin,” said Beedie. “I’m Beedie. Beed’s daughter, really, but they call me Beedie. I’ll get some other kind of name after I’ve worked at Bridging a while—something like, oh ...”

“Smoked sausage? Root dangler?”

“Probably.” She raised one trembling hand to feet along her ribs. They were bruised, terribly tender, and it hurt when she took a deep breath or moved her head. She put the hand down, carefully, and was still once more. “More likely something like ‘Rulie-chaser’ or ‘Strap-weaver.’ We like to be named after big things we’ve done, but some of us never do anything that big.”

“Well, Beedie, what did this other bird have to say for itself? When it changed into a woman, I mean?”

“It never said anything, not that I heard of.” The question made her a little uncomfortable, as though there were a right answer to it, one she didn’t know. “It sings. Mercald used to bring it out in the noonglow and it flew. It circled around and around in the light, singing. Lately, though, it hasn’t changed into a bird at all. It’s stayed a woman.”

“What does the woman do?”

“Sits. She sits in the window of the Birders House and brushes her hair. They feed her fruit and moss cakes, and bits of toasted flopper. They give her nodule beer to drink, and water. They dress her in soft dresses with ribbons woven by the Weavers’ caste, especially for her. At festival times she watches the processions, and the jugglers, and the root walkers. And she sings.”

“And never speaks? Never at all?”

“Never at all,” said Beedie, in a definite voice. “Now, best you tell me what she is to you, for the people up there”—she moved her eyes to indicate the woven bottom of the great bridge above which threw an enormous shadow across them—“those people think she’s sacred. You go asking too many questions, like you have with me, and they won’t be contented just wondering where you came from, like I do. They’ll wonder if maybe you’re a devil from the Bottom. Or another messenger from the Boundless, in which case they’ll lock you up, just to keep you safe, until they decide you’ve delivered the message, whatever it’s supposed to be.” She fell into a gray fog, exhausted by this speech.

“Dangerous, then, to be a messenger! Well, who else could I be? Who could visit you without stirring any curiosity at all?”

Beedie’s head was swimming, but she tried to consider the question carefully. “You could be someone from Harvester’s bridge. We hardly ever see anyone from Harvester’s, because it’s such a long way down-chasm. There’s a Harvesters House on Topbridge, so you’d have someplace to stay.” She sighed, the pain pulsing insistently.

“Ah. Well now. Tell me, Beedie, do you owe me for saving your life?”

She had not thought about it until that moment, and it was an odd question, all things taken into account,

but still it was a question she could answer. “Yes,” she said. “I owe you.”

“Good. I want you to tell me all about this place, the chasm, the—what did you call them?—the bridgetowns. About Harvesters and Bridgers and whatever else there are about. Then, when you’ve done that, you won’t owe me anymore and we can talk about some other arrangement.”

“You’re ... strange,” Beedie commented. “If you hadn’t pulled me off that root and got me out of the smoke, I’d be dead by now, though, so I guess strange doesn’t matter.”

“A remarkable conclusion for one so young. So, sausage girl, tell me about this place. I am a stranger. I know nothing. You must tell me everything, even the things you know so well you never think of them.”

It was an odd session, one Beedie was always to remember. Later in her life, the memory was evoked by smoke smell, always, or by sudden jolts of pain. Even after, she was to recall this time whenever she was ill or injured. Now she lay as quietly as she could on a furry root, soft as her own bed, cushioned somehow in the arms or person of whoever it was called herself Mavin, and talked through her pain about the chasm, sometimes as though she were present, sometimes as though she were dreaming, in both cases as she had never talked or heard anyone talk before.

“Our people came here generations ago,” she said. “Down from the plain above. I didn’t know about the trees and the roots up there, because all the records of that time were lost when Firstbridge was destroyed. All we know is that the people were getting eaten up by the beasts, so the Firstbridgers came down into the chasm and built a bridge. Firstbridge. It wasn’t far enough down, and the beasts got at it, so the survivors came down further to Nextdown while they built Topbridge. You can see Firstbridge if you look, way up against the light. We call it Brokenbridge sometimes. There isn’t much left of it but the mainroots and a few dangling verticals. When my cousin Highclimb went to the rim, she saw it. She says the mainroots are still alive.”

“Ah. Humm. Are there any—ah—Gamesmen, among you?”

“Gamesmen? You mean people who play games? Children do, of course. There are gambling games, too. Is that what you mean?”

“Are there any among you who can change shape? Who can fly? Who can lift things without using their hands?”

“Demons, you mean. No. There’s a story from before we came down into the chasm, there were Demons or something like that over the sea. We used to trade with them in the story, but it’s only a story. According to the story, we came to this world before they did. When we came, the animals weren’t so bad, so we lived on top. Then, later, the animals got bad. That’s when we moved down.”

“All of you? All the persons this side of the sea?”

Beedie shook her head and winced. “I don’t know. I don’t think anyone knows. We keep hearing stories about lost bridges or lost castes . People who survived some other way. Aunt Six says it’s all myths, but I don’t really know. Do you still want to hear more about the chasm?”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt. It was just a thought. Yes, go on.”

“Well, let’s see. After Topbridge was built, they finished Nextdown. Then the Potters built their bridge down-chasm, because there were clay deposits in the wall along there, and coal. They use that for the firing. Then came Miner’s bridge, further down-chasm, because that’s where the mines were. Metal, you know. And gems for the saws, though they don’t seem to find many of those ...

“Then Midwall, up-chasm, the other side of Nextdown, then Harvester’s bridge, away down-chasm where it bends, and last of all came Bottommost. Aunt Six says Bottommost is rebels and anarchists, but then she talks like that about a lot of things. I think it’s Fishers, mostly, and Hunters, and some Grafters, and Banders and casteless types.” She stopped to take a deep breath before continuing, gasping. Her ribs cut into her like knives.

The arms around her tightened, then pillowed her more deeply. “Tell me about castes. What are they?”

“Top caste is Bridgers. They’re the ones who build the bridgetowns and maintain them and build the stairs and locate the water-bellies and all that. Then there are Grafters, who make things out of wood, mostly, though they use some metal, too. And Potters, and Barthers, and Miners, and Teachers. And Harvesters. They train the slow-girules to harvest the nodules from the roots, and they harvest the wall moss, and fruits from the vines and all like that. And the Messengers. They have two jobs to do. We don’t talk about one of them. The other—well, they fly. Not how you meant it when you asked. They put on wings, and then they jump out into the air when it rises, and they fly between the bridgetowns with messages or little things they can carry. Medicine, maybe. Or plans, to show the Bridger in the other city

what's going on. Maintainers. They're the ones who take care of the Bridgers, feed them, clean their houses and all. Birders I already told you about. Then there are the Fishers, two kinds of those, one that fishes for floppers from the Fishers' roosts and those who drop their lines from Bottommost into the river down there, so far they can't even see it, and bring up fishes. And the Hunters who track game through the root mat ..." She stopped, exhausted.

"And you said something about casteless ones?"

Beedie sighed, weary beyond belief. "There are always some who don't fit in. Weavers—did I mention Weavers before?—who can't weave. Or Potters who can't do a pot. Or even Bridger children who get the down-dizzies when they look down. They may get adopted into some other caste, or they may ask to become Maintainers—some say Maintainers will take anybody, though I don't know if that's true—or they may just stay casteless. It's all right. No one hates them for it or anything. It's just that they don't have any caste house to live in or any special group to help them or take them in if they're sick or old or have a baby."

"Do people marry?"

"Oh, yes. In caste, usually, though not always. They say if you marry in caste, your kids will have the right aptitudes. That isn't true, by the way. Aunt Six says it never was true. She says having a child is like betting on a flopper's flight. They always go off in some direction you don't count on."

"What are caste houses?"

"Oh, like Bridgers House on Topbridge. Whenever there are enough of any one caste on one bridge, they build a caste house. Usually the elders of the caste live there, and any other caste members there's room for. One elder from each castehouse makes up the bridge council, though we usually just say 'the elders,' and they decide when to expand the bridgetown or build new stairs or pipe a new water-belly. I don't know what else to tell you. Except I hurt. Please let me stop talking."

"Just a moment more, sausage girl. What about clothing? Do the castes dress differently?"

Beedie could not understand the question. She tried to focus on the question and could not. Dress? How did they dress? "Like me," she whispered. "More or less. Trousers. Shirt. Only Bridgers wear belts like this. Harvesters wear leather aprons. Potters have very clean hands. Miners have dirty ones ... I can't ...

can't ...” There was only a heavy darkness around her, a sense of vast movement, easy as flying, as though she were cushioned in some enormous, flying lap. Then there were voices.

“Are you her Aunt Six? The root she was working on ... burning ... the smoke ... don't think she's seriously hurt ... from Harvester's Bridge myself ... just happened to see her as I was coming up the stairs ... thank you, very kind of you. Yes, I would be glad to do that. Boneraan, you say? In the yellow house next to Bridgers'? Never mind, ma'am, I'll find it ...”

Inside the darkness, Beedie felt herself amused. The bird/woman/person was leading Aunt Six about by the nose, pretending to be a Harvester from Harvester's Bridge. Beedie was enjoying it, even through the black curtain. It was very humorous. They had sent for the Boneman, to find out if anything was broken. So, she was home, home on Topbridge, in Aunt Six's new place. Now that she knew where she was, she could let the darkness have its own way. Though the voices went on, she stopped listening to them.

There seemed to be no next day, though there was a day after that. She swam lazily out of quiet into the light, feeling hands holding her head and the rim of a cup at her lips once more. This made her laugh, and she choked on the broth Aunt Six was trying to feed her, then couldn't explain what the laughter was about. “Lucky you were, girl, that a doer-good came along just then. I was in little mood to trust any Harvester, as you can imagine, seeing what an arrogant bunch they are, as you well remember from just a few days ago. But this one, well, she told me someone had fired the root ...

“I sent the elders. They saw no sign of it, except the smell of smoke clinging. Greenwood smoke does cling, so they don't doubt the story at all, or the word of the doer-good, Mavin, her name is. I suppose you wouldn't remember that, being gone to all intents and meanings from that time to this.” Aunt Six used her handkerchief, blowing a resounding blast. “A bad thing to take almost a whole family that way, your daddy and mother, all the uncles, then to try it with you, girl.” The pillow was patted relentlessly into a hard, uncomfortable shape. “We can't imagine who. Who would it be?”

For some reason, all Beedie could think of was that phlegmy c huckle of old Slysaw Bander, the sneering eyes of Byle Bander, the two of them like as root hairs. Making mischief. But why? Why?

Why would even a Bander do hurt to his own caste? What could he gain from it? How did he know I'd be going down there alone?

“Well, fool girl,” a voice inside her head said, “He knew no such thing. He thought there'd be six or seven Bridgers, including a few elders.” Then her head swam and accusations fled through it like birds through air. He must have thought he'd take six away with the root ... the way he did before ... the way

he did before ... the way he did before.

Gradually her mind slowed and quieted. Well, if it hadn't been for the doer-good, one Bridger would have fallen to the Bottom, but there could be no proof it had been planned or who by. Byle had probably been accompanied by five or six Bridgers all day, including at least one or two Chafers or Beeds. No proof. No proof, and all a waste, for the trap hadn't killed six, hadn't even killed one. Was that why Byle was so eager to get away from Bridgers House last night? To get someone else to set the fire he had planned to set himself?

Could she accuse him? Them? Byle hadn't had a chance to set that fire, so someone else had. Who? Slicksaw and her friends, while they were down there checking her measure? No. Too early to set it then, though they may well have made ready for it. And if so, was it a general thing, then? A conspiracy among all the Banders? To accomplish what? To kill Bridgers, evidently, but why?

Dizzy from the unanswerable questions in her mind, Beedie drifted off into gray nothing again, unable even to be curious about Mavin, the person/bird/woman who might be doing anything at all while Beedie slept.

She awoke to find a leather-aproned Harvester sitting in the window, the Harvester sipping at a cup while reading one of Aunt Six's books about religion; the steam from the tea curled over the lamp beside the bed. At first Beedie did not recognize the woman, but then something in the tilt of head said bird/person/creature, and Beedie smiled. "Good morning."

Mavin put down the tea cup and turned to pour another, offering it to the swaddled figure on the bed. "Say 'good evening,' sausage girl. You've spent a good time muffled up there, recovering from your wounds, I thought, but then, hearing your Aunty Six talk for a time, I figured it was only to escape the constant conversation."

Beedie tried to laugh, turning it into a gasp as her ribs creaked and knifed at her. "I don't think I'm better."

"Oh, yes. You've got a few cracked ribs where you hit the mainroot with the side of your ownself. The Boneman strapped them. He says they'll heal. You've got a nasty blue spot on your forehead spoiling your maidenly beauty. The Skin-woman put a foul-smelling poultice on that. Aside from that, there's not much wrong with you a few days lying about won't cure. Meantime, I've met the people at your Bridgers House and been thanked by them for saving you. There's been a good deal of climbing up and down as well, trying to figure out what set the roof afire—or maybe who set it afire. Far as I can learn, no one

knows for sure, though there seem to be whispered suspicions floating here and there.

“Your Bridger elder, Rootweaver, says I have a strange accent and must come from the farthest end of Harvesters where no one talks in a civilised manner, but she was kind enough for all that.”

“Rootweaver is a good person.”

“True. She is such a good person I told her some of the things I had seen ‘on my way up from Harvesters.’ To which she replied by trading confidences, telling me that something seems to be eating the verticals of the bridgetowns. Killing them dead, so she says. Giving me a keen look while she told me, too, as though she thought I might have been eating them myself. Had you heard about that?”

“Something of the kind,” murmured Beedie. “The Bridgers are very upset about it.”

“Indeed? Well, I heard her out. Since then, I have waited for you to recover so that you can take me to see the greatest wonder of Topbridge.”

“And what’s that, Mavin doer-good?”

“Doer-good, am I? Well, perhaps I am. The wonder I speak of is the birdwoman, sausage girl. I’d rather visit her with someone discreet by my side. Someone who knows more than she says. That is, unless your praiseworthy silence results from inability to talk rather than discretion.”

“Oh, I can talk,” Beedie said, proving it. “But when there are strangenesses all about, better maybe to keep shut and wait until talk is needed. My father used to say that.”

“Pity he didn’t tell your Aunt Six. Why was she named Six, anyhow?”

“She was named Six because when she was a girl, she always insisted on carrying six spare straps for her spurs. Not four, nor five, but six. And if my father had tried to tell her anything, she wouldn’t have listened. She would have been too busy talking. And”—she shifted uncomfortably—“I have to go.”

“If you mean you have to go, the Boneman who looked at you said you could. Get up, I mean. Just take it easy, don’t lift anything, don’t bump yourself. Is there a privy in here?”

“Of course. Do you think we live like floppers?” Beedie struggled out of the bed and across the room, feeling the cold boards on her feet with a sense of relief. Until that moment she had not been sure she could stand up. She left the privy door ajar, letting the heat from the bedroom warm all of her but her bottom, poised bare over the privy hole, nothing but air all the way to the Bottom and all the night winds of the chasm blowing on her. “All the houses on all the bridges have privies, That’s why we don’t build bridges one under the other, and that’s why we put roofs on the stairs.”

When she returned to the bed, Mavin handed her a piece of paper and a pen. “Draw me a plan, girl. Looking end on, how are these bridges of yours arranged? How do we get from one to another supposing—as it would be wise for us to suppose—neither of us can fly?”

Beedie sipped at her tea, propped the paper against her knees and thought. Finally, she drew a little plan on the paper and handed it to Mavin. “There. These are the ends of the bridges. There’s a stair from Topbridge to Nextdown. There are two stairs from Nextdown; one on down to Midwall, another winding one across under Topbridge to Potter’s. From Potter’s there’s a stair down to Miner’s; and from Miner’s there’s a stair up to Harvester’s. Then, from Midwall, there’s a stair down under Nextdown to Bottommost. There are rest places on that stair, and from Bottommost there’s a long stair which leads along the Wall to mine entrances way below Miner’s and then goes on and meets the Harvester’s trail way below Harvester’s. Some of these stairs are at the morning-light end, and some at the evening-light end of the bridgetowns, so it can be a long walk between Potter’s and Topbridge. That’s why we have messengers, if word needs to be carried quickly on wings. There’s one hot spot right below us, off the edge of Topbridge.”

“Hot spot?”

“Where the air rises, where the Messengers fly. Remember, I told you. There are other hot spots here and there, every bridge has at least one close by. There’s a big one near Harvester’s, around the corner of the chasm. No one knows what causes hot spots, though some of the old books say it’s probably hot springs, water that comes out of the ground hot.”

“And you’ve never been to any of these places?”

“I was born on Nextdown. And I came here. And that’s all.”

“Ah. Well, if I go journeying while I’m here, perhaps you’d like to go along? But first, you’ll sleep some more and recover entirely. I hear your aunt coming. Time for me to get along to Harvesters House ...”

“They took you in then, at Harvesters House?” Beedie whispered.

“Why shouldn’t they? I’m a Harvester, aren’t I? I work well with the slow-girules, don’t I? Besides, you can tell by my apron.” And Mavin winked at her, making a droll face, strolling out of the room and away.

“A very pleasant doer-good,” said Aunt Six. “Well spoken and kindly. You’re a lucky girl, Beedie, to have had such a one climbing the stairs from Nextdown just at the time you needed help. And one not afraid of root climbing, either. What if it had been a Potter? Or a Miner? Not able to climb at all for the down-dizziness in their heads?”

“I’m very lucky,” Beedie agreed, saying nothing at all more than that.

By afternoon of the third day from then, her ribs rebandaged by the Boneman, she was able to visit the Skin-woman who lived just off center lane, midchasm, by the market, in order to have another poultice put on her forehead. A train of Porters had brought in a greatload of pots from Potter’s bridge, and the Topbridgers were out in numbers, bargaining in a great gabble for cook pots and storage pots and soup bowls. Mavin and Beedie walked among the stalls, half hearing it all, while they spoke of the birdwoman at Birders House.

“Of course they’ll let you see her!” said Beedie. “As a messenger of the Boundless, she can be seen by anyone, for any person might be sent a message from the Boundless, and the Birders wouldn’t know who.”

“I’ve been in places they would tell you they did know,” said Mavin in a dry voice. “And tell you what the message was, as extra.”

“Why, how could anyone know? Would the Boundless give someone else my message to tell me? Silly. Of course not. If the Boundless had a message for me—which I am too unimportant to expect, mind you—it would give it directly to me, no fiddling about through other people.”

Mavin laughed. “There are things about your society here that I like, girl. Your good sense about your religion is one of them.”

Beedie shook her head in confusion. “If a religion doesn’t make sense, what good is it? It has to make sense out of things to be helpful, and if it isn’t helpful, who’d have it?”

“You’d be surprised, sausage girl. Very surprised. But here we are. Isn’t this Birders?” They had stopped outside a tall, narrow house which reached up along the Wall, its corners and roof erupting in bird houses and cotes, its stairs littered with feathers and droppings, and with an open, latticed window just before them behind which a pale figure sat, smiling heedlessly and combing its long dark hair. “Aree, aree,” it sang. “The boundless sea, the white wave, the light wave, the soundless sea.”

“Can we get closer?” asked Mavin in a strange, tense tone. “Where she can see us?”

“We can go in,” Beedie answered. “We’ll have to make an offering, but it won’t be much. I’ll tell them you have confusions and need to be blessed by the messenger.”

“You do that, sausage girl. For it’s true enough, come to think of it.”

They went up the shallow stairs to the stoop and struck the bell with their hands, making it throb into the quiet of the street. A Birder came to the door, his blue gown and green stole making tall stripes of color against the dark interior. When Beedie explained, he beckoned them in.

“I’m Birder Brightfeather,” he said, nodding to Beedie. “I know you, Bridger, and your parents before you. Though that was on Nextdown, and I am only recently come to Topbridge to help in the House here, for young Mercald was no longer able to handle the press of visitors. Will you offer to the Boundless before seeing the messenger?”

“If we may,” answered Mavin easily, moving her hand from pocket to Birder’s hand in one practiced

gesture. The Birder seemed pleased at whatever it was he had been given.

“Of course. Go in. Stay behind the railing, please. She becomes frightened if people come too close. If you have a question, ask in a clear voice, and don’t go on and on about it. The Boundless knows. We don’t have to explain things to It. Then if there’s an answer, the birdgirl will sing it. Or perhaps not. The Boundless does not always choose to answer, but then you know that.” The Birder waved them into the room, through heavy drapes that shut away the rest of the House. They found themselves behind a waist-high barrier, the birdgirl seated before them, half turned away as she peered out through the lattice at the street, still singing as she combed her hair.

“No sorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow go free, to high flight, to sky flight, the boundless sea.”

“Handbright,” said Mavin, in a husky whisper. “Handbright. It’s Mavin.”

“Aree, aree,” sang the birdgirl, slowly turning her head so that she could see them where they stood. She was dressed in a soft green robe, the color of the noonglow, with ribbons of blue and silver in her hair. Her face was bony, narrow, like the face of a bird. She looked like something out of the old tales, thought Beedie, something remote and marvelously beautiful, too wonderful to be human. And yet, this Mavin spoke to her ...

“Handbright. Sister. See, it’s Mavin. Come all the way from the lands of the True Game, all the great way from Danderbat Keep, from Schlaizy Noithn, from cliffbound Landizot and the marshy meadows of Mip, over the boundless sea to find you. It’s been more than fifteen years, Handbright, and I was only fifteen when you saw me last.”

“No sorrow, no sorrow, the soundless sea,” sang the birdgirl, her eyes passing across them as though they did not exist. “Aree, aree.” She stood up and moved about the room behind the railing, around her chair, half dancing, her feet making little patterns on the floor. Then she sat back down, but not before Mavin had seen the way the soft gown fell around her figure, no longer as painfully thin as it had been when Mavin had seen her last, no longer slender at all. Her belly bulged hugely above the thin legs.

“Ah,” said Mavin, in a hurt tone. “So that’s the way of it. Too late for you, Handbright. So late.” She stood in a reverie, seeing in her head the great white bird, plumes floating from its wings and tail, as it dived from the tower of Danderbat Keep, as its wings caught the wind and it beat itself upward into the blue, the high blue; a colour which these people of the chasm never saw, preserved only in these ribbons, in the ritual garments of their Birders. She saw herself, pursuing, asking here, there, high on the bounding cuffs of Schlaizy Noithn; among the seashore cities of fishermen who wore fishskin trousers and oiled

ringlets; in Landizot, the childless town; high in the marshy mountain lands near Breem; among the boats of the hunter fleet which never came to land but plied from Summer Sea to Winter Sea, its children born to the creak of wood and the rattle of sheets; along the desert shore of this other land beyond the western Sea, where there were no Games nor Gamesmen, coming at last to this people living pale and deep, beyond the light of the fructifying sun; fifteen years spent in searching, asking, following. "Well, I have found you at last, sister," she said to herself. "And your face is as peaceful as a candle flame in still air, burning with its own heat, consuming itself quietly, caring not. You sing and your voice is happy. You dance, and your feet are shod in silk. Oh, Handbright, why do I need to weep for you?"

She turned to take Beedie by the arm, her strong hands making pits in the girl's flesh so that she gasped. "Sorry, sausage girl. It is a sad thing to come too late. Ah well, let's go back to your place, my dear, and drink something warming. I feel all cold, like all the chasm night winds were blowing through me."

"What is it, Mavin? Why are you so upset? Do you know her? Is she truly your sister?"

"She is truly my sister, girl. Truly as ever was. I was fifteen when she left, when I told her to leave, but she is my sister, my Shifter sister, mad as any madman I have ever seen, and pregnant as any mother has ever been. And if I understand your religion, my dear, and the respect that would be due to a messenger of the Boundless, the fact that my sister will bear now—though she did not bear in years past, to her sorrow—bodes ill for the Birders. And, sausage girl, from what I have seen traveling the width of the world for fifteen years, when a thing bodes ill for the religion of a place, trouble follows, and anarchy and rebellion and terror." Her voice rang like a warning bell, insistent and troubling.

Beedie trembled at her tone. "Oh ... surely, surely it is not such a great thing ..."

"Perhaps not. We will hope so. But I think best to consider it, nonetheless. There is time to be tricky, child, and best to have plans made before needs must." She smiled and laid a hand gently on the girl's shoulder. Strange, to have come so far and made such an odd alliance at the end of it all. "Tush. Don't frown. We will think on it together." And she squeezed Beedie's shoulder in a gesture which, had she known it, was one Beedie's father had once used and thus won the girl to her as no words could have done.

CHAPTER THREE

Trouble came more quickly than Mavin had foreseen, more quickly than Beedie would have thought possible. It was the following morning that they left Beedie's house on their way to take a breakfast cup of tea at one of the ubiquitous stalls, when they saw a Birder—not a person they would have recognized

except for her robes—fleeing with loud cries of alarm from a group of youngsters intent upon doing her some immediate harm. The expressions on their snarling faces left no doubt, and when Mavin and Beedie came among them like vengeful furies, pushing and tossing them about like so many woodchips, they responded with self-righteous howls. “They’re blasphemers, the Birders ... They’ve blasphemed the Boundless ... else she’s no messenger ... need to be taught a lesson... . My dad says they should be whipped.” Indeed, one of the leaders of the child pack had a whip with him.

“And who are you to be judge of the Birders? And what have they done that is blasphemous?” Mavin demanded in a voice of thunder, drawing a good deal of attention from passers-by, including the parents of some of those cowering before her who shifted uneasily from foot to foot wondering how far they might go in interfering with this angry stranger. Beedie, throwing quick looks around, was horrified to note that a good part of the child pack was made up of Bridgers—Bander whelps—as good a guarantee as any that they might go about their evil business without being called to account for it.

“My dad says ... no fit judges for us anymore ... did a bad thing ... Either that or she’s no messenger ...”

Mavin seized the speaker and shook him. “Before you decide to run a mob behind you, boy, better wonder what vengeance the Birders might take if you are wrong! Have you thought what may come from the Boundless as messenger ... to you ... in the dark night—with no mob about to protect you?” Her voice shivered like a maddened thing; wild-eyed, her hands shook as though in terror. The boy began to tremble in her grasp, eyes widening, until he broke from her to fall on his knees, bellowing his fear. Beedie was amazed. Anyone within reach of Mavin’s voice could feel the terror, the awfulness of that messenger who might come. The boy took his fear from her pretended feeling, cowering away as though she had threatened him with immediate destruction. The adults gathered about were no less affected, and several of the young ones were hauled away by parents abruptly concerned for their own welfare though they had been egging the children on until that moment.

The other whelps ran off down an alley, yelping as they went. Mavin spun the boy with the whip around, kicking him off after them, and wiped her hands in disgust. The Birder, who had paused at the turn of the street, returned to thank them.

“This riot and attack is all up and down the chasm,” she said, still breathless. “I came to warn the Birders House here on Topbridge, for our house on Nextdown is virtually under seige, and no sooner set foot upon the street than that gang attacked me. They were set on me! I saw their fathers or older brothers urging them on from a teahouse door.”

“You’d best let us take you to the Birders House,” ventured Beedie.

“You’d best stay there when you arrive,” Mavin instructed her. “There is a kind of animal frenzy can be whipped up sometimes among fools and children, often using religion as an excuse for it. When it happens, it is wise to be elsewhere.”

They escorted the Birder to the House, much aware of gossiping groups falling silent as they passed, much aware of eyes at windows, of chunks of root thrown at them and easily fended off by either Mavin or Beedie, who walked virtually back to back in protection of the robed woman. Once at the Birders House, Mavin asked for Mercald and learned that he had been sent to the far end of Topbridge to gather the shed plumes of gongbirds, used by the Birders in their rituals.

“He will return momentarily,” dithered Brightfeather. “I told him to set his robes aside and go. With all this confusion and the violence outside, I wanted some time alone, to think. I don’t understand what is happening.”

“Violence outside?” The newly arrived Birder was peering from the window. They could see no sign of trouble, but the Birder assured them there were small groups of ill doers lurking just out of sight.

This was confirmed as they came from the house after the visit. They encountered a group of Topbridgers skulking just inside an alleyway, keeping watch upon the Birders House.

“There’s some. Ask’m” muttered one of the loiterers, thrusting another out of the alley at them. “Ask’m whether it’s true. She’s puff-belly, right? Ask’m.”

“ ‘Ja see the birdgirl?’” panted the thrustee. “There’s some saying she’s swole. Been havin’ at her, those Birders, some say. Mercald’s had atter. ‘Ja see her?’”

Beedie started to say something indignant, but the pressure from Mavin’s hand stayed her. “Oh, I have indeed,” said Mavin. “There are three schools of thought, good people, among those from Harvesters. One school teaches that the birdwoman was pregnant when she came to us, but a long pregnancy of a strange, messengerial kind, and that it is the desire of the Boundless that we foster her child. Then another opinion teaches that she became pregnant sometime after she came, and that it will be her child who carries the message from the Boundless. And a third opinion teaches that it was the intention of the Boundless she become pregnant, but only to illustrate that the holy and the human are of like kind. Be wary, people, for we do not yet know the truth of this, and it would not be wise to anger the Boundless.” And Mavin fixed them with eyes which seemed to glow with a mysterious fire even as she, herself, seemed to grow taller and more marvelous. It was less overt than the technique she had used upon the

youths, but it worked no less well. The men stopped muttering and merely gazed at her, their mouths gaped wide like that of the puffed fish lantern above them, working over the phrases they had rehearsed, now impotent to arouse themselves with their litany of hate. When they had thus gazed for a little time, Mavin brought them back to the present. "You might ask," she said in a voice of portentous meaning, "among your acquaintances, which of these theories they subscribe to. Which, for example, do you yourselves believe? You may be held accountable for your belief."

There was a muttering, a scuttling, and the two of them were quite suddenly alone.

"I'd love to know where you learned to do that with your voice," Beedie said. "Where you learned to do that trick you did earlier, with the boys, and this one, with these fellows. It's in your eyes and your face. Suddenly they forget what they were about to do. They get real worried about themselves. You'd been planning that, hadn't you? You were ready for those brats, for these folk. You knew they'd been put up to that talk." Then, in a voice of sudden revulsion, "Someone's been stirring a vat of chasm air about the Birders."

"Oh, assuredly they'd been put up to it. But I've given them other matter to chatter on. The interesting part of it is, who did it? Who blamed the Birders right off? Who blamed Mercald? And why?"

"To prevent the Birder caste being raised," she answered, sure of it. "Though why it should matter to them, I cannot tell."

"Ah. Tell me, Beedie, what is this lantern we stand under, and why have I not seen them before?"

"Because there aren't many of them, Mavin," she replied, confused at this change of subject. "Most of them are very old and rare. They come from the Bottomlands. Fishers catch them sometimes. They glow, you see. The Fishers take out the insides and blow up the skin, then when it's dark, the skin glows. The fishers say there are many glowing things deep in the chasm. These are about the only one they can catch, however."

"Interesting. It glows. You know, root dangler, the bottom of your chasm is a wonderful and mysterious place, wonderfully attractive to such an adventurer as I."

"I told you before, it's dangerous down there, Mavin."

“I think it’s going to get dangerous up here, girl. Now use your head to help me think. Why would anyone not want another caste raised up? You told me that the Bridgers were top caste. What does that mean in simple language?”

“Simple language is all I have,” she said with some dignity. “It means the eldest Bridger is the head of the chasm council.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s enough. Head of the chasm council can do almost anything. The head can decide to build a new bridgetown. Or send off an expedition. Or assess new taxes. Or get up an army, not that we’ve ever needed one since we came down from Firstbridge. Or assign duties to a caste, or take duties away.”

“All by himself, he can do this?”

“Or herself, yes. Not that they do go off all on their own like that. Mostly they’re quiet kinds who do a lot of talk before they decide anything. You’ve met Rootweaver. Likely, she’ll be next head of council. Her cousin, old Quickaxe, is head now, but he’s getting very feeble. Either he’ll resign or he’ll die or become so ill the council will declare him honorably dis-casted.”

“And how old is Rootweaver?”

“How old? I haven’t any idea.”

“How old is—oh, the Bander from Nextdown, Byle’s daddy, Slysaw?”

“Almost as old as Rootweaver, I suppose.”

“So, if Rootweaver died, and maybe a few others younger than she but older than Slysaw, who would

be the eldest Bridger in the whole chasm? Hmm, girl?" Mavin paused, smiling dangerously while Beedie considered this. "And you think the bottom would be dangerous, do you? I'll tell you, nothing is so dangerous as ambition in a man who cares not who stands in his way."

"Slysaw Bander? Oh, the day he became eldest Bridger is the day we would all change caste. It's disgusting! No one would have him."

"Oh, girl, girl. So speaks the naivete of youth. Why, I have seen such tyrants as you would not believe cheered and carried on the shoulders of their countrymen in that same frenzy the boys were whipped up to this morning. I'll wager you, girl, you'll find some in the teashops today who are talking of Slysaw, telling of his generosity, and what good ideas he has, and how much things would be improved if he were eldest Bridger. I'll wager there are tasteless ones and bitty members of this caste and that one, including more than a few Bridgers, probably, all with sudden coin in their pockets and free time to talk endlessly, all talking of Slysaw Bridger and what a fine fellow he is."

Beedie, who had learned something about Mavin in the last day or so, said, "You'll wager what they're saying in the teashops because you've heard them."

"Right first time, sausage girl. There seem to be many visitors from Nextdown in your bridgetown, more than I can figure why they've come. They seem to have no business but talk. But they are talking, endlessly."

"But why—I still can't figure why, Mavin. If old Slysaw lit the fire that killed my daddy and mother, well, I'll believe anything of him including he's a devil. But I can't figure why."

"Because there's power to be had, girl. I'll tell you a tale, now. Suppose these talkers go to the teashop and go on with their talking, fuming and blowing, saying how terrible it is what the Birders have done, maybe how terrible it is what the birdgirl has done ..."

"Maybe saying she's no messenger from the Boundless at all?"

"Words like that. The sense of it doesn't matter much, so long as the sound is full of indignation and fire. So, they talk and talk, getting fierier and fierier, until at last some of them go to set matters right. How will they do that?"

“Bring Mercald and the Birders up before the judges.”

“Ah. But it’s Birders are your judges, girl, and Birders they claim are doing evil. So, what is it they’ll cry then?”

“They’ll cry the judges are corrupt; they’ll say they’ll have to do justice on their own ...”

“Right again. And their justice will mean killing someone, maybe Mercald, maybe half a dozen other Birders or all of them, maybe the birdwoman ...”

“Which you won’t ... you can’t let happen,” whispered Beedie, beginning to understand for the first time what a tricky person sat beside her.

“Which I won’t let happen. Meantime, there’s confusion and threats and maybe a few little riots. You’ve got no kind of strong arms in this chasm except the Bridgers themselves, perhaps, and—you’ll have to forgive my saying it, girl, but they seem half asleep to what’s going on.”

“They’ve never—had to ...”

“That’s obvious. Well then, with all the confusion, this one and that one could get killed. And wouldn’t it be strange if among those killed were a number of elderly Bridgers? And at the end of it strange that Slysaw Bridger would happen to be eldest Bridger in the chasm and thus head of council. And in the meantime, of course, everyone too upset and confused to wonder who fired the mainroot you almost died on.”

“How could any Bridger do such a thing?” she demanded, white around her eyes, mouth drawn up into an expression of horror and distaste. “Even a Bander shouldn’t be able to think of such things. I wouldn’t have thought that, ever.”

“Which is what he counts upon, sausage girl. He counts on no one believing ill of a fellow caste member. He counts on being able to sow distrust without being suspected of it or blamed for it. He cares nothing

for the religion, so does not fear to meddle with it. He's no believer, that one. Else he wouldn't have trifled with a messenger of the Boundless."

"I thought she wasn't—that she was just your sister, Mavin. I'm all confused ..."

"She's my sister right enough. But who's to say what messengers the Boundless sends? Why not my sister?"

"Why not you?" asked Beedie, whispering.

"Ah. Why not me, indeed. Well, then, this messenger needs a word with your lady Footweaver, and it's up to you to arrange, it, Beedie. Arrange it quietly, and in a way no one will wonder at, for I've things to tell her and her fellows, things to ask of her as well, and I want no prying ears while I'm doing it."

"You're not going to tell them that you ..."

"I'm not going to tell them anything except what any Harvester might have overheard, in a teashop, say. Or at a procession. And if you're asked, girl, you know nothing about anything at all except that I saved your skin on the mainroot one day as I came climbing up from Nextdown. That way, whatever I say, you know nothing about it."

"I could help you," Beedie pleaded.

"Not yet. Come necessary time, then yes, but not now. Just go along to Rootweaver, child, and give me the space of a few minutes to think what I'm going to say to her." She turned to lean on the railing of the bridge, leaning out a little to let the updraft bathe her face in its damp, cool movement, full of the scent of strange growths and pungent herbs. Behind her, Beedie dithered from foot to foot for a moment before moving off purposefully toward the Bridgers House.

Mavin put her face in her hands, letting herself feel doubt and dismay she would not show before the girl. She felt disaster stirring in every breath of air and was not completely sure she could save Handbright, either her life or the life she carried. Far out on a Fishing bridge, which jutted from the mainbridge like a broken branch, she saw a Fisher blowing into his flopper call, making a low honking that echoed back

from some distant protrusion of the wall. He put the call away to stand quiet, flicking his line above his head in long, curled figures as a chorus of honks came from inside the root wall. Too quickly for the eyes to follow, a flopper dropped from the root wall, planing across the chasm on the skin stretched from forelegs to backlegs, folding up from time to time to drop like a plummet in the intermittent flops which gave the creatures their name, then opening the stretched skin to glide over the chasm depths once more. The fisher's line snapped out, the weighted hooks at the end of it gleaming in the evening light, missing the flopper by only an arm's breadth. Another flopper fell from the root wall, and this time the hook caught it firmly through the skin of its glider planes. The flopper honked, a long, dismal hoot into the dusk, and the Fisher began hauling in against the struggling weight.

"Caught," breathed Mavin. "Handbright, you dropped out of Danderbat Keep on wings, on wings, girl, and you've been hooked here in this chasm, the hook set so deep I may never get you loose." She fell silent, thinking about the technique she had used in diverting the mob of boys, the one she had used on the men. When had she learned to do that? And how? It seemed a long time past, a great distance gone.

There had been a town, she remembered, along the coast north of Schlaizy Noithn, separated from the world of the True Game by high cliffs and from the sea by a curving wall of stone around a placid harbor, such a wall as might have resulted from the inundation of some ancient fire mountain. The people of that town had called it Landizot. She came there seeking Handbright and the company of humankind but found a people hesitant and wary, uneasy with strangers and as uneasy among themselves. Yes, they said, there had been a white bird high upon the cliffs—those they called the dawn wall—earlier in the year. The young people had pursued it there, setting nets for it, mimicking its call in an effort to entice it down, but the bird had avoided them easily, circling high above the cliffs in the light of early morning or at dusk, when it gleamed like silver against the mute purple of the sky.

When had it last been seen, Mavin asked, only to be confronted with shrugs and disclaimers. The children had not been allowed to play outside lately, she was told. Not for some time. So they had not seen it. No one went outside much, certainly not alone at dusk, and the bird had always avoided groups. Perhaps it was still there. Perhaps not.

Mavin decided to stay a while and look around for herself. When she asked why people no longer ventured from their locked houses with the barred windows and doors, she did so in that flat, incurious voice she had learned to use in her travels, one which evinced a polite interest but without sufficient avidity to stir concern among casual talkers.

"Because," she was told, "they have released the Wolf." The person who told her this glanced about with frightened eyes and would say nothing else. Stepping away from this encounter, Mavin looked into the faces of others to find both fear and anger there.

When she enquired, they said they were not Gamesmen, that they repudiated Gaming as a wicked thing, if indeed even a tenth of what was said about it was true. They did not want to be thought of as pawns, however. They were an ancient people, they said, with their own ways of doing things. Mavin smiled her traveler's smile, said nothing about herself at all, but made a habit of sitting about in the commons room of her inn at night, listening.

At first there was little conversation. The people who came there at the supper hour were the lone men and women of the town, those without family. They ate silently, drank silently, and many of them left once they had eaten so that the room was almost empty by dusk. As the evenings wore on, however, a few truculent men and a leathery woman or two found their way to the inn to drink wine or beer and huddle in the warmth of the fire. Mavin, with a laconic utterance, offered to buy drink for those present. Later in each evening that courtesy was returned. On the third or fourth night she sat near one old couple who, when the wine had bubbled its way through to their tongues, began to talk, not much, but some.

"Stranger woman, you'll stay here in the place after dark at night, won't you?"

"I'd planned on it," said Mavin.

"Don't go out at night. You're not young as most of the girls or children who've been et, but you're female, and the good Guardians witness the Wolf has eaten older."

Mavin thought about this for a while, not wanting to seem too interested. "Is that the same Wolf I'm told was let out?"

"There is no other," said the old woman. "And thanks be to all the Guardians for that."

"What had he done, to be locked up?" She kept her voice calm, almost uninterested, so the woman would not feel it would be troublesome to tell her.

"Killed a woman. Drank her blood. And after crying remorse and swearing he would not do such a thing again."

"Oh," said Mavin. "Then the Wolf had been locked up before."

“Aye,” responded the oldster. “Twice, now. First time he was young, the wolf. There were those said young ones find society troublesome and strange, so it wouldn’t do to set him down too hard for it. So, that time they locked him up for a season, no time at all.”

“And the second time?” Mavin prompted.

“Well second time they locked him for a full year. A full year. That’s a weary long time, they said. A full year. Tssh. Seems years go past like autumn birds to me, all in a flock, so fast you can’t see them clear. But then, I’m old.”

“So they’ve let him out?” Mavin prompted again.

“Well, the time they set for him was done. Since it’s done, they let him out.”

“The time seems very short. For one who ate a young woman and drank her blood.”

The oldsters shifted uncomfortably on their chairs, and Mavin changed the subject. Still, she thought a year seemed a very short time indeed.

When all had gone save the innkeeper himself, she yawned her way past him on the stairs, remarking as she did so that the two oldsters had seemed upset at the short confinement of the Wolf.

“Those two,” snorted the innkeeper, wiping his hands on his protruding, apron-covered belly. “They’re among those howling loudest at the cost of it. Wolf isn’t eating them, they say, so why should they want to pay for it?”

“Pay for what?” asked Mavin, unable to keep the curiosity out of her voice.

“Pay to keep him locked up, woman! You think it comes free?” And he snorted his way to his rest, shaking his head up all three flights of stairs, calling back down to her, “Tell truth, though. They’ve got nothing. It’s all they can do to keep their own hovel warm without buying firewood for the Wolf.”

Next day Mavin had strolled about the town, seeking among the children for any who might have seen the white bird. In her walk she passed the prison lately vacated by the wolf. Though it looked like a dreary place, it had every comfort in it of warmth and food and drink and soft mattresses and a shelf of amusements and a place to run in for exercise. Seeing it, Mavin well knew it had cost treasure to keep it, for the wood to burn to warm for it for a winter alone would have cost many days’ labor, and the food many days’ labor more, to say nothing of the guards who would have been needed night and day.

A number of children claimed to have seen the bird. One lovely girl of about ten years believed it had flown away south. Her name was Janine, called Janny, and she tagged after Mavin for the better part of five days, talking of the bird, the dawn cliffs, of life and the ways of the world while begging for stories of that world in return. The child was artless and delightful, full of ready laughter. Though Mavin had learned all there was to learn about the white bird, she put off her travels for a time out of simple joy in the girl’s company.

One night there was a new face at the inn, a local preacher of Landizot, one Ristor Kyndle, whose house had been burned down by someone or something and would live at the inn while it was being rebuilt. Seeing Mavin was a stranger to the place, he set about making himself pleasant with the intent of converting her to the faith of Landizot and the Guardians. Talk turned, as it often did, to the Wolf.

“Why didn’t they kill the Wolf when they caught him?” she asked. “Or, if they won’t do that, why don’t they lock the Wolf in a cage of iron here in the village square and let him shiver when the nights are cold. Surely he would be no colder than the corpses of the young women and children who lie in your burying ground?”

The pastor was much disturbed at this. “It would be cruel,” he said. “Cruel to treat a person so. We are good people. Not cruel people.”

Mavin shook her head, but withheld any judgment. If there was anything she had learned in long travels here and there, it was that to most people in the world, every unfamiliar thing was considered unacceptably strange. She told herself she was undoubtedly as odd to them as they were to her, and let the matter go. She determined to continue her search for Handbright as soon as the weather warmed only a little. She stopped asking questions and settled into the place, merely waiting for the snows to melt.

But before the thaw came a wicked murder of a young girl child of the town. Her body was found at the edge of the woods, dragged there by something. There was blood on the snow, and tracks of someone who had struck her down and drunk her blood. The tracks disappeared in the hard-packed ice of the road, however, and could lead them nowhere. The little girl was Janny, and Mavin learned of it with a cold horror which turned to fury.

That night in the inn were only murmurings and sideways glances, and more than once Mavin heard this one or that one speaking the Wolf's name. She expected before the night was over to hear he had been taken into confinement once more, but such was not to be.

He had not left the tavern, they said. He had been in his room drinking with his friends. All night. Never alone, not for a minute. His friends swore to it—Hog Boarfast, and Huggle, the brick-maker's son, and Hot Haialy, the son of Widow Haialy who had beggared herself trying to help him out of one scrape after the other.

“With them all night, was he?” murmured Mavin, controlling her voice with some difficulty.

“So they say.”

“Trustworthy men, these? Those who say the Wolf was with them?”

“Well ... there's no proof not. I mean, who's to say not?”

“Where did they get to know one another? The Wolf and these friends of his?”

“By the hundred devils, traveler, how would I know? All of 'em were born and raised here. Wolf, now, he came more lately, but I don't keep track of him. Most likely they got to know one another while they were locked up—all of 'em have been at one time or another. Or over the wine jugs at the Spotted Fustigar.”

Mavin smiled a narrow smile and bought the man a drink. As days wore on, her fury did not abate. In a few days was another killing, and once more the three friends of the Wolf swore he had been with them in the tavern. Mavin had known this child, too—one like Janine, trusting, joyous, kind. The next day

Mavin left town with some noise about it, saying she would return in a few day's time. Instead, she returned that evening in the guise of a wastrel youth who took a room at the Spotted Fustigar and bought drinks for all and sundry in the tavern. It took no time at all to be introduced to Hog, Huggle, and Hot, and when one met them, one met the Wolf.

He had yellow eyes, and a slanted smile. His eyebrows met over his nose, and he had a feral, soft-voiced charm which had the new young barmaid, who was scarcely more than a child herself, bemused and troubled before the evening was half done. Hog, Huggle, and Hot were youths of a type; one fat, one meaty, one lean, but all as ignorant of the world as day-old bunwits and covering that ignorance with noise. Mavin set herself to be agreeable—which no others in that place did—and before much had been drunk or more than a dozen disgusting stories told, Mavin too, was among the Wolf's close friends. During the fits of lewd laughter, Mavin had looked deep into the faces of the other friends of the Wolf to see the mindless excitements stirring there, gleaming in their eyes like rotten fish on tide flats.

Each day that passed there were fewer people on the streets, each night was closer locked and tighter fastened. The childlike barmaid seemed to stop breathing when the Wolf came near, yet she could not stay far from him. She was always within reach of his hands, always seeking his eyes with an open-lipped fascination. Mavin, watching, made angry, silent comments to herself.

Came an evening the Wolf said, "I'll be here all night tomorrow, won't I, Huddle?" He giggled, a high-pitched whine of excitement. "It's time for a good boozer, eh, Hog, all us good friends together, up in my rooms. Time for hooraw till the cock tries to get up and can't!"

There was a shifting, eager laughter among the three, in which Mavin joined beneath Wolf's speculative eyes. "I'll be back for it," she gasped from her wastrel's face, pretending drunken amusement. "Got to go to Fanthooly in the morning, but I'll be back before dark."

"What's of such interest in Fanthooly?" drawled the Wolf, his suspicious eyes burning in his face so that they seemed to whirl like little wheels of fire. The others hung on his words, ready to laugh or strike, as he bid.

"Old aunty with money, Wolf. Every year, money left me by dead daddy. She has it ready for me, same time, every year in Fanthooly." Mavin appeared too drunk to have invented this, and the four had been drinking at Mavin's expense for some days, so they laughed and believed, saying they would save a drink for him. Mavin, in her wastrel guise, set off in the direction of Fanthooly the following morning.

Only to return, under cover of the forest, entering Landizot once more at the first fall of dark.

She went to the alleyway behind the Spotted Fustigar. There was a door into an areaway in which the trash could be dumped, and if Mavin had read the signs aright, it was there the young barmaid would come, charmed as a bird is said to be charmed by a serpent. And she came, sneaking out without a lantern, wrapped tight in a thick shawl, face both eager and apprehensive. Mavin took hold of her from behind in a hard, unpleasant way which would leave her with a headache but do no other damage, then dragged her unconscious form into the stables. Shortly, the same shawl was in the areaway once more, wrapped around someone else.

The Wolf came there, as she had known he would.

He did not waste his time with words or kisses. The knife was in his hand when he took hold of her, and it stayed in his hand when she took hold of him.

Mavin had been curious about his eyes. She wanted to know if they would glow in that way if he were afraid, if he were terrified, if he knew he was about to die. She found he could not believe his own death—later she thought that might be why the deaths of so many others had meant nothing to him—so, she tried her voice to see whether she could convince him. After a time she caught the knack of it; by the end of it, the Wolf was truly convinced.

It was Hog who found him later that night, lying in his blood, yellow eyes filmed over and tongue protruding from between his slanted lips, the knife still in his hand.

In the morning, Mavin returned to Landizot as herself, full of tsks and oh-my's at the Wolf's sad end. She was questioned about the Wolf's death, as were others, but there was no proof. A stranger young man had been among the Wolf's friends, and it was thought he might have committed the deed except that he had been seen leaving for Fanthooly earlier that day.

As far as Mavin was concerned, the matter was done with. She could not restore Janine to life, but no other Janine would die. She was no longer angry, and she felt she had repaid whatever hospitality had been shown her.

One of the officials of the town came to Mavin afterward, however, with many suspicious questions and lectures on morality. Mavin was sure Pastor Kyndle had cast suspicion on her because of her views. She

was sure of it when the official talked on and on about the Wolf's demise.

"Why?" he asked, attacking her, apropos of nothing.

"Why was he killed? Why, I suppose because he made a habit of killing others. Surely no one except himself expected him to do it forever?" Mavin asked it as a question, but it seemed only to agitate the man.

"We had no proof he was still killing, perhaps it was someone else who was killing the women."

"Perhaps," Mavin shrugged.

"Whoever killed the Wolf had no right ..." the official began.

"Explain to me again," asked Mavin, "because I am a stranger. Why was it you could not subject the Wolf to the cruelty of a cage? Why did you not simply kill him the first time? You had proof then."

"Because he is—was human."

"Indeed? How did you know that?"

"Why, because his mother was human, and his father."

"Ah. And is that all humanity is? To be born from others who appear human? What does it mean, humanity?"

"It means," said the official with some asperity, "that he was born in the ordinary way and therefore had a soul. We cannot subject someone with a soul to cruel or horrible punishment."

“Ah,” said Mavin, cocking her head in a way she knew to be particularly infuriating. “And the young women and children he killed? Did they also have souls?”

“Of course.”

“And by Landizot’s failure to restrain the Wolf, were they not cruelly treated and horribly punished? Was your town not guilty, therefore, of a grievous and very cruel punishment of the innocent? Ah—I see from your face I have missed some subtlety and fail to understand. Forgive me. I am a stranger and quite stupid.” By this time she was also very angry, for the man had begun to bluster and threaten.

Though she had intended to leave the town at the first thaw, the thaw came while she lingered near Landizot in a cave high upon the dawn wall. The town had acquired a new Wolf. She spent the next season and a half stealing all the children of that town up to the age often or so and carrying them away, far away, to be fostered in desmenes beyond the mountains, over the chasms in the world of the True Game. The people of Landizot were much upset, but they had no proof, so could do nothing. When she had taken all the children to the least, newest baby, she enticed the inhabitants i nhabitants of the town out onto the beach, then burned the town behind them, leaving them weeping upon the shore.

She appeared to them then, only that once, in the guise of a terrible, wonderful beast, using the voice she had learned to use in the alley with the Wolf. “I will teach you my teaching, people,” she roared at them. “No man gets a man’s soul by birth alone. That which behaves like a Wolf is a Wolf, no matter who bore him. I have judged you all and found you guilty of foolishness, and this is the punishment, that you shall walk shelterless and childless until you learn better sense.”

After which she left them.

She remembered this now as she stood beside the rail on Topbridge, roiling with the same kind of fury she had felt in Landizot, seething with a hundred ideas for intervention, wondering how much of it she could justify to herself. She had been young then, only eighteen. Even so, she had not been able to excuse having been judge and executioner as a youthful prank. It had not been without consequence. There were still nights when she wakened from a dream of the Landizot children mourning that they would not see their people again. And yet, even so, she still believed they were better in the lands of the True Game, whatever might befall them, than in the town of Landizot beside the ancient sea. At least in the lands of the True Game, people who gambled with women’s lives did not claim to do it out of morality.

In the last several days she had stood in the Birders House more than once, hands resting upon the railing, listening to the voice of Handbright singing. There was no sorrow in that voice, and it was that as much as anything that had stayed Mavin from precipitous action. She had not yet seen Mercald. With Beedie off talking to the Bridger elders, perhaps now would be time to do it, though Mavin dreaded it. When she thought of Handbright and her pregnancy, she could think of it only in terms of the abuses of Danderbat Keep, and her anger envisioned what the man would look like and how she would hate him.

In which she was wrong.

He was slight and pale as a boy, soft-spoken, mild as mother's milk, timidly diffident, stuttering, his fingers perpetually catching to twist on one another as a baby's do in the crib. He was dressed in the blue and green of the Birders, but on him it looked like festival dress, a child got up in costume, at once proud and shy, and his smile was a child's smile abruptly radiant. In that instant, Mavin knew she had been wrong and in what degree, for Mercald was like Mertyn, Handbright's younger brother and her own, Mertyn who had held Handbright in Danderbat Keep out of love long after she should have left it out of pain.

"You're Beedie's doer-good," he said breathlessly, holding out his hand, trembling in his desire to thank her. "We have all blessed the Boundless that you were there when needed to help her and save her."

"Yes," she said, changing her mind suddenly, as she sometimes did. "I am Beedie's doer-good. I am also the sister of the person you call the birdwoman. Her name is Handbright."

His skin turned white, then flushed, the hot blush mounting from his neck across his face to the tips of his ears, onto his scalp to glow through his light hair like the ruddy glow of a lamp. His hands went to his mouth, trembling there, and his eyes filled with tears. Mavin found herself wondering who had beat him as a child, why he felt this fear, finally deciding that it was merely an excess of conscience, an over-sufficiency of religious sensibility.

"Come" she said harshly. "If I can forgive you, surely the Boundless will do no less."

"Forgive ..." he muttered in a pathetic attempt at dissimulation. "What ... is there to forgive?"

"She's pregnant, Birder. Having seen you, I can tell you how and why and even when, mostlike. You

didn't plan it, did you? Didn't even think of it. It was just that she had been here for some time, sometime weeping, and you held her, and then—well, whist, it happens. She didn't mind at all, no doubt."

"No," he wept. "I prayed forgiveness of the Boundless, so to have treated his messenger with such disrespect, but then as time went by, I thought perhaps it had been intended. Oh, but I am soiled beyond all cleansing ..."

"Nonsense," said Mavin impatiently. "You are silly beyond all belief, but that is your sole sin I am aware of, young man. I have no doubt that even now you do not know what trouble this will cause."

"I will be disgraced," he said in a sorrowful voice. "And it is right I should be."

"If that were all, we could possibly bear it with equanimity," s he said, "but there is more to it than that. There is a deal of riot and murder involved. Well. I have seen you, Mercald. Having seen you, I may not become angry with you, for I do not become angry with children."

He flushed again, this time offended.

"Ah," she thought, "so he is capable of anger. Well and good, Mercald." To him, aloud, she said, "Think, now, if you are disgraced, will you be disgraced alone?"

"It was my fault alone. No other Birder would ..."

"Tush, boy. I wasn't talking of Brightfeather out there. I was speaking of her, Handbright. If you are disgraced, so will she be disgraced. If you are punished, so will she be punished. If you are put to death—as I have no doubt someone will try to do—then do you think they will not try it with her as well?"

His expression took on all the understanding she could have wished, horror and terror mixed. "But she is a messenger of the Boundless. They would not dare so offend the Boundless ..." Then he thought of this and his expression changed. She knew then that there was a functioning mind behind all the milky youth of him, for his eyes became suddenly aware and cold. "By the Boundless, but they would. Those piles of flopper excrement would try it, to discredit our judging of them ..."

Mavin smiled. "Who? Who are they, boy?"

He drew himself up, blazing. "I am not 'boy'. I am a Birder of the third degree, judge of the people of the chasm. I will examine mine own conscience, doer-good, if that is warranted, but I will not submit to disgrace which uses matters of conscience as a starting point for revolt. As to who they are, if you know so much, you know as well as I. The ones from Nextdown. Bridgers, mostly, though with casteless ones mixed in, and Barthers and people from Bottommost."

"Led by whom?"

"I don't know. Nor why. But led by someone, I have no doubt."

"As to that, I can enlighten you. Which I will do, young judge, if you will come with me towards Bridgers House. Beedie has gone there to arrange a meeting with the Bridger elders—only those of Topbridge, mind you."

"It is customary for Bridgers to wait upon the Birder caste," he replied in a stiff voice, now growing accustomed to his anger and making use of it.

"Come off it, Birder. If the rebels have used Handbright's condition to discredit your caste, it was you who gave them the opportunity. Take off your robes. Put on something dark and inconspicuous, and we will walk outside the light of the lanterns. We are sneaking away to a secret meeting, not leading a procession of dignitaries." And she smiled at him, nodding toward the door to give him leave to go, listening throughout all this to the voice of Handbright behind her, threading endless chains of unstrung words with her song.

They left Handbright singing, making no attempt to guard her, Mavin doing so in the hope the skulkers had not been directed to start overt trouble so soon, and Mercald with the conviction that she was safe, would always be safe in a Birders House. Leaving dignity behind, they skulked down the twisty ways among the dwellings and shops, up and down half flights of stairs, out onto Fisher platforms and back again, staying out of the light of the lanterns, away from the alley corner gapers and chatterers. They encountered Beedie only a little way from the Bridgers House. "Rootweaver says she can meet with us in about an hour, Mavin. Mercald. You look very different without your robes. Was it you got Mavin's sister pregnant?"

He began the stuttering, fluttering, pale then red once more, only to be stopped in midflutter by Mavin's saying, "Of course he did, sausage girl. He's the only one innocent enough to have done it without realizing what a mess it would make. Don't tease him about it. He's troubled enough as is, and will be more when we finally figure out what needs to be done."

CHAPTER FOUR

The buildings of Topbridge burgeoned at the edges of the bridge like growing things, room atop room, lump on lump, anchored by fine nets of twig roots to the buildings below, connected across alleys by twisting, tendril-like flights of Fishers' roosts juttied like rude tongues from this general mass; every roomlet sprouted corbeled parapets; machicolations perforated the edges, allowing a constant shower of debris to float downward. The city was fringed with vertical roots which fell from the great supporting catenaries into the everlasting murk of the far-below, pumping life up into the mainroots and thus into the city. Along some of these verticals, new towers spun themselves in airy insubstantiality, a mere hinted framework of hair roots and a plank or two awaiting the day they would be strong enough to support a floor, a wall, a roof.

Water fell occasionally from the green leafy sky, a kind of sweet rain or sticky dew, and children ran about in it with their mouths open and tongues stuck out, whooping thier pleasure at the taste as their elders made faces of annoyance and wiped the dew from their hands with gestures of fastidious displeasure. Everyone wore fishskin hats on days like this, to keep the sticky rain from coating their hair, and all the awnings were put up, adding to the general appearance of haphazard efflorescence.

This clutter of room upon room, tiny balconies jutting over other such balconies, flat roofs forming the front porch of still other dwellings, all the higgledy piggedly disarrangement of the place gave way here and there to more open spaces, commons where market stalls surged at the foot of the surrounding structures, flapping with woven awnings and banners like a net full of fishes. Wide avenues ran the length of the bridgetown; narrower alleys twisted across it. Carts rumbled up and down, hawkers cried the flavour of tea, the strength of liquor, the fieriness of exotic spices f rom Midwall—culled from the parasitical vines which grew there and there alone. Harvesters stalked about vending quantities of root nodules from gaping sacks, or wall moss in bulk, as well as vine fruits, thickic herb, dried strips of net-caught flattree leaves and fifty other viands as strange and odd-smelling.

The favourite place for meetings, whether planned or spontaneous, was Midbridge Market, and the most favored of the stalls there was that of Tentibog the Teaman. There were those who said Tentibog traded with the pombis aloft, that nothing else would explain how he obtained herbs unobtainable by other men, at which Tentibog only laughed and talked of the quality of his water, procured at great expense from some distant, secret water-belly. Whatever his secrets, his place was so crowded that it

virtually assured anonymity. Anyone might be there, might meet anyone else, might engage in a moment's conversation or a morning's philosophical discussion without anyone else wondering at it or commenting upon it. So it was that Beedie and Mavin encountered Rootweaver there, and the three of them happened upon Mercald the Birder—dressed in simple trousers and shirt and unrecognizable therefore—and the four of them drank Noon Moment tea while deciding the fate of the chasm.

Rootweaver had ordered the third pot by the time Mavin had finished talking, Beedie marveling the while at the things she had said and had not said. "Because we are what we are, my sister and I," Mavin had emphasized, "does not mean we are not what you supposed my sister to be—a messenger of the Boundless. Indeed, by this time, I believe we are both such messengers, sent to help you out of a difficulty."

"Out of mere kindness, I suppose," Rootweaver had said, somewhat cool in manner.

"Oh, I think not. If the Boundless uses us as its messengers, surely it takes into account what will make us act. I am moved out of sympathy for my sister, whom I owe a debt. And out of regard for your people, who until now have treated her kindly."

Rootweaver toyed with her teacup, one of the Potters' best, circled with lines of rippling colour and pleasant to the touch. When she spoke at last, it was with some hesitation. She did not wish to offend Mavin, nor the Boundless, if it came to that, but she was acting eldest, and that carried certain imperatives. "Mavin—see, I call you by your name, thus offering a measure of friendship and trust—you ask that we take your ... sister into Bridgers House. You make a persuasive case that her life is in danger where she is. No! You need not cite further incident. I'm inclined to believe you. We are not so blind in Bridgers House we cannot see unrest or hear the result of manufactured demonstrations of discontent.

"So, well and good. But what would occur if this woman were taken into Bridgers House? Those responsible for rumor and riot would soon learn she is gone from Birders. They would seek her out. Our house is full of Maintainers and workmen who come and go. There is no locked room so remote that its existence might not become known if a search were going on. So on the one hand a woman will have disappeared, on the other hand there will be a locked room at Bridgers House. What will the rumormongers make of that?"

There was a lengthy silence. Beedie sighed, tapping the table with her own teacup. "She's right, Mavin. That wouldn't keep the birdwoman safe."

"Besides which," Rootweaver went on in her calm voice, "you give us no real reason to assist you in this

way. We would be more sensible to disinvolve ourselves, to stand remote from this Bander-Birder conflict so that our own position would not be threatened.”

“The Banders killed my family,” Beedie burst out, in a barely suppressed whisper. “Tried to kill me ...”

“Where is your proof? What proof do you have, child? A cough heard on the stair from Potter’s bridge? A sneering look? Suspicious absences? A bit of harassment by officious Banders? Well, here is a judge. Tell me, Mercald, would you convict the Banders on this evidence?”

Mercald flushed, then turned pale. “I could not,” he whispered. “As you know, Bridger.”

“You see,” said Rootweaver. “If we have no proof, we cannot take action against the Banders. We cannot even be sure to prevent what evil they may attempt in the future. Because we have not proof, we Beeds and Chafers must protect ourselves. We cannot openly ally ourselves with Birders who may fall into disrepute. We cannot have ourselves accused of blasphemy because we offer protection to a person alleged to be a false messenger, perhaps a servant of Demons ...”

“I have said Handbright means much to me. I cannot take her away with me until she is delivered of the child she carries. If she remains here, it is at peril to her life. And you say you will not help me?” Mavin spoke in that flat, incurious voice Beedie had heard before, an ominous voice in that it gave nothing away.

“I didn’t say that,” replied Rootweaver, pouring Mavin more tea. “I merely said that you asked a great deal and offered nothing much in return except information we were already aware of. Now—if you were willing to take on a job of work for us ...”

“Ah,” said Mavin. “So now we come to it.”

“We come to it indeed, if you wish. I have something in mind.” Rootweaver leaned forward to speak softly, intently, making closed, imperative gestures with her fingers, hidden from others in the room by their huddled bodies. Mercald and Beedie listened with their mouths open.

Mavin feigned uninterest. When Rootweaver had done, however, she leaned back, stared at the ceiling for a time, then dried her hands on her trousers and held them out. “Done,” she said. “Agreed. If you will

keep Handbright safe.”

“We can only try,” the Bridger replied. “We may not succeed once it is known she lodges with us.”

Mavin gave her one, brilliant smile. “I think we can improve her chances in that regard. It may not be necessary for anyone to know that the birdwoman is with you at all. And while we are at it, may we test to see if proof of our belief may be found?”

“You may test. You may not forment insurrection merely to see who falls into your mouth.” Mercald said this firmly, without doubt, and Beedie gave him a surprised look. For all his milky youth, still he had some iron in him.

“Very well then,” agreed Mavin. “Here is what we will do ...”

The following day, an hour or so before noonglow, a procession of Bridgers and Birders was seen to enter the marketplace, dressed in the full regalia of office, obviously on some portentous mission.

The assembly of so many top caste persons was enough in itself to attract attention, and by the time the call for prayer cried silence upon Topbridge, there were people in every alley and every market stall, on every roof and balcony, waiting to see what would happen.

It was Rootweaver who mounted to the announcement block on the market floor at the very center of the commons, she who cried into the attentive quiet of the place. “People of Topbridge, I speak for the eldest Bridger, Quickaxe, head of chasm council, who is too feeble with age to attend upon you. I am next eldest, next in line to be head of chasm council. I am here to speak about disorder, for disorder has come to the chasm. There has been talk and dissention. A Birder has been assaulted—no, do not draw horrified breath. There is not one of you who did not know of it.

“As you all know, Mercald the Birder received a visitation from a messenger of the Boundless. This is a mystery. We do not understand why the messenger has come. Some, in their foolishness, have accused the Birders of ill doing. Others have gone so far as to question the validity of Birders’ judgments, their place to judge at all.

“I come to you all with a message. Tomorrow, during noonglow, the messenger will depart Topbridge. It has come to lead a small group on a quest, toward a greater mystery than any we have spoken of. Mercald, the Birder, will attend upon that quest. Beed’s daughter, Bridger, will attend upon it. The Maintainer Roges will attend upon the quest. They go to find the lost bridge. I invite you to witness the going forth.

“There will be no disorder! I serve notice here upon you all. If there is language unfitting the occasion, if there is unruly behaviour, if there is childish rebelliousness displayed, those responsible will be brought before swift judgment under chasm rule.” Then there was indrawn breath from everyone present. Mavin had been prepared for that, and she heard it with satisfaction. Chasm rule allowed immediate execution of rebels against the order of the bridgetowns by tossing them into the chasm. Privately, she thought it a bit too good for the Banders—at least, those involved in the conspiracy, as she felt most of them probably were. From the corner where she stood, she watched faces, eyes, searching for the quick sideways glance, the covert whisper, the betraying signs of those who had plans that were upset by this announcement. There were many. Too many. Most of them casteless ones, but there were Bridgers among them, and Fishers, and a knot of belligerent-looking Harvesters. She shook her head. Proof! She had all the proof she needed.

“Ah, well. Much to do before the morrow. Much explanation, much preparation. Rumor must be spread in the market place concerning the treasures of the Lostbridgers. Beedie must be outfitted for travel, and Mercald, and the ‘Tainer Roges.” Beedie had not wanted him along, had become rather flushed about it, as a matter of fact, but Rootweaver had insisted. “Where a Bridger goes, a Maintainer goes, Beedie, and that’s the rule. In times of danger, a Maintainer is a Bridger’s spare eyes, a Bridget’s spare nose.”

“I can take care of myself,” she had replied rebelliously. “I don’t need Roges.”

“If you will not accept him as a quest mate, then we must send some other Bridger,” Rootweaver had replied. “We will not begin a holy quest by breaking the rules. You may be sure someone would notice, and it would throw doubt upon the whole endeavor.”

“Rootweaver is right,” Mavin had said. “Let be, Beedie. I’ve met Roges. He’s strong, sensible, and seemingly devoted to you, though why he should be, I cannot tell you.” At which Beedie had flushed bright red and shut up.

In the night, at the darkest time, a small group of people left Birders House unobserved, carrying something fairly heavy. They placed it in a cart with muffled wheels and took it along the main avenue. The avenue was much darker than usual, for all the lanterns had gone out simultaneously. This happened rarely, but it did happen. If anyone lay wakeful at that time to hear the muffled squeak of a wheel, no one remarked upon it at the time or later. At Bridgers House the cart was unloaded and those who had

accompanied it dispersed into the dark. When morning came, there was no evidence of the trip. The cart was back behind Harvesters House from which it had been borrowed. The visiting Harvester, Mavin, who had enquired about the cart, had departed the evening before. There were those in the house sorry to see her go. She had been interested in everything, a good listener to all their tales, all their woes and dissatisfactions, and she had been remarkably good with the slow-girules, almost as though she understood their strange language. Two of the Harvesters, meeting over breakfast tea, remarked that it was sad she would miss the beginning of the quest which was to start at midday.

“Though she’s probably on the stairs to Nextdown by now, and from there she’ll probably see as much as we will. Likely more. With the crowd there’ll be, likely we’ll see nothing or less.” Mavin, preparing herself in the back room at Birders House, would have been amused.

Time moved toward noonglow. Mercald came out of the Birders House, together with Brightfeather and half a dozen others of the Birders, all in their robes and stoles, tall hats on their heads with feather plumes nodding at the tips. In their midst walked a bird-woman in her green dress, silver and blue ribbons flowing as she walked, calm and easy, humming her song in a quiet voice.

The woman who had once worn that dress now sat in a high, comfortable room at Bridgers House, guarded both day and night. She wore clothes of quite a different kind. Her hair had been cut and dyed. She did not resemble the birdwoman at all.

Anyone who went to the Birders House would find it empty; any-one who looked at the birdwoman in the procession saw that she was lean as a sideroot. There was murmuring, consternation in some quarters. How could one accuse the Birders of having interfered with a messenger of the Boundless when the messenger did not seem to have been interfered with? Byle Bander, watching from a convenient doorway, slipped inside the house to report to his dad.

“No sign at all, Dah. None. She was swole like a water-belly three days ago. I swear. Saw it myself. Not now, though.”

“There’s some can use herbs,” said the old man in a dire voice. “We can give it out that they used herbs on her, made her lose it.”

“Ah, but Dah, those herbs come nigh to killing anyone who takes ‘em. Everybody knows that. This one is healthy as anything. No sign she was ever sick, and there are those know she was swole three days ago. They’re saying it’s a miracle already on the street.”

The man heaved himself up, face dark with fury. "What are they up to, those Beeds, those Chafers? I ask you. What do they know?"

"Nothing, Dah. How could they?"

"Well it's strange, I tell you. All suddenly now, after doing nothing for days and days, the whole Bridger bunch is talking quest. Talking miracle. Talking to the Birders as though they was cousins. And you noticed how they go around? There's never a time they don't have a Maintainer within reach, knife in his belt, looking, looking. What are they suspecting?"

"Well ... a lot of 'em have died, Dah. You can't expect they shouldn't notice."

"Accidents," said the old man, sneering. "All accidents. It's that Beeds daughter girl. She's come up from rootburn all full of fury, spreading stories."

"I haven't heard any, Dah. Swear I haven't."

"Well, hear it or not, it's her, I'll tell you. Come up on the roof, boy. We'll see what they're about."

Outside, the procession moved into the commons. The birdwoman moved toward the railing to stand framed by two verticals, posed, all soft as feathers in dress and demeanor, gazing around her with mild eyes. Some of those who had been busy assaulting the Birder only days before had the sense to look ashamed of themselves, and more than one wife whispered angry words to her husband. "You see! You can tell she's holy. You men, putting your filthy mouths on everything wonderful ..." "Pregnant, is she? Well, she's about as pregnant as my broom handle, husband. If you'd spend more time making nets and less rime in chatter, we'd be better off and the Boundless would be gratified, I'm sure." Mavin, looking at them out of Handbright's face, read their lips, their expressions, and smiled inwardly.

The Birders moved toward her, setting up poles, banners, making a screen around her on all sides except outward toward the chasm. They roofed it with scarves, and Mavin was hidden from their view. The call for prayer sounded, a narrow cry, a climbing sound which rose, rose, upward into the green sky. Floppers honked in the root wall. Birds sang. High above them a breeze shook the leaves of the flattrees and the sweet dew fell. Noonglow came. The Birders drew the screen away.

All the assembled people gasped at the white bird which perched at the edge of the chasm, unbelievably huge and pure, more a symbol than a living thing, hierarchic and marvelous.

Mercald moved forward, a traveler's pack on his back, Beedie coming to stand beside him, then Roges.

"Show us the way," Mercald called to the bird in his high, priest's voice. "Show us the way, messenger."

Mavin spread her wings, dived from the edge of the bridge, caught the air beneath her and whirled out into the hot, uprising draft. She circled upward, twice, three times, gaining height with which to circle above the bridge, crying in a trumpet voice as she did so, then outward once more and down, down into the depths and out of sight. Mercald struck the bridge floor with his staff, cried, "We follow, messenger. We follow." The three of them moved resolutely toward the stair to Nextdown as the crowds pushed back in religious awe. A group of ordinary people Messengers assembled at the chasm side, strapping on their flopperskin wings, leaping one by one out into the same warm updraft to circle away up-chasm and down-chasm, carrying word of what had happened.

Behind the questers on the roof of his house, Slysaw Bander pounded the parapet with his fists. "They know something, Byle, I tell you they know something. They've got something in their teeth. Something big. Something wonderful. The lost bridge went down in the long ago, so they say, with treasure on it. Treasure we can't even think of, boy, because we've lost the secrets of it. Can you imagine? Well, I've need of treasure right now. I need to put it in many pockets, boy, and the Banders are running shy of enough of it. So I'm not going to let them get it all by themselves. Pack us some gear, boy, and go tell your cousins. There'll be two expeditions going down, one to lead and one to follow—one to find, and one to take it away from them."

"But, Dah! It makes me fearful to hear you talk so. Fearful to think what they may be up to. There's only a few of the old Beeds and Chafers to have done with and you'll be eldest. Why go away now? We're close, Dah. Real close."

"Because they're onto something, boy. And whatever it is, we've got to know. The other'll wait. None of 'em'll get younger while we're away. Come on now, hop." And Byle Bander hopped, unaware that when the group left the house and headed for the stairs down which Mercald had gone, they were observed with considerable satisfaction by Rootweaver herself.

“You see, cousin,” she said to the eldest, who sat well wrapped in an invalid chair at the teashop table. “While it won’t do as proof, still it goes far to establish that Mavin was right.

“But who is she?” the old man said wonderingly. “What is she?”

“A wonder, a Demon, a messenger of the Boundless,” replied Rootweaver. “Mavin Manyshaped. One who can see farther than we have had to learn to do, cousin.”

“Well then,” he said, “what is to happen now?”

“According to Mavin, the announcement of a quest, particularly one rumored to have treasure as a part of it, will draw the villains out where they may be seen and proof assembled against them. Mercald goes with the questers to witness such proof and to remove him as a subject of rumor. Beedie goes because Mavin asked for her, and because the girl has an adventurous spirit. Roges goes where Beedie goes.” Rootweaver refilled their cups, meditatively, gazing at the stair head, now almost vacant. She remembered her own youth, her own adventurous spirit. With her, too, there had been a certain Maintainer ...

“Actually, Eldest, they go to find out what is killing the roots of the bridges. We do not say that, for to say it would mean panic, but that is why they go—that is the bargain we have made with Mavin. ‘Find out’, we said, ‘and put a stop to it.’

“Privately, I believe Mavin would have gone into the chasm to explore it whether we asked her to do so or not,” she said. “She is an adventurer first, and whatever else she may be second. This is in her eyes, in the very smell of her skin. Well, as for us, we will wait and see. Guard the pregnant birdgirl, guard ourselves against assassination, warn our fellows on the other bridges, and wait and see.”

The old man shook his head. Despite his fragility, his concern for the people he had so long cared for, he found himself in a curious mood. After thinking about it for a very long time, he decided the feeling was one of envy. Wait and see was not what he really wanted to do, and he thought of Beedie and Roges as he had seen them marching off to the stairs with a longing so sharp that he gasped, and Rootweaver had to put his head between his knees until he recovered.

CHAPTER FIVE

There was no one else on the stairs when the small group began the descent. They looked back to see the whole rim of the bridge edged with white disks of faces, mouths open in the middle so that it looked like hundreds of small, pale O's along the railing and at every window. "We are already a legend," said Beedie, not without some satisfaction.

"I pray there will be more to the legend than a last sight of us disappearing into the depths," commented Roges. He was staying politely behind her, and Beedie was surprised to find that the thought of him so close rather pleased her. Well, it was a new thing she was doing, unused to travel as she was. It was always good to have familiar things about, rugs, bits of furniture, ones own 'Tainer. With uncustomary tact, she did not mention this to him, knowing that he would not like being compared to cooking pots and sleeping mats. Then, too, perhaps the comparison was not quite fair. Roges was a good deal more useful than a sleeping mat. She flushed, and began to think of something else.

"Do I understand that the white bird was not actually the ... the messenger which we had received before?" Roges asked. "Actually, Bridger, Rootweaver told me very little."

"Maintainer, the white bird we are following into the depths is named Mavin. She, whatever she is, is sister to that white bird Mercald had in Birders House—the one all the fuss was about. However, everyone thinks it is the same white bird, so if they are intent on doing it harm, they'll have to follow us into the depth to do it."

"And we are not actually upon a quest to find the lost bridge? I gathered that much."

"Roges," Beedie sighed, calling him by name for the first time in her life without noticing she was doing it, "We're going to find what's eating the roots. Because Rootweaver and all the elders are frightened half out of their wits. And they're afraid to talk about it or go down into the depths themselves for fear it will cause an uproar. So they've maneuvered Mavin into doing it for them. Now that's the whole truth of it."

"Ah," said Roges, turning pale, though Beedie did not see it, for which he was grateful. "There's been talk about something eating the roots. Whispers, mostly. No one seems to know anything about it, except that some of them are dying. Well. How ... interesting to be going on such a mission."

Then he fell silent and said nothing more for quite some time while he tried to decide how he was going to act now that he knew what the mission was about. Eventually he reached the conclusion that he would still have volunteered to come even if he had known the whole truth; that being part of the group selected

for such a mission was gratifying; and that while the journey had suddenly gained certain frightening aspects, he did not regret that aspect of it. Besides, nothing could have kept him from going wherever Beedie went, though he carefully did not explain this to himself. After a little time he felt better about it, and actually smiled as he followed Beedie on down the seemingly endless stair.

“What was it you said about not stopping at Nextdown?” Mercald asked her. “I didn’t understand that part.”

“Mavin said she would meet us on the stairs before we get to Nextdown, and she doesn’t want us to go to Nextdown at all if we can help it. She thinks old Slysaw has been building strength there, and likely we’d be set upon. It’s important that they not lay hands upon you.”

“How would they know we are coming? Are the Banders set to assault any Birder who shows up?” Mercald was edgy with uncertainty, fearful and made touchy by his fear.

“Mavin thought old Slysaw had probably hired a Messenger or two. We know Slysaw is up on Topbridge. One of the Chafers from Bridgers House saw him. So he might have sent word ahead of us to Nextdown. She says she’ll be very surprised if he didn’t.”

“I didn’t know there was a way around Nextdown,” commented Roges, hearing this for the first time.

“Neither does she. But Mavin says if there is a way, she will have found it by the time we get there. She thinks there may be some construction stairs used by the Bridgers in times past that will duck down this side and join the stairs to Midwall farther on.”

“If so,” said Mercald, “I’ll wager they’ve rotted away by now. Nextdown is the second oldest of all the bridges, and it hasn’t been renewed at all. Any construction stairs would be fair for crawly-claws by now.”

“I thought Topbridge was the second bridgetown built,” said Roges. “Before the fell of Firstbridge.”

Mercald shook his head. “Nextdown had been started before Firstbridge was destroyed. There were already stairs down to it, which is how a few Firstbridgers escaped. Then, it was from Nextdown they

moved up to build Topbridge. It's all in the records we have left at the Birders House. Not that they're complete in any sense. Mostly they're things that were rewritten from memory after Firstbridge was broken."

"Do they say where we came from, Mercald?" Beedie had been curious about this ever since Mavin had spoken of the wide world above the chasm.

"Only that we came from somewhere else, long ago. We lived on the surface under the trees until the beasts drove us out. And why that happened is a mystery. Some say it's because we sinned, disobeyed the Boundless. Others say the Demon Daudir brought it upon us out of wickedness."

"I haven't ever heard of the Demon Daudir!" Beedie was indignant. "If it's an old story, why haven't I heard it?"

"Because it's accounted heresy," replied Mercald. He had stopped for a moment at a place the stair root they were on switched to another one, heading back along the root wall. Stairs were made by pulling a sideroot diagonally along the root wall as far as it would go, then cutting steps into it and building rails where necessary. Except for the short stretch between Potter's bridge and Miner's bridge, one root was not sufficient for the whole distance and crossovers were needed. At these crossover points, small platforms gave space to rest. Travelers caught between bridges by nightfall sometimes slept there, too. Mercald stopped to take off his high feathered hat, folding it up with some care and slowing it away in his pack wrapped in a handkerchief. His robes were next, and when he had finished all the regalia was hidden away and he appeared to be merely another traveler. "Daudir was supposed to be a Demon who arrived out of the Boundless in the time of our many-times-great forefathers. She brought disaster upon our world, so it is said, and our own troubles were the result. However, this is not in accordance with the Birders' teaching, so we don't talk of it."

Beedie wondered if Mavin knew the legend, and if so what she thought of it. "Why isn't it in accordance, Mercald? Is it a story?"

"Everything is a story," muttered Roges, unheard.

"It isn't a story," Mercald said. "But it is doctrine. Do you want to hear it?"

"If it isn't too much trouble."

“As a Birder, I have no choice. Trouble or no, I must tell what is to be told. That’s what Birders are for. So. Let me follow you and Roges, and that way you can hear me as I talk...”

“The Story of the Creation of All. Ahem. Time was the Boundless lived alone, without edge or limit, lost in contemplation of itself. Time was the Boundless said, ‘I will divide me into parts and compare one part against the next to see if I am the same in all parts of me, for if there is difference in anything, in this way may I discover it.’

“So the Boundless divided itself, one part against another part, and examined all the parts to see if difference dwelt among them, and lo, there was difference among the parts for what one part contained was not always what another part contained.

“So the Boundless was lost in contemplation, until the Boundless said, ‘Lo, I will divide me smaller, in order to see where the difference lies.’ And the Boundless divided itself smaller yet, finding more difference the smaller it was divided ...”

“I don’t understand that at all,” murmured Beedie to Roges.

“It would be hard to tell the difference between Beedie and Beedie,” Roges whispered. “But if you divided yourself in pieces, I suppose it would be easy enough to tell your left foot from your elbow.” He smiled behind his hand.

“Until at last,” Mercald went on in full flight of quotation, “the Boundless was many, myriad, and the differences were everywhere. Then did the Boundless hear the crying of its parts which were lost in the all and everything. ‘Woe,’ they cried, ‘we are lost’.”

“I should think so,” muttered Beedie. “What a thing to do to oneself.”

“So it was the Boundless created Bounds for its parts and its differences, and places wherein they might exist, that the differences might have familiarities in which to grow toward Boundlessness once more ...”

“And a good thing, too,” said Beedie. “Now, what has that to do with not believing in Daudir the Demon?”

Mercald shook his head at her, provoked. “Obviously, this chasm is a familiarity, a Bounded place which was created for us by the Boundless. We are the differences who live here. If it was created for us by the Boundless, then it can have nothing to do with Demons or devils or anything of the kind. All of that is mere superstition and beneath our dignity as people of the chasm. Doctrine teaches that all differences are merely that—differences. Not necessarily good or evil.” He then fell silent, climbing a little slower so that the other two drew away from him

“Try not to tread on him,” said Roges. “All the really religious Birders are sensitive as mim plants. You touch them crooked, and they curl up and ooze. As judges go, Mercald isn’t bad. He’s true to the calling.”

“You speak as though some might not be,” she said, surprised.

“Some are not. I come from Potter’s bridge, and we had Birders there as judges I would not have had judge my serving of tea for fear they’d condemn me under chasm rule. It was pay them in advance or suffer the consequences, and those among us too poor to pay suffered indeed.”

“Wasn’t it reported to the chasm council?”

“Oh, eventually. Before that, however, there was much damage done. In the end, it was only three of them were judged by their fellows and tossed over, two brothers and a sister, all corrupt as old iron.” He moved swiftly to one side of the stair, reaching out toward a ropey root that hung an arm’s length away. It was dotted with tender nodules, the green-furred ones called root mice, and he cut them cleanly from the root to place them in the pouch at his belt. “Enough for the three of us,” he said. “And some left over for breakfast.” He knelt, peering through the railings. “Ah. Look there, Bridger. In that little hole in the biggest root along there, see—behind the three little ones in a row.”

She knelt beside him, searching until her eyes found the waving claws, moving out, then in, then out once more. “A crawly-claw,” she whispered. “Do you suppose we could get him?”

“Do you suppose we should? With a judge following after? We’re not Hunter caste.” He was laughing at

her, she knew, but at the moment she didn't mind.

"I caught one once," she confessed, blushing at the memory of her illicit behaviour. "A little one. I had to hunt all up and down the root wall for enough deadroot to cook it, but it was worth it. Isn't it all right if we're out on the root wall?"

"We're not on the root wall. We're on the stairs. And there's likely to be a party coming up or coming down past us any time. No. Likely hunting a crawly-claw would take longer than would be prudent."

"It's true. They pull back in and disappear, and you have to burrow for them. Well, all right," she agreed. "But we'll keep an eye out for any wireworms. And if we see any, we get them, whether there's a Hunter around or not." Beedie had never had enough fried wireworms, and there were never enough in the market to satisfy her appetite, even if she had had enough money to buy them all.

Mercald had caught up with them, evidently restored to good humor by his time alone. He moved ahead of them now, after admiring the crawly-claw and quoting in great details several recipes for preparation of the beasts, and they continued their downward way. Beedie, her legs accustomed to hard climbs by hours each day spent in spurs, did not feel the climb, but she noticed that both the others stopped from time to time, wriggling their legs and feet to restore feeling numbed by the constant down, down, down.

They had not come far enough yet for the quality of light to change much. It was still that watery green light the Topbridgers knew as daylight, full of swimming shadows cast by the leaves as they moved in winds from outside the chasm. Beedie remembered the light on Nextdown as being less watery and more murky, darker. She had heard that on Midwall and Miner's bridge, lanterns were used except at midday, and of course on Bottommost they were needed at all times. She had heard, also, that the eyes of the people on Bottommost were larger, but this might well not be true. Surely travelers from Bottommost would have come to Topbridge from time to time, but she had never noticed any strangers with very large eyes. They went on. A group of chattering Porters passed them going up, followed not much later by a second group, their legs hard and bulging with climbing muscle. A Messenger swooped by on flopperskin wings, calling to them as they went, "Luck to the quest, Bridger ..." before fairing away out of sight in the direction of Potter's bridge. The light began to tail; the stairs became hard to see. Far below them lights began to flicker in a long line, stretching from the root wall out across the chasm in a delicate chain, growing brighter as they descended. They stopped at the railing to look down, hearing the voice behind them without surprise, almost as though they had expected it.

"What took you so long?" asked Mavin. She stood in the shadow, half-hidden behind a fall of small roots, almost invisible.

“We had no wings, ma’am,” said Roges, grinning at Mavin with what Beedie considered astonishing familiarity.

“Fair blow Maintainer. Well, I had hoped to tell you of a sideway by this time, some kind of trail or climb around Nextdown. I’ve looked. Up the wall and down it, behind the roots and before them. Nothing. What was there has rotted away and been eaten by the wireworms long since.”

“So we must go to Nextdown after all,” said Beedie.

“Where needs must, sausage girl. However, we’ll not do it without a little preparation. There’s a house full of Banders near the stair—the very house your Aunt Six told me you used to occupy, Beedie. Evidently all the Bander kin from upstairs and down have come to fill it full, and every window of it has eyes on this stairway. They’ve been warned we’re coming. There’s talk of assault and the taking of a Birder hostage. So, lest harm fall ...”

“Lest harm fall?” questioned Mercald, fearfully.

“We shall commit a surprise. As soon as we figure one out. However, why don’t we have something to eat first. Have you supplies, Maintainer?”

“Fresh root mice, ma’am. And things less fresh brought from Topbridge. We can have a cold supper.”

“No need for that. There’s a cave in the wall, just here, behind these roots, and a pile of deadroot in it enough to warm twenty dinners. There is also a convenient air shaft which guarantees we will not suffocate in our own smoke. Even if all this were not so near and so convenient, I would want it to be a good bit darker before we attempt to go past that Bridgers House. So we might as well rest a while and enjoy our food.”

“We saw a crawly-claw, Mavin. I wanted to hunt it, but Roges said the Hunter caste might catch us at it.”

“Are they especially delicious, girl?”

“They are the best thing next to wireworms. Even better, sometimes.”

“Then we’ll have to try and hunt one down, somewhere along the way, Hunter caste or no.” She wormed her way behind the bundle of roots, showing them the way into the cave. The sight of it surprised them all, for it was lit with one of the puffed fish lanterns glowing softly to itself in the black. Snaffled from Nextdown by a strange bird, said Mavin with some amusement. There was also a vast pile of deadroot, looking as though it had fallen there rather than been gathered in. Roges set about building a fire, laying his supplies ready to hand on a spread sheet of flopperskin.

“I didn’t know there were caves in the root wall.” Mercald was indignant, as though the existence of anything he did not know of was an affront to his priestly dignity.

“I think your people have become so caste-ridden, priest, that they do not use their humanish curiosity any longer. You have no explorer caste, do you? No. Nor any geographers? Your adventurous young are not encouraged to burrow about in the root wall?”

“Well, in a manner of speaking,” Beedie interrupted. “Bridger youngsters climb about from the time they can walk. I did.”

“Always under supervision, I’ll warrant. Always learning methods or perfecting skills. Well, it doesn’t matter; it’s only a matter of interest to me. In looking for a way around Nextdown, you see, I have found a number of curiosities, and I merely wonder that the people of the chasm seem unaware of them. For example, there is another cave somewhat below us which happens to be occupied by a strangeness.”

“Occupied?” Roges looked up from his folding grill, interested. “Someone living in the wall? A Miner, perhaps?”

“A person. He tells me his name is Haile Seiklik; by profession, a theoretician; in actuality a stranger, an outlander, not belonging in this chasm at all. He tells me he has come here for difference, for where he was before was same. I invited him to join us for supper.”

Roges made a face and turned to his pack for another handful of the root mice. He was slicing them into

a pan with bits of dried f lopper meat and a bulb of thickic. He did not comment. Mavin watched their faces, interested in the ways they received this news: Mercald fearfully; Roges with housekeeperish resignation; Beedie with delight. "How wonderful! What is he, Mavin? I don't know what a theo— a theor whatever is."

"I'm not at all certain, sausage girl. That's why I invited him. He looks hungry, for a start, so I presume a theoretician is not anything practical like a Harvester or a Bridger. He is living in an unimproved cave, so I presume it isn't something useful like a Miner or Grafter. There is a sort of dedication in his expression which reminds me of you, Mercald, but he has no regalia at all."

"What is he doing, then? In his cave?"

"So far as I can tell, he sits and thinks."

"Only that?" asked Mercald, scandalized.

"Only that. He's being fed by the slow-girules. I saw two of them come in and leave him a few nodules while I was there. They talked at him, and he talked back at them, and they purred." She smiled again, then held up one finger. "Shhh. I think I hear him on the stairs." There was a slow tread on the stairs, interrupted by frequent stops. Beedie ran to the cave entrance and peered between the roots, seeing a dark shape silhouetted against the lights of Nextdown, below them. "I know why it does that," said a voice in a tone of pleased amazement. "It's obvious."

"You know why what does what?" asked Beedie, coming out onto the stairs. "Why what does what?"

"I know why it feels colder here than it does up above, among the trees. They always say it is because we are closer to the river, here, with more moisture in the air. Nonsense. We've come down a long way. There's more atmosphere, more heat capacity, and the thicker air cools us faster. That's all. I hadn't thought about that until now. Interesting, isn't it." The person turned toward her, not seeing her. "Different. Not the same at all." He moved blindly toward the place in the roots from which she had emerged, feeling his way between them to the firelit space beyond.

"Who's they?" asked Beedie. "I never heard 'they' say that, about the river and the moisture."

“They,” said the man, moving steadily toward the fire and food, “You know. Them.”

Beedie had no idea about them. She shook her head and followed him, seeing Mavin grasp him by one arm and lead him to a convenient sitting stone. He was dressed all in ragged bits and pieces, and his face was one of mild interest, unfocused, as though he did not really see any of them even while he took food from Roges’ hands. He had shaggy, light hair and a wild-looking moustache and beard which drooped below his chin, wagging gently when he spoke. The colour of his eyes was indeterminable, somewhere between vacant and shadow. After a long pause during which no one said anything, he murmured, “Perhaps it was some other place they said it about. That it was cooler lower down. Because it was wetter. Perhaps that was it.”

“What other place was that?” Mercald asked, suspiciously. “Nextdown? Midwall?”

The man chewed, swallowed, spooned another mouthful up before considering this question. “Oh, not any place very local, I’m afraid. Elsewhere, I think. Before I came here at all.”

“You came from elsewhere,” commented Mavin. “Perhaps from the place the ancestors of these chasm dwellers came from? Or from the southern continent?”

“Elsewhere,” he replied, gesturing vaguely at the rock around them, as though he had permeated it recently. “It started with liquids. They didn’t understand liquids. Local geometry is non-space-filling. Icosohedra. Triginal bipyramids. Oh, this shape and that shape, lots of them. More than the thirty-two that fill ordinary space, let me tell you. That’s why things are liquid, trying to pack themselves in flat space, and that’s what I told them.

“They couldn’t deal with it. They wanted order, predictability, regularity. Silly. Local geometry can be packed, I said, just not in flat space. So, I said, give them a space of constant curvature and they’ll pack. All they did was laugh. I took some liquids to a space of constant negative curvature to show them it would crystallize, and it sucked me up. One minute, there. Next minute, somewhere else. Somewhere different, thank the Boundless. Boundless. That’s a local word for it. Picked it up from someone off the stairs out there. Boundless. Good name for it.”

“I’m sure the Boundless would be gratified at your approval,” said Mercald, much offended.

“Shhh,” calmed Mavin. “The man’s a guest in our midst.”

“They said every place was like the place I was. Infinite replications of sameness. They called it translational symmetry. Well, I determined to find difference no matter what it took. So I left there and came here. It’s different here. It’s local. Rx>f and feh on translational symmetry.”

“I thought you said you got here by accident,” said Beedie, trying to make sense out of the person. “By some curvature or other.”

“Yes. Both. Hardly anything is mutually exclusive when you really think about it. You can’t look at things too closely. The more precisely you look at one thing, the more uncertain the others get. If we locate me precisely here, how I got here becomes increasingly unsure. Tell you the truth, I don’t remember.”

“ ‘Reality has many natures,’ ” said Mercald in his most sententious voice.

“That’s the truth,” said the theoretician, focusing on the priest for a moment before drifting away again.

“That’s the truth, so far as it goes, at least.” He chewed quietly to himself, smiling at his own thoughts. “Surfaces,” he murmured. “Edges. Reality has edges.”

“That’s the truth,” Beedie muttered to herself. “So far as it goes.” She glared at Mavin. “What did we need him for?”

“Need? Well, sausage girl, what do we need you for? To make life more interesting. He’s different, isn’t he?”

Mercald circled the theoretician in slow, ruminative steps, eating, staring, eating. At last he said, “What do you mean, reality has edges?” Receiving no response, he repeated the question, finally driving it through with a kick at the stone the man was sitting on. “Edges?”

The theoretician put his plate down, picked up a length of root from the floor of the cave. “You see this?”

This is a system. It has surfaces. It has extent. It has size and corners and edges and impurities and irregularities.” He put it down, searched for a stone, found one. “This one, too. Here’s another. Not the same, not the same at all. And another one yet. All local. Everything’s local. Local.”

The other three looked at one another, Mercald kept on with his circling; at last it was Roges who said, “So?”

“Not to them! Oh, no, not to them. To them, everything is the same. In all directions. For ever. No edges. No corners. They used to scream at me. ‘What do you do about surface states?’ As though that meant something. I thank the Boundless for the surface states. Show me something, anything without surface states! Anything at all! There’s nothing like that in reality. But they didn’t understand. Just went on inventing ‘ons. Palarons. Plasmons. Phonons. Exitons. Vomitons and shitons soon to come. Feh.”

Beedie murmured, “I don’t know, Mavin. It seems to me we ought to let him go back to his cave and start worrying about the Banders.”

“Banders,” screamed the theoretician in a sudden expression of fury. “Infinite lattices. Homogeneous deformation. Idiots.”

“I really think it’s something religious,” said Mercald to Mavin in a thoughtful voice. “There’s a fine kind of frenzy about it. Of course, it might be heretical, but it sounds quite like doctrine.” He regarded the theoretician almost with fondness.

“We’ll take him with us,” said Mavin. “If he wants to go. Thinker, do you want to come with us?”

The man shook his head, then nodded it, reaching into the general pan for the last of the fried root mice. “If it will be different where you are going. I’ve modeled this place. There’s nothing left to do here.”

“He means he has realized it,” said Mercald with satisfaction. “I’m beginning to understand him. It is definitely religious, after all.” He stroked the theoretician’s shoulder, wrinkling his nose at the feel of the rags. “I’ve got an extra shirt I can lend him.”

“Ah,” said Mavin. “I’m glad you find him sympathetic, Mercald. I wonder if he has any practical use at

all.” She stretched herself on the cave floor, seeming, to Beedie’s eyes, to flow a little, as though she shaped herself to the declivities of the place. “Thinker, will you solve a problem for me? Give me an answer?”

“Answers? Of course. I always know the answer. After I see the problem, of course. Not before. They’re always terribly simple, answers. Which one do you need?”

“We need to get to the stairs below Nextdown—that’s the bridge just below us— without being seen by anyone on Nextdown. There is no other stair and no root climbable by any of us but perhaps Beedie here.”

“Ah,” said the theoretician. “Might one ask why?”

“There are a dozen large men at the end of this stair who are determined to do us harm,” said Mavin, without changing expression. “Is that reason enough?” She had been watching Beedie’s bright, excited face, and was determined not to change into some huge climbing shape which would solve all problems and take all the fun out of the expedition. Besides, shifting was too easy. Sometimes it was more fun to plot one’s way out of trouble. This praiseworthy thought was interrupted.

“Shhh,” said Roges, moving to throw his jacket over the fish lantern. “I hear voices. Someone coming down.” They fell silent, listening, hidden as they were in the dark of the cave, the last glowing coals of the fire hidden from the entrance by their bodies. There was the sound of a dozen pairs of feet, a malignant mutter, a phlegmy cough.

“I smell smoke,” said someone from outside. Byle Bander’s voice. “Smoke, Dah.”

“Well of course you smell smoke, idiot boy. There’s Nextdown no more than a few hundred steps down. This time of evening when don’t you smell smoke? Everybody’s cooking their dinner, and good time to do it, too. I’m hungry enough to eat for six.”

“You think the Birder’s gone on down? You think our family took ‘em at Nextdown, Dah?”

“I think that’s probable, boy. In which case, we’ll have a high old time finding out from that Birder what

they're going after."

"And Beedie. I get to ask Beedie, Dah. That and a few games, huh? She's one I've been wanting to play a few games with for a long time ..." The voices faded away into silence, footsteps echoing up the stair for a time, then nothing.

"Ah," whispered Mavin. "So we are not only expected below, but followed after as well."

"They won't find us down there," said Beedie. "But they'll know we have to be somewhere."

"It's all right, sausage girl. They won't come searching back up the stairs until morning. Well, Birder. Was their conversation proof enough for you?"

Mercald gestured impotently. "What did they say? They would ask me questions. They would play games with Beedie. Can I prove dishonorable intent?"

"Rootsap," said the theoretician. "I've been thinking about rootsap. The way down, you know. Rootsap."

"Poisonous," said Beedie. "Eats through your skin."

"Not at the temperature of the chasm at this altitude at this time before midnight," said the theoretician. "Which is the coolest time of the daily cycle in the chasm. A phenomenon which awaits explanation but is undoubtedly the result of a warming and cooling cycle on the surface." He stood up and patted himself, as though taking inventory, though he carried nothing at all. "Knife," he said. "Or hatchet. We need several good sized blobs."

"Knife is quieter," commented Mavin. Beedie nodded. Mavin took a knife from her hip and went out of the cave, Mercald following her silently. The theoretician merely sat by the coals, his eyes unfocused, staring at the stone around them, muttering from time to time. "Suitable viscosity. Alpha helix. Temperature dependent polymerization. Glop. All local."

Beedie dumped her pouch on the ground and re-packed it, taking a moment to put her hair in order, coiling the dark wealth of it neatly into a bun when she had finished. She caught Roges looking at her, and he flushed. "You have lovely hair," he whispered. "I've wanted to say that, you know."

"That ... that kind of talk isn't customary, Maintainer," she said stiffly. Then, seeing the pain in his face, "Roges. You embarrass me. I'm sorry. Nobody ever said I had nice hair. Aunt Six always says I'm a scatter-nonny."

"You're not a scatter-nonny," he said. "Don't be embarrassed. It's just ... just, I've never had anyone trying to do me harm before. If anything happens, I wanted ... I wanted to have said ..."

"I don't think they're going to do you harm, Roges. I think it's me they're after. And Mercald, maybe. They don't even know Mavin is here."

His face darkened in a kind of remote anger. "Harm to you, Beedie, is harm to me. Maintainers are not mere servants. We are a good deal more than that."

"Polymer," said the theoretician, loudly. "About now." Mavin reentered the cave, carrying a huge milky blob of rootsap on a piece of bark, Mercald just behind her similarly burdened.

They put the blobs down where the theoretician could see them.

"Well, Thinker?"

"Cooler," he directed. "Wherever it's cooler."

Beedie rose, moved around the cave. "It's coolest just at the entrance, Mavin. There's a draft there." They put the rootsap down and waited as the theoretician wandered about, examining roots that came through the cave top, smiling at rocks. At last he came to the cave entrance and peered at the blobs. "There," he said with considerable satisfaction. "You can see the polymerization beginning." They looked at the whitish blobs which were turning transparent. "Cut it," he suggested in his mild voice. "Into four pieces. No. Five. I'll go with you."

Mavin shrugged, took her knife and cut the blobs into five parts. They resisted cutting, piling up around the blade. She pushed the blobs apart, for they seemed to want to rejoin.

“That’s funny,” said Beedie. “I’ve never seen it behave that way before.”

“Nighttime,” said the Thinker. “You’d have to have seen it at nighttime, when it’s cool.”

“You’ve seen it at nighttime before?”

“Well, no. But I thought about it.”

“Now what?” asked Mavin. “We’ve got five blobs, rapidly turning transparent. What now?”

“When they are totally clear, you’ll need to pull it through a hole of some kind. Lacking any method of precise measurement, I would say something roughly finger size. Small finger size.” He watched with interest as Mavin carried the blobs and the fish lanterns out into the dark. There she found a chunk of tough rootbark and drilled a hole in it with her knife.

“So?” she asked. “Why don’t you do one.”

“Madam, I am not an experimentalist!” The theoretician turned his back on her, as offended as Mercald had been earlier.

Mavin snorted. “Well, if you won’t soil your hands, you won’t. Have you any suggestion what I should do next?”

He turned, very dignified in his rags. “You’ll need to push the blob through the hole. You’ll need to fasten that chunk to something that will hold your weight.”

She found a convenient fork in a root and wedged the chunk behind it after pushing some of the blob through the hole with a stick of deadroot.

“That should do,” said the theoretician, taking a firm hold on the part of the blob which protruded from the hole and leaning outward into space. “Be sure to make all the holes in the bark just that size. The yield at that diameter will be approximately one hundred man heights ...” The blob stretched. He grasped it firmly. It stretched further. He stepped into air, and the blob stretched, becoming a thick rope, a line, a line that went on stretching, bobbing him gently at the end of it like a child’s balloon as he sank down below the light of the lantern into darkness. “I thought it would do that,” his voice came plaintively up. “I could theorize, but does anyone know what’s down below?”

“For all our sakes, I hope it’s the stair to Potter’s bridge,” muttered Mavin, leaning out into the chasm. “Well, let’s make another chunk with a hole in it, sausage girl. However, let me try it first. What works for our strange guest might not work for us. He’s fond of saying everything is local.”

After another session with knife and bark chunk, Mavin stepped into the chasm and dwindled away at the end of the stretching line, bobbing as she went. The sapling made a thin humming noise as it stretched, a kind of whirring. After a time, when the blob had shrunk almost to nothing, the whirring stopped, and Beedie heard a muffled call from below.

“I guess we try it,” she said to Roges, wiping her hands up and down her trousers.

Mercald was dithering at the edge of the drop, peering down once more. “I ... I ... can’t ... let ... I can’t ...”

“Oh, foof,” she spat. “He’s got the down-dizzies. I might have known. Mercald. Don’t look. I’m pushing some of it through, now take firm hold of it. Wipe your hands, ninny. They’re all slippery and wet. Here. I’ll use my belt to fasten you to it so you can’t drop. Now. Roges and I are going to hold you by the hands. Shut your eyes. Now! I mean it. Do what I say, or I’ll call the Banders and let them have you. We’re holding you. Now. I’m going to let go. You’re going down. Just keep your eyes shut. Shut!”

She checked the straps of her pack, wiped her hands once more. “Are you ready, Roges? Roges?”

“Hnnn,” he whined through his teeth. “As ready as I’m likely to be, Bridger. I, too, suffer from the down-dizzies, but I suppose it’s time to get over it.”

She surprised herself, and him, by touching his face, stroking it. “Honestly, Roges. You can get over it. It just takes getting used to. Do what I told Mercald. Just don’t look down.” She watched as he eased himself over the edge, teeth gritted tight, sweat standing out on his face. He began to drop, and she took firm hold of her own blob, jumping outward with a strong thrust of her legs, stretching it abruptly, so that it twanged, bobbing her up and down in midair. She clung for dear life, cursing her own stupidity.

When she stopped bobbing, she was beside him, falling down the side of the wall in a dream drop, the hairs of the roots tickling her face, occasional small creatures fleeing with squeaks of alarm. She could see only the light of the fish lantern above them, fading into distance, and the lights of Nextdown which came nearer and nearer on her left, until she and Roges were bathed in their glow. He still gritted his teeth, but his eyes were open, darting this way and that, and she knew that he searched for danger to her even as he fought fear for himself.

Then the lights of Nextdown were above them, becoming only a glow against the root wall as the bulk of the bridgetown eclipsed the lanterns. From below she could hear the voice of the Thinker raised in complaint.

“They would never have thought of that. Their systems have no surfaces, and it’s totally dependent upon surface ...”

“I think I’m going to get very tired of that voice,” she said to Roges plaintively.

“I’m tired of it already,” he agreed. “Still, we’re past Nextdown. We didn’t get captured or tortured or held for ransom. We’re all alive. And I’m confident we’ll find out what’s eating the roots, and then we can go home.”

Beedie was silent, watching the glow of Nextdown fade above her. “I’m not sure I want to think about ... home, Roges. Not just yet. I know you get the down-dizzies, but ... isn’t it exciting? Aren’t you enjoying it at all?”

There was no time for him to answer. Mavin’s voice came out of the blackness nearby. “The stairs are

to your right, sausage girl. I'll toss you a line." Then they were drawn down onto the stairs, and she forgot she had asked the question.

CHAPTER SIX

"Where are we?" asked Mercald, his voice still trembling.

"On the stairs to Potter's bridge. Which is not where we particularly want to be," said Mavin. "Nextdown is slightly above us on one hand, Potter's bridge a long way below us on the other hand. Midwall, which is where I need to go in order to reach Bottommost, eventually, is beyond Nextdown, quite the other direction."

"We can work our way along the root wall under Nextdown," said Beedie, not looking at all sanguine about it. "That will bring us to the Midwall stairs."

"I think not," said Mavin. "At least two of us, possibly three, would find such a traverse difficult. I'd rather find another way, if possible."

"Is the idea to escape from those who followed? Who may follow?" The theoretician seemed only mildly interested in the answer to this question.

"No," said Mercald firmly, surprising them all. "The idea is to stay out of reach, but not out of touch. We need proof they are murderers, and for that we must remain within distance to see and hear what they do, but I'd just as soon not fall into their hands."

"Hurrah," said Mavin, laughing a little. "Mercald, you put it cogently. We don't want to lose them, Thinker. Only avoid them. Which means I must go up yonder and leave a few clues or whisper a few rumors indicating we've passed them by, don't you think? I suggest the rest of you curl up on the steps—they're rather wide along here—and sleep if you can. I'll return before light."

"Couldn't we go all the way to the Bottom on the rootsap?" Beedie had enjoyed the drop, once she had quit bouncing. Even that had been interesting. Now she saw with disappointment that the Thinker was shaking his head.

“Limits,” he sighed. “Surface to volume, temperature changes, weight a factor, of course. We came about as far as one blob will allow. And now it’s too warm.”

Beedie hadn’t noticed, but the midnight cool had passed. The winds which swept down the chasm each day from midafternoon to midnight had stopped, and now the warm mists were rising once more. “What would happen if you tried that in the day time?” she asked.

“Plop,” said the Thinker, making a vividly explanatory gesture. “Plop. Nothing much left of you, I should think.”

Mavin had already gone. They settled themselves upon the step, backs against the stair risers. Knowing Mercald’s fear of heights, Beedie planted pitons and belted him to them. Knowing Roges’ pride, she did not do the same for him. Instead, she placed herself between him and the edge, as though unintentionally, a little dismayed at his quiet, “Thank you, Bridger.” They settled, not believing they would sleep, but falling asleep almost at once out of sheer weariness.

In remembering it afterward, Beedie was never sure quite what had wakened her. Was it a scratching sound from the stair root itself? Something moving in the root wall? A slight shaking of the stair they rested upon? As though tugged by something pulling at it from below? At first she thought it a dream and merely dozed in it, without concern, waiting to see what odd thing would happen next. Then her eyes snapped wide against the glow of Nextdown, and she felt Roges stiffen behind her, his foot kicking at her involuntarily as he awoke.

“What is it?” he hissed.

“Mnn, um,” said Mercald. “Wassn. Morning?”

“Unlikely to be volcanic or tectonic,” said the Thinker calmly. “Biologic in origin, I shouldn’t wonder. Probably zoologic, though there’s too little evidence to be sure.”

The mists were rising around them, bringing the odors of Bottom, a rich, filthy smell, of rotted things, a soupy odor of growth. Suddenly a miasma struck them, a stench, foul as decaying flesh, sweetly horrible,

and they all gagged and gasped in the moment before a rising draft of air wafted it away. The root trembled again, purposefully.

“Something climbing on it, I should say,” said the theoretician. “I can compute the probable bulk, knowing the modulus of the root stair we are on, and the degree of movement ... say something on the order of a thousand two hundred man weights, give or take a hundred.”

“How big would that be?” gasped Beedie as another wave of stink flowed over them.

“Oh, something roughly six or seven men long and a man height and a half through.”

Seeing her look of incomprehension, Roges said, “Put another way, something about as long as a four-story building is tall, and as thick through as the Bridgers House living room.” The root shook beneath them, a steady, gnawing quiver accompanied by aching vibrations of sound.

The noise covered the sound of Mavin’s return, but they heard her voice as she said, “Gamelords! How long has this been going on?”

“Just started,” said Roges through his teeth. The smell had grown worse in the last few moments.

“Stay here,” she hissed at them in a voice of command. “Don’t move. I’ll be back in a moment.” They had not seen her leave, or return, or leave again, but Beedie’s mind flashed quick images of the white bird, and she thought she could hear the whip of air through feathers. They clung to the stair, waiting. It was not long before Mavin returned, calling urgently, “Up. We’ve got to get off the stair. Either back into the root wall or up onto Nextdown, one or the other. There’s a something eating the stairs, something too big to fight.” They heard a frantic fluttering among the roots along the wall, exclamations, expressions of fury, a quick hammering, water falling. “Beedie, light a bit of deadroot and get over here.”

Roges had it ready, even as Beedie wondered why they had forgotten the fish lantern. Sparks flew, went out, flew again, as Roges cursed at them. Then they caught and the deadroot flared up, centering them in a weird, shadowy dance of light. They saw Mavin along the root wall, perched on a water-belly, a round hole carved into it and another at its bottom draining the water away.

“Tie something to Mercald and I’ll haul him over. Roges, help the Thinker. Beedie, put your spurs on.”

“I already have them on,” she said. “I put them on when the shaking started.” She tied Mercald to her with a safety belt and thrust him along a side root, hissing at him. “Close your eyes and c rawl, Birder. Crawl, and don’t look at anything. Pretend you are crawling under Birders House to check for wall rot. It is very quiet and unexciting, and you’ll get to Mavin in just one moment. There.” She turned to find Roges at her heels, teeth clenched, eyes fixed ahead. Behind him the Thinker walked along the root, examining the bark as though he had been a Bridger since birth.

“Do you know, the formation of water-bellies occurs at precises intervals dependent upon the diameter of the root involved. I’ve been thinking ...”

“Later,” snarled Mavin. “Get in here with the rest of us and think about it silently.” They slithered together into the water-belly just as the last of its contents drained away, piled untidily in the spherical space, still wet, feeling the tickly brush of little capillary hairs as they huddled, each trying to see out. Mavin had gone out as they came in, and she was perched well above them now, holding the burning deadroot to cast a light upon the quivering stair. The light blinded them; they could not see what shape she had, and only Beedie knew enough about Mavin to wonder. The thought distracted her, and she did not see what the others did until their indrawn breath drew her attention.

It was vast and gray, covered with scabby plaques of hardened ichor or flaking skin, oozing between the plaques thin dribbles of greenish goo which stank. It had an upper end, but no head that they could see. Still, from beneath the upper end came the sound of chewing, gnawing, the rasp, rasp, rasp of hardness biting into the stair root. The thing moved up, up, not seeing them, not looking for them, merely chewing blindly as it came. Then the chewing stopped. The thing quivered obscenely. Its top end began to rise up, sway, a horrible tower of jiggling jelly ending in a circular mouth which sucked, chewed, sucked—and somehow sensed them. The terrible head moved in their direction, cantilevered out from the root stair toward the water-belly, toward the place they crouched, staring, unable to breathe.

Then something flew at the creature’s head, something bearing flame, beating at it, burning it. The monster screamed a hissing agonized sigh like a kettle boiling dry. It lashed itself upward, striking blindly, without a target. The torch darted upward, back, down once more, striking at the mouth, again and again. With a last, horrible scream, the mass began to withdraw down the stair faster than it had come, folding in upon itself, sliding on its own slimy juices, a trail it had laid as it climbed up, going now away and down and out of sight.

Beedie shuddered and then embarrassed herself by beginning to cry. Roges held her tightly, and she could not tell if the wetness on his face was from her or from them both. Mercald was beneath them, his face hidden at the bottom of the water-belly, half suffocated, and she could not imagine how he had

come there. The Thinker had withdrawn a pad from among his rags and was making notes, murmuring to himself as he did so.

“Lignivorous. Purulent dermatitis. Unlikely to be a survival trait, therefore pathological. Recently invaded areas would indicate a newly arrived natural enemy perhaps? Or, possibly, use of a toxic substance ...”

“What do I understand you to say, Thinker?” demanded Mavin, arriving at the opening in the water-belly, panting, holding the torch high so that she could see them. She wore her own shape, or one Beedie thought of as hers.

“The thing is sick,” said Thinker, putting his pad away. “If not dying, at least not at all well. That skin condition is not normal to the species. So much is evident.”

“It wasn’t evident to me,” muttered Beedie with some hostility. “Does he know everything?”

“Within certain limits, yes,” replied the Thinker. “Your attitude of irrelevant hostility is one I have encountered before.” He sniffed.

“It’s not sick enough that it wouldn’t have eaten us, is it?”

The theoretician cocked his head, ruminated over this for a little time, then pronounced; “No. It was eating voraciously. I imagine it will eat almost anything it can get at, though my guess would be it prefers flesh, moist roots and whatever small creatures live upon them.”

“There are places not far from where I grew up where they domesticate things like that,” said Mavin thoughtfully. “Not exactly like that, of course. Not so big. Rock eaters. There are said to be smaller ones that eat plants further north. I’ve never seen them....”

“Quite possibly the same genus,” said the Thinker.

“What did you think made the thing sick?”

“A natural enemy, or some accidental ingestion of a naturally toxic substance, or some purposeful contamination by a toxic substance. In other words, something is eating it, it ate something which disagreed with it, or someone is trying very hard to kill it.”

“Whoever it is, I’m for them,” said Beedie. “I don’t blame them a bit.”

“Whoever?” asked Mercald, slightly dazed. He had burrowed his way up from the bottom of the water-belly and was now one of them once more, though slightly slimy in aspect. “We would have heard! Where? Even on Bottommost, we would have heard! If anyone had seen one of these things, we would have been notified!”

“Something was destroying the roots, the verticals, Mercald. Rootweaver told us. It’s just—no one supposed anything like this.” Beedie fell silent, suddenly aware of the implications. “You mean ... someone is trying to kill those things ... besides the people on the bridgetowns? Thinker? You mean someone else?”

“My dear person, I have no idea. The who is unimportant. I merely recited the possibilities. If you want me to extrapolate probabilities, it will take me a few moments.”

“I don’t think we need to belabor our ignorance,” Mavin said, heaving Beedie out of the water-belly. “One reason that we came upon this journey was to find this thing—these things. So. We’ve found it. One. Perhaps there are more. But to find the cause of peril was not the main reason for coming; the main reason is to put an end to that peril, and we are a very long way from knowing how to do that. That we are not alone in the attempt changes nothing, really.

“A thing I do know, however, is that the creature didn’t climb all the way up here in one night. That means it didn’t go all the way back down, either. I think I saw it ooze itself into a hole some distance below. It’s probably been working its way up, night after night, for a long time. It’s likely no other of them, if there are more of them, has worked up this high until now, which would explain why they have not been seen or smelled before.”

“But now that we have seen, we must send word,” said Roges. “The Bridgers must be told.”

“Yes, we must send word,” agreed Mavin. “We can leave a note nailed to the stair. The first group up from Potter’s bridge this morn-ing will find it—and word will be sent. The chewed stairs alone would probably be enough, but we’ll describe the creature for them.”

“Tell them it fears fire,” said Roges. “They’ll need to know that.” He fell silent, thinking in horror of a bridgetown invaded by such a monster, or monsters, the crushing of little houses, the shrieking of children, the steady rasp, rasp, rasp of its teeth, the stink.

“Light,” said the theoretician. “The thing avoids light. It shrank not only from the heat of the torch, but also from the light of it. At least, so I think.”

“We will say fire, certainly, and light, possibly,” agreed Mavin. “Now. It is written. Do you have a spare piton, Beedie? So. Nailed fast. No one could possibly miss it. I see light above, green light through the leaves. It’s time for us to move on before the Banders arrive. Like it or not, we’re going to cross the root wall.”

“Madam,” said the Thinker, “Is it your desire to reach Bottommost?” At her nod he continued, “Bottommost is almost exactly beneath us now.”

“Down,” said Beedie indignantly. “Three days climb down. Past that thing. Maybe dozens of them. And I’m the only one of us with spurs.”

“Down,” agreed the Thinker. “With warm updrafts and otherwise calm air, and Bottommost precisely below. I suggest we float.”

The others in the group turned to Mavin, exasperated, annoyed, yet despite their annoyance sure that the weird creature had thought of something. “Mavin ...” Beedie pleaded. “I don’t know how to talk to theo-theor-whats-its. Will you talk to him? He makes me tired.”

Mavin sighed. “Well, Thinker. Explain yourself. In short and sensible words.”

“Well, in layman’s terms, there are flattree leaves lying in the Nextdown nets, which are slightly above

us. Climbable, I should think. By the young woman with spurs. Or even reachable from the stairs, for that matter. There are half a dozen of them there, at least, very large, tissuey things, soft, pliable, almost like fabric. It has occurred to me that they might be used to manufacture a kind of hyperbolic air compression device ... let me see, 'wind catchers.' Then, we leap off, one by one, and after an interesting float, we arrive at Bottommost."

"Splashed into a puddle on the commons, no doubt," said Beedie. "Going about a million man heights every heart beat."

"Dropping at about one man height per heart beat," said the Thinker, annoyed. "Please do not dispute scientific fact with me. It is annoying enough when qualified people do it."

"Would it work?" Beedie pleaded to Mavin. "We could always work along the root wall to the stairs to Midwall. If we take it carefully ..."

"If we take it carefully, it would take us five days," sighed Mavin, muttering almost inaudibly. She knew that she could solve the problem in a number of ways, all of which required that she gain bulk and shift into something large, crawly or winged, which would involve her in endless explanations. She preferred to remain only a messenger from the Boundless, bird or woman, nothing more than that. It would be safer for Handbright if her sister was not thought to be a devil of some kind even by this friendly group. "Look, I'll test the Thinker's idea. I can always become a bird, so there's no danger. If it works for me, then the rest of you can try it."

"Become a bird?" asked the theoretician. "Is that metaphorical?"

"Never mind," said Beedie, irritated. "Just explain to Mavin what this 'wind catcher' thing is!"

By the time she had climbed to the net, folded and extricated five of the flattree leaves and returned them to the stair, light was shining clearly through the flattrees high above. Rigging the wind catchers seemed to take forever, and Beedie kept reminding herself how long a traverse of the root wall would have taken. Mavin had more or less figured out what the Thinker had in mind and had drawn a little diagram of the way the cords should be strung, from the edges of the leaves to a central girdle. When the first one was done, Mavin fastened the cord girdle around herself then spread the folded leaf along the railing as she climbed over.

“This should be very interesting. It would probably help to jump out as far as possible.” The Thinker had observed all this rigging with great interest but without offering to help. “It should unfold nicely, if it doesn’t catch on the railing.”

“If it doesn’t tear, if the ropes hold, if the leaf doesn’t rip in the air, if Bottommost is really straight down,” muttered Beedie. “Mavin, are you sure you want to do this?”

“It’s all right, sausage girl. Besides, I think you can rely on the white bird to help out if anything goes wrong. Now, if it works well for me, rig the others in the same way. You come last. That way you can help the rest of them.” And with that she leaped out into the chasm, the faded green of the flattree leaf trailing away behind her. The leaf was small as flattree leaves went, only large enough to carpet a large room, and it caught the air, cupped it, turned into a gently rounded dome that seemed to hang almost motionless in the air as it dwindled slowly, slowly downward.

“Lovely,” came Mavin’s voice. “Toss Mercald over.”

They had already decided that Mercald would have to be tossed. He had turned up his eyes and gone limp at the thought of being dropped into the chasm and was now completely immobile. It was Roges who heaved him over, out into the chasm like a lumpy spear, and they all held their breaths until the leaf opened above him.

“I thought that would work,” said the Thinker, tying himself to the girdle. He waited with no evidence of impatience while Mavin spread the leaf behind him, then stepped far into the chasm.

“All right, Roges,” she said, knowing without looking that he was sweating again. “Don’t look down.”

“Beedie.” He reached out to touch her shoulder. “You’re very pretty, did you know that? Ever since you were little, when you first came to Bridgers House on Topbridge. Even then, you were pretty.”

She stared at him, disconcerted again. “I always had skinned knees,” she said. “And Aunt Six said my face was never clean from the time I was born.”

“Maybe,” he replied, trying to smile. “But pretty in spite of it.”

“Is this like the hair business?” she asked, growing angry. “You think you’re going to get badly hurt or die, so you want to tell me now? Well let me tell you, Roges, I don’t go throwing my friends over railings if I think they’re going to die. Mavin says she’ll catch any of us who have trouble, so if there is trouble just yell and keep yelling. Get up there over that railing and let me spread this thing out.” She pushed at him, getting behind him so that he couldn’t see the tears on her face. All she seemed to do lately was cry! When he was poised to go, however, shaking so uncontrollably that she could not fail to see it, she could not let him go without a word.

“Roges. When we’re down. When we’re finished with all this. When we’ve got the proof that the Banders are murderers and Mavin figures out how to kill those things, tell me then that I’m pretty, will you?” And she pushed him. He fell silently, without a sound, and she found her nails cutting small, bloody holes in her palms until the leaf billowed behind him, cupping air, and he floated after the others.

She spread her own leaf carefully, being sure it would not snag on the railing, then leaped outward—into terror. Her heart thrust upward into her mouth, clogging her breathing. She gasped, sickened, eyes wide with fear, horrified at the weightless, plunging feel of falling, she who had never been afraid of heights before. “You n ever fell before,” she screamed at herself. “Oh, I’m going to die.”

Then the leaf opened above her. Warm air rose around her, and the root wall drifted past.

Silence. It was the first thing she noticed. Stairs drummed and clamored beneath feet. Bridgetowns were full of chatter and whine. On the root there was always the noise of the spurs digging in, the chafe of the straps, the blows of hammers or hatchets. But here, here was silence, only the drum of one’s blood in one’s ears, only the far, falling cry of a bird. Below her, slightly to one side, she could see a movement in the root wall as small creatures burrowed there, then a bare spot where a strange rock ... a scabrous, oozing rock—the creature. There it was, piled into a cave in the wall, only part of its horrid hide exposed. It heaved, breathed, lived, and she dropped below it. The peace of the drop had been destroyed and her stomach heaved in sick revulsion.

She heard Roges calling, twisted herself around to find him. The mound of his leaf was below her, and she called down to him. “Just above you, Roges. Can you see Mercald?”

“Under ... me ...” came the call. “Hear ... town ...”

She listened, hearing it at last, the far, rattling clamor of a town. What was the word Mavin used? "Gamelords!" More and more lately it seemed like a game, some strange, silly game in which no one knew the rules. Would old Slysaw come down after them? Likely he would, if the stairs were passable. She considered for the first time that the creature, whatever it was, might have cut the stair root, eaten the stairs themselves. In which case, Slysaw couldn't follow, and where would their proof be then? And Mercald might be permanently out of his head, in which case they didn't have a judge. So, so, "Gamelords," she swore fervently.

The sounds from below grew louder, even as the light around her grew dimmer, more watery. Now it was dusky, shadowy, an evening light. She searched the darkness below her for lights, lanterns, torches, seeing nothing. She looked up at the wall once more, watching it float past, thinking.

She had to think about Roges. Roges, by the Boundless. A Maintainer. Though she knew some Bridgers who were married to Maintainers. Several of them. Quite happily. Rootweaver herself had been married to a Maintainer, so it was said. He had been killed during a storm, a great storm of rain which had almost drowned Topbridge and all who lived there, but he had saved Rootweaver's life, so it was said. She recalled what Roges had said. "We are more than servants, much more." That was true. It wasn't always remembered, but it was true.

"Beeeedieeee," came a call from below. Roges' voice again. She looked down, seeing the lights now, glowing fish lanterns making green balls of light, yellow and blue balls of light all along the bridgetown mainroots, two glowing necklaces of lights in the depths. She was not quite above the town, and for a moment she felt panic, believing she would fall on past, but then there was a brush of wings and a voice, "Well, sausage girl. You and Mercald are the only ones I've had to fish in. Roges and the whatsit fell straight as a line. Hold on, now, I'll tow you a little. ..." Her straight line of fall turned into a long, diagonal drop that brought her over the open avenue of Bottommost.

"I'll not appear like this," Mavin called in a whisper from above. "Join you later ..."

The bridge grew larger, larger, more light, more sound, wondering faces looking up, a great tangled pile of flattree leaves below with Roges reaching up from the middle of it, reaching up, to grab her—then they stood together as the leaf fell over them, closing them in a green fragrant tent, away from the world. He was holding her tightly. She was not trying to get away. Neither of them were saying anything, though there was much chatter from outside.

Mercald was saying, "Get them out from under there before they suffocate," and Beedie was thinking quietly that she would like to suffocate Mercald and to have done it yesterday. Then the leaf was pulled away amid much shouting, and Roges untied the lines from her waist.

“I’ll save the cord,” he said in a strangely breathless voice. “We’ll need it later, I don’t doubt.”

She needed to say something personal to him, something real. “The fall—I was scared. When I jumped, all of a sudden, I was really frightened.”

He looked at her with a kind of joyousness in his eyes that she didn’t understand at all. “Were you really, Bridger? So was I.” Then Mavin in her persona of birdwoman came calmly through the crowds and the moment’s understanding was behind them.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Though I must pretend to be the birdwoman once more, I have serious need of breakfast, and tea, and a wash. And poor Mercald needs a change of clothing. Unfortunately for him, his unconscious state did not last until he landed. And then we all need to revise some plans, or make some. It seems things are worse then we knew.”

They had landed just outside the Bridgers House of Bottommost. It was a small house, not as well kept as the one at Topbridge, but with a guest wing, nonetheless, though one barely large enough for all five of them.

After a quick wash, they went along to the House dining hall, Mercald resplendent in his robes and hat—the only garb he had to wear while his others were being washed. As for the rest of them, they were only cleaner, not otherwise changed except that Mavin was once more playing her silent role of birdwoman. The food was quickly provided and almost as quickly eaten before Roges and Beedie were taken aside into a smaller room where the eldest Bridger of Bottommost awaited them, wringing his hands and compressing his lips in an expression of concern.

“The Messenger came yesterday, Bridger. We did not expect you for many days still, and yet here you are! I thank the Boundless you have come, for it was only two days ago we first saw the thing. I have sent word to the head of chasm council, but we cannot expect a response from old Quickaxe—or from his junior, Rootweaver—for some days.”

“By thing” said Beedie, “I suppose you mean the gray monster with the oozing hide.” At his expressions of awed dismay, she went on, “We encountered it on the downward stair. Eating the stair, I should say. Just the other side of Nextdown.”

“Is it true what my Bridgers say?” the old man asked, hoping, Beedie knew, that she would say it was all an exaggeration.

“It is a thing some six or seven man heights long, as big around as this room, Elder. A ... man who is with us says he believes it is sick. He believes it has been poisoned, perhaps purposely, by ... Roges, what can I say? By what?”

“By people, Beedie. The ... ah, the messenger of the Boundless who is with us says that there may be ... people in the depths. That is, if it was not done by people from this town, Elder.”

Beedie sighed. “Elder, have you made any attempt to kill this thing? Or have you had any word of any intelligent creatures living below you in the depths?”

“Never.” He wriggled the thought around in his mouth for a time, trying it between various pairs of teeth, finally spat it back at them. “No, never. As for killing the thing, I would not know where to begin. As for the other, my Bridgers go down the roots as Bridgers do, and up, and out across the root wall. We see the usual things. Crawly-claws. Slow-girules. Wireworm nests, sometimes. Leaves fell from above, and sometimes the nets of Topbridge or Nextdown miss them so we catch them. It is true that the Fishers bring up strange things from time to time, oddities which we cannot explain. But intelligence below ... well, I’ve never heard any allegation of it.”

“The lost bridge?” prompted Beedie. “That would be below you, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, but my dear Bridger. What is the lost bridge? Sometimes I wonder if it ever existed! And if it did, is it not surely gone? No one has seen or heard of the lost bridge for what?—hundreds of years.”

She shook her head. “When there was a lost bridge, before it was lost, Elder, how did people get to it? Was there a stair?”

He made a face at her, age grimacing at the silly ideas of youth. “There is said to have been a stair. Yes. At the morning-light side. We even have some books with adventure tales for children concerning the stairs and the lost bridge and all the rest of it. Would you like to see them?”

Beedie started to say no, indignantly, then caught sight of Roges' face, intent upon the old man's words. "I would, yes, Elder. If you would be so kind."

4 'I will have them sent to the guest rooms. Have you any other word for me, Bridger? We are very much afraid of these creatures ..."

"They are afraid of fire," said Beedie firmly. "It is thought they might be afraid of light."

"Not of our lanterns, I'm afraid. The one we saw two days ago was on the stair trail which leads to the mines below Miner's bridge. It is a little used way built for the convenience of the Miners, to bring loads of some materials across to us for processing. It was lit by fish lanterns, and the thing had eaten great pieces of the stair, lanterns and all, when first we saw it. Fire—that's a different thing. Torches. We do not use torches. It is damp this far down in the chasm. Except during the wind, smoke lies heavy upon Bottommost. Still, if fire will drive the monsters away, we must somehow learn to use fire once more ..."

And the old man turned away, weary and fearful, yet somehow resolute.

They walked back toward the guest rooms, Beedie's hand finding Roges' as they went, silent, dismayed not a little. They slipped into the room Mavin shared with Beedie and told her what had transpired.

"So the Thinker was right," said Mavin. "The things have only recently been seen so far up in the chasm. Well, they must somehow be made to go back where they have been. We will stay here in Bottommost today, perhaps tonight. Read the books when they are brought, sausage girl." Then, seeing her annoyed expression, "Read them to her, Roges, if you will. I will return after dark. If anyone asks, the messenger of the Boundless is asleep," and she slipped out of the room, disappearing down the corridor.

"Do you want to sleep, too?" asked Roges. "Our rest last night was interrupted."

"Later perhaps. Not now. Now I want to see Bottommost, the mysterious bridgetown I have heard of since I was a child! Aunt Six says it is all rebels and anarchists here, that there is no custom worthy of the name, that bad children gravitate to Bottommost as slow-girules to root mice. We are here and I must see if she lied to me."

They left Mercald curled up on a clean bed, quietly asleep. They left the Thinker sitting in a window, staring at nothing, a small muscle in his left cheek twitching from time to time. Beedie had had the

generous intent of asking him if he wanted to go with them. One sight of him changed her mind. The two of them went out together, out of Bridgers House onto the main avenue of Bottommost.

“It’s narrow!” she exclaimed. “It’s little.” Compared to Topbridge, it was narrow and confined, the lines of lanterns which marked the mainroads only two hundred paces apart, beads of light softly glowing in two arcs that met at the far wall. “And it’s like night-time!” Far above them the light of the chasm could be seen as a wide line of green, slightly shifting, as though they looked upward into a flowing stream, but the light upon the bridge came more from the ubiquitous fish lanterns than from the sky. Every corner carried at least one of the scaled globes; every market stall was lined with them, blue orbs and green, with an occasional amber one here and there. Those which were amber, Beedie noticed, bore horns and warts and protuberances of various shapes and kinds as well as a discouraging set of fangs. “I would not like to be the Fisher who caught one of those,” she remarked to Roges.

Bottommost was quieter than Topbridge. It buzzed with a muted sound, as though it did not wish to attract attention to itself. The cries of the hawkers were melodious and soft, a kind of repetitive song. “They don’t look like rebels and anarchists,” said Roges. “They look rather sad.”

“It’s because there’s so little light. It’s an evening sadness, a perpetual dusk. If I lived here, I would cry all the time.” The colours of the place were strange to her high chasm eyes. Soft greens and grays and blues. No white or red, no yellow. “Look how narrow their nets are.” The nets on either side of the railing were mere handkerchiefs, of no extent.

“Look up and you’ll see why,” murmured Roges. High against the light were the twin bars of Topbridge and Nextdown, bracketing Bottommost on each side. “If the nets were any wider, they’d be catching all the fell-down from up there. Not very pleasant for the net cleaners.”

“Well, there’s got to be something good about the place. Let’s try a teashop.” And in the teashop they began to appreciate the true flavor of Bottommost as the calls of the hawkers, the bells in the Birder House, and the soft light blended into music. If there were rebels in Bottommost, they were rebels of an odd sort, rebels of silence, of shadow, of gentle movement. “I haven’t seen any Banders,” she said. “None in the House.”

“There are some here,” he replied. “I asked the Maintainer who brought us blankets whether there had been any unrest on Bottommost concerning the messenger of the Boundless. She said yes, rumor and story telling, a small attempt to whip up frenzy, resulting in nothing much. Still, there are some of them here, enough to do us harm if we are not careful.”

“Enough to carry the word back to old Slysaw?”

“I should judge so.” He did not sound as though he cared greatly about it, about anything. He had been sitting, sipping, smiling at her for hours. She blushed. She, too, had been sipping, smiling. Resolutely, she got to her feet. “Roges. We promised Mavin we would read the books about the lost bridge.” She took his hand, dragged him upright.

They went out onto the avenue, still hand in hand, lost in the gentle music of Bottommost, to remember it always as magical and wonderful, more wonderful than any of the truly wonderful things which were to follow.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lantern-eyed, fluff-winged she flew along the root wall, soft as down, observant as any owl in the dusk, peering at this, that, the other thing. There were many small creepies, many larger ones as well—claws gently waving, and things that came to the claws thinking they were something else; shelves of fungus in colours of amber and rose, washed into grays by the green light; other fungoid growths hanging upon the roots themselves in pendant fronds, projecting horns and antlers and mushroomy domes, pale as flesh, moist as frogs.

There was a chorus of smells, rich and fecund stench, rot and mildew and earthy green slime. There were greens innumerable, bronzy green and amber green and the blue-green of far seas not remembered by the people in the chasm. The air was wet, wetter the lower she went, full of mist wraiths which seemed in any instant almost to have coherent shape. Her wings were wet and heavy, and she changed the structure of her feathers to shed the damp, bringing a clear set of membranes across her eyes at the same time.

Those who might have known her in the white bird shape would not have known her in her present form, and she took pleasure in this, in this renewed feeling of anonymity, of remoteness. Beedie was a good girl; Roges a treasure; the theoretician an interesting find; Mercald a necessary burden—and not good enough to be a partner for Handbright as she had been, though perhaps better than one could have expected for Handbright as she was now—but there was much to be said for solitude. There was time for contemplation, time for feeling the fabric of the place, time for memory.

There had been another place, not unlike the chasm in its watery light, a pool-laced forest, green under leaves, full shadowed in summer warmth and breathless with flowers. Mavin had come there in the guise of a sweet, swift beast, four-legged and lean, graceful as the bending grass. It had been a shape

designed for the place, needful for the place, and her body had responded to that need without thinking. So she had, unaware she was observed, wandered, unaware until she came one dawn to the shivering silver pool and saw her own image standing there, head regally high, crowned with a single spiraled horn like her own, male as she was female, unquestionably correct for that place, that time, without any requirement for explanation.

And there had been a summer then, without speech or thought or plan for the morrow; a summer which spun itself beneath the leaves and over the welcoming grass, sparkling with sun shards and bathed in dew. Morning had gone into evening, day into day, as feet raced upon the pleasant pastures and across the mysterious hills. And then a day, a day with him gone.

She had never named him in her mind, except to believe that whoever he was, he was Shifter like herself, for there was no such supernally graceful beast in the reality of this world, had never been, probably now would never be again. And when a certain number of days had gone without his return, she had shifted herself and left the place behind her, sorrowing that she would not know him again if she met him in a street of any town or upon the road to anywhere at all. Outside of that place, that stream-netted garden of gold-green light, what they had been together would have no reality.

It was the sight of Roges' face that had made her think of this, Roges' face as he brooded over Beedie who, though she was beside him, did not see the way he looked at her. In that silken passionate look which reverberated like soft thunder was what she had felt in the summer garden. And it made her think of something more, of that same expression seen fifteen years before on the face of the Wizard Himaggery. Twenty years, he had said. Return to him in twenty years. Over three-quarters of that time was gone. Well, she could not think of that now, not with Handbright's child soon to be delivered, and Mavin soon to take it away to be safely reared as a Shifter's child should be reared—not with the chasm to be explored—and all these lands beyond the sea.

She moved out into the chasm, away from the root wall, attracted by a hard-edged shape which spiraled down toward her. It was one of the rigid frameworks webbed with flopperskin which the Messengers used to fly between bridgetowns, gliding on the warm, uprising air to carry messages from Topbridge to Harvester's. She flew close, wondering what brought a Messenger to these depths.

It was no Messenger. The kite held a young man's body, shrouded in white upon the gliding frame, staring with unseeing eyes into the misty air. There were embroidered shoes upon his feet, a feathered cap upon his head, and his hands were tied together before him with a silken scarf. Someone had decked the beloved dead for this last flight. Someone had set dreams aside, love aside, to grieve over this youth, and in that grieving, had realized there would be no more time in which to dream.

She flew aside, eyes fixed upon those dead eyes, as though she might read something there,

accompanying the body down as it fell, turn on wide turn into the narrowing depths. At last she let it go, watching as it twirled into the chasm, softly as a leaf falls, the bright feather upon the cap catching at her vision until it vanished in mist.

No more time in which to dream. Twenty years. The bird body could not hold the pain which struck at her then, a shiver of grief so great that she cried out, the sound echoing from root wall to root wall, over and over again, in a falling agony of sound. She did not often think of herself as mortal.

“I will return,” she promised herself. “I will return.”

And was Himaggery still alive in that world across the sea? Must be, her mind told her sternly. Must be. I would have known if anything had happened to him. I could not have failed to know.

There, in the chasm mists, the Mavin-bird sang its determination and decision, even while it sought for mystery in the chasm with wide eyes.

Back in the guest rooms of Bridgers House, Roges lay with his head in Beedie’s lap and read to her.

“ ‘In the time of the great builders, the outcaste Mirtylon (he whose name came from the ancient times above the chasm) took captive the maiden daughter of the designer of Firstbridge, the Great Engineer, she whom he called Lovewings after the love he bore her mother who had died. For the Great Engineer had forbidden his daughter to marry Mirtylon, though he had sought her in honor and in love, for the Great Engineer feared to lose her from his house.

“ ‘And Mirtylon fled from the wrath of the Great Engineer, into the bottomless depths of the chasm, root to root, with his followers, losing themselves in the shadowy lands beneath the reach of the sun. Then it was the Great Engineer wept and foamed in his fury, for taken from him was what he held most dear in all his life, for Lovewings had gone with them. And he fell into despair. And in his despair he failed to set the watch upon the bridge, and in the night the great pombis came, lair upon lair of them out of the darkness, driving the people of Firstbridge down into the chasm to the half-built city of Secondbridge, called by some Nextdown. And though many came there for refuge, the Great Engineer was slain together with the Maintainers of his house.

“ ‘But unknowing of this was the outcaste Mirtylon and unknowing of this was Lovewings—who would have been greatly grieved, for she loved her father—so she married Mirtylon of her own will and lived

with him in a cave at great depth upon the root wall while those who followed him drew great mainroots together for the establishment of the town of Watertight. In those depths the light was that found deep in river pools of their former lands, mysterious and shadowy. And in time the bridgetown of Watertight was built, and Bridgers were sent from it to build a stair along the morning-light wall which should reach from Watertight upward to the run of the chasm. And in time the Bridgers so sent met the Bridgers of Nextdown upon the root wall, and the news of the death of the Great Engineer, her father, came to Lovewings.

“ ‘Then did she feel great guilt and great despair, accounting herself responsible for what had occurred, for she well knew with what value her father had held her. And she went to Mirtylon and told him she would go away for a time, to expiate her guilt in loneliness after the manner of her religion, but he would not let her go.

“ ‘And by this time the stair which Mirtylon had ordered to be built stretched upward from the depths into the very midst of the chasm, to the new-built bridge of Bottommost. Forbidden to expiate her guilt Lovewings took herself to the highest point which had yet been built and threw herself into the depths so that none saw her more. This is the story told of her, for none knew the truth of it save that she had climbed the stair and came no more to Watertight.

“ ‘And Mirtylon despaired, ordering that the stair be shattered, that none might walk that way again. So it was broken, and all connection between Watertight and the other cities of the chasm was cut off.

“ ‘Still the Messengers flew between the bridges, and there was trade of a kind between them, with much gathering of gems and dia-monds from the Bottom lands by those of Watertight, and much trading of this treasure for the foodstuffs which grew high above. And though people of the bridgetowns were curious as to the source of the treasure, the secret was well kept by the people of Watertight who would say only that the treasure was gathered at great danger to themselves from that which dwelt in the Bottomlands below.

“ ‘Until came a day the Messengers flew to Watertight to find it gone, its place empty, the roots severed, the people gone, all in one night, vanished as though taken by a Demon or devil of the depths.

“ ‘And of Mirtylon many songs are sung, and of Lovewings, and of the vanished bridge which is called Lostbridge, and of the shattered stair ...”

“ ‘And that,” Roges said, “is that. There’s another story here about Lovewings. You want to hear it?”

“No,” said Beedie definitely. “It’s depressing. All that guilt and foolishness and throwing themselves about. I would like to know where the bridge went, though.”

“So would Mavin,” said Roges. “And I doubt not she’ll find out, one way or another. Whatever she may be, she is very positive about things. I wonder who she is—what she is ...”

“I don’t know. She’s like the birdwoman. I mean, there are two of them, sisters. That’s all I know. What I think about how she came when I was caught on the root, dying in the smoke, I know I should be frightened of her. But I’m not. She’s just not scary.”

“I think she’s scary.” Roges was serious, worried. “Though I try not to show it. She knows things. That’s scary.”

“Oh, the theo ... theor ... the whatsit knows things, too. And I know things. And some are the same things, and some are different things. That’s all. It doesn’t matter to her. It shouldn’t matter to you.”

Roges laughed, burrowed the back of his head into her lap, reached up to touch her face. “Beedie, you don’t have any doubts at all, do you?”

“Hardly any,” she agreed, in surprise that he should ask. “It seems an awful waste of time. You just do things, and if it doesn’t work, then you do something else next time. Sitting around having doubts is very wasteful. At least, it seems so to me.”

“Don’t you ever worry about whether things are right or wrong?”

“Daddy and mum taught me what wrongs are. I don’t do wrongs. I take care of my tools, and I don’t risk my neck on the roots, and I’m castely in my behavior—mostly—and polite to my elders. I don’t tell lies. What else would you like to know about me?”

“Are you religious?”

“Oh, foof, Roges. You know I’m not. Just enough to make sort of the right responses to noon prayers, and that’s about it. Are you?”

“Some,” he admitted. “I wonder about the Boundless a lot.”

“Maybe you should have been a Birder.”

“Maybe I was born a Birder. No one knows. I was found on the root wall, a foundling.”

“Oh, Roges. That’s very sad. Why, do you suppose?”

“I don’t know. Never knew. Tried not to wonder.”

“I’m sure I know,” she said, grinning at him, not letting him see she was beginning to tear up again. “You were so beautiful a baby that everyone looked at you all the time. Your aunt had an ugly baby no one ever looked at, and it made her so jealous that she stole you away from your mum and daddy and hid you on the root wall, giving out the slow-girules had carried you away. And ever since then they’ve been longing for you, unable to find you at all.”

“Not very likely,” he said. “They’d have found me by now.”

“That could be true. Well then, we’ll say they got very sick from their loss, and they both almost died from despair. And their elders told them they had to give the mourning up.”

“Now who’s making stories about guilt and despair?” he asked her in mock fury. “Beedie. You’re a crazy child.”

“I’m not a child,” she said, suddenly deciding it was time to prove it to him. “Not a child at all.”

They were interrupted by Mavin's voice from the doorway, warm and amused. "I see I interrupt. Well, such is my fete. I have found the broken stairway, young ones." They turned to her, a little dizzy and unaware, not believing her at first, faces questioning. "True! Surprisingly, it is still there. Nothing has eaten it. It hasn't rotted. It is hatcheted away at the top end, but the rest of it goes down and down—overgrown a little, true—into the depths."

Then they were both on their feet, the books—and other things—forgotten for the moment. "Did you go to the bottom? Have you seen it? Shall we go now?" asked Beedie, ready as ever for action.

"I saw only a little. The light is scant enough at this depth, and what is there is waning. I think we will go at first light tomorrow. While I saw no signs of the gray oozer on the morning-light wall, it should be easier to avoid them in light. So. Let us go in light, such as it is." And she stretched herself upon the bed in the room. "Go on with whatever you were doing ..."

"Oh, Mavin," Beedie growled. "You are not always very funny."

"Not always," agreed Roges in a wry voice. "I think it would be a good idea for all of us to get some rest and a good meal here at Bridgers House tonight." He took up the books, placing them in a neat stack on the table beside Mavin's bed.

Mavin leafed idly through one of the books, scanning a few pages while Beedie talked about the story of Lovewings and Mirtylon and how sad it was, then let her eyes close.

"Mavin ... Mavin. Are you asleep?"

"Trying very hard to be, sausage girl."

"Do you think old Slysaw is still following us?"

"I can guarantee he is, child. At this moment, he is two-thirds of the way down the stair to Midwall. He will rest in Midwall tonight. Two nights hence he will rest here in Bottommost. And the day after that,

someone will show him where the broken stair is.”

“Do you think we will get proof he killed my family? That he set fire to the mainroot?”

“I don’t think it matters, root dangler. Whether we get proof Mercald would accept or not, I have enough to suit me. You may depend upon it. Old Slysaw Bander will not return from the depths.” And then there was only the gentlest of snores, like a dragon purring, as Mavin slept.

There was a traverse of considerable extent across the root wall between the morning-light end of Bottommost and the place the old stair began, its splintered end well hidden behind a cluster of side roots and a fountain of fungus. The Bridgers of Bottommost were so excited at the thought of finding the old stair, however, that they had worked most of the night while the expedition slept to build a temporary footbridge across the root wall. Except for Mercald, the expedition crossed it without difficulty, and Roges solved the Mercald problem by carrying him over on one shoulder. Once the stair was reached and they had burrowed into it with hatchet and knife and much flinging aside of great blobs of fungus, Mercald was able to stand once more, though it took him a little time to be steady on his feet.

“It’s hidden,” Beedie said, looking down the stair in the direction they would go. “The roots have grown all over the outside of it.” Indeed, it was like walking through some dusky cloister, the roots on the outside of the stair making repeated windows into the chasm so that they walked first in shadow, then in half light, then in shadow once more. “How far down does it go, Mavin?”

“I didn’t find out. Just found that the stair was here, then flew up above to check out old Slysaw. Shh. Here’s the Thinker coming along behind. I’d as soon not talk with him about my private habits. Hush now.”

They set a slow pace at first, warming up to it as the day warmed, easing up again when they had eaten their midday meal, then slowing still further when the afternoon wind began to blow down the canyon, whipping the root hairs over the stairs, making their eyes water.

“I postulate a desert at the lower end of this chasm,” said the Thinker, wiping his eyes so that he could see his notebook. “Quite large, very dry, very hot. At the upper end of the chasm a range of mountains, perhaps a tall, snow-capped range ...”

“Actually,” said Mavin, “it’s a glacier. A monstrous big one.”

He did not ask her how she knew, but simply plunged on with his explanation. "The sun heats the air over the desert. It rises. The air in the chasm, being cooler, flows out onto the desert. The air over the glacier, being cooler still, flows down into the chasm. We have wind each day from afternoon through about midnight, by which time the desert has given up all its heat. Then the hot springs in the chasm begin to warm the chasm air once more. The lower we go in the chasm, the stronger the winds will become. That is, unless there are many barriers down there, narrowings, turns, fallen rock. In that case, it might be strongest above the bottom ..."

"Is that true?" Beedie whispered to Mavin. "Is that really why the wind blows every day? The Birders say the Boundless does it to move the smoke away, so we won't suffocate."

"Is there any reason it couldn't be both?" laughed Mavin. "I suppose the Boundless can use deserts and glaciers to sweep smoke away if it wants to."

"The way I would use a broom," said Roges. "Why not. Still, it makes traveling difficult." He wiped away a clot of wet root hairs the wind had driven into his face. "It wasn't this strong on Bottommost."

"It was stronger than you felt. The buildings on Bottommost are all built facing down-chasm, away from the wind. Besides that, they're all built with curved backs, I noticed, and there are wind shields along the streets." Mavin leaned out into the chasm to look down. She was now the only one of the party not constantly wiping streaming eyes, though the others had not noticed the clear lids she had closed to protect her own eyes from the wind. "We may have to find a sheltered place and wait until the wind drops before we go on. I've brought fish lanterns, so we needn't camp in the dark. Hss. What's that?" She pointed away along the root wall, toward a distant shadow. Roges and Beedie thrust their heads out, drawing them in immediately.

"I can't see anything," Roges complained. "What did you think it was?"

"A shape," she replied, still peering into the chasm. "Only a shape. Vaguely manlike. Perhaps it was nothing, only a shadow."

"Probably just a shadow. Our eyes are tired. I think stopping for a time would be a very good idea," said Mercald apologetically. "We've been climbing down since early this morning, and my legs have cramps in them. Both."

“Well then, why not. Start looking for some kind of declivity or protected spot. We’ll stop as soon as we find one.” Mavin drew her head in and clumped along behind them, her face both thoughtful and apprehensive.

Beedie moved ahead, Roges close beside her, searching the root wall. There were many small holes, but none large enough to offer shelter to the group. Then they came to a fairly flat stretch of stair solidly overgrown on the chasm side with only a shrill shiver of wind entering from the bottom end. “We could close that off,” said Beedie, measuring it with analytical eyes. “I can cut some short lengths of ropey root, and weave a kind of gate across it, then we can put a blanket or two across it to shut out almost all the wind.” Without waiting for the others, she began to hack at the wall, pulling down lengths of shaggy root. Roges tugged them to the opening, thrust ends into the root wall and began weaving them together, hauling and tugging until the woven gate was in place.

By this time the others had arrived, and Mavin fastened her blanket to the gate, tying it along the sides. It felt as though the temperature on the stair went up at once, just from excluding the cold wind.

“I suppose it would be too much to hope for that there’d be some deadroot along here,” Mercald commented. “I’m thirsty for tea.”

There was usually deadroot up under the thatch along the wall, and a few moments’ scratchy burrowing brought a pile of it to light. It was brittle enough to break and dead enough not to threaten them with lethal smoke, but it was soggy than they were accustomed to burning. Roges had trouble lighting it upon the portable hearth. However, once started, it burned readily enough, the smoke roiling upwards along the stair. They sat in the firelit space, hearing the wind howl outside, all of them aware of some primitive, fearful feelings concerning darkness and the creatures which dwelt in it. Mavin found herself listening to the wind, listening through the wind, trying to hear what other sounds there might be in the chasm. There had been a manshape upon the root wall, and yet not exactly a manshape. It should not have been there. There were no men in the bottoms. She knelt, thrust her ear against the root stair, but there were no hostile sounds, no rasp of great slug teeth, only the thrumming of the wind upon the root fibers, the monotonous hum of steadily moving air.

They sat, dozed, woke with a start only to doze again. The light faded and Mavin took the fish lanterns out of her basket to hang one upon the staff she carried, one upon Mercald’s staff. The light was not the warming amber-red of firelight but the chill blue-green of water, and they found themselves shivering.

“The wind will let up about midnight,” said Mavin. “I suggest we wrap up tightly, get as close together as

possible to share warmth, and wait until then to go on.” She heard no dissent, not even from the Thinker, though he did not lie down among them but sat under the chill green lanterns muttering to himself, making notes in his little book.

The wind began to howl loudly, rocking the stair, moving it in a curiously restful motion, so that they all slept as in a cradle, or, thought Mavin, as on the deck of a sea-going ship.

It was the cessation of motion that wakened Mavin, that and the stillness. The Thinker still sat, still muttered, eyes fixed on something the rest of them could not see. In the darkness, she could see firelight glittering on Beedie’s open eyes. “So. You’re awake, sausage girl.”

“I’m sore,” she complained. “Next time I’m going to bring something softer to sleep on.”

“How often do you plan to go on such expeditions?”

“Whenever I can. Don’t you think it’s exciting?”

“Umm,” said Mavin. “What does Roges think?”

“I’m sure he thinks he’ll be very glad when he can get me back to Topbridge and maybe marry me and probably talk me into having babies.”

“What do you think about that?” Mavin sat back, pulling her own blanket around them so that they half reclined between Roges and Mercald, warmed by their sleeping bodies. “Is that something you would enjoy?”

“When Roges and I are—when we’re ... ah ... involved, I don’t mind the idea. Then, other times, like now, I do mind the idea. I want to go to Harvester’s bridge and around the chasm corner and see what’s there. I want to see that thing you told the Thinker about, that glacier. I can’t do that if I’m all glued down on Topbridge with babies and Aunt Six being grandma. Whoof. I’d sooner eat dried flopperskin.”

“By that, I presume you mean the idea lacks flavor.”

“Flavor, and chewability, and a good smell. Oh, Mavin, I don’t know. Were you ever in love?”

Mavin considered this. In the lovely summer forest, once, she had loved. In the long ago of Pfarb Durim, when she had been the age Beedie was now, she had looked into love’s face, had heard its very voice. Since she had seen the dead youth fluttering like a dry leaf into the chasm, she had been aware of mortality in a way she had never been before. If she were honest, she would admit that the five years which stretched between now and that time she would meet Himmaggery seemed a very long time, a time she would shorten if she could. And yet it would be hard to say why, for little had passed between them in that long ago time. Little? Or perhaps much?

Finally she answered. “I believe ... believe that I love, yes. Someone. And yet, I have not sought him out in many years. I do not go to him or call him to me.”

“How do you know he’s still alive? People die, you know. Things happen to them.” Beedie had thought of this in the night hours, had wondered how she would feel if she put off Roges until some future time and then found there was no future time for them. “If I had to choose, I suppose I’d rather have a child now than never do it at all.”

Mavin shivered at this expression of her own thoughts. “You would rather love Roges now than never a do it at all? Even though it might keep you from that far turn of the chasm?”

“Hmm. I think so. How do I know? Would there be someone else who would make me feel the same way? Would I have cheated him if I did not?”

Mavin chuckled, humor directed at herself rather than at Beedie. “I know. Since I met ... the one I speak of, all other men have seemed to have ... too much meat on their faces. I find myself longing for a certain cast of feature, a strong boniness, a wide, twisty mouth, eyes which seem to understand more than that mouth says ...”

“Eyebrows which meet in the middle over puzzled, sometimes angry eyes,” whispered Beedie. “A certain smell to skin. A certain curl of hair around an ear ...”

“Ah, yes, sausage girl. Well, I will say only this one thing to you. If you would regret forever not having done a thing, then do it. But you need not give up your dreams in order to have done it. Go, if you will, and take your man and babies with you.”

“Roges has the down-dizzies .” She said it sadly, as though she had announced a dire and deadly disease.

“Well then, leave him at home with the babies and tell him you’ll see him when you return.” She stood up, stretching her arms to hear the bones crack. “Midnight?” she announced loudly into the silence. “Are we ready to go on?”

They rose, groaning from the hard surface. “Stairs should be carpeted,” said Beedie. “Either that, or they should put way stations with beds every half day along them.”

“Shhhh.” Mavin’s hiss quieted them all. She had pulled the makeshift windshield aside and was leaning out over the stair rail, peering into the depths. “Look.”

Below them in the suddenly calm air, the chasm was full of lights, globes of pearly luminescence which swam through the moist air, collected in clusters like ripening fruits, then separated once more to move in long, glowing spirals and curving lines. As they watched, several of the globes swam up to their level, peered at them from the abyss with wide, fishes’ eyes from bodies spherical and puffed as little balloons of chilly light. One of them emitted a tiny, burping sound, then dropped with a sudden, surprised swoop to a much lower level and fled. The other, a smaller, bluer one, with quick, busy fins, followed them as they continued the downward way. There were smaller things in the chasm, also, vibrations of trans-lucent wings, shivering dots of poised flight, darting among the glowing fish to be gulped down whenever they approached too near. Other blue fish joined the one which followed them, and then still others, until they were trailed by a long tail of blue light, shifting and glowing. “There,” said Mavin suddenly, pointing ahead of them. After a moment they saw what she had seen, huge stumps of mainroot, projecting into the chasm like broken corbels. “This is where the city was.”

“Watertight.” said Beedie and Roges together.

“What was that?”

“Watertight,” said Roges. “The name of Lostbridge was really Waterlight. At least, according to the books up in Bottommost.”

“I can see why,” murmured Mercald. “I haven’t seen a bird of any kind since way before Bottommost. Do you think these fishes keep them away?”

“I think the air is too wet for them,” said Mavin, not bothering to tell him that she knew so from experience. “Feathers would get soggy, heavy in this air. It would be almost impossible to fly.”

“No Birders, then,” he said. “I wonder what religion the people had to come uncomplaining into this depth.”

“Follow the leader, I should think,” said Roges. “The man who built Waterlight was named Mirtylon. From the tone of the stories we read, the people followed him and him alone.”

“Always a mistake,” said Mercald. “To follow men instead of the Boundless.”

“On the other hand,” remarked Beedie, “if you’re following a man, he can at least tell you what he really expects you to do. Sometimes it seems to me the Boundless is a little vague.”

Mavin was examining the end of the severed mainroots, noticing that they did not appear to have been chopped through or sawn. The ends were blunted, as though melted.

She shivered. “Down,” she said. “We’re spending too much time in chitchat. This was the level of the qty; now we’ll find out where it went.”

Though Beedie had expected the stair to end at the site of the ancient bridgetown, it went on down, doubling back on itself onto a new root system. They clambered around the turn, carrying the lantern fish which seemed to attract other, living ones, so that they continued to walk with a growing tail of lighted globes.

“Electron transport,” said the Thinker suddenly, almost yelling. “Hydrogen segregation through cytochromes.”

“What are you saying now?” asked Mercald in a kindly tone. “What is it, Thinker?”

“That’s how they float. Hydrogen. They crack it out of water, using heme or hemelike proteins ... remarkable.” He did a little jig on the stairs, scratching himself as he sought his little notebook among his rags. “We could test it, of course. Try lighting one of them. It should go up in a puff of flame.”

“Difficulty to light a flame down here, Thinker. Have you noticed how damp you are? How damp everything is?”

He had tried to separate the pages of his notebook which sogged into a kind of pulp in his hands, and he merely looked at her with an annoyed expression. Beedie felt the increasing weight of her hair, the knot on her neck as waterlogged as it was possible to be. Also, the air had grown warmer during the past hours so that they seemed to move through a thin soup, almost as much liquid as gas. “I’ve been in fogs as thick as this before,” said Mavin, as though talking to herself. “But not many. I hope we’re nearly down, for if it gets any thicker, we’ll be swimming.”

She stopped, amazed, for the light of the fishes showed a net reaching out from the stair in every direction, as far as she could see on every side. Fish swam up and down through the meshes, some large, some small, and below the net they gathered by the thousands. The stair burrowed through the net, and they followed it down, silent, wondering, one man height, two, three, four. Then Mavin stepped off the root onto stone, the others crowding after. “Shhh,” she said. “Listen. Water running.”

The sound seemed to come from all around them, a light splashing, babbling sound, an occasional whoosh of air, a chuckle as of streams over stone. “The fish are all above us now,” said Beedie. “None below us. We must be at the Bottom.” At that moment her feet struck solid stone.

“Look up,” said Roges. “Noonglow.” There, so far above them that it did not seem they could have come from that height, was the narrow ribbon of green, light which meant noonglow, a mere finger’s width shining through the fish-spangled gloom. “Bottommost is only a day and a half from the Bottom. I thought it was much farther than that.”

“No one has tried to find out for a very long time,” said Beedie. “Because everyone believes it is

dangerous. I told you that, Mavin.”

“Indeed you did, root dangler. I haven’t forgotten. But I remember also that you did not tell me why it is dangerous, or for whom. So—let us go carefully, watchfully.”

“And well prepared,” said Roges, taking his knife from his belt. “I thank the Boundless we have sure footing beneath us if danger comes.”

“I, too,” murmured Mercald. “I thank the Boundless for having seen such wonders. What must we do next?”

“The promise I made to Rootweaver, priest, was that we would put an end to whatever it is that eats the roots of the towns. So much; no less, no more. In return for which she keeps Handbright safe, awaiting our return, Well, we know it is the gray oozers which eat the roots. I have seen none of them on the root wall below Bottommost. So—I presume we must search.” She had been speaking moderately loudly, loudly enough to attract a circle of curious fish, loudly enough that they were not really surprised to hear a voice answering her from outside their circle ...

It was a breathy voice, the kind of voice a forge bellows might have, full of puffing and excess wind. “You need ... not search ... far ... travelers.” The word was stretched and breathed, “traaahvehlehhhrs.”

They turned as one, peering into the shadowy light, seeing nothing at first, locating the speaker only when it spoke again.

“What are ... you looking ... for ... travelers? Is it... only ... the bad beasts ... of the ... Bottomlands?” Bhaahtahmlahhhnd.

Even Mavin, more experienced than the others in the variety of which the world was capable, shivered a little at this voice. There was something ominous in it, though the robed figure which stood in the shadows of the root wall did not menace them in any way.

It merely stood, occasionally illuminated by a passing fish, its hood hiding its face. Mavin shivered again. “We do indeed, stranger. We seek certain beasts, if they are gray, and huge, and eat the roots on which

the bridgetowns depend. And we are greatly surprised to find any ... any person here in the Bottomlands, for we believed them occupied only by creatures ...”

“Ahhhh. But ... you knew ... of Watertight.” Whaaaahtehr laihhht. “Is it believed ...” —puff, puff—“that ... those on ... Watertight ... perished?”

Beedie started to say something, but Mavin clutched her tightly by the shoulder, bidding her be silent. “Nothing is known of Watertight, stranger. Nothing save old stories.”

“Do the ... stories ... speak of ... Mirtylon?”

“They do, yes,” said Roges.

“I am ... Mirtylon,” Aihh ahhm Muhhrrtihlohhn... said the figure, moving a little out of the shadow toward them, stopping as they took an involuntary step back, away from it. It was robed from head to toe in loose folds of flattree leaf; a veil of the same material covered its face; its hands were hidden in the full sleeves. It regarded them now through mere slits in the face covering, a vaguely manhigh thing, but with only a line of shoulder and head gleaming in the fish light to say that it had anything resembling manshape.

“Ah,” said Mavin. “Watertight has not been heard of for some hundreds of years. If you are indeed Mirtylon, then you have lived a long time, stranger.”

“The ... Bottomlands are ... healthful. Things ... live very ... long here.”

“Enzymes,” murmured the theoretician, patting his pockets in search of the notebook which had turned to moist pulp. “Cell regeneration ...”

“We desire ... to welcome ... you ... properly,” the form went on. “Our ... village is ... only a ... little distance ... toward the wind ...”

“One moment,” said Mavin. “Let us confer for a time.” She drew them into a huddle, watching the robed

thing over Roges' shoulder. "There is something here I do not like," she muttered. "And I do not want all of us in one heap, like jacks to be picked up on the bounce—Aha, you play that game, do you? Well, I am not about to have it played upon us.

"Beedie, I want you and Roges to go back up the stairs, quick and hard. Keep going until you're above where Watertight used to be. Keep going until the air is dry enough to get a fire going, then build a deadroot fire on the hearth and keep it burning until you hear from me. Don't let it go out. If anyone comes from above, it will be Slysaw. Hide yourself and the fire as best you can and let him come down. If anything comes at you from below, use torches. Do not seem surprised at anything I say, and do ... not ... argue with me!" This last was at the rebellious expression on Beedie's face. "I would send Mercald if I thought he could make the climb fast enough. He can't. The Thinker would forget what he was told to do in theorizing about something else. I have no choice. Our lives may depend upon having someone up there who can go for help if we need it, so get going."

Still resentful, Beedie turned toward the stairs, Roges close behind.

"Surely ... you will not... go so soon," puffed the stranger. "We would ... show ... our ... hospital ... ity."

"We have others waiting for us a little way up the stairs," called Mavin, urging Beedie and Roges upward. "I'm sending the young ones to bring them down. Can you have someone meet the party here when they return?"

There was a doubtful pause, almost as though the figure engaged itself in conversation, for the figure poised, bent, poised again in a way that had a questioning, answering feeling about it. Then at last the breathy voice answered, "We will ... meet them. Now ... we will ... go to our ... village."

Without looking back, the figure moved along the chasm floor, winding its way between rocks and huge, buttress roots which emerged from the root wall like partitions, ponderous in their height, thickly furred with hair. Mavin looked up at the net spread above them, seemingly stretching from wall to wall of the chasm, from which more root hairs dropped into the rocky soil to make fringed walls along the path on either side.

"Protection," the Thinker muttered. "To protect them from stuff falling off the rim and from the bridgetowns. I would imagine the nets cover the entire area they occupy. And the net is living, of course, because of all these root hairs hanging down, which must mean that they cut these paths through it. No. No. Ah. Look," and he pulled one of the fringing root hairs up before Mavin's face.

“Not cut. Rounded. As though it just stopped growing. Hmm. Now, what would make it do that ...”

Mavin did not answer. She was too busy considering that Mirtylon, seemingly so eager to offer hospitality, had not turned to see whether they followed. She looked behind her, seeking Mercald’s face, pale as a fish belly. “Are you all right?”

“No,” he whispered. “My heart is pounding. I smell something strange. It makes me sweat and shiver.”

“Pheromones,” said the Thinker. “Something exuded by a living thing to attract mates or warn predators away. Perhaps exuded voluntarily by some kind of water dweller ...”

“Perhaps involuntarily,” murmured Mavin. “By something that calls itself Mirtylon.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

As they walked through the fibrous hallways of the Bottom following the robed stranger, Mavin felt all her senses begin to quiver and extend. Unseen by Mercald or the Thinker, she sharpened her eyes, enlarging them and moving them outward so that she could have a wider range of vision to the sides. What light there was was not much diminished by the netted roof they walked beneath for lantern fish swarmed through the whiskery jungle, casting pale circles of cold light.

Just above and slightly to her left, Mavin saw a hardedged diamond shape upon the net, a thing of some weight, making the net sag beneath it. One of the rare amber fish nosed at the shape from above, and in that sunny glow she caught a glimpse of bright colour, knowing it at once for what it was—the bright feather upon the cap of the young man whose body she had seen two days before, slowly circling upon its kite into the depths. The hallway led beneath it, and when she was almost below, she looked upward, quickly, to see the cap, the kite, the wrappings of white. There was no sign of the body which had been wrapped and decked in the clothes. She made no comment, merely trudged on, keeping close watch on the figure before her.

The sound of water grew louder, a bubbling and boiling with plopping heavings in it as of seething mud. They set foot upon a wooden bridge which led across this noise, through rising clouds of hot mist and the hiss of escaping steam. The bridge was made of short lengths of root, tied with bits of root hair to long,

horizontal beams. The robes of the person before her moved in the rising steam without flapping loose, evidently being fastened at the ankle so that no surface of the body could be exposed. Mavin thinned her lips and marched on. Behind her the Thinker muttered once more about tectonics, rift valleys, plate separation. She had no idea what he was talking about, but naive intuition told her that the chasm Bottom burrowed near the great, hot heart of the world and was heated thereby. She needed no theorist's language to tell her that. Her own nose told her, full as it was of sulphurous, ashy stench and the acrid smell of hot metal.

"We must ... come to ... shelter before the ... winds begin," puffed their guide. "Else we ... will be crushed."

"Crushed?" wondered Mavin. Certainly the winds were strong, but they had not been of crushing strength. What kind of creature might be crushed by such winds? She checked the two who followed, seeing them trudging along behind her, the one with his eyes fixed firmly upon his boots, the other staring placidly at everything he could see, muttering the while as though he stored away a million facts for later consideration. They had been walking for some time in a winding path that would have confused anyone other than Mavin. She had opened an additional eye in the top of her head and kept it fixed upon the green sky at the chasm top. Though they had walked a considerable distance, they had not come far from the stair. She estimated the distance Beedie and Roges might have climbed. They should be halfway back to the broken roots of Watertight by now. Keeping her eye fixed on their direction, she went on.

At a conjunction of the hairy hallways they found two other robed strangers waiting. One was silent. The other spoke in a manner no less breathy than the first, but with an unmistakably feminine voice, "We greet you ... travelers. My name ... is Lovewings."

Something tugged at Mavin's memory, an insistent, nagging thought which she could not take hold of. "It seems our arrival is not a surprise."

"You were ... seen on the ... Shattered Stair. No one has ... climbed that ... stair for ... a long time. The one who ... saw you was ... surprised. When we thought ... about it ... we knew it ... must happen sometime. Sometime ... bridge people must ... come down." This short speech took an interminable, windy time. It appeared to have exhausted the speaker, and Mavin wondered if they ever spoke to one another in this watery depth or whether they communicated in some other fashion. Certainly their voices seemed unaccustomed to regular use.

"How long has it been since you had commerce with the bridgetowns?" asked Mercald.

“Since ... since Watertight ... fell. Since then. Except ... there have ... sometimes been ... people fall. Into the ... nets.” For all its breathiness, the voice was wistful. Why did Mavin distrust that wistfulness? Could it not reflect an honorable desire for company?

“Why did Waterlight fall?” demanded the Thinker. “Was it conflict? Rebellion? Something eating the roots?”

“Aaahhh,” breathed the first guide.

“Aaahhh,” echoed the second. There was silence, then the third figure spoke.

“It was ... was the desire of ... those on ... Waterlight. To ... to go into ... the Bottomlands ... and live there. ...”

“In expiation for those who died on Firstbridge?” demanded Mercald eagerly. “Because of all the deaths that were caused then?”

“Oh, yes ... yes,” all three of the figures sighed, in breathless unanimity. Suspicious unanimity, Mavin thought. They sounded like children caught in some naughtiness who seized upon an offered excuse with relief that they did not need to make up a story of their own. What was going on here? Was it so easy to put words into their mouths?

She spoke quickly. “You have lived here, then, since your scouts first explored here, before Waterlight was taken down. You took Waterlight down yourselves, of course, after you had moved here.”

“Of course,” sighed the breathy, male voice of the one who called himself Mirtylon. Ahhhv cohhrz.

“Of course,” said the female voice, almost simultaneously. So she calls herself Lovewings, thought Mavin. Lovewings. What was it she could not remember about Lovewings?

The beard-walled hallway opened into a larger space, a clearing near the morning-light wall through

which a quick, cool stream ran down into the steamy lands behind them. Mavin's eye told her that she was only a few wing beats from the stair, though their pathway had wound back and forth across the chasm a dozen times in the last hours. A few score openings gaped in the chasm wall before them, carefully rounded, some of them decorated by a carved fretwork at the sides and top. Around each opening a cloud of fish lanterns hovered, nibbling at the fungus which grew there.

"Saprophytic," murmured the Thinker. "Living upon waste and decay, to be eaten in turn by the fishes, which may be eaten in turn by the occupants. Though I wonder if they would digest at all well? Phosphorous poisoning? I would need to look that up."

"Will you ... enter?" The robed figures inclined themselves in a mere hint of bow. "Soon the ... wind will ... blow."

"My friends will stay here," said Mavin in a firm voice, "until I have seen whether these accommodations are suitable. Mercald? Thinker? Thinker! Can you concentrate on simply standing here for a few moments?" She had succeeded in jolting his attention away from the lantern fish, at least for the moment. She walked up the little slope to the cave, giving no appearance of hurry or distress. The cave was shallow and sandy-floored with a hinged screen standing ajar. Not large, she thought. Large enough for the three of them to lie down in, not large enough for anyone else to come in. And not furnished with anything. Not a pot of water, not a rag to wash one's face, not the semblance of a chair or bed to soften the sandy floor.

She knelt, taking a handful of that sand in her fingers. It was dotted with bright, smooth stones which gleamed at her in blues and violets and greens. Gems. Some of them huge. They were not faceted, but smooth, as though worn by water. Looking back through the gate, she saw sparks of light thrown from many places in the clearing. Well now, she thought. That is interesting. No furnishings of any kind. But protected places, out of the wind. And gems. Everywhere.

"Very nice." She went out. "Very comfortable. Do come up, Mercald. Thinker. We offer our thanks, Mirtylon. And to you, Lovewings." The robed figures confronted her still, offering no food or drink, no comfort or company.

"Aaahhh," murmured the one.

"Aaahhh," echoed the others.

“We will find water when we need it in the stream, of course, and root mice growing upon the wall, and edible mushrooms. You mean us to take food and water as we need ... of course.”

“Of course,” sighed the one.

“Ahhhv cohhrz,” echoed the others.

Mercald and the Thinker came in as Mavin pulled the gate across the opening and peered through it at the figures outside. For a time, they did not move. At last, the three turned away as though joined by invisible strings and moved across the clearing where they halted against the dangling root hairs and did not move again.

“If you notice,” Mavin asked, “no offer of food, or drink. No beds. No chairs.”

“Persons living a life of religious expiation would hardly be expected to think of such things,” said Mercald in a sententious voice. “It is likely that they fast for days at a time. Probably they engage in self-mortification as well, flagellation or something such, and robe themselves both to avoid licentiousness and to hide their wounds from one another’s eyes.”

“I don’t know what they engage in, priest, but I do know that hospitality to strangers is a duty of every religion I have ever encountered with no exceptions. None. I am inclined to believe, therefore, that all your blather about expiation and fasting and what not is just that—blather. I don’t know what’s going on here, but it isn’t religious.”

“Besides which,” said the Thinker, “it’s unlikely that Lovewings, who committed suicide several hundred years ago, could be still alive. To say nothing of Mirtylon, who would have to have lived for about nine hundred years. Unlikely they would still have any licentiousness to cover.”

“Of course!” Mavin struck her forehead with one hand, waving the other at the Thinker. “That story Beedie was telling me about the lost bridge. Lovewings was the one who threw herself off the stairs.”

“The Boundless might extend the life of any worthy ...” Mercald began, only to be cut off.

“The Boundless might, but I’ll bet my socks the Boundless didn’t. No, Mercald. Something other than the Boundless is at work here. Best rest while you can. They say they are concerned about the wind, and yet they stand out there in the clearing, not taking shelter. Something is awry here, so let us be cautious.” She lay on the sandy floor, accommodating herself to it, placing her head where she could see through the woven gate, hearing Mercald burrowing in his pack, smelling the food he unwrapped but refusing a share of it when he offered.

The sides of the sandy clearing were hung with thick mats of root hairs, like the pelt of some giant beast, and against this shaggy background the robed figures stood out plainly, as silent and un-moving as when they had first arrived there. There were some dozen of the forms around the clearing, all standing with hooded heads slightly down, hands and arms hidden in the sleeves of the flattree-leaf robes. Mavin nagged at herself, wondering what was odd about the grouping, realizing at last that the creatures stood at strange, out-feeling angles one to the other, not toward one another as people tended to do in groups. “Thinker,” she whispered. “Look here.”

When he lay beside her, she said, “Look at them. Are they talking with one another?”

He stopped breathing for a time, mouth half open around a chunk of cold fried root mice. Then he sighed. “No. Not talking. But something is happening. Look at the shifting, at the far end of the group, then the next one, then the next, as though they are moving slightly, one by one along that line. You don’t think they are people at all, do you? Well. I have my doubts. We should see what’s under those robes. Do you want me to postulate?”

“No. Better just find out what’s under the robes. I’m going to sneak out, get around through the root wall. I think you’d better stay close to this cave, not wander about, and you’ll probably be safer if you keep the gate shut until I return.”

“The root hairs out there are impenetrable. The mean density of root hairs per square ...”

“Never mind,” she said. “I’ll manage.” She pulled the gate open, slipped through and sidled along the root wall until her relocated eyes told her she was out of direct line of vision from any of the fretted arches. The group across the clearing still stood, heads down. She Shifted.

Spidery feet with sharp claws levered long legs up the rootwall. Spidery eyes, multifaceted, searched for

any sign of movement. Once she had climbed above the level of the netted roof, she stopped to peer away toward the stairs, seeking upward for a fugitive gleam of light. There was still too much light in the chasm to tell whether it burned or not. She thought she saw a little, golden gleaming upon the wall but could not be sure. Well, that matter would wait. Both Roges and Beedie were sensible; they would not take chances.

The net bounced beneath her as she moved to the place the kite had rested. Once there she turned it over with angled legs, searching with mandible and claw. Only the wrappings, the clothing. Nothing else. Except—except a smell. A scent. Not unpleasant, but odd. Odd. Making her shiver and sweat. What was the word the Thinker had used. Pheromones? Well, and what was that? Stinks. Emitted by things. So, there were stink bugs and stink lizards and perfume moths. Back in the long ago, she had met an Agirule. It had had a strange, fungus smell, earthy and warm. Himaggery had smelled like autumn woods. Pheromones. So, these wrappings smelled like the creature that called itself Mirtylon. Which meant, so far as Mavin was concerned, that Mirtylon or one of his fellows had been here. And now the body of the youth was gone. Only his bravely feathered cap, his funeral wrappings remained. She shifted uneasily on her many legs, jiggling upon the net until it quivered beneath her. Then she made her way across the net until she was above the quiet forms where they stood, silent and unmoving.

The wind had begun to blow by the time she reached the place, moving very slowly. The only light lay high upon the evening-light wall, only the eastern end of Topbridge breaking the line of shadow, a hard, chisel shape against the glow. The other bridgetowns hung in darkness. Beneath the net the lantern fishes swarmed in their thousands, moving now toward the walls where they dwindled, diminished, becoming dark egg shapes fastened tightly to the walls. Beneath the net the robed forms stood as they had first arranged themselves, the robes flapping a little in the wind. Mavin lay upon the net, let her legs dangle through it, appearing to be only another set of skinny root hairs dangling into the clearing, invisible among countless others.

She took hold of a sleeve, pulled it gently, gently, tugging in time with the wind. It was fastened tight. She sent an exploratory tentacle along it, not believing what she found. The sleeve had no opening. The two sleeves were joined at the ends. If there had been arms and hands in these sleeves, they had never been expected to reach the outside world.

Her tentacle dropped to the sandy floor, probed up upward at the top of the clumsy shoe shapes. No opening. Shoes and robe were one. The thing was a balloon, all in one piece. On the net, Mavin snarled to herself, a small, spider snarl. Well and well, what was the sense of this?

The end of the tentacle grew itself a sharp, ivory claw and cut a slit in the robe, moving like a scalpel along one rib of the flattree leaf of which the garment was made. When the slit was large enough, the tentacle probed through.

After which Mavin lay upon the net in furious thought. Whatever she might have suspected, she would not have suspected this. She slid down a convenient root hair, spent some time exploring the area very carefully, with great attention to the boiling springs, then went back up onto the net, finding her way quickly from there back to the cave.

She paused before entering, searching the high wall for the gleam of amber light, sighing with relief when she found it unmistakably. So. Beedie and Roges were there, above harm's reach if Mavin had reasoned correctly. Above one harm's reach, she corrected herself. Slysaw would have reached Bottommost by now. On the morrow, he would come down the Shattered Stair. Well and well once more. After midnight, when the wind stopped, would be time enough to worry about that. There were other things to think of first.

She slipped inside the cave, pulling the gate tight behind her and taking time to lash it with a bit of thong. Evidently Mercald had ventured out, for there was a pot of steaming tea upon the sandy floor. She looked around for the fire, before realizing there was no smoke.

"I ventured just as far as that boiling spring," said Mercald in an apologetic tone. "The Thinker kept watch. It's only at one side of this clearing. We both wanted something hot. I thought you would, too."

Mavin listened to the wind rising outside and nodded. It had been sensible of him, she had to admit. If one set aside the man's fear of heights, he was brave enough for all ordinary matters. Wishing she could like him more, for Handbright's sake if for no other reason, she crouched beside the steaming pot and took the cup he offered. If one could not have fire, this would do. There was a long silence. At last she looked up to see both pairs of eyes fastened upon her and realized that they were waiting for her.

"Can you still see the figures out there?" she asked Mercald who was sitting near the gate.

He peered into the dusk, nodded. "The wind is fluttering them a little, but they still haven't moved."

"They aren't likely to," she said. "They're anchored to the roots. Besides, they're empty." She waited for expostulation, surprise. There was none.

"When Mercald went out for the water," said the Thinker, softly, "he said they looked like the cloak room at the Birders House. Hanging there. The minute he said it, I thought that's why they were left out in

the wind—because there was nothing in them.” Mavin peered through the gate, head cocked to one side. They did have that look, a kind of limpness even though she knew they were supported from within by a framework of wiry greenroot. “They are made like balloons,” she began, going on to describe the framework of flexible strands inside, with the flattree leaves stretched over. “There are two slits in the veil, probably to appear as though the beings have eyes, but I doubt it. Then there are no soles to the shoe parts. There is a smell there, at the bottom of the things, as though something flowed out of them and along the soil, away into the root tangle. There are places along there where the roots don’t reach the ground, places about ankle high and an armspan wide, where the roots look burned off or chewed off. No, the ends are smooth. They look—rounded, somehow.”

“Digested off,” suggested the Thinker.

“Perhaps,” she agreed, silent for a time after that trying to visualize a being shaped like a flatcake, with an odd smell, which could eat greenroot without dying from it. “Of course, once I saw the greenroot framework inside those things, I knew they couldn’t have been people.”

“It would poison people,” agreed Mercald. Fresh greenwood sap on the skin, even small quantities of it, caused ulcers which did not heal. He had been listening to all of Mavin’s discoveries, sadly shaking his head from time to time, not in disagreement but in profound disappointment that what he had thought was a religious community was likely to be something quite different.

“And then,” she went on, “I found a burial kite—what do you call them?”

“Wings of the Boundless,” said Mercald. “Which carry the dead into the Boundless sky. Or, sometimes, into the Bounded depths. Depending upon what kind of life they’ve lived, of course.”

“Of course. Part of the duty of the Messenger caste, as I understand it? Manufacture of wings and dispatch of the dead thereon? Yes. Beedie told me. Well, two days ago I saw one of the ... wings ... descending into the chasm. There was a bright feather on the ... well, on the fellow’s cap. That wing now lies on the net a short way from here. The cap is there, and the white wrappings, and the other clothing, but the body is gone.”

“Of course it’s gone,” said Mercald with asperity. “It went into the care of the Boundless.”

“I thought the ones that went up went into the care of the Boundless. This one came down.”

“Well, naturally, both end up in the care of the Boundless, it’s just that ... our ... theology is a little indefinite about ...”

“It’s just that you don’t know, Mercald. Do you really think that the Boundless cares about bodies? Well, no matter. In my experience across the lands of this world, bodies invariably vanish because something buries them or burns them or eats them. Beetles, usually. Or things that look like beetles. Except that I could find no beetles around the kite. Excuse me, Mercald. Around the Wing of the Boundless.

“I did find the smell of whatever. Whatever wore those robes. Whatever greeted us in human language. Whatever guided us here. Whatever has now gone elsewhere, probably because the wind has started to blow and whatever is afraid of being crushed.”

“The inescapable hypothesis is, then, whatever ate the people of Lostbridge.” said the Thinker.

“Whatever,” agreed Mavin. She leaned forward to fasten the rattling gate more tightly. The wind kept up its steady pressure on the thong, stretching it.

“How horrible,” said Mercald, making a sick face. “How dreadful.”

“Dreadful, certainly,” she agreed. “But helpful. I think we can draw some conclusions from what we know, can’t we, Thinker?”

“Ahhm. Well. Yes. A form of life which absorbs some—how much, I wonder?—of the mental ability or memory of whatever it eats. Hmmm. Yes. Language for example? Yes. Hmm. Doesn’t manage it any too well, but does have the general idea. Tends to use it reflectively ...”

“They don’t think very quickly,” said Mavin. She had come to this conclusion some time ago. The poor creatures, whatever they were, did not think well. They struggled with thought, struggled to put ideas together, like a partly brain-killed Gamesman trying to do things he had once done easily, not able to understand why these simplicities were now impossible. She had seen that. More than once. She clenched her teeth at the memory, set it aside.

“What would explain this masquerade? Why the robes? Why the names of the long gone?”

Mercald cleared his throat. “Because, Mavin, they told the truth when they spoke of expiation. No. Listen. Let us suppose these creatures, these whatever, came upon Watertight in the darkness those hundreds of years ago, came upon it and ate the people, only to take into themselves all the memories of those people, and the thoughts, language, feelings. All the sorrows. All the pain.

“Before that, they had been animals. They hadn’t had any ‘thinking’ at all. Now, suddenly, they would have language and thought and guilt. For the first time, guilt. Oh, what a terrible thing. A simple animal of some kind, with only animal cleverness or skill, and then suddenly to have all that thinking. No way to get rid of it. No way to go back as they were before. Only the idea of expiation which they had swallowed at the same time they swallowed guilt, but no way to do that, either. And the thinking perhaps gets less and less useful as time goes on ...” He fell silent, sorrowing, hearing the wind sorrowing outside as though it agreed with his mood.

“Probably asexual reproduction,” said the Thinker. “Which means clones. Which means no change, no natural selection. Every generation the same. as the preceding generation, and every individual—though there really wouldn’t be individuals in that sense—the same as every other. So, whatever ate Mirtylon is still Mirtylon. And whatever ate Lovewings is still Lovewings ...”

“Because she didn’t die when she jumped,” said Mavin. “She landed in the net and the whatevers got to her while she was still alive.”

“Possibly more than one of them,” the Thinker went on. “And possibly learned from her that there was good eating on Watertight bridge. If that was the case, then we have to assume that the total effect of thought didn’t come about immediately. Maybe it took some time for it to be incorporated into the beings, the whatevers.”

“Poor things,” said Mercald, sadly. “Poor things.”

“Well, if they are such poor things, tell me how to help them, Priest. Would you have them expiate, finally, what it was they did? Perhaps we could arrange it. That is, provided they don’t eat us first.”

“Surely not. Having once felt guilt ...”

“Having once felt guilt, Priest, there are those who court it, believing that more of the same can be no worse. No, there may be sneaky slyness at work here. I will believe only what these creatures do, not what they say. I do not think they understand words very well, though they use them. I have known people like that in the world above. They say human words, but from an unhuman heart. Even a thrilpat may speak human language, often with seeming sense, but that does not mean I would trust one with my dinner.”

“But you speak of expiation ...”

“Yes. Something is trying to kill the oozer that threaten the bridgetowns, or so Thinker says. We know of nothing which could be making that attempt save these whatever. So. If these creatures, whatever they are, succeed in killing gray oozer, then they will have expiated their guilt at wiping out Lostbridge—Watertight. We will give them ... what is it you give penitents, Priest? Forgiveness? We will give them that. Perhaps it will satisfy them.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Mercald, giving her a narrow and suspicious look. “And do you intend to give them Slysaw Bander and his followers, as well?”

Mavin smiled a slow smile at him, a wicked smile which burrowed into him until he shifted uncomfortably, unable to bear the stare. “Well, Priest. I thought of it, yes. And I decided against it. Can you tell me why?”

He sighed in relief, wiped his forehead which had become beaded with perspiration. “Because you are a messenger of the Boundless, Mavin, and would not judge without proof?”

“No, Priest,” she said in the same wicked tone. “Because I am a pragmatist. I do not want one of these whatever sliding about in the Bottomlands with Slysaw’s evil brain alive inside it, moving it. It may be we are fortunate that none of those who were eaten on Lostbridge desired power. If they had wanted power or empire, the creatures that ate them might not have stopped with Watertight. If Slysaw Bander had eternal life, clone or no clone, I would not sleep soundly in my hammock anywhere in this chasm or, it may be, in this world. Even though the things seem to have trouble keeping their train of thought, I would not risk it. It may be they merely find language difficult.”

Mercald flushed. "You mock me, Messenger."

"I instruct you, Priest. Pay heed. When you believe that messengers arrive from God, it is wise to listen to everything they say, not merely when they recite accepted doctrine." She was ashamed of herself almost immediately. He turned so pale, so wan. Well. It was only as she had suspected from the beginning. Many men had a strong tendency to tell God how to behave, and religious men were more addicted to this habit than most.

"All of which," she said, changing the subject, "is not relevant to our current need. We need a way to destroy the oozers. The whatevers evidently have not found a way, not yet. It would help if we knew whether the whatevers think at all. Do they think, Thinker?"

He shrugged. "What is thought? No current theories explain it. I suggest you attempt what it is you wish to do and see whether it works. Though I am not an experimentalist, at times one must simply sit back and observe what experimentalist manage to accomplish. In the interest of acquiring data. No other way. Sorry. Sometimes, one simply must."

"Well, then, Thinker, we are stymied until the wind stops. Whatever they are, they will not come out until midnight. I suggest we sleep until then, keeping watch turn about. Priest, you seem wide awake."

"I am troubled," he said with dignity. "I will watch first. It is unlikely I would sleep in any case."

"I have abused you," said Mavin, "if only for your own good. So watch then. Wake me when you grow sleepy."

She curled into a ball on the sandy floor, covering herself with her blanket. Though the gate of the cave was loosely woven, it seemed to be out of the wind, protected on the up-chasm side by a protrusion of the root wall. The wind was cool but it did not feel as cold as it had the night before upon the stair. She drowsed, half dreaming, half remembering.

Near the source of the River Dourt was a town called Mip. It lay in the valley of the Dourt, below the scarps of the Mountains of Breem, far east of the Black Basilisk Demesne of which the people of Mip spoke often, softly, and with some fear. As far to the east as the Black Basilisk lay west was the Demesne of Pouws, and between the desmesnes a state of wary conflict had become a way of life and

death. Mip, lying as it did between, strove quietly to be invisible. The people around were small holders, farmers, those to the south raising livestock while those in the river valley grew vegetables and fruits for towns as far away as Vestertown and Xammer in the south or Learner in the north. Thus the town itself was largely devoted to commerce of an agricultural kind, full of wagons and draft animals, makers of harness and plows, seed sellers, animal Healers and minor Gamesmen who would dirty their hands and Talents with ordinary toil.

Mavin had come there, pursuing the white bird, coming south from Landizot, down the rocky shores of the Eastern Sea, past Hawsport, with its harbor full of fishing boats behind the breakwater, down along the mountains to the Black Basilisk Demesne which was mad with celebration over the birth of a boy child named Burmor to the family of the Basilisks. Mavin went quiet there, anonymous, answering fewer questions than she was asked, learning at last that the white bird had been seen. "Ah, yes, stranger. Seen by the Armigers on duty at the dawn watch. Two of them flew off in pursuit of it, losing it in the haze above Breem Mountains. It would have gone to water along the Dourt, no doubt. But that was some time ago. Ask in Mip."

So she had gone to Mip.

A quiet little town, on both sides of the Dourt, which so early in its flow was little more than a brook, full of inconsequential babble and froggy pools. A town full of trees, planted there, most of them, generations before by the first settlers in the area. "We feed the Basilisks," she heard whispered. "We feed Pouws. They have no wish to go hungry, so leave us alone."

And, indeed, there was little sign of Great Game in Mip. No tumbled rocks to show that Tragamors had heaved the landscape about. No piles of bones to show where Gamesmen had pulled the heat from the very bodies of the townsmen to fuel their Talents. An occasional Armiger from the Black Basilisk Demesne high in the western sky, light shattering from his armor; an occasional highly caparisoned Herald from Pouws stopping for beer at the Flag and Branch on his way to or from some other place. Mavin had settled into the town, found a quiet room on the upper floor of the Flag and Branch and moved about to ask questions.

There was a hunter in Mip. "I saw the bird, Gameswoman, in the marshes. The source of the Dourt lies there in the ready marshes, and the wild fowl throng there between seasons, moving north or south. I did not attempt to take the bird. I do not take the rare ones. Only the common ones, those we may eat without feeling we have eaten the future and so kept it from the lips of our children. It seemed contented there, though without a mate or nest or nestlings to rear. If you go there, likely you will find it, though if you go to harm it, I would beg you to reconsider."

"I am a Shifter," Mavin had said. "As is the white bird. My sister."

At which the hunter had moved away, with some expressions of politeness, his face suddenly hard and unpleasant. It was not the first time Mavin had seen that expression when Shifters were mentioned. Seemingly no other Gamesmen—no, not even Ghouls and Bonedancers, who moved among hosts of the dead to the horror of multitudes—were held in such disrepute. It was fear. Seemingly some pawns did not believe the carefully constructed mythology which Shifters were at considerable effort to put about. Seemingly some pawns believed they had special reason to distrust, to fear the Shifter Talent. It was a reaction Mavin found curious. She promised herself she would learn the cause of it some day.

Come that day when it would come; she took herself off to the swamps at the source of the Dourt. This was high country, much wooded, with little meadows surrounding the streams and the low, marshy places grown up with reeds. It reminded her a little of another forested place, and she was almost contented there, in one shape or another, searching for the white bird.

The streams came down out of many shallow valleys into a myriad meadowlands. Searching was no matter of high flight and sharpened eyes. She had to seek along each separate creek and gully, among each separate set of marshes. It was not until ten days had passed that she caught sight of the bird, the white bird, helplessly beating her wings against the net which held even as the hunter closed in to take her. If it was not the same hard-faced hunter she had left in Mip, it was his twin, and the anger that was always close to the surface in Mavin boiled up in a fury. Still, she held back, seeing the way he peered about, face sly and full of hating intensity. She knew then what he meant to try. This white bird, a Shifter, was to be bait for another Shifter, herself. The fact that he brought nothing but a net showed his ignorance. He believed, then, only the common knowledge about Shifters, much of it spread by the Shifters themselves. He thought a Shifter could be either human or one other thing—a wolf, a pombi, a fustigar, a bird.

“I am Mavin Manyshaped,” she sang to herself in the treetop from which she watched him. “You have done a foolish thing, Hunter.” Then she followed him as he put the white bird in a cage, a cage too small, painfully too small, and carried it away in a wagon.

Mavin, seeing him through fitchhawk eyes, circling high above him, saw each plodding step of the team.

He did not go far. Only to an open meadow where the white bird would be very visible for a long way, and where he tethered her tightly to a stake driven deep into the ground and set his nets to drop if that stake should be touched.

Mavin, watching him from mountain zeller eyes, merely smiled.

Dusk came, and after that darkness, and the hunter curled beside his dying fire to rest. What did he think? she wondered. Did he believe Shifters could not stay awake at night? Did he think that because one Shifter flew as a bird in the daylight that her sister would also fly only in the day? Foolish man. Her serpent's eyes saw him clearly by his warmth, even in the dark.

She slid beside the stake, found the thong that bound the white bird's leg, whispered, "Handbright? Handbright? It is Mavin, your sister."

There was no whispered answer, only the glare of mindless bird eyes, gleaming a little in the light of the embers. Well and well. It was a thing known to Shifters. Sometimes one took a form too long, too well, and could not leave it again. Well and well, sister, she thought. So you are sister no longer. Still, because of what you were and your protection of me ...

The serpent's form bound about the white bird, grew little teeth to chew the thong away, slithered away into the night to lead the white bird stumbling in the dark to the forest's edge as though it had forgotten how to Shift eyes for night vision, only the maddened gleam showing. "Stay," Mavin murmured, as she would have to some half wild fustigar. "Stay. I will return."

Then she returned to the stake, began to take on bulk, eating the grass, the leaves of the trees, whatever offered. At last, when she was ready, she trembled the stake and let the nets fall over her howling.

The hunter tumbled out of sleep, half dream-caught yet, snatched up a torch and thrust it into the embers, then held it high, uncertain whether he still dreamed or was awake, to confront the devil eyes within his gauzy net, to see the claws which shredded that net, the fangs which opened in his direction ...

Mavin thought, later, that perhaps he stopped running when he reached Mip, though he might have gone all the way to Hawsport. It had been a good joke.

Too good. The white bird had been no less terrified and had flown. All the search had to begin again, be done again. Still, when next she heard word of the white bird, that word had been clear. The white bird had flown west, over the sea.

Over the sea. To strange lands and far. To this chasm. Outside the wind had dropped. Through the woven gate she could see the glowing lanterns emerging from the root wall. It would not be long before the whatevers sought to fill their strange, manshaped garments once more. She sat up, seeing Mercald's eyes in the fishlight.

"You didn't wake me, Priest?"

"I was wakeful enough for both, Mavin. I knew you would be about as soon as the wind dropped. I will sleep in a while, perhaps, while the Thinker keeps watch. If you need me—though I do not suppose you will—call me."

"Ah," she thought. "So you are still unhappy with me, Mercald."

She sidled out through the gate, surrounded at once by a great cloud of blue fish. Across the clearing, one of the flattree garments moved purposefully toward her.

CHAPTER NINE

"You are not Mirtylon," she cried.

The balloon dress, twitchy upon its framework, stopped where it was, trembling in indecision.

"You are not Mirtylon," Mavin cried again, "but that doesn't matter. You do not have to be Mirtylon to talk to us."

"Am Mirtylon," it puffed Ahhm Muhhrtuhhlohhn.

"No." She moved across the clearing, thrusting her way through a cloud of importunate fishes to stand beside it, almost within touch. "No. You ate Mirtylon. Now that you have eaten Mirtylon, you think Mirtylon. You have his name and can use it if you like. But you are not Mirtylon. What did you name yourself before Mirtylon?"

There was only an edgy silence during which the balloon quaked, shifted, and did not answer. At last an answer came, from another of the forms.

“No name ... had no name ...”

“Ah. Well. If you did not call yourself by human names, what other name would you have?” The Thinker had suggested this line of questioning in an effort to determine whether the things thought at all, whether they could deal with conditional concepts. Everything the creatures had said until now might have been mere stringing together of phrases the humans might have said—or so the Thinker thought. She waited. Silence stretched thin. She could feel the Thinker’s eyes, behind her in the cave, watching every tremor.

“We ... bug ... sticky.”

Mavin’s mouth fell open. What in the name of the Boundless or any other deity was she to make from that? She heard the Thinker hissing from the cave. “See if you can get it to come out of cover! Let us get a look at it.”

“Come out of that shape,” she commanded.

“No.” The word was strong, unequivocal, from several of them at once. “No. Ugly.”

She scratched her head. “Ugly” was a human word and therefore represented a human opinion. Which meant it was possibly what the dwellers of Watertight had thought of these creatures. Which had a great many implications. “Ugly is all right,” she said at last. “Thinker is ugly.” She waved at the cave behind her. “Many things are ugly.”

“Ugly ... things ... are ... bad.” Ahhhr bahhhd.

“Not ... always.” She shook her head, understanding what horror these words conveyed. She could visualize what had happened on Watertight bridge. It would have been night, people would have been

asleep, then would have come the invasion of these whatevers, the terror of being eaten alive, consumed, only to find after one had been eaten that thought and personality did not end but went on, and on, and on. Still, there must have been some self-awareness in the creatures before. Otherwise they could not have named themselves at all.

“All things which eat us are ugly-bad. Being eaten is ugly-bad. If you do not eat me, I do not think you are ugly-bad.” There, let them chew on that, she thought, turning to rejoin the Thinker. “What do you think?”

He shrugged. “I postulate mentation prior to their having eaten people. However, seemingly they had no visual or symbolic communication. They obviously had some form of language, however, and it may have been in smell. They had a concept of number—the thing said ‘we’. They had a concept of otherness—it said bug. They had a concept of relationship—sticky. It’s possible we’ll find they’re a kind of mobile flypaper.

“However, if the people of Watertight used the phrase ‘sticky-bug’ then these creatures may just be using it because they swallowed it. In that case, all we’re left with is the fact one of them used a plural.”

“All of which means?” sighed Mavin, understanding about one word in five.

“That I can’t say at this point how intelligent they are, leaving aside for the moment that we don’t know what intelligence is. I have always eschewed the biological sciences for exactly that reason; they’re unacceptably imprecise.” He peered over her shoulder, eyes suddenly widening.

Mavin turned. Something was flowing out at the bottom of the balloon dress, something thick and oleaginous, shiny on the top, puckered here and there as though the substance of it flowed around rigid inclusions. When it stopped flowing, it was an armspan across, ankle high, and it quivered. Out of the centre of it, slowly edging upward as though by terrible effort, came the shape of an ear, a bellows. The ear quivered. The bellows chuffed. “Not ... eating ... you ...” it puffed. “Not ... ugly ...”

While Mavin considered that, trying to think of something constructive to say next, a cloud of small flutterers swept through the clearing. As though by reflex action, the thing that had spoken lifted a flap of itself into their path. Wings drummed and struggled. There was a momentary agitation of small bodies upon the surface of the thing, then the smooth shininess of it closed over the disturbance.

“What did I say?” asked the Thinker, triumphantly. “Mobile flypaper!”

“Not ugly,” said Mavin, firmly, trying not to laugh. “Very neat, very good-looking. Very shiny. You are ... Number One Sticky.”

Across the clearing another puddle of glue thrust up its own ear and bellows. “I ... Number ... Two ... Sticky.”

“Well, that answers a lot of questions,” said the Thinker. “They certainly have self-awareness.”

“And they can count,” commented Mercald. “So, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that they ...”

“I don’t want to hear it,” said Mavin. “There isn’t time. Whether they are religious or not, Mercald, I don’t want to consider the matter now.”

“Well. So long as you don’t expect them to do anything that would offend against ...”

“I don’t want to hear that, either, Mercald. My understanding of what would offend against the Boundless is at least as good as yours. As you would remember if you reflect upon recent history!” Mercald flushed and fell silent, obviously distressed. Mavin turned to see the ears quivering at full extension, and cursed herself for having yelled. Undoubtly she had confused them. “Pay no attention to the arguments we humans have from time to time. It is our way. Often, it means nothing.”

“We ... remember,” blob said. “Number ... Two ... Sticky ...?” It repeated with an unmistakably questioning rise in tone.

“Number Two Sticky,” agreed Mavin. “But you will have to mark yourself somehow, so that we will know which one you are. We cannot smell the difference as you probably do. We must see it.”

Ears and bellows disappeared into the flat surface. The blobs quivered, flowed toward one another, seemed to confer through a process of multiply extrusions and withdrawals. Finally the surfaces of both

began to form a dull fibrous pattern against the overall shine. The figures were clear, a large figure "1," an even larger figure "2."

"They've moved some of their bottom membrane onto their tops," said the Thinker. "That stands to reason. They couldn't move around at all if they were sticky on the bottom."

The conference among the Stickies went on, and more numbers began to appear, 3, then 4 and 5 in quick succession. When all those in the clearing had identified themselves, there were fifteen.

"Handsome," announced Mavin in an approving tone. "Very handsome. Very useful."

"And very fortunate that the poor people of Watertight were literate," sighed Mercald. "I wonder if any of these creatures ate the babies on Lostbridge. Poor things. They wouldn't have enough language yet to talk with us."

"There ... are ... more ..." said One, breathlessly. "In ... the ... place we ... stay."

"How many?" asked the Thinker. "How many of you?"

The glue blob quivered, shivered, erupted in many small bubbles which puckered and burst, then became calm, slick, only the fibrous identifying number contrasting upon its surface. The bellows gasped, puffed hugely: "Three thousand ... nine hundred ... sixty-two now. One was ... crushed in the last ... wind."

"And that," said the triumphant Thinker, "proves they can reason with quite large numbers. Well. Most interesting."

"Do all talk human talk? All understand?" Mavin's keen sense of survival quivered to attention. How many people had there been on the lost bridge, after all? Surely not almost four thousand of them.

The ear drooped, the bellows pumped. "Only ... four hundred ... seven. All. We ... want ... ed ... did

want ... did want ... not now ... understand ... not now.”

“What did you want?” asked Mavin, already sure of the answer.

“Did want ... people ... to eat. For ... the ... others.”

“Noble,” sighed Mercald. “Risking their lives to help their brethren. Giving it up when they learn it is a greater wrong ...”

“Mercald, I am not at all sure they have learned any such thing,” Mavin hissed at him, cupping her hands around her lips and standing close so that the stickies should not hear her. “They have said they do not wish to be ugly. Very well. But they desire to acquire more of—well, whatever it is they acquired when they ate the people of Watertight. They’re outnumbered nine to one by those who speak only in smells. Now, no matter how ugly I might wish to avoid being, that kind of desire would speak strongly to me. We will do them a courtesy by not putting temptation in their way.”

“Of course not,” he said with offended dignity. “I wouldn’t.”

“Then don’t adopt them, Mercald. Don’t make them into some kind of Bottom-dwelling holiness. I’ve had sortie experience with promises of expiation and reformation. I’ve seen what happens when people act on such promises prematurely. We must not risk our lives on some religious notion you may have.” She realized she was glaring, panting, that her face was flushed. “Oh, foosh, Mercald. I feel like we’ve been arguing about this for days. Can’t you simply leave the religious aspects of it alone until you can get back to Topbridge and have a convocation or something to decide what it all means.” She turned away, sure he had not heard a word she had said.

She turned to the stickies. “We have come here to find the big beasts that are eating the roots.” Mavin had started to say “Great, gray oozers,” and had then remembered what Mirtylon, nee Sticky One, had called them. “Do you know about those big beasts?”

“Beasts ... eat ... stickies ... too,” puffed Sticky Seven, quivering in indignation.

“We put... rootsap ... on them. ...” puffed another. Mavin could not see its number, hidden as it was

behind two or three others. "Make little ... ones sick ... die. ..."

"There, you see!" demanded Mercald. "Our interests are similar. We can help them!"

"We're going to have to help one another," muttered Mavin. "Rootsap won't kill the big ones? Is that what you're saying?"

"Too big ..." came the disconsolate reply.

"Can the net hold the beasts? Do the big beasts crawl around on top of the net?"

"Go on ... top, yes." Puff, puff. "Sometimes, net... breaks ... beasts fell ... down ... eat us. Crawl around ... eat ... everything." This was the same sticky that had spoken before. By extending her neck a little, Mavin could read its number. It was Sticky Eleven.

"How many beasts?" she asked. "Many?"

There was a quivering conference among the glue blobs, with much extrusion of parts and emitting of smells. At last number Eleven struggled to the front of the group. "Nine ... big ones ... left ... near here. Sap ... killed ... little ones. Always had ... little ... ones here ... making pretty stones. First time ... big beasts ... come here. They come from ... down-chasm." Puff, puff, puff, collapse. Eleven thinned to a pancake, bellows pumping impotently.

Sticky One took up the story. "Eleven is ... right. Nine big ... ones ... left."

All right, thought Mavin. I'll need to think about this. She turned to Mercald and the Thinker, hammering a fingertip into her palm. "Now's the time to negotiate. None of the three of us is a representative of the bridge people—I speak of the governance of them, Mercald, not their religion. So, we need to get Beedie down here promptly. As a Bridger, she should serve nicely as ambassador. I can think of a few things we can try, but the agreement needs to be between the stickies and the chasm people so that it can't be repudiated later by some collection of Banders or whatnots."

“I am glad to hear you say so,” murmured Mercald. “Whoever speaks for us should be open-hearted. There is too little love and trust in you for that. You are too cynical. I do not think you are a real messenger from the Boundless, Mavin. The white bird ... your sister ... now, she is a different matter. I can believe she is a messenger.”

Mavin stepped back, stung, angry. Ah, my sister, she thought. Poor, mad Handbright. Yes. She is a different matter indeed. Besides, she doesn't argue with you, you pompous, self-righteous idiot!

Aloud, she said, “You have not heard me, Mercald. I'm sorry. I have tried to tell you there are dangers in the unknown.”

“And opportunities,” he said. “Opportunities to extend the hand of friendship, the hand of ...”

“And I have asked you not to extend anything yet,” she snapped. “Wait until Beedie and Roges get down here. I'll fetch them now and be back by the time it gets light. Just wait here, both of you, and don't ... do ... anything.”

She cast one quick look in the Thinker's direction, remembering that he had not yet seen her change shape. Bidding the stickies loudly to wait until she came back, she drew upon the power of the place to Shift into the great bird-bat form she had put together which could fly even in the soggy air of the chasm. Around her the place grew chill. She saw the Thinker shudder with cold as he stared at her. As she lifted through the cold in a whoosh of wings, she heard him cry out behind her.

“Marvelous! Revolutionary! A verification of the ergotic hypothesis!”

“Oh, by Towering Tamor,” Mavin muttered. “Now I've done it. He'll want to talk to me about how I do this, and I can't explain be-cause when I try to explain or even think about it I can't do it at all!” Resolutely, she turned her mind to other things, not thinking about flying as she circled upward toward the amber gleam of Beedie's fire.

As she came closer, however, she saw that it was the gleam of a torch they carried in a headlong dash down the stairs. She Shifted into her own form and met them.

“Mavin!” cried Beedie. “Whoosh, I’m glad it’s you. There’s a hundred Banders clumping down behind us, and I wanted to warn you. I know you told us to stay put, but we didn’t expect so many.”

“A hundred?” Mavin was doubtful. “Surely not so many as that.”

“One hundred seven,” said Roges, putting down his pack in order to stretch his arms. “When we heard them coming, Beedie went back up to a place she could count them as they crossed a break in the stair. One hundred seven of them, each with much cursing and many weapons. They think they are to find some great treasure down below, something the Beeds and Chafers have kept secret from them for generations.”

“You’re right,” admitted Mavin. “I expected neither so many nor so soon. Let me carry part of that for you. I think we’d best hurry to get as far ahead of them as possible. Throw the torch over; it will go out on the net below. The fish make enough light. Come. ...” She led them on down, carrying some of their burdens so that all could move faster, ignoring all attempts at conversation.

When they had come some little way, she left them in order to fly up along the stair and see the descending Banders for herself. There were over a hundred, as Roges had said, old Slysaw in the forefront, all galumphing down at a steady pace and cursing the stairs as they came. She hovered just out of their sight, listening to their mutinous threats as to what they would do if they were not allowed to rest soon, then dropped on her bat wings down the chasm once more with a feeling of some relief.

“You’ve gained good distance on them,” she told the others. “And they’ll soon stop to rest. Evidently they’ve been climbing in the wind, and even though many of them have strong Bridger’s legs, they are tired and hungry. Come, give me that pack again, and we’ll go a bit more slowly.”

Beedie refused to relinquish the pack until she was told what Mavin and the others had found in the depths. Then there were squeals of astonishment at the descriptions of the stickies and still greater astonishment when she was told they would soon meet Mirtylon and Lovewings—or what remained of them.

“The Thinker is ecstatic at all the new theories he has about them,” said Mavin. “But Mercald is determined that they are something very holy, somehow sanctified through guilt or some such. I have begged him to simply wait until we know a bit more before doing anything, but he accuses me of cynicism.”

“Mercald is such an uneven person,” said Beedie. “He can be brave as a pombi if it is a question of faith in the Boundless, and in the next minute he is peeing in his pants because he has the down-dizzies. I hope he will listen to you, Mavin, because I think he is not very realistic.”

“And I hope you’ve had time to discuss a few things besides theology,” panted Roges. “We may have gained on the Banders, but they will arrive at the Bottom eventually. When they do, they’ll expect to do away with us, I imagine.”

“I have a few ideas,” said Mavin modestly. “A few things that might work out.” Her foot jolted upon the solid floor of the chasm, and she sighed with relief. “Follow me. I’ve found a shorter way than the one we were led in by.”

She led them at a fast trot through the whiskery halls beneath the net, pointing out the features of the place as she did so; the boiling pools—including one very large, deep pond alive with steam—the flopperskin kites that dotted the net, the ankle-high holes connecting between the hallways. Though her way was much more direct than the path the stickies had led them before, daylight was shining through the flattrees on the rim when she brought them into the clearing to find—no one. No Thinker. No Mercald. No stickies.

“Now what?” Mavin sighed in frustration. “Where have they gone? I told them to stay right here. I begged them not to do anything until I returned.”

Roges moved through the open gate into the cave. “Here’s the Thinker behind the door,” he called. “He seems to be Thinking.”

The others came in to see him crouched against the wall behind the gate, gesturing to himself as he babbled a string of incomprehensible words over and over. “Thinker!” Mavin demanded. “Where’s Mercald? What happened to Mercald?”

“Mercald? Does one care? When one has verified the ergotic hypothesis at last, does one care about Mercalds? It seems that in order to describe the statistical state of a system, one needs an ensemble. There are those who believe the ensemble has physical reality, that the occurrence of a particular state corresponds to the frequency with which one observes the phenomenon. Others think the ensemble only a mathematical construct. It is now established that all systems must go through all states in the ensemble. Ergo, you can fly. This place is merely a rare event, sitting out in the tail of distribution of all places,

non-representative ... I shall present a paper before the physical society at the fell meeting ...”

“Oh, flopper poop,” Beedie. “He saw you change shape, didn’t he? He doesn’t believe in the Boundless, like Mercald; and he isn’t open-minded, like Roges and me; so he’s theo ... theor ... thinking his way through it and has dropped off his bridge completely. He probably thinks I’m a rare event too, and no more real than anything else.” She shook him. “Thinker! Where’s Mercald? Tell me about Mercald!”

“Absolution,” grated the Thinker distractedly, his eyes unfocused. “He wanted to give absolution to Sticky One. He wanted to lay on his hands in forgiveness, and he did, and he couldn’t take his hands off, and he ... ah ... wah ... aaahhh dissolved ... aaahhh slurp!” The last word was uttered with a hideously descriptive sound which made them all recoil in disbelief.

“By the Pain of Dealpas,” moaned Mavin. “By the Great Flood and the Hundred Devils. By the p’natti of my childhood. By ... by ...” She stuttered her way into silence, beating her head with one hand.

“A paper for Physical Review would be out of the question,” muttered the Thinker. “It would never get by the idiot referees.”

“By the Boundless,” Mavin sighed at last. “Did Mercald think they had voluntary control over their stickiness?”

“I don’t imagine he thought at all,” murmured Beedie sadly. “Often he didn’t, you know.”

“Don’t speak of it as though it were in the past,” Mavin urged. “If he has been slurped up by Sticky One, he is still with us, still Mercald, and he will have a lot of time to consider what he has done.” Oh Mercald, I told you to be careful. Because I did not speak in syrupy words, you would not listen. She shook her head again, then laid down her pack and went out into the clearing.

“Sticky-One-Mirtylon-Mercald! Sticky Two! All the stickies! Come out, come out, wherever you are!” Then she disgraced herself by weeping. Beedie took her hand in sympathy.

“It’s awful, isn’t it. I really want to throw up, but I haven’t anything in my stomach at all.” Across the

clearing the whiskery wall trembled. Moments passed. A sticky crawled out, slowly, so flat in aspect that Mavin wondered if it had suffered some accidental crushing. When it emerged completely, she saw that it was Sticky Two. "It's Lovewings," she sighed to Beedie.

"Sticky Two," she said, loudly, then waited for the ear to emerge, which it did only reluctantly. "I know what happened. It was not your fault. Not ... your ... fault."

"Sticky ... One ... fault ... it was ..." puffed Sticky Two.

"No. It wasn't any sticky's fault," Mavin sighed. "It was the man's fault. He didn't think. Where is Sticky One, now?"

"Very ... sick. Sticky ... One has ..." There was a long, long pause. "Has ... too many... things inside ... all at once." The ear trembled, retracted, the bellows sighed dismally to itself.

"I'll bet he does," said Beedie. "Can you imagine trying to digest Mercald? Oh my, I shouldn't joke about it. But then, it shouldn't seem funny, and it does."

"Sticky Two." Mavin was trying not to hear what Beedie said, for it made her want to laugh unbecomingly. "There are ugly men coming. We must do things very quickly. We cannot wait for Sticky One, or anything else. We must talk with all the speaking stickies at once. Will you fetch them?"

The glue blob dithered for a moment, then flowed away under the wall. Roges came out of the cave nibbling on a piece of bread, offering some to Mavin and Beedie with the other hand. "Thinker is all tied up in knots talking to himself about you, Mavin, and birds and some law or other he claims you broke. I haven't seen him like this before, and I don't think he'll be much use to us."

"That's all right," Mavin replied distractedly. "At least he'll be out of the way." She began explaining to Beedie and Roges what she had thought they might do, with much waving of arms and pointing here and there. Roges did not accept it without question.

"That's dangerous for Beedie, doer-good. She could be hurt!"

“She won’t be, Roges. I’ll take care of that part myself.”

Beedie had a doubtful comment. “You know how Mercald would feel about doing it this way. We still don’t have any proof he would accept that the Banders are what we know they are.”

“He’s not in any position to complain about it,” she laughed bitterly. “We can give the Banders fair warning, if that would make you feel better. They won’t heed it, but we can try. Then, if it’s the wrong thing to do, Mercald can figure out later how we can expiate for it. All of us, including the stickies who help us do it.”

“Are you sure they will help us?”

“Well, sausage girl, it’s up to your eloquence. I think there’s a good chance for building excellent relations with the stickies. If they do the chasm people a favour, then they’ll be in good odor with all. If we do the stickies a favour, they’ll want to treat us well in future. It’s up to you, Beedie. You’ve been reared to work on the roots, to manage a crew. Now we need you to work on the root net, and the stickies will be your crew. Right now I think they’re very eager to please. Let’s see how eloquent you can be!”

At almost midday the Banders came down to the vast net which spread across the chasm, making a ceiling above the Bottom. The net was made up of many ropey roots, tugged sideways from the forest of verticals, which were knotted or grown together at armspan intervals, again and again, until the whole chasm was divided horizontally by a gridwork of thick, strong lines, each individual polygon of rope-sized roots was further connected by a finer mesh of knotted root hairs. When Beedie had first seen it, she had known at once it was sufficiently strong to catch something large and flat dropping from above or perhaps even a person who might fall on his face while running across the grid. She had known at once it would not stop large rocks plunging from the rim—or the crawling gray oozers whose weight had torn ragged holes in the fabric already.

It was not unlike the floor of a bridge before the main planks were laid, and the Banders looked across it as a natural and familiar arena for exploration, whereas the Bottom, with its steams and stinks, was both strange and intimidating. Only one small group of the Banders went to the Bottom, found themselves in the maze of hallways, and promptly rejoined the others above the net level where they stood peering at the distant root wall, wondering where to go next.

It was not long before one of them, more sharp-eyed—or more acquisitive—than the rest, spotted a bright sparkle on the net, bounced his way out to it, and brought it back to be passed around among the others

“Jewels,” shouted Byle. “Dah, it’s jewels. Laying there on the net like so much flopper flub. See yonder, there’s another sparkle.” The gems, in glittering clusters, had been glued onto the grid with rootsap to form a twisting path. They were stones like those Mavin had discovered in the cave—gizzard stones from the small oozers, polished to a fine, high shine by the tumbling of the creatures’ great guts. All the stickies who spoke human language had been at the labor of placing them until moments before the Banders arrived. Now the stickies crouched upon the net, and their shiny tops camouflaged with nonsticky bottom membrane, half-hidden with bits of root hair and leaf. The trail of gems wound out across the chasm; some of the younger Banders were already following it and collecting them.

Slysaw bellowed at them. “You all get off there! I didn’t say go, and you don’t go till I say. Now get back here and let me look at those. Well, well, what a wonder. So this is what the Birder and the Beedie wench were after. I’ll be dropped off a bridge by my ears if this isn’t something ...”

There were mutterings from the others in the band. One or two looked as though they were going to disregard orders, but these were cuffed into line by some of Slysaw’s close kin.

“Now, boys. Now then. Think what a shortage of saw gravel there’s been lately, and all the time pots of it here in the Bottom to be picked up by the pocketful! And won’t we have fun taking all this back and showing it around. All this secret stuff the high and mighty Beeds and Chafers and Birders never told us about. Let’s be orderly, now. Byle, you and your cousin get out there first, and the rest of us’ll come after.” And soon the hundred were moving across the net in a long line which undulated from side to side as jewels were found and picked and popped into pockets—though some were hidden in shoe tops or behind ears in the expectation of avoiding the eventual sharing out.

Up-chasm, others waited. Roges and Beedie were upon the net; Roges at the root wall, securely anchored to the mainroot, Beedie more or less at the center of the chasm, on the up-chasm side of the steamy place above the boiling pool. Before her, and to either side, stickies lay upon the net, almost invisible in the steam, their ears carefully extruded between bits of leafy litter as they listened for the signal.

Mavin, hovering high above, peered down through the veils of steam. The mists made seeing difficult, but she had planned for it to be difficult. She did not want the Banders able to see clearly. They must be greedy, angry, and with obscured vision. She lifted a bit higher to see farther, then dropped down to whisper. “Beedie, are you ready?”

Beedie waved her away impatiently, trying to remember her lines. At her direction, the largest, brightest stones had been placed in the steamy place. Now she could hear the result of that placement; raised voices, argument, the sound of blows. She heard Slysaw's voice as he intervened, his own greed making him half-hearted. "Doesn't matter who finds 'em," he shouted at his men. "We'll share alike when we're done. Just keep gatherin' 'em in, and soon we'll come to the source of it all ..."

The group tumbled on, stooping, grabbing, pushing one another in their haste.

"Stop right there, Banders!" Beedie cried in a fine, trumpety voice.

The men stumbled to a halt, their eyes widening in surprise, searching through the steamy veils for the source of the voice. Then one of them glimpsed her, pointed, shouted. Behind him, others pushed close.

"Stop!" she cried again. "You have no business here, Byle. Nor you, Slysaw. The rest of your ruffians should be back at work on the bridgetowns that pay them. I give you warning, you are at peril of your lives, so take care. Go back to the stairs and up where you belong."

"And who're you, wench?" Slysaw thrust through the pack, leaning on Byle's shoulder. "Who appointed you head of chasm council, heh?" The Banders heaved and pushed at one another, drawing into a smaller, tighter group. Behind them stickies moved across the net.

"Yeah," interrupted Byle Bander, bouncing and posturing on the net. "Who're you, Beedie? I'll tell you. You're gametime for me, that's what. And after me, as many of these kin of mine as are interested in your skinny body."

Cheers and animal howls rose at this sally. Mavin, hearing this from above, recalled old, bad memories of Danderbat Keep, and boiled with fury. Still she hovered, close above the place Beedie stood.

"I tell you to go back. You are meddling in things that are none of your business. "You do not belong here. You are in danger here. Don't be stupid, standing there threatening me. Just turn yourselves around and go!" Beedie no longer needed to remember lines she had rehearsed. She was now so angry that they came of themselves. Beside the root wall, Roges heard her anger and sizzled with protective wrath.

“We’ll see, Beedie girl. We’ll see ...” Byle plunged toward her through the rising steams, the entire pack pressed at his back. Slysaw was carried along in the rush even as his native suspicion made him try to stem the stampede. They came in all together, individually sure-footed yet stumbling against one another, so intent upon their own beastly mob noises they did not hear Mavin’s scream.

“Stickies. Now. Now. Now. Now.”

Roges at the root wall began to echo the sound, through Mavin’s am-plified voice could have been heard by any creature not deafened by its own howls. Beedie, too, cried out, and the three voices rose together. “Now. Now. Now. Now”

Stickies had moved into a circle around the Banders, a circle that had already cut many of the main grid roots supporting the mesh above the boiling pool. Abruptly, with a loud, tearing sound, the fabric ripped to one side of the close-pressed mob. The flap of net they stood upon dropped to one side, throwing many of them flat, dropping others so quickly that arms and legs broke the finer meshes and dangled below, waving frantically at nothing.

Those at the rear of the pack nearest the torn edge were first to realize that there was nothing below but the sound of seething water, occasional glimpses of its bubbling surface appearing through the gusts of steam. Those who saw what lay below tried to climb over the bodies of those above them on the net, shouting and kicking. Those above them retaliated by kicking and pushing in return. Two or three men toppled through the hole and fell, screaming only for a moment before striking the water with a splash, a final agonized gargle and silence.

The entire pack was silent, only for that moment, not realizing what had happened but aware that something was wrong, that the net was no longer horizontal, that Beedie was moving away from them in the veiling mists, her face drawn into an expression of—what was it? Sorrow? Horror? At what? Even as shouts and howls arose once more, Byle, with his usual sensitivity, let voice follow wonder.

“Whatcha starin’ at, bone body? Heh? Run if you like, Beedie, girl, but I’m faster then you are ...” Slysaw was grabbing at his shoulder, but the boy shrugged it off, blind and deaf to any needs but his immediate desire to do violence. Slysaw dropped and was trampled under the climbing hands and feet of a dozen others, kicked downward, beneath half a hundred struggling bodies, to lie at last half-dazed upon the very edge of the tear, clinging with both hands to a mesh of root hair.

The stickies had continued with their work. The tear widened, the finer lacework ripping with an audible shriek, ropey roots breaking under the increased weight with repeated, snapping sounds which made Beedie think of a drum rattling, faster and faster. "Go back," she screamed, unheard in the general din. "Go back." It was too late for any of them to go back, and she knew it only briefly before they did.

Now a second tear opened, across from the first. Those who remained upon the net were caught now upon a kind of saddle, low at the sides, high at the ends, with those ends growing more narrow with each breath they took. Beedie stood just beyond one end so that she looked straight into Byle's face when the far, narrow strip broke through and the entire flap of net hung down for an instant's time, laden with clutching forms, shedding other forms amid shouted words she could not understand and some she could, old threats and obscenities, all ending in a liquid gulping, diminishing echoes, and quiet.

Beedie stood at the edge of the torn net, unable to move. Seeing her safe, Mavin dropped from her guardian's post through the roiling steams, past fringy edges of torn net and the quivering stickies poised there awaiting her word, down to examine the simmering surface of the pool. Nothing floated in it. She had not measured its depth, but now knew it must be a vast cauldron to have swallowed so many without a sign remaining.

Above, where Beedie stood, the net bounced from some weight hanging below it which jiggled and fought against felling. She looked between her feet to see him hanging upon a remaining shread of root just as his hand took her by the ankle. Byle Bander. She screamed his name.

And Roges drew his knife, cut the root hairs which fastened him safe at the root wall and ran upon the gridwork, sure-footed as any Bridger, not looking down, not remembering to be afraid, thinking of nothing except the sound of her voice. He came to her while she still struggled against the hands that were pulling Byle Bander upward on her body while he cursed at her and called her filthy names.

Beedie's cry had summoned Mavin back in that instant. She was too late. Her great bird's beak was too late to strike those climbing hands away. Roges' knife had already done so, and he stood with Beedie wrapped in his arms on a net which shook and shivered and threatened to collapse beneath them at any moment.

"Come on, young ones," she said quietly. "There's other time for that, and better places." And she led them back to the root wall and down, not letting either of them go until she was sure they were safe.

Later, when they thought of it, they went looking for the Thinker. They could not find him. Mavin was suspicious of the stickies for a time, but they convinced her of their innocence at last. He had g one, gone

as he had come, into some other place, through some wall only he could see or understand.

“Now I’ll never know how I do it,” Mavin thought with some disappointment. “I really thought he’d figure it out and would explain it to me.” The disappointment was not sufficient to keep her from curling up upon the cave floor and sleeping for a very long time.

CHAPTER TEN

It was some days later that they sat in the small commons room of Bridgers House on Topbridge. Beedie and Roges were unpacking a small bag they had brought from the Bottomlands, laying the contents upon the table before Rootweaver’s interested eyes. Old Quickaxe sat in one corner where his blanket-wrapped body could catch the last of the day’s light through a grilled window. Mavin sprawled before the hearth, playing with a stick in the deadroot fire which burned there to warm their supper.

“And you think all the great oozerers are dead?” asked Rootweaver, fingering the gems on the table. “Though you did not see them killed?”

“We saw the first two killed,” said Mavin. “The first time wasn’t very efficient. The stickies hadn’t quite figured out what smells were most attractive to the beasts, so the first one tended to wander about. The second time—”

“The second time was perfect,” said Beedie. “They stretched a net-road right over the Stew Pot, that’s what we named the boiling pool. Then they laid stink all over it, to attract the oozer. Then more stink to where the nearest oozer was, and it wasn’t close at all. It must have come a long way. Then, when it went out on the net-road, they cut the net, and down it went. Stewed beast. That didn’t smell very good either, but eventually it will all wash away.”

“The stickies will have killed them all by now, ma’am,” said Roges, “even the one we saw on the root wall above Bottommost . . . The Bridgers from Bottommost were driving it down into the chasm with torches when we came that way. Evidently there was only the one who climbed that high, and both they and the stickies were very eager to have the beast gone.”

“Why now?” quavered Quickaxe from his corner. “What brought the huge beasts into the chasm? We have never had a nything eating the roots before.”

Mavin nodded in time with the dance of the flames. “I knew you would want to know, so I went down the chasm to see. There had been a rock fell there, just beyond the bend of the chasm. Evidently, a few of these very large beasts were trapped on this side of the fall. There are many of them further down, where it is even wetter and warmer and where a different kind of vegetation flourishes.”

“But you say there are small ones below us?”

“Not the same kind,” said Mavin offhandedly. “The little ones are a different beast entirely. They don’t eat the roots deeply, for one thing, and they stay away from the stickies, for another. The stickies have been killing them off with rootsap as long as any one of them can remember—certainly long before they ate the people on Watertight.”

“And it was gizzard stones they traded with the Waterlight people long ago?” Quickaxe asked.

“Gizzard stones, from which our saw gravel is made, yes. And our supply of it had been laid up since that time. Even hoarded and used thriftily, as we did, it would soon have been completely used up ...” Rootweaver sighed. “Now there is enough of it we may deck ourselves in gems as in the old stories.”

“They traded different kinds of fungus, too,” offered Roges. “And fish lanterns. Things like that.”

“We made a treaty with them,” said Beedie. “I hope the chasm council will ratify—is that the word, Mavin?—ratify it. The stickies won’t hurt us if we don’t build a bridge below the level of Bottommost, because it isn’t wet enough for them that high up in the chasm. And if we aren’t silly, like poor Mercald, and try to touch them, they can’t do us any harm.”

Mavin nodded in agreement. “I think you can act on that assumption, ma’am. But take my warning. There are thousands of them down there that still speak in stinks, and they would really like to have living, thinking humans to eat. I don’t think they’re evil, but I don’t think they’re holy, either, and I’d continue to be careful.”

“Poor Mercald,” sighed the old man. “I remember his father. No practical sense at all. Still, Mavin, there is a certain temptation there.”

Mavin rose slowly, looked the old man in the eye, thought carefully before she spoke. "Old Sir, I will not presume to guide you. But before I would consider any such thing, I should have myself carried to the Bottom, and there I would speak with that which was Mercald. He is a confusion now, some Mercald, some Mirtylon, and some Sticky One. Still, he has gained ... insight."

Beedie and Roges both looked horrified when they finally realized that the old man meant that he felt a temptation to do what Mercald had done, but Rootweaver considered the idea calmly.

"Did he say anything to you? Mercald, I mean. Before you left?"

"He said he could find very little guilt or expiation in Mirtylon. And he said Mavin had been right. And he sounded very disappointed," said Beedie. "I felt so sorry for him I forgot and almost patted him on the shoulder."

"He also said," Mavin spoke for the old man's ears alone, almost in a whisper, "that it didn't hurt. It surprised him, of course, since he wasn't expecting it. But it didn't hurt."

The old man gave Mavin a fragile, tremulous smile. "If one were to do such a thing, one would have to do it fairly soon. While there is still time."

Mavin did not answer. She had found a great poignancy in Mercald's disappointment. His voice had puffed out of the sticky shape as all sticky voices did, windy and full of huffs, but the intonation had been very much his own. She recalled he had told her she had too little kindness in her, and this made her sad. Perhaps he was right. She had power, and had used it, and had made her own judgments. She did not regret them. But still ...

She remembered the weeping children of Landizot.

The frightened hunter of Mip.

The slim, silver-horned beast she had loved in the pool-laced forest.

“What are you thinking about, Mavin?” Beedie whispered to her.

“I am thinking, sausage girl, that I wish Handbright would hurry with what she is about so that I may take the baby and go. Being among you has made me doubt myself, and that makes me fractious.”

“Oh, pooh. You mean Mercald. That was his job, Mavin. Birders are supposed to make us doubt ourselves so we don’t get too proud. Do you think you are too proud?”

Mavin shook her head, seeing Rootweaver’s eyes on them from across the table. “Perhaps I was.”

The older woman nodded. “Sometimes each of us is. Now, I think from the smell that food is cooked. Will you share it around, Roges?” And she rose to seat them all at the table.

They were only half through the meal when a Maintainer woman entered, beckoning Rootweaver into the hall. She returned with a sad face. “Your sister is not young, Mavin. Among our people, we would not want to bear children at her age.”

“She’s almost forty,” said Mavin “Is there trouble?”

“The birther women are concerned, worried. She has been in labour for a very long time now. She does not seem concerned. She sings, and does not concentrate. She seems to feel nothing. We have medicines, but they are dangerous ...”

“Well,” Mavin rose. “I will come. No—alone. Beedie, you stay here. I’ll see if I can help her, but I must do it with as few as people around as possible.”

Handbright was lying on a white bed, her legs drawn up, the muscles in her belly writhing, but her face was as calm as a corpse as she sang a little, wordless song. Mavin motioned the women out of the room, asking only the head birther to stay. The place smelled of the sea, salt and wet.

“Tell me what she must do,” she directed the birther, taking Handbright’s head between her hands to make the blind eyes stare into her own. She began to speak. It was the voice she had used in Landizot and in Mip; the voice she had used on the Banders mobs, utterly confident and compelling.

“Handbright. White bird. Shifter. Sister. You have seen birthing before. This is a good child. Like Mertyn, Handbright. Mertyn. Mertyn. A good child. You must save this good child, you must birth it, Handbright. Think.” The birther woman gestured, thrusting down. “Push. Birth the good child.”

Something fled behind Handbright’s eyes, the singing stopped. Mavin went on, demandingly. “Save this good child, Handbright. Concentrate. Push. Think. This is a good baby. Handbright always wanted a baby. Think. The birther says now, Handbright. Push. See. That makes it easier. Now again, push.”

Handbright cried out, a sound completely human rather than the strange birdsongs she had made before. The birther nodded, encouraged, and felt the swollen belly. Mavin spoke on, and on, and on.

There was a thin cry, and she looked down to see a wriggling form, all blood and wetness, in the birther’s hands. Sighing, exhausted, she released her sister’s hands and sat back. There was a scurrying. Others came in from the hallway. Handbright cried out once more and the birthers moved even faster around the bed, lifting another child in their hands. Mavin looked on only, bewildered.

“Twins,” cried one. “Twin boys.”

“Ah, now, now,” thought Mavin, tears in her eyes. “One would have been quite enough. More than enough.” She rose unsteadily and went out into the hall, breathing deeply. She had seen death in Handbright’s eyes. If not now, soon. Soon. Well, she could have come more quickly. She could have interfered less in the world’s business and paid more attention to her own. She leaned against the wall, weeping, not knowing Beedie was there until she felt the strong young arms tight around her.

The birther came into the hall, her face strained and tight.

“Never mind,” said Mavin. “I know.”

“She’s asking for you,” the birther said. “She’s come to herself. She’s asked for the babies, too.”

“Well then,” Mavin responded. “Well then.”

She sat in that quiet room for the rest of the day, and most of the day following. The birthers put Handbright’s children on her breasts, though she had no milk for them yet and none of them expected that she would have. Still, she asked to have them. And Mavin. She talked of Mertyn and their mother. And died, lying quietly there with the babies in her arms.

The Birders came the next day, expecting to send Handbright’s body to the Boundless. Mavin told them it had already gone.

“What are their names?” asked Beedie, poking one of the babies with her strong, Bridger fingers to make it smile.

“Swolwys and Dolwys,” said Mavin. “Dolwys has hair that is a little darker, I think.”

“Will you let me have them?” asked Beedie, all in a rush. “Me and Roges. We decided together we’d like to have them. We’ll have some of our own, too, of course, but we’d like very much to raise Handbright’s sons.”

“No, sausage girl. You’ll have enough of your own to keep you busy. These are my own kin, my own Shifty kin, and they will need to be reared by those who understand our ways. I’ll take them with me, as soon as they are a tiny bit older and able to travel.”

“How will you carry them, Mavin? How can you manage with two?”

“I’ll manage,” she said. “I’ll figure out a way.”

It was in the summer season that the people of Battlefox the Bright Day, a Shifter demesne on the high

downs of the shadowmarches, looked out across the p'natti to see a great beast. The beast would not have been considered extraordinary by any Shifters' demesne. Shape and size and aspect are all infinitely variable in Shifters' lives, and they are not surprised by fur or wing or feather. Still, there was something surprising about this beast: the red-haired twin boys who rode upon its back.

The beast opened its mouth and bellowed, "Plandybast!" at which one of the inhabitants of Battlefox Demesne trembled with mixed apprehension and delight.

By the time he had threaded his way through the p'natti, Mavin stood there in her own shape, holding her toddlers by their hands. "Plandybast," she said. "Thalan. My mother's brother. You told me once Handbright would have been welcome at Battlefox Demesne. Tell me now that her sons are equally welcome!"

After which was a time of general rejoicing, story-telling, lying, and welcoming home. Plandybast's half sister, Itter, had left the Demesne long before and was believed dead. Mavin sighed with relief and offered polite consolation. Itter had been the one thing she had doubted about Battlefox Demesne. Now there was nothing to doubt, and even Mavin herself felt at home.

Still, in a few seasons, after the babies were accustomed to the place and had found dozens of kin to care for them, she took quiet leave of the demesne.

"Can you tell me why you're leaving us?" begged Plandybast, who had grown fond of Mavin.

"Oh, thalan, you will think it a silly thing."

"I would rather be told and think it a silly thing than think myself not worthy of being told."

"Well then, hear a tale. Some almost twenty years ago, I came with Mertyn to Pfarb Durim. He was a child, and so was I, scared as two bunwits in a bush when the fustigars howl. So, we made it up between us I would say I was a servant of a Wizard. Himaggery. Mertyn made up the name."

Plandybast nodded. "Not a bad stratagem. Wise men don't fool with Wizards, or the servants of Wizards."

“That’s what Mertyn thought. So, I told my tale, but during the next few days I came into danger and told my tale to unbelieving ears. Then came one who said, ‘This is my servant, and I am the Wizard Himaggery.’”

“Ah,” said Plandybast.

“And the end of the tale was I sworn him an oath, thalan, that in twenty years time I would come once more to the city of Pfarb Durim, to find him there.”

After a thoughtful silence, “Will you be back for Assembly?”

“Perhaps not then. But I will be back. I’ll be back for the boys when they’re old enough. I want to take them to Schlaizy Noithn myself, if they turn out to be Shifter. If they turn out to be something else—or nothing else—well, I want to decide what should be done in that event.”

“Not the Forgetter?”

“No. Not the Forgetter. We have tried to convince the world we are ... limited, thalan. So they would not fear us, or hate us. We have woven mystifications around us, and the world does not believe them. Shifters are not well liked in the wide world. That being so, why should we commit evil deeds to protect that which can’t be protected?”

“Ah, well. I don’t intend to get the demesne in an uproar raising the question now. It’ll be ten years or more before we know what Handbright’s sons will be. It may be best to take them back oversea to their father’s people.”

“Who is their father?” asked Plandybast, curious about this matter for the first time.

Mavin thought briefly she would tell him, “A glue blob in the bottommost lands of a chasm, over the sea.” Instead she contented herself with a larger truth. “A priest,” she said. “A good and kindly if

imperfect man.”

She turned when she arrived at the bend in the road beyond which the demesne dissappeared behind the hill. He was waving to her, smiling, weeping a little. Beedie had wept a little, too, and Roges, when she had left them. It was pleasant to be wept over in such kindly fashion.

And the better part of twenty years was gone since she had promised she would keep tryst in Pfarb Durim, twenty years from then.

And the better part of twenty years was gone.

“I am the servant of the Wizard Himaggery,” she hummed, remembering that refrain. “Perhaps. Almost. But not quite yet.”

THE SEARCH OF MAVIN MANYSHAPED

CHAPTER ONE

The season of storms had begun in earnest when Mavis Manyshaped rode down the Ancient Road, beneath the strange arches, toward the city of Pfarb Durim. It was almost twenty years since she had been there last; twenty years since she had promised to come there again. “The Blue Star hangs upon the horns of Zanbee,” she sang to herself, not sure she was remembering it, correctly. It was something Himaggery had said, was it? Something; Wizardry, a specific time which had to do with the season and the arches? The tall horse she rode tiptoed into the shadow of each arch with shivering skin, dancing as he came out again, and she adjusted to this fidgety movement with calm distraction. Twenty years ago they had promised to meet upon the terrace of the hotel Mudgeif Mont in the city. Looking down from this height upon the labyrinth of walls and roofs, she was not sure she could find her way to the hotel. Ah. Yes, there it was. Upon the highest part of the city, almost overlooking the cliff wall. She chirruped to the horse, urging him to stop fidgeting and move along.

Just beyond the last of the Monuments was a small inn, a dozen empty wagons scattered around it, as though parked there until the weather cleared, and a fork in the road with one branch leading down to the town. A distant rumble of thunder drew her attention to the clouds, boiling up into mountainous ramparts over the city, black as obsidian, lit from within by a rage of lightning and from the east by the morning sun. This was the weather during which the Monuments were said to dance. While it was never alleged

that they had any malevolent intent, it was true that certain travelers caught on the Ancient Road during storms arrived at Pfarb Durim in no condition to pursue their business. If they had the voice for it, and unfortunately sometimes when they did not, they tended to lie about with unfocused eyes singing long, linear melodies which expressed a voice of disturbing wind. Mavin shivered as the horse had done, encouraging him to make better speed toward the distant gates.

A few she knew of had actually seen the Monuments dance. Blourbast the Ghoul had seen, only to die moments later with Huld's dagger in his throat. Huld the Demon and Huldra, his sister-wife had seen, as had their mother, Pantiquod the Harpy. Mavin spat to get the memory of them out of her mouth. She had heard they had gone away from Hell's Maw, left that warren beneath the walls of Pfarb Durim to inhabit another demesne: Bannerwell, beside the flowing river. It was, so her informant had said, a cleaner and more acceptable site for a Gamesman of power. Kings and Sorcerers who could not be enticed to Hell's Maw for any consideration would plot freely with Huld in Bannerwell. She spat again. The memory of him fouled her mind.

Two others had seen the Monuments dance, of course; Mavin, herself, and the Wizard Himaggery. They, too, had gone away separately after promising to meet again when twenty years had passed. Now Mavin Manyshaped rode her tall horse along that Ancient Road, so lost in memory of that other time she paid little attention to the clouds towering over the city. Two decades ago there had been wild drumming in the hills, a fury of firelight, and a flood of green luminescence from the dancing arches. The murmur of present thunder and the threatening spasms of lightning merely rounded out the memory.

A challenging shout brought her to herself. A gate guard, no less fat and lazy than those who had been here long ago. "Well, woman? I asked were you bound into Pfarb Durim or content to sleep on your horse?"

"Bound in, guardsman. To Mudgery Mont."

He gave her a curious glance, saying without saying that he thought her a strange guest for the Mont. Most of those who stayed there came with retinues of servants or with considerable panoply. She gave him a quirky smile to let him know she read his thought, and he flushed slightly as he turned away. "Go then. The gates are open to all who have business within."

As indeed they always were, she reflected. There was no city in all the lands of the True Game so open, not even Betand, which was a crossroad itself. And, as in other of the commercial cities of the land, there was little large scale Game—though much small scale stuff, Games of two, family duels and the like—and a minimum of Game dress. Helmed Tragamors could be seen around the inns and hotels. Even here guards were often needed. A gaudy band of Afrits entered the square as she crossed it, bound away south, no doubt, to the Great Game lately called in the valley land beside Lake Yost, in the midland.

Everyone had heard of that; the first Great Game in a decade and half. The Gamesmen in the land headed to it or from it, as their own needs struck them.

The streets were shrill with hawkers, bright with banners, alive with a smell she remembered, rich and complex, made of fruit both rotted and fresh, smoked meats, hides, the stink of the great cressets upon the wall full of grease-soaked wood. The pawnish people of Pfarb Durim had a distinctive dress; full black trousers thrust down into openwork boots (which let the dust and grit of the road sift in and out while somewhat hiding the dirty feet which resulted) and brilliantly colored full shirts with great billowy sleeves. The women belted these garments with an assortment of sashes and chains, topping all off with an intricately folded headdress; the men used simple leather belts and tall leather hats. Both sexes fluttered like lines full of bright laundry or a whole festival of pennants, and were shrill as birds with their cries and arguments. The tall horse picked his way through this riot fastidiously, ears forward, seeming interested in all that went on around him.

As she came farther into the city, the noise quieted, the smell dwindled, until, between the rumbles of thunder, she could hear the wind chimes and smell the flowers in the Mont gardens. The courtyard wall was surmounted with huge stone urns spilling blossoms down the inner wall where a dozen boys plied wet brooms to settle the dust, though by the look of the sky this task would soon prove redundant. The Heralds at the entry looked up incuriously, and then returned to their game of dice, dismissing her in that one weighing glance. "Of no importance," their eyes said. Mavin agreed with their assessment, content to have it so.

A liveried stableman came to take the horse, and she let him go thankfully. It was no easy matter to ride upon another's four legs where she could go easier upon her own. But Shifters were not always welcome guests, not even among Gamesmen notable in treachery and double dealing, so she came discreetly to the Mont, clad in softly anonymous clothing of sufficient quality to guarantee respect without stirring avarice or curiosity.

Now, she thought, I will meet him as I promised, and we will see. What it was she would see she had not identified. What it was she would feel, she had carefully avoided thinking of. Each time her mind had approached the thought it had turned aside, and she had let it turn, riding it as she might a willful steed, letting it have its own way for a time, until it grew accustomed to her—or she to it. She went into the place, shaking her head at the man who would have taken her cloak, wandering through the rich reception halls toward the terrace she remembered. It lay at the back, over the gardens which stretched down to the cliff edge and the protecting wall, bright under their massed trees, their ornamental lanterns. The door was as she remembered it, opened before her by a bowing flunkey—

And she stood upon the terrace, shaken like a young tree in a great storm.

“Gameswoman?” She didn’t hear him. “Gameswoman. Are you well? A chair, Madam? May I bring you something to drink?” Evidently she had nodded, for he raced away, stopping to say something to some senior servant at the doorway, for that one turned to look at her curiously. She took a deep breath, grasped at her reason with her whole mind.

“Come now, Mavin,” she said to herself in a stern, internal voice seldom used, always heeded. “This is senseless, dangerous, unlike you. Sit down. Take a deep breath. Look about you, slowly, calmly. Think what you will say when he returns, how you will set his curiosity aside. Now. He is coming. Careful, quiet.”

He set the glass of wineghost before her and she took it into her hand, smiling her thanks. “I was here last many years ago at the time of the great plague,” she said in a voice of calm remembrance. “It was a tragic time. We lost many dear to us. The memory caught me suddenly and by surprise. You are too young to remember.” She smiled again, paid him generously, and waved him away.

At the door he spoke once more to the other man, shaking his head. The other man nodded, said something with a serious face, but did not look in her direction. So. All was explained. All was calm. She sipped at the wineghost, staying alert. No one was interested in her. The few on the terrace were talking with one another or—admiring the gardens or simply sitting, looking at nothing as they soaked the last of the morning sun slanting below the gathering clouds. Was Himaggery among them? Had he seen her come out without knowing her?

She examined the others carefully, one by one, discarding each as a possibility. She knew what he would look like, had visualized him many times. And yet—could it be that plumpish fellow by the wall? Perhaps it was. Her stomach knotted. Surely not. Not. No. He had turned toward her with his purseymouth and heavy-lidded eyes. Not Himaggery.

One of the men by the stairs, perhaps? The tall, martial-looking man? “Silly,” she said to herself. “He has a Sorcerer’s crown. Himaggery, if he wore Gamesman’s garb at all, would wear Wizard’s robes.” She finished the wineghost, stood up abruptly and left the terrace. She had been so sure that he would be here when she arrived, so sure. So certain.

Inside she dithered for a moment. She could wander about the place, spend half a day doing it, without knowing whether he was here or not. There was a simpler way.

“Your title?” demanded the porter, officiously blocking the door of his cubby. “Your title?”

“If there is a message for me,” she said, “it will be addressed simply to Mavin. I am Mavin, and my title is my own business.”

He became immediately obsequious, turning to burrow in the un-tidy closet among papers and packages, some of them covered with the dust of years. It was obvious that nothing was ever thrown away on the Mont. She was ready with significant coin when he emerged, the sealed missive in his hand. “Who brought it?” she asked.

His eyes were on the coin as he furrowed his face, trying to remember. “A pawn, Gameswoman. A lean, long man in a decent suit of dark clothes. Many lines in his face. A very sad face, he had. The air of a personal servant about him. He did not stay at the Mont, you understand. He just left the message with me, along with the payment for its safe keeping and delivery.” He looked at the coin once more, his expression saying that the previous payment could not have been considered sufficient by any reasonable person. She flipped it to him, left him groveling for it in the dusty closet as she turned the packet in her hands. So. Not Himaggery. A message delivered by a man who could only be Johnathon Went, old Windlow’s man. Windlow. Himaggery’s teacher. Himaggery’s friend. The last of the morning light had gone and rain was falling outside. She found a quiet corner in one of the reception rooms, behind a heavy drapery which held away the cold. The note in the tough parchment envelope was not long.

“Mavin, my dear,” it said. “I have no doubt you will be in Pfarb Durim, faithful to your promise. Himaggery will be there, too, if he can. If he is not, it is because he cannot, in which case you are to have the message enclosed. Over the years, each time he has left me to go on one of his expeditions he has left a letter with me for you. This one was left eight years ago. I am sending someone with further information. Please await my messenger upon the Ancient Road—where the Monuments danced ...

“I think of you often and kindly. My affectionate regard.

“Windlow.”

It was sealed with Windlow’s seal. Another letter lay within.

She stuffed them both into the pocket of her cloak, rose abruptly and went out into the courtyard, shouting for her horse, though the threatened rain had begun. When he was brought to her, she mounted without word and clattered through the city, almost riding through the guards at the gate. The rain had become a downpour and the roadway ran with water, but she urged the horse into a splashing canter up

the hill toward the crossroad. She would not, could not have stayed in Pfarb Durim another moment. The city seemed to swallow her. She needed a smaller scope, with trustworthy walls around her.

The tiny inn ghosted into existence through the slanting knives of rain. She shouted to bring a stable boy out of the barn; his mouth was half full of his lunch. Inside the inn she found a room, acceptably clean though sparsely furnished, with a fire ready laid upon the hearth. Food was brought, and beer, and then the kitchen girl was gone, the door shut behind her, and Mavin sat beside the fire with the unopened letter in her hand.

“Well,” she said. “Well and well. So all this hurry was for nothing, Himaggery. All this long ride from Schlaizy Noithn, this Shifting into acceptable form with an acceptable face and acceptable clothing. All for nothing. Nothing.” Her thumb nail moved beneath the seal. It broke from the paper with a brittle snap, flying into the fire to sizzle upon the wood, hissing like a snale. “For nothing?” she said again, opening the page.

Mavin, my love:

Though I have called you my love often in these past seasons, you have never heard me. If you read this, the chance is great that this is the only time you will ever hear me.

I am going into the Northlands tomorrow, first to see the High Wizard Chamferton—who, I am told, knows much of the true origins and beginnings of things which have always intrigued me—and then farther north into places which are rumored often but seldom charted. There is a legend—well, you probably are not much interested in such things. If you were here now, Mavin, I would not be interested in them either.

Since it is not likely you will read this—I have been, after all, fairly successful at looking after myself for some dozen years—I will allow me to say the things I could not say to you if you were here for fear of frightening you, sending you off in one shape or another, fleeing from me as you fled from Pfarb Durim so long ago. I will say that you have been with me each morning and each night of the time between, in every branch which has broken the sky to let sunlight through, in every deep-eyed animal I have caught peering at me in the forests, in each bird cry, each tumult of thunder. I will say that the thought of you has held me safe in times of danger, held me soft in times of hardship, held me gently when I would have been more brutal than was wise or fair.

Mavin, if I am gone, treasure how deeply I loved you, how faithfully, how joyously. Live well.

Yours as long as I lived,

Himaggery.

She sat as one frozen into stone, eyes fixed on nothing, the room invisible around her. So she sat while the food chilled and the fire died; so she sat until the room grew cold. “Ah, Himaggery,” she said at last. “Why have you laid this on me, and you not here.”

She rode out at dawn, spending the day upon the Ancient Road, waiting for Windlow’s messenger. That day she did not eat, nor that night. The next day she ate something, though without appetite, and stayed again upon the road. The third day she told herself would be the last. If Windlow’s messenger did not come, then no messenger would come, and she would ride south to Tarnoch to talk with Windlow himself.

So for this last day she sat upon the tall horse as he fidgeted beneath her, sidling in and out of the shadows once more. “Be still, horse,” she said, patting him without thinking. “We are waiting for a messenger.”

The horse did not care. He had waited for three days and was not interested in waiting more. He jumped, hopped, shook his head violently until the links upon the bridle rang and jingled.

She dismounted with a sigh and led him upon the new grass of the hill. “Here then. Eat grass. Founder upon it. I’ll not sit on your twitchiness longer.”

She stretched her arms toward the threatening sky, shifting her ribs experimentally around the soreness remaining from the long ride east. She had left Battlefox Demesne last year, had spent the intervening seasons in Schlaizy Noithn—trying, without success, to remedy an unpleasantness in that tricky land—and had come out not long ago to Shift into her own shape and equip herself for the journey. So, horse legs instead of her own legs; real clothing instead of mere Shifting; her own face instead of the grotesqueries she had used lately. There was nothing Shifty about her now, nothing to betray her except the quivering Shifter organ deep within her which would announce the presence of another of her kind.

As it did now.

She crouched, ready to assume fangs and claws if needed for her own defense. There was no one on the road in either direction. She searched the dark forest from which a questioning howl rose, abruptly broken off, and her teeth lengthened slightly and her feet dug into the soil. The plump fustigar which trotted from the trees did not threaten her, however. It sat down a good distance from her, peering about itself with attention to the road and the surrounding thickets, then Shifted into a woman's shape clad much as Mavin was in tight breeches and boots.

"Mavin Manyshaped?" the woman said, beating the dust from her trousers. "I am Throsset of Dowes, and I come from the Seer Windlow."

Mavin's mouth dropped open. Throsset of Dowes? From Danderbat Keep? Mavin's own childhood home? Such as it had been. Well and well.

"Throsset of Dowes?" she asked wonderingly. "Would you remember Handbright of Danderbat Keep?"

The woman grinned. She was a stocky person with short, graying hair, bushy dark brows and eyes which protruded a little, giving her the look of a curious frog. Her shoulders were broad and square, and she shrugged them now, making an equivocal gesture. "Your sister, Handbright! Of course. She was younger than I. I tried to convince her to come with me, when I left the keep. She would not leave Danderbat the Old Shuffle."

"They said you were in love with a Demon, that you went across the seas with your lover."

The woman frowned, her face becoming suddenly distrustful. "The Danderbats said that, did they? Well, they'll say anything, those old ones. Likely Gormier said that. Or old Halfmad. Or others like them. I left, girl. So did you. It's likely we left for the same reasons, and lovers had no part in it."

"It was Handbright told me, not the old ones." Mavin felt an old anger, for Handbright, for herself.

"Ah." Throsset's voice turned cold, but her mouth looked tired. "She had to believe something, Mavin. She couldn't allow herself to believe that I simply went, that I got fed up with it and left. Girls of the Xhindi aren't supposed to do that, you know. We're supposed to be biddable—at least until we've had

three or four childer to strengthen the keep. Well, it would be better to say the truth. I am not only Shifter, Mavin. When I was sixteen or so, one of the old ones tried something I didn't care for, and I found a new Talent. It seems I had Shifter and Sorcerer Talent both, and the Danderbats didn't know how to handle that. One Talent more and I'd have been a Dervish, and time was I longed for it, just to teach them a lesson. Still, there's no basket discipline will hold a wary Sorcerer, though they tried it, surely enough. I burst the basket and the room, and then I left. I'm sorry Handbright didn't go with me. How is she now?"

"Dead," said Mavin flatly, not caring to soften it.

"Dead!" The woman slapped at her legs, hands going on of themselves, without thought, as though they might brush the years away with the dust. "I hadn't heard. But then, I haven't been back to Danderbat Keep."

"They wouldn't have been able to tell you had you gone there. She died far away, across the western sea. She was mad—until the very end. She had two sons, twins. They're fifteen-season childer now, five years old, at Battlefox Demesne, with Handbright's thalan and mine, Plandybast Ogbone."

"So she did leave Danderbat at last. Ah, girl, believe me, I did try to get her to go with me. She said she stayed for your sake, and for Mertyn's. She loved him more than most sisters love their boy-kin. I could not break her loose."

Seeing the distress in the woman's face, Mavin tried to set aside her own remembered anger and to dissipate the chilliness which was growing between them. Handbright's servitude and abuse had not been Mavin's fault, or Throsset's. "Mertyn made her stay," she said sadly. "He had Beguilement Talent even then, and he used it to keep her there because he was afraid she would leave him. He was only a child. He did not know what pain it cost her. Well. That is all long gone, Throsset. Long gone. Done. Mertyn is a man now. Though his Talent was early, it has continued to grow. He is a King, I hear. Lately appointed Gamesmaster in some school or other."

"Windlow said to tell you he is in Schooltown." The woman stopped brushing dust and frowned. "Look, Mavin, I have traveled a distance and this is a high cold hill. There is threat of rain. I have not eaten today and the city lies close below ..."

"We need not go so far as the city. There's an inn at the fork of the road, called The Arches. I have a room there." She lifted herself into the saddle. "Come up with me. This twitchy horse can carry double the short way." The woman grasped her arm and swung up behind her, the horse shying as he felt two

sets of knees Shift tight around him. Deciding that obedience would be the most sensible thing, he turned quietly toward the road, going peaceably beneath each of the arches as he came to it with only a tiny twitch of skin along his flanks. The women rode in silence, both of them distressed at the meeting, for it raised old hurts and doubts to confront them.

It was not until they were seated before a small fire in a side room at the inn, cups of hot tea laced with wineghost half empty before them, that old sorrow gave way to new curiosity. Then they began to talk more freely, and Mavin found herself warming to the woman as she had not done to many others.

“How come you to be messenger for Windlow? A Shifter? He was Gamesmaster of the school at Tarnoch, under the protection of the High King. I would have thought he would send a Herald.”

“I doubt he could have found a Herald to act for him. Windlow has little authority in the Demesne of the High King Prionde. Did you know the High King’s son? Valdon?” Mavin shuddered. Memories of that time—particularly of Valdon or Huld or Blourbast—still had the power to terrify her, if only for the moment.

“I met him, yes. It was long ago. He was little more than a boy. About nineteen? Full of vicious temper and arrogance. Yes. And his little brother, Boldery, who was a little older than Mertyn.”

“Then if you met him it will not surprise you to know that Valdon refused to be schooled by Windlow. His pride would not allow him to be corrected, so says Windlow, and he could not bear restraint. He announced as much to the King, his father, and was allowed license to remain untaught.”

Mavin had observed much of Valdon’s prideful hostility when she had been in Pfarb Durim before. “But he wasn’t the only student!” she objected. “Windlow had set up the school under the patronage of King Prionde, true, but there were many other boys involved. Some were thalans of most powerful Gamesmen.”

“Exactly. You have hit upon the situation. Prionde could not destroy the school without hurting his own reputation. He could let it dwindle, however, and so he has done. Windlow is now alone in the school except for the servants and two or three boys, none of them of important families. Since Himaggery left, his only source of succor is through Boldery, for the child grew to love him and remains faithful, despite all Valdon’s fulminations. Valdon is a Prince of easy hatreds and casual vengeance. A dangerous man.”

Mavin twisted her mouth into a sceptical line. "Fellow Shifter, I sorrow to hear that the old man is not honored as he should be, and I am confirmed in my former opinion of Valdron, but Windlow has not sent you all this way from the high lakes at Tarnoch to tell me of such things."

Throsset gulped a mouthful of cooling tea and shook her head. "Of course not. I owed the old man many things. He asked me to come to you as a favor, because I am Shifter from Danderbat Keep, and you are Shifter from Danderbat Keep, and he believed you would trust my word ..."

"Trust you because we are both from Danderbat Keep!" Mavin could not keep the astonishment from her voice.

Throsset made a grimace. "Unless you told him, what would he know about the lack of trust and affection in Danderbat Keep? That wasn't what he was thinking of, in any case. He asked me because we were both women there. That old man understands much, Mavin. I think you may have told him more about yourself than you realized, and I certainly told him more than I have told anyone else. He senses things, too. Things that most Gamesmen simply ignore. No, Windlow didn't send me to tell you of his own misfortune. He sent me to bring to you everything he knows about Himaggery—where he went, where he might be."

"But he is dead!" Mavin cried, her voice breaking.

"Hush your shouting," commanded Throsset in a hissing whisper. "It is your business, perhaps our business, but not the business of the innkeeper and every traveler on the road. He is not dead. Windlow says no!"

"Not dead? And yet gone for eight years, and I only hear of it now!"

"Of course now. How could you have heard of it earlier? Did Windlow know where you were? Did you send regular messengers to inform him?" Throsset was good-natured but scornful. "Of course, now."

"He is a Seer," Marvin said sullenly, aware of her lack of logic.

"Poof. Seers. Sometimes they know everything about something no one cares about. Often they know

nothing about something important. Windlow himself says that. He knows where Himaggery set out to go eight years ago; he Sees very little about where he may be now.”

“Eight years!”

“It seems a long time to me, too.”

“Eight years. Eight years ago—I was ... where was I?” She fell silent, thinking, then flushed a brilliant red which went unnoticed in the rosy firelight. Eight years ago she had wandered near the shadowmarches, had found herself in a pool-laced forest so perfect that it had summoned her to take a certain shape within it, the shape of a slender, single-horned beast with golden hooves. And then there had been another of the same kind, a male. And they two ... they two ... Ah. It was only a romantic, erotic memory, an experience so glorious that she had refused to have any other such for fear it would fail in comparison. Whenever she remembered it, she grieved anew at the loss, and even now she grieved to remember what had been then and was no more. She shook her head, tried to clear it, to think only of this new hope that perhaps Himaggery still lived. “Eight years. Where did he set out for, that long ago?”

“He set out to meet with the High Wizard Chamferton.”

“I know that much; his letter said that much. But why? Himmagery was Wizard himself. Why would he seek another?”

Throsset rose to sidle through the narrow door into the commons room in the inn where she ordered another pot of tea. She came into the room carrying a second flask of wineghost, peeling at the wax on the cork with her teeth. “Two more cups of this and I’ll be past the need for food and fit only for bed. Don’t you every get hungry?”

Mavin made an irritated gesture. It was no time to think of food, but her stomach gurgled in that instant, brought to full attention by Throsset’s words. The woman laughed. When the boy came in with the tea, Throsset ordered food to be prepared, then settled before the fire once more.

“You asked why he sought another Wizard. I asked the same question of Windlow. He told me a tale of old Monuments that danced, of ancient things which stir and rumble at the edges of the lands of the True Game. He told me of a time, perhaps sixty years ago or so, when great destruction was wrought upon the lands, and he said it was not the first time. He had very ancient books which spoke of another time,

so long ago it is past all memory, when people were driven from one place to another, when the beasts of this world assembled against them. He spoke of roads and towers and bells, of shadows and rolling stars. Mysteries, he said, which intrigued Himaggery and sent him seeking. Old Chamferon was said to know something about these ancient mysteries.”

Mavin tilted her head, considering this. “I have heard of at least one such time,” she said. “Across the seas there is a land which suffered such a cataclysm a thousand years ago. The people were driven down into a great chasm by beasts which came suddenly, from nowhere.”

“Stories of that kind fascinated Himaggery,” Throsset mused, “as they do me. Oh, we heard them as children, Mavin! Talking animals and magical rings. Swords and jewels and enchanted maidens. Himaggery collected such tales, says Windlow. He traveled all about the countryside staying in old inns, asking old pawnish granddads what stories they remembered from the time before our ancestors came from the north.”

“You say our ancestors came from the north? In Schlaizy Noithnj I have heard it rumored we came from beneath the mountains! And across the seas, in the chasm of which I spoke earlier, the priests say the Boundless—that being their name for their god—set them in their chasm.”

Throsset turned up her hands, broadening the gesture to embrace the space near the table as the boy came into the room with their food. “Ah. Set it here, boy, and bring another dish of that sauce. This isn’t enough for two! Good. Smell that, Mavin? Cookery like this always reminds me of Assembly time at Danderbat Keep.”

Mavin did not want to remember Assembly time at Danderbat Keep. “The food was the best part of it,” she remarked in a dry tone of recollection.

“It was that,” Throsset agreed around a mouthful. “But we have enough sad memories between us without dragging them out into the light. They do not grow in the dark, I think, so much as they do when well aired and fertilized with tears.”

Mavin agreed. “Very well, Kinswoman, I will not dwell on old troubles. We are here now, not at the Keep, and it is here we will think of. Now, you tell me Himaggery had heard all these tales of ancient things. I can tell you, for you are in Windlow’s confidence, that Himaggery himself saw those arches dance, those Monuments where we met today; and so did I—Yes! If you could see your face, Throsset. You obviously disbelieve me. You don’t trust my account for a moment, but it’s true nonetheless. Some future time, I’ll tell you all about it if you like—Well, I saw the arches dance, but afterward I was willing

to leave it at that, perhaps to remember it from time to time, but not to tease at it and tear at it. Not Himaggery! Himaggery had a mind full of little tentacles and claws, reaching, always reaching. He was never willing to leave anything alone until he understood it.

“Strange are the Talents of Wizards, so it’s said, and strange are the ways they think. Once he had seen, he couldn’t have left it alone, not for a moment. He’d have been after it like a gobble-mole with a worm, holding on, stretching it out longer and longer until it popped out of its hole. And if he heard the High Wizard Chamferton knew anything—well then, off he’d go, I suppose.” She felt uneasy tears welling up.

Throsset confirmed this. “Yes, he heard it said that Chamferton knew about the mysteries of our past and the past of the world and ancient things in general. So. He went off to see Chamferton, and he did not come back.”

“But Windlow knows he is not dead?”

“Windlow knows Himaggery lives.”

“Not mere wishful thinking?” Mavin turned away from the firelight and rubbed her eyes, suddenly a little hopeful, yet still hesitant to accept it. “Windlow must be getting very old.”

“About eighty-five, I should say. He is remarkably active still. No. He says that Gamesmen, often the finest and the best of them, do disappear from time to time into a kind of nothingness from which the Necromancers cannot raise them, into an oblivion, leaving no trace. But Himaggery’s disappearance is not of that kind.”

“How does he know?”

“For many years, Windlow has been collecting old books. He sends finders out to locate them and get them by beggary, barter, or theft, so he says. During the last several years he has asked these finders to search for Himaggery also. Some of them returned to say they felt Himaggery’s presence, have sought and sought, felt it still, but were unable to find him. And this is not old information; a Rancelman came back with some such tale only a few days before I left there.”

“So Windlow has sent you to tell me Himaggery is not dead but vanished and none of the Pursuivants or Rancelmen can find him.” Mavin said this flatly as she wiped sauce from her chin, keeping both her voice and her body still and unresponsive. The tears were in abeyance for the moment, and she would not acknowledge them. It would do no good to weep over her food while Throsset chewed and swallowed and cast curious glances at her over the edge of her cup. It would do no good until she could think of something else to do besides weeping. Despite her hunger, the food lay inside her like stone.

She pushed the plate away, suddenly nauseated. The firelight made a liquid swimming at the corners of her eyes.

“Tush,” mourned Throsset. “You’re not enjoying your dinner at all. Cry if you like! We don’t make solemn vows over twenty years unless there is something to it besides moon madness. Was he your lover?” She shook her head, tears spilling down her face in an unheeded flood, dripping from her chin onto her clenched hands. Her throat closed as in a vice, almost as it had done when she had read his letter.

Throsset got up and closed the door, leaning a chair against it. Then she walked around the room, saying nothing, while Mavin brought herself to a gulping silence. When that time came, she brought a towel and dipped it into the pitcher on the table. “Here. Wash the tears away before they begin to itch. You have a puddle on your breeches. They’ll think you’ve wet yourself. Come to the fire and dry it. Now, you don’t need any more wineghost, that’s certain. It won’t cure tears. Take some of the tea for your throat. You’ll have cried yourself hoarse ...”

After a time, Mavin could speak again. “I am not much of a weeper, Throsset. I have not wept for many years, even when I have made others weep. I don’t really know why I’m doing it now. No, Himaggery and I weren’t lovers. We could have been. I was very much ... desirous of him. But I kept him from it, kept me from it. I did not want that, not then. There was too much of servitude in it, too much of Danderbat Keep.”

The woman nodded. “Anyone who grew up in Danderbat Keep would understand that. Still, there was something between you, whether you let anything actually happen or not.” She took the towel and wrung it out before handing it to Mavin once more. “Windlow told me of some joke between you and Himaggery. That Himaggery was not his true name at all, that you had made up the name.”

“Mertyn and I made it up on our trip north from Danderbat Keep. To avoid being bothered by child stealers and pawnors, I was to say that I was the servant of the Wizard Himaggery—which was a name we invented—and that he, Mertyn, was thalan to the Wizard. In this way, we hoped to avoid trouble or Gaming as we traveled north. For a time it worked. Then we were accused of lying—accused by Huld.” She shivered, remembering the malevolence in that Demon’s voice and manner.

“And then this casual young man came into the room saying the accusation was nonsense; that he was himself the Wizard Himaggery and that I, Mavin, was indeed his servant. And so the threat passed. Afterward, he said he would keep the name. I thought at the time it suited him better than his own.”

“And that was all that passed between you?”

“That. And a night together on a hillside among the shadowpeople. And a few hours in Pfarb Durim at the hotel Mudgery Mont when the plague and the battle and the crisis were all over. And a promise.”

“And yet you wept ...”

“And yet I wept. Perhaps the weeping was for many things. For Handbright, because you knew her. And for the young Throsset of Dowes as well. For old Windlow, perhaps, who has not received the honors he deserves. And for me and the eight years I have wandered the world not knowing Himaggery was gone. I had imagined him, you know, many times, as he would look when I met him again at last. I saw his face, clearly as in a mirror. It is almost as though I had known him during these years, been with him. When I rode to Pfarb Durim, I knew how familiar he would look to me, even after all this time ...” She wiped her face one final time, then folded the towel and placed it on the table near her half-emptied plate. “Well. I am wept out now. And I know there must be more to this than you have told me. Windlow could have put this in the same letter he sent to Mudgery Mont.”

“He could,” agreed Throsset, piling the dishes to one side before returning to her cup. “He could. Yes. He did not, for various reasons. First, there are always those who read letters who have no business reading them. Particularly in Pfarb Durim. Huld still has great influence there, I understand, and every second person in the city is involved in gathering information for him.”

“That’s true. Though I was told at Mudgery Moht that Huld repented of Blourbast’s reputation and will stay in Bannerwell from now on.”

“No matter where he stays, spies who work for him will still sneak a look at other people’s letters. In addition, however, there are those abroad in the world who have no love for Himaggery. I speak now of Valdron. Windlow did not tell me the source of the enmity. Perhaps he does not even know. But Windlow would put nothing in writing which might be used to harm him.

“In any case, that was not the main reason Windlow sent me. He says he had a vision, years ago, when you were all here before, in which he saw you and Himaggery together in Pfarb Durim. Somehow in the vision he knew that twenty years had passed. So, says Windlow, if Himaggery is to come here again and the vision to be fulfilled, then you, Mavin, must be involved in it.”

“He wants me to go searching, does he?”

“He thinks you will. He never said what he wanted.”

Mavin made a rather sour smile, thinking of the leagues she had traveled since her girlhood. “I spent fifteen years searching for Handbright, did you know that? No, of course you didn’t. I could have done it in less time. I might have saved her life if I had been quicker. When that search was done, I was glad it was over. I am not a Pursuivant who takes pleasure in the chase, Throsset. My experience is that searching is weary work. I don’t know what I will do, Kinswoman. As you say, we were not lovers.”

“Still, you made a promise.”

“To meet him here. Not to find him and bring him here.”

“Still, a promise ... well. It is no part of my duty to chivvy you one way or the other. Only you know what passed between the two of you long ago and whether it was enough to send you on this journey. Only you know why you have been crying as though your heart would break. I have done as I promised the old Seer I would do—brought you word. No. I have not done entirely. He sent a map of the lands where the High Wizard Chamferton dwells, if indeed he dwells there still. It is a copy of the one Himaggery took with him. It is here on the table.”

“Are you leaving? So soon?”

“No. I am taking a room in this place for the night, unless you will let me share yours. Whichever, I will go there now to sleep. Which you should do, unless you are determined to linger by the fire and think deep thoughts. If I thought I could help you, I would offer to do so, for long ago I cared about Handbright. Cared for her, foiled her. There should have been something more I could have done, but at the time I thought I had done everything.” She stared into the fire herself, obviously thinking deep

thoughts of her own.

Marvin, curious, asked, "Is there a name for this combination of Talents you have, Throsset? I have gone over and over what little I know of the Index, and I cannot remember what Gamesname you should be called."

Throsset flushed. "There is a name, Mavin. I would prefer to be called simply Shifter, if you must call me. Or Sorcerer, if Shifter is not enough. I sometimes think those anonymous ancestors who made up the Index suffered from an excess of humor. Their name for one of my Talents is not one I choose to bear. Well. No matter what I might have called myself, Handbright would not hear me when I spoke to her. You have not said how it was she left at last."

Mavin murmured a few words about the lateness of the hour, indicating she did not want to talk about it then. The thought of Handbright saddened her always, and she was sad enough at the moment over other things. Throsset nodded in return, signifying that another time would do. The time did not come, however. When Mavin woke in the morning, the bed beside her was empty and Throsset was gone. The map lay on a chest beside the door. The innkeeper said the account had been paid.

Outside in the stableyard Mavin's tall horse whickered, and after a time of thought Mavin sold him to the innkeeper. Somehow in the deep night the matter had become decided, and she needed no flesh but her own to carry her to whatever place Himaggery had gone.

CHAPTER TWO

There was a note attached to the map with a silver pin. "Mavin, my dear child, this is a copy of the map Himaggery and I made up before he left. Most of the information is from some old books I had, but we got one or two things from some recent charts made by Yggery, the Mapmaker in Xammer. Himaggery was to go first to Chamferton, who is reputed to have access to an old library. If you decide to go looking for Himaggery, there is no point in coming here. Everything I know is on the map or Throsset will have told you. I hope you will want to go after him. I would do so if these aging legs would carry me, for he is very dear to me." It was signed with Windlow's seal, and she stood staring at it for a very long time.

She bought a few provisions from the Arches, more for appearance's sake than anything else. It was better to let those who saw her upon the road, those who might speak of her to others, think she had had to sell the horse to buy food than that they know her for a Shifter who could live off the countryside as well as any pombi or fustigar. Shifters were not highly regarded in the world of the True Game, not by Gamesmen or pawns, and there was recurrent unpleasantness to remind her of it. Better to be merely

another anonymous person and wait until she was out of sight of the inn before Shifting into a long-legged form in which she could run all day without weariness—in which she had run day after day in Schlaizy Noithn.

According to the map, the High Wizard Chamferton dwelt in the Dorbor Range, east of the shadowmarches, in a long canyon which led from the cliffs above the Lake of Faces northward among the mountains. Mavin knew her way to the shadowmarches well enough. She had traveled there before; to Battlefox the Bright Day, where her own kin lived in a Shifters' demesne; to the lands of the shadowpeople where Proom lived with his tribe, wide-eared and bright-fanged, singing their way through the wide world and laughing at everything; to Ganver's Grave, the place of the Eesties, or Eestnies as some called them; to that enchanted, pool-laced valley she remembered in her dreams where the two fabulous beasts had lain together in beds of fragrant moss. North. The location did not surprise her. If she had been told to seek out knowledge of ancient things, northward is the way she would have gone. Still, the paths she knew would not help her in coming to Chamferton. She had not been that route before.

Bidding a polite farewell to the innkeeper she stepped onto the road and walked northward on it. The night's storm had given way to a morning of pale wet light and steamy green herbage dotted with flowers. Far to the west she could see Cagihiggy Creek in a plaze of webwillow, yellow as morning. It was calming to walk, stride on stride, aware of the day without worrying where night would find her. She yawned widely as she turned aside from the road onto the wooded slope of the hills.

She was now a little east of Pfarb Durim, ready to run in fustigar shape along these eastern hills until she came some distance north of Hell's Maw. Having walked into that labyrinth once, she had no desire to see it or smell it again. Once she was for enough north, she would climb down the cliff in order to reach the Lake of the Faces, a new feature upon the maps, created, so it was said, only within recent years. She had a mind to see it, to learn if what was said of it was true, though half her mind mocked the rest of her with believing such wild tales. Still, there would be no time wasted. The Lake of Faces lay in the valley below the entrance to the canyon where the Demesne of the High Wizard Chamferton would be found. She felt the map, tightly folded in her pocket. Once she abandoned her clothing, she would make a pocket in her hide for it.

Soon she was lost among the trees, invisible to any eyes except small wild ones peering from high branches or hidey holes among the roots. Keeping only the little leather bags which held her supply of coin, she put her clothing into a hollow tree, the boots dropping against the trunk with a satisfying clunk. Fur crept over her limbs, sensuously, slowly, so she could feel the tickling emergence of it; bones flexed and bent into new configurations. She dropped to all fours, set eyes and nose to see and hear the world in a way her own form could never do. A bunwit flashed away among the bushes, frightened out of its few wits by this sudden appearance of a fustigar. Mavin licked her nose with a wet tongue and loped away to the north. A bunwit like that one would make her supper, and she would not necessarily feel the need to cook it.

Dark came early, but she did not stop until she had reached the edge of the cliff and crawled down it in a spidery bundle of legs and claws. Once at the bottom she could smell water and hear many trickling fells, thin and musical in the dark. A shaving of moon lit the Lake of Faces and made silver streamers of the water dropping into it from the cliffs above. The spider shape yawned, Shifted; the fustigar yawned, Shifted. Mavin stood in her own shape upon the shore, ivory in the cool night. She scratched. Whatever shape one Shifted into, the skin stayed on the outside and all the dirt of the road stayed on it. The water welcomed her as she slid beneath its surface, relishing its chill caress.

The lake had been so inviting she had taken no time to look around her. Now, floating on her back with her hair streaming below her like black water weed in the moonlight, she began to see the Faces.

White poles emerged from shadow as she peered into the dark, an army of them in scattered batallions on the shore, in the shallows, marching out into the fringes of the forest. One such stood close beside her, and she clung to it, measuring it with hands which would not quite reach around it, finger to finger, thumb to thumb. She lay on the water and thrust herself away from the pole so she could look up into the face at its top, white as ivory, blind-eyed, close-lipped, its scalp resting upon the top of the pole, a thin strap extending from ear to ear behind the pole and nailed there with a silver spike.

It was a woman's face, a mature woman, not thin, not lovely but handsome. The face had no hair, only the smooth curve as of a shaved skull, pale as bleached bone.

Though it seemed no more alive than a statue and was no more real, it troubled her. She swam away a little, found another of the white posts and confronted a man's face, weak-jawed and petulant-looking, the blind eyes gleaming with reflected light. The moon had come higher, making the pale poles stand out against the dark of the forested cliffs like a regiment of ghosts.

From high above the cliffs, a scream shattered the silence; the harsh, predatory cry of some huge bird. Mavin looked up to see two winged blots circling down toward the lake. Shifting herself, she sank beneath the waters to peer at them with protruding, froglike eyes.

Harpies! She edged upward, let her ears rest above the water in the shadow of the pole, drawn by something familiar in the cry. Yes. Though she had not heard that voice for twenty years, she could not mistake it. One of the descending forms was Pantiquod—Pantiquod who had brought the plague to Pfarb Durim, who had almost killed Mertyn, who should have been far to the south at Bannerwell with her evil children—screaming a welcome to another child.

“Well met, daughter! I thought to find you during new moon at the Lake of Faces. And here you are, at

old Chamferon's oracle. Does he send you still to question the Faces?"

The voice in reply was as harsh, as metallic, with an undertone of wild laughter in it. "Pantiquod, mother-bird, I had begun to think you too old to take shape. What brings you?" The two settled upon the shore, folding their wings to stalk about on high, stork legs, bare pendulous breasts gleaming in the moonlight. Mavin became aware of a smell, a poultry house stink, chemical and acrid. Shifting her eyes to gather more light, she saw that the shore among the poles was littered with Harpy droppings, white as the masks themselves.

"Not too old, daughter. Too lazy, perhaps. Since Blourbast is dead, I have luxuriated with no need to Game or bestir myself."

"And how are my half sister and brother," the younger Harpy cried, voice dripping venom. "The lovely Huldra, the lovelier Huld?"

"Well enough, daughter. Well enough, since Huldra bore a son, Mandor, she has had little to do with Huld. She hates him, and he her, and both me and I both. I do not let it trouble me. I stay with them for the power and the servants and the comfort. In the caves beneath Bannerwell there is much pleasure to be had."

"I can imagine. Years of such pleasure you've had already. More years than I can remember, yet never a word from you since Blourbast died. Why now, mama? Why now, loathsome chicken?" And she cawed with wild laughter, at some joke which Pantiquod shared, for the older Harpy shrilled in the same tone.

"Oh, does Chamferon call you that still? And me as well? I came not before, dear daughter, because I do not serve him still and would not be caught again in his toils. I come now because you do serve him still and I want to borrow it from you. For a moment or two."

"I do not serve him. He holds me, as he once held us both. And you want to borrow it? The wand? Foolishness, mother-bird. He would know it in a minute."

"Would it matter if he did? After eight long years, is he still so violent? Would he punish you? For granting a small request to your own mother?"

The younger Harpy lifted on her wings, threw her head back and screamed with laughter, jiggled on her stork legs, wings out, dancing. “Would Chamferon punish me? Would Chamferon punish me? What a question, a question!”

Mavin paddled her way closer to the shore. They were talking more quietly now, the screaming greetings done, and she thrust her ears upward to catch each word.

“I will not lend it to you, Mother. Do not ask it. Try to take it and I’ll claw your gizzard out and your eyes as well. But I’ll use it for you, perhaps, if you have not any purpose in mind Chamferon would find hateful enough to punish me for.”

“It is no purpose he would care a thrilpskin for. Does he care for Huld? Is the Face of Huld still here?”

“He cares nothing for Huld, and the Face is still here, where he had you put it, Mother. Long ago.”

“He has probably forgotten it. But I have not forgotten, and I need to know from it a little thing. Ask it for me: Will it grow and flourish like webwillow in the spring? Or will it shrivel and die? Ask it for me, daughter. And I will then do what is best ... for me.”

The two stork-legged shapes moved away among the poles, Mavin after them flat as a shadow on the ground, invisible as she crept in their wake. They wound their way through the forest of poles, searching for a particular one. At last they found it, cawing to one another excitedly. “Oh, it is Huld’s Face, as he is today. He was handsomer when young, daughter. For a time I thought him a very marvel of beauty, before Blourbast changed him and made him what he is.”

“Ahh, cahhh, ah-haa, mate a Ghoul with a Harpy and blame the Ghoul’s influence for what comes out. Well, Mother. Shall I ask?”

There were whispers. Then the younger Harpy stood back from the pole with its Face and called strange words into the silence of the place, striking the pole three times with a long, slender wand she had drawn from a case on her back. Three times she repeated this invocation. On the ninth blow, the lips of the Face opened and Huld’s voice spoke—Huld’s voice as it would have come from another world, beyond space. It was the timeless ghost of his voice, and it made shivers where Mavin’s backbones

might have been.

“What would you know?”

“Will you live or die, Huld?” asked the Harpy. “Will you flourish or wilt into nothing?”

“For a season I will flourish. I will lose that which I now hold precious and discover I care not. I will heap atrocity upon atrocity to build a name and will lose even my name in a dust of bones.” The lips of the Face snapped shut with the sound of stones striking together. The young Harpy spun on her tall legs, snickering.

“So, Mother? Is that enough?”

“It is enough,” Pantiquod said in a dry, harsh voice. “I felt something of the kind. A pity. If one would choose, one would choose a son who would not be so ephemeral. Still. It is he who will dwindle and die, not I. There is time for me to protect myself. I will be leaving Bannerwell, daughter.”

“And your other daughter, lovely Huldra?”

“As she will. She may choose to stay, or go.”

“Where will you go?”

“If I do not wish to share Huld’s eventual ruin, away from him. Into the Northlands, I think. I have heard there are fortunes to be made and damage to be done in the Northlands. And I will not go empty-handed.”

“Ah-haw, cawh, I would think not. Will you wait with me now, Mother, while I do Chamferton’s bidding? Will you keep me company?”

“We were never company, daughter,” said Pantiquod, rising on her wings and making a cloud of dry, feathery droppings scud across the ground into Mavin’s face. “But I fly now to Chamferon’s aerie, and you may return there before I go. Maybe he will have news for me of doings in the north.” She flew up, circling, crying once at the top of the spiral before wheeling north along the valley.

Now the younger Harpy moved among the Faces, chattering to herself like a barnyard fowl, full of clucks and keraws. Three times she stopped before Faces and demanded certain information of them. Three times the Faces replied before returning to their silent, expressionless masks. A man with a young-old Face was asked where he was and answered, “Under Bartelmy’s Ban.” It was a strange Face and a strange answer. Both stuck in Mavin’s memory. An old woman’s Face opened its pale lips and chanted, “Upon the road, the old road, a tower made of stone. In the tower hangs a bell which cannot ring alone ...” There was a long pause, then the lips opened once more. “The daylight bell still hangs in the last tower.” The Harpy chuckled at this before going on to the next Face, that of a middle-aged man with a missing eye who announced that the Great Game being played in the midlands near Lake Yost would soon be lost for all who played, with only death as a result and the Demesne of Lake Yost left vacant.

By the time Mavin had heard the words of invocation said three times for each of these, she could have quoted them herself. The moon was high above. The young Harpy seemed to have finished her assigned duties and now moved among the poles and Faces only for amusement, Mavin still following doggedly, her curiosity keeping her close behind.

She almost missed seeing Himaggery’s Face, her eyes sliding across it as they had a hundred others, only to return, shocked and fascinated. It was the face of a man in his mid years, perhaps forty, with lines from nose to mouth and a web around his eyes. And yet—and yet see how those lips quirked in a way she had remembered always, and the lines around his eyes were those her fingertips remembered. He looked as she had dreamed he would, as she had known he would, and that second look told her it was he beyond all doubt.

She came up from the guano-smear soil in one unthinking movement, grasping the Harpy with fingers of steel before she could react.

“I will take the wand, daughter of Pantiquod.”

The Harpy did not reply, but began a wild, wheeling struggle, beating her wings against Mavin’s face, thrusting with her strong talons. When she found she could not escape, she began screaming, raising echoes which fled along the lake-shore, rousing birds who nested there so that they, too, screamed in the night. Mavin felt the distant beating of wings, heard a cry from high above, knew that fliers there could

plunge upon her in moments.

“Call them off,” she instructed breathlessly. “At once. I have no desire to kill you, Harpy, unless I must.”

There was only a defiant caw of rage as the Harpy redoubled her struggles. Mavin shook her, snapped her like a whip, raised her above to serve as a shield—and felt the talons and beak of whatever had plummeted from the sky bury themselves in the Harpy’s body. Abruptly the struggles ceased.

Mavin dropped the body. Perched upon it was a stunned fitchhawk, its dazed, yellow eyes opaque. Mavin pulled it from the Harpy’s throat and tossed it away. It planed down onto the soil to crouch there, panting.

Mavin turned her back on the bird. She drew the Harpy’s wand from its case. The battle had driven the words of invocation from her memory, and it took a moment to recall them. Then she stood before Himaggery’s Face and chanted them, striking with the wand three times, three times again, and a final three.

The stony lips opened. “What would you know?” asked the ghost of Himaggery’s voice.

“Where are you?” she begged. “Where are you, Himaggery?”

“Under the Ban, the Ban, Bartelmy’s Ban,” said the ghostly voice, and the lips shut tight.

She had heard that meaningless answer before! She tried to open his lips again with the wand and the words, but it did no good. She wandered among the Faces, to see if there were others she knew. There were none. At length her weariness overtook her, and she returned to the water to wash away the harsh, biting smell of the place. After that was a long time of sleep on a moss bank, halfway up the cliff, where no Harpies had come to leave their droppings. And long after that, morning which was more than halfway to noon.

She went down to the lake for water. The Harpy lay where Mavin had thrown her the night before, dried blood upon her throat and chest. That chest moved, however, in slow breaths, and the wound had clotted over. Mavin mused at this for some time before turning to the water. When she had washed

herself and found something juicy for her breakfast, she returned to the Harpy's unconscious form and took it upon her back. "I will return you to your master," she announced in a cheery tone, Shifting to spider legs which could carry them both up the precipitous cliffs around the lake. "You and your wand—the Wizard's wand. It may be he will be grateful."

"And if he is not?" asked some inner sceptical part of her. "And if Pantiquod is there?"

"Well then, not," she answered, still cheerily. "He can do no worse than try to enchant me, or whatever it is Wizards do. I can do no better than Shift into something horrible and eat him if he tries it. So and so. As for Pantiquod ... likely she will have gone on by now. She did not intend to await her daughter's coming." The spider shape gave way to her lean, fustigar form when she reached the cliff top. Before her the canyon stretched away in long diagonals where the toes of two mountains touched, northwest then northeast then northwest once more. The small river in its bottom was no more than a sizeable creek, bright shallow water sparkling over brown stones and drifts of gravel. Fish fled from the shallows where she stood and something jumped into the water upstream, bringing ripples to her feet.

She lapped at the water, feeling it cool upon her furry legs. The water joined her breakfast to add bulk, making the body on her back less burdensome. Squirring to get it more comfortably settled, she trotted up the canyon into the trees, which grew thicker the farther north she went.

At noon she put her burden down, caught two ground-running birds, Shifted into her own form and cooked them above a small fire as she watched the smoke, smelled it, smiled and hummed. The mood of contentment was rare and inexplicable. She knew she should feel far otherwise, but as the day wore on, the calm and content continued to grow.

"Enchantment!" her inner self warned. "This is enchantment, Mavin."

"So," she purred to herself. "Let be. What will come will come." It was dusk when she rounded a last curve of the canyon to see the fortress before her, its battlements made of the same stone it stood upon, gray and ancient, as though formed in the cataclysm which had reared the mountains up. There was a flash of light from the tower, like a mirror reflecting sun from the craggy horizon. In that instant, the mood of contentment lifted, leaving behind a feeling of dazed weariness, as when one had drunk too much and caroused too late. She knew someone had seen her, had weighed her up and determined that the protection of enchantment was not necessary any longer. She snarled to herself, accepting it.

After waiting a few moments to see whether anything else would happen, she trotted forward. A road began just before her, winding, grown over in places, but a road nonetheless. She followed it, tongue out

and panting. The way had been long and mostly uphill. Breakfast and lunch were long gone.

The fortress stood very high upon its sheer plinth of stone. From the canyon floor, stairs wound into darkness up behind the pillar. Mavin dropped her burden and lay down at the foot of these stairs, first nosing the Harpy to determine whether she still lived. She stretched, rolled, then began licking sore paws. She would stay as she was, thank you, until something definitive happened. She was not about to get caught in any shape at all on that dark, ominous staircase.

“Is that as far as you intend to bring her?” asked a hoarse, contentious voice from the stairs.

She looked up. He stood there, framed against the dark, in all respects a paradigm of Wizards. He had the cloak and robe, the tall hat, the beard, the crooked nose and the stern mouth. She was silent, expecting sparks to fly from his fingers. None did. He seemed content to stand there and wait.

Mavin fidgeted. Well. And why not? She Shifted, coming up from the fustigar shape into her own, decently clothed, with a Shifted cloak at her shoulders. Let the man know she was no savage.

“I had need to borrow her wand,” said Mavin flatly. “She fought me.”

“So you wounded her. Considerably, from the look of her.”

“She called down a flichhawk from the sky. It wounded her. I thought her dead until this morning. Then, when I saw she breathed, I decided to return her to you.”

“What did you expect me to do with her in that state?” There was a movement behind the Wizard as someone emerged upon the stair, a tall, gray woman in a feathered headdress—no longer in Harpy’s shape. Pantiquod.

Mavin shrugged elaborately, pretending not to see her. “If she has value, I presume you will have her Healed. If she has none, then it doesn’t matter what you do. In any case, I have returned your property. All of it.” She took the wand from her shoulder and laid it upon the Harpy’s breast where it moved slowly up and down with her breathing. Pantiquod screamed! She started down the stairs, pouring out threats in that same colorless voice Mavin had heard her use in Pfarb Durim, hands extended like claws,

aimed for Mavin's throat. "Shifter bitch! It was you killed Blourbast! You who set our plans awry! You who have wounded my daughter, my Foulitter. Bitch, I'll have your eyes ..."

The Wizard gestured violently at the Harpy, crying some strange words in a loud voice, and the woman stopped as though she had run into a wall. "Back," the Wizard shouted. "Back to your perch in the mews, loathsome chicken. Back before I put an end to you." The woman turned and moved away, reluctantly, and not before casting Mavin one last, hissing threat. Mavin shivered, trying not to let it show.

Somewhere nearby a door banged. There were clattering footsteps, and several forms erupted from the dark stairway. Servitors. The Wizard pointed to the limp body.

"Take her to the mews. Maldin, see if the Healer is in her rooms. If not, then find her. Fermin, take that wand up to the tower and hang it on the back of the door where it belongs." He turned to Mavin and gestured toward the stairs. "Well, Shifter, you had best come in. Since you have taken the trouble to return my property, it seems only fitting to offer some thanks, and some apologies for a certain one of my servants."

Mavin stared upward. The castle loomed high above her, an endless stair length. She sighed.

He interpreted her weariness correctly. "Oh, we won't climb up there. No, no. We use that fortification only when we must. When Game is announced, you know, and it's the only appropriate place. It's far too lofty to be useful for ordinary living. Besides, it's impossible to heat." He turned to one of the servants who still lurked in the shadowy stair. "Jowret, tell the kitchen there'll be a guest for supper. Tell them to serve us in my sitting room. Now, just up one flight, young woman, and through the door where you see the light. To your left, please. Ah, now just open that door before you. And here we are. Fire, wine, even a bit of cheese if hunger nibbles at you this early."

He took off his tall hat and sat in a comfortable-appearing chair before the tiled stove, motioning her to a similar one across the table; and he stared at her from under his brows, trying not to let her see that he did so.

Uncomfortably aware of this scrutiny, Mavin cut a piece of cheese and sat down to eat it, examining him no less covertly. Without the tall hat he was less imposing. Though there were heavy brows over his brooding eyes, the eyes themselves were surrounded with puffy, unhealthy-looking flesh, as though he slept too little or drank too much. When she had swallowed, she said, "I overheard the two Harpies talking. I know Pantiquod from a former time, from the place they call Hell's Maw. She called the other her daughter."

“I doubt they spoke kindly of me,” he said sneeringly, reaching for the cheese knife. “Both of them attempted to do me an injury some years ago. I put them under durance until the account is paid. Pantiquod was sly enough to offer me some recompense, so I freed her, in a manner of speaking. The daughter was the worse of the two. She owes me servitude for yet a few years.”

“She questioned the Faces. I heard her doing it. Three of them for you. One for Pantiquod.” Mavin hesitated for a moment, doubting whether it would be wise to say more. However, if she were to find any trace of Himaggery, some risk was necessary. “And then I took the wand away from her and questioned one myself.”

“Someone you know?” His voice was like iron striking an anvil.

“Someone I’m looking for. He set out eight years ago to find you. His friends have not seen him since.”

“Oh,” he said, darting one close, searching look at her before shrugging with elaborate nonchalance. “That would be the Wizard Himaggery, I think. He stopped here, bringing two old dames with him from Betand. Foolish.” He did not explain this cryptic utterance, and Mavin did not interrupt to ask him to clarify it. “He’d been collecting old talks, songs, rhymes. Wanted to solve some of the ancient mysteries. Well. What are Wizards for if not to do things like that? Hmmm? He wanted to go north. I told him it was risky, even foolish. He was young—barely thirty? Thirty-two? Hardly more than a youth.” He shook his head. “Well, so you found his Face.” He seemed to await some response to this, almost holding his breath. Mavin could sense his caution and wondered at it.

“You put it there?” She kept her voice casual. There was a strange tickle in her head, as though the man before her sought to Read her mind. Or perhaps some other person hidden nearby. She had never heard that Wizards had that Talent.

“Well, yes. I put it there. It does them little damage. Scarcely a pinprick.”

“How did you do that? What for?” Still that probing tickle.

“How do I make the Faces?” He leaned back, evidently reassured that she carried the question of

Himmagery's Face no further. "It would take several years to explain. You said your name was? Ah. Mavin. Well, Mavin, it would take a long time to explain. It took me several decades to learn to do it. Suffice it to say that the Lake is located at some kind of—oh, call it a nexus. A time nexus. If one takes a very thin slice of person and faces it forward, just at that nexus, then the slice can see into its future. That is, the person's future. Some of them can see their own end, some only a little way into tomorrow. And if one commands a Face to tell—using the right gramarye, a wand properly prepared and so forth—then it tells what it sees. Believe me, I use only a very thin slice. The donors never miss it." Again he seemed to be waiting some response from her.

Why should he care whether I believe him or not, she thought. This question seemed too dangerous to ask. She substituted another. "Why did you want to know his future?"

He paused before answering, and Mavin seemed to hear a warning vibration in her mind, a hissing, a rattle, as when something deadly is disturbed. She leaned forward to cut another piece of cheese, acting her unconcern. This misdirection seemed to quiet him, for the strange mental feeling passed as he said, "Because he insisted in going off on this very risky endeavor. Into places no one knows well. I thought it might yield some new information about the future, you know. But none of it did any good. He went, and when I questioned his Face a season later, all it would say was that he was under the Ban, the Ban, Bartelmy's Ban. I have no idea what that means. And his quest into the old things is not what I am most interested in." Again that close scrutiny, that casual voice coupled with the tight, attentive body.

Some instinct bade Mavin be still about the other Face which had also spoken of Bartelmy's Ban. Was it logical that the Wizard would have two such enigmas in his Lake of Faces?

"That surprises me. I was told that the Wizard Chamferon was interested in old things, that he had much information about old things, that he had much information about old things." She pretended astonishment.

"So Himmagery said. Which is why he brought the old women from Betand. Lily-sweet and Rose-love." He paused, then said with elaborate unconcern, "Well, at one time I was interested. Very. Oh, yes, at one time I collected such things, delighted in old mysteries. Why, at one time I would probably have been able to tell you everything you wanted to know about the lost road and the tower and the bell ..."

Still that impression of testing, of prodding. What was it he wanted her to say? What was it he was worried about her knowing? Mavin chewed, swallowed, thanked the Gamelords that she knew nothing much, but felt herself growing apprehensive nonetheless. She went on, "Do you mention roads, towers, bells by accident? One of the Faces your Harpy questioned spoke of a tower, of bells." She quoted all she could remember of what she had overhead, all in an innocently naive voice, as though she were very little interested.

“Old stories.” He dismissed them with a wave of his hand. “The old women Himaggery brought—they were full of old stories.” He would have gone on, but the door opened and servants came in to lay the table with steaming food and a tall pitcher of chilled wine. Bunwit and birds, raw or roasted, were all very well, but Mavin had no objection to kitchen food. She pulled her chair close and talked little until the emptiness inside her was well filled.

“Well,” she said finally, when the last dish had been emptied—long after Chamferton had stopped eating and taken to merely watching her, seemingly amazed at her appetite; long after the mind tickle had stopped completely, as whoever it was gave up the search—“I must learn what I can from you, Wizard. Himaggery is my friend. I am told by a friend of us both that he came in search of Chamferton because he desired to know about old things and it was thought that you had some such knowledge. Now, you say he went from you on some risky expedition you warned him against. The story of my entire life has been spent thus—in pursuit of kin or friends who have gone off in pursuit of some dream or other. I had not thought to spend this year so, but it seems I am called to do it.”

“Why? For mere friendship?” Prodding again, trying to elicit information.

Mavin laughed, a quick bark of laughter more the sound of a fustigar than a person. “Are friends so numerous you can say ‘mere’, Wizard?” What would she tell him? Well, it would do no harm to tell him what Pantiquod already knew. “A long time ago, a Gamesman helped my younger brother during the plague at Pfarbl Durim.

“You heard of that? Everyone south of King Frogmptt of the Marshes heard of it!” And especially Pantiquod, who caused it, she thought.

“I heard of it,” he agreed, too quickly. She pretended not to notice. “Well, I am fond of my brother. So, even if there were no other reason, in balance to that kindness done by this Gamesman, I will do him a kindness in return. He is Himaggery’s friend and wants him found.”

The Wizard’s tone was dry and ironic, but still with that underlying tone of prying hostility. “Then all this seeking of yours, which you find so wearying, is for the Seer Windlow.”

“That is all we need consider,” she said definitely, seeming not to notice his use of a name she had not mentioned. So, Himaggery had talked of his personal life to this Wizard. Of his life? His friends? Perhaps

of her? “Anything beyond that would be personal and irrelevant.”

“Very well then,” he replied. “For the Seer Windlow, I will tell you everything I can.”

As he talked, she grew more certain there was something here unspoken, something hidden, and she little liked the feel of it. However, she did not interrupt him or say anything to draw attention to herself, merely waiting to see what his voice would say which his words did not.

“Himaggery came here, eight years ago. Not in spring, but in the downturn of the year with leaves blowing at his heels and a chilly wind howling in the chimney while we talked. He had a map with him, an interesting one with some features on it I didn’t know of though they were near me in these hills. He told me about Windlow, too, and the old books they had searched. Himaggery had been collecting folk tales for six or seven years at that point. He wanted to hear the ones I knew, and I told him he might have full liberty of the library I had collected. Old things are not what I am most interested in now. Now I am interested in the future! It has endless fascination! Himmagery admitted as much, but he didn’t share my enthusiasm. Nonetheless, we talked, he told me what he had found in the books, and we dined together and even walked together in the valley for the day or two he spent here. I took a mask from him for the Lake of Faces, which amused him mightily.” He fell silent, as though waiting for her to contradict him, but Mavin kept her face innocent and open.

“So! What sent him on? Where did he go from here?”

“Ah. Well, truthfully, he found very little helpful here. I was able to tell him about the road. There is a Road south of Pfarb Durim, with Monuments upon it. Do you know the place? Yes? Well, so did he. And when I told him that the Road goes on, north of Pfarb Durim, hidden under the soil of the ages, north into the Dorbor Range, then swinging west to emerge at the surface in places—when I told him that, he was all afire to see it.” He nodded at her, waving his hands to demonstrate the enthusiasm with which Himaggery was supposed to have received this information. “Like a boy. All full of hot juice.”

There was something false in this telling, but she would not challenge it. She sought to pique his interest, perhaps to arouse enthusiasm which would override his careful talk. “The Road south of Pfarb Durim that has Monuments on it—I saw them dance, once. The shadowpeople made them do it.”

“So Himaggery said! You were there then? I would like to have seen that ...”

“My point, Wizard, is that we were not harmed. Some are said to have been driven mad by the Monuments, though I don’t know the truth of that, but I have never heard that any were killed. Yet you told Himaggery it was risky? Dangerous?”

“So I believed.” He poured half a glass of wine, suddenly less confiding, almost reticent, as though they had approached a subject he had not planned for.

“Come now. You must tell me more than that. You know something more than that. Or believe you do.”

“You are persistent, “ he said in a tone less friendly, lips tight. “Uncomfortably persistent.”

Mavin held out her open hands, palms up, as though she juggled weights, put on her most ingenuous face. “Am I to risk my own life, perhaps Himaggery’s as well, rather than be discourteous? If it is something which touches you close to the bone, forgive me, Wizard. But I must ask!”

“Very well.” He thought it over for a time, hiding his hesitation by moving to the window, opening it to lean out. There he seemed to find inspiration, for he returned with his mouth full of words once more. “There are many stories about the old road, Mavin. Tales, myths—who knows. Well, I had a ... brother, considerably younger than I. He was adventurous, loved digging into old things like your friend Himaggery. I was away from the demesne when he decided to seek out the mysteries of the old road. I did not even know he had gone until much later, and my own search for him was futile.”

“Ah,” said Mavin, examining him closely, still keeping her voice light and unchallenging. “So, if the truth were told, Wizard, perhaps you did not warn Himaggery so much as you might? Perhaps, respecting him as you did, you thought he might find your brother for you?”

“Perhaps,” he said with easy apology. “Perhaps that is it. I have searched my mind on that subject more times than I care to remember. But I do remember warning him, not once but many times. And I do remember cautioning him, not once but often. And so I put myself to rest, only to doubt again on the morning. I believe I did warn him sufficiently, Shape-shifter. But he chose to go.”

She rose in her turn to investigate the open window. It looked out upon the valley, moonlit now, and peaceful. A cool wind moved the budding trees. Scents of spring rose around her, and she sighed as she closed the casement against the cool and turned back into the firelight. “Your Harpy questioned three of the Faces, Wizard. One was an old woman who spoke of a bell. What does it mean. ‘The daylight bell

hangs in the last tower'?"

He gestured to say how unimportant a question it was. "I told you Himaggery brought two old story-tellers with him from Betand. I took a Face from one of them—her name was Rose-love—shortly before she died. It was her Face you heard in the lake, saying words from a children's story. Old Rose-love told stories to the children of Betand during a very long life, stories of talking foxes and flying fish and of Weetzie and the daylight bell."

"Weetzie?" She laughed, an amused chirrup of sound.

He barked an echoing laugh, watching her closely the while. "Weetzie. And the daylight bell, not an ordinary bell, but something very ancient. Himaggery had heard of it, and of another one. He called it 'the bell of the dark,' the 'cloud bell,' the 'bell of the shadows.' Have you heard of that?" His voice was friendly, yet she felt something sinister in the question, and she mocked herself for feeling so, here in this quiet room with the fire dancing on the hearth. The man had said nothing, done nothing to threaten her. Why this feeling? She forced herself to shake her head, smilingly. No, she had not heard of it.

He went on, "Nor had I. Well, he had found out something about these mysterious bells from old Rose. I question her Face once or twice a year to see how long it will continue to reply. It says only the one thing. First a little verse, then 'The daylight bell hangs in the last tower.' "

"The Blue Star is on the horns of Zanbee."

"It is not," he said. "That time is just past and will not return for many seasons yet." His voice was harsh as he demanded, "Where did you hear that?"

She remained nonchalant. "It was something Himaggery said once. The night the Monuments danced on the Ancient Road south of Pfarb Durim. They danced when the Blue Star was on the horns of Zanbee—the crescent moon. Now we have, 'The bell is in the last tower.' They both sound mysterious, like Wizardly things."

He relaxed. "I suppose they are Wizardly things, in a sense. Certainly your friend Himaggery thought so. My ... brother, too."

“What was his name?” asked Mavin, suddenly curious about this unnamed brother. “Was he a Wizard?”

“Ah ... no. No, he was not a Wizard. He was ... a Timereacher. Very much a Timereacher.” He smiled, something meant to be a kindly smile, at which Mavin shuddered, speaking quickly to hide it.

“His name?”

“Arkhur. He was ... ah ... quite young.”

“And so, Wizard.” She rose, smiling at him, letting the smile turn into a yawn to show how little concerned she was with what she said or what he replied. “You can tell me only that there is a road northwest of this place. That there is a bell somewhere, called variously, which Himaggery talked of. That Himaggery’s Face says only what I heard it say. That your brother Arkhur is gone since his youth. That all of this, you think, is connected with ancient things, old things, things beyond memory. You think. You believe.”

“And that it is risky, Mavin. Dangerous ...”

“Everywhere I have gone they have told me that. ‘It is risky, Mavin. Dangerous.’ I have sought Eesties and battled gray oozer and plotted with stickies and crept through Blourbast’s halls in the guise of a snake. All of it was risky, Wizard. I wish you could tell me something more. It is little enough to go on.”

“If you had not interrupted me, I would have gone on to say there are others seeking the road you seek.” He seemed to wait for her comment or question, to be dissatisfied by her silence. “Also, the other old woman brought here by Himaggery still lives, still chatters, still tells her stories. It is too late to disturb her old bones tonight, but if you will wait until morning, she will tell you one of her stories, no doubt. Perhaps there is something in her story which will enlighten you.”

You mean, she thought, that perhaps it will convince me of your friendship, Chamferton, and make me talk more freely. Well, little enough I know, old fox, but I will not tell you more than I need.

She nodded acceptance of the invitation to hear the storyteller, weary to her own bones. The night

before had not been restful, and since she had drunk those last few sips of wine she had been weighted down with sleep. She bowed, an ordinary gesture of respect. He patted her on her shoulder, seeming not to feel her flesh flinch away from him, and then tugged the bell near his hand.

Chamferton's servants took her to a room with a bed far softer than her bed of moss had been. There was a tub full of hot water on a towel before the fire. She did not linger in it. The shutters were open at the high window, letting the night air flood the room to chill her wet skin, and she shut them, fumbling with the latch to be sure it would not blow open again. She remembered only fleetingly that Chamferton had spoken of someone else on the trail she followed, thinking that curiosity over this might keep her awake. It did not. She did not even dry herself completely before falling asleep between the sheets, as though drugged.

CHAPTER THREE

Very early in the morning, just before dawn, she woke thinking she had heard some sound—a scratching, prying sound. She sat up abruptly, calling out some question or threat. The shutters were open, a curtain waving between them like a beckoning hand, and she rose, only half awake, to look outside. Around the window were thick vine branches, one of which was pulled away from the wall, as though something heavy had tried to perch upon it. She saw it without seeing it, for in the yard at the base of the stairs a group of horsemen was preparing to depart. Even with her eyes Shifted, she could not make out their faces in the dim light, but there was something familiar about one of them—something in the stance. Chamferton she could identify by his tall hat, and he stood intimately close to the familiar figure, their two heads together in conspiratorial talk. Mavin widened her ears, heard only scattered phrases. "... While she is here ... easy enough to get rid of ..."

Then the horses walked away, not hurrying their pace until they had gone well down the valley, and Mavin knew it was for quiet's sake, so that she would not hear. "Shifter ears, Wizard," she yawned. "Never try to fool Shifter's ears."

After watching the men ride out of sight, she closed the shutters firmly once more, then returned to bed to sleep until the sun was well up.

In the morning she found Chamferton on a pleasant terrace behind the plinth on which the castle stood. There she ate melons grown under glass, the Wizard said, so they ripened even in the cold season. He was all smiling solicitude this morning, and Mavin might have accepted it from one who did not employ Harpies as servants. They were creatures of such malice, she could not believe good of one who kept them, though she asked him whether the injured Harpy lived, trying to sound as though she cared. "Foulitter is recovering," he told her. "She bears you much malice. Or perhaps me, for not punishing you. I told her her former plots against me earned her whatever damage you had done to her, and to hush and

do my bidding.” He smiled at Mavin, showing his teeth, which were stained and crooked. It was not a nice smile, and she did not find it reassuring.

“I would not like to have her behind me when I go,” said Mavin, cursing herself silently for having said so the moment the words left her mouth.

“I will see she does not leave the aerie for some time,” he promised with that same smile. “She is fully under my control. I am less worried about her than about some others who seek the same road you do.”

Mavin put down her spoon with a ringing sound which hung upon the air. “You mentioned that last night. I was so weary, I could not even think to ask who it would be.”

“Did you ever meet King Prionde’s eldest heir? Valdon Duymit, son of the King Prionde?” His voice was deceptively casual, as it had been the night before.

Valdon! Of course. That had been the familiar stance she had recognized. So. Valdon had been the Wizard’s guest until the predawn hours—and he had left surreptitiously. She deducted another portion from Chamferton’s reputation for truth. Do not say too much, Mavin, she instructed herself. But do not lie, for he may know part of the truth already. “I have,” she admitted. “I was there when he and Himaggery came almost to Game duel between them. They did not like one another.”

“So much I guessed,” he said. “Nonetheless, he came here, so he said, in search of Himaggery.”

“Did he say why?” She spooned up melon, trying not to seem interested in the answer to this question.

“Oh, he gave me some reason of other. He lied. However, I encourage my servants to gossip. Sometimes it is the only way to get at the truth. My servants told me he fancied himself wronged for some reason connected with the school set up by Prionde. Do you know anything about that?”

“I know of the school, yes.” She spoke of it as anyone might who knew nothing beyond its location and that Prionde had sponsored it, thinking meantime that it was undoubtedly the Harpy whom he counted upon to gossip among the guests. In her own shape, she was probably not uncomely.

“So I had some knowledge of the school,” she concluded, “though I am told it is not a large one. That is all I know.”

“You are succinct. Would that more of my informants were so terse. Well, I gathered that Valdon has some unfinished anger which moves him. He desires Himaggery’s embarrassment, perhaps even his destruction. I knew that. I could read it in his voice; I did not need a Face from him to learn it.” An expression of annoyance crossed the Wizard’s face, was wiped away in an instant as though he became aware of it and did not want the world to see it.

“How long ago was Valdon here?”

“Oh, a year or two. No. Little more than a year. I tell you so you may be warned.” He turned toward the stairs while Mavin made note he had told her yet another lie.

“Ah. Look over there to the steps. See the old woman, the very old woman being carried up in the chair? She is two hundred years old, that woman. So she says, and so I do believe. Old as rocks, as the country people say. That is Lily-sweet, sister to Rose-love, whose Face you saw in my lake. I have had her carried up here in the sun, which she much enjoys, and promised her all the melon she can eat if she will tell you a story. She and her sister told stories in Betand for all their long lives, stories learned from their great grandmas, who also, if the stories about them be true, lived to be very old. If she were still young and strong, she could talk about Weetzie for several days, for Weetzie had more adventures than a thousand years would have given him time for. Somewhere in all that mass of story-telling is a little verse which says something about there being a road, and on the road a tower, and in the tower a bell, which cannot ring alone. That verse much intrigued your friend Himaggery. You may choose to ask for the story of Weetzie and the daylight bell. She will say she is too old to remember, too tired, that it is only a children’s story, a country tale. You must persist.” He was playing with her now, Mavin knew. All this was so much flummery, to keep her occupied.

“This is the story you mentioned last night.”

“Yes. If you seek Himaggery, you may find something in it. He pretended to do so. If you are to get her to tell you anything you must say her name in full, caressingly, and do not laugh.” Chamferon went back to his melon, waving her away.

She rose almost unwillingly, strongly tempted to challenge his lies and his foisting nonsense upon her in

the guise of information, and yet unwilling to pass by anything in which Himaggery had been interested. That much, at least, might be true and she, Mavin, might find help in it that Chamferton did not intend. So she strolled across the high terrace to the chair where the old woman sat wrapped in knitted shawls against the slight chill of the morning. She was so old her face and arms were wrinkled like the shell of a nut, like the fine wavelets of a sea barely brushed by wind. Thin flesh hung from her arms and neck. Wisps of white hair fringed the edge of her cap. Her eyes were bird-bright though she pretended not to see Mavin's approach. "Well then," thought Mavin, "we will lure her as the birder does the shy fowl of the air".

"Lily-sweet," she begged, "the High Wizard Chamferton says that you know a tale known to none other in all the lands. The tale of Weetzie and the daylight bell."

The old woman stroked her throat, made a pitiful shrug and shook her head wistfully. "Ah, girl, but one's throat is too dry and old for telling tales."

Mavin rose without a word and went to Chamferton's table. "I need to borrow a teacup," she told him, returning with it to the old woman.

"Wet your gullet, Lily-sweet. This is the High Wizard's own tea, and while it is not good enough for softening the throat of a true story-teller, still, it is the best we have."

"You are a well spoken child, for all your outlandish appearance. In my day the women wore full trows and vests to show their bosoms. None of this tight man-breeching and loose shirts." Lily-sweet tugged at Mavin's shirt, and inside that tug, Mavin twitched. The shirt was herself.

"So my own grandmama has said, Lily-sweet. And much we regret that those days are past." She sighed. "If we dressed now as true women did in the days of your youth, chance is I would have a ... companion of my own."

"You'd have a husband, child, and thankful for it. Ah, and well, and sorry the day. What was it you wanted to know of again?"

"The story of Weetzie and the daylight bell?"

“Ah. A children’s story, was it? I’m not sure I remember that one.”

“Oh, it would be a tragedy if you did not, Lily-sweet, for none but you can be found to tell it rightly. Oh, there are those in Betand who pretend to know the story, but the mockery they make of it is quite ...”

“None know that story save me!” The voice was suddenly more definite, and the old hands quivered upon the arms of the chair. “Since sister Rose died, none but me.”

“I know,” Mavin soothed. “So says the Wizard Chamferton. He says the women in Betand are liars and scrape-easies, that you are the only one who has the truth of it.”

“And so I do,” said the old woman. “And so shall you be the judge of it.” She took a deep breath.

“One time,” she quavered, gesturing with a claw to indicate a time long past, “one time a time ago, was a young star named Weetzie, and he went out and about, up and down, wet and dry, come day come night till he got to the sea. And there was a d’bor wife, grodgeling about in the surf, slither on slither.

“And Weetzie spoke polite to her, saying ‘Good morn to you, d’bor wife. And why do you slither here near the shore when the deep waves are your home?’

“And the d’bor wife, she struck at him once, twice, three times with her boaty flappers, flap, flap, flap on the sand, but Weetzie jumped this way and that way, and all that flapping was for nothing. So, seeing she could not get Weetzie that way, the d’bor wife began to sing in her lure voice, ‘Oh, I grodgel here in the surf to find the daylight bell where the shadows hid it.’

“And Weetzie was greatly taken with this idea, so he came close to the d’bor wife and began to help her grodgel. And whup, the d’bor wife wrapped Weetzie up in her short reachers and laughed like a whoop-owl, ‘Oh, little star, but I have you now, I have you now.’

“And Weetzie was sorry to have been so silly, for Weetzie’s forepeople had often said that trusting a d’bor was like betting on the wind. So Weetzie thought quick, quick, and said, ‘But why did you stop me, d’bor wife? Quick, grodgel down, grodgel down, for just as you caught me, I saw the very edge of

the daylight bell.’

“And the d’bor wife was so excited, she dropped Weetzie in the instant and began to grodgel again, with the water flying. And Weetzie took his bone and twanged it, so the d’bor wife was all wound up in her tentacles and tied in a lump. Then he sat down and sang this song: ‘Daylight bell in water can’t be; Tricky lie brings tricky tie. Give a boon or else you die.’

“And the d’bor wife cried loudly, until all the seabirds shrieked to hear it, and begged the little star to be let go. So Weetzie said, ‘Give me the boon, d’bor wife, and I’ll untie you.’

“So they talked and talked while the sun got high, and this was the boon: that Weetzie could go in the water and breathe there as did the d’bor. So he twanged his bone to turn the d’bor wife loose and went on his way, up and down, over and under, back and forth in the wide world until he came to a forest full of tall trees.

“And there in the top of the tallest tree was a fitchhawk in a nest, grimbling and grambling at the clouds as they flew past. And Weetzie cried out, ‘Ho there, fitchhawk, why are you grimbling and grambling at the clouds?’ And the fitchhawk said, ‘Because I’m looking for the daylight bell which is hung up here in the mist where the shadows hid it.’

“I’ll help you, then,’ cried Weetzie, and he climbed the tall tree ‘til he came high up, and he stood in the nest and reached out for the clouds to grimble and gramble them in pieces. But the fitchhawk screamed and grabbed Weetzie in his huge claws and then laughed and cawed as though to raise the dark, ‘Little star, I’ve got you now.’

“ ‘Why did you grab me, old fitchhawk,’ cried Weetzie ‘just as I was grambling the clouds? I caught a glimpse of the daylight bell just there where I was grambling when you took hold of me!’ And when he heard that, the fitchhawk dropped Weetzie and went back to grimbling and grambling the clouds, looking for the daylight bell and crying, ‘Where is it? Where did you see it?’ But Weetzie took his bone and twanged it and sang this song: ‘Daylight bell in water can’t be Daylight bell in treetop shan’t be Tricky lie brings tricky tie. Give a boon or else you die.’

“And fitchhawk was tied wing and claws so he couldn’t move, and he begged to be let loose, but Weetzie would not until the fitchhawk gave him a boon. And the boon was that Weetzie could fly in the wide sky as the fitchhawk had always done. So then Weetzie twanged his bone and turned the fitchhawk loose.

“Up and down he went, in and out, under and over, until time wore on, and Weetzie came to a broad plain where there was a gobble-mole druggling tunnels, coming up with a snoutful of dirt and heaving it into little hillocks. So, Weetzie said, ‘What’s all the tunneling for old gobble? More tunnel there than a mole needs in a million.’

“And the gobble-mole says, ‘Druggling to find the daylight bell, little star. I know it’s right down here somewhere in the deep earth where the shadows hid it.’

“So Weetzie says, ‘Well, then, I’ll help you druggie for it,’ and he started in to druggie with the mole. But the mole pushed Weetzie in a hole and shut it up so Weetzie couldn’t get out.

“And Weetzie cried, ‘What did you do that for, old mole? I caught sight of the edge of the daylight bell, just then, before you covered it up with your druggling.’

“Old mole said, ‘Where? Where did you see it?’ and he uncovered the hole where Weetzie was so Weetzie could twange his bone and sing this song:

‘Daylight bell in water can’t be.

Daylight bell in treetop shan’t be

Daylight bell in earthways wan’t be

Tricksy lie brings tricksy tie.

Give a boon or else you die.

“And the gobble-mole was all tied up, foot and snout, so he couldn’t move. So the gobble-mole decided upon a boon, and the boon was that Weetzie should be able to walk in earthways as the mole had

always done. Then Weetzie twanged his bone and let the mole loose.

“ ‘Well now,’ said Weetzie. ‘All this talk of the daylight bell has made me curious, so I’ll take my three boons and go looking for it.’ And all the creatures within ear-listen laughed and laughed, for none had ever found the daylight bell where the shadows had hidden it, though the beasts had had boons of their own for ever since. But Weetzie danced on the tip of himself, up and down, in and out, over and under, as he went seeking.”

The old woman sighed. Mavin put the teacup to her lips, and she supped the pale brew, sighing again. “That’s the story of Weetzie and the daylight bell, girl.”

“Is there more to the story, Lily-sweet?”

“Oh, there’s enough for three days’ telling, girl, for it may be he found the bell at the end of it, but I’m weary of it now. Let be. He that calls himself Wizard there may tell it to you if you’ve a mind to hear it. I told it to him, and to that other Wizard—real, he was, sure as my teeth are gone—and to people in Betand, and to children many a time when they were no more than mole-high themselves.” And she leaned back in the chair, shutting her eyes. So the old woman did not much care for Chamferon, either. “He that calls himself Wizard ...”

Back at the table where Chamferon sat smiling at her as a fox might smile at a bird, she continued to play the innocent. “I wonder what all that was about?”

“I think it’s about Eesties, Shifter-woman, though I’m not certain of that. Eesties, Eestnies, the Old-folk, the Rolling Stars. Whatever you choose to call them ...”

“They say ‘Eesty’ among themselves,” said Mavin, without thinking. Then her throat closed like a vice and she coughed, choking, gesturing frantically for air.

“You mean you’ve spoken to them, seen them? Gamelords, girl, tell me of it!” His face blazed with an acquisitive glow, and his hand clutched her arm. Now, she thought through her suffocating spasm, now I see the true Chamferon.

She shook her head, trying to breathe as her face turned blue. Then the spasm passed, and he nodded with comprehension, handing her a cup. "Don't try to talk then. I understand. What you've seen, what you've heard, they don't want talked about. Well. Pity." He took paper from a nearby table and wrote on it, "Have you ever tried to write it out?" He turned the paper for her to read. She shook her head, drawing deep breaths as her throat opened reluctantly.

He put the pen and paper near her hand. She wrote a trial sentence. "I have talked with an Eesty at Ganver's Grave ..." Nothing happened. She turned the paper to face him, and he nodded eagerly.

"Well, Shifter-girl, there is a bit of additional information which I will trade for an account of your ... experience." He nodded toward her hand, resting upon the paper as he turned the page toward her again. He had written, "If you will write me an account of your experience, I will tell something else about Himaggery—also, I will pay you well for the account."

Mavin shook her head in pretended indecision. "You know, Wizard, from time to time I have been asked to Game for this King or that Sorcerer. All have offered to pay me well, but none has yet told me what I am to do with the pay. What do Shifters need, after all? I cannot eat more than one meal at once, nor sleep in more than one bed at a time. I have little need to array myself in silks or gems. What payment would mean something to me?"

"Perhaps hospitality," he suggested. "A place to rest, or eat cooked food, or merely to stare at the hills."

"No. It is not tempting," she said, having already decided what she would give him which might both allay his suspicions of her and make him careless. "But I will do it because you have something to tell me about Himaggery, and for no other reason."

He nodded, then remarked in passing, almost as though it did not matter. "And—when you go to seek Himaggery, will you seek Arkhur as well? At least, do not close your eyes to him if you see him on the road? And if you see any sign of him, will you send word to me? Again, though it may take time to agree upon a coin, I will pay you well."

She smiled. Let him take that for assent if he would. She would do no more than write what she had seen of the Eesties and of the dancing Monuments and the shadowpeople upon the hills. She made it brief, leaving most of what had happened out, unwilling to put anything in his hands he might use for ill—as he would. She did mention that the magical talisman, Ganver's Bone, had been taken back by the Eesty who gave it, believing that it would go ill for the shadowpeople if Chamferton thought they still had it, though why she was so certain of that, she could not have said. When she had finished, it was a very

brief account, though Chamferton nodded his head over it, almost licking his lips, when she had finished.

“This goes in my library, Mavin.” Then, after a pause, as though to assure her of his good intent. “And should you not return in a fairly short time, I’ll see that a copy of it goes to Windlow.”

She nodded, in a sober mood. If she did not return in a fairly short time, she doubted Windlow could do much about it. Also, she thought Chamferton would not bother to do anything, no matter what he had promised, unless for some reason of his own. “I’m off north, now, Wizard, so tell me now what thing it is you know.” For a moment she thought he would deny the bargain, but he thought better of it. “It is only this one fact, Shifter. There are runners upon the road to the north. Strange runners. They come in silence, fleeing along the Ancient Road, without speaking. It was those runners Himaggery followed, and if you see them, they may lead you to the place he went.”

So. She wondered what else he might have told her if he had wished to. How much he had left untold. How many other things he had lied about. Why say Valdron had not been there for a year when he had left only this morning? Why all that careful questioning, that covert watching? What had he hoped to learn?

Well, she would not find out by moping over it. Of the two of them, Mavin had probably learned the more. She went down and out of the place, the door shutting behind her with an echoing slam of finality. She started to turn toward the north, then whirled at a sound behind her.

It was Pantiquod, in Harpy shape, her head moving restlessly on its flexible serpent’s neck, and her pale breasts heaving with anger. Yellow-eyed Pantiquod. Mavin set herself to fight, ready to Shift in the instant.

“Oh, no, fool Shifter,” the Harpy hissed. “I will not attack you here under Chamferton’s walls, where he may yet come out and stop me. Nor in the forest’s shadow, where you and I might be well matched. No, Shifter-girl. I will come for you with my sisters. When I will. And there will be no more shadowpeople singing to help you, or tame Wizards to do your bidding, nor will Shiftiness aid you against the numbers I will bring.”

There was hot, horrid juice in Mavin’s throat, but she managed somehow to keep her voice calm. “Why, Pantiquod? What have I done to you? Your daughter is recovering, and it was she who attacked me, not I her.”

The Harpy's head wove upon its storklike neck, the square yellowed teeth bared in a hating grimace. "It was you killed Blourbast, though Huld put the knife in his throat. It was you robbed us of Pfarb Durim. It was you and your forest scum friends who sang away the plague, Shifter-girl. Now it is you who has wounded my daughter, Foulitter. Did you think the Harpies would not avenge themselves?"

"You have not done much for twenty years, loathsome chicken," Mavin said. "But threats are easy and promises cheap. Do what you will." Her knees were not as strong as her voice as she turned her back upon the bird, opening a tiny eye in the back of her head to be sure she was not attacked from the rear. Pantiquod merely stood, however, staring after her, her yellow eyes burning as though a fire were lit behind them. Mavin shivered, not letting it show. When she was a wee child, she had been afraid of snakes. Her worn dreams had been of touching snakes. The Harpy moved her with a similar revulsion. She did not want to be touched by that creature. She could not think of fighting it because she would have to touch it. Still, so long as she could Shift, she could not utterly fear the Harpy—even if there were more than one. So long as she could Shift, it would not pay the sag-breasted bird to attack her.

When she had come out of sight of the tower, she entered the trees. There she crouched upon the ground, looking back the way she had come. Two sets of wings circled high above the tower, moving upward upon warm drafts of air. When they had achieved considerable height, they turned toward her and the wings beat slowly as the two figures closed the distance between them. Though she had not shown fear before Pantiquod, now Mavin watched the wings come nearer with a feeling of fatalistic fascination which paralyzed her, that nightmare horror of childhood, that ancient terror children feel when they awake in the dark, sure that something lurks nearby, so immobilized by that knowledge that they cannot move to escape. Only when the Harpies had come almost within hailing distance did she stir herself, melting back into the shadows and changing her hide into a mottled invisibility of green and brown. There had been something hypnotic in the Harpy's stare, something like ...

"I would advise you, Mavin," her internal voice said calmly, "that you not look into a Harpy's eyes again. It would be sensible to kill them now, but if you find them too repulsive even for killing, then you should get moving. If you don't want to fight the creatures, avoidance would be easier if they didn't find you."

This broke the spell and she ran, under the boughs, quickly away to the north, deep in small canyons and under the edges of curling cliffs, until she had left the Harpies behind her, or lost them, or they had gone on ahead. In any case, the feeling of paralysis had passed—at least for the time. Her voice had been right. She should have killed them then. "I must be getting old, and weak, and weary," she cursed herself. "Perhaps I should settle on a farm, somewhere, and grow thrilps." This was not convincing, even under the circumstances, and she gave it up. Enough that she had not wanted to touch the beasts. Leave it at that.

She had come some little distance north when she saw the first travelers, paralleling her course to the

west. They were higher on the sides of the hills, running with their heads faced forward—though there was something odd about those heads she could not precisely identify, even with sharpened vision, as the forest light dappled and shadowed. They were naked, men and women both, with long, shaggy hair unbound flapping at their backs. At first she saw only four or five of them, but as she went on others could be seen in small groups on the hillsides, emerging into sunlight before disappearing momentarily into shade once more.

There was a sheer wall ahead, one which stretched across her own path and that of those on the hill, a fault line where the land on which she walked had fallen below that to the north, leaving a scarp between, that scarp cut by tumbling streams which had left ladders of stone in their wake. The westernmost such path was also the nearest, and as she went on she saw the others gradually shift direction toward the rock stair, toward her own path, toward intersection. Prudence dictated she not intrude upon a multitude though the multitude seemed utterly unaware of her, so she dawdled a bit, trotting rather than striding, letting the others draw ahead. When she came at last to the stream bed which led upward to the heights, they were assembled there, squatting on the ground in fives and sevens, small intent circles faced inward. She crept into the trees above them from which she could watch and listen without being observed. Their heads were bent. The chant started so softly she thought she imagined it, then louder, repeated, repeated. “Upon the road, the old road, A tower made of stone. In the tower is a bell Which cannot ring alone. One. Two. Three. Four. Five ...” The voices went on, breathy, counting, seemingly endlessly. At last they faded into silence on number one thousand thirteen, as though exhausted. After a time they began again.

“Shadow bell, it rang the night,

Daylight bell the dawn,

In the tower hung the bells,

Now the tower’s gone.

One thousand thirteen, one thousand twelve, one thousand eleven ...” and so on until they came to one again.

Some of the heads came up. She saw then what had been so odd. They were blindfolded, their heads covered as far as their nostrils with black masks, like fitchhawks upon the wrist, hooded. They were silent, faced inward, hearing nothing. Mavin rustled a branch. They did not respond. Then, all at once, without any signal which she could see, they stood up and began to run once more, up the stone ladder toward the heights.

Intrigued, she Shifted into something spidery and went up the wall in one concerted rush to confront them at the top of the scarp. They went past her as though she did not exist, not hearing her challenging cry. She fell in behind them, not needing to keep up, for their tracks were as plain as a stream bed before her. There were hundreds of them, sometimes running separately, sometimes together. She set her feet upon their trail and thought furiously about the matter.

Somehow, without sight, they knew where they were going. But sometimes they ran together, sometimes not. Therefore, her curious mind troubled at the thought, therefore? Sometimes the way was single, sometimes separate? Like strands of rope, raveled in places, twisted tight in others? But where were the signs of it? She put her nose up and sharpened her eyes. Whatever it was that guided them, it couldn't be smelled.

Now they were running all together, in one long clump, straggling a bit, yet with the edges of the group smooth, feet falling cleanly into the tracks of those before. Something along the edges, then. She paused beside the track, peering, scratching with her paws.

Tchah. Nothing she could see. Nothing she could feel. She stopped, puzzled, scratching her hide where the dirt of the road itched it. Perhaps from above.

She Shifted, lifted, beat strong wings down to raise her into the soft air, circling high, above the trees, sharpening sight so that she could see a tick upon a bunwit's back. Circle higher, higher, peering down at the runners, separated again now. She could see their trail cleanly upon the earth, a troubling of the grass, a line of broken twigs. Leaves crushed. Dark then light. And more!

Along their way a scattering of stones. No. Not scattered, tumbled. Heaved up. Some washed aside in spring rains, but still maintaining their relationship to one another. Lines of stones. A slightly different shade of gray than the natural stones of the hills. Lighter. Finer grained. Like the stones of the Ancient Road south of Pfarb Durim. She dropped like a plummet, down onto those stones, then Shifted once more.

Yes. Now she could see the difference. But how did the runners know? She laid her palm upon the stone, shut her eyes, concentrated. It was there, a kind of tingling, a small, itchy feeling as of lightning in the air. Experimentally, she Shifted a human foot and laid it upon the stone. Yes. She could feel it. So then. She did not need to follow the runners, she knew where they would go. They would follow this road, this road, broken or solid.

Satisfied, she trotted in the tracks of those who ran, wanting to see what they would do when night came.

Had Himaggery come this way in pursuit of the runners? Or had he followed the map, which would likely have brought him to the same place? And where was that place? A tower, she thought. There is always something magical about a tower, a stone tower. Magicians and Wizards live in towers. Kings are held captive in towers. Signals come from towers, and dragons assault towers. So it is fitting that on this old road there should be a tower. But now the tower's gone. So sang the runners. Then what were they looking for?

"Shadow bell, it rang the night, daylight bell the dawn, in the tower hung the bells, but now the tower's gone," she hummed to herself between fustigar teeth. Not really gone, she thought. Gone, perhaps, but not really gone. Just as Himaggery was gone, but not really gone. Somewhere. Somewhere. Somewhere.

It became a chant, a kind of prayer which accompanied each footfall. Somewhere. Somewhere.

CHAPTER FOUR

The way of the Ancient Road lay across hills and valleys, sometimes with the slope, sometimes against it, as though the Road had been there first and the valleys had come later to encroach upon it. Sometimes trotting, sometimes scrambling, Mavin followed the way, the tracks of the runners going on before her, the sun crossing above her to sink into the west so that long bars of shadow stood parallel to her path, making a visible road along which she and the runners moved in a silence broken only by far, plaintive birdsong. Beside the road bloomed brilliant patches of yellow startle flower—no seed-pods yet to startle the traveler with noonday explosions. Beneath them lay the leafy lacework of Healer's balm, a promise that great purple bells would swing above the moss toward the end of the season. Clouds had sailed in from the west all day, full of the threat of rain, but none had fallen. Instead the gray billows had gone on eastward to pile themselves into a featureless veil covering the Dorbor Range. The east was all storm and rumbling thunder while the west glowed softly in sunset. The shadow road was as clear before her as an actual road would have been.

It was a moment before she realized that she ran upon the surface of an actual roadway. In this place the tingling stones had never been covered, or perhaps they had come up out of time to lie upon the earth once more. Among the trees she could catch glimpses on either side of huge, square stones which might once have supported monuments like those which arched the road outside Pfarb Durim. The light glared straight into her eyes from the horizon, blinding her, and she almost strode across the naked runners before she saw them. They lay upon the roadway, prostrate in their hundreds. She stood for a moment,

troubled at the sight of so many figures lying as though dead upon the road, barely breathing.

The light faded into dusky gray-purple. The runners heaved themselves onto all fours and crawled into the surrounding forest, scavenging among the litter on the forest floor for the moist carpets of fungus which lay in every sunny glade. Seeing them moving about, Mavin felt less pity for them and set to follow their example, making a pouch in her hide to gather this crop as well. The mushrooms were both delicious and nourishing, known among gourmands as “earth’s ears” both for their shape and raw texture, crisp and cartilaginous. Both the flavor and texture improved when they were cooked, which Mavin intended to do. The sight of the runners groveling offended her, and only after she had found a place to suit her remote from them did she build a fire at last, laying the wood against a cracked stony shelf beside a small pool. Her firestarter was the only tool she carried, the only tool she needed to carry—though she had heard it said in Danderbat Keep that one Flourlanger Obquisk had learned to Shift flint and steel in some long forgotten time. Mavin had never believed it a practical solution. Since one would have to Shift flint and steel into one’s body to begin with, why not simply carry them and have done.

She sat warming herself, lengthening her fur to hold body heat from the evening cool, turning the thin sticks on which the fungus was strung, watching it crisp and brown. A strange sound pervaded the quiet, a soft whirring, as though some giant top hummed to itself nearby. She crouched, trying to decide whether it conveyed some threat, whether the fire should be put out or she herself put remote from it. She compromised by leaping to the top of the shelf and collapsing there into a pancake of flesh, invisible upon the stony height.

Something came into the clearing, a whirlwind, a spinning cloud, a silvery teardrop gyring upon its tip. It glinted in the light of the fire, twirling, slowing, the long silver fringes of its dress falling out of their spiral swirl into a column, the outstretched arms coming to rest, one hand clasped lightly in another. It wore a round silver hat from which another fringe settled, completely hiding the face—if there was a face.

Upon the stone, Mavin stirred in astonishment and awe. She had never seen a Dervish before, for they were rare and solitary people, devoted, it was said, to strange rites in the worship of ancient gods. Still, she could not fail to recognize what stood there, for the dress and habits of Dervishes figured often in children’s tales and fireside stories. Wonderful, remote, and marvelous they were said to be, but she had never heard they were malign. She dropped from the side of the stone and came around it to the fire once more, reaching to turn the splints on which the mushrooms roasted. Let it speak if it would.

“I smelled your fire,” it said. Mavin could not tell if it was man or woman, for the voice was scarcely more than a whisper. “The runners build no fire, so I knew someone followed them. I came to warn.”

Mavin chose to disregard the warning. “Will you sit down?” Mavin gestured at a likely rock beside the flames. “I would be glad to share my supper.”

“Thank you, no. I seldom sit. I seldom eat. Like those runners on the road, I go on and on, without thinking about it very much.” There was a breathy sound beneath these words which, after a time, Mavin interpreted as laughter.

“My name is Mavin,” she offered. “Mavin Manyshaped.”

“A Shifter,” the other breathed. “I could tell from your fur. A pretty beast, you, Mavin Manyshaped. An unusual one as well. Most beasts do not cook their earth’s ears.”

“They taste better cooked,” said Mavin, testing one with her fingers to see if it was done. “Also, when they are cooked, they do not make that noise between one’s teeth that makes one believe one is eating something still alive and resisting.”

“Ah,” laughed the windy voice, “a pretty, sensitive beast. Are you following the runners?”

“I am.” She saw no need for dissimulation. “I am seeking someone—someone who followed these runners eight years ago. Someone who has not been seen since, but who the Rancelmen and Pursuivants say still lives. Have you seen him?”

The figure before her shrugged. “Perhaps, Mavin Manyshaped. I have seen many since first I watched the runners go past. That time, the first time, they sang nine hundred years and twenty. This time they sing one thousand and thirteen. In that time, I have seen many, Mavin Manyshaped.”

Mavin set the splint to one side to cool a little. “These runners—they run each year?”

“Each year, beginning when the Blue Star approaches the horns of Zanbee, from the south city upon the Ancient Road, north, west, then south and east until they come to the south city once more. Many die upon the way, of course. Every year, many die.”

“The road makes a circle?”

“A circuit. Yes.”

“And where is the south city?”

“It is only ruins now. A place in the hills, at the headwaters of the River Banner, north of Mip and Pouws. Do you know that land?”

“I never heard of any ruined city there.”

“No. They hide it well, these devotees. Still, when the Blue Star rises, they assemble in that place for the run. Those who die upon the circuit are assured of bliss, so they say. Even those who live to return to the lands of the south have earned great merit.”

“But ...” Mavin took a mouthful of mushroom and sucked in the juice which spurted on her lips. “What is it all for?”

There was that hint of breathy laughter once more. “What is it for? What is anything for, Mavin Manyshaped. There is something in their eschatology which speaks of rebuilding the tower. You will say, ‘What tower?’ and I will say, ‘What tower, indeed?’ “ The Dervish paused, seeming to invite response or comment.

Mavin felt the question, chose not to indicate interest. “The tower that is gone, I suppose,” she said flatly. “Except that it isn’t gone. I think.”

“What makes you think that?”

Now there was no mistaking the oddly expectant tone in that whispery voice. As though they had been talking in riddles. As though the Dervish were seeking some particular answer. Mavin decided to let the matter go no further. If Dervishes were not malign, still they were not understood. Least said, best handled. For now.

She nodded over her meal. "Oh, just that it seems likely there must be some tower around someplace or other. Sufficient to keep the legends spinning. Don't you think?"

Something wilted in the Dervish's stance. Still, it persisted. "Have you come this way before, Mavin Manyshaped? Upon this road? Or any other?"

Surprised by the question, Mavin answered it honestly. "I have not come this way before, Dervish." She finished chewing, swallowing. "Now. Dervish without a name, can you help me find the one I seek?"

"Perhaps," said the Dervish with a disappointed breath. "Perhaps." It began to spin, at first slowly, arms rising until they were straight out from the shoulders, fringes rising, whirling, the figure moving faster and faster. When the fringe rose from the face, Mavin caught a look at it, skeletally thin, huge-eyed, lips curved in an eternal, unchanging expression of calm, and yet—Mavin thought she saw something of disappointment in the face, too, though it blurred into motion too quickly for her to be sure. The Dervish hummed, spun, began to move away through the trees, Mavin let it go.

"If you will, perhaps," she whispered to herself, "then do, perhaps. Though why you should have expected me to say anything else, I do not know. So, if you will help me find him, do. If not ... well, I will find him by myself." She lay back upon the mosses, replete, weary, not suddenly full of new thoughts. If the Ancient Road merely bent upon itself and returned to the south, then was Himaggery likely upon it or aside from it? Would he—could he have joined the runners? She would not have thought to look for him there.

Groaning, she rose to her feet and made a torch to light her way. Back upon the road the runners lay sprawled, unconscious, driven into exhausted sleep. She moved among them, making an orderly pattern in her mind to assure that she examined them all. Men, women, even some who were little more than children. Lean as old leather straps, bruised and scratched from the road, with soles on their feet like cured d'bor skin, hard as wood. She turned over lax bodies, pulled hoods aside to peer into faces, and replaced them. There were hundreds of them, and the task took hours. Dawn paled the eastern sky before she was finished. The clouds of the night before had gone; now there was only clear sky to the eastern horizon, flushed with sickly rose. Mavin threw down the torch with a growl of disgust and wandered back to her fire to curl close around the coals and sleep, not caring that the runners woke, chanted, and ran on into the west. She could find them if she wanted to. She was no longer sure she wanted to.

Late evening she wakened, stretched, scratched, built up her fire once more, gathered a new supply of

earth's ears thinking furiously the while. Himaggery had followed the runners. He had come, as she had, to this place on the road. Likely he, as she, had encountered the Dervish. The Dervish who had "come to warn." The Dervish who had said that the runners would return to the south would likely have said as much to Himaggery. Who had not, at that time, joined the runners. At least he was not among them now. So he had turned aside, say.

"As good a supposition as any other," she encouraged herself. Himaggery had turned aside, then, after meeting the Dervish. Why? "Because," she answered herself, "he, too, would have said something about the tower. Being Himaggery, he would not have done as I did, merely put the subject aside. No, he would have said something curious, something more Wizardly than mere chitchat. And if he did, then the Dervish would have replied with something sensible, also, and off Himaggery would have gone. So. Perhaps. At least it is worthy of examining further." She covered the fire with earth and Shifted into fustigar shape. The Dervish would not be difficult to track.

The trail was like a swept path, leaves and litter blown to either side by the Dervish's spinning, a little drift on either side marking the way. The path led away north of the road, down quiet moon-silvered glens and through shadowed copses, up long, dark inclines where the black firs sighed in the little wind, quietly moving as in the depths of a silent sea. Though the way rose and fell, she was neither climbing nor descending overall. Streams fell from higher tablelands into the valleys, ran there as quick streams away into the lowlands beyond. She wove deeper and deeper into the hills. She could not recall ever having come that way before, and yet there was something familiar about a distant crest, the way in which a line of mountain cut another beside a great pinnacle. There was something recognizable in the way a bulky cliff edged up into the moonlight, catching the rays upon one smooth face so that it glowed like a mirror in the night. She stopped, tried to think where she had seen it before. It must have been some other similar place, though it teased at her, flicking at the edges of memory.

From this place the trail led upward, over a ridge. On either side were great trees, those called the midnight tree because of its black leaves and silver bark. The trees were rare, had always been rare, and were rarer now because of men's insatiable use of the black and silver wood, beautiful as a weaving of silk. Mavin shook her head, troubled. She had seen ... seen such trees before. Not—not from this angle, but the bulk of them seemed somehow familiar, painful, as though connected with something she did not want to remember. Still, the trail led between the trees and down.

Down. There was velvet moss beneath her feet. She could feel it, smell it. The moss was starred with tiny white blossoms which breathed sweetness into the night. Other blossoms hung in long, graceful panicles from the trees, and a spice vine twined up a stump beside the way. Here the Dervish had slowed, stopped spinning. He—she, it had walked here quietly, scarcely leaving a trail. Across the valley was a low stone wall, and behind that wall a small building. Mavin could not see it, but she knew it was there. Discomfited, she whined, the fustigar shape taking over for a moment to circle on the fragrant moss, yelping its discomfort. Across the valley a pombi roared, softly, almost gently, like a drum roll.

The fustigar fell silent, Shifted up into Mavin herself, wide-eyed and bat-eared upon the night, no less uncomfortable but more reasoning in her own shape. "Now, now," she soothed herself. "Come now. It may be enchantment, or some malign influence or some Game you know nothing of, Mavin. Hold tight. Go down slowly, slowly, into this valley." Which she did, step by step, pausing after each to listen and sniff the air.

A pool opened at her side, ran liling into another. The path crossed still another on a bridge of stone which curved upward like a lover's kiss. Down through the blossoming trees she could see the valley floor, laced with streamlets and pools, like a silver filigree in the light. Beside one of the pools stood a glowing beast, graceful as waving grass, with one long horn upon its head.

Mavin ceased in that moment, without thought.

The place from which she came ceased, and the runners on the road. Windlow and Throsset ceased, and the cities of the world. Night and morning ceased, becoming no more than shadow and light. There was water, grass, the unending blend of foliage in the wind. There was whatever-she-was and the other, two who were as near to being one as had ever been. She was in another shape when she called from the hill, there from the crest where the great black trees bulked like a gateway against the stars, called in her beast's voice, a trumpet sound, silvery sweet, receiving the answer like an echo.

He ran to meet her, the sound of his hooves on the grass making a quick drum beat of joy. Then they were together, pressed tight side by side, soft muzzles stroking softer flanks, silk on silk, this joy at meeting again no less than the joy they had had to meet at first, that other time, so long ago. But that-which-they-were did not think of so-long-ago, nor of the time-past-when-they-were-not-together, nor of the moment-yet-to-come. Time was not. Before and after was not. The naming of names was not, nor the making of connections and classifications of things. Each thing was its own thing, each song in the night, each shadow, each pool, each leaf dancing upon its twig against the sky. They simply were.

Sometimes, in the light of morning, when they had walked slowly across the soft meadows, he would call in that voice she knew, and she would flee, racing the very clouds away from him, ecstatic at the drum of his hooves following; never so fast to flee as he to pursue. Then they would dance, high on their hind hooves, whirling, manes and tails flourishing in a fine silken fringe to veil the light, their voices crying fine lusty sounds at the trees, coming into a kind of frenzy at one another, lunging and crying, to settle at last with heaving sides, hearts thudding like the distant thunder.

Sometimes they would lie in the deep grass, chewing the flowers, head to tail as they whisked the glass-winged flies away, talking a kind of stomach talk to one another, content not to move. Then they would rise lazy at midday to stroll to the pools where they would swim, touching the pebbly bottoms with their feet, rolling in the shallows as they tossed great wings of spray against the trees. And at dusk, when

the whirling, humming thing came from the stone building at the edge of the rise, they would stand at the gate to let it stroke them and sing in tune with that humming, a song which the birds joined, and the pombi of the forest, and the whirling creature itself.

And sometimes they would run together, outdistancing the wind, fencing the air with their graceful horns, leaping up the piled hills of stone to stand at last like carven things on the highest pinnacles, calling to the clouds which passed.

Sometimes. Time on time.

Until one night the whirling thing came to the place they lay sleeping. It stopped whirling, and sat on the ground beside them and laid one hand upon her head. Her, her head. Her head only. And began to speak. "This is the garden, Mavin. The garden. Come up, now, out of this place you are in, the wordless place. Come up like a fish from the depths and hear me. This is a garden you are in—the garden, most ancient, adorable, desired. All here is limpid and bright, all details perfect. There are pure animals here, and trees bright with blossom and fruit, streams which sing a sort incessant music and birds which cry bell sounds of joy. There are lawns here, Mavin, green as that light which burns in the heart of legendary stones, and there are other creatures here as well. They lie upon the knolls soft with moss, garlanded with flowers, eating fruits from which a sweet scent rises to the heights.

"Hear me, Mavin. In this land walks also the slaughterer, Death. He comes to an animal or an other and kills it quietly, leaving the body to be eaten by the other beasts and the bones to bleach in the twining grasses. There is no outcry when he comes, for no creature in the garden sees the slaughterer or knows his purpose or anticipates his intent. No one here knows the end of his action, for none in this garden know one moment from another, none know the next moment from the moment at hand. None fear. None are apprehensive for the coming hour, or the morrow, and none hunger or thirst, but all eat and drink and mate and bear in the perfect peace which this garden has always within its borders. Mavin, do you hear me?"

"Listen to me, Mavin. There is only peace, tranquility, and simplicity here. And the end of it is Death, Mavin. Only that. Come up out of that dreamless place, Mavin, and think into yourself once more ..."

And the peace was destroyed. Not all at once, for she rose and trumpeted her song and ran across the meadow to leave the words behind, but they pursued her, slowing her feet. And when she swam in the pool, she looked into the depths of it and thought of drowning, making a panicky move toward the bank. And when evening came again, she did not lie upon the grasses beside him but stood, head down, musing, unaware that she was changing, Shifting ...

The Dervish stood before her, summoning her with a quiet hand. "Come."

A voice which she did not recognize as her own said, "I cannot leave ... him ..."

"For a time," said the Dervish. "Come." And they walked away up the hill toward the low stone building behind the wall.

Inside it was only white space, simple as a box, with a single bench and a cot and a peg upon the wall where clothing could be hung, and one small shelf. The Dervish brought clothing to Mavin, trousers, a shirt, a cloak, a belt and knife. "Put these on."

Mavin looked stupidly down at her nakedness, began to Shift fur to cover herself, was stopped by an imperative "No," from the Dervish. "Put them on." While Mavin was occupied with this, the Dervish took a cup from the shelf, filled it from a flask and gave it to Mavin. "Sit. Drink. Listen to me, Mavin Manyshaped."

"I must go ..."

"Listen." The voice was hypnotic, quiet, almost a whisper. "Who is it who lies yonder on the grasses, Mavin Manyshaped?"

"I ... I don't know. Not a person ..."

"You know better, Mavin Manyshaped. Who is it who runs trumpeting with you through the glades? Who swims with you in the pools of the garden? Who is your companion?"

"Don't ... I don't know."

"Come, woman. Do not try me too far. Did you lie to me? You were here before. Eight years ago. You found him here then because I had brought him here. He had enraged the shadow, and it came after him.

There is no way to flee from the shadow, only a way to hide—or be hidden. So, I hid him here in shape other than his own, safe for a time, only for a time ...

“Then I had to go away. There were things I had to do, great goings on which required my attention. When I returned I found him here and took him away, out of the valley, to a place where it would be safe to change him into his own form. He would not change. He could not change. He could not get out of the shape I had given him. So, I brought him back here, thinking to find whatever—whoever it was which had enchanted him more deeply than ever I had intended. I looked here in the valley, but there was no one here. Signs, yes. Tracks so like his own they were made by his twin. But of that beast itself no trace. Whoever had been here was gone.

“And it was you! You who came to him eight years ago! It had to have been a Shifter. Who else? What else!” The Dervish rose, began to spin, to him, the very walls humming with it as though enraged. After a time it calmed, settled, whispered at her once more. “Mavin Manyshaped, what have you done?” Mavin sat frozen, like curdled stone, only half aware of what was said, what was meant. Eight years ago Himaggery had disappeared. Eight years ago she, Mavin, had found an idyll in this place. With ... with ...

“Himagery!” she sobbed, at once grieved and joyed, lost and found, the world spinning around her as though it were the Dervish. “Himagery!”

“Ah.” Now the Dervish was quiet. “So you didn’t know. And perhaps you told me the truth when you said you had not been upon the road before? Hmm. But you had come here, and found him here, and changed, not knowing who he was. Well, having loved you here, my girl, he would not leave the place, would not give up his shape. You did not know it was he. I wonder, somehow, if he knew it was you. Well. Knowing this, perhaps now I can save him.”

“Save him for what?” Mavin cried, anguished. “Save him for what, Dervish? Were we not content as we were in your garden? Could you not have left us as we were?”

“Think on that, Shifter-woman. True, I have set some in this garden who will never leave it. But the slaughterer will come, woman. Age will come, and Death. The youthful you will go, and there will be no joy of the mind to make up for it. Think of it. What would Himaggery have you do, if he could ask?”

Mavin leaned her head in her hands. How long had this gone on? All she wanted to do was return to the garden, leave this simple house and return. If she could not do that? What then? Could she take Himaggery with her?

“Oh, Gamelords, Nameless One. Tell me your name, at least. Let me curse you by name!”

“I am Bartelmy of the Ban, Mavin. It is beneath my Ban that Himaggery was saved from the shadow, within my Ban he has lived these eight years.”

“Can we get him out of it?”

“I believe so. I believe you can. Now.”

“Well then, Dervish, let us do it. All my body longs only to go back to your garden. Oh, it is a wicked enchantment to make such a longing. See. I am sweating. My nose is running as though I had a fever. Yet inside my head is boiling with questions, with summons, with demands. I would be content to leave it, but it will not leave me. Let us get on with it.”

“You are too quick, Shifter. Too quick to Shift, too quick to change, too quick to decide. You came here the second time, and even though I half expected you, you were too quick. Now you would pull Himaggery back into his self without knowing why he was hidden, why that hiding was necessary. No. I will not accept this. Before we try, you and I, to get Himaggery out of the garden I put him in, you must understand why he went there. He was on a search, Shifter. He found at least part of what he was looking for.”

“I don’t care,” Mavin sobbed. “Himaggery is like that. He must understand everything. It doesn’t matter to me, not half of what he cares about. If a thing needs to be done, let us do it.”

The Dervish made a gesture which froze her as she sat, and the voice which came was terrible in its threat. “I said, too quick, Shifter. I, Bartelmy, will say what you will do. It is for your good, not your harm, and I will not brook your disobedience. You may go willingly or I will take you, but you will see what it was Himaggery saw.”

The voice was like ice, and it went into Mavin’s heart. There had been something in that voice—something similar to another voice she had heard long before. When? Was it in Ganver’s Grave? The Eesty? She drew herself up, slowly, feeling the inner coils of her straighten to attention, readying themselves for flight or attack. Oh, but this was a strange person who confronted her. It was both

weaponless and fangless, and yet Mavin shuddered at it, wondering that she could be so dominated in such short time.

It commanded. There was no energy in her to contest its commands, no strength to assert her own independence, her own autonomy. Almost without thought, she knew that this one had a will to match her own—perhaps to exceed her own. Too much had happened, too much was happening for her to consider what might be best to do—so let her do what this Dervish demanded. And if a thing must be done, then better seem to do it willingly than by force. She forced down her quick, instinctively shifty response to sit silent, waiting.

“Beyond the crest of the hill, Mavin, is a path leading to the south. Walk upon it. You will go three times a rise, three times a fall. On the fourth rise look away to your left. Something will not be there. Seek it out. Examine it. When you have done so, if you still can, return here.

“If you do not draw its attention, it will not follow you.” The Dervish began to spin, move, away and out the door of the place, down the meadow and into the trees. Mavin looked among those trees for the silver beast, the lovely beast, the glorious one, her own. A pain too complex to bear broke her in two, and she gasped as she ran toward the crest of the hill. Gamelords. She would not live to finish this journey.

Once at the crest, it was some time before she could gather her attention to find the southern path. Once on it, her feet followed it of themselves, counting the rises, the falls. She burned inside, an agony, uncaring for the day, the path. The third rise, the third fall. Gasping like a beached fish she came to the last crest and fell to her knees, tears dropping into the dust to make small dirty circles there. At last she stood again and looked off to the left, wondering for the first time how one could see a thing which was not there.

Her glance moved left to right, to left, to right once more, swinging in an arc to that side, only slowly saying to her brain that there was one place in that arc where no message came from the eye. A vacancy. Nothing. She sat upon a log and stared at it. It vanished, filled in with lines of hill and blotches of foliage. She scanned along the hill once more, and it vanished once more. Her throat was suddenly dry, hurtfully dry. There was a streamlet in the valley below, and beyond that stream a hill, and beyond that the upward slope. She struggled down toward the water, catching herself as she slid, somehow not thinking to Shift or unable to do so. At the stream she drank and went on.

As she reached the last hill, she fell to her belly to crawl the last few feet, masking her face with a branch of leafy herb. Below the hill was ... a road. A side road, a spur leading from the south to end in this place. Upon the road a tower. She thought it was quite tall, but the wavering outlines made it uncertain. If one could get closer ... It seemed almost to beckon, that wavering. One should get closer.

No! It was as though the Dervish's voice spoke to her where she lay. Himaggery would have gone closer. Being Himaggery, he would have been unable to keep himself away from it. He went down there, saw—something. Something terrible, which did not want to be seen. Something which pursued him.

Then he ran. She could see him in her mind, fleeing down the steep slope, falling, scrambling up to run again, panting, his throat as dry as her own. Run. To the path at the top of the hill, down three times, up three times, growing wearier with each fleeing step, with some horror coming after him. Until he reached the great midnight trees at the entrance to the valley where the Dervish waited ...

Whatever had pursued him from this place could not be misled or outrun. So much she had gathered; so much she understood. No. He could hide from this pursuing horror only by giving up everything which made him Himaggery.

So, go no closer, Mavin, she told herself. Watch from here. Find out from here what is there.

Nothing was there.

Nothing boiled at the edges of vision, blurring and twisting like the waves of heat she had seen on long western beaches, making a giddy swirl of every line. For a time there was nothing more than; this impression of boiling nothingness to hold her attention, making her feel so dizzy and sick that she gripped the ground beneath her, digging her nails deep into gravelly soil which seemed to tilt and sway. Then, when time passed and her eyes became accustomed to the unfocused roiling, she saw there was substance—if not substance, then color—to whatever shifted and boiled. It was not another hue. Greens were not bluer or yellower, browns not more red or ocher. It was, instead, as though all color was grayed, darkened, becoming mere hint and allusion to itself, a ghostly code for the shades and tints of the world. This allusive grayness piled upon the roadway, flickered around the outlines of the tower she believed she saw, coalescing into writhing mounds, fracturing into fluttering flakes.

Breaking away, one such flake flew upward toward her, coming to rest upon the littered slope. Behind it as it flew the trees lost their gold-green vitality to appear as a brooding lace of bones against the sky; at first an entire copse, then a narrower patch, then a thin belt of gray which striped the trees. As it came to rest, the shadow became wider once more, the copse behind it showing gray and grim. After a chilly time, her mind translated this into a reality, a thing seen if only in effect; something leaf-shaped, thin when seen edge on but broad in its other dimensions, something which could lift or fly and was, perhaps, like those other flakes crawling in nightmare drifts upon the roadway.

Shadows. Shadows which moved of themselves. She put her face into her hands and lay there silently, unable to look at them because of the vertiginous dizziness they caused. She was helpless until the nausea passed, leaving a shaky weakness in its place. Then she could breathe again, and she opened her eyes to watch, not daring to move.

There were birds nesting in the trees behind her. She heard them scolding, saw their shadows dash across the ground as they sought bits of litter and grass. One of them darted near her face. It hopped toward a bunch of grasses on which the shadow flake lay, gathering dried strands as it went. There was plenty of grass outside the shadow. The bird half turned, as though to go the other way, but a breeze moved the grasses. Within the shadow, they beckoned. The bird turned and hopped into the shadowed space. The grasses dropped from its beak. It squatted, wings out, beak open, then turned its head with horrid deliberation to peck at one wing as though it attacked some itching parasite.

All was silent. Mavin lay without breathing, prone, almost not thinking. Before her on the slope in the patch of shadow a bird pecked at its wing, pecked, pecked.

After a time the shadow lifted lazily, hovering as it turned, becoming a blot, a line, a blot once more as it rejoined the clotted shadow at the tower. Behind it on the slope a bird stopped pecking. With a pitiable sound it stumbled away from its own wing which lay behind it, severed.

Mavin drew upon the power of the place without thinking. She Shifted one hand into a lengthy tentacle, reached out for the bird and snapped its neck quickly to stop the thin cry of uncomprehending pain. The piled shadows heaved monstrosly, as though someone had spoken a word they listened for. They had noticed something—the draw of power, her movement, the bird's death. She could not watch any longer. Head down, she wriggled back the way she had come.

When she had returned to the road, she saw shadows there as well, one or two upon the verges, a few moving across the sky from tree to tree. At the top of each rise were a few, and in each hollow. As she approached the great midnight trees at the entrance to the valley, she saw others there, more, enough to shimmer the edges of the guardian trees in an uneasy dance. Between them stood the Dervish. "You have seen." It was not a question. It was a statement of fact. Mavin knew what she had seen showed in her face; she could imagine the look of it. Ashamed. Terrorized.

"I have seen something," she croaked. "I do see. They lie in the trees around us."

"I know," the Dervish replied. "In usual times, they lie only upon the tower as they have done for

centuries, hiding it from mortal eyes, hiding the bell within. I have seen them, as have others before me. But Himaggery was not content merely to see. He attempted to penetrate, to get into the tower.”

“How is that possible?”

“To a Wizard, anything is possible,” the Dervish said with more than a hint of scorn. “Or so they lead themselves to believe.”

“If you think so little of Wizards, why did you save him from the shadows at all?” Mavin asked this with what little anger she could muster.

“I counted it my fault he went there. He asked about the tower and I answered, not realizing his arrogance. I did not warn. Therefore this disturbance was my responsibility, Shifter. At least for that time. Now it is one I will pass on to you, for it is you who thwarted my releasing him. You will take him away with you. His presence, and yours, disturb my work.”

“If you’ll put him into his own form,” agreed Mavin, not caring at the moment what the Dervish’s work might be. “Though he may immediately try to go back to the tower and finish whatever it was he started ...”

The Dervish hummed a knifelike sound which brought Mavin to her knees, gasping. “Not in his own form! And he will not go back to that tower! How far do you think these will let him go in his own form?” The Dervish gestured at the shadows, making a sickening swooping motion with both arms, then clutching them tight and swaying. “They would have him tight-wrapped in moments. No. It must be far and far from here, Mavin Manyshaped, that he is brought out of that shape. Come!”

There were no shadows in the valley, at least none that Mavin could see. There was a silvery beast waiting beside the flowery pools, and she fought the instinctive surge toward him, the flux of her own flesh inside its skin. There was a pombi there as well, huge and solemn beside the low wall, leaning against it, an expression of lugubrious patience upon its furry face.

“Come out, Arkhur,” commanded the Dervish.

The pombi stood on its hind legs, stretched, faded to stand before Mavin as a sad-faced, old youngster dressed in tattered garments. Mavin gasped. It was the face she had seen at the Lake of Faces, the other which had spoken of Bartelmy's Ban. So here was Chamferton's brother, wearily obedient to this Dervish.

"Go back, Arkhur," said the Dervish.

The youth dropped to all fours and became a pombi once more.

"I didn't know anyone could do that," grated Mavin. "Except Shifters, and then only to themselves."

"No one can, except Shifters, and only to themselves. He only believes he is a pombi. You believe it because he believes it. He believes it because I believe it. Even the shadows believe—no, say rather the shadows do not find in him that pattern they seek. When Himaggery went to the tower, he found this one nearby, enchanted, perhaps, or drugged, or both. When Himaggery fled, he carried this one out with him, though he would have been wiser to go faster and less encumbered. I hid him as I hid Himaggery, though it is probable it was not as necessary. Now both must go. Those you meet upon the road will believe he is a pombi.

"So, too, with the other. He believes he is the fabulous beast he appears to be to others. You believe it also. All others will believe it. The shadows will not sense in him the pattern they seek. But you must go far from here, very far, Mavin Manyshaped. No trifling distance will do. You must be several days' journey from your last view of the shadows before you bring him out into himself once more. Do it as I did. Call his name; tell him to come out. Make him hear you, and he will come out."

"A place far from here." Mavin staggered, too weary to stand. "Far from here."

"A place well beyond the last shadow, a place where no shadow is," the Dervish agreed.

She took up a halter which was hanging upon the gate, and wondered in passing whether it was real or whether she only believed she saw it. Whichever it might have been, the fabulous beast believed he felt it, for he called a trumpet sound of muted grief as they went up the road past the guardian trees, the pombi shambling behind them.

CHAPTER FIVE

They could not go far enough. Mavin stumbled as she led the beast, dragged her feet step on step, looking up to see shadows in every tree they passed beneath, on every line of hill, in every nostril of earth. Still, she went on until she knew she could go no farther, then tethered the beast to a tree and coaxed him to lie down as a pillow for her head. The pombi lay beside them without being coaxed, and warmed by the furry solidity she rested. The smooth body beneath her cheek breathed and breathed. She forced herself not to respond to that gentle movement, though she passionately desired to lie right against that body and abandon herself to the closeness, the warmth. Something in the beast responded to her, and he turned to bring her body closer, touching the soft flesh of her neck with a muzzle as soft. She forced herself away, trying to find a position which would not so stir her feelings, found one of sheer weariness at last. Thus they slept, moving uneasily from time to time as night advanced, and it was in the dark of early morning that she woke to begin the trek once more.

The thought of food began to obsess her. She did not know what the beast could eat. She remembered eating grass when she had been his mate, but she had actually Shifted into a form which could eat grass. What did Himaggery eat in this strange shape he thought he bore? Did belief extend to such matters as teeth and guts? Could she feed such a beast on grasses which would not keep the man alive? The pombi did not wait upon her consideration. He shambled off into the forest and returned with a bunwit dangling from his jaws, munching on it with every appearance of satisfaction. Soon after, they passed a rainhat bush. Mavin peeled a ripe fruit and offered it from her hand. The beast took it with soft lips and a snuffle of pleasure. Had it not been for the shadows clustered around them, she would have felt pleased. "I cannot call you ... Himaggery," she whispered, giving voice to the name itself. "Not even to myself. To do so starts something within me I cannot hold. And I may not think of you as I did when I was your mate within the valley, for to do so melts my flesh, beast. So. What shall I call you?" She considered this while they walked a league or so, the pombi licking bunwits blood from his bib of white hair, she feeding the other two of them on fruit and succulent fronds of young fern which thrust their tight coils up among the purple spikes of Healer's balm. Only the rainhat bush bore fruit so early, and she gave some thought to the monotony of the beast's diet if, indeed, it could not eat grass or graze upon the young leaves.

"I will call you Fon," she said at last. "For you were Fon when we met. Or I will call you Singlehorn."

The beast stopped, staring about himself as though in confusion, and she knew her words had reached some inner self which was deeply buried.

"Fon," she said in pity. "It's all right. It's all right, my Singlehorn."

It was not all right. The shadows had only multiplied as they went, as though attracted by some ripe stink

of passion or pain. Something in the relationship among the three of them, perhaps, or between any two of them. Something, perhaps, which sought to surface in either Arkhur or ... Fon. Something, perhaps, which sought expression in herself. She thought of the bird which had severed its own wing, wondering what had motivated the shadow to cause such a thing, or whether any creature, once it had invaded the shadow, would have acted so automatically. Yet Himaggery had sought to invade the tower and had somehow escaped.

The bird had simply gone into the shadow.

How had Himaggery gone?

The shadows had not sought the bird. Or had they?

The shadows were seeking something now. Seeking, following, but not attacking. She wondered at their passivity, knowing they could attack if they would. Their failure to do so was more frightening than the actuality, making heart labor and breath caw through a dry throat without purpose. Running would not help. Conversation would make her feel less lonely, but there was no one present who could answer her. Even her words were dangerous, for either of the beasts beside her might rise to an unintentional inflection, an unmeant phrase, rise into that pattern which the shadows sought.

So, in a forced silence, for the first time since leaving the valley, she began to consider where they were going. Somewhere without shadows. And where might such a place be found?

“We need a Wizard,” she whispered to herself. “One walks at my back, and I cannot use him. Chamferon is far to the east of us. Besides, I cannot like him, dare not trust him. So. Perhaps instead of a Wizard, I need ... a Seer. To find the shadowless place. And who would be more interested than Windlow, Fon-beast, eh? Far and far from here, down the whole length of the land to the mountainous places of Tarnoch. Still, I could rely upon him. And once there—once there we could rest.”

Even though the shadows did not attack, they were present. Weariness followed upon that feet, a weightiness of spirit, a heaviness of heart and foot and hand so that mere bodies became burdens. Mavin wondered dully if she could Shift into something which would be less susceptible to this lassitude and was warned by some inner voice to stay as she was, not to change, not to draw upon any power from the earth or air, for it was such a draw upon the power of the place which had stirred the shadows in her presence once before.

“As we are, then,” she sighed. “As we are, companions. One foot before another, and yet again, forever. Gamelords, but we have come a wearying way.”

They had not come far and she knew it. They had gone up and down a half-dozen small hills, tending always south toward the road of ting-ling stones where the blind runners had been. She did not know why she had set out with that destination in mind except that it was a real place, a measurable distance from other places she knew, not so far that it seemed unattainable even to a group as weary as this one.

One rise and then another. One hollow and then another. Trees blotted dark on a line of hill. Rocks twisted into devil faces; foliage in the likeness of monsters. Clouds which moved faster in the light wind than they three moved upon the earth. Each measure a measure of a league's effort to cross a quarter of it. Until at last they came to a final rise and saw the pale line of the road stretching across its feet.

The day had dawned without sun and moved to noon in half light. They could go no further, but she led them on until the road itself was beneath their feet. Once there, they dropped into a well of sleep as sudden as a clap of thunder. No shadow moved on this road. No shadow moved near this road. Pale it stretched from east to west, the stones of it cracked into myriad hairline fissures in which fernlets grew, and burtons of fungus, their minute parasols shedding a tiny fog of spores upon the still air. Mavin lay upon them like a felled sapling, all asprawl, loose and lost upon the stones, the beasts beside her. In their sleep they seemed to flatten as though the stones absorbed them, drew them down, and when they woke at last they lay long, half conscious, drawing their flesh back up into themselves.

It was music which had wakened them, far off and half heard on a fitful wind, but music nonetheless. A thud of great drum; a snarl of small drum; blare and tootle, rattle and clash, louder as it continued, obviously nearing. There were no shadows nearby though Mavin saw flutters against a distant copse. She dragged herself up, tugging the beasts into the trees at the side of the road. They stood behind leafy branches, still half asleep, waiting for what would come.

What came was a blare of trumpets, a pompety-pom of drums, three great crashes of cymbals, thrajngggg, thranggg, thranggg, then a whole trembling thunder of music over the rise to the east. They, saw the plumes first, red and violet, purple and azure, tall and waving like blown grass. The plumes were upon black helmets, glossy as beetles, small and tight to the heads of the musicians who came with their cheeks puffed out and their eyes straight ahead, following one who marched before them raising and lowering his tall, feathered staff to set the time of the music. Mavin felt the Fon-beast's horn in the small of her back, up and down, up and down, marching in time to the music. Looking down, she saw pombi feet, Fon feet, and Mavin feet all in movement, pom, pom, pom, pom, as the bright music tootled and bammed around them.

The musicians were dressed in tight white garments with colorful fabric wrapped about them to make bright kilts from their waists to below their knees, reflecting the hues of the plumes as they swished and swung, left-right, left-right. Polished black boots thumped upon the stones; the musicians moved on. Behind came the children, ranks and files of them, some with small instruments of their own, and behind the children the wagons, horses as brightly plumed as the musicians were, the elderly drivers sitting tall as the animals kept step, legs lifted high in a prance.

She could see no shadows anywhere near, not upon the road nor within the forest, perhaps not within sound of the music. Mavin moved onto the roadway behind the last of the wagons. From the back of it, an apple-cheeked old woman nodded at them with a smile of surprise, tossing out a biscuit which the Fon caught between his teeth. Mavin got the next one and the pombi the third, throwing it high to catch it on the next step, marching as it chewed in the same high, poised trot the wagon horses displayed.

“Are you Circus?” cried the old woman from a toothless mouth. “Haven’t seen Circus in a lifetime!”

Mavin had no idea what she meant, but she smiled and nodded, the Singlehorn pranced, and Arkhur-pombi rose to his hind legs in a grave two-step. So they went, on and on, keeping step to the drums even when the other instruments stopped tweedling and flourishing for a time. The sun dropped lower in their faces, and lower yet, until only a glow remained high among the clouds, pink as blossoms.

Then the whistle, shreeee, shreee; whompity-womp, bang, bang. Everything stopped.

A busy murmur, like a hive of bees. Shouts, cries, animals unhitched and led to the grassy verges of the road. Fires started almost upon the road itself, and cookpots hung above them. Steam and smoke, and a crowd of curious children gathering around the Fon-beast and Arkhur-pombi, not coming near, but not fearful either, full of murmurs and questions.

“Are they trained, Miss? Can you make them do tricks? Can you ride them? Would they let me ride them? Are you Circus?”

“What,” she asked at last, “is Circus?”

“Animals,” cried one. To which others cried objection, “No, it’s jugglers.”

“Clowns.”

“Acrobats, Nana-bat says.”

“It’s marvels, that’s what.”

An older child approached, obviously one to whom the welfare of these had been assigned, for he wore a worried expression which looked perpetual and shook his head at the children in a much practiced way. “Why are you annoying the travelers? One would think you’d never seen an animal trainer before. We saw one just last season, when we left the jungle cities.”

“Not with animals like this, Hirv.”

“Those were only fustigars, Hirv.”

“Nobody ever told me you could train pombis, Hirv.”

“Hirv, what’s the one with the horn. Ask her, will you Hirv.”

“That beast is a Singlehorn,” Mavin replied in an ingratiating tone. “The pombi was raised by humans since it was a cub.” Which is true enough, she told herself. Arkhur must have been raised by someone. “I am not their trainer. I am merely taking them south to their owner.” She had thought this out fairly carefully, not wanting to be asked to have the beasts do tricks. “If it would not disturb you, we would like to go along behind you for a time. Your music makes the leagues shorter.” And she provided another ingratiating expression to put herself in their good graces. The children seemed inclined to accept her, but the one who was approaching next might be harder to convince.

He was the music master, he of the tall, plumed staff and the silver whistle. He thrust through the children, planted the staff on the pave and looked them over carefully before turning to the child-minder. “What does she want?”

“Only to follow along, Bandmaster. She says it makes the leagues shorter.”

The Bandmaster allowed himself a chilly smile. “Of course it does. The Band swallows up the leagues as though it had wings. Music bears us up and carries us forward. In every land in every generation.”

The children had evidently heard this before, for there was tittering among them; and one, braver than the rest, puffed himself up in infant mockery, pumping a leafy branch as though he led the marching.

“What is your name?” the Bandmaster demanded.

“Mavin,” she said, making a gestured bow. “With two beasts to deliver to the southland.”

“I assume they are not dangerous? We need not fear for our children?”

Mavin thought of the murdered bunwit and looked doubtfully at Arkhur-pombi, who returned the gaze innocently, tongue licking his breast hairs, still slightly stained with bunwit blood. “I will keep it near me, Bandmaster. Can you tell me where you have come from? I have traveled up and down this land for twenty years, and I have not run across your like before.” The Bandmaster smiled a superior smile, waving his hand to an elder who lingered to one side, arms clutched tight around a bundle of books. “Where have we been in twenty years, Byram? The Miss wishes to know.”

The oldster sank to his haunches, placing the bundle on the ground to remove one tome and leaf through it, counting as he leafed back, stopping at last to cry in a reedy voice, “Twenty years ago we were on the shores of the Glistening Sea nearby to Levilan. From there we went north along the shore road to the sea cities of Omaph and Peeri and the northern bays of Smeen. And from there,” leafing forward in his book, “to the Qtadel of Jallywig in the land of the dancing fish, thence north once more along Boughbound Forest to the glades of Shivermore and Creep and thence south to the jungle roads of the Great Maze. Oh, we were on the roads of the Great Maze ten years, Miss, and glad to see the end of them at last in the jungle cities of Luxuri and Bloome. And from there south across the Dorbor Range onto the old road where we are now. We have played the repertoire forty times through in twenty years ...”

“How long have you been doing this?” she asked. “Traveling around this way?”

“How long have we been marching,” corrected the Bandmaster. “Why, since the beginning, of course. Since disembarkation or shortly thereafter. At first, so it is written, there were few roads and long, Miss, but as we go they ramify. Ah, yes, they ramify. Used to be in time past, so it is written, we could make the circuit in five years or so. Now it takes us seventy. In time, I suppose, there will be children born who will never live to see their birthplace come up along the road again. Jackabib, there, with his leafy bough pretending to mock the Bandmaster, why, it may be he will never see the city of Bloome again.”

Jackabib did not seem distressed by this thought. He only flushed a little and ran off into the trees where he peeked at them from among the leaves like a squirrel.

“Well then, I would not have seen you,” agreed Mavin. “You have not been this way in my lifetime. I am mighty glad you came this way now, however, for it is a sight I will always remember.” And a sound, she thought, aware of the ache in her legs. The sound had carried them step on step, and never a sign of weariness or hurt until the music stopped. “This pombi is pretty good as a hunter as am I. May we contribute meat for the pot?”

This was agreed to with good cheer, so she led Arkhur beast into the trees and set him on the trail. She poised, then, ready to Shift herself into hunting fustigar shape, only to stop, listening, for it seemed she heard a deep, solemn humming in the trees. The sound faded. She took a deep breath, began the Shift, then heard it once more. The voice came on the little wind like a sigh. “Do not Shift, Mavin. Stay as you are. You risk much if you Shift, the shadows not least.”

When it had spoken, she was not sure she had heard it. When she readied herself once more, however, she knew she had heard it, for her flesh twinged away from the idea of Shift as though it had been burned.

“Well then,” she said to herself, not ready yet to be worried at this. “I will do as the children of Danderbat Keep were taught to do. I will set snares.”

Arkhur-pombi returned to her from time to time with his prey, like a cat bringing marshmice to the door. Each taim Mavin patted him and took the preferred bunwit with expressions of joy, as though he had indeed been some young hunting beast she sought to train. She laughed at herself, yet went on doing it. Her snares, set across burrow runways, were also useful; and they returned to the wagons some hours later, Mavin’s arms laden with furry forms, even after feeding two of them to Arkhur to assure the safety of the children.

She found the people of the band occupied with a myriad orderly duties, cooking, cleaning their musician dresses, polishing boots and helmets, copying strange symbols by firelight on squares of parchment which they told her conveyed the music they played. Mavin had not seen written music before, and she marveled at it, as strange and exotic a thing as she could remember ever having seen. Others of them gathered food from the forest by torchlight, rainhat berries, fern fronds, fungus to be sliced and dried before the fires. "When we play in the cities," she was told, "we are given coin, and we use that coin to fill the meal barrels and the meat safes. Between times, we must live upon the land."

The Fon-beast, tethered to a tree, was suffering himself to be petted and decked with flowers by a tribe of children. Mavin offered fruit and bread from her hand, only to be copied by all the young ones. So she could leave the Singlehorn without guilt in their tender hands and sit by other fires to hear what these people knew. She ended the evening telling stories of lands across the sea, of giant chasms and bridge-people who lived below the light, and stickies—one of whom, at least, probably remembered the days of disembarkation. "His name is Mercald-Myrtilon," she said. "And he has memories in him of that time a thousand years long past." There was much expression of interest and wonder at this, and the Bandmaster even began to talk of taking a ship to that farther shore to march there, until Mavin told him there were no roads at all.

After which she slept beside her beasts along with half a dozen children who had fallen asleep while petting or feeding one or both. When they woke, it was a brighter world than on any recent morning.

"Come, Arkhur-pombi," she teased the beast up and into motion. "There are no shadows near this road, and I must risk us both to learn something sensible." She took him off into the trees, not far, watching all the time for that telltale darkening of foliage or sky, seeing nothing but the honest shadows cast by the sun. There in a sweet clearing full of unrolling ferns she told him in the closest approximation of the Dervish's voice, "Arkhur, come out!"

It was some time before he did, rising on his hind legs, dropping again, circling uneasily, then at last seeming to set his mind on it. The figure which materialized out of the pombi's shape was no more impressive than before. It still had that young-old expression of apologetic intransigence, a face which said, "I know you all think this a stupid idea, and perhaps I do also, but I must get on with it." When he was fully before her, he seemed to have no idea what to do with his hands, but stood waving them aimlessly, as though brushing flies.

"You are Arkhur?" she asked in a gentle voice, not wanting to startle him. "Younger brother of the High Wizard Chamferton?"

She might as well have struck him with a whip. His eyes flashed; his back straightened; the hands came down before him in a gesture of firm negation.

“I am Arkhur,” he said in a furious tenor. “I am the High Wizard Chamferton, younger brother of a foul Invigilator who despised his Talent and sought to usurp mine!”

“Ahh,” she breathed. “So that was it. And how came you to this pass, Arkhur—or should I call you High Wizard, or sir? I called your brother by your name, I’m afraid, but it doesn’t surprise me to learn the truth. He had a slyness about him.”

“I trusted him,” the pombi-man growled, so suddenly angry he was almost incoherent. Mavin had to struggle to understand him as he spat and gargled. “I trusted his pleas for understanding and rest. He told me he was an old man. Beyond scheming anymore, he said. Beyond treachery. Wanting only warm fires and warm food, cool wine and quiet surroundings. And so I took him in. And he stayed, learned, Read me when I least expected it, then drugged me deep and sent me to be Harpy-dropped where the shadows dance. Fool! Oh, much will I treasure vengeance against him, woman. But well will I repay the Gamesman who brought me away from the shadows and the tower.” He seemed to savor this for the moment then demanded:

“Where is he?”

Mavin assumed he meant Himaggery. She shook her head. “He is near, but worse off than you, Wizard. Now, before you say anything more, tell me a thing. The Dervish who hid you told me to bring you out of the pombi shape ‘where no shadow was. ‘ Well, there is no shadow here, but I doubt not they are somewhere perhaps within sight of us. Are you in danger in your shape? And if so, shall I return you to beastliness?”

At first the High Wizard Chamferton understood none of this and it took considerable time for Mavin to explain it. By the time he had climbed a tree to see for himself where shadows lay upon the line of hills, smells of breakfast were wafting from the fires along the road, and they were both hungry.

“My brother used a certain drug on me, Mavin. He knows little enough of his own Talent, and even less of mine, or he would have realized that in that drugged state, the shadows would pay me no more attention than they might pay a block of wood. Though I could see them and even consider them in a dreamy way, I had no more volition than a chopping block. No. They did not care about me and will not be attracted to me. I am certain of that.”

“Certain enough to risk our lives?” she persisted.

He nodded, again solemn. “Certain.”

“Well, that’s something the Dervish didn’t know.” This made Mavin cheerful for some reason. It was good to think that there were some things a Dervish might not know. “Well then, how do I explain the loss of the pombi?”

“Don’t explain it. Put me back as I was, woman, and let us part from these good people amiably. Perhaps in time we will want their friendship. Then, when we have separated from them, you can bring me out again. Next time it will not be such a task, for I will set myself to remember who I am, even in pombi shape.”

Mavin, well aware of the lure of forgetfulness which came with any beast shape, did not totally believe this optimistic statement but was content to try it. “Go back, Arkhur,” she said, needing to say it only once. They emerged from the trees to the welcoming bugle of the Singlehorn and in time for breakfast.

“Have you a map of the way you are going?” she asked the old man, Byram, who seemed to be totally responsible for all matters of record. “Perhaps I might rejoin your party farther on?”

He sniffled, scuffled, laid the map out on a wagon’s hinged side and pointed out to her the way they would go.

“Well, here’s the way of it, girl. Last time we were by here, I was a youngun. ‘Prentice to the manager before me, just as he was to the one before him clear back to disembarkation. He took the notes and went over ‘em with me, and I took ‘em down myself, just to have another copy—he used to say that a lot: ‘one copy’s a fool’s copy,’ meaning if you lost the one, where’d you be? Eh? Well, so I always had my own copy made from then on. Now, though, after fifty years, try and read it! So look here. It goes from where we are on west, and west, bumpety-bump, all through these whachacallems forests. ...”

“Shadowmarches,” offered Mavin. “This whole area west of the Dorbor Mountains and east of the sea, north of the Cagihiggy Creek cliffs, all the way to the jungles.”

“Sha-dow-mar-ches,” he wrote laboriously, spelling it out. “Well now, that’s good to know. So, westward, westward for a long straight way, then we come to the coast and turn away down south. No road north from there, just trails. At least fifty years ago was just trails. Maybe won’t be any road south either, now, but we can usually find flat enough to march on.

“Anyhow, the road goes south and south until it comes to this long spit of land heading right out into the sea, down the west side of this great bay, almost an inland sea. Well, the road goes along south. East across the bay you can see a town, here, at the river mouth. What d’ya call that?”

“Ummm,” said Mavin, puzzling out the map. “That’s Hawspport.”

“Right! See, those little letters right there. That’s what they say. Hawspport. So you know it’s been there a while, don’t you? Well, we go on until we’re well south of Hawspport, then the spit of land turns east a little, coming closer to the mainland, closer and closer until it gets to a bridge.”

“I don’t think there’s a bridge there,” said Mavin. “Not that I remember.” She tried to summon bird memories of the coast as seen from above, as she had crossed it again and again in the long years’ search for Handbright. No bridge. Certainly not one of the length the old man’s map called for.

“Now then, isn’t that what I said to the Bandmaster! I said, likely that bridge’s gone, I said. There was a storm not long after we were here before that would have been a horror and a disaster to any bridge ever built. Even if it isn’t gone, likely it’s in a state of sorrowful disrepair. Oh, the bridges we’ve gone over that trembled to our step, girl, let me tell you, it’s no joke when a band must break step to keep a bridge from collapsing. And the ones we’ve not dared tread on and have had to go around, ford the stream, march along the river to a better place. Bridges! They’re the bane of my life.”

“I truly don’t think there’s one there,” she repeated. “What will you do if there isn’t?”

“Well that’s not my problem,” he said, folding the map with small, precise gestures. “I’ve told Bandmaster, told him in front of half the horn section just this morning, and he paid me no mind. So we get there and no bridge? Well, that’s his problem, not mine.”

“You’ll have to go back?” she asked.

“Likely. And wouldn’t that make him look silly.” The old man giggled into his hands in a childlike way, then harumphed himself into a more dignified expression. “If you don’t find us on the shore, Mavin, you look for us across the great bay. Likely we’ll be there, waiting for boats!”

Mavin had to be satisfied with this. She felt she could take twenty days or more and still meet them somewhere on the road, across the bay or this side of it, safe from shadows. Or so she told herself to comfort the cold sorrow with which she left them. Perhaps she would only bring Arkhur into his own shape and let him go alone. Perhaps, she told herself, watching him shamble along behind the wagons, that solemn expression upon his face, as though he considered all the troubles of the world.

After the noon meal she left the Band, turning aside on a well traveled track as though such a destination had been intended from the beginning. When the Band had tootled itself away into the west no more than a small cloud of dust upon the horizon, she upon the ancient pave and said, “Arkhur, come out.” This time he was less hesitant, and he did remember himself—which somewhat increased her respect for Wizards, or at least for this one—so that their way east could begin immediately. Only Singlehorn stood behind them, crying into the west as though he could not bear the music to be gone. Mavin had to tug him smartly by the halter before he moved, and even then it was with his head down, his horn making worm trails of gloom in the dust.

“There is the one who saved you, Arkhur. We are not far enough from the shadows to restore him to his own shape, but his name,” she whispered, “is Himaggery, and you may choose to remember it. You will want to return to your own demesne. There is probably little I could do to help you there, and since it is not our affair, we will go on south.”

“It is not your affair,” he agreed in a troubled voice, “if you are sure my brother has not your Face at the Lake of Faces, yours nor Himaggery’s. I need not search the place to be sure he has mine!”

“He does have Himaggery’s,” she confessed. “Though he said not!”

“No more than a pin prick at the time, no more than a year’s life lost each time he questions the Face thereafter. He need only send evil Pantiquod or her daughter Foulitter, to question a Face some forty or fifty days running, and the life of even a youngish person would be gone. I am sure he questions my Face from time to time as I was in the Dervish’s valley. What did my face say?”

The question had been rhetorical, but Mavin answered it “It said the same as Himaggery’s did; that you were under Bartelmy’s Ban.”

He thought deeply, hands covering his eyes as he concentrated upon this information. “Well, I think it likely that such an answer did not shorten my life nor Himaggery’s. But my brother Dourso will not cease questioning. He may be there now, or tomorrow, asking of my Face. And when he hears I am no longer under—what was it you said?—Bartelmy’s Ban, will he not strip me of what life I have left as soon as he may? And he will not neglect to take yours, Mavin, and Himaggery’s as well. Do not ask me why, for I do not know, but it is no coincidence that all three of us came from Chamferton’s aerie to the Shadow Tower.” He gloomed over this, seeking a solution. “No. We must go quickly to the Lake of Faces, you as well as I, for either one of us alone might be unable to complete the task. Run as we may, are we not six days, eight days from the Lake of Faces? More perhaps?”

“You, perhaps,” she said. “Not I.” Even if she could not Shift, dare not Shift, for some reason only the Dervish understood, she could lengthen her legs and her stride. That was not truly Shifting. It was only a minor modification. “It is likely he has my Face as well. I slept deeply when I was there, too deeply, now I think of it. Perhaps he took my Face ... ”

“I think it probable,” Arkhur said. “More than probable. In my day I had a dozen Faces there, no more, all of them of evil men and women whose lives are a burden to the world. Even so, I questioned them seldom and only in great need. Not so my brother! I doubt not he has filled the Lake with them, and the forest as well.” Seeing Mavin’s expression, he nodded, confirmed in his belief. “Well then, we must move as quickly as we can. You must go there swiftly, Mavin. Take our masks down from the posts on which they hang and press them deep into the Lake. They will dissolve. Once gone, they are no danger.”

“Can you run faster as a pombi?” she asked, wondering whether he would know.

“No faster than when I am not.” he said, “except that I may run safer.”

“Will you bring Singlehorn as quickly as you can? I can go faster without either of you. It will perhaps save a day or two—a year or two...”

The High Wizard Chamferton looked at her with serious eyes, and Mavin knew she could trust him with her own life or any other she could put in his keeping, to the limit of his ability. She nodded at him. “I will make a trail for you to follow. Watch for signs along the road.” Then she spoke as the Dervish had done once more “Go back, Arkhur.”

She ran away to the east without looking behind her, lengthening her legs as she went. There were still no shadows near nor on the road. It stretched away east, straight and clear, edged by long, ordinary sun shadows from the west, seeming almost newly built in that light. She fled away, stride on stride leaving them behind, hearing the shuffle of pombi feet and the quick tap of Singlehorn hooves fade into the silence of the afternoon.

CHAPTER SIX

She had not gone far before discovering that it was one thing to run long distances when one could Shift into a runner—whether fustigar shape or some other long-legged thing—and quite another thing when one must run on one's own two legs, even when they were lengthened and strengthened a bit for the job. The road was hard and jarring. She stepped off it to run on the grassy verge, seeing the shadows lying under the trees, wondering if they were of that same evil breed she had seen around the tower, knowing they were only a flutter away from her if they chose to move. The feet that they did not made them no less horrible.

She fell into a rhythm of movement, a counting of strides, one hundred then a hundred more. It seemed to her that she felt weariness more quickly than she had done on other similar occasions. Was it age? Was it only having to run in her own shape? Was it the feet that she ran eastward toward the Harpies once more, toward that paralyzing fascination she had felt once and dreaded to feel again? Was it the presence of the shadows? Was it that other thing—whatever it was—which prevented her Shifting? And what was that other thing? A mystery. Inside herself or outside?

Eighty-five, eighty-six, eighty-seven ...

It isn't the Dervish who speaks to me, telling me not to Shift, she told herself. Even though I hear that strange Dervishy humming all around, it isn't the Dervish. If the Dervish had known a reason I should not Shift, the Dervish would have said so, just as it said too many other things.

Besides, when she had pulled power there on the hillside above the shadowed tower the chill had attracted their attention, or it had seemed to do so. So it might be her own dream-mind telling her to be careful, telling her things her awake-mind was too busy to notice. Too busy to notice. As for example, how relieved she was to have left the Fon-beast behind ...

"That's not true!" she tried to tell herself. "That's nonsense."

The denial was not convincing. It was true; she was relieved to have left him behind. There was too much feeling connected with his presence, a kind of loving agony which pulled first one way then another, making her conscious of her body all the time. It was easier not to worry about that, easier to be one's own self for a time.

"Selfish," she admonished herself. "Selfish, just as Huld and Huldra were thinking only of themselves."

"Nonsense." Some internal monitor objected to this. "You have lived for thirty-five years on your own, mostly alone, not having to worry about another person every day, every hour. Thirty-five years sets habits in place, Mavin. It is only that this new responsibility disturbs your sense of the usual, that's all."

But it was not all. If that had been all she could have left the Fon-beast at any time for any reason, and so long as he was cared for, she should have felt no guilt. If that had been all, it would not have mattered who cared for him. But as it was, she knew she would not leave the Fon-beast unless it were necessary to save his life. He was now her responsibility. Set into her care. Given to her. Foisted upon her. She could no more turn her back on that than she could have turned her back on Handbright's children. "But I did not agree to that," she said to herself in a pleading voice. "I did not agree to that at all."

Seventy-one, seventy-two, seventy-three ...

"You agreed to meet him. Of such strange foistings are meetings made."

She did not know where these voices came from, familiar voices, sometimes older, sometimes younger than her own. They had always spoken to her at odd moments, calling her to account for her actions—usually when it was far too late to do anything about them. "Ghosts," she suggested to herself. "My mother's ghost? Ghost of all the Danderbat women, dead and gone." It was an unprofitable consideration which distracted her attention from covering the leagues east. She tried to think of something else, to concentrate upon counting her strides.

One hundred, and a hundred more, and a hundred more ...

Responsibility. Who had taught her the word? Handbright, of course. "Mavin, it is your responsibility to take the plates down to the kitchen. Mavin, you are responsible for Mertyn. Don't let him out of your sight. Mavin, you must acquire a sense of responsibility..."

What was responsibility after all but a kind of foisting? Laying a burden on someone without considering whether that person could bear it or wanted to bear it. Dividing up the necessities among the available hands to do it, though always exempting certain persons from any responsibility at all. Oh, that was true. Some were never told they must be responsible. Boy-children in Danderbat Keep, for example.

So it was some went through life doing as they chose without any responsibility or only with those responsibilities they chose for them-selves. Others had it laid upon them at every turn. So Handbright had tried to lay responsibility upon Mavin, who had evaded it, run from it, denied it. She had not felt guilty about that in the past. Why then did she feel guilt because she relished being on her own again, away from the thin leather strap which tied her to the Fon-beast, linking her to him by a halter of protection and guidance, a determination to bring him to himself safely—one hoped—at last. And it was not really the Dervish who had laid it on her; she had it laid on herself—laid it on with that promise twenty years ago.

“Every promise is like that,” she whispered to herself as she stopped counting strides for a moment. “Every promise has arms and legs and tentacles reaching off into other things and other places and other times, strange bumps and protrusions you don’t see when you make the promise. Then you find you’ve taken up some great, lumpty thing you never knew existed until you see it for the first time in the light of morning.” It was easier not to think of it.

Thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven ...

A great lumpty thing one never saw before. Not only ecstasy and joy and an occasional feeling of overpowering peace, but also guiding and protecting and watching and hoping, grieving and planning and seeing all one’s plans go awry. “I did not agree to be tied to any great, demanding responsibility,” she said, surprised at how clearly this came. “I don’t want to be tied to it.”

“Come now,” said a commentator. “You don’t know what it is yet. You think it’s likely to be lumpty, but it might not be that bad. You haven’t seen it. How would you know?”

“I know,” said Mavin, scowling to herself. “Never mind how I know, I know.”

“She knows,” said the wind. “Silly girl,” commented the trees. Her inner voices agreed with these comments and were silent.

She tried to estimate how far she might be from the Lake of Faces. Two days perhaps, or three. The Lake was a good way south of Chamferton's aerie, of course, and the road lay north. It was probable a great deal of distance could be saved if she could cut cross country southeast to intercept the canyons north of Pfarb Durim. Shadows lay beneath the trees to the southeast. Everywhere except on the road. Benign or malign. Both looked superficially the same until they moved, quivered, flew aloft in sucking flakes of gray. Better not tempt them. Run on.

Ninety-nine, one hundred, start over.

"You loved him as Fon-beast," her internal commentator suggested, as though continuing a long argument. "When you ran wild in the forest. Why do you disavow him now, at the end of a halter?"

"Because," she hissed, "I am tied to the other end of it! If he is tied, we are both tied. Now, voices, be still. Be done. I will think on it no more, care about it no more, worry it no more. I have leagues to run again tomorrow. I run to save my life and Himaggery's life and Arkhur's life, and there is no guilt in that, so be done and let me alone."

This exorcism, for whatever reason, seemed efficacious. She ran without further interruption to her concentration until darkness stopped her feet. She thought she would have no trouble sleeping then, though the stone was of a hardness which no blanket was adequate to soften. She would still sleep, no matter what, she thought, but that supposition was false. She lay half dozing, starting awake at every sound, realizing at last that she heard a Harpy scream in each random forest noise. When she realized that, she remembered also that she was traveling back toward the Lake of Faces, back toward the Harpy's own purlieu. It would be impossible to avoid them there. Impossible to avoid those eyes, those mouths, those long, snaky necks. She fell at last into shuddering dream, in which she was pursued down an endless road, Harpy screams coming from behind her, and she afraid to turn and see how many and how near they were.

She woke to music, thinking for a time in half dream that the Band had come to chase the Harpies away, or had not gone on, or had come back for her.

"Now we sing the song of Mavin," a small voice sang. Actually, it sounded more like "Deedle, pootie parumble lalala Mavin," but she knew well enough what it meant. In half dream she knew that voice as from a time long past when she had wandered the shadowmarches with the shadowpeople, hearing their song. Half awake, she identified it.

“Proom?” she called, sitting upright all in one motion. “Is that you?” only to have the breath driven out of her as something landed on her lap. Proom. Plus several other shadowpeople, their delighted faces beaming up into her own from between huge, winglike ears while others of their troop pranced and strutted around her.

“Proom, you haven’t grown older at all.” She was astonished at this, somehow expecting that he would have turned gray, or wrinkled, or fragile. Instead he was as wiry, sleek and hungry as she remembered him, already burrowing into her small pack to see what food she had to share. “There’s nothing there, Proom. I’ll have to go hunting. Or you will.”

He understood this at once, rounding up half his troop with a few high-pitched lalalas and vanishing into the forest. She started to cry out a warning, then stopped. There were no shadows within sight. What had seemed ambiguous the day before was clear enough today. Where the shadowpeople had gone there were no shadows except the benign interplay of sun and shade.

A pinching made her gasp, and she looked down to find two of the shadowperson females with their huge ears pressed tight to her stomach. “I know I rumble,” she commented, a little offended. “I’m hungry.”

The two leapt to their feet, smiling, caroling, dancing into and out of her reach in a kind of minuet. “Obbla la dandle, tralala, lele, la,” over and over, a kind of chant, echoed from the forest, “lele, la.” They were back in a moment, one with ear pressed against her belly while the others paraded about miming vast bellies, sketching the dimensions of stomachs in the air. “Lele, la,” making a great arc with their hands. “Lele, la.”

She did not understand. Even when their miming became more explicit she did not understand. Only when Proom emerged from the trees to caress one of the females, gesturing a big belly and then pointing to the baby she carried, did Mavin understand. “No,” she said, laughing. “You’re mistaken.”

“Lele, la,” they insisted, vehemently. “Lala, obbla la dandle.”

“Oh, by all the hundred devils,” she thought. “Now what idea have they swallowed whole. I am not lele la, couldn’t be. I haven’t...”

“In the lovely valley,” sang one of her internal voices, using the tune of a drinking song Mavin remembered from Danderbat Keep. “In the lovely valley, see the beasties run ...”

“That’s not possible. Himaggery was a Singlehorn. I was a Singlehorn. I mean, he thought he was. I really was. Besides, I was only there a day or two. Or ten. Or ... I don’t know how long I was there. How could I know?”

“Lele, la,” sang the shadowpeople, seeing her tears with great satisfaction. In their experience human people cried a lot over everything. It took the place of singing, which, poor things, most of them seemed unable to do. There was one group of humans who sang quite well—all males, back in a cliffy hollow west of Cagihiggy Creek. And there was a house of singers in the city of Learner. Other than the people in those places, most humans just cried.

One of the females crawled into Mavin’s lap and licked the tears off her cheek. “Lele, la,” she affirmed. “Deedle, pootle, parumble, lalala Mavin.”

She, Mavin, even while being sung of at great length and with considerable enthusiasm; she, Mavin, awaiting breakfast; she, Mavin, still disbelieving, stood up to look about her at the world. Some clue was there she had missed. She had been so focused on the shadows, she had not seen the purple lace of Healer’s balm under the trees, the seedpods nodding where yellow bells of startle flower had bloomed twenty or thirty days before. So. It was not a matter of a day or two. The startle flower had carpeted the forest north of Chamferton’s tower. Now it was gone to greenseed, the pods swelling already.

“It’s not possible.” She said this firmly, knowing it was a lie, trying to convince herself.

“Lele, la,” sang the female shadowpeople, welcoming the males back from their foraging in the woods. They came out singing lustily themselves, bearing great fans of fungus, skin bags full of rainhat fruit, and the limp forms of a dozen furry or feathered creatures.

“Celebration,” she said to herself in a dull voice of acceptance. “We’re having a celebration.”

Fires were lit. Mavin was encouraged by pulls and tugs to help prepare food; there was much noise and jollification until she laughed at last. This, was evidently the signal they had waited for. The shadowpeople cheered, danced, sang a new song, and came to hug Mavin as though she had been one of their children.

“Well, why not,” she wept to herself, half laughing. “Why not. Except that I should not Shift for a time, it is no great burden. And perhaps a child will be company.”

“Of course,” soothed an internal voice. “Except that you should not Shift for a time.” Which was what it had been saying all the while. So she had known it herself. With a Shifter’s intimate knowledge of her own structure, how could she not have known it? Known it and refused to admit it.

And that was it, of course. Her protection, her Talent, her experience—all useless for a time. Singlehorn and Arkhur behind her, depending upon her to do a thing which would be easy for a Shifter but perhaps impossible for someone without that ability. Harpies before her, threatening her, quite capable of killing her. If not easy, it would have been at least possible to defeat them so long as she could Shift. And now ... now!

If Shifting were simply impossible, the matter would be simpler. If she couldn’t do it, then she couldn’t—there would be no decisions to make, no guilty concerns about choices that should have been made the other way. She would live or die according to what was possible. But the ability to Shift was still there. If she abstained it was only that an internal voice had told her to abstain—in order to protect what lay within. Old taboos, childhood prohibitions, little brother Mertyn’s voice coming back to her out of time, “Girls aren’t supposed to, Mavin. They say it messes up their insides. ...”

Was that true? Who knew for sure? And how did they know? So now, Mavin, believe in the old proscriptions and you will not Shift until this child is born. So now, Mavin, do not Shift and it may be you cannot accomplish what you have set out to do, in which case Himaggery could suffer, even die because of it. Protect the one, lose the other.

“I did not want this lumpy thing all full of hard choices,” she cried, tears running down her face. “I did not want it.”

“Lele, la,” sang the shadowpeople, happy for her.

When the food was cooked, they ate it. The shadowpeople preferred cooked food, though they would eat anything at all, she suspected, including old shoes if nothing else were available. They licked juice from their chins and munched on mushroom squares toasted above the fires, nibbling rainhat berries in between with dollops of stewed fern. When they had done, with every bone chewed twice, they sat across the ashes, stomachs bulging, and looked expectantly at her. This was Mavin Manyshaped of

whom a song had been made, and they would not leave her unless they determined that nothing interesting was likely to happen. There were babies present who had never seen her before, this Mavin who had been to Ganver's Grave, who had saved the people from the pits of Blourbast. So they sat, watching her with glowing eyes, waiting for her to do something of interest.

At last, in a bleak frame of mind which simply set all doubts aside for the time, she stood up, brushed herself off, and waited while they packed up their few bits and pieces; a pot, a knife, a coil of thin rope, the babies clutching tight to their neck fur. Then she went to the side of the road and built a cairn there with a branch run through its top to point a direction. All the shadowpeople understood this. She was leaving a sign for someone who followed. They chattered happily at this opening gambit, then went after her as she ran off the road toward the southeast, shadows or no shadows. She thought it likely the particular shadows she most feared did not come near the shadowpeople. Perhaps the shadowpeople were immune. Perhaps, like the people of the marching Band, they created an aura which shut such shadows out. For whatever reason, she believed herself safe while with them and chose to use that time in covering the shortest route possible.

The hearty breakfast made her legs less weary, the day less gray than before. The members of the troop gathered foods as they ran close about her, the little ones darting ahead to leap out at them from behind trees or dangle at them from vines broken loose from the arching trees. Mavin stopped from time to time to leave sign along their way, though a blind man could have tracked them by the plucked flowers and the dangling vines. A warm wind came out of the south, carrying scents of grass so strong she might have been running beside mowers in a haymeadow. "Diddle, dandle, lally," the people sang, skipping from side to side. One who had not heard their songs translated might think them simple, perhaps childish. Mavin knew better. Childlike, yes. But never simple. Their tonal language concealed multiple meanings in a few sounds; their capacity for song carried histories in each small creature's head. "Diddle, dandle, lally," they sang, and Mavin made up a translation, wishing the translator-beast, Agirul, were present to confirm it. "I sing joy and running in the bright day, glory in the sun, happiness among my people." She would have wagered a large sum that it was something like that. "I sing babies playing hide and seek in the vines."

This was a good song to run by, and it kept her mind away from her destination. Away from Harpies. The shadowpeople were an excellent distraction and she blessed them as she ran, thanking their own gods for them. It was hard to be really afraid among them, for they faced fear with a belligerent, contagious courage.

When they rested at noon, she acted a play for them, showing herself sleeping first, then acting the part of one who came and stole her face, taking it away, placing it upon a high pole. When she had acted it twice, one of the people began to chatter, dancing up and down, gesturing at the trees, climbing one to a point above her head, hanging there as he mimed a face hanging there, touching the eyes, then his eyes, nose, then his nose, the mouth, then his own, showing them what hung upon the tree. At this they all fell into discussion some pointing eastward of the way they ran, others to the south, waving their arms in violent disagreement. When it was obvious they could not agree, Proom spoke sharply, almost unmusically, and a young one climbed the nearest tall tree to sing from the top of it toward the south and

east. After a time, they heard a response, a high, feint warble like distant birdsong. Time passed. The people did not seem distressed or hurried. More time passed. Then, when the sun stood well after noon and Mavin was beginning to fidget, the high, feint birdsong came again, and the shadowman above them warbled his response before plunging down among the branches. He gestured the direction and all of them pounded into movement again, this time guided by infrequent calls which seemed to emanate from distant lines of hill.

Somewhere, Mavin told herself, there are shadowpeople who know the Lake of Faces—perhaps even now they are near there. So the call goes out and is relayed across the forests until someone responds, and then that response is relayed back again. Song-guided, we go toward a place we cannot see. So they went until evening fell and the shade of the trees drew about them. Once more the fire, the foraging, the songs, the laughter. Once more lele-la, and choruses of joy. “I am unworthy of the great honour you do me,” said Mavin, bowing until they fell over one another in their amusement. “I am deeply touched.”

In the night she dreamed once more, starting upright in the darkness with a muffled scream. In dream the Harpies had laid their talons upon her, she had felt their teeth. The dark around her bubbled with small cries of concern, small soothing songs. Poor lele-la, they sang. She is not used to it yet. After a time, the songs became a lullaby and she slept.

When morning came, they could hear the guiding calls more clearly, this time with something of warning in them. Proom pulled at Mavin’s leg, asking to be taken up on her shoulders as he had ridden in the past. At first she thought he was weary of the long run, then she realized he wished to gain height in order to see better what lay before them. Two of the shadowmen ran far ahead this day, darting back from time to time. As noon grew near, they came back from their scouting with a rush of whispered words, and all the troop then went forward at a creep, silent through the brush, seeing light before them at the forest’s edge. It was not only the edge of the trees, but also the edge of the land where it fell away in steep cliffs down which streams trickled in a constant thin melody.

She had not seen it from this angle before, but when she looked down, screening her face behind a small bush, Mavin knew where she was. The Lake of Faces lay immediately below them. Had she been able to Shift, she could have swarmed down the cliff and finished her business within the hour. Had she been able to Shift—had the place been untenanted.

It was not only occupied but guarded. At the edge of the trees below were high, square tents of crimson stuff, main poles poking through their scalloped roofs like raised spears. From these poles limp pennants flapped, the device upon them raising old memories in Mavin. She had seen that Game symbol before. It had been blazoned on the cloak and breastplate worn by Valdon Duymit long ago in Pfarb Durim. So. The Demesne of the High King in the person of his thalan-son, Valdon.

Aside from these tents and the armsmen lounging outside them, there were other occupants of the place. She shuddered, sank her teeth into her arm and bit down to keep from crying out. They were there, like giant storks, their white breasts flapping as they walked among the faces, their heads thrown back in crowing laughter so that she seemed to look down their throats, their endless, voracious throats. And he whom she had called the High Wizard Chamferton, strolling there without a sorrow in the world. Mavin stopped biting herself with a deep gulping sigh. She had hoped it would be easy; she had hoped it would be possible. Now what? She rolled away from the rim of the cliff into the mossy cover of the trees, the shadowpeople following her, silent as their name.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When she had recovered a little, the first thing which came into her head was that she wished to hear what Valdon and the false Chamferton—what had his brother called him? Dourso?—what those two would talk of. The fact they were here together said much: much but not enough. There was Game afoot, Game aswing, Game doing something and going somewhere. Shifty Mavin was angered enough by that to ignore all the lumpy responsibilities and hard choices in an instantaneous retreat to a former self. “I need to get where I can hear them,” she growled to the shadowpeople, adding to herself—purely as an afterthought—“Without being seen by the Harpies. And without Shifting.”

Proom seemed to understand this well enough, even without an Agirul translator present or a lengthy mime session. Perhaps spying out the ground was a routine first step prior to any interesting thing—a bit of sneaking and slying to learn what was going on. At any rate, he fell into discussion with his fellows, much whispered trilling and lalala, hands waving and eyebrows wriggling, ears spread then cocked then drooped, as expressive as faces. Several of them ran off in various directions, returning to carry on further conversation before inviting her in the nicest way to accompany them. She was not reluctant to go, though doubtful they had found any suitable way down those precipitous cliffs, and was thus surprised to find almost a stair of tumbled stone leading down behind one of the falls. The bottom of it was screened behind a huge wet boulder, and this way led to a scrambly warren among the stones and scattered trees at the foot of the cliffs which emerged at last within two strides of Valdon’s tent, the whole way well hidden.

Proom had his neck hair up and his ears high, both expressing self-satisfaction, so she bowed to him, then he to her, then both together, trying not to make a sound, at which all the others rolled on the ground with their hands clamped over their mouths. There was nothing funny in the situation but she relished their amusement. They lay beneath the stone together, waiting for dark. Mavin could hear the Harpies screeching away at the far edge of the lake. They were a good distance away and she could relax enough to plan.

Tomorrow the pombi should reach them, the pombi and Singlehorn. She hoped it would be sooner rather than later, the help of the Wizard being much desired. If she had been able to Shift, she told herself, she would have crept into Valdon’s tent at once, strangled him, then swumbled up his men at

arms. Then ... then she would have laid some kind of nasty trap for the Harpies. Yes. Something clever, so that she would not have to touch them. After which the Faces could have been taken care of with simple dispatch. As it was ... well, as it was she would have to think about it.

Just as dark was beginning to fall, there was a clucking Harpy chatter from the shore of the lake, and the false Chamferton came strolling along the water to be greeted by one of Valdon's men. He disappeared into the nearest tent. The Harpies who had followed him scratched among the poles, pausing now and then to caw insults at the silent Faces. Foulitter carried the wand in its case upon her back. Soon they went back the way they had come, disappearing among the white poles in the dusk. Mavin unclenched her teeth and wriggled from behind the stones, barely aware of the shadowpeople who followed, each mimicking her movements as though they reflected her in a mirror. When she reached the back of the tent she lay still, head resting upon her arms as she strained to hear whatever was said inside.

The false Chamferton was speaking. "Two days ago ... knew something had happened ... should have at the time ..."

"You should have done many things at the time!"

Valdon's voice was raised, easy to hear, stirring memories in her of a long ago time. He sounded no less arrogant now than he had done twenty years before.

"Had you the wits the gods gave bunwits, you would have done many things differently. Eight years ago you engaged upon this elaborate scheme concerning your brother, the Wizard Chamferton. Why did you not merely kill him? Dead is dead, and it is unlikely a Necromancer would seek him out among the departed. But no. You must do this painstaking stupidity, this business of drugging him and having him dropped by Harpies. Why?"

"Because it could have been to our advantage, Prince Valdon. I set him where he could observe the shadow and the tower, the tower and the bell. I kept his Face here to answer my questions. So we might have learned much of mystery and wonder ..."

"Dourso, you're a dolt! Mystery is for old men teaching in schools because they have no blood left to do otherwise. Wonder is for girls and pawns. But power and Game—that is for men. Save me from puling Invigilators who seek to outplay their betters ..."

“You are in my demesne, Prince.” The voice was a snarled threat. “Shouldn’t you mind your tongue?”

“I am in my own demesne wherever I go, Dourso. You ate my bread and took my coin for decades among the least of my servants. Oh, it’s true you had some small skill in treachery. Nothing has changed. You have had possession of a tower for a few years. You have learned a few tricks for a time. Do not overestimate the importance of these trifling things.”

“I have them at your instigation,” Dourso hissed again. “Let us say at your command. It was you bid me come here and rid the land of the High Wizard Chamferton, taking his place in order that Valdron, King Prionde’s son, might have an ally to the north.”

“Well, and if I did? I said rid the land, not encumber it further with enchantments and bother. Let be. What is the situation now?”

“It is no different than it was an hour ago, or a day ago. When I drugged my brother—half brother, and on the father side, which makes it no kind of treachery—I had my Harpies drop him in the valley where the Shadow Tower is. None can come near that place without being shadow-eaten, so it seemed safe enough ...”

“Seemed,” snorted Valdron in a barely audible voice.

“Seemed safe enough,” repeated Dourso. “I took his Face before he was drugged, but I never questioned it. There was no need to question the Face. I knew where he was. The Harpies swore to it under pain of my displeasure. That same year came the Wizard Himaggery in search of Chamferton, as you had said he would.”

“In pursuit of an old tale I had taken some pains to see he learned of. His eccentricities were well recognized among more normal Gamesmen. It was not difficult.”

“Well, so he came, bringing with him two old dames from Betand. I fed him the stories we had agreed upon, all of which are true enough, and he went off in pursuit of the runners and the tower. I took his Face before he left, also—though he did not know it—and the Face of one of the old dames as well. She was so far gone that the taking killed her, so it is as well he did not know of that either.”

“So Himaggery came and went, and after a time ...”

“After a time, not long after he left, his Face began to answer that it was under Bartelmy’s Ban. Then I thought to question the Face of my brother, and so spoke the Face of Chamferton also. Thus I knew one fate had taken them both. So, I said to myself, Himaggery and Chamferton have both been shadow-eaten, and my friend and ally, Valdon, will be mightily pleased. As you were, my Prince. As you were. It is not long since you feasted in my tower and told me so.”

“As I might have remained,” sneered Valdon, “if he had not returned from the shadow gullet after eight years like one vomited up out of the belly of death.”

There was a pause. Mavin could almost see Dourso’s shrug. “It was that Mavin, I suppose. You told me years ago she would probably follow Himaggery.”

“As I thought she would eventually. Long and long ago she promised to meet him. My brother Boldery told me of it, full of romantic sighs and yearnings—the young fool. And with her gone there would have been only two left upon my vengeance list—her younger brother, Mertyn, and the old fool, Windlow, at the school in Tarnoch.”

“Why such enmity? If her brother is much younger than her, he must have been a child at the time. Was it not at the time of the plague in Pfarb Durim? Twenty years ago?”

“Child or not, Mertyn is on the list. Senile fool or not, Windlow is there as well. Woman or not, Mavin shares their fate. What care I what they may have been. They offended me. They did me an injury. If it had not been for Himaggery, and Windlow, and Mavin and her brother, Pfarb Durim would have fallen into the hands of my friend, and thence at least partly into mine. So my friend tells me. And if I had the wealth of Pfarb Durim in my hands, I would not be grodgeling now about the northern lands in search of allies.”

There was a long strained silence. After a time, the false Chamferton spoke again. “Well, so, Mavin came as you know, interrupting your own visit to me. And I did the same with her, feigning friendship and helpfulness, giving her bits and pieces of the story, telling her at the last about the runners. And I took her Face as I had the others and sent her off.”

“But she did not die, and the others returned from the dead.” Prince Valdón spat the words, working himself up into a fury.

“Which is impossible.” Dourso was vehement. “No one returns from the tower. It holds fifty generations of questing heroes sleeping the shadow sleep at its gates.”

“What is it, this tower?”

Again, Mavin could extrapolate the shrug from the expressive silence. “Something old, from the time before men came to these parts. Something to do with the Eesties. You say you do not care for such things. Well then, it doesn’t matter what it is. It is easy enough to stay away from.”

“And to get away from, seemingly. At least your brother and Himaggery and Mavin seem to have done so.”

“We don’t know that. We know only that when Chamferon’s Face was questioned yesterday, it did not speak of the Ban as it has spoken in the past. It said other garbled things, speaking of pombis and music. And when Mavin’s Face was asked, it, too, spoke of beasts and music. Only Himaggery’s face said what it has said for years, that it is under Bartelmy’s Ban.”

“So it may be they have only exchanged one death for another?” Valdón asked, rather more eagerly than Mavin thought mannerly. “Then they may yet be dead, or as good as.”

“I consider it likely. My Harpies consider it probable. They have been full of celebratory laughter all afternoon. I think you have little to concern you, Prince Valdón. Still, we will let tomorrow come and question the Faces once again.”

“You will wait until tomorrow comes and question them, yes,” Valdón grated in a harsh, imperious voice. “And the day after that, and the day after that, until you have used up whatever lives they might have left in the answering, Dourso. There are more ways to plant a hedge of thirpls than by poking the dirt with your nose, and your maybe this, maybe not approach has not proved satisfactory.”

“As my Prince commands,” said the other, conveying more ironic acquiescence than obedience. “I had

intended to do so in any case.”

Well, thought Mavin, squirming back from the tent into the gloom of the rocks. Isn't he a carrier of long grudges. Twenty years of vengeful thought over a few boyish disagreements. “And a lost city,” reminded an internal voice. “At least part of one.”

She looked over the area. Dark had come with a sliver of moon, enough light to find a Face, perhaps. She thought she could remember where Himaggery's had been, on the far shore of the lake, about halfway between the water and the trees, roughly in line with a great boulder. Where might her own Face be? Somewhere in that forest, hard to see in the dark.

A soft touch on her shoulder turned her. Proom, reaching out to touch her face, then gesturing away to the poles. Touching her face once more, gesturing away, that questioning gesture. She nodded in great chin wagging agreement and reached up behind her ears as though she untied something there. She moved her hands forward as though she stripped a mask away, then pointed at the mimed mask and said, “Mavin's.” She indicated the poles, then gestured to Proom and his fellows as she raised her eyebrows. Could they find her Face? Could they get her Face? There was colloquy among them while she thought further.

Proom had seen Himaggery once, on the side of a hill above Hell's Maw. She reached out to him, went through the dumb show once more, this time naming the mask, “Himaggery's.” He cocked his head, thinking. She did it again. “Himaggery's.”

Aha. His face lighted up, and he turned to his troop with a lilting quaver of words. “Maggeries, gerries, ees, ees.” Proom was becoming Himaggery, miming him, walking with a graceful stride, chin tilted a little in diffidence, face drawn down in a serious expression. For someone only knee high, he looked remarkably like her memory of the tall Wizard. Mavin tittered, smothering the sound, but it had been enough to set them off. In the instant Proom had a parade of Himaggeries, winding their way among the stones. Mavin lay back against a narrow mossy strip between the rocks, weary beyond belief. So. Perhaps they could find her Face, hers and Himaggery's. She would have to look for Chamferon's Face herself. There was no way to describe him to Proom.

The moon sank toward the west. Night birds called from the cliff tops and were echoed from the river bottom. One of the Harpies screamed in the forest, a quavering screech that brought Mavin upright in terror, making her head ache. She pressed her head between her hands, but the pain only worsened, two sharp, horrible stabbings around her ears, as though two knives were inserted there. Just when she thought she could bear it no longer, that she must scream, the pain weakened, became merely sore, throbbing rather than agonizing. Trembling, she dipped a handkerchief in the trickling fell and bathed her face and eyes. Tears spilled onto her cheeks. She was reluctant to move her head. Pressing the cold, wet

cloth around her ears helped a little. She brought it away red with blood.

She was still staring stupidly at the stains when Proom wriggled back through the rocks, holding a thing at arm's distance from him, his lips drawn back in an expression of distaste and fear. He let it fall at her knees, and she recoiled as her own face looked blindly up at her, ragged holes chewed at ear level. Proom had gnawed the strap away which held it to the post. His lips were red, and he bathed them in the stream with much spitting and wiping. When Mavin showed him the wounds at her ears, he recoiled in mixed dismay and horror.

The mask was paper light, like the shed skin of a serpent, fluttering in the light evening air with a kind of quasi life. She held it under the fells, feeling it squirm weakly beneath her hands, suddenly slick as frogskin and as cold. It became a slimy jelly in her hands, then began to dwindle in the cold water, becoming totally transparent before it dissolved and washed away. As it did so, the pain in her head almost disappeared though a quick touch verified that the wounds remained.

Another of the shadowpeople squirmed through the stones bearing a mask. Yes. Himaggery's. Ragged about the upper face as her own had been.

"Gamelords," she cursed to herself. "Did it hurt him as it hurt me?" Knowing even as she said it that it would, that it already had. "He will not understand," she whispered. "Oh, Chamferton, pray you have tight hold upon him!"

Once more she held a mask in the flowing water, feeling the foul sliminess of it soften into jelly before it vanished. The shadowpeople observed this closely as they talked it over among themselves, and Mavin knew that they were resolving to steal others of the Faces now that they knew what to do with them. Not now, though. Now was time for sleep. She had not the energy to do more tonight.

They climbed the stones behind the fells and found a softer bed among the trees. There was no fire tonight, but she lay pillowed and warmed among a score of small bodies, sleeping more soundly than she had upon the Ancient Road.

She was wakened by a startled vacancy around her, a keening cry of panic which dwindled at once into shushed quiet. There was hot breath on her face. The pombi face which stared down into her own had a broken strap in its mouth and an expression of sad determination in its eyes. She struggled out of dream, trying to remember the words of exhortation.

“Come out, Arkhur,” she said at last, still struggling to get her eyes fully open. The pombi shape shifted, lifted to its hind feet, solidified into the figure of Chamfertoa, the strap still in his mouth.

He spat it out. “I lost him. Last night, not far from here. He screamed as though he were wounded, and then dashed away into the trees. The strap broke. I thought of going after him, but it was too dark to trail him and I knew you might need me here.”

The first thought she had was that she should feel relieved. She had wanted to be away from the Fon-beast—wanted not to be responsible for him. Now he had gone, and the matter was settled. Except, of course, that it was not. Her eyes filled with tears which spilled to run in messy rivulets down her face, puffy from sleep.

“He ran because he was wounded when one of the shadowpeople chewed his mask from the pole. I didn’t know that’s what would happen, but it did to me as well.” She lifted her hair from the sides of her face to show him. “The masks are spiked to the poles, and the little people couldn’t pull out the spikes, so they chewed the masks off. We’ll have to find him, Chamferton, but it must wait a little. There is Game here against you and Himaggery and me. You were right that we need you here.”

She led him to the cliff’s edge. They lay there, peering down at the encampment, and Proom’s people, puzzled but reassured by the pombi’s disappearance, came to lie beside them, waiting for whatever came next. “I don’t know how many times they’ve questioned your Face in the past, Wizard, but they intend to question it every day from now on. More often if they can.”

“They can’t,” he said flatly. “And I doubt if any of the questioning done while I was in the valley will deprive me of life. I feel stronger than when I last saw this place, the strength of anger, perhaps, but nonetheless useful. Now what is to be done?” He began to list.

“First—to get my own Face down from that obscene array. Second—to eliminate one Dourso, and his allies if necessary. Third—to find Singlehorn. Can you think of anything else?”

“Harpies,” said Maviin. “I have some cause to think they are dangerous. Pantiquod brought plague to Pfarb Durim, many years ago. Her daughter Foulitter tried to kill me when I was here last. And Pantiquod has threatened me.”

“Harpies,” he said, as though adding this item to his list. “The first thing I need is my wand. We have no strength to oppose Valdon and his men until I have the wand. Dourso has probably hidden it somewhere in the fortress.”

“He has given it into the keeping of Foulitter,” she said. “Look beyond the largest pile of stones, against the trees. See where she struts about there. Look on her back when she turns. See! That is the wand. He gave it to her so that she might question certain of the Faces. I caught them at it when I came here first.”

“The fool! To set such a thing in a Harpy’s hands. They would as soon turn on him as obey him!”

“He has some hold on one of them,” Mavin said. “Pantiquod flies free but her daughter’s in some kind of durance. He told me he would hold her for some time yet.”

“Still a fool. He learned a few words, a few gestures, and fancied himself a Wizard. What he learned was only thaumaturgy, gramarye. Children’s things, ‘well, even children’s toys may be dangerous in the hands of a fool, so we must go careful and sly. I need that wand.”

Mavin forced herself to move. She wanted nothing to do with the Harpies, but something had to be done. She made a long arm to touch Proom and tug him toward her, pointed at the Harpy, moving back from the cliff edge to mime the storklike walk, the bobbing neck, the head thrown back in cackling laughter. The shadowpeople took this up with great enthusiasm, becoming a flock of birdlike creatures almost instantaneously. She pointed out the wand, then pretended to have one such on her own back, removing and replacing it. Finally, she led them off through the trees. Chamferon had time to grow bored with the view below him before she returned.

“Come on,” she said. “We need simple muscle, and all of it we can get. The shadowpeople will lead her into a kind of trap, but they are not big enough to hold her.”

The plan had the virtue of simplicity. If the Harpy were typical of her kind, she would pursue any small creature with the temerity to attack her, which Proom or one of his people would do. They would flee away, and the Harpy would follow.

“They’ll try to get her when she’s alone, not with Pantiquod. It seems the shadowpeople aren’t particularly afraid of them one at a time, but they don’t want to tangle with two or more. At least that’s what I think all their lalala-ing was about. Proom is down there behind the biggest pile of stones. The

others are scattered in a long line leading to that rockfall. The tricky part will be at that point. The shadowman will drop down into the rocks. Then another one will show himself halfway up the slope, then another one at the top. If they time it right, it should seem to be one small person the whole time. She can't walk up that slope, but if she's angry enough, she should fly to the top, at which point they'll lead her between these two trees. Then it's up to us, Wizard. Proom left us a knife, and some rope ..." She said nothing about her nausea, her revulsion.

"Rope if we can," hissed Chamferton. "I've a use for her alive. But knife if she starts to scream."

Mavin nodded her agreement. From their hiding place they could see between leafy branches to the valley floor. Mavin sharpened her eyes, not really Shifting, merely modifying herself a little, to catch a glimpse of Proom—she thought it was Proom—perched near the edge of the stones. The Harpy was prodding at some bit of nastiness on the ground nearby. Pantiquod had wandered toward the tents. There was a scurrying darkness, a darting motion, and the Harpy leaped into the air like some dancing krylobos, screeching, head whipping about. Proom had bitten her on the leg. Mavin could see the blood. A palpable bite, a properly painful bite but not one which would cripple the creature.

No! Not cripple indeed. She strode toward the stones, head darting forward like the strike of a serpent, jaws clacking shut with a metallic finality. On the cliff top, they gasped; but she had missed. A small furry form broke from cover and fled toward the cliff. The Harpy crowed a challenge and sped after it. The shadowman fled, darted, dropped into hiding. From another hidey hole not far away, another form popped up and fled farther toward the cliffs. The Harpy strode, hopped, struck with her teeth at the stones, hurting herself in the process so that her anger increased.

"Watch now," hissed Mavin. "They're coming to the cliff."

The quarry disappeared into a cleft between two large stones wet with spray. The Harpy thrust her head into the cleft, withdrew it just in time to see her prey appear briefly halfway up the slope, fleeing upward. It turned to jeer at her, increasing the Harpy's frenzy. She danced, clacked her jaws, spread her wings to rise in a cloud of spray and dust. The quarry on the slope disappeared, only to reappear at the top of the cliff.

"Get your head down," Mavin directed.

They could hear Foulitter's approach, the whip of wings and the jaws chattering in rage. A furry shadow fled between the trees, and the Harpy came after. As she passed between the trunks, Mavin and Chanifertan seized her, Mavin holding tight to the wings as she tried to avoid those venomous

teeth—without success! The serpent neck struck at her, and the teeth closed on her hand. Fire ran through her, as though she had been touched by acid or true flame, and she cursed as she slammed the striking head away. Chamferton thrust a wad of cloth between the teeth and threw a loop of rope about her feet which he then wound tight around the wings. When he had done, they stepped back breathlessly. The Harpy glared at them with mad yellow eyes, threatening them with every breath.

“She will kill us if she can,” said Mavin, gasping, cradling her hand; it felt as though it was burned to the bone.

“She would,” agreed Chamferton. “If she could.” He took the wand from its case, drawing it from among the coils of rope. “If you watch me now, you must promise never to ...”

“Oh, Harpy-shit, Wizard! Oath me no oaths. I’ve seen more in your demesne recently than you have. I am no chatterbird and you owe me your life. So do what you do and don’t be ponderous about it.”

“Did she bite you?”

“Yes, damn it, she did.” Mavin stared at him stupidly. “How did you know?”

“Because you suddenly sounded Harpy bit. We’ll take care of it before you leave—must take care of it, or you’ll die. Harpy bite is deadly, Mavin. But you’re right. I have no business demanding sec-recy oaths from one who has saved my life. So go or stay as you like.”

She was curious enough to stay, not that she learned anything. She could not concentrate because of the pain in her hand, now moving up her arm. All she saw was waving of the wand, and walking about in strange patterns, and speaking to the world’s corners and up and down, and sprinkling dust and sprinkling water, at the end of which time he removed the rag from the Harpy’s mouth and turned her loose. “You are my servant,” he told her in a voice of distaste. “My unworthy servant. Now you will serve me by giving me the name of one of those you have questioned down below—the name of any one.”

The Harpy answered in a toneless voice without pause, “I have questioned Rose-love of Betand.”

“Very well,” said Chamferton. “When you next hear the words ‘Rose-love of Betand,’ your servitude is over and you have my leave to die. Do you understand?”

The Harpy nodded, its pale, pendulous breasts heaving. “When I hear the words ‘Rose-love of Betand,’ I have your leave to die.”

“And you will die then,” said Chamferton. “Quickly and without pain.”

“And I will die then,” agreed the Harpy. “Quickly and without pain.”

Chamferton turned away from the empty-faced creature. “The first thing I must do is obtain my own Face.” Turning to the Harpy, “Go to my Face, Foulitter. Pull the silver spike which holds it to the pole, gently, with your teeth. Bring the Face to me here.”

Without a sound the Harpy walked away to the cliff’s edge and dropped from there on quiet wings to the regiment of pale poles on which the Faces hung. To Mavin, accustomed to the constant cluck and keraw of the Harpies, this quiet evoked more foreboding than sound might have done.

“Is she completely at your command?” Somehow she still doubted this.

“Completely. Though nothing would have put her completely at my command unless she had attempted to injure me first—or had succeeded. There is a rule of Wizardry called the Exception of Innocence. We are not allowed to bind the will of one who has never done us ill or attempted it. It is somewhat inconvenient at times.”

“I can imagine it would be,” she rasped, glad she had done the High Wizard Chamferton only good. “And what of those who have actually helped you, aided you?”

“No true Wizard would be so unmannerly as to enchant one such,” he replied with a smile. It was an ominous smile, for all his appearance of grave, childlike stubbornness. Still, she took it as sufficient encouragement to ask a further question.

“You said something earlier about Dourso having learned only thaumaturgy, gramarye—children’s things. Does that mean such things are not the Talent of Wizards?”

“Such things are not. Such things are mere tricks, like the Faces. They are dependent upon a particular place, perhaps a particular time. Did Dourso tell you about the lake? About the nexus here? Blame my stupidity that I bragged to him about it, crowing at my discovery. The crux of the thaumaturgy lies with the lake, with the forces around it. I chose my demesne because of the forces which are here, not the other way around. Away from this place I am no more or less Wizardly than any of my colleagues. Only this place—and that arrogant aerie built halfway to the clouds—gives me the name ‘High Wizard’.”

“How did you ever learn to ... to do things. Make the faces. Or bind Harpies. Or whatever?” It was hard to think through the pain in her arm, but she doubted that Chamferon would often be so patient with questions.

“I have speculated about that,” he mused. “It is my theory that the forces of the place desire expression. That they, themselves, are my tutors, suggesting to my dream-mind what I should try or do.” He gave her another of those quick, ominous looks. “You have said you are no chatterbird, Mavin, and I rely upon that. I do not want half the world of the True Game camped upon my steps, attempting to learn what I have learned, or—worse—finding out and using it to make more pain and tragedy in this world.”

She returned him an enigmatic smile. She had already given him her word; it was not necessary to give it again. Besides, the sound of wings returning drew their eyes to the cliff edge where Foulitter now perched, her teeth broken and bloody around the silver spike and limp Face she carried. Arkhur took it without a word, carrying it to the stream where he pressed it deep into the chill water to let it dissolve, shuddering slightly as he did so.

“I think the shadowpeople intend to remove more of them,” Mavin remarked, more to break the silence than for any other reason.

“It won’t be necessary,” he growled with sudden determination, shuddering again at the feel of the slimy tissue under his fingers. “There will not be any left after today. I have decided that because a thing can be done is not always reason enough to do it.” He rose from the stream, face pale, a small muscle at the corner of his eye twitching again and again. “Do you have any idea whose Faces he has taken down there? Dare I hope they are mostly villains? Gamesmen Ghouls, perhaps? What of that one the Harpy named? Rose-love of Betand?”

Mavin shook her head, almost sorry to tell him the truth. "I think it unlikely they are Ghouls and villains, Wizard. Rose-love is one of the old women Himaggery brought from Betand, a story-teller. I overheard Dourso say he had taken her Face and killed her doing it. Her sister still lives at the aerie—or did when I was there half a season ago. She, too, is full of old tales. Neither of them were Gameswomen. They were merely ... people."

"So Dourso has taken Faces from peaceful folk, pawns, perhaps even goodly Gamesmen, Healers and the like?"

"I would not doubt it," she agreed.

"And some of them have lost life, perhaps much life. Some, like old Rose-love, may have lost all life. Whatever is done must seek to set that right. Certainly whatever is done must not put them at further risk. Ah well. I have my wand. I can do what must be done. However, there is a counter spell, and it may be that Dourso has learned it. His understanding is not great, but his sense of power and treachery are unfailing. If he has learned it, then the Faces would be caught between my power and his, possibly injured or destroyed, and their owners would suffer even more."

"But you have the wand!"

"The counter spell would not require a wand though perhaps he does not know it. Would you risk that?"

Mavin thought of the Faces as she had seen them first in moonlight, unconscious, taken from who knew what persons abroad in the world. "No," she admitted. "I wouldn't risk hurting them any more. Not if there were some other way."

"We will think of some other way. Perhaps we can lure Dourso away from here, back to the aerie, leaving me here alone for a short time ... Yes. Back to the aerie with Valdon. Hmmm. Let me think on that."

He strode away toward the cliff top, ignoring the Harpy half crouched there, her nipples almost brushing the ground. The Harpy's face was not unlike those on the poles, blind and unaware, yet full of some enormous potential which was almost palpable. In this case, the potential was for evil, thought Mavin, turning her back on the creature, trying not to vomit at the sight of her. Her arm throbbed and she was full of pain and hunger and annoyance. Waiting on another to take action was foreign to her nature, and she

fought down her irritation. She should be away from here, searching for Himaggery.

“Searching for Himaggery,” she snarled. “I have done nothing else since first arriving at Pfarb Durim.”

A tug at her leg made her look down into Proom’s face, wrinkled with concern. Was she sick, unhappy, miserable? Poor Mavin. What would Mavin do now?

“I’m hungry,” she announced, rubbing her stomach and miming eating motions. “Let’s have breakfast.”

He was immediately ready for a feast, slipping away full of song to summon the others. It was not long before they had a fire going, hidden behind piled stones, with chunks of mushroom broiling. Someone had brought in a dozen large, speckled eggs. Surprisingly they were fresh, probably purloined from some farmyard. When the High Wizard finished his solitary walk and sought them out, they were fully engaged in breakfast with little enough left for him.

“I have a plan,” he said.

Mavin nodded, her mouth full. She would listen, the nod said, but she didn’t feel it necessary to stop chewing.

“You will go to the aerie,” he said, ticking this point off on one palm with a bony finger. “Seek the Healer. Tell the ones there you have been Harpy bit, need Healing, and have a message for the High Wizard Chamferton—his demesne is threatened from the north. That should get their attention. Someone there will know where the supposed High Wizard is. Insist that a message be sent immediately. Can you ride horseback?”

The question seemed a meaningless interpolation, and it took her a moment to respond. “After a fashion. Why?”

“There is a farm a little east of here where you can borrow an animal in my name. Ride hard as you can to get to the aerie by early afternoon. They will send a messenger back here—to my loving brother, Dourso—that messenger arriving by evening. If the message is properly portentous, Dourso will leave here at once for the aerie, arriving there about midnight. It may be Valdon will go as well, but in any case

Dourso will go. That will be enough for my purposes.”

“What am I to do there? Merely wait? Or depart again?”

“Well, you are to find the Healer, as I said. You must not let that Harpy bite go untended. The mouths of the creatures are poisonous as serpents’. It is not precisely venom which they hold, but some other foulness which comes from the filth they eat when they are in Harpy shape.

“So, you find the Healer, in private, and tell her I sent you. Say ‘Arkhur’ so she will know which Wizard you speak of. After she has healed you, secret yourself somewhere within sight of the aerie. It may be you will want to see the end of this matter.”

“How will I know when that is?”

“You’ll know,” he said in a flat, emotionless voice. “You will know.” He pulled her to her feet and pointed the direction to the farm he had mentioned. She wiped one hand upon her trousers, cradling the other in her shirt, and awkwardly tied back her hair. Proom had his head cocked in question, and she nodded to him. Yes. She wanted the shadowpeople to come with her. No further word or action was needed. They were packed and ready to go within moments.

She found the farm without trouble. The farm wife heard her out, then went to the paddock and whistled to a sleek brown horse which came to her hand, nuzzling her and her pockets.

“Prettyfoot,” cooed the wife. “Will she carry the nice lady and her pet? Hmmm? High Wizard wants us to help the nice lady. Will Prettyfoot do that? Oh, wuzzums, she will, won’t she?”

Mavin stared in astonishment at this, but Proom—the only one of the shadowpeople to have accompanied her into the yard—stood nose to nose with Prettyfoot and seemed to sort the matter out. The farm wife went so far as to try to pet him. Proom growled deep in his throat, and her gesture became a quick pat of Prettyfoot instead.

“She’ll go best for you at an easy jog,” she said, suddenly all business. “Not fast, but steady. When you’re arrived where you’re going, turn her loose and she’ll find her way back to me. I trust you not to

abuse her, woman, you and your pet. The High Wizard has not often asked a favor before, though we owe him much at this farmstead.”

Mavin promised, helped with the saddle and bridle, and got herself and Proom astride, Proom bounding up and down behind her, making her dizzy by tugging at her sides. Then they were away, and Mavin merely sat still while Prettyfoot jogged off toward the north, tirelessly, and happily for all Mavin could tell. They stopped briefly only once, to drink from a streamlet they crossed, and it was still early afternoon when she saw an aerie towering above a low hill. If she were to talk of threats from the north, she would have to arrive from the north, so she circled widely to the east before dismounting, tying the reins loosely to the saddle and patting Prettyfoot on her glossy flanks. The little horse shook her head and cantered back the way she had come, seemingly still untired. Mavin memorized the animal’s shape. It was one she thought she might have use for in the future.

She left Proom in the trees with a stern injunction to stay where he was. Previous experience had taught her to verify this, and she walked part of the distance to the tower backwards, making sure he was not following her. She had no doubt the rest of his family would be with him by the time she returned. If she were able to return. She was staggering rather badly, and her arm felt like a stone weight.

The fortress was as she had seen it last, brooding upon its high plinth, the sun flashing from the narrow windows, the stairway making a pit of darkness into the stone. She approached it as she had before, hammering upon the heavy door with her good hand, hearing the blamm, blamm, blamm echo up the stony corridors within. It was some time before there were other sounds, pattering, creaking, and then the squeak of a peephole opening like an eyelid in the massive wood.

“I come with an important warning for the High Wizard Chamferton,” she intoned in her most officious voice, somewhat handicapped by the fact that the world was whirling around her. “Tell him Mavin is here.”

“Babble babble, Wizard not at home, babble, grumph, go away.”

“When he learns you have disregarded my warning, he will want to know the name of the person who told me to go away. I have no doubt he will repay you properly.” She saw two faces at the peek hole but knew there was only one person there. She held up one finger and saw two. “Healer,” she begged silently. “Please be at home.”

Scuttle from inside, a whiny voice trailing away into distant silence, then the approach of heavier feet. “What do you want?”

“I bring a warning for the High Wizard. First, however, I must make use of his Healer.”

The door creaked reluctantly open. “High Wizard isn’t here.”

“The High Wizard is somewhere,” Mavin snarled. “I have no doubt you know where to find him. Best you do so very quickly. Before giving the message, however, I need to see the Healer. Now!”

Orders were shouted in a surly voice. A search took place. There was running to and fro and disorderly complaints. “Is she in the orchard? Beggle says look in the melon patch. Get Wazzle to come up here.”

Mavin sat herself wearily. The world kept fading and returning. At last they found her. Mavin retreated with her into the privacy of a side room, pulling the door firmly shut behind her.

“Harpy bit?” the Healer questioned. “Nasty. Here, give me your hand.”

“Arkhur sent me,” whispered Mavin, dizzy, distracted, sure there were ears pressed to the door.

“Ahhh,” murmured the Healer, gratified and moist about the eyes. “Is he well?”

“Now he is. Now that his Face is taken down from its pole.”

“That is good news. Be still, please. I am finding the infection.” She nodded at the door, indicating listeners. Mavin sat back and relaxed. There were a few peaceful moments during which the pain lessened, becoming merely a slight twinge, a memory of pain. The throbbing which had pounded in her ears was gone. She sighed, deeply, as though she had run for long leagues.

Then they had done holding hands. The Healer passed her fingers across the wound, already half healed, then across those shallow scrapes around Mavin’s ears. These, too, she Healed, making them tingle

briefly as though some tiny, marvelous creature moved about raking up the injured parts and disposing of them.

“Now, what’s afoot?” the Healer asked, brushing the tips of her fingers together as though to brush away the ills she had exorcised. “What can I do?”

“A message must be sent to ... the High Wizard Chamferton telling him his demesne is attacked from the north.” This was loudly said.

“Ah. Do we know who attacks?”

“The attacker is unspecified,” murmured Mavin. Better let Dourso respond to some unknown threat than discount a threat he might know to be false. Loudly: “Unspecified but imminent. He should return here as soon as possible.”

“A messenger sent to him now will reach him by dusk. If he left there at once, the ... High Wizard might return here by midnight.”

“Whatever,” Mavin yawned. “Now, if you have no further need of me, I will take my leave. Send the message quickly, please. Much may depend upon it.”

The Healer gave her one keen glance, then moved away, opened her door to give firm orders to some, quick instructions to others. As Mavin left the place she saw two riders hastening away south in a cloud of dust. She rubbed her face. The area around her ears itched a little, and she smoothed her hair across it self-consciously. Shifters did not make much use of Healers. It had not been as bad an experience as she had thought.

Proom was where she had left him, Proom and his family and his friends. A much wider circle of friends than heretofore. They seemed to enjoy the afternoon, though most of it was spent watching Mavin sleep and explaining to the newcomers that this was, in fact, the Mavin of which many things were sung. Undoubtedly something of interest would occur very soon, and the newcomers were urged to pay close attention. Mavin heard none of it. She had decided to sleep the afternoon away in order to be up and watching at midnight

Night fell, and there was a foray for provisions followed by small fires and feasting. Smoke rose among the trees, dwindled to nothing and died. Mavin rose and led the shadowpeople forth to find a good view of the aerie. Even as they settled upon their perch, Dourso came clattering up to the fortress with Valdón and Valdón's men making a considerable procession upon the road, two baggage wagons bringing up the rear. A large, grated gate opened at ground level to admit the wagons, the horses and most of the men. Valdón and Dourso climbed to the door Mavin had used, and not long afterward she saw lights in the highest room of the tower.

"May neither of them have time to get their breath back," Mavin intoned, almost enjoying herself. She had found a grassy hollow halfway up the outcropping on which the aerie stood. She could see the road, the aerie, the doorway—even the roof of the melon patch gleaming a glassy silver in the moonlight. "Now Dourso will be looking north to see what comes." She sipped at the wine the Healer had given her, offering some to Proom. He took a tiny taste and handed it back, nose wrinkled in disgust. "Well, beastie," she commented, "to each his own taste. I've never really liked those stewed ferns everyone cooks each spring, though most people consider them delicious. Now. What's that upon the road?"

It was an ashen shadow, a bit of curdled fog, a drift of clotted whey. It moved not with any steady deliberation but in a slow, vacillating surge, like the repeated advance of surf which approaches and withdraws only to approach once more. Though Mavin sharpened her eyes, she could see no detail. It came closer with each passing moment, the shadowpeople staring at it with equal intensity.

"Lala perdum, dum, dum," Proom whisper-sang. "Ala, la perdum."

"I don't know what perdum is." Mavin stroked him. "But I'm sure we're going to find out."

"Perdum." Proom shivered as he climbed into Mavin's lap. She had seen him thus disturbed only once before, many years ago in the labyrinth under Hell's Maw, and she closed her arms protectively around him. "It's all right, Proom. Whatever it is, it isn't coming for us."

The cloud came nearer, still in its clotted, constant surge and retreat. She peered in the dim light, suddenly knowing what it was. "Faces," she cried. "All the Faces. There must be thousands of them. And they have their eyes open!"

Through the milky cloud she could make out Arkhur's form on horseback, with the striding Harpy behind him as he set the pace for the floating Faces in their multitude. Proom whispered from her lap, a hushed, horrified voice. She could see why. The mouths of the Faces were open as well, hungering.

From the high tower the northern windows flashed with light, now, again, again. Whoever watched from there did not see the threat approaching on the southern road. Mavin had time to wonder how the Faces would assault the fortress, or whether they would simply besiege the place. She did not wonder long. The cloud began to break into disparate bits, a hundred Faces there, a dozen here, here a line trailing off up the stony plinth like a dim necklace of fog, there a small cloud gathering at the foot of the great door. There was no frustration of their purpose. The door presented no barrier to their paper thinness. They slipped beneath it easily, as elsewhere they slipped through windows and under casements, between bars and through minute cracks in stone. Within moments all were gone.

Silence.

Silence upon the height, the light still flashing to the north.

Silence within the aerie, the stables, the armories.

And then tumult! Screams, shouts, alarm bells, the shrill wheeing of a whistle, the crashing sound of many doors flung open as people tried to flee.

Did flee. Down the steps of the fortress, out of the great gates. Beating with arms and hands as though at a hive of attacking bees while the Faces clustered thickly upon those arms, those hands, around mouths, clamped upon throats. A man ran near the hollow where Mavin sat, screaming a choked command as a Face tried to force its way into his throat. It was Valdon, all his arrogant dignity gone, all his Princely power shed, running like an animal while the Faces sucked at him with pursed, bloody lips, to be struck aside, only to return smiling with manic pleasure as they fastened upon him once more.

Mavin turned away, unsure whether she was fascinated or sick. On the flat below ran a half-dozen others, Dourso among them, so thickly layered with Faces it was only their clothes which identified them. Some of Valdon's men. Some of Dourso's. Yet even as these ran and choked and died beneath the Faces, others walked untouched. The Healer, quiet in her white robes, came down the steps to stretch her hand toward Arkhur, to cling first to his hand and then to his body as though she had not thought ever to see him again. So, thought Mavin. So that is what that is all about. Something in her ached, moved by that close embrace.

Valdon had fallen. One by one the Faces peeled away, eyes closed once more, mouths shut. Misty on

the air they hung, fading, becoming a jelly, a transparency, a mere disturbance of sight and then nothing. Unable to stop herself, she went to the place the body lay, prodded it with her foot. It swayed like a bundle of dried leaves, juiceless, lifeless.

“There are two ways to dispose of the Faces,” said Chamferon’s voice from behind her. “To dissolve them in running water, or to let them regain whatever life was taken from them. Come in and we will see what has been done.” He turned toward the fortress and Mavin followed, the shadowpeople staying close by her feet. The Harpy stalked behind them without a sound, but still Mavin shuddered to come near her. They passed up the great stairs, through the door, down a long, echoing corridor to stop before a narrow door behind an iron grate. On this door, Chamferon knocked slowly.

“Who’s there,” quavered an old voice. “Who is it there?”

“Who is it there?” Chamferon responded.

“I?” asked the weak old voice, wonderingly. “I? Why I am Rose-love of Betand ...”

Behind them the Harpy slumped dead to the floor.

“What’s in there?” asked Mavin, not really wanting to know.

“The tombs of my demesne,” said Chamferon. “Healer? Will you have her taken out of there and up to her sister’s room? Chances are she will not live out a year, but such time as it is, it is hers. Recovered from Dourso’s blood and bone.

“None of the Faces has lost life. The Faces themselves are gone. Valdon and Dourso are dead. Foulitter is dead. Only Pantiquod was left behind at the lake, and she fled before I could bind her. I believe she has gone to the south, Mavin. It is unlikely she will return to the north.”

Mavin heard him without hearing him. She wanted to believe what he said.

They found the room Mavin remembered from her prior visit, and there were summoned the people remaining in the place, many of them suffering from wounds or minor enchantments. Some were Healed, some disenchanting, wine was brought, and while the shadowpeople roamed about the room, poking into everything—surprisingly free of the place, inasmuch as Mavin had never seen them enter human habitation before—Chamferton turned the talk to Singlehorn.

“It will be a search of many days, I fear,” he said in a tired voice, obviously not relishing further travel. She saw the way his eyes searched the shelves, the corners, knowing that he found it defiled and would not be content until he could replace it as it had been. “A search of many days.”

“No,” Mavin said. “It shouldn’t take that long. I could find him almost at once if I could only tell the shadowpeople what he looks like. I can convey only so much in mime. Trying to describe the beast is beyond me.”

The Healer had followed all this with interest, though never moving from Chamferton’s side. For his part, he seemed to be conscious of her presence as he might be conscious of his own feet or ears, giving her no more of his attention than he paid those useful parts. She laid her hand on his arm.

“Old Inker is still here, Arkhur. Couldn’t he do a picture for the little people?”

So in the end it was very simple. Mavin described while an old, sleepy man drew a picture, this way and that until he had it right; then he put it in her hand and staggered back to his bed.

“I will come with you,” offered Chamferton without enthusiasm, examining a pile of books.

“No,” she said, knowing he would be little help. If he came with her, his mind would be here. “The shadowpeople will find him. I have only to follow. But I would like to know one thing, High Wizard, before I go.”

“If I know whatever it is.”

“What is the tower? The one where you were dropped? What are the shadows? Why did Himaggery want to find it, and how did he get in without being eaten?”

He stared at her for such a time that she felt he had stopped seeing her, but she stood under that gaze neither patiently or impatiently, merely waiting. Proom and his people were lying quietly about, silent for once, perhaps composing a song to memorialize the destruction of the Lake of Faces.

When he replied it was not in the ponderous, Wizardly voice she had begun to associate with him. It was rather doubtful, tentative.

“Do not talk of it, Mavin. When Himaggery is brought back to himself, discourage him from having interest in it. Though I have read much, studied much, I understand very little. I will say only this ...

“Before men came to this world—or to this part of the world, I know not which—there were others here. There was a balance here. You may say it was a balance between shadow and light, though I do not think what I speak of can be described in such simple terms. One might as well say power and weakness, love and hate. Of whatever kind, it was a balance.

“There was a symbol of that balance. More than a symbol; a key, a talisman, an eidolon. A tower. In the tower a bell which cannot ring alone. Ring the bell of light, and the shadow bell will sound. Ring the shadow bell and the daylight bell will resonate. So was the balance kept. Until we came. Then ... then something happened. Something withdrew from this world or came into it. The tower disappeared or was hidden. The bell was muffled ...

“An imbalance occurred. Does the real tower still exist? Is the bell only muffled? Or destroyed? Does something now ring the shadow bell, something beyond our understanding?

“Mavin, do not speak of this. In time the balance must be restored or the world will fail. But I think the time is not now, not yet. Any who attempt it now are doomed to death, to be shadow-eaten. So—when you have brought Himaggery to his own once more, do not let him seek the tower.”

Mavin heard him out, not understanding precisely what he attempted to say—and knowing that he understood it no better than she—yet assured by her own sight and hearing that he spoke simple truth as it could be perceived by such as they. She, too, had seen the shadows. She, too, had heard the sound of their presence. It was not the time.

“I will remember what you say, Arkhur,” she promised him. Then she took leave of the Healer, accepting many useful gifts, and went out into the dawn.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At Chamferton’s invitation—though it was actually the Healer who thought of it—Mavin took several horses from the stable beneath the rock. None was the equal of Prettyfoot, but any at all would be easier than walking. She rode one and led three, the three ridden—or better, she thought, say “inhabited”—by Proom and his people. They did not so much ride as swarm over, up and down legs, around and across backs. The horses, at first much astonished and inclined to resentment, were petted into submission. Or perhaps talked into submission. Mavin had a sneaky belief supported by considerable evidence that Proom spoke horse as well as fustigar, owl, flitchhawk, and a hundred other languages.

She showed Proom the picture of Singlehorn only after they had found the place from which the Fon-beast had bolted, a place in the woods still some distance northwest of the Lake of Faces (former Lake of Faces, Mavin said to herself, trying to think of a good name for it now). He looked at it with obvious amusement, then passed it around to the accompaniment of much discursive lalala, snatching it back when one infant attempted to eat it.

The search was immediately in motion, with a dozen shadowpeople up as many trees, all twittering into the spring noonday. They descended after a time to swarm over their steeds once more, pointing away to the west and urging Mavin to come along. Calls kept coming throughout the afternoon, always from the west, as they proceeded into the evening until the forest aisles glowed before them in long processions of sun and shade, the sky pink and amber, flecked with scaly pennants of purple cloud. None of them had slept for a full day and night. Though the guiding song had not yet fallen silent there was general agreement—not least among the horses—that it was suppertime.

They built a small fire and ate well, for the Healer had sent packed saddlebags with them, bags full of roast meat and cheese, fresh baked bread and fruit from Chamferton’s glasshouses. Then they curled to sleep—except that they did not sleep. The shadowpeople were restless, getting up again and again to move around the mossy place they had camped upon, full of aimless dialogue and fractious small quarrels. Finally, just as Mavin had begun to drift away, one of them cried a sharp, low tone of warning which brought all of them up to throw dirt upon the coals of the fires.

“Sssss,” came Proom’s hiss, and a moment later tiny fingers pressed upon her lips.

It took time to accustom her eyes to the dark, though she widened them as much as she could to peer upward in the direction all the little faces were turned, ears spread wide, cocked to catch the least sound.

Then she heard it. The high, shrill screech of a lone Harpy. A hunting cry.

“Pantiquod,” she whispered, questioning their fright.

“Ssss,” from Proom. A shadowperson was pouring the last of Mavin’s wine on the fire while others peed upon it intently, dousing every spark and drowning the smoke.

“Why this fear?” she asked herself silently. “They played tag with Foulitter upon the hill near the lake. They led her into a trap without a moment’s hesitation, yet now they are as fearful as I have ever seen them.”

The horses began an uneasy whickering, and a dozen of the little people gathered around them, talking to them, urging some course of action upon them and reinforcing it with much repetition. Mavin did not understand their intention until the horses trotted away into the darkness, returning as they had come.

“No!” she objected. “I need ...”

“Ssss,” demanded Proom, his hands tightening on her face.

Then she saw them. A line of black wings crossing the moon, beat on beat, as though they breathed in unison, moving from the northeast. From that purposeful line fell a single hunting call, as though only a lone Harpy hunted there upon the light wind. Beat on beat the wings carried them overhead, and as they passed directly overhead Mavin heard a low, ominous gabble as from a yard of monstrous geese.

They waited in silence, not moving, scarcely breathing. After a long time, Mavin tried again. “Pantiquod?”

Proom showed his teeth in a snarl. “Perdum, lala, thossle labala perdum.”

“Perdum,” she agreed. “Danger.” The little ones took this word and tried it out, “ger, ger, ger,” decided they did not like it. “Perdum,” they said, being sure all of them were in accord. Mavin thought not for the first time that she must learn Proom’s language. Perhaps—perhaps there would be a time of peace while she waited for her child to be born. Perhaps then. She considered this possibility with surprising pleasure. It was ridiculous not to be able to talk together.

Be that as it may, she could appreciate the danger. One Harpy could be teased, baffled, led on a chase. Perhaps two or three could be tricked or avoided. But more than that? All with poisonous teeth and clutching talons? No doubt Pantiquod had learned of Foulitter’s death and was out for vengeance. “Fowl, bird-brained vengeance,” she punned to herself, trying to make it less terrible. Proom had sent the horses away because they were large enough to be seen from the skies. So long as those marauders ranged the air, travel would have to be silent, sly, hidden beneath the boughs. She hoped that Singlehorn was not far from them and had not chosen to wander down into the plains or river valleys where there would be no cover.

At last, having worried about all this for sufficient time, she slept.

Proom shook her awake at first light, and they made a quick, cold breakfast as they walked. The twittered directions came less frequently today, and more briefly. Obviously other shadowpeople went in fear of the Harpies as well. Rather than travel today in a compact group, they went well scattered among the trees, avoiding the occasional clearings and open valleys. When it was necessary to cross such places, they searched the air first, peering from the edges of the trees, then dashed across, a few at a time. Mavin judged that the Harpies were too heavy to perch at the tops of trees—and the thought made her remember the broken vine outside her window at Chamferton’s castle—but they could find suitable rest on any rock outcropping or cliff. Proom, well aware of this, kept them far from such places, and they did not see the hunters during the daylight hours.

Nor did they see Singlehorn. That night as they ate another cold meal without the comfort of fire, Mavin remembered that forlorn, bugling call the Fon-beast had sent after the Band as it marched away west. If Singlehorn were following the Band, then he might be moving ahead of them at their own speed. If that were the case, they might not catch up with him until he came to the sea, a discouraging thought. Though the shadows had little interest in him in his present shape, she wondered if the Harpies did.

At midnight she woke to the sound of that lone, hunting cry. There was an overcast, and she could not tell if there were more than one. Around her, the shadowpeople moved restlessly in their sleep.

So they went on. On the third night nothing disturbed them. Proom began to be more his usual self, full of prancing and jokes. The fourth and fifth night passed with no alarms. Mavin had convinced herself that the Harpy flight coming so close to her own path was mere coincidence. As Chamferton had said, Pantiquod had likely gone south to Bannerwell by now. Or somewhere else where her habits and appetites could be better satisfied.

They began to travel on the road which they had paralleled for many leagues. Now they came out upon it, staying close to the edge, still with some nervous scanning of the skies. They could move faster on this smooth surface, and by the time the sixth night fell, Mavin smelled the distant sea.

And on the following morning, a friendly family of shadowpeople drove Singlehorn into their camp, head hanging, coat dusty and dry, tongue swollen in a bleeding mouth. The broken strap of the halter still hung from his head, making small, dragging serpents' trails in the dust. Mavin lifted Fon-beast's head and looked into dull, lifeless eyes. She growled in her throat, hating herself for having wanted him gone. There were swollen sores around his ears, and remembering her own pain and the gentleness of the Healer, Mavin cursed her impatience with him. And with herself, she amended. It was not the Fon-beast himself, but her feelings about him that disturbed her. "I will forget all that," she resolved in a fury of contrition. "I will forget all that and concentrate on taking care of him until we get to Windlow's."

They gave him water. She squeezed rainhat fruits into his mouth. Obviously he had not eaten well in the days he had been gone, or rather he had tried to graze on common grasses. Though he thought himself a grazing beast, the grasses had not been fooled. They had cut his mouth and tongue until both were swollen and infected. Mavin made a rich broth of some of the meat they had carried and dropped this into his mouth from a spoon while infant shadowpeople rubbed his dusty hide with bundles of aromatic leaves.

She had not noticed that Proom had left until he returned with a group of the older shadowpeople carrying bags full of herbs and growths, most of which she had never seen before. These were compounded by the tribe in accordance with some recipe well known to them all. It resulted in a thick, green goo which Proom directed be plastered around Singlehorn's mouth and upon the open sores. Some of it trickled into the Fon-beast's mouth as well, and Mavin was restrained from wiping it away. Finally, when everything had been done for him that anyone could think of, she covered him with her cloak and lay down beside him. After a time the smell of the herbs and the warmth of the day made them all drowsy—they had been much awake during the past nights—and they slept once more.

When they awoke in the late afternoon, the Singlehorn was on his feet, pawing at the ground with one golden hoof, nodding and nodding as though in time to music. Dried shreds of the green goo clung around his mouth and ears. Beneath this papery crust the flesh was pink and healthy-looking, the swelling reduced; and while his eyes were still tired, he did not look so hopeless. There was a pool a little distance away, and while the shadowpeople yawned and stirred, readying for travel, Mavin led him there. She let him out to the length of the new rope she had tied to his halter but did not release him. "No more running

away,” she said firmly. “Whatever I may feel about this whole business, Fon-beast, however impatient it makes me, we are bound together until we reach safety.” And to herself, she said, “And when we reach Windlow’s—then we’ll see if there is a true tie between us.”

Singlehorn, rolling in the shallow water, tossing his head and drinking deep draughts of cool liquid, did not seem to care. She let him roll, unaware of the sun falling in the west, enjoying the peace of the moment. When she returned to the road, the shadowpeople were gone.

“Hello?” she cried. “Proom?”

Only silence. Perhaps a far-off twitter.

“Goodbye?” she called.

No answer. Well. They had observed and assisted while Mavin had done several interesting things. They had introduced their children to this person. They had, perhaps, made a new song or two—the Lake of Faces was surely good for at least a brief memorial—but now the shadowpeople had business of their own. Mavin had found the creature she sought, and now they might be about their own affairs. She sought the edges of the road for any sign, any trail, but saw nothing.

Nothing ...

Except a grayness lying quiet beneath a tree. And another superimposed in fluttering flakes upon a copse, wavering the light which passed through it so it seemed to shift and boil.

Her soul fell silent. Shadows from the tower come to haunt her once more. Not upon the road, which still prevented their presence, but nearby. Perhaps the shadowpeople had been shadow-bane, but without them the bane prevailed no longer.

There was nothing for it except to get on to the south. They must come to Tarnoch at last, or so far from the tower that the shadows would give up. Though what they would give up, or how they were here, she could hardly imagine. Was it she who drew them, or Singlehorn? Were they set to follow any who left the Dervish’s valley? And if so, until when? Until what happened? Perhaps this was only conjecture. Perhaps

they had not followed at all but were everywhere, always, ubiquitous as midges.

To which an internal voice said, Nonsense. You have not seen them in your former travels because they were not in this part of the world before. Now they are, because they have followed you here from the Dervish's valley. But follow you where they will, they did not harm you when you were with the shadowpeople, and they do not harm you if you stay upon the road.

As she walked away, leading Singlehorn, it was to the steady double beat of those words; the road, the road, the road. "On the road, the old road, a tower made of stone. In the tower hangs a bell which cannot ring alone. One, two, three, four, five ..." When she reached one thousand she began again. "Shadow bell rang in the dark, daylight bell the dawn. In the tower hung the bells, now the tower's gone."

Why a stone tower? Was it important? She hummed the words, thinking them in her head, then saw all at once how thickly the shadows lay, how closely to the road, how they piled and boiled as she sang.

Gamelords! Was that verse of the weird runners a summoning chant? It could be!

Sing something else. Anything. A jumprope chant. "Dodir of the Seven Hands, a mighty man was he; greatest Tragamor to live beside the Glistening Sea. Dodir raised a mountain up, broke a mountain down. See the house where Dodir lives, right here in our town. One house, two house, three house, four house ..."

The shadows were not interested in this. They dwindled, becoming mere gray opacities, without motion beneath the softly blowing trees.

"Dodir of the Seven Hands, a mighty man to know, every tree in shadowmarch, he laid out in a row. One tree, two tree, three tree, four tree ..."

It was true. The shadows were fewer. "Well, Mavin," she said, "Chamferton told you not to think of it, so best you not think of it. Sing yourself something old and bawdy from Danderbat Keep or old and singsongy from childhood, and keep moving upon the southern way." She soothed herself with this, and had almost reached a comfortable frame of mind when she heard the scream, high and behind her. She spun, searching the air, seeing clearly the dark blot of Harpy wings circling upon a cloud.

Pantiquod had found her at last.

Oh, damn, and devils, and pombi-piss. And damn you, Chamferton, that you let her get away.

And damn you, Himaggery. Damn you, Fon-beast. I should raise you out of that shape and let you fight for yourself. Why must I do everything for you?

The Harpy circled lazily and turned away north. Mavin knew she would return. That had done it! There was no way she could face even one Harpy without Shifting. Being Harpy bit taught that. Even a scratch could be deadly. There being no help for it, she went on walking, singing over in her head every child's song she remembered, every chanty learned in the sea villages, even the songs of the root-walkers she had learned in the deep chasm of the western lands across the sea, and these led her to thoughts of Beedie which led in turn to nostalgic longings to be wandering free again. She had not truly wandered free for five years, not since bringing Handbright's babies back to her kin, and the longing to break away from the rigid edges of the road became almost hysteria by nightfall.

Off the road, beneath the trees, her mind sang, shadows piled up to your knees. Safe from shadows on the road, and you'll feel the Harpy's goad. She had not seen Pantiquod again, but she knew the Harpy would return in the dark, or on the day which followed, and she would not return alone.

"Now, Mavin," she harangued herself angrily, "this hysteria does not become you. Were you nothing but Shifter all these years? Were you a Talent only, with no mind or soul to call upon except in a twist of shape? Your Shiftiness is still there, may still be used if we need it. It is not lost to us, but by all the hundred devils, at least try to figure out if we're Shifty enough without it. So, stop this silliness, this girlish fretting and whining and use your eyes, woman. Think. Do."

The self-castigation was only partly effective. She tried to imagine it having been administered by someone else—Windlow, perhaps. That lent more authority, and she forced herself to plan. There were narrow alternatives. If she stayed upon the road to be protected from shadows, she would be exposed to the air. However! "We came a long way from the Dervish's valley to this road, and though the shadows swarmed all about us, we were not hurt. Use your head, woman!"

She set herself to watch the shadows instead of ignoring them. How did they lie? How did they move? She watched them for many long leagues, and it seemed to her they moved only in random ways, piling here and there, singly here and there, floating like fragments of gray glass between copses and hills. She

tried to foretell where floating flakes would fall. Beneath that tree or upon that clump? Upon the other shadow, or beside it? Where that flock of birds sought seeds among the hedgerows, or beyond them? After a time, she thought she was beginning to be able to predict where the shadow would fall. There was a strange, hazy pattern, if not to their movement, at least to their disposition upon the earth.

If there were any sizeable living thing—any bird or small beast, the shadow would not descend upon that place but in a place near adjacent. The larger the animal or bird, the more thickly the shadows would pile around it, but never upon it and never completely surrounding it. There was always a way out, a trail of light leading through the dark. She remembered the bird upon the hill. The shadow had not fallen upon it. The shadow had lain there, waiting—waiting for the bird to intrude upon the shadow. And then ...

Himaggery had intruded upon the shadow. So said the Dervish.

So had the drugged Chamferon, presumably, though in such a condition that the shadows had not recognized him as a living thing. She saw that the shadows did not seem to bother very small forms of life—beetles and worms went their way beneath the shadow undisturbed.

But larger creatures near which the shadows fell almost always chose the unshadowed way as they hopped about, even when that way was very hard to see—as when the sun was hidden behind clouds, or when the haze of dusk made all things gray and shadowlike.

So. So. One could walk, if one were careful, among the shadows. One could walk, if one were alert, safely away from the road. She stopped to get food from her pack, to feed Singlehorn, all the time keeping her eyes fixed upon patches of gray in a little meadow to the west of the road. There were gobble-mole ditches druggled through the meadow, dirt thrown up on either side in little dikes, a shower of earth flying up from time to time to mark the location of the mole as it druggled for beetles and worms and blind snakes. The tunnel wound its way among the shadows as though the mole had a map in his snout which told him where they lay.

Could the shadows be sensed in some other way than sight? Perhaps even in the dark? Did they exist in the dark? If one were unaware of the shadows, would one find a safe way among them, without even knowing it? Useless consideration, of course. She did know about them, all too well. But did Harpies—ah, yes, she thought—did Harpies know about the shadows?

Dusk came at last, but well before that she chose the place they would spend the night; a half cave beneath a stone which bulged up from moss and shrub into a curled snout. Shadows lay about it, true, but not in it, and a tiny pool of rainwater had collected at the foot of the stone. They would be

comfortable enough, well fed enough, with water to drink and to wash away the dust of the road. They would be unseen from above also, and could lie quiet against the stone, invisible beneath the mixed browns and grays of Mavin's cloak. Deep in the night she awoke to the first Harpy's cry. Now the variety of cries was unmistakable; the Harpies had returned in force. Why they flew at night she could not tell, unless they relied upon some other sense than sight to find their quarry. Perhaps they, like the huge ogre-owl of the southern ice, cried out to frighten and then struck at the sound of things which fled. Perhaps they did it only to terrify.

"It won't work on me, Pantiquod," she said between gritted teeth. "Go eat a Ghoul or two and die of indigestion." Ignoring the feet that her nails had bitten bloody holes into her palms, she forced herself to sleep. When next she opened her eyes it was day.

Dull day, overcast day, day in which nothing moved and no shadow could be seen against the general murk. She stood at the mouth of the cave, refusing to feel hopeless about the matter but tired beyond belief, wondering what path they might take back to the road. "No panic," she grated. "No hysterics. Quiet. Sensible. You can camp here for days if need be ..."

She drew the Singlehorn close beside her, feeding him from her hand. "Fon-beast, sit here by me and keep me warm. We must take our time this morning. I have trapped us by being clever. We must spy out a path."

Which they did, little by little, over the course of an hour, spying where moles moved in the grass, where birds hopped about, where a bunwit mother ran a set of quick diagonals, her two furry kits close behind. They stepped onto the road at last, Mavin with a feeling of relief, the Singlehorn placidly walking behind her. Twice during the afternoon Mavin thought she heard Harpies screaming, but the sound came from above the overcast, remote and terrible, making the Singlehorn flinch and shy against the halter as though he connected that cry with pain.

Toward evening the sky began to clear; and by dusk it held only a few scattered traces of cloud, tatters of wet mist upon the deeper blue. They came to the top of a rise which overlooked a league or more of road, endless undulations of feathery forest, and to the west the encroaching blue of the sea. Mavin began to put landmarks together in her mental map of the area. Schlaizy Noithn lay to the east. Below them the coast began its great eastward curve, and several days to the south they would come to Hawsport, lying at the mouth of the River Haws, full of little boats and the easy bounty of the ocean. Her heart began to lift as she thought of protective roofs and solid inns, sure that the shadows could not gather thickly where there were so many men.

Her elation lasted only for a few golden moments, long enough to make one smothered cry of joy and draw the Fon-beast close to surprise him with a kiss. Then the cry came from the sky behind her,

triumphant and terrifying. The Harpies once more.

Harpies. Many more than one. They would not give her time to reach Hawsport and safety. They had played with her long enough, followed her long enough, and now that she was almost within sight of safety they were readying for the kill.

The kill.

Which she might defeat, even now, by Shifting into something huge and inexorable. They were still circling, still flying to get above her. There were a few moments yet. There was time, still, to gain enough bulk for that. Tie the Fon-beast somewhere hidden. Retrieve him later. Build oneself into a wall of flesh which could gather in one Harpy, or a dozen, or a hundred if need be.

An easy, accustomed thing to do.

And then there might be no Himaggery's child and her own.

She considered this for some time. It was by far the easiest solution. Behind her, Singlehorn tapped the stones with his hooves, a jittery dance from one side of the road to the other. Mavin went on thinking, adding to a plan half formed the night before.

"Himaggery," she said at last. "This is as much your doing as mine, and you must share the risk. Come out, Himaggery." She remembered the Dervish's words: Make him hear you, and her voice was high-pitched in fear that she would not be able to, in haste and danger.

But the Singlehorn reared to his hind legs, faded, took the form of the man she remembered, the face she had seen a thousand times in reveries, had imagined night and morning over twenty years. His face was full of confusion and doubt. Beyond him on the hillside the air was suddenly alive with shadows, boiling in a frenzy, collecting more thickly with every moment—as she had hoped.

"Go back, Himaggery," she commanded in a stentorian voice allowing only obedience. "Go back!" The man dropped to all fours to become the Fon-beast once more. It stood with its head dragging, discomfited at this abrupt transformation. The shadows, seeming confused, piled in drifts at the side of

the road. The Dervish had been right. The shadows had been seeking Himaggery, and now they were fully alerted to his presence. Her hazardous play depended totally upon what these alert and ravenous shadows would do now with any creature which intruded upon them.

The Harpy cries came once more, nearer. Whirling around, she saw them descending from the north, close enough that she could recognize Pantiquod in the fore. The next step, she reminded herself. Quickly. Do not look at them, do not become fascinated by them. Do not think of them at all, only of what you must do next.

She spun to search the area near the road. There had to be an appropriate battleground near the road, a patch now occupied by some living thing which the shadows had left clear. It had to be close! And it must have a clear trail of light back to the road. She searched frantically, hearing the sound of wings in the height, the cawing laughter of the Harpies as they circled, savoring their intended slaughter.

There it was! A gameboard of light and shadow to the left of the road. A bunwit's burrow in the light, the shadow piled deeply about it, alternate bits of shadow and light leading to it, jump, jump, jump. She pulled the Fon-beast close behind her—he unresisting but unhelpful, subdued, his usual grace gone, almost stumbling after her—hauling him by main strength to keep him away from the shadowed squares, only remembering when she straddled the burrow that she could have tethered him at the road. Well and well. No, the Harpies might have attacked him there. Here at least they stood together upon this tiny patch of sunlight surrounded by piled shadows on every side.

She pushed him to the ground and stood astride him, bellowing a fishwife's scream at the falling fury of wings. He lay dumbly, nose to the ground. "Ho, Pantiquod! Filthy chicken! Ugly bird! Die now as your foul daughter did, and her kin, and her allies. Come feel my claws ..."

She had Shifted herself some claws and fangs, needing them badly and considering it no major thing. It was only fingers and teeth, nothing close to the center of her. If so little a thing could destroy the baby within—well, then so be it. Without this much, there would be no chance at all. She danced over the recumbent Singlehorn, screaming abuse at the skies, trying to make the women-creatures furious, frantic, mad with anger, so they would fall to encircle her, come to the ground to use their teeth and talons. They must not drop directly upon her if she could prevent it. She made a long arm to snatch up a heavy branch from the ground, whirling it above her head.

She had succeeded in infuriating them. Their screams were shattering. They slavered and shat, the nastiness falling around her in a stinking rain. Their breasts hung down in great, dangling udders, swaying as they flew. Beneath Mavin's knees the Fon-beast trembled at the sound of them, even dazed as he was, drawing his legs tight against his body, as though to get out of her way. Mavin whirled the branch above her and taunted them. "Filthy bird. Stinking fowl. Drag-breasted beast!"

Directly above her, Pantiquod folded her wings and dropped like a fitchhawk. Remembering that other fitchhawk which had dropped upon her at the Lake of Faces, Mavin whirled the branch in a whistling blur of motion.

The whirling branch stopped Pantiquod in her stoop, wings scooped back to break her fall. Around her the other Harpies touched ground, started to strike with talons and teeth only to stop, half crouched, mouths open, panting, panting. Almost all of them had landed in the shadow. Those few which had not beat their wings and leaped on storklike legs to come at Mavin, stepping across their sisters as they did so. Then they too squatted to pant, tongues hanging from wide-opened mouths before they turned their heads to bite at themselves. Then all but the one were so occupied.

She, Pantiquod, was still in the air, still fluttering and screeching threats at Mavin, eyes so closely fixed upon her prey she had no sight to spare for her sisters.

“Filthy chicken,” Mavin grated again from a dry throat. “Cowardly hen. When I have finished with you, I will seek out your other children and put an end to them ...” This broke the bonds of caution which had held the Harpy high, and she plummeted downward again like a falling stone.

“Strike well, girl,” Mavin instructed herself, holding the branch as she had done as a child playing at wand-ball. The stink of the birds was in her nostrils. Her skin trembled with every moment. She gritted her teeth and ignored it. “Strike well ...” As it was, she waited almost too long, striking hard when the foul mouth was only an armspan from her face, swinging the branch with all her strength, unwinding herself like a great, coiled spring.

The branch caught the Harpy full upon her chest. Mavin heard the bones break, saw the body fell away, half into the shadow. Only half. On the clear ground the head and feet. In the shadow the body and wings. Slowly, inexorably, while the mouth went on screeching and the talons grasped at nothing, the wings drew back into the shadow, back until they were covered.

Mavin looked at her feet. She herself stood within the width of one finger from the shadow. Gulping deeply she drew herself away, drew the Fon-beast away, carefully, and slow step by slow step found a safe path back to the road.

Once there she looked behind her, only once. The shadows were lifting lazily, as though well fed. Behind

them on the grass the Harpies flopped, as headless chickens flop for a time, not knowing yet they are dead. Pantiquod was eating herself, and Mavin turned from that sight. Something within her wanted to call out, "Remember the plague in Pfarb Durim, Pantiquod? This is your payment for bringing that plague, Harpy!" She kept silent. She was sure that no creature within the shadow could hear any outside voice. She prayed she would never hear the voice that Pantiquod must be hearing; the voice of the shadow itself.

For a long time she lay on the road, at first heaving and retching, then letting her stomach settle itself. The Fon-beast was utterly quiet, not moving at all except for a tiny tremor of the skin over his withers. At last she drank some water from her flask, gave the Singlehorn a mouthful from her palm, then went away down the long slope, pausing to rest once more at the bottom of it as she smelled the salt wind from the sea.

After a time she raised her head, habit turning her eyes to inventory the shadows. She sought them first where they had been easiest to see, along the edges of the road. None. Reluctantly, she looked behind them, seeing whether the shadows followed them only now from that battlefield at the top of the hill. None beneath the trees, or on the stones of the hill. None moving through the air in that lazy glide she had learned to recognize.

None. None at all.

Well, Mavin thought, it is possible. Possible they sought a certain creature; possible they found that certain creature, thus triggering some kind of feeding frenzy. Then they had fed. Would the shadows know that the creature which triggered their frenzy was not the one they ate?

Possibly not. Only possibly. Mavin wondered if they had really gone for good. She considered bringing Himaggery back again. She thought of it, meantime stroking the Fon-beast who had at last recovered his equanimity enough to tug at the halter, eager to be gone.

"No, my love," she said at last, patting him. "I can handle you better as you are. Let us come to Windlow's place and ask his help before we risk anything more. Truth to tell, Singlehorn, I am mightily weary of this journey. In all my travels across the world, I have not been this weary before. I do not know whether it is the child, or my own doubts, or you, Fon-beast, and I do not want to blame you for my weariness."

Which I might do, Himaggery. Which I would do. She had said this last silently to herself, wary of using his name. She believed the shadows were gone, but she could be wrong. Himaggery had come out of the

Fon-beast shape more easily than she had expected. She would not risk it again. It would be foolish to assume ... anything.

“I will remember what you told me, Chamferon,” she vowed. “There is much I will tell Windlow when I see him at last, and there is much I will not tell Himaggery at all. Let him find some other quest to keep him busy.”

They came into Hawsport on a fine, windy day, the wind straight across the wide bay from the west, carrying elusive hints of music; taran-tara and whompety-whomp. Singlehorn danced, tugging toward the shore to stand there feeling the waters, adding his own voice to the melodic fragments which came over the waves.

Mavin bought meat and fruit in the market place, where children pursued the Fon-beast with offers of sweets and bits of fruit. “Is there a bridge south of here?” she asked the stallholder. “One which connects the shore with that long peninsula coming down from the north?”

“Never was that I know of,” said the stallholder offhandedly, leering at her while his fingers strayed toward her thighs, making pinching motions.

Mavin drew her knife to cut a segment from a ripe thrilp and did not replace it in her belt. The stallholder became abruptly busy sorting other fruit in the pile. “No bridge there,” he said, putting an end to the matter.

“Oh, yes,” creaked someone from the back of the stall. “Oh, yes there was. It was built in my granddaddy’s time. My granddaddy worked on it himself. They took boatloads of rock out into that shallow water and made themselves piers, they did, and put the bridge on that. Fine it was to hear him tell of it, and I heard the story many times when I was no bigger than a bunwit. It had a gate in the middle, to let the boats out, and the people used to go across it to all the western lands ...”

“What happened to it?” Mavin asked, ignoring the stallholder’s irritation at his kinswoman’s interruptions.

“Storm. A great storm. Oh, that happened when I was a child. Sixty years ago? More than that even. Such a great storm nobody had seen the like before. Half of Hawsport washed away. They say whole forests came down in the east. Dreadful thing. My granddaddy said a moon fell down ...”

“A moon fell down!” sneered the stallholder. “Why don’t you stop with the fairy tales, Grandma. I didn’t even know there was a bridge. Was you planning to go over there? My brother has a boat he rents out. Take you and the beast there in a day or so.” He leered again, less hopefully.

“No,” Mavin told him with a measuring look. “Can’t you hear the music? The Band will need to get over here.”

“The Band?” queried the old voice again. “Did you say Band? Oh, my granddaddy told me about the Band. They came through when my daddy was a boy. Before the storm, when I was just a babby, while the bridge was still there. My oh my, but I do wish I could see the Band.”

“Since there is no bridge,” Mavin said, “I should imagine that if the fishermen of Hawsport were to sail over to the far side, they might find a full load of paying travelers to bring back. It’s only a suggestion, mind, but if the fishermen are not busy with their nets or hooks at the moment, and if they have nothing better to do ...”

She was speaking to vacancy. The stallholder had hurried away toward the quay, shouting to a group of small boys to “Go find Bettener, and Surry Bodget and the Quire brothers ...”

“Tisn’t his brother’s boat at all,” quavered the old voice. “He only says that to save on taxes. Pity you told him about it. He’ll only cheat those Band people, whoever they are, and I would so liked to have seen the Band.”

“That’s all right, Grandma,” Mavin soothed her. “The Band people have been traveling this world for a thousand years. They probably know tricks your grandson hasn’t thought of yet. There’s an old man named Byram with them. He probably remembers the moon falling down. I’ll bring him to meet you, and you two can talk about old times.”

She wandered down to the shore, cutting bits of fruit for herself and for the Fon-beast, counting the little fishing boats which were setting out to sea. Not enough. They would have to make two trips or more. The far peninsula lay upon the horizon, a single dark line, as though inked in at the edge of the ocean. The boats were tacking, to and fro, to and fro. Well, say four or five days at the outside. Time enough to rest and eat kitcheny food. She fingered the coins in her pocket. Time enough to buy some clothing for herself. If she couldn’t Shift fur or feathers when she wished, then she would need more than the

Dervish's cast-offs to dress herself in. Time enough to let the Fon-beast finish healing. She stroked him, feeling his soft muzzle thrust up to nuzzle at her ear. Tempting. Very tempting.

"Not until we get to Windlow's," she said, Sighing, she went to find an inn.

CHAPTER NINE

Mavin and the Singlehorn came to Windlow's school early of a summer evening. Though the way had been wearying, there had been no fear or horror lately, and the companionship of the Band people had replaced fear and loneliness in both their minds. Singlehorn did not shy at the sound of hunting birds any longer. Mavin did not often wake in the night starting bolt upright from dreams of gray shadows and screaming Harpies. Night was simply night once more, and day was simply day. They had come down the whole length of the shoreline from Hawspout, past the Black Basilisk Demesne, and on south to the lands of Gloam where the road turned east once more. Thence they had come up long, sloping meadows to the uplands of Brox and Brom, and there Mavin had left the Band to turn northward along the headwaters of the Long Valley River.

They left the river at last to climb eastward into the hills, and at some point in this journey, the Fon-beast began to lead them as though he knew where they were going. At least so Mavin supposed, letting him have his way. When they came over the last shallow rise looking down into Windlow's valley, she recognized it at once. Though she had never seen it, Throsset had spoken of it, and Windlow himself had described it long ago in Pfarb Durim. There was the lone white tower, and there the lower buildings which housed the students and the servants. Even from the hill she could see the sparkle of light reflecting from a fountain in the courtyard and a shower of colorful blossoms spilling over the wall.

Singlehorn gave an odd strangled but joyous call, and Mavin saw a small bent figure in the distant courtyard straighten itself and peer in their direction. Windlow was, after all, a Seer, she reminded herself. Perhaps he had expected them. If that were so, the tedious explanations she had dreaded might not be necessary. She had done things during the past season which she found it hard to justify to herself. She did not want to explain them to others.

Fon-beast led the way down the hill, tugging at the rope. She pulled him up for a moment to take off the halter, letting him gallop away toward the approaching figure. Of course he was tired of being tied. So was she. It might have been only stubbornness on her part which had insisted upon it all those last long leagues, but she had not wanted to risk his running away again. Day after day when Singlehorn had looked at her plaintively, wanting to run with the children, she had refused him. "Not again, Fon-beast. I am weary of searching for you, so you must abide the rope for a time." However, she had told herself, however, that isn't the real reason. The real reason is you would go back to that same form with him, Mavin, if you could. "You must learn to abide it," she had said aloud, ignoring the internal voices.

In time he had learned to abide it. Now that time was done. She watched his grace of movement, the flowing mane, the silken hide, knowing she had appeared the same when they had been together. They had had perfection together. Was there anything else in life which would make the loss of that bearable?

Well and no matter, she told herself. That person coming toward you is Windlow, and he is hastening his old bones at such a rate he may kill himself. Come, Mavin. Forget the past. Haste and put on a good face.

So she greeted him, and was greeted by him, and told him what person lay beneath the appearance of Singlehorn and something of what had passed, saying no more than she had to say, and yet all in a tumble of confusing words. He passed his hand across his face in dismay. "But in my vision, long ago, I saw you together at Pfarb Durim!" He had aged since she saw him last, though his eyes were as keen as she remembered them.

"I'm sorry, Windlow. It must have been a false vision. We did not meet in Pfarb Durim. We met in a place far to the north, of a strangeness you will not believe when I tell it to you over supper."

"And this is truly Himaggery?"

"It truly is."

"Is he bound in this shape forever? Is it an enchantment we may ..."

"No and yes, Windlow. I will bring him out of that shape as soon as you have heard what I must tell you." And she stubbornly clung to that, though Windlow said he thought she might release Himaggery at once, and so did Boldery, who was there on a visit, and so did Throsset of Dowes who was likewise.

"I will tell you," she said to Windlow, granting no compromise. "And then I will release Himaggery and all of you may say whatever you like to him and may tell him everything he should know. When he has had a chance to think about it all—why, then he and I will talk ..."

“I don’t understand,” said Boldery in confusion. “Why won’t she bring him back to himself now?”

“Let her alone,” Throsset directed, unexpectedly. “I imagine she has had a wearying time. It will not matter in the long run.”

So there was one more meal with Himaggery lying on the hearth in his Singlehorn guise during which Mavin told them all that she knew or guessed or had been told about Himaggery’s quest and subsequent captivity, carefully not telling them where the Dervish’s valley was, or what had happened to her there, or where she had seen the tower.

“Chamferton says Himaggery must leave it alone,” she concluded. “I believe him. The shadows did seek Himaggery, and it was a great part luck and only by the narrowest edge that they did not eat us both. The shadows fed upon Pantiquod and her sisters and did not seem to know the difference, but I would not face such a peril again—not willingly.” The telling of it still had the power to bring it back, and her body shook again with revulsion and terror. Throsset put a hand upon hers, looking oddly at her, as though she had seen more than Mavin had said. Mavin put down her empty wineglass and rose to her feet, swaying a little at the cumulative effect of wine, weariness, and having attained the long awaited goal. Her voice was not quite steady as she said, “Now, I have told you everything, Windlow. I will do as I promised.”

She laid her cheek briefly against Singlehorn’s soft nose. “Come out, Himaggery,” she said, turning away without waiting to see whether the words had any effect. She left the room, shutting the door, while behind her a man struggled mightily with much confusion of spirit and in answer to a beloved voice, to bring himself out of the Singlehorn form and to remain upright on tottery human legs. For Mavin, there was a soft bed waiting in a tower room, and she did not intend to get out of it for several days.

The knock came on her door late, so late that she had forgotten what time it was or where she was, or that she was. Aroused out of dream, she heard the whisper, “Mavin, are you asleep?” and answered truthfully. “Yes. Yes I am.” Whoever it was went away. When she woke in the morning, very late, she thought it might have been Windlow. Or perhaps Himaggery.

She had bought clothing in Hawsport, during the days spent there waiting for the Band to be ferried over from the peninsula. Skirts—she remembered skirts from Pfarb Durim a time before—and an embroidered tunic, cut low, and a stiff belt of gilded leather to make her waist look small, though indeed it was already tighter than when she had bought it. When she was fully awake—it might have been the following day or several days, she didn’t know—and after a long luxurious washing of body and hair, she dressed herself in this unaccustomed finery and went into Windlow’s garden.

Someone observed her seated there and went to tell someone else. After a time she heard halting steps upon the stone and turned to find him there, neatly trimmed of hair and beard, walking toward her with the heasitant stride he was to have for some years, as any four-footed creature might if hoisted high upon two legs and told to stay there.

She was moved to see him so familiar, as she had pictured him a thousand times. "Himagery. For a time, you know, I had not thought to set eyes upon you in human shape again." She was unprepared for his tears, and forgave him that he was not her silken-maned lover any longer.

They sat in the garden for some time, hours, talking and not talking. He had heard of the journey and was content to ask few questions about it.

She was less content. "Do you remember anything at all about being the Singlehorn?" she asked. "Do you remember anything at all about the Dervish's valley?"

He turned very pale. "No. And yet ... sometimes I dream about it. But I can't remember, after I've wakened, what the dream was about."

She kept her voice carefully noncommittal. "Do you desire to return there?"

"I don't think so," he faltered. "But ... it would be good to run, I think. As I ran. As we ran. We were there together, weren't we?"

She waited, hoping he would go on to speak of that time, even a few words. He said nothing more. After a time he began to talk about other things, about plans for his future, things he might do. He asked about the Lake of Faces, and she described it as she had seen it in moonlight, with the Harpy questioning the Faces. She told him of Rose-love's answer, and of the man who spoke of the Great Game taking place around Lake Yost. This piqued his interest, for he remembered the place, and they spoke for a time comfortably about things which did not touch them too closely.

When the bell rang to tell them supper was served in the tower, he took her hand and would not let her go. "May I come to your room tonight?" Not looking at her, dignified and yet prepared for her refusal, hardly daring to ask her and yet not daring to go without asking. She was more moved by that pathetic dignity than she would have been by any importunate pleas.

“Of course. I hoped you would.” That, at least, had been the truth. Later, deep in the ecstatic night, she knew it was still the truth, and more than the truth.

Several days later she sat with Throsset in that same tower room, lying upon a pile of pillows, a basket of fruit at her side. Throsset had been nervously stalking about for some minutes, picking things up and putting them down. Now she cleared her throat and said, “You’re pregnant, aren’t you? I’ve been watching you for days. All that nonsense on the road with those Harpies! Any Shifter worth a trip through the p’natti could have handled a dozen Harpies without being touched. But you didn’t Shift. You haven’t Shifted once since you’ve been here. Not even to fit yourself to a chair or lie comfortably before the fire. How far along are you?”

“I don’t know,” Mavin replied, almost in a whisper. “I was Shifted when it happened, not myself. In the Dervish’s valley. It could have been a season I was there with him, or a few days. I don’t know.” She did not mention the time she had visited that valley eight years before. She wondered if Himaggery would ever remember how it had been, they two together in the valley. Somehow it seemed terribly important that he remember it—without being reminded of it.

“Shifted when it happened! Well and well, Mavin. That leaves me wondering much. Time was we would have assumed it an ill thing and believed that no good issue could come of it. I’m not certain of that any more. Still it’s interesting. And you don’t know how long ago? Well, we can figure it out. I left you near Pfarb Durim early in the season of storms. You traveled from there how many days before you found him?”

Mavin counted. “One to the Lake of Faces. One to Chamferton’s tower—or to him who said he was Chamferton. I don’t know after that, three or four days, I think, following the runners. Perhaps two days to find the Dervish, then time got lost.”

“So, the earliest it could have happened would have been still during the season of storms. Only a few days after you left me. Then how long to come south?”

“Forever, Throsset. Days at Chamferton’s tower, straightening out that mess. Days searching for Singlehorn. Days running from shadows. Days trying to hide from Pantiquod, until the shadows ate her. Days and more days following the Band as it came south along the shore. Days following the river courses. Then across country, through the mountains. To here. And the time here, these last few days.”

“So. Perhaps about one hundred days ago. Perhaps a bit more. Not really showing yet, but I can tell that you feel it. Any Shifter-woman can feel it almost from the beginning, of course. A land of foreign presence telling one not to Shift.”

“You have had ...”

“Two. A son, a daughter. Long ago. Neither were Shifter, so after they came of age I left them with their father’s kin. Better that way. Still, sometimes ...”

“Did you use a forgetter?”

Of course not. They were grown, and fond enough of me. They forget soon enough on their own, and if they’re ever ashamed of having a Shifter mother, then bad luck to them.” She laughed harshly enough to show that the thought of this hurt her. “What are you going to do?”

“Do?”

“Do. Are you going to stay with Himaggery? He wants you to go with him to build a great demesne at that place he talks of, near Lake Yost. The place with unlimited power. He says anything is possible to one with a demesne at such a place.”

“And if I go with him, what?” Mavin asked in a bleak voice. Then, rising to stride about, her voice becoming a chanting croon in the firelight. “When I think of him, Throsset, I am afire to be with him. My skin aches for him. It is only soothed when I am pressed tight against him, as tight as we can manage. My nipples keep pushing against my clothes, wanting out, wanting him to touch them. Then, when we are together, we make love and lie side by side, our arms twisted together, and there is such wonderful peace, like floating—quiet and dusky, with no desires for a time. And then he talks of his plans. His plans, his desires, his philosophy. Of things he has read. I listen. Sometimes I think he is very naive, for I have found things in the world to be different from his beliefs, but he does not hear me if I say so.

“So I merely listen. I fell asleep. Or, if not, my head starts to hurt. Soon I ache to be away, in some quiet place with the wind calling, or in some wild storm where I could fly, run, move. And so I go into the woods and am peaceful away from him for a time, until I am brought back like a fish upon a line ...

“If I go with him, what?” she asked. “I keep asking myself that. He has never asked me what I would like to do.”

“That’s not true,” objected Throsset, “I heard him ask you as we dined last evening. ...”

“You heard him ask me, and if you listened, you heard him answer his own question and go on talking. He asked me what I would like to do, and then he told me how useful a Shifter would be to him. He has heard the story of our journey south, but he has not questioned why I could not Shift. He has not questioned why I have not Shifted in the time we have been here.”

“That’s true,” Throsset sighed. “Men sometimes do not see these things.”

“So.” Mavin nodded. “Since they do not see these things, if I were to go with him, then what?”

“You’re planning to go to Lake Yost, aren’t you,” Windlow asked Himaggery. “You haven’t stopped talking about it since you first heard about the place. Not even when you’re with Mavin, at least not while the two of you are with anyone else. Why all this sudden interest in the place?”

“At first I was afire to go back norther,” Himaggery said, laying the pen to one side and shuffling his papers together. “Couldn’t wait to try that tower again. I figured out how I got caught the first time, and I had all sorts of ideas that might have worked to outwit the shadows—or distract them. I don’t think they have ‘wits’ in the sense we mean. But the longer I thought about it, the more I decided you were right, Windlow. The time isn’t right for it. So, the next best thing is to set up the kind of demesne you and I have talked of from time to time. And an excellent place to do it is at Lake Yost. There’s more power there than any collection of Gamesmen can use in a thousand years, enough to make the place the strongest fortress in the lands of the True Game.”

“Mavin told you the place has been emptied?”

“She learned of it at the Lake of Faces. Actually, I already knew of Lake Yost. A marvelous location but it was held by a troop of idiots, True Game fanatics, wanting only to challenge and play, come what might of it. They called Great Game a season ago, a Game so large we haven’t seen its like in a decade. With the unlimited power of the place, they succeeded in killing all the players, every Gamesman. The

place is emptied and dead, ready for my taking.”

“And will Mavin go with you?”

“Of course! We can’t lose one another now, not after all this time.”

Windlow went to the tower window, stood there watching the clouds move slowly over the long meadows to the west. There were shadows beneath them on the grasses, and he wondered if the shadows hid in these harmless places unseen, when they did not wish to be seen. “Have you thought she might have something else she would like to do?”

“Ah, but what could be more important than this, old teacher? Eh? A place where your ideas can be taught? A place where we can bring together Gamesmen who believe in those words of yours, where we can work together! Wouldn’t anyone want to be part of that?”

“Not everyone, my boy. No. There are many who would not want to be part of that, and that doesn’t make them villains, either.”

“Mavin will want to come with me,” he said with satisfaction. “Windlow, we are so in love. I imagined it, all those years, but I could not imagine even a fraction of it. She wouldn’t lose that anymore than I would.”

“You’ve asked her, I presume.”

“Of course I have! What do you take me for, old teacher? Some kind of barbarian? Kings and other Beguilers may hold unwilling followers—or followers who would be unwilling if they were in their own minds—but Wizards do not. At least this Wizard does not.”

“I just wondered if it had occurred to you—a thought I’ve had from time to time, a passing thing, you know—that love behaves much as Beguilement does. Mertyn, for example. Do you remember him at all?”

“Mavin’s brother. Surely I remember him. A nice child. Boldery’s friend. Of course, he was only eleven or twelve when I left the School, so I don’t remember him well ...”

“Mertyn had the Talent of Beguilement, you know. Had it early, as a fifteen-season child, I think. And it was Mertyn who kept Mavin’s sister from leaving the place they lived, not a very pleasant place for women to hear Mertyn tell of it. He blamed himself, you know, crying over it in the night sometimes. And I asked him if his sister loved him, even without the Beguilement, and he told me yes, she did. So—mostly to relieve the child’s mind, you understand—I said it could have been love did it just as well. And he was not responsible for that. We may be responsible for those we love, but hardly ever for those who love us. Takes a saint to do that.” He turned from this slow, ruminative speech to find Himaggery’s eyes fixed on some point in space. “Himaggery?”

“Um? Oh, sorry. I was thinking about Lake Yost. There’s a perfect site for a community, as I recall, near the place the hot springs come up. I was trying to remember whether there was a little bay there. It seems to me there was, but it’s not clear. You were saying?” He turned his smiling face toward the old man, eyes alight but already shifting again toward that distant focus.

“Nothing,” Windlow sighed. “Nothing, Himaggery. Perhaps we’ll talk about it some other time.”

“I wanted you to have this account of the Eesties,” said Mavin, hand-ing the sheets of parchment to the old man. “Foolishly, I betrayed myself into giving one such account to the false Qiamferton. He was very excited over it. I think he would have tried to hold me in some dungeon or other if I hadn’t cooperated with him so willingly.” She sat upon the windowsill of the tower room, waiting while he read them over, hearing his soft exclamations of delighted interest, far different from Chamferton’s crow of victory when he received his copy. The washerwomen were working at the long trough beside the well, and a fat, half-naked baby staggered among them, dabbling in the spilled water. She considered this mite, half in wonder, half in apprehension.

“And you can’t speak of this at all?” Windlow asked at last.

“Not at all,” she said. “And yet nothing prevents my writing it down.”

“Let’s see,” he murmured. “You went to Ganver’s Grave and ... ahau, ghaaa ...” He choked, coughed, grasped at his throat as though something were caught there, panted, glared around himself in panic. Mavin darted to him, held him up and quiet as the attack passed. He sat down, put his head upon his folded arms. “Frightening,” he whispered. “Utterly frightening. The geas is laid not only upon you, then,

but upon anyone?"

"To speak of it, yes. But not to write of it. That fact makes me wonder strangely."

"For a start, it makes me wonder if the ... they do not choose to be spoken of by the ignorant. They don't mind being read of by literate people, however. Remarkable."

"I thought so, too," she agreed. "Except that the pawns have a thousand fables about the rolling stars and the Old Ones and the Eesties. Nothing stops their throats. Nothing stopped old Rose-love when she told me the story of Weetzie and the daylight bell."

"Because fables are fables." He nodded, ticking the points off to himself. "And facts are facts. You could probably tell the story of your own meeting with them, Mavin, if you fabulized it."

"Girl-shifter and the Crimson Egg," she laughed. "The story of Fustigar-woman and the shadowpeople."

"Quite wonderful. Are you going back there? Seeking the Eesties again?"

"Of course," she cried in unconscious delight of which Windlow was altogether conscious. "Who could not? Oh, Windlow, you would like that place. As full of marvels as a shell is full of egg. And there are other things, things having nothing to do with the Eesties. There's a place below the ridge by Schlaizy Noithn like nothing you have ever seen. I call it the Blot. Traders come there—Traders some say. I think them false gifters, myself—and I want to explore it one day. And I left a girl-child friend across the sea. Her I would see again, before I am old, her and her children."

"And what about your child?" he asked, head cocked to one side, gentle as the wind as he said it.

"How did you know?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I'm a Seer, Mavin. Of one thing and another. In this case, however, it was a case of using my mind and my heart, nothing more. Himaggery doesn't know, does he?"

“Anyone might know,” she replied in a sober voice. “Anyone who used mind or heart. Throsset knew.”

“You won’t allow that he’s simply afire to get on with his life, so much of it having been spent in a kind of sleep?”

“Why, of course!” she answered in exasperation. “Why, of course I’ll allow it. Do I constrain him to do other than he will? He lost eight years in that valley. Should I demand he turn from his life to look at me? Or listen to me? Windlow. That’s not the question to ask, and you know it.”

He nodded, rather sadly, getting up with a groan and a thud of his stick upon the floor. “Surely, Mavin. Surely. Well. Since it seems you’ll not be Shifting for a time—do I have it right? That is the custom? More than custom, perhaps?—call upon me for whatever you need. Midwives perhaps, when the time comes? I have little power but many good friends.”

“I do not know yet what I will need, old sir. Midwives, I guess, though whether here or elsewhere, I cannot say.”

“You’ll risk that, will you?”

“Risk Midwives? I would not do other. It is a very good thing the Midwives do, to look into the future of each child to see whether it will gain a soul or not. The great houses may scoff at Midwives if they will, caring not that their soulless children make wreck and ruin upon the earth. Of such houses are Ghouls born, Gamesmen like Blourbast and Huld the Demon.” She did not mention Huld’s son, Mandor. Years later, deep in the caves beneath Bannerwell, she was to curse herself for that omission. If Windlow had known of Mandor ... if Mertyn had known of Mandor ... “Of course I will risk Midwives, and count the risk well taken to know I have born no soulless wight who may grow to scourge the earth and the company of men.”

He smiled then, taking her hand in his own and leaning to kiss her on the cheek, a sweet, old man’s kiss with much kindness in it. “Mavin, perhaps I erred when I had that vision of you and Himaggery in Pfarb Durim. It seems to me that in that vision your hair was gray. Perhaps it was meant to be later, that’s all.” He sighed. “Whatever you need, Mavin. Tell me.” Then they left the place and went to their lunch, spread on a table in the courtyard among the herb pots and the garden flowers. For a quiet time in that garden, Mavin told herself she would stay where she was, for the peace of it was pleasant and as kindly

as old Windlow's kiss.

"You might remember that he's eight years younger than he seems," commented Throsset. "All that time in the valley. He didn't live then, really. In fact, he may have gone backwards ..."

"To become what?" Mavin asked, examining her face in the mirror. She had never before been very interested in her own face, but now it fascinated her. One of Windlow's servant girls had asked if she could arrange Mavin's hair, and the piled, sculptured wealth of it made her look unlike herself. "Become a child, you mean?"

Throsset swung her feet, banging her heels cheerfully against the wall below the windowsill where she sat, half over the courtyard, defying gravity and dignity at once as she tempted the laundress's boy-child with a perfect target for his peashooter. "Children are very self-centered, Mavin. They are so busy learning about themselves, you know, that they have no time for anything else. You were like that, I'm sure. I know I was. Himaggery, on the other hand, went straight from his family demesne into Windlow's school, and straight from that into continuous study—books, collections. Not Gaming. Not paying attention to other people, you know."

"'Among,' but not 'of,'" commented Mavin, touching the corner of her eyes with a finger dipped in dust-of-blue. She turned. "Do you like that? It's interesting."

"I like the brown better," Throsset advised. "Better with your skin. What are you up to with these pawn tricks, anyhow?"

Mavin turned back to the mirror, wiping away the blue stain to replace it with dust-of-brown. She had bought the tiny cosmetic jars from a traveling Trader and was being self-consciously experimental with them. "I'm finding out whether I can get him to look at me."

"He looks at you all the time. He's in love with you."

"I mean see me. He doesn't care whether I'm Mavin the woman, a fustigar hunting bunwits, or a Singlehorn. He's in love with his idea of me." She applied a bit more of the brown shadow, then picked up the tiny brush to blind herself painting her lashes.

“Your eyelashes are all right!” Throsset thumped down from the window, brushing at her seat, not seeing the pea which shot through the opening behind her. “When are you going to tell him?”

“I’m not.” She was definite about this. “And you’re not to tell him either.”

“Oh, Mavin, by all the hundred devils but you’re difficult. Why not?”

“Because, dear Fairy Godmother”—The proper designation for one with both Shifting and Sorcery was “Fairy Godmother.” Mavin had looked it up in the Index and had been perversely waiting for an occasion to use it. Now she took wicked pleasure in Throsset’s discomfiture—“dear Fairy Godmother, what you saw and what Windlow saw you saw by observation. Himaggery is not innocent. He knows where babies come from. He does know we were together in the Valley. It is a kind of test, my dear, which may be unfair, but it is nonetheless a test I am determined to use.”

“And if he passes it?”

“If he passes it, with no advice from either you or Windlow—whom I have been at some pains to silence—then I will go with him to Lake Yost, and see what it is he plans to do there with his thousand good Gamesmen. And I will not Mavin at him, will not flee from him, will not distress him.”

“And if he fails ...”

“Then, Throsset of Dowes, I will know that it really does not matter to him much. He is in love with the idea of me, and that idea will content him. He will be reasonably satisfied with memory and hope and a brave resolution to find me once again—which he will put off from season to season, since there will always be other things to do.” She looked up at Throsset with a quirk of the eyebrows. “Listen to me, Throsset, for I have made a discovery. It may be that Himaggery will prefer the idea of me to the reality—prefer to remember me with much romantic, sentimental recollection, at his convenience, as when a sweetly painted sky seems to call for such feelings of gentle melancholy. In the evenings, perhaps, when the sun is dropping among long shadows and the air breathes sadness. On moonlit nights, with the trees all silvered ...

“A remembered love, Throsset of Dowes, does not interfere with one’s work! A lovely, lost romance is a convenience for any busy man!”

“You’re cynical. And footloose. You simply don’t want to sit still long enough to rear this child.”

“I’ll sit still, Throsset! Where I will and when I will, and for as long as is necessary. And if Himaggery sees the meaning behind this paint on my face or realizes I am carrying his child, well then I will become dutiful, Throsset. So dutiful, even Danderbat Keep would have been pleased.” She made a face, then rummaged in her jewel box for some sparkling something to put in her hair. “I have discovered something else, Throsset of Dowes. And that is that men give women jewels when they have absolutely no idea what might please them and are not willing to take time to think about it.”

They sat beside the fountain beneath the stars. Out in the meadow other stars bobbed and danced, lantern bugs dizzying among the grasses.

“I used to imagine this,” said Himaggery. She lay half in his lap, against his chest, watching the lights, half asleep after a long, warm and lazy day.

“What did you imagine? Sitting under the sky watching bugs dance?”

“No, silly. I imagined you. And me. Together. Here or somewhere like here. I knew how it would be.”

“This isn’t how it would be,” she said, the words flowing out before she could stop them. “This is an interlude, a sweet season. It’s no more real than ... than we were before, in the valley.”

“How can you say that?” He laughed, somewhat uneasily. “You’re real. I’m real. In our own shapes, our own minds.”

She shook her head. Now that she had started, she had to go on. “No, love. I’m in a shape, a courtyard shape, a lover’s shape, a pretty girl shape, a romantic evening shape. I have other shapes for other times. With those other shapes, it would be a different thing ...”

“Not at all. No matter what shape it might be, it would always be you inside it!” His vehemence hid

apprehension. She could smell it.

She soothed him. "Himaggery, let me tell you a story.

"Far on the western edge of the land, there's a town I visited once. Pleasant people there. One charming girl-child I fell in love with. About nine years old, I suppose, full of joy and bounce and love. She was killed by a man of the town, a Wolf. Everyone knew it. They couldn't prove it. They had locked him up for such things before, but had always let him go. It was expensive to keep him locked up and guarded, and fed and warm. It took bread from their own mouths to keep him locked away ..."

"What has this to do with ..." he began. She shushed him.

"So, though everyone knew he had done it, no one did anything except walk fearfully and lock up their children. I was not satisfied with that. I took the shape of one of his intended victims, Himaggery, and I ended the matter."

There was a long pause. She heard him swallow, sigh. "As I would have done, too, Mavin, had I the Talent. I do not dispute your judgment."

"You don't. Well, the people of the town suspected I might have had something to do with it, and one of them came to remonstrate with me that such a course of action was improper. So I asked why they had not kept him locked up, or killed him the first time they had proof, and they told me it would have been cruel to do so. And I asked then if it were not cruel to their children to let the Wolf run loose among them. They did not answer me.

"So then, Himaggery, I took their children away from them. All. Far to the places of the True Game. For at least in the lands of the True Game people are not such hypocrites. I thought better those children chance a hazardous life knowing who their enemies were than to live in that town where their own people conspired with their butchers."

There was another long silence. "You were very upset at the child's death," he said at last.

"Yes. Very."

“So you were not yourself. If you had had time to think, to reflect, you would not have acted so.”

Then she was silent. At last she said with a sigh, “No, Himaggery, I was myself. Completely myself. And if I’d had longer to think on it, I would have done worse.”

He tried to tell her she was merely tired, but she changed the subject to something light and laugh-filled. Later they made love under the stars. It was the last conversation they had together.

Midmorning of the following day, Throsset of Dowes rode with Mavin northward along the meadow edge. They had brought some food and wine with them, intending to take a meal upon the grassy summit which overlooked the canyon lands before Throsset left for the south. Throsset had decided to go visiting her children soon, away in the Sealands. It was a sudden decision.

“I decided they would scarcely remember me unless I went soon. I haven’t gone before because I feared they would reject me, a Shifter. But if I don’t go, then I have rejected them. So better let the fault lie upon their heads if it must lie anywhere. I will go south tomorrow. I have not run in fustigar shape for a season and a half, not since I met you outside Pfarb Durim. I am getting fat and lazy.”

Mavin hugged her. “You will be here tonight then? Good. You will be able to tell them that I have gone.”

“Ah,” said Throsset, a little sadly. “Well. So you have made up your mind.”

“When we have had our lunch, you will ride back and I will ride on. Tell Windlow I will repay him for the horse sometime.”

“Windlow would have given you the horse. Where are you going? Why are you going?”

“I am going because I do not want this child to be born here, or at Lake Yost, to serve as a halter strap between me and Himaggery. I am going because Himaggery does not see me as I am, and I cannot be what he thinks I am. I am going because there is much distraction here, of a wondrous kind, and I want

two years, or three, to give to the child without distractions.

“As to where. Well. North. Somewhere. I have friends there. I will find Midwives there. And when the time is right, I may see Himaggery again. Windlow now thinks his vision was of a later time. We may yet come together in Pfarb Durim.”

“What am I to tell them?”

“That I became restless. That I have gone on a journey. Don’t say much more than that. Himaggery will be quite happy with that. Each day he will think of going off to find me. Each day he will put it off for a while. Each night he will dream romantic dreams of me, and each morning he will resolve again—quite contentedly.

“Don’t tell him I’m expecting a child. If he knew, he would first have to decide how to feel about it, and then what actions such a feeling should create. Better leave him as he is. After all, the Midwives may not let the child live. So don’t take his smile from him, Throsset. Strangely though I seem to show it, I do love him.”

They drank the wine. When they had done, Throsset threw the jug against a stone, shattering it into pieces. She wrote her name upon a shard and gave it to Mavin, accepting a similar one in return. So were meetings and partings memorialized among their people, without tears.

After Mavin rode down into the canyon lands, Throsset sat for a long time staring after her. She was not sad, not gay, not grieving or rejoicing. She went boneless and did the quick wriggle which passed for comment in Danderbat Keep; Mavin could not Shift for a time, but she was still Mavin Manyshaped, and Throsset did not doubt she would return.

“Good chance to you,” she whispered toward the north. “And to your child, Mavin.” Nothing answered but the wind. Putting the shard into her pocket as one of the few things she would always carry, she went to tell them that Mavin Manyshaped had gone.

