

PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN

THE ISLAND IN THE LAKE

LONG AGO, IN THE MORNING of time, the people lived in a warm and green place, where the sun had cared for them since first they opened their eyes. And life was sweet in that place, in the care of that good and generous sun. But the people were wanderers in their hearts, and at last they turned their backs on that green place, and on that good sun, and set out into the Great Night to find another home.

Their journey was long, for the darkness was vast, and homelands were as tiny and lost in it as flowers on the grassy plain. But the Pole Star had looked upon them in that darkness, and finding them worthy, he claimed them for his own, and guided them safe to this sun and this place. Yet when they came to their new home, it was not a land such as they had known before. No, it was a land strange and beautiful, a land where magic grew in every meadow, and flowed in every river, and breathed in the very wind. And foolishly, they destroyed that magic, and made the land over in the image of their old home, which they had left so far behind in the Great Night. And they were happy in their new home, not understanding what they had done.

But the Pole Star, who loved them in spite of their folly, preserved that magic in a few hidden places, and laid a net of his own power over land and sea, that the magic might be protected and perpetuated, forever living. And the Pole Star gave the knowledge of that magic to those who chose to dwell in his own favored domain, to hold and to use to ease their hardships. For they are wanderers, as the people were once wanderers every one, and the Pole Star has claimed them before all others. And the sign of that gift is the promise of the sun--that no matter how great the night grows, there will always be a dawn.

--Song of the World's Beginning  
(among the People of the North)

Alaric the minstrel paused at the crest of the hill. To his left and right, a line of hills stretched as far as the eye could see, but before him, to the west, the land sloped downward gently to a broad, flat plain. Upon that plain lay an irregular grid of ocher fields, their grain all reaped, only the yellow stubble of barley, wheat, and oats left to dry in the last warm days of the year. The two dozen dwellings of the peasants who worked those fields were clustered together into a village near the center of that grid, Alaric could just make out their stone walls and thatched roofs, and the stone fences of the animal pens that flanked them. Farther on, much too far from the village to be a comfortable walk for fetching water, was the lake, shining like burnished silver under the autumn sun. The Lake of Death.

The day had been hot, even so late in the year, and Alaric was stripped to the waist, his face shaded by the wide-brimmed hat he had plaited from the sparse wayside grass. Slung over one shoulder was his knapsack, with only a cloak and a

shirt and some scraps of bread inside; over the other was his lute, the minstrel's boon companion. The strange and magical north lay far behind him--the great glacial waste, the lodestone mountains, the witchcraft of a woman who read men's souls and of her elixir that healed the dying and could even raise the dead. Lately, he had moved through less exotic lands, through arid hills cloaked in scrub, their infrequent streams shallow and meandering over pebbly beds, their scattered inhabitants scrabbling to draw a living from the parched soil. Yet in those lands he had heard again and again of a bountiful plain beside a mirror-bright lake, a place where a strong lord ruled and enemies had never conquered. A place where the people used water from that lake as their weapon--water that killed what it touched.

The first time he heard the tale, Alaric knew that a minstrel whose stock in trade was legend and wonders would be a fool to pass it by.

He could have reached it earlier in the year. He could have used his witch's power to leap from horizon to horizon, from village to village, tracking the place down in a matter of days. But he had walked instead, as an ordinary man would walk, because this was the south, where the cry of witch made folk strike out at what they feared. And he had walked, too, because he was in no great hurry to see what lay beyond the next hill as long as there were listeners for his songs before it. Barely nineteen summers old, he had lost everything in his life, or abandoned it, and now nothing called him to one place over another. Nothing but curiosity.

The track he followed to the hilltop had been broad and rutted, but overgrown, as if little used in recent times. As it descended among the fields, though, it became a real road, cleared of weeds and graded smooth. It led directly to the village and on past, to the lake shore, where it became a stone causeway linking that shore with an island in the very center of the water. The island was a small one, and occupied entirely by a single building, a high-walled fortress with pennons flying from its many turrets--the fortress of the lord of the Lake of Death.

Alaric had not even reached the village when he saw two stocky, middle-aged men and a boy of nine or ten walking toward him. They were dark-haired and sun-browned, dressed in sleeveless gray tunics and breeches, and they strode fearlessly toward the stranger. Before they were near enough to ask his business, he halted, doffed his plaited hat, and bowed low. The lute slid from his shoulder, and he caught it with one curled arm and strummed a chord as he held it against his bare chest.

"Greetings, good sirs!" he called. "Alaric the minstrel, at your service with songs for every mood and every season!"

They halted a few steps away, and the men smiled, but the boy just stared at the lute, wide-eyed, as if it were some unknown animal.

"A long time since a minstrel came this way," said the shorter of the men; he had the guttural accent Alaric had become accustomed to in these western lands.

He laid an arm across the boy's shoulders. "Not since before my son was born."

Alaric answered the man's smile with his own. "So much the better for me. Thirsty folk drink deep and are usually kind to the water-bearer."

The man laughed then. "Well, I suppose there will be quite a few thirsty folk, when they discover that water has arrived. I hope your water is sweet, my friend."

"Always," said Alaric.

"We have both kinds of water here," said the boy. "Sweet from the springs and bitter in the lake."

His father laughed again, and the other man joined him. "The child is a little young to understand figures of speech. But he tells the truth. And you should be warned-- don't try to drink the bitter water of our lake. It would ruin your voice, and the rest of you, forever."

"I've heard something like that," said Alaric.

"Good," said the man. "I wouldn't want to think that the tale has died in recent years. For it's as true as it ever was. Anyone who touches that water, who so much as dips a hand in it, hardly has time to regret the act."

"And yet they say you toss it at your enemies. Can you avoid touching it yourselves when you do that?"

"We have pumps," said the boy, "and special clothing."

His father shook his shoulder gently, as if to silence him. "We have been here a long time, minstrel," he said. "We know how to live with the water in the Lake of Death."

Alaric glanced at the lake, at the island in its center. "I see that."

The man nodded. "My Lord Gazian lives there. Come now, minstrel. I am the headman of this village, and Taskol is my name. And these are my son Yosat and my brother Adeen. Come to our home and sing for us, and we'll reward you according to your merits."

Alaric grinned. "Then I look forward to a fine reward. But should I not pay my respects to Lord Gazian first of all?" He gestured toward the fortress.

"Oh, he's a busy man. He wouldn't have time to hear a minstrel until much later in the day. You can sing for the village this afternoon and for him this evening." And when Alaric still hesitated, he added, "I think you should prove yourself to lesser folk before being allowed to entertain such a great man, don't you?"

Alaric strummed a chord on his lute, and then another. "Are you perhaps afraid he'll keep me to himself and not let you listen if I go to his castle first?"

Taskol shrugged. "He is a man who likes the best of things. And he deserves them, of course, for he keeps us safe. But as headman, I must look out for my villagers, in my own small way. Surely you understand."

"I don't wish to offend such a great man," said Alaric.

"I will escort you to him myself this evening," said the headman.

Alaric looked at him for a long moment. There had been trouble once or twice in his life over such matters of courtesy. Not so long ago, men-at-arms had been sent to terrorize a peasant family that had kept Alaric from their lord for a single night. But looking at the village headman, at his son and his brother, Alaric saw no uneasiness, no sign of fear of the man who lived in the middle of the Lake of Death. "I would like to rest my legs a little before crossing that causeway," he said at last.

"Indeed you shall," said Taskol. "I wager you've walked a fair distance today."

Alaric nodded.

"And some ale would not go amiss, would it?"

"Indeed it would not."

The headman's hut was the largest of the village, and the only one with a door of wood rather than hard-tanned leather, though the wood was old and weathered. Inside, there was hardly any wood at all. Where settee and chairs might have stood in another household, this one offered stone stools and a stone bench, roughly shaped and thickly cushioned with straw mats. Even the bed in the corner had not the simplest wooden frame to raise it above the hard-packed earthen floor; it was a mere straw pallet, though a thick one, draped with a woolen blanket. Of all the furniture, only the tabletop was made of wood, as weathered as the door, and resting on stone pillars instead of legs. And in the fireplace, dried dung smoldered beneath the big cookpot. There was plenty of straw and stone and dung around the Lake of Death, Alaric realized, but not a single tree.

Taskol's wife brought ale, and when the minstrel had quenched his thirst, he sat outdoors on another straw-cushioned stone bench and entertained the village with songs of the ice-choked Northern Sea and the deer-riding nomads who hunted on its shores. Nearly a hundred listeners crowded the space beside the headman's home, standing, sitting on the stone wall that penned his sheep and cows, squatting on the dusty ground--the whole of the village, Alaric guessed, from the eldest graybeard to the smallest babe in arms. He made them laugh first, with the tale of the herder boy who discovered that his deer could speak and was disbelieved until he revealed some of the embarrassing human secrets that the deer knew; and then he made them gasp at the tale of the nomad who tried to save his people from starvation by hunting the huge and terrible Grandfather of All

Bears. Afterward, when the crowd had dispersed with many an appreciative word, Taskol served him fresh bread and new butter and admitted that his skill was great enough for the lord of the Lake of Death.

"But remind him, please, that we of the village like music, too," he said. "So that he does not keep you entirely to himself."

Alaric savored the crusty, still-warm bread. "I will do what I can," he said between bites.

"I suppose I must deliver you to him, then. If you are ready..."

"Is there bread like this on the island?" asked the minstrel.

"There is the best of everything on the island," the headman replied.

Alaric downed a last draft of ale to clear the butter from his throat, then drew the dark shirt from his knapsack and slipped it on. "I am ready."

The lake shore was a broad, barren margin, marked at the water's very edge with a thick pale crust, like hardened foam. The causeway, made of fine, squared blocks of stone so white it dazzled the eye, began well before this crust and rose smoothly till, where it entered the water, it stood a man-height high above the surface. Broad enough to accommodate two wagons abreast, it ran arrow-straight to the island, broken by two gaps, each spanned by a heavy, iron-banded drawbridge. At the very gate of the fortress was a third bridge, guarded by a spearman in bossed leather armor. Taskol identified Alaric to the man, and the two were admitted.

Inside the gate was a courtyard large enough to hold half the houses in the village.

"This is a strong citadel," Alaric said, looking up at the high, crenelated walls. Only a handful of armed men stood at the crenelations, scanning the world beyond the lake. At any other castle, there would be dozens. "It's given you safety for quite a long time, I would think."

"For my lifetime, and my grandfather's, and more," said Taskol. "No one living remembers the last time we had to lock ourselves inside these walls for a siege. Of course, the lake is our true defender."

"I would hate to fall off that causeway."

Taskol nodded. "So would I."

"Has anyone?"

"Not lately."

Alaric glanced over his shoulder. Beyond the gate, the lake lapped gently at the

pure white sides of the raised stone road. "What would happen if someone did?"

"No one could save him. Within a few heartbeats, the flesh would begin to shred from his bones, and then the bones themselves would begin to dissolve. It's an ugly sight."

Alaric shuddered. "You've seen it?"

"When I was a child, we chased a fox off the causeway. It floated, for a short time, while the water worked on it." He shook his head. "Poor hapless fox. Normally, animals stay away from the lake. They know what it holds."

Looking up at the walls again, the minstrel said, "How strange to live surrounded by...that." Then he smiled a slow smile. "I'll make a song of it, if I can."

Taskol smiled back. "I think that would not displease my lord." He pointed to the doorway of the keep, at the far end of the courtyard. "I imagine he awaits his dinner just now. If I introduce you, he might invite me to stay for the meal."

"By all means, then, introduce me."

The great hall of the keep was not so large as some Alaric had visited, but it was one of the most luxurious, at least at first glance. High, narrow windows admitted the afternoon sunlight, showing the walls hung with tapestries, the stone floor scattered with carpets and furniture of velvet and fine-carved wood. Only on closer inspection, as he walked the length of the chamber, did he see that the carpets were worn almost to their backings in many places, the tapestries were moth-eaten, the velvets thinnapped and shiny, and the fine woods dry and cracked. The riches of the citadel were of an earlier generation, and had not been renewed. He realized that more than a few seasons must have passed since that overgrown road had known much traffic.

Yet there was newer wealth here, even so. The trestle table at the far end of the room, ancient as it appeared, was heavy laden with fresh bread, meats, and vegetables, with butter, cheese, and ale. And the two men who sat behind it were dressed well enough, in supple leather, light wool, and golden chains. They looked like brothers, both dark and strong-jawed, though one was much older than the other.

Taskol bent the knee before them, and Alaric imitated him.

"My lord," said Taskol, "I beg to present Alaric the minstrel, lately come into our land to offer his songs for our pleasure."

The older of the two men pushed his chair back and rose to his feet. "It has been long and long since a minstrel came to this land. You are welcome, sir." But he said the words gravely, without any smile. He was a tall man, and broad with muscle, though his hair was touched with gray and there were deep lines

carved about his mouth and across his forehead, and dark pouches beneath his eyes. "As you see, we are dining. Join us, minstrel, and afterward show us your wares. We would welcome something new." He sat clown again. Then he added, "Stay, too, Taskol. You threshed the grain that made this bread."

Taskol bowed. "I thank you, my lord."

He and the minstrel took places on a bench at one end of the table, and they ate well of the viands spread before them. From time to time, other leather-clad men entered the hall, made their obeisances, and sat to the meal, but none of them stayed long, and none of them wore gold. Alaric recognized one as the guard of the gate.

Two young serving women cleared the table and set out more ale to signal the end of dinner. They eyed Alaric curiously but said nothing, only hurried off when they were done, to a door that stood at a corner of the hall, between two tapestries. They did not close themselves away behind it, though, but stayed in the open doorway, looking at him, and other men and women crowded there with them, half a dozen or more. The castle servants, Alaric thought, waiting for whatever novelty the stranger was about to provide.

Lord Gazian waved at him to proceed. Pushing his bench away from the table, Alaric settled the lute on his lap. There was a song he had been working on for quite some time, and he thought it was ready for singing now--a tale of darkness for half the year and light for the rest, of blossoms growing from the very ice at the pole of the world and spawned by seeds fallen from above the sky, from whose leaves a curing elixir could be made. In the song, a young man fought storms and monsters and the Northern Sea itself to reach those blossoms, for his beloved lay ill, and not even the wisest healer knew another way to keep her from death. When he had won through and saved her, and they had celebrated their wedding in the final verse, the listeners at the doorway clapped their hands and chattered among themselves until their lord cast a single dark glance in their direction.

"A well-sung song," he said, "but I like not the subject matter. Sing of something real, minstrel."

Alaric almost said that the elixir was real enough, though the monsters were inventions, but he caught himself and bowed his head. He had no proof, just his word, and he had learned over the years that it was rarely healthy to contradict a nobleman, even with proof. He sang another song, a comic one of squabbling neighbors and stolen sheep, and of a man who was fooled into counting his sheep three times and reckoning a different number at each. Before he was done, the folk at the doorway were laughing, and even Lord Gazian himself had smiled a little.

"You have much skill," he said. "And your songs are...interesting. You could make your fortune in some large and powerful household, but instead you've come here to these remote and sparsely peopled lands." He sat forward, leaning his elbows on the table, the cup of ale between his hands. "What brings you to us,

minstrel?"

Alaric bowed again. "Nothing, my lord, but a boundless desire to see the world and add to my stock of songs. Those songs are my fortune, and an easier one to carry than any gold."

The younger man spoke for the first time. "You are brave to come here, sir minstrel. Unless Taskol has not told you of the lake..." He looked narrowly at the headman.

"I had already heard, in far-distant places, and he told me as well," said the minstrel. "But I think I am less brave than the folk who live here. I would not wish to try this lake during a storm, when the deadly waves splash high."

"These stout walls protect us," said Lord Gazian. "And we take care. It has been many a year since one of our own was claimed by the lake."

"Still, I see high courage in living here. You and your people have all my admiration."

"Enough admiration," said the younger man. "Sing another song."

Gazian looked at his companion for a moment, and Alaric saw a flicker of anger pass between them before the lord of the castle turned back and said, "Go ahead, another song."

Another song led to another, and at last the sunlight in the high windows reddened and faded, and tripod oil lamps were lit to take its place. Finally, Alaric pleaded weariness after a long day of walking and said that he would sing again the next day, if desired.

Lord Gazian nodded and rose abruptly from his place at the table. "You have our thanks, minstrel, for this afternoon's entertainment. My brother will see that you are made comfortable for the night." He nodded to the younger man and, without waiting for any acknowledgement, crossed the room to a tapestry-fringed archway in the farther wall. Stairs were visible beyond the arch, and in a moment, he had climbed out of sight.

The younger man rose, when his brother had gone, and he came around the table to stand above the minstrel. "You sing well, young minstrel. What was your name?"

"Alaric, my lord."

The man's mouth tightened for a moment. "I am not known as lord," he said. Then he made a peremptory gesture toward the doorway that was still crowded with servants, and the two young women came scurrying. "Make him a pallet in the kitchen," he said, and turned away. With a swift stride, he went out to the courtyard.

Alaric glanced at Taskol. "Have I insulted him?" he asked.



Taskol shrugged. "Master Demirchi is the heir. But while his brother lives, there is only one lord here--we haven't room for more in our little land. I'm sorry, minstrel; I should have thought to warn you. We call him sir."

"I will do that, then, and hope he forgives a stranger. Though I've never before met a man who didn't like being addressed above his station. What would he have done if I had called him majesty?"

Taskol laughed and shook his head and led the way to the kitchen, while the serving women trailed behind.

The kitchen was a small room, dominated by a great fireplace and crowded with worn trestle tables and deeply grooved butchers' blocks, with cauldrons and platters and roasting spits. It was also a warm room, but now that darkness had fallen and cool night air had begun to slide through the high windows of the keep, that warmth was pleasant enough. The kitchen servants made Alaric a pallet near the embers of the hearthfire, and they left a few choice tidbits from dinner on a table nearby, in case he woke hungry in the middle of the night. Taskol packed a few of those tidbits into a sack, to take home to his family, before he bade Alaric good night. Then he and the servants put out the lamps and left the minstrel to sleep his first sleep surrounded by the Lake of Death.

Alaric lay on his back for a time, staring up at the kitchen's single window, far above his reach. He could see a few stars there, for the red glow of the embers was not enough to drown them out. The window was much too high, he told himself, to be touched by the waves, even in the wildest storm. And there was no storm tonight, just a gentle autumn breeze. Still, he thought that if this were his castle, he would shutter the windows, just to be sure. Finally, he got up and took his pallet out to the empty hall and set it where there was a wall between himself and that kitchen window, and all the other windows were far away. One lamp still lit the room, leaving heavy shadows in all the corners, but Alaric had no fear of shadows. He fell asleep, an arm crooked protectively about his lute, both of them wrapped against the gentle autumn breeze in his well-worn cloak.

When he woke to a touch on his shoulder, the lamp no longer burned, and dawn twilight showed through the windows. He knuckled sleep from his eyes and blinked up at the man who leaned over him. It was Lord Gazian, wearing a dressing gown of fine, pale wool that gave his body a ghostly cast in the dimness.

"My lord?" said Alaric.

"Will you come upstairs, minstrel? There is someone who would hear you sing."

Odd though the time was, Alaric rose, knowing that no good could come of reluctance. Carrying his lute close against his body, he followed the master of the lake through the arch and up the narrow, winding stairway beyond. At the third landing, they turned off the stair and walked along a curving corridor that was marked every ten paces by a narrow window. Through each window, Alaric

could see the lake below; the water reflecting the soft, gray-pink color of the eastern sky. They had passed four windows, making nearly a half-circle, before Lord Gazian halted at a door on the inner wall. He eased it open.

The room was small, though richly hung with tapestries, and crowded by a bed, a chair, and some low chests. A bedside table held a small oil lamp, a tray of tiny pastries, and a cup. And the bed itself, wide enough for three men, held a boy of no more than seven summers, propped up on bolsters and covered with a light blanket. Even in the candlelight, Alaric could see that the boy was ill--his face was pale, with a sheen of moisture, and his dark eyes were sunk deep above his hollow cheeks. He said nothing when the lord of the castle and Alaric entered, though his gaze followed them to the side of his bed.

Lord Gazian sat down on the edge of the mattress and gently stroked the damp dark hair away from the child's forehead. "I've brought the minstrel for you." He nodded at Alaric.

"Thank you, Father," said the boy in a small, soft voice. He looked at Alaric. "I'm sorry to get you up so early. It is early, isn't it?"

"A little," said Alaric. "But I don't mind."

"Sometimes he doesn't sleep well," said his father, resting one large hand on the boy's shoulder. "And last night the servants told him about you, and he hardly slept at all for asking when you would come upstairs."

"My nurse sings to me," said the boy. "But they told me you sing much better."

"I am flattered," said the minstrel. "Do you like songs about magic?"

"Oh, yes."

"About knights and dragons and fair maidens?"

The boy's eyes widened. "Is that what you sing about?"

"Sometimes. For special listeners."

"Please," breathed the boy.

"Very well." Alaric sat down on the foot of the bed and balanced his lute on his knee. "This is the tale of a boy who grew up to fight dragons." And he launched into an old favorite in more familiar lands--the song of the youth who found an enchanted sword in a hollow tree, a sword that itself became his teacher. By the time he finished, with the young man slaying his monster and winning the hand of a king's daughter, and the kingdom as well, the boy's mouth hung open in wonder, and there was a bit of color in his cheeks.

"Oh, another, please, minstrel," he begged.

Alaric looked at Lord Gazian, who nodded.

In the end, he sang of magical adventures until the boy's nurse came with his morning meal.

"You mustn't stop in the middle!" the boy cried. The color in his cheeks was hectic now, and his eyes were very bright.

"The child must eat," said the nurse, as she set the tray on the bed. She was a stout woman, old enough to be Alaric's grandmother, and the expression on her face was stern. She pointed to the tray of pastries, all untouched. "He's eaten nothing since yesterday noon, not even one dainty, and you have excited him on an empty stomach, as well as keeping him from sleep."

"I didn't want to sleep," said the boy.

She propped him up farther on his bolsters. "You must sleep. And you must eat. How can you ever get well if you don't sleep and eat, I ask?" She lifted a cover from a bowl of porridge and dipped up a spoonful for him.

He turned his head away from it.

"Eat a little, my son," said his father. He glanced at Alaric. "I'm sure the minstrel would say the same."

"Indeed," said Alaric. "I'll be eating this very porridge downstairs shortly, and it smells excellent."

The boy frowned, but then he nibbled at the edge of the spoon and finally swallowed the whole amount.

"A little more," said the nurse, with another spoonful.

The boy looked up at Alaric. "What is your name, minstrel?"

"Alaric."

"Mine is Ospir."

Alaric bowed. "Greetings, Ospir."

"Will you come back later?"

"If your father wishes it. The decision lies with him."

"Father?"

Lord Gazian caught the boy's small hand for a moment. "If you will promise to eat your porridge, and to try to sleep, I'll bring the minstrel back later."

The boy sighed. "Very well, Father."

"Good child," said the lord of the castle, and he stood up. "Till later." And he gestured Alaric toward the door.

They were halfway down the stairs before Alaric asked, "My lord, what ails the boy?"

Lord Gazian kept walking. "No one knows, minstrel. He has been sickly for most of his life. He is a good boy, though, and a patient one." When they reached the foot of the steps, with the archway to the great hall before them, he stopped and turned back to Alaric. "Thank you, minstrel, for being kind to him."

"My lord, I am here to serve you. It would be poor service indeed to be unkind to your son."

The lord of the castle nodded and stepped through the arch.

They broke their fast with more than porridge--with eggs and bread spread thick with butter, with slices of fat mutton and grilled fowl, and with a drink made of soured milk that Alaric found not as attractive as plain, clear water. But water there was in plenty--from a spring, servants explained, that rose from deep within the island and never failed.

"How strange," Alaric said, "that pure water should flow in the midst of the Lake of Death."

"This land is full of such springs," said Master Demirchi. "There would be no fields without them." Unlike his liege and brother, he was fully dressed for the day, in leather and soft, thin wool. "And without the fields, we would all be elsewhere." He picked at his plate of mutton and eggs. "But I think a few people would come here anyway, just to carry off some of our deadly waters for a weapon. We are especially rich in that weapon, are we not, my brother?"

Lord Gazian cast him a sour glance. "Don't ask again," he said.

Demirchi nodded toward Alaric. "The minstrel has traveled the world. Speak to him about it."

"I don't wish to speak about it. I've made my decision."

Demirchi peered with slitted eyes at Alaric. "How much gold do you think an outsider would pay for a few sealed containers of water from the Lake of Death?"

Alaric looked from one man to the other. "I don't know, sir. Perhaps it is too dangerous to transport elsewhere."

"Nonsense," said Demirchi. "We know how to deal with it."

"We have no need of outsiders' gold," said Lord Gazian.

With two fingers, Demirchi lifted the gold chain that hung at his throat. "This may be enough for you, but it won't buy new carpets for this room, or furniture, or weapons. I want a new sword; must I trade my only chain for it when a cask of water would suffice?"

Gazian set the flats of both hands on the table. "I will not sell death, and that's an end to it. When you rule here, if you rule, you may decide otherwise. Till then, we will leave off speaking of it."

"My brother, you are not thinking to our advantage."

Gazian looked at him for a long moment, and then he said, "I know you have many responsibilities to attend to today. I would not keep you from them."

Demirchi made a disgusted noise and then stood up and strode from the room.

The lord of the castle and the visiting minstrel were both quiet for a time, eating. Shortly after Demirchi left, a couple of other men came in and sat down to partake of the meal, and seeing the frown that lingered on their lord's face, they said little and excused themselves quickly. Alone with Gazian again, Alaric was unsure of what to do. At last, he said, "Shall I sing for you, my lord?"

Gazian looked up from the remnants of his meal. There was tiredness in his eyes, in the slope of his shoulders. "You must be weary, minstrel, from waking so early. There is an empty chamber upstairs, just beyond my son's room. Perhaps you would like to take your pallet up there and sleep a bit more. Tell one of the servants I said to help you with it. You can sing again later."

"You are kind, my lord."

He shook his head. "I think not, but I thank you for being so willing this morning. Go on. Rest."

"As you will," said Alaric.

Rather than disturb the servants, who all seemed busy enough, Alaric took the pallet upstairs himself. Half a dozen steps past young Ospir's door was another; he pushed it open.

At first he thought he must be in the wrong chamber, for this one was not at all empty. Illuminated by a single narrow window, it was fully three times the size of the boy's bedchamber, and richly furnished. The floor was almost entirely covered by a single large carpet, and the walls were hung partly with tapestries and partly with thick velvet curtains. A velvet settee stood in the center of the carpet, with a pair of finely carved tables flanking it and a needlework footstool before it. On one wall was a fireplace of white stone, and against the other was a wide bed made up with fine pillows and quilts.

Alaric backed out the door, to see if he had missed the room he was supposed to

find. But this one was indeed beside the boy's, and the corridor ended in a blank wall after it.

Inside again, he laid his pallet on the floor beside the settee and made a circuit of the room. The fireplace contained no trace of wood or dung or ash, just a naked grate. The carpet, the tapestries, the settee and tables were worn much as the furnishings of the great hall were worn, but all were covered with a thin layer of dust. The bed was dusty, too, and stale-smelling, as if the bedclothes had not been aired in a long time.

There was a chest at the foot of the bed, half covered by the quilt, with no lock to keep a curious minstrel out. Alaric turned the quilt back and lifted the wooden lid. Immediately, the sweet scents of cedar and lavender wafted up at him, the one lining the chest, the other sprinkled over the contents as dried blossoms. A woman's clothing was packed inside--linen and lace and embroidery, all heavily creased from lying long undisturbed. Alaric closed the lid again, and draped the quilt back over it. Whoever's clothes they were, he thought, she had not worn them in quite some time.

He moved his pallet nearer the window and looked out for a moment. It was a beautiful view, if one ignored its deadliness--the lake shining like polished metal, the fields spread out in a golden array, the sky clear and cloudless above the line of hills on the horizon. He imagined her, whoever she was, sitting on the windowsill and gazing out, perhaps with embroidery in her hands. And then he realized he was thinking of other castles, other hands, other embroidery left far behind, and he turned his mind away from them. No one had sat on this windowsill lately, for it was as dusty as everything else in the room. He lay down on the pallet and closed his eyes. He was tired, as Lord Gazian had known, and he fell asleep quickly.

A rough hand on his arm brought him out of jumbled dreams of the past. For a moment he thought Lord Gazian must be shaking him, and then he looked up and recognized Ospir's nurse.

"What are you doing here, minstrel?" she demanded.

Yawning, he stretched his arms out above his head. "Lord Gazian told me to sleep here."

"Did he?" She loomed over him, hands on her hips, suspicion on her face and in her voice. Then, less sharply, she said, "Well, I suppose if you had come here without permission, you would have closed the door. But to send you to her room." She clucked her tongue.

"Whose room is it?" asked Alaric.

"His lady's, of course. What other room would be so near the boy's?"

"Yours."

"Not a room like this," she said indignantly. "Mine is on the other side, and befitting my station. This is a finer chamber than even Lord Gazian's own."

"But Lord Gazian's lady doesn't live in this chamber," said Alaric.

The corners of the nurse's mouth turned down. "She died giving my lord an heir." And she nodded toward the wall behind which Ospir lay.

"And Lord Gazian never took another wife?"

She shook her head. "None could compare to her. He loved her, minstrel." She laid a hand on the back of the settee and stroked the worn velvet. "Many was the time they sat here together, and I brought them dinner, just the two of them here in this room. It seems so long ago. I air the room sometimes, just for the memory of her. Poor lady."

Alaric sighed, thinking how often love led to unhappiness in the real world. Far more often than in song. "A sad tale," he said.

She looked at him sharply. "One you could put to music, I suppose, just one tale among many. I heard about your tales from the other servants. Fancies and lies, most of them, it seems."

"Some. Others have a bit of truth to them."

"A small bit, I'd think. But the boy likes them--I'll say that for you."

"That pleases me," said the minstrel. He glanced out the window, saw that the sun was high; he had slept most of the morning away. "Is he awake now?"

She had already turned toward the door, but she paused at his question. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I thought I would visit him before going downstairs, if he were awake."

"His uncle is with him."

"Master Demirchi?"

"He has only the one uncle."

Alaric pushed his covering cloak aside and got to his feet. "I was told yesterday that Demirchi was the heir. But you just said it was the boy. Surely this land isn't large enough for two."

The nurse lowered her voice. "No one expects the boy to live out the winter. He has never been well, not since his babyhood, and two years ago my lord decided that another heir must be named."

"Poor child," murmured Alaric.

"He is a good boy," said the nurse.

"Will Master Demirchi stay long with him now?"

"He never stays very long."

"Then I will wait."

His lute under one arm, he followed the nurse to the door of Ospir's room and stood outside as the woman slipped in. He caught a glimpse of Demirchi sitting on the bed, holding the boy's hand, and then the nurse closed the door again. Shortly, Demirchi came out.

"He is eager for your songs, minstrel," he said, "but I beg you not to tire him. He has little strength these days."

Alaric bowed. "It must be hard to lie in bed for so much time, sir. I only desire to make it a bit easier for him."

Demirchi nodded. "We will see you later in the great hall?"

"Of course, sir. I am here to sing for all who will listen."

"At dinner, then." He walked off down the corridor.

Inside the room, Ospir greeted Alaric in his small, soft voice. "Thank you for coming back so soon."

"I had some porridge and took a nap, which I hope you did as well, and now I am ready for a little more music."

"He ate and slept," said the nurse. "He has been a good child this morning."

"And my uncle came to visit," said Ospir. "I wish he had stayed longer. He always makes me laugh. But you are here, and that makes up for his going."

Alaric sat down on the edge of the bed. "Well, I will try to make you laugh, too, if your nurse does not mind."

The woman waved a hand, as if in permission, and Alaric began a long, complicated song about a wolf who tried to trick eight sheep into leaving their fold to run away with him. By the time he was done, the boy was laughing, and the nurse was as well. But in the midst of his laughter, Ospir began to cough, a deep, hollow cough; and when he could not stop, his nurse had to help him sit up, and she rubbed his thin chest until at last the spasms passed. By that time he was half-fainting, and as he fell back on the pillow, a trickle of blood started from a corner of his mouth. The nurse swabbed his sweaty forehead and wiped the blood away with a damp cloth.



"I think you should go now, minstrel."

"No," gasped the boy, his voice smaller than ever. "Please." He closed his eyes, and he was so pale, and his breathing became so shallow, that Alaric thought he must be dying that very moment.

"Shouldn't we call his father.?" he asked the nurse.

Then Ospir's eyes opened, and the look in them was beseeching. "I'll be all right," he whispered. "Please sing."

The nurse nodded to Alaric. "Something more serious."

And so Alaric returned to songs of knights and fair maidens, of sorcerers and monsters, and of lands beyond the horizon. He sang softly, though, and after a time he left a song unfinished, because he knew the boy slept.

The nurse walked with him into the corridor and closed the door gently between them and the child.

"I'm sorry," said Alaric. "I didn't know."

The nurse shook her head. "He has had congestion of the lungs before, but never so bad. They die sometimes, after the blood comes. And he is very weak, poor child." She looked down at her hands, which were clenched in the voluminous fabric of her skirt. "I shall call his father now."

Alaric trailed after her to the great hall, where Lord Gazian sat talking with two men in bossed armor. When informed of his son's condition, he directed the two to find his brother, and then he went upstairs. Master Demirchi came in from the courtyard a short time later and went up, too. Neither man asked Alaric to come along.

He went to the kitchen for a time, and listened to the talk among the servants. None was surprised that the child was so gravely ill; they had been expecting his death for two years already. They speculated on how long the mourning period would be, and then they asked Alaric to sing, because there might not be much singing allowed when the household was in mourning. Finally, Alaric went upstairs, though unbidden, to see what he could see.

The door to the boy's chamber stood ajar, and inside both Gazian and Demirchi sat on the bed, on opposite sides, and the nurse hovered near. That left little space for another visitor, so he did not attempt to enter. He could see, though, that the boy was awake, with one hand held by his father and the other by his uncle. None of them seemed to notice Alaric standing in the corridor.

Silently, he slipped on down the passageway to Ospir's mother's chamber. Entering, he shut the door quietly but firmly, and then he bolted it. He laid his lute on the settee.

The strange and magical north lay far behind him, and in it the elixir so powerful that it brought the dead back to life. He had never intended to return there, never intended to revisit Kata the witch, who brewed that elixir, but now he knew that he must.

A heartbeat later, he stood on a mountainside above the northern valley that was now her home. The air about him was suddenly crisp with the northern autumn, and he shivered a little as he scanned the valley floor. He looked past the harvested fields and the peasant dwellings, past the great fortress that guarded all and the people who walked its battlements and strolled in and out through its gate. He looked, finally, to the shore of the river that had created the valley, and there he saw the tent, figured all over with the symbol of the sacred Pole Star, that belonged to Kata. A moment later, he was thrusting aside its entrance flap and stepping into her firelit domain.

She sat cross-legged by the fire, a grinding stone upon her lap, a pestle in her hand, the bags and bundles that held her possessions piled all around her. Her thick, dark braids brushed her knees as she bent over her work, the smooth muscles of her slender arms flexed beneath their load of leather bracelets. When she looked up, and her eyes met his, there was not the slightest trace of surprise in her face.

"Greetings, my Alaric," she said in the soft, lilting accent of the north. "You return to us."

He shook his head. "No. I only come to ask a favor."

She smiled a little. "If you wish a favor, you must give one in return."

He sat down beside her. "This is not for myself. It is for a child."

One of her eyebrows rose. "Whose child?"

"Not mine. The child of my host, far to the south. He is sick, perhaps near death, and I would help him."

"Ah, soft-hearted Alaric. Has your softness not found you enough trouble in your life? Had you stayed in the north, you would have become hard, as we are hard."

"I am what I am, lady. Will you give me the elixir?"

She brushed fine dark powder from her stone into a square of muslin, twisted the cloth into a sack, and tied its mouth with a strip of sinew. "These are the leaves you helped us bring back from the Great Waste. Shall I withhold from you your share of what I make of them? It would be ungrateful of me."

"You are fair, lady. You have always been fair to me."

"How old is the child?"

"Seven, I believe, and small for his age."

She dipped into a bag and pulled out a ceramic flask the size of her fist and sealed with wax. She also found a spoon made of horn. "Give him two spoonfuls diluted in a cup of wine each day till the elixir is gone. If it can help him at all, that will be enough."

Alaric took the flask and the spoon. "Thank you, lady. Now, what favor can I offer you in return?"

She caught his wrist. "Only one, my Alaric."

He shook his head. "I can't stay."

"You will never find what you seek."

"I have given up seeking, lady."

She looked long into his eyes. "No," she said at last. "Don't fool yourself, minstrel. You will never give up. Songs and travel will never be enough for you. One day, I think, you will go back to your past, you will not be able to resist it any longer. I hope it does not disappoint you too badly."

"I have nothing to go back to," said Alaric, and the words were thick in his throat.

"Those are only words, my minstrel." She let go of his wrist. "Is there a woman in this place you've come from.? The mother of the child, perhaps.?"

"No. No woman."

She smiled again and stroked his cheek with one finger. "I find that hard to believe, pretty boy."

He smiled back. "I've only been there two days."

"Then there is still plenty of time. Tell me about this place," she said. "Tell me about all your wanderings since you left us."

He looked down at the flask and the spoon. "Lady, I cannot. The child might die while I entertained you. You must understand.."

She nodded slowly. "I do understand. And you must also understand that you will always be welcome among us. Always."

"Farewell," he whispered.

An instant later he was back in the chamber next to Ospir's.

Lord Gazian, Demirchi, and the nurse were still in the tiny bedroom, and Ospir

was still breathing, though laboriously, when Alaric slipped in. Demirchi was the first to look up at him. "Not now, minstrel," he murmured.

"I have an elixir which I picked up in my travels," Alaric said, showing the flask. "It has proven itself in the past in any number of grave illnesses, and I believe that it might help the boy."

Demirchi glanced at the flask. "Are you a healer as well as a minstrel, Master Alaric.?"

"I've used it myself more than once. I know its power."

Demirchi shook his head sharply. "We want no unknown elixirs for the boy."

Lord Gazian looked up then. "You've taken it?" he said.

"Yes, my lord," said Alaric.

"Had you a fever?"

"A high one, my lord."

"And so has my son. Bring your elixir here."

Alaric squeezed by Demirchi and the nurse to stand beside the lord of the castle.

"Give it to me," said Gazian.

Alaric handed over the flask. "Two spoonfuls should be given each day in a cup of wine," he said. He held the horn spoon up. "This is the measure."

Gazian perforated the wax seal with his sheath knife and sniffed of the elixir. "It has a pungent smell," he said. "Harsh. Like cloves. Is it bitter?"

"Not in wine, my lord," said Alaric.

"Fetch some wine," Gazian said to Demirchi.

"Brother, what do we know of this stuff?" said Demirchi. "It might be poisonous."

"I will taste it if you wish," said Alaric.

"The wine, brother," said Gazian.

"Let me get it, my lord," the nurse said suddenly, and before anyone could object, she hurried from the room.

In a voice barely audible, Ospir murmured, "I will take it, Father."

"Good boy," said Gazian, caressing his son's cheek.

The nurse returned shortly with a carafe and a cup. Alaric measured the elixir and mixed it with the wine, and then he spooned out a mouthful and swallowed it in full sight of the others.

"What proof is this?" said Demirchi. "One spoonful of dilute poison might be harmless to a grown man, and a cup of it deadly to a weakened child."

Lord Gazian looked at his son. "We have nothing better to try," he said. "Come, my child, drink." And he held the cup to Ospir's lips.

It took some time to finish the cup, for the wine was strong for such a young child, and the elixir, Alaric knew, made it taste odd, but at last he drank it all. Then he closed his eyes and whispered, "May the minstrel sing for me?"

Gazian nodded to Alaric.

The minstrel chose a lullaby of many soft, sweet verses, and by the time he was finished, Ospir was sleeping.

Lord Gazian gestured for all but the nurse to leave, and out in the corridor, he said, "If your elixir helps him, you will be well-rewarded, minstrel."

"If it helps him, that will be reward enough, my lord," said Alaric.

Gazian took his arm. "Come down to the hall and sing for us now. I have need of diversion."

The remainder of the afternoon was a restless one. For a time, Alaric sang, and the lord of the castle and his brother listened. And for a time, other men joined them and the group played at a game with colored stones on an octagonal board. Master Demirchi got up often and went to the foot of the stairway, but Gazian always called him back, saying that word would be sent if there were anything to know. The household dined, though Lord Gazian ate little, and then Alaric sang again. Night fell, and at last the master of the Lake of Death dispatched a servant to his son's room, but the servant could only report that the boy was sleeping still.

Lord Gazian looked at his brother. "Perhaps you should see to the mourning ceremonies, in case they become necessary." He rose heavily from his chair. "I will be on the postern balcony, not to be disturbed...unless there is some word from above."

Demirchi inclined his head. "As you wish."

"Come, minstrel. I would listen to more music, if you can."

"I can, my lord."

Alaric followed him up the stairs, to the second landing this time, through a doorway, and down a broad, shallow flight of steps. At the bottom was a door heavier than any he had seen elsewhere in the castle, oak almost solid with iron banding, and fastened shut by two great horizontal beams. Gazian unbarred it with one hand, the beams swinging easily on well-oiled pivots, and pulled it open. Beyond lay a balcony open to the night sky.

There were no lamps on the balcony, but the moon rode low on the horizon, casting its silver gleam upon a space three paces deep and a dozen wide, with a hip-high wall guarding its rim. Lord Gazian went to that wall and leaned upon it with both forearms, and when Alaric joined him there, he saw that the surface of the water lay only a couple of man-heights below. The waves were calm beneath the moon, but a pale mist was rising from them, swirling in the gentle breeze. Alaric stepped back from the wall.

"No need to be afraid, minstrel," said Lord Gazian. "The waves never come this high."

"The mist," said Alaric.

Gazian shook his head. "Harmless." He looked out over the water. "Though they say the ghosts of everyone who ever died in this land are in that mist. They say the lake holds them prisoner, and they wander over its surface every night, trying to escape. I've seen them myself, whatever they are--vague figures in the distance, writhing. Sometimes I've even heard them moan. Or perhaps it was just the wind."

Alaric looked where he was looking and saw only mist, thicker here and thinner there.

"I wonder, sometimes," Gazian said, "if my lady wife is among them. And I wonder if she will be happy if our son joins her."

Alaric said nothing.

Gazian glanced at him over one shoulder. "He sleeps long. Is it the sleep that comes before death?"

"The elixir always brings sleep," said Alaric.

"It may be too late for your elixir, minstrel."

"I hope not."

He sighed. "I have not much hope left in me. Once, I had hoped to see him grow up strong to care for my people after me. I can no longer remember when anyone still thought that was possible." His head sank down between his arms. "Sing, Master Alaric. Sing of hope."

And Alaric sang, as the moon glimmered on the deadly waters and the mist writhed and twisted above them. He sang of quests successful and of love affirmed. And as the moon rose ever higher, he thought, once or twice, that he too could see vague figures in the mist, as if his music had raised them. Later, Lord Gazian dismissed him, with permission to use his lady's old bedchamber once more.

In the morning, before breaking fast, Alaric tapped at Ospir's door to make sure the nurse administered another dose of elixir. She woke the boy to do so, but he went to sleep almost immediately afterward. For the brief moments his eyes were open, he did not seem to recognize either her or the minstrel.

In the great hall, all the day was as restless as the previous afternoon had been. Halfway through, Lord Gazian sent his brother out on some errand to keep him from going to the stairway so often. He himself saw to all the myriad details of life in the castle, but offhandedly. He spurned the game of colored stones and dismissed the men who would play it with him. And he hardly listened when Alaric sang, pacing instead, back and forth across the hall, even going out to the courtyard and up onto the battlements. He stayed on the battlements for quite some time, looking out toward the village of his peasants. He was there when a servant came running through the great hall with word that Ospir was awake, hungry and thirsty, and asking for the minstrel.

Gazian raced up the stairway. Alaric and a servant with a tray of broth and bread followed at a more demure pace.

They found the boy sitting up, supported by his bolsters, his nurse's arm, and his father's strong hands. The nurse gestured peremptorily for the tray and, choosing the cup of broth, held it to the boy's lips. He drank greedily.

"Not so fast, my darling," she said. "Small sips at first." She moved the cup away from his mouth.

"But I am so thirsty," he said.

"Drink again in a moment."

He saw Alaric standing in the doorway. "Sing for me, please minstrel. I dreamed you sang for me."

"As you wish, young master," Alaric replied. And as the boy drank more broth and even ate a little bread, Alaric sang of knights and fair maidens and fire-breathing monsters.

Over the next few days, as he continued to drink the elixir, the boy improved dramatically. His fever vanished, his paleness was replaced by healthy color, his eyes brightened, his cheeks lost their sunken look. By the time the flask was empty, he could even stand up, though his legs were weak and shaky after so much time in bed. But his small, soft voice was stronger, and his laugh was clear and unmarred by any coughing. Three days later, he insisted upon going downstairs to the great hall, so that he could dine with his father and uncle;

he even walked part of the way.

Seeing him sitting so straight upon his cushioned bench, the servants and the men in bossed leather made much of him, and he answered them like a little lord, graciously, his face glowing with the attention. But his nurse would not let him stay long, for fear of overtiring him, and as soon as the meal was done, his father carried him back upstairs, laughing with him, laughing loud and long. That night, Alaric sang him to sleep, as had become his habit.

"How can I reward you, minstrel?" Lord Gazian asked for the dozenth time as he and his brother and Alaric sat by lamplight in the great hall.

Alaric just shook his head and strummed his lute. He had already politely refused Gazian's own gold chain as being a gift that would only be stolen from him somewhere along the road. He understood how rare such wealth was near the Lake of Death and he, who could steal all the gold he wished, did not want to carry off any of their poor treasures. "I have everything I want--good food, a soft place to sleep, music, and listeners who like what I offer."

"But you wander the world, never knowing where your next meal will come from, never knowing even whether you will sleep with a roof over your head."

"Minstrels are born wanderers, my lord. We don't mind sleeping in the open or hunting game for our suppers."

"A homeless life. Not one most men would choose."

Alaric shrugged. "In truth, I have a thousand homes, for wherever folk are good hosts, there I feel welcome. As here."

"Do you indeed feel welcome here, Master Alaric?"

"I do."

Lord Gazian leaned forward. "Then stay with us. Make your life here. The boy would like that, I know, and I would as well."

"This is a kind offer, my lord."

"And there would be no need to sing every night, only when you wished it. You would be as a member of my own family, like a second younger brother."

Alaric glanced at Demirchi, who was lounging back in his chair, playing with his gold chain. "That is too high for me," said the minstrel. "You have a brother already."

"Call it what you will," said Gazian. "This is my desire."

Alaric drew another chord from the lute. "You overwhelm me, my lord."



"Will you do it?"

"I must think. This is a great decision. I have a certain sort of life, and giving it up would be hard."

"This is a wealthy land,' said Gazian, "and a safe one, as you know."

"Wealthy?" muttered Demirchi. He looked at Alaric from beneath lowered eyelids. "Surely our young minstrel has seen wealthier. He's traveled the world and seen castles full of gold, haven't you, lad?"

"Occasionally," said Alaric.

"Our wealth is our grain and livestock," said Gazian. "That is the only wealth that matters. The rest is mere display."

"And will you still be saying that when we are all sitting on the floor because our chairs are broken?" asked Demirchi.

"You exaggerate, my brother."

Demirchi snorted. "The peasants already sit on stone. And you won't even sell a little of our surplus grain to buy us wood."

Gazian looked at him. "The lord who sells his grain is a fool. I've told you I will not flirt with famine."

"There hasn't been a famine since our great-grandfather's day."

"And you can promise me there never will be, is that it?"

"Brother--"

"Enough. I won't hear you try to win the minstrel to your side with these tired old arguments. If you want wood, go trade your own gold chain for a fine chair at some great town. I won't stop you."

Demirchi made no reply to that, only frowned at his brother and fingered the chain.

Alaric looked from one of them to the other. "I am sorry to be the cause of such a quarrel, my masters,' he said softly.

Demirchi straightened in his chair. "It is an old quarrel, minstrel," he said, and then his frown twisted into a sardonic smile. "One I never win. But that does not make me give up. Perhaps when we, too, are sitting on stone benches, my brother will finally think again about our wealth." He rose to his feet. "Now I shall bid you good night, brother, and you, Master Alaric. I hope you will stay with us, minstrel, for every time he sees you, my brother will remember that there is a world beyond this lake." He bowed slightly and left by way of the

stairway to the upper floors.

Lord Gazian looked at his own gold chain for a moment after his brother had gone. Then he raised his eyes to Alaric's. "Are we too poor for you, minstrel?"

Alaric smiled. "I have sung at great houses and small, to listeners clothed in velvet and listeners clothed in rags. There was not much difference in their enjoyment. Just in the food they offered. And your food is excellent, my lord."

Gazian nodded. "And our enjoyment is high. It always would be. Think hard on your decision, Alaric."

"I will, my lord. I promise."

"Now...perhaps one last song before we sleep?"

"Of course, my lord."

And he sang of a long dark journey to a distant land where a sip of the water could make one immortal, as long as one never left. The youth who made the journey stayed many centuries and was happy, but he went out at last, homesick for the place of his birth, and crumbled to dust as soon as he passed the land's enchanted border.

When the song was done, Gazian said, "Is that what you think of my offer? That someday you would regret staying?"

Alaric shook his head. "It is only a song, my lord."

"The boy wants you to stay. And he needs you. He is not completely well yet. What if he falls ill again? Only you know where to find the elixir. He has been ill so much of his life!"

Alaric slid his hand along the strings of his lute, eliciting only the faintest murmur of sound. Then he said, "I could draw you a map. But it is a long, hard journey. And no promise that at the end the maker of the elixir would give any to a stranger."

"So much the more do we need you."

"I need time to think, my lord."

Gazian leaned toward him and gripped his arm. "You will be a brother to me. I swear it."

Alaric smiled. "It is not a repellent offer, my lord. But I need a little time."

"Of course," said Gazian, letting go of him. "I look forward to your answer, whenever you are ready with it."

Alaric bowed to him, bade him good-night, and went upstairs.

He lay awake for a while, considering the offer. It was not the best he had ever had, nor the worst. It had certain attractions, not the least the quality of the food. But he had eaten good food elsewhere. And he had met kind people elsewhere. And he had never stayed. He had not decided what to tell Lord Gazian by the time he fell asleep.

He awoke to the sound of someone entering the room and to light, though not the light of morning. It was a small oil lamp, and Master Demirchi held it high. Outside the chamber window, the sky was still black as midnight.

"Minstrel?" said Demirchi.

Alaric sat up on his pallet. "Yes?"

"My lord and brother wishes to see you on the postern balcony."

"Is it Ospir?"

"No. Will you come?"

Alaric pushed his cloak aside and reached for his lute. "Of course."

Demirchi led the way down the stair and out the great iron-banded door. A low half-moon illuminated the lake and the stone balcony. The lake was misty, the balcony was empty.

"He'll be here shortly," said Demirchi. "You were quicker to wake and gather yourself together than we presumed."

"Very well," said Alaric, and he played a chord on the lute.

Demirchi went to the stone railing and looked out over the lake. "You wouldn't think that something so beautiful could be so deadly," he said.

"No," said Alaric. The mist swirled, so heavy in some places that the surface of the water was hidden. Peering at it, Alaric now had no trouble imagining shapes in the wind-stirred whiteness--buildings, trees, even human figures moving upon the water. "My lord Gazian says there are ghosts on the lake. In the mist."

"Oh, yes. I see them often. But they never come near the castle."

Alaric stepped closer to the railing. "Do the people of the village also see them?"

"I don't know," said Demirchi. "I've never asked. Ah, look at that one there. A woman with her arms stretched out to us."

Alaric followed the line of his pointing finger. "Where?"

"Farther to the right."

Alaric squinted into the mist. "I don't quite --"

At that moment, he felt a tremendous blow on the back of his head, an impact so sudden and sharp that it pushed him beyond pain and into a moonless, starless, insensate dark. But he was there, it seemed, for only an instant, wrapped in the thick black velvet of nothing; and then, abruptly, he was enveloped in water, and his mouth and nose were filled with the thick bitterness of brine. He swallowed the vile stuff, breathed it in, choked, and flailed his arms and legs in panic. His struggles brought him to the surface, coughing and gasping. Through burning eyes he saw Lord Gazian's castle looming above him, the postern balcony jutting out over the deadly water. He fought the terror that told him his skin was stripping away from his bones, running like wax melting from a candle. With horrible clarity, he knew where he was and where he wanted to be. In his own special way, he leaped.

And tumbled into the cold, fresh water of the river beside Kata's tent.

In a moment, he was pulling himself up its grassy bank, stopping half in and half out of the water, vomiting and coughing and drawing great ragged breaths of air. Then he rolled back into the river to rinse himself again. By the time he finally crawled out of the water, Kata was waiting for him, a burning brand held high in one hand.

"What is all this commotion?" she said.

He tried to strip off his clothes, thinking that they might still bear some trace of the deadly water, and when she moved to help him, he thrust her away, fearful of harming her with its touch. "It will kill you," he told her. "Maybe it has killed me already." The wet shirt came off at last.

"What are you talking about? Are you wounded?" She held the torch close and peered at him.

"I fell into the Lake of Death. The water will eat the flesh from your bones in a few heartbeats. They spray it at their enemies." He had his treads off now and was shivering in the northern breeze. He clutched himself with crossed arms.

Kata gripped his shoulder hard, and when he tried to pull away, she slapped his face and gripped him again. "This flesh looks well enough to me."

He looked at his shaking hands, his arms, his chest.

"Not a mark on you," she said. "Now come sit by the fire."

Inside her warm tent, Alaric's shivering subsided. Kata thrust the brand into the fire, stirring it to a bright blaze, and inspected him again, more closely. Again she found no signs of damage.

"There are substances which can dissolve flesh," she said, running her hands firmly over his arms and torso, "but they make it slippery first, and your flesh is not. Tell me, does this Lake of Death have a scent? Pungent? Sharp? Making the eyes stream?"

Alaric shook his head.

"And what is the taste of it?"

"Salty and bitter."

"Open your mouth." She lit a splint and held it near his face. "Your tongue is normal, and the inside of your mouth. Is your throat painful?"

"No. But it made my eyes bum."

"Any brine would do that. Is your vision harmed?"

"I don't think so. And the burning is less now."

Kata dropped the splint into the fire. "This deadly lake water would seem not so deadly then."

"But it is. It must be. They all said so."

Kata looked at him sharply. "Is this my Alaric speaking?"

He hesitated, remembering Taskol's cautions, Demirchi's desire to sell the water as a weapon. "It has kept their enemies away for generations."

Kata nodded, then she dipped into one of her bags and pulled out a long-handled bronze ladle. "Bring me a sample of this water, Alaric. I would examine it closely."

Alaric took the ladle, but he said, "This will not reach the water, lady, not from any safe place."

"Then we will give it a longer handle." Under the bundles on one side of her tent she found a spare support pole, as long as Alaric was tall. "Will this suffice?"

Outside, they bound the pole to the ladle with strong sinew.

"You must promise me to be very careful, lady," Alaric said, the pole set on his shoulder like a pike, the bowl of the ladle resting in his hand.

"Of course."

Naked, he traveled to the lake shore near the place where the causeway began.

The mist was thick there, and the shore deserted, as he expected. He flitted to a spot a dozen paces along the stone road, and lying flat on his stomach, stretching his arm downward to its limit, he was able to scoop up a small amount of water. He climbed to his feet carefully, waited a few moments for the ladle to stop dripping, and returned to the north.

Kata held a ceramic bowl while he poured the contents of the ladle into it. Then they went inside her tent.

"No, there is no odd scent," she said, after sniffing at the liquid. "Nor the oiliness that would mark some of the more powerful flesh-dissolvers." She found a thin strip of leather and dangled one end into the bowl. She moved it around, stirring the water. "A few heartbeats, you say."

"That's what they told me."

She pulled the strip out and peered at it closely. Then she dunked it again, for a longer time, and pulled it out. "I see nothing."

"I don't know that this is a fair test," said Alaric.

"Leather is skin, is it not?"

"Cured skin. Perhaps that makes it proof against the deadliness, I was told the people have ways of carrying it, even of pumping it."

"No doubt," said Kata, and she thrust her finger into the bowl.

"No!" said Alaric.

"My Alaric, this is a brine, nothing more." She stirred it with her finger.

"Look." She raised her unharmed finger from the bowl. And then she licked it and nodded. "A strong brine and a bitter one. Saltier by far than the Northern Sea, and with more salts than just the one we put on our food. But a pleasant enough bath, I think, if you hadn't feared it would kill you. That was a clumsy thing, my Alaric, falling into a lake you so feared."

"I didn't fall," he said. "I was pushed. By someone who believed the water would kill me. I know he believed it."

"Ah." She set the bowl down by the fire. "Well, I suppose they must, and their enemies, too. What strange beliefs there are in the south, with no proof behind them!"

He sighed. "Well, the water will prove deadly enough to something. I had my lute when I went in. And I didn't think to bring it north with me. So it floats...somewhere in the lake."

"And it won't survive the wetting."

"No. I shall have to find another."

"You've done that before."

"Yes. Yes." He stared into the fire, but his inner eye saw the Lake of Death instead. He thought back over the time he had been in Lord Gazian's castle. He thought about Gazian himself, and Ospir and Demirchi. Especially Demirchi. And he wondered if Demirchi had paused on the stairs to listen to his last song, and to the conversation that followed it. Or perhaps he had not needed to hear them. Perhaps his decision had been made while he played with his gold chain. "I must go back," he said at last.

"To a place where they tried to kill you?"

"I must."

"For revenge, my Alaric? That is not like you."

"No. To protect someone."

They dried his clothes over Kata's fire, and a moment after he put them on, he was back in his temporary bedchamber in Lord Gazian's castle. Dawn had not yet come.

He slipped into Ospir's room. The boy was sleeping soundly, and the nurse was dozing in the chair at the foot of the bed. Gently, Alaric touched her shoulder, and when she opened her eyes, he made a sign for her to follow him.

In the corridor, the door closed between themselves and Ospir, he said, "Why were you so eager to fetch the wine the first night we gave the boy the elixir?"

She frowned. "I, Master Alaric? I only wanted to bring it so that the boy could drink."

"Lord Gazian had ordered his brother to fetch it."

"But he was delaying, Master Alaric."

"He would have gone in another moment, you know that. Or my lord would have given you the order. But you didn't wait."

"Master Alaric--"

"With all that talk of poison, were you afraid of what Master Demirchi might fetch?"

Her eyes became wary. "I would never say anything like that!"

"But I think you must know that Master Demirchi did not want the boy to live. Does not want the boy to live."

The woman hesitated. "He was happy to be the heir, everyone knows that."

"But the boy is no longer ill. Demirchi will not be the heir."

"Master Alaric--"

He gripped her shoulder hard. "Tell me the truth, woman. Don't you think Demirchi knows that you suspect him? Or do you try to ingratiate yourself with him by your silence?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what you mean."

"And you left the two of them together many a time, didn't you, so that Demirchi could put his evil powders in the boy's cup, his bowl, his pastries?"

"The boy loves him, and he loves the boy. What is this talk of evil powders?"

"Or perhaps you put them there yourself."

"I? No!"

"Shall I tell Lord Gazian why his son has been so sick for so many years ?"

"You would not accuse me!"

"I would tell the truth. And because I saved the boy's life, he would believe me."

Tears started in the woman's eyes. "Oh, Master Alaric, don't accuse me. What could I do? I am only a servant, and he is my lord's brother. He could throw me into the lake! I never wished the boy ill. I love him dearly."

"But not as much as your own life."

The tears overflowed down her cheeks. "No, not as much." She covered one side of her face with her hand. "You are an outsider. You don't know. It is a terrible death."

"I do know," he said softly. "He killed me that way."

Her mouth dropped open.

"Yes," said Alaric. "I am dead. And I am part of the mist on the lake now. But I know how to enter the castle. Go tell Master Demirchi that I wish to see him on the postern balcony. Now."

She shook her head. "He sleeps. I cannot disturb him."

"Yes, you can," said Alaric and, letting go of her abruptly, he vanished.



The balcony was deserted when, in the next heartbeat, he appeared there. The iron-banded door was closed and barred from the inside--he checked it to be sure, flitting in and out in an instant. He sat down, then, on the hip-high wall, one knee drawn up, his crossed arms resting on it. He waited. Shortly, he heard the sound of the bars being drawn. The door swung inward, revealing Demirchi.

"Come out, Master Demirchi," he said, smiling.

Demirchi stood where he was.

"Now I know without any doubt that there are ghosts in the mist," said Alaric. "They thank you for sending me to them, for they liked my singing and wanted the singer among them forever."

"No," said Demirchi.

"Yes," said Alaric. "The flesh stripped off my bones quite cleanly, and then even my bones dissolved. And my lute, too, poor thing. But I shall seek its ghost shortly, and we will make ghostly music on the lake. You will hear it at night, Demirchi, and remember what you did."

Demirchi gripped the edge of the door. "Go away," he said hoarsely.

"Oh, I will never go away now. You have made certain of that. I will visit you often, mostly at night, but perhaps in the daytime, too. And perhaps I will bring my ghost friends with me. And together, tomorrow or the next day or the next, we will tell Lord Gazian how you killed me, and how you tried to kill his son. I imagine such ghost testimony would be believed, don't you?"

"You can't come inside," said Demirchi. "The ghosts must stay on the lake!"

"But you know I've already been inside. You can't keep me out. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you and I can make a bargain."

"What sort of bargain?"

Alaric drew his other leg up and sat tailor-fashion on the wall. "You must swear that you will never try to harm the boy again. That's simple, isn't it? Your promise in return for mine not to bother you and not to tell Lord Gazian."

Demirchi took one small step forward, still clinging to the door. "How do I know you will keep your promise?"

"You have only my word. And I will have only yours. Is that not enough? I won't be far, of course. I'll know if you forswear yourself. And don't think you can

evade me by persuading someone else to do the deed. I'll know where the responsibility lies. Ghosts always know things like that. You would be amazed at what the ghosts of this lake know."

Demirchi took another step forward. "You don't look like a ghost."

Alaric shrugged. "I suppose that's because I'm new. Perhaps later I'll fade into the mist. Or perhaps the other ghosts will learn from me how to become...more substantial."

Abruptly, Demirchi leaped, arms outstretched. But Alaric was too quick this time, and vanished, reappearing at the far end of the balcony.

Demirchi's thighs struck the stone railing, and his momentum, unchecked by his intended target, carried him over the edge. He screamed once before he splashed into the water. But after the splash not a sound came from him, not a cough or a gasp or the slightest audible hint of limbs flailing in water.

Alaric leaned over the railing and saw him by moonlight, floating half submerged, face upward, motionless. Even if he had been struggling, there was no way he could climb back to the overhanging balcony, and the shore was a long swim away, especially for someone who had feared the water so much that he surely had never learned to swim. Resigning himself to being wet again, Alaric used his witch's power to reach Demirchi. Treading water, he gripped the man's arms, and in another moment, they were both back on the balcony.

Demirchi sagged limply in Alaric's grasp, and Alaric eased him to the stone floor. "Wake up, Master Demirchi!" he said sharply, kneeling over him and slapping his face. But Demirchi did not wake, and at last Alaric put a hand on the great vein of his neck and then bent to press an ear against his chest. He found no heartbeat.

"Is he dead?" came a small, soft voice from nearby.

Alaric looked up and saw Ospir in the doorway, clutching the curved handle of the great iron and oaken door with both hands. "How long have you been standing there?"

Ospir edged forward slightly. "I heard what you said to my nurse. I listened at the bottom of the door, where it doesn't quite meet the floor. And then I followed him and stood at the next landing." He peered down at Demirchi. "He is dead, isn't he? He was in the water. But he looks all right. I've heard the water makes you look horrible."

"Yes, he's dead. But the water didn't kill him, Ospir. His fear of it did. Would you like to know a secret?"

The boy nodded.

"The water is harmless. It tastes bad, but touching it won't hurt you."

"That isn't what Father says."

"No. It isn't." Alaric climbed slowly to his feet. Water dripped down his arms, his back, his legs, joining the puddle in which Demirchi lay. The boy clung to the door, two paces from that puddle, and did not try to move closer. Alaric wanted to reach out to him, to caress that small dark head, to give him comfort at the sight of death. But he did not. "Well, you must believe your father," he said finally. "He is a good man. Not like your uncle."

The boy looked up at him. "You said he tried to kill me."

"Yes. He made you very sick. But he won't be able to do that anymore, and you'll be well from now on."

"He did bring me things. Sweets. Were they bad for me?"

"His were. But you'll have others now, and they won't hurt you."

The boy heaved a great sigh. "I did like him. I did. Why did he want to kill me?"

"Because he wanted to be lord of this land after your father. And that is your right, as long as you are alive."

"I liked him very much:" For a moment, Ospir's voice was as tiny as at the depth of his illness. "Was that wrong, Master Alaric?"

"No, Ospir, it's not wrong to like people."

"I like you."

"And I, you."

Ospir stretched one hand out toward Alaric, then pulled it back without touching him. "You're really a ghost, aren't you?"

"What do you think?"

"You appeared and disappeared. Only a ghost can do that. Or one of the magic people from your songs."

Alaric looked down at Demirchi's body for a moment, and then he nodded. "Yes, I am a ghost. And now I must leave the castle, because dawn will come soon."

"Oh, don't go!"

"I must. But if you look out on the lake at night, and you see the mist swirling above the water, you'll be seeing me. Never doubt that, Ospir. You'll always be seeing me. And I will never let any of the other ghosts harm you. Not even his."

He smiled at the boy one last time. "Farewell, future lord of the Lake of Death."

"Oh, won't you sing just one more song?"

Alaric shook his head. "Ask your nurse to sing."

"She's crying."

"Then tell her for me that she should sing instead." And he vanished.

But he did not go far, just to the shore of the lake, just beyond the wavering mist. From there, the castle was ghostly, wreathed in wispy whiteness, the postern balcony invisible. Walking at the verge, beside the crust of salts, he began to circle the lake. He had not gotten more than a quarter of the way around when he saw ghosts in the mist. Not vague, distant figures that might as easily have been imaginary as real, but solid bodies of flesh and bone, dressed in thin white wool, moving across the surface of the water not a score of paces from the shore. There were four of them, and all were shorter than he.

"I see you," he said. "You might as well come here."

After some hesitation, one of the bodies began to move toward him, and one by one the others followed. Their feet seemed to slide over the water's surface, and when they were closer, he realized that they walked on that surface on wide wooden boards that were strapped to their feet like huge sandals, like the webbed frameworks that the people of the north used for walking on top of snow. When they grounded at the verge, he recognized Yosat, Taskol's son, and three of the other village boys who had listened to him sing beside the headman's home.

"So you are the ghosts of the lake," he said, watching them unfasten the boards from their feet. "Do your parents know what games you play at night?"

"Our fathers gave us these foot-rafts," said Yosat.

"Aren't you afraid of the water? The deadly water."

The boys looked at one another and shuffled uneasily.

"So you all know," said Alaric. "It's only the people of the island who don't know. And outsiders."

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" said Yosat, his voice anxious.

"I? Oh, I won't be able to tell anyone. I'm a ghost, too, killed this very night by the terrible water. You'll hear about me tomorrow, I'd guess. And if, someday, some minstrel happens to sing of this place, why, folk will marvel at water that strips the flesh from a man's bones and then dissolves those bones to nothing. It's a very good tale. I wouldn't change it for anything." He reached out to grip the boy's shoulder. "I would ask you to tell your father farewell

for me, but I think perhaps you would do better not to let him know we saw each other."

Yosat nodded. "Thank you, minstrel."

"But there is one thing I will ask-- a favor from you in return for that favor from me."

"Anything." And the others murmured their agreement.

"There's a boy on that island. He was sick for a long time, but he's well now. Visit him. Play with him. He needs friends." He smiled. "Perhaps someday you might even show him how to play ghost." Then he turned and, with a wave of his hand, walked into the night.

When he could no longer see them, looking back over his shoulder when their pale, moonlit shapes had been swallowed up by darkness and distance--he vanished in search of daylight, a fire to dry his clothes by, and a new lute.