
Ciaran had found that children loved the tales in the Distance Cycle particularly. Their imaginations were still elastic enough not to see the ridiculous side. He always gave the telling a lot of schmaltz. And the one legend in the Cycle that had always maintained its original shape under the battering of generations was the one about Ben Beatha, the Mountain of Life, being the dwelling place of Bas the Immortal and his androids and the Kalds. And somewhere under Ben Beatha was the Stone of Destiny, whose possession could give a man eternal life and the powers of any god you chose to believe in.

Ciaran had toyed with that one in spite of his skepticism. Now it looked as though he was going to see for himself.

He looked at the Kalds, the creatures who didn't exist, and found his skepticism shaken. Shaken so hard he felt sick with it, like a man waking up to find a nightmare beside him in the flesh, booting his guts in.

—from *The Jewel of Bas*, by Leigh Brackett

PLUS: *Thieves' Carnival*, 's all-new "prequel" to *The Jewel of Bas*—published here for the first time anywhere!

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THIEVES' CARNIVAL

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Mouse hated him on sight. He was a small, bandy-legged man in a tattered yellow

tunic. Nut-brown, he had light shaggy hair and a hard face. Just her luck to have drawn him as her partner for The Race at Thieves' Carnival, she thought. She watched his gray eyes darken as he appraised her. Apparently, the feeling was mutual. Angrily, Mouse brushed her wild black hair back from her forehead. To her left, Vandor was already plotting with his partner, a tall, slim redhead. Now why, Mouse wondered, couldn't she have drawn Vandor? Tall and dark, with long, graceful arms and legs, he was much more to her taste than this short, ugly stranger. "Don't you eat regularly?" her partner asked. Mouse grabbed the knife in her belt. She was sensitive about her thinness.

"Does anybody eat regularly in Thieves' Quarter?" she snapped. "If you weren't a stranger here, you wouldn't ask such stupid questions. Besides, you don't exactly look well fed yourself."

"I'm a traveling minstrel," he said, patting his harp. "Eating is a luxury." Mouse sniffed. "If you're a minstrel, what are you doing in The Race?"

"The Race is famous in all the Four Quarters. And the prize would buy me a new harp." He shrugged. "How could I resist?" She was about to tell him just how much she wished he'd resisted the temptation when Vandor walked past them, his arm around his partner's shoulders. He winked at Mouse. She gave him a bright smile that only dimmed as she turned toward her partner.

"What's your name?" she asked, sighing. "Ciaran. And yours?" "I'm called Mouse." His gray eyes flickered with amusement. "I can see why."

"You know, I'm beginning to wish I'd drawn a Kald," Mouse said. "Even if they don't exist. Or maybe a Weirder. Anything would be better than a scruffy musician with bad manners."

She turned her back on him and studied the green cobblestones of the plaza as though she had not seen them a thousand times before, had not run across them as a child playing thievish games, had not crept over them in quest of bread, dream wine, or some other necessity that she could later sell. Mouse had been born in Thieves' Quarter to a family five generations deep in thievery. She expected to die there. But not soon. And not, by Shuruun, until she'd won The Race at Thieves' Carnival. Even if she had to drag the dead weight of this harpist along behind her.

"All thieves, attention!" yelled Gray Tom, the crier for the Quarter. "Come now and pick your tasks."

He doffed his wide-brimmed orange hat and held it out toward the crowd. Eager fingers grabbed for the slips of vellum within; each assigned a theft considered dangerous and daring. The thieves knew they would be judged not merely for agility, but for swiftness and style as well. Mouse darted between two heavysset men in brown wattle fur and snatched a vellum slip. It was soft in her hands and stained from hard use. She swore as she read the markings on it.

"What's wrong?" Ciaran peered over her shoulder.

"Well, my luck is holding true," she said, scowling. "Here. Read it for yourself." She tossed the slip to him.

The harpist caught the strip of hide and stared at it, a frown furrowing his brow. Then he turned the slip around and squinted at it. Finally, his eyes met hers.

Mouse saw chagrin and embarrassment in their gray depths. "I can't read," he said, his voice soft.

She snorted. "Can't read? And you a minstrel? Well, you must have a good memory. Remember this, then, Ciaran the Harpist: We must steal the Portal Cube from the Black Cathedral." With satisfaction, she watched his jaw drop in amazement.

"The Portal Cube?" he said. "Are they mad?" "No. They're thieves." She straightened her red tunic.

"Come on. Let's get started. The faster we do this, the happier I'll be."

She led him at a trot into the maze of streets behind the plaza. Here, the light of the twin sunballs was shaded by odd walls and building angles. A soft twilight gloom pervaded the alley. Mouse watched her companion shiver.

"Chilly in here," he said.

Anger flared in her black eyes. "Delicate, aren't you? Well, brace yourself, musician. It's about to get much colder." She slipped into a narrow span between two ancient houses and vanished down a dark stairwell. Ciaran stayed hard on her heels.

"Where are we going?" he whispered.

"A shortcut under the city. Watch your footing." She pulled a glowstone out of a pouch, kindled it against the wall, and held it at eye level. They descended into the gloom, slipping on the stone stairs, which grew slick with moisture as they descended. Six levels down, a landing gave way to two corridors. Mouse chose the leftward route, holding her glowstone high. In the distance, wall grids flickered with peculiar light, casting a cold, gray aura down the passageway. Mouse extinguished her stone.

"What are these?" Ciaran asked, fingering the panels as he passed them.

"Old things," Mouse answered. "From long ago."

Her companion stopped moving.

"What's wrong?" she asked irritably.

"These are part of the Legend of Bas," Ciaran said, eyes shining. "The Distance Song Cycle." He swung his harp around, paused, then ran his hand lightly over its strings. A bright chord danced out from under his fingers. As, in a clear, true voice, he sang out:

*"Bas showed the people how to walk
along the ways that glowed. He led a thousand people out into the
airless cold. Led them to a better place of double
warmth and light. Beneath the streets, the legend says, the
warmth pierced endless night."*

The lively melody echoed down the passage, turned a corner and was gone. Mouse stared at him. "So you really are a minstrel," she said. Ciaran bowed.

"Is that an old song?"

"No. But it will be. Someday." He smiled. Ciaran wasn't half as ugly when he smiled, Mouse thought.

"And you think these glowers are part of some legend?" she asked, tracing the outline of the one nearest her with a finger.

"Maybe." He shrugged. "They'll make part of a good song, anyway." He settled the harp on its sling behind his left shoulder. "Where are we?"

"Under the Second Quarter. We'll take the next stairway up."

One hundred paces later, the panels' light faded behind them. Mouse rekindled her glowstone, turned right and stepped up into a notch in the wall. They climbed up eight levels before daylight illuminated their path and they emerged into a street of dark stone and hooded figures. "What is this?" Ciaran asked. Mouse gave him a sharp look. "Shh. It's Mentlan. The hour of silence. The Cators will all be going home to sit and twiddle their amulets. We can get the Cube now if we do it quietly."

"In the middle of the day?" "When else?" Mouse hissed. "Can you suggest a better time?"

Ciaran flung his arms up in surrender. "Lead on." They hurried past the hooded figures, who ignored them as though they were ghosts with no substance. Around a corner, the street widened into a marketplace. But the stalls were shuttered, the merchants vanished. At the south end of the market, a building cast long shadows.

"The Black Cathedral," Mouse said. She walked through the deserted plaza, strode up the steps, and pushed confidently against the dark glass doors of the building. They were locked. Ciaran swore. "Patience." Mouse held up a warning finger. "Let's look for a side door. They're easier."

The glossy, dark stones of the Cathedral lay flush against the Parish House on the right. But on the left, a stone corridor measuring barely a child's width across separated the great building from its neighbor. A grown man could not negotiate that passage. But a slender woman, a black-haired Mouse, could. And gamely, Ciaran followed behind her, sidling into the alleyway. Slowly, they inched along the path. Mouse cursed softly. The side of the Cathedral was covered with lynchweed. Thick curtains of the curling vine cascaded down the stone walls. She probed carefully behind the barbed tendrils.

"It should be here somewhere," she muttered.

"Found it yet?" Ciaran's voice was a hoarse whisper. Mouse didn't answer. She probed harder, feeling only stone and thorns, thorns and stone. Then her thumb touched cold glass.

"Got it!" She almost crowed with triumph. Mouse stripped off her leather belt and wrapped it around her palm for protection. She grasped the viney bramble and slashed at it with her knife until a Mouse-sized oblong had been cut through to the door. The lock was an old-style two-in-two. Mouse studied it for a moment. Pulling her knife free, she slipped the tip of her blade into the keyhole and rotated it. With a *click*, the tumblers gave. Mouse pushed the door gently. It would not budge. Her next effort was not so gentle. She landed on her tail in the dust.

"Allow me," Ciaran said. He reached past her, powerful shoulders flexing, and leaned into the door. It groaned and began to move slowly inward.

"I'd bet dinner that this door hasn't been used in years," he said. Mouse watched with surprise as he forced the door fully open. She'd never expected a musician to be so strong. Hopping to her feet, she poked her nose in the doorway. Thin daylight illuminated a cramped passage behind what seemed to be an altar.

"Come on." Frowning, Ciaran squatted down and followed her. Slowly, the ceiling sloped upward, and soon both could walk freely. But anyone taller than Ciaran would still be crouching uncomfortably. Good thing he's short, Mouse

thought. Vandor would never have been able to fit through that alley, much less this tiny passage. The hallway broadened at the far end into a large chamber filled with brown stone benches flanking a long gray slab. There were dark stains upon the slab that caused Mouse to shudder as she passed it. Ciaran touched its worn surface. A harsh light kindled in his eyes.

"I've heard tales of these Cators. Nothing good." Mouse flashed a furious look at him.

"Shh!" "Frightened?" She spun on her heel and grabbed the front of his yellow tunic. "How would you like me to take you back down below and lose you?" she snapped. "Try paying attention to what we came here for. Start looking for the Portal Cube."

"I thought you knew where it was." "All I know is it's somewhere in here. Now get busy!" She scrambled through a doorway into the main hall. The walls were lined with headless statues. Small indentations in the floor indicated where generations of faithful knees had ground into the stone as their owners prostrated themselves before their gods. At the far end of the room, a huge black glass altar glinted in the half light.

Mouse surveyed its glittering facade hopefully, but it was all of one piece. No jewels winked back at her from gilded settings.

"Damn! This is the logical place for it," she muttered.

Ciaran appeared from behind the altar. "Any luck?"

"No. You?" "I found a lot of creepwebs but no stone." Mouse cursed again. She turned, looking for another door, another room, when a strange pink gleam from above made her eyes water.

"What was that?" Ciaran stood beside her, rubbing his eyes. "I don't know. It came from above, from the balcony, I think. There must be a staircase around here somewhere." She cast about the hall but found no hidden arch, no handclasp to open masked doorways. In futile search, the thieves passed their hands over the walls.

Mouse sighed. "We'll just have to climb up." She unwound a sturdy cord from her pouch and secured one end of it to her belt. With a deft toss, she hooked the far end over the balcony and back upon itself. Planting her left foot firmly against the base of a headless statue, she pushed off with her right leg and pulled herself up the rope. Sweating, hands slipping, she made her way up and up, until she had a solid grip upon the balustrade. Muscles straining, the little thief swung herself over the railing to the gallery floor. With barely a moment to catch her breath, Mouse clambered to her feet and began to search for any sign of that red-tinged flare.

Three-quarters of the way around the gallery, she spied a blue glass table. Upon it sat a small grille, rusty with age. A neglected shrine? She reached toward it, but before she could touch either side of the hinged metalwork a pink light flashed out from behind the grille.

"Hsst! Mouse! Where are you?" Ciaran's urgent whisper rose up from the floor below.

She ignored him, intent on the light behind the metal doors. Taking a deep breath, she pried the right-hand gate of the shrine open. A small, squared gem about the size

of a knucklebone sat in a web of tarnished silver wire. Its surface flashed with red and orange fires.

The Portal Cube! What else could it be? Mouse reached for the bauble gently and found it came away easily. Warm to the touch, the Cube glimmered in her palm like a dying glowstone. For a moment, Mouse felt like a robber bird, raiding a spring nest of its prize. Then she tucked the thought away with the Cube in her pouch, wrapped in the piece of vellum that had first decreed this crime. Mouse wanted to dance with glee.

I've done it, she thought. By the dreams of Sacred Bas, I've stolen the fabled Portal Cube.

She hurried to the balcony railing and waved down at her partner.

"I've got it," Mouse said. Her voice shook with excitement. "At least, I think I've got it. It's not very big."

Ciaran peered up at her. His light hair fell back from his face. "If you think you've got the Portal Cube, that's good enough for me. It's late. We should start ..."

Mouse lost the rest of his whisper in the clatter of shoes upon stone. There were many feet, and they were getting louder, coming toward her. Five hooded heads peered through a window of the gallery. Just as quickly, they disappeared, and a door in the wall began to open.

Heart pounding, Mouse pivoted, pulled out the Cube, and tossed it in a long arc down to Ciaran.

"Quick," she cried. "The Cators are back. But we can still win. Take the second doorway out of the plaza. Find Gray Tom to record our time. Hurry!"

Rough hands grabbed her and she couldn't see Ciaran anymore. Mouse kicked the nearest Cator full in the stomach. He dropped his hold on her, doubled over with pain. Furiously, clawing and scratching, she fought toward freedom. But there were too many of them, and her strength began to give out. A hard blow to her jaw drove the last bit of fight from her. Panting, she sagged in her captors' arms.

Well, she thought, whatever they do to me now, at least I've won The Race.

The Cators' faces remained hidden behind their deep black hoods. Fiercely, they whispered curses at her from unseen mouths. Thief, they called her. Cheat. Whore. Right only the first time, Mouse thought. She was dragged across the balcony into a deep stone alcove and down a steep, narrow staircase into the room of benches. In the corner, a brazier she hadn't noticed before glowed red. Mouse's captors cast her onto the stone slab, spread-eagled.

The stone was cold against her back. Again, she struggled, but they were stronger, and cruel hands held her arms, her legs, her head.

Behind her, several Cators scabbled in a cupboard. A metallic sound set Mouse's teeth on edge, followed by a wicked hissing. In horror, she watched a hooded one approach her holding a long metal rod. The end of the skewer formed a circle that glowed deep red. Mouse knew what it was. A thief's brand.

"No!" she screamed. "Please!"

She tried to kick out at them. Her legs were clamped tight by remorseless fingers. The wicked red circle grew larger, blotting out the light, the room, the world.

"Thief!" the hooded one cried. "Wear our brand!"

His face was in shadow. Mouse tried to find his eyes, to entreat mercy through

piteous glances, but the hood was deep and she had no time left.

Bright, sharp pain seared between her eyes. Mouse's ragged cry caught in her throat. The smell of burning flesh was sickening. A high tenor voice cut through her agony.

"Brothers. A second thief is in the House of Worship!" A hooded figure stood at the door pointing in alarm down the balcony.

"In the great hall!" he cried. "Do not delay."

The brand was withdrawn. Mouse sobbed quietly as the wound throbbed with heat. Mouse's tormentors dropped her arms and legs and raced out the door. Weakly, she watched as the Cator who had raised the alarm moved toward her. She managed to glare at him in fury, but even that effort was finally too much for her. She closed her eyes. Without a word, he lifted her off the table and flung her over his shoulder.

I don't care what else they do to me, she thought.

Then the world grew dark.

When she opened her eyes, she was lying on damp stone, lit only by a glowing panel. A hooded figure sat next to her. Mouse pulled back, gasping.

"Breathe easy," a familiar voice said. "It's only me." The hood was flung back to reveal Ciaran's face. Mouse didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She grasped his hand.

"Did you get the Cube back to Gray Tom?" she asked in a whisper. Ciaran frowned, "And leave you to those madmen?" He shook his head. Her hand curled into a fist. She tried to swing at him, but he caught her arm.

"You fool!" she cried. "By Immortal Bas, has this all been wasted, then? I've been branded a thief and it's all for nothing." Mouse hung her head and wept until Ciaran released his hold on her.

"Maybe I should have left you to their mercies," he said, his voice harsh. "Stop sniveling." Mouse wiped her eyes on her tunic, taking care to avoid the sore spot between her eyebrows.

"What a queer thing this Cube is," the harpist said, cradling it in his palm. "Opaque until it decides to show you its fire. Not unlike some thieves I know."

The side of his mouth lifted in a half smile. "I wonder what it does," he mused. Scowling, Mouse snatched the Cube from his hand and tucked it into her belt pouch.

"Who cares?" she snapped. "Since I can't trust you to follow instructions, maybe I'd better carry the Cube until we get back to Thieves' Quarter."

"What happens then?"

"We give it over to Gray Tom and the Thieves' Treasury. We'll be awarded the coin prize."

"Just like that?"

Mouse snorted. "Maybe you'd like to pierce the thing and wear it as an earring? Come on. Maybe there's still time to get back and win."

She stood up and started to walk, but her knees wouldn't obey her properly. "Hold onto me," Ciaran commanded. "Otherwise, we'll never get out of here."

Gratefully, she clutched his arm, feeling the muscles work beneath the skin.

"Where's your glowstone?"

"Here."

Was it her imagination, or were the wall panels losing their brightness? It couldn't be. She'd found this passage as a child. The panels had always glowed, always lit her way. Mouse blinked, and particles glittered behind her eyelids. Well, maybe she and Ciaran were just moving farther away from the panels into the tunnel.

The harpist lit the glowstone and Mouse directed them back to the Thieves' Quarter. By the time they were topside, Mouse had her legs back under her and was striding eagerly toward the plaza.

She spied Gray Tom's orange hat in a crowd at the side of the old clock and made for it. Maybe they still had a chance at the prize.

In midstep, she felt the bottom of her stomach give way, and she was walking through air thick as sweetsap, with a storm of particles gleaming gold and green and silver around her. Mouse swam through the shimmer. Where was Ciaran? She'd lost sight of Gray Tom. Who were those strange folk wearing unfamiliar clothing and sitting by the steps playing knucklebones?

"Mouse? Mousie?"

A strong arm was shaking her. Who dared call her Mousie? She swung on the insolent rascal only to confront the harpist. He stared at her, alarm widening his gray eyes.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Ciaran demanded. "You were staring at Gray Tom and making strange noises."

Mouse ran an impatient hand through her wild black hair.

"Fine. I'm fine, I tell you. Here. Give Tom the Cube."

Ciaran swung the pouch holding the Portal Cube into the crier's palm. Gray Tom hefted it, inspected the Cube, then nodded his approval.

"Good time," he said. "Second prize for sure."

"Second prize!" Mouse cried. "Who won first?"

"Vandor and Istral," the graybeard said. "They were first to return. With the Magistrate-General's toe ring." Mouse gnashed her teeth in fury. Vandor and that red-haired wench were lolling on the stairs, sharing a globe of dream wine. As they drank from its twin spouts, their eyes were locked in blissful reverie. Mouse looked away.

"Tough luck," Ciaran said. "But we've got the Cube. It's worth a fortune. We'll sell it and split the proceeds." She rounded on him. "Is that all that you can think about? Money for your new harp? Well, minstrel, why don't you go steal yourself a new harp! I told you, the Cube goes to the Thieves' Treasury. Gray Tom is taking it there now." She turned her back to him. Ciaran moved close, put his hands on her shoulders and his lips to her ear.

"Mousie, do you really want to give that fine prize over to the Thieves' Treasury? After what you've gone through to claim it? The fat old fools who administer that hoard will just sit on it anyway."

"Don't call me Mousie." In disgust, she shook him off and moved away.

The harpist followed, and pulled her tightly against him, until she could feel the heat from his body all along her back.

"You're the best thief in the Quarter, and you know it," he said. "Why are you cheating yourself?"

"I'm not cheating myself," Mouse said, but her tone wavered. Ciaran's breath

tickled her ear as he spoke.

"Of course you are. The fabled Portal Cube, and you snatched it like a child's toy, right out from under those Cators' long noses. You deserve more than just second prize for this feat. All along the Quarter, they'll be spinning tales half the night of how Mouse the Master Thief stole the Portal Cube."

He paused. Mouse leaned back against him now, thinking how pleasant his voice sounded.

"And then," Ciaran said, "they'll speak of how Mouse meekly handed the Portal Cube to Gray Tom. And they'll laugh." His voice was a soft whisper. "Do you want them to laugh at you?"

"No!" Mouse burst out. "I deserved first prize!" The harpist nodded. "Then why not steal the Cube back from the Treasury and get yourself the best prize of all: top value for a legendary relic?" Mouse spun around and grabbed Ciaran's hand.

"I'll do it." It was easier than she expected.

Gray Tom had piled the plunder in a temporary hold by the old clock. Big Lashio had been set to guard it. But Lashio was known to be overfond of dream wine. Mouse sent Ciaran scrambling for a pitcher of the stuff. In moments, he returned, having purloined one from the feasting tent. She hoisted the jug on her hip and ambled toward the guard.

"Ho, Lashio," she greeted the big Weirder. "What's it like to sit, a brood hen, upon a precious hoard?"

"Little Mouse," he said, showing a mouthful of jagged teeth. His one eye blinked rapidly. "I'd as soon the loot hatched quickly. I've a dry throat. What's that you've got with you?"

"Dream wine," Mouse said. "For the feast." Lashio's thick dark features convulsed.

"For the feast? Have pity on me, tiny one. Spare a glass for poor Lashio. Spare two." Mouse pretended to consider his request.

"If I do, how will you pay me?" she asked archly. The Weirder grinned unevenly, scenting victory.

"In whatever coin I may have, pretty one." Swinging the jug teasingly, Mouse pressed her point.

"Any coin?"

"Name it."

"A peek at the treasure." Lashio sighed.

"Can't."

"Very well," she said, and began to walk away, hips swinging. "Wait! Little Mouse, wait." Lashio sounded desperate. "All right. Here. Give me the jug and stick your pretty nose in the door. But be quick about it."

"Done." Mouse handed him the wine and watched as he unlocked the treasury door, then stepped eagerly inside. She gasped at the glittering pile of goods on the floor of the chamber. The treasury half filled the room. Among the purloined goods Mouse spied a golden, oval mirror framed by gems that twinkled like faceted chunks of white ice; great strands of plaited ruby glass hanging from thongs like horgans' tails; blue flasks of rare Neivian aphrodisiac liquor; tiles of ebon cordaline mined from the hills of Phrygia; and a square gold house seal bearing the mark of the

Second Quarter's Magistrate-General. Close to the door sat the Cube, strange green fires playing over its surface. When Lashio was deep into the jug, Mouse palmed the Cube and closed the door.

"Thanks, Lashio. Keep the pitcher," she called, and skittered back out into the plaza.

His eye half-closed, Lashio waved his gratitude. Smoothly, Mouse deposited the Cube into her waist pouch, sealed the pocket, and gave it a pat.

"Aby done," Ciaran said. "And just in time. I hear the musicians tuning up. The carnival's just beginning." His voice was warm as the light of four sunballs. "Come along, master thief. Let's go to Thieves' Carnival."

He threw his arm across her shoulder and led her into the gaudy festival tent. Inside, tumblers were tossing each other high in the air. Their bright yellow and orange robes streamed out behind them as they pranced through the room. The feasting tables were being set with roasted joints of meat and savory fish stews. The rich smell of gravy tantalized Mouse. She closed her eyes and sniffed happily, her anger forgotten. Ciaran set his harp across two seats at the main table. Together, he and Mouse heaped high plates of bread and meat. As quickly, they cleaned each platter and returned for more. When had they last had a meal like this? Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, Mouse reached for a heel of bread from Ciaran's plate. He began to scowl until her smile melted him. Then she offered him her cup of wine as a peace offering.

"We make a decent team," Ciaran said.

"Not bad," she agreed.

The minstrel raised high his cup.

"To a couple of thieves," he toasted. "To us." The wine sloshed over the cups' rims as they clinked together. A high, keening sound disturbed Mouse's tipsy reverie. Suddenly dizzy, she glanced around. Where had Ciaran gone? A strange, dark-eyed man in a blue tunic sat next to her. He met her gaze with evident puzzlement and said something she couldn't understand.

The shrill sound was coming from an odd, baggy musical instrument that a pale-haired woman was pounding. The air was smoky. Mouse felt nauseated. She shook her head several times. Maybe fresh air would help.

Giddily, she staggered toward the exit. Outside, the square was dark. How strange, she thought. Where were the sunballs? And when would the squealing stop?

"Mouse? Wake up."

A strong hand shook her arm. She turned. Ciaran held her by the hand.

"Maybe you need to see a healer," he said.

"I just had too much wine," Mouse said, and pushed her hair off of her forehead.

"But I wish to hell that squealing would stop."

The harpist frowned. "Some boys have found a haakon's nest."

He strode forward, pulled the squalling pup from the children, and placed it safely back on its stone perch. Then he scattered the youngsters with a good-natured kick.

"The music's about to begin," he said. "I don't want to miss it."

"Do you dance?"

"What minstrel doesn't? Feel up to it?"

"I'll leave you gasping in the dust."

The horns started. Ciaran caught up Mouse in his arms and spun merrily around the room, whistling to the melody. They danced reels and jigs, feet stamping on the rush-covered ground. Thieves' Carnival meant music and more music. Lustily, the thieves twirled and jumped. But when the balladeers began, Ciaran released Mouse and sat in respectful silence, listening intently. The singers filled the hall with the ballad of Bas the Immortal. Their voices were strong and true as they told of other worlds with green seas and white clouds. Mouse leaned back in her chair and listened with her eyes closed. When the last plaintive chord had died away, she looked at her companion.

"What do you think?" she whispered through the hush.

Ciaran smiled and nodded his approval.

"Ablly done," he said. "A fine rendition. Not perfect, of course."

"I suppose you could do better?"

He shrugged and reached for his wine. Mouse grabbed his wrist. Into his hand she thrust his harp.

"Show us!" she commanded.

He stared at her for a moment, his mouth frozen in an odd half smile. Then, with a bow, he complied. The noise in the room had risen again, but Ciaran's first notes sliced through the din and silenced every tongue. In strong, deep chords, he played "Lament for Bas," his fingers dancing over the strings. His clear voice burnished the words of the old ballad to a high gloss.

*"And now he rests in pearly tomb,
His bier, a cross, in mountain room,
The sleeping god who brought us home,
The sleeping god, he dreams alone."*

Without pause, the minstrel plunged into the jaunty opening chords of "Great Ben Beatha." But the words he sang were his own.

*"Were I not a thief,
I'd live in a house, live in a house, live in a house,
And were I a cat, then I'd want a mouse, want a mouse, want a mouse."*

He strummed for a moment, casting a sly look at the assembled thieves.

*"Well, I'm not a cat.
and I have no house.
I'm a thief and a minstrel,
But I'd love to catch a Mouse!
Yes, I'd dearly love to catch a Mouse."*

The audience roared its approval, slamming hands on tables and laughing bawdily. Mouse felt her face getting hot. How like a bandy-legged, little harpist to embarrass her! Well, just let him try to catch her. She was halfway to the door before Ciaran sprang forward, blocking her path. He grinned broadly.

"Well, what did you think?" She gave him a cool look.

"You certainly are pleased with yourself."

Behind them, the dance music resumed. Ciaran rolled his eyes. "Women and thieves. What a bad combination!"

Over her protests, he pulled her back out among the dancers. But now the music was softer, and couples were clinging together. Mouse felt stiff in his arms. After she'd stepped on his foot the third time, he gave her a disgusted look, pulled her closer, and kissed her thoroughly.

Halfway through the embrace, Mouse stopped fighting and decided she liked it. They broke for air, then he kissed her again. If the song hadn't ended, Mouse would have kissed him a third time. But the tent was hot. The celebrants surged toward the door for air.

Mouse pulled free from Ciaran.

"I'll be right back," she told him, tracing his lips with her finger.

Outside, the sunballs were bright in the sky. Mouse took a drink from the plaza fountain. A glimpse in a mirror stone showed a small brown face with a red dot between dark eyebrows and wild hair framing it. She scrabbled in her waist pouch for a comb, then froze in horror. The Cube. It was gone.

Comb forgotten, she dashed back into the tent.

"Ciaran!"

Look as she might, she could not find a trace of the short, fair-haired harpist in his yellow tunic. As the minutes passed, her panic turned to fury.

He had stolen the Cube from her. Under cover of clever words and seductive kisses. Mouse uttered a few choice comments on the harpist's pedigree. Taking one last swig of wine, she quit the tent. She would find Ciaran, reclaim the Cube, and rid the world of one pesky minstrel!

The Gators' marks were posted everywhere. Criers in each Quarter were singing of the stolen Cube, of the reward offered for its return, of the reward for capture of dark Mouse and Ciaran the Harpist. Gray Tom's voice had been added to the chorus: the theft of the Cube from Thieves' Treasury had not gone unnoticed. Mouse crept carefully through the yellow stone streets of Third Quarter, intent on eluding bounty hunters.

Be small, she thought. Small and dark and mouselike. Nobody takes notice of a little dark woman at the edge of the crowd.

I'm here because I belong here. A familiar face. You've all seen me before.

Nimbly, she moved through and past the busy marketplace, keeping an ear cocked for stray bits of conversation that might lead her toward Ciaran. At a grilled meat stall, she bought some roast scrapings wrapped in redgrass dough. As she paid, she asked casually about musicians.

"I need a harpist," she said. "Know of any?"

The meat seller gave her a sharp look.

"Am I a crier?" she asked. "Go look for your musician in the Guild Hall." Mouse stifled a curse, palmed back her change before the merchant counted it, and vanished into the crowd. In a few moments she had found the Musicians Guild. A

burly, blond gamba player greeted her with a hearty pinch that made her jump.

"Have you a harpist?" she asked, rubbing her thigh and keeping the snarl to herself.

"Little dark-eyes, I'd take up those strings myself if it meant an hour spent in your sweet company."

"Err, I'm really in need of a shorter harpist," Mouse blurted out. Sacred Bas, she thought, what if this behemoth really can play the strings?

The blond musician roared with laughter.

"Then you'd be wanting Ciaran, wouldn't you, my pretty thief? That boy steals hearts as easily as he lifts purses." The giant gave her a merry look. "He's probably at his favorite table in the Haakon's Claw, begging night weed. Or upstairs in the wenches' gallery."

Mouse waved her thanks and scrambled out of his reach back into the street.

I hope Ciaran's in the wenches' gallery, she thought, murder sparkling in her black eyes. I'll stab him right in the act.

The Haakon's Claw was dim and quiet at midday. A lone dreamer sat, lost in visions, near the fire, an empty wine jug at his feet. His face was hidden by fair hair. Mouse crept over and lifted the shaggy head, revealing a full, matted beard. She let his head fall back on his chest and boldly marched into the wenches' gallery.

Only one room was busy. The occupants, both overweight and middle-aged, looked up in surprise when Mouse opened the door.

"Hello, lovey," the wench greeted her. "Care to join us?"

Mouse slammed the door in their red faces.

Downstairs, feeling desperate, she asked the gray-haired weed seller if she'd seen a short, bandy-legged harpist.

"That would be Ciaran," the merchant said. "He was in earlier, looking to brag about some treasure. Went off with a trader toward Ravig's on Jewel Alley, I think. Turn left out the door and it's the first lane on your right."

Mouse thanked her with a bright coin and hurried on. The jeweler's shop was locked up tight.

How strange, Mouse thought. At midday? Her intuition tingled. I think I'll have a look around back.

Cautiously, she moved along the passage on the far side of the shop. She could hear men's voices, pitched low, but their words were lost to her. A grunt of pain was easier for her to understand. She pulled the knife from her girdle. The voices were clearer now: two of them deep and unfamiliar, and one tenor that she'd heard before. Ciaran!

Mouse listened for a moment. The harpist had to be under some pressure; his voice was tight and narrow.

"Isfahan, I thought we had a deal!"

A bass voice answered him. "We had nothing, thief! The Catons offer more for you than that wretched bauble could ever bring!"

Mouse's breath came in short gasps. Bounty hunters! And Ciaran had been caught. But did he have the Cube with him?

"The Catons didn't say whether I had to bring you in alive, harpist. If you'd like, I'll kill you quick." The rough voice had a note of sympathy in it.

"Might be kinder if you did," said another voice, a bass as well, but with a quaver

in it. Two of them, Mouse thought. And Ciaran hog-tied, no doubt. Well, they can't have him before I'm done with him. That's *my* Cube! And if I have to steal it three times, then by Shuruun, I will!

She scanned the back of the shop. There was a rough shack from which the voices seemed to come. Mouse resheathed her knife, grabbed a handful of pebbles, and in quick steps climbed quietly to the roof of the brick lean-to. Aiming carefully, she tossed down a few pebbles to rattle at the window.

No response. Mouse tossed a few more.

"Go see what's making that noise," Isfahan rumbled.

"Why don't you go?" the quaverer replied.

The trader answered with a bellow. Mouse heard the sound of feet scurrying. As she watched, the door creaked open and a head appeared, bald save for a few greasy strands of dirty gray hair. The jeweler shut the door behind him and walked first this way, then that, peering nervously.

When he was ten feet away, Mouse jumped. She landed hard on his head and shoulders. The momentum carried them both into the rear wall of the shop. Mouse allowed the man to cushion the blow for her, with his head. When the dust had cleared, only she stood up.

One down, she thought. But what do I do about the trader Isfahan? He sounds big. Without sound, she stalked to the half-open door and peered through. Sure enough, Ciaran was trussed like a game bird. He squinted in her direction. Then his gray eyes glittered. The man in front of him didn't notice, so intent was he on searching the harpist's belongings.

Mouse fought back a squeal of laughter. This huge trader, Isfahan, was no taller than she. Shorter, perhaps. And troll-like.

She cast around for a moment, pulled a thick piece of log from the fire pile by the door, and slid into the room. On tiptoe, she approached the bounty hunter. Just before he could feel her breath on his neck, she tapped him on the shoulder. He cocked an ear in her direction without looking up.

"So, Ravig," he asked. "What did you find out there?"

"A headache," Mouse said as she wound up and swung. The cudgel caught him in the back of the head. Unconscious, he slid to the floor.

"Bravo, partner!" Ciaran said. "Well done!"

Mouse jabbed the wood into the harpist's chest.

"Happy to see me?"

He nodded. "Of course. Untie me and we'll ..."

"We'll do nothing," Mouse said softly. "Where's the Cube?" A furrow appeared between Ciaran's eyebrows.

"You're angry."

"Oh, no. I enjoy being played for the fool. Being seduced and robbed." Mouse dropped the log, pulled out her knife, and held it carefully under the minstrel's chin. He swallowed nervously.

"Now, Mousie ..."

"Tell me where the Cube is, or I'll start slicing your string fingers."

"It's not here." Sweat beaded his forehead. Mouse stroked his hands with the blunt side of her knife.

"Where is it?"

"Someplace safe."

"I don't believe you."

Angrily, Mouse jabbed his thumb.

"Hey! That hurt," Ciaran yelped.

Mouse pricked his second finger. Ciaran snarled, worked his jaw, then extended his tongue. On it, the Cube flashed purple fire. Gingerly, Mouse collected the relic, dried it on Ciaran's yellow tunic, and pocketed it. With a wave, she turned to go.

"Mouse, wait." The musician's voice was plaintive.

"Why?"

"You can't just leave me here. Those two bounty hunters will wake up sooner or later."

Mouse whirled to face him.

"I hope it's sooner! Damn you, I'm a thief, not a butcher. But I'll happily leave you to this poacher's attentions, Ciaran."

"At least cut my bonds and give me a fighting chance."

"No."

"I promise I won't hurt you." The small thief smirked at him.

"You'd never get the chance."

She wanted to turn tail and leave him behind. But now that she had the Cube, her anger was ebbing. To abandon him here was to consign him to the death pit—perhaps more than he deserved. There'd been real fear in his eyes when she cut him. That was revenge enough. Mouse sighed. She leaned over and, with three quick slashes, set him free. Gasping with relief, Ciaran sprang up, rubbing his wrists. The wounds on his fingers left bloody streaks on his arms, quickly, he stanching the bleeding with creepweb. Tearing a strip off his tunic, the harpist bound his injuries.

"At least you didn't get my playing hand," he said with a wry smile.

"I know," she answered.

At that, they seemed to run out of words. Each stood, riveted to the spot, staring at the other. Then, with an oath, Ciaran broke the silence. A quick movement, and he'd swept Mouse into his arms.

"Savage little thief," he said, and kissed her. She fought not at all, and when they broke for air, she smiled up at him before their lips met again. Time slowed, almost stopped, until Ciaran moved his hands under her tunic.

Mouse opened her eyes.

"Not here," she said, and pulled away. Ciaran shook his head as if to clear it, then began laughing.

"A fine sight that would be to greet these cretins upon awakening—the two of us locked in embrace." He picked up his harp, looking sheepish. "Let's permit them to slumber in peace."

He took her hand and strode out of the hut.

"Where are we going?" Mouse asked.

Ciaran gave her a roguish smile.

"Someplace where we won't be interrupted."

Breathing fast, Mouse ran hard through the winding streets of Thieves' Quarter. On her heels, a pack of dark, hooded figures bayed and gibbered, Demons in hoods, they were. Ghouls who shifted from grinning skeletons to screaming flesh and back again as they hunted their quarry. In thunderous echoes, their laughter boomed and crashed around her. Desperately, she turned a corner and plunged down an alleyway. Where was the exit? Dark stones hemmed her in on all sides, rising out of sight into the red sky. The alley was blind. Mouse turned to face her ghastly pursuers. And woke up.

Panting, she blinked furiously. The room was strange, illuminated by purple and green light. Something touched her and Mouse jumped, ready to flee. Then she recognized the minstrel, Ciaran, asleep next to her, his hand on her arm.

Memories flooded back, turning her cheeks rosy. He's led her to his rooms below Guild Hall, and eagerly, she'd followed. They'd wrestled and fought, tickled and whispered. The lovemaking had been better than she'd hoped. Calm now, she smiled down at his clever musician's hands. He'd played her like a fine harp.

She studied Ciaran's features in the strange light. Not even the fondest mother could call him handsome. But there was strength and humor in his hard features. Cunning and kindness, too. Mouse ran a gentle finger over his lips. Ciaran pulled away, muttering in his sleep.

Where was that light coming from? A glowlamp?

Mouse looked around the room, then saw her waist pouch lying open on the floor by their pallet. The Cube floated in the air five inches above it, glowing yellow, purple, green, and blue. Openmouthed, Mouse stared at the pulsing gem. She turned back to Ciaran. And screamed.

The harpist was gone. A skeleton lay beside her, vacant eye sockets staring. As she watched in horror, the thing took flesh again. Ciaran lay once more beside her, asleep. But a changed Ciaran. Lines traced his mouth, furrowed his forehead, and rayed out from his eyes. Was his scalp peeking through his thinning hair? His flesh fit him loosely, hanging in folds at his joints and belly. The veins on his hands and arms stood out in stark relief.

Without moving, Old Ciaran shifted. In the nightmare light, the flesh of his face became taut, plump. The lines disappeared. He grew younger. Younger. Suddenly a slim youth lay next to Mouse, downy-faced and supple of limb. A stripling scarcely into the first pulsebeats of manhood.

Mouse bit her lip. She had to break the spell.

"Wake up! Ciaran, oh, please wake up."

Desperately, she shook him. But he lay like one drugged, slack in her arms, head lolling to the side, unresponsive to her cries.

Mouse, slapped him. Then slapped him again. As she pulled back for the third blow, Ciaran's hand shot out and caught her wrist.

"Is that how you thank me for a good time?" he asked ruefully, rubbing his jaw. He looked restored. Normal.

Mouse collapsed on his shoulder, sobbing.

"You were different. Changing. Old. Young. A skeleton."

"And you just had a bad dream." He patted her shoulder.

"No. It was the Cube. It was floating."

Ciaran reached down and kindled the lamp. Its flame spread his shadow along the wall.

"Sure it was. And both of us with it."

Mouse looked up. The light in the room was normal. Where was the Cube? She grabbed up her waist pouch and found the relic within it, just as she'd left it.

"But it really happened," she insisted. "First, I *was* having a nightmare. Then I woke up. But the nightmare went on."

Ciaran gave her an indulgent look and ran his finger along her upper arm.

"I know something that will banish all bad dreams," he said slyly. His lips traced the path his finger had followed.

Willingly, Mouse sank down with him onto the pallet.

The next day the two thieves walked through Third Quarter, careful to avoid passing bounty hunters and guardsmen. At midday they found themselves in the Weirders' Market, a half circle of ragged tents and strange wares. Mouse surveyed the place uneasily.

"Kiri, let's get out of here."

"Nervous?" Ciaran flashed her a scornful look. "When we first met, I thought you were anxious for Weirders' company." A band of Weirder children tugged at Mouse's tunic, begging for coins. Shuddering at their green skin and scaly fingers, she waved them away.

"Why do we have to be here?" she demanded.

"Because half the city's looking for us. Or had you forgotten that little detail?" He shook his head. "You didn't have any problem with Big Lashio."

"That was just one Weirder in a street full of thieves."

"Well, now we're just two thieves in a street full of Weirders. Hold your tongue, Mouse. There's a trader here I want to talk to."

Ciaran strode past a dusty display of opalescent Weirder glass and entered a green tent whose bill promised "Trading and Divining." He greeted the green-skinned tradesman heartily.

"Luca, I have business for you," he said.

The Weirder blinked his single green eye and stared at Mouse.

"Ciaran the Harpist. Who's your friend?" he asked. His voice was high, tinny, and completely at odds with his large, fleshy body.

Ciaran pulled Mouse forward and forced her to shake the merchant's six-fingered hand.

"I'm called Mouse," she said quietly. Her black hair hung over her face, not quite masking the angry glint in her dark eyes.

Luca frowned as their hands touched, his one great eyebrow wiggling like a fuzzy worm across his forehead. His eye closed for a moment. Opened.

Slowly, he spoke.

"I cannot take the Portal Cube."

"What? Why not?" Ciaran demanded.

"How did you know we have it?" Mouse cried.

The Weirder grunted. "Easy to see for those who know how to look." He turned

away. Dismayed, Ciaran and Mouse stared at each other. Then Ciaran hurried after the trader.

"Luca, wait! What do you mean you can't take it?"

"Once stolen, it is no good to me or anybody. No good for you, especially."

"But this is *the* Portal Cube," Mouse said. "It's legendary."

The Weirder nodded sadly. "True. But impossible to trade it now. And no use for it either."

Ciaran snorted. "No use? Cut it up! Grind it for gem dust. Look at it, man. The fabulous Portal Cube of the Black Cathedral."

Mouse pulled the relic from her purse and held it so that it caught the light of the sunballs.

Luca stared a moment, caught in fascination by the amber and blue fires radiating across the surface of the thing. Then, shaking his head, he closed his eye.

"Is the Cube," he agreed. "Beautiful. Dangerous. Be careful." "Don't worry about the bounty hunters," Ciaran said scornfully. "We can outwit them."

"Not bounty hunters I speak of. Cube itself. Must go now." Luca retired behind the private curtain at the rear of his tent.

"Put it away, Mousie," Ciaran said. His voice was low, dispirited. "This is getting more complicated than I expected."

Together, they wandered the marketplace, unspeaking. In a dark corner, they sank down near a gurdy wagon and watched the masked players listlessly. But their bellies were empty, and they had no money left with which to purchase food. In desperation Mouse palmed a handful of gora seeds from a grain merchant. Dividing the meager pile in half, she munched her share and watched Ciaran do the same.

"We'll starve by inches, stealing grain from the market," he said sourly.

Mouse wiped her mouth, wishing for real bread. "We can't stay in Third Quarter, Kiri. The bounty hunters will get us sooner or later."

"No Quarter is safe. By now, the Cators will have warrants in every corner of Bergamel."

Mouse took his hand. "At least we could hide in Fourth for a while. And their gate is closest to the border lands. I've heard there's better living out there."

The harpist sighed. "All right, Mouse. Let's go."

Through subterranean tunnels they made their way to the farthest Quarter of the city. Blinking, they emerged into the warmth of the sunballs' light. The streets were filled with the maddening aroma of roasting meat. Mouse felt saliva fill her mouth. She turned to Ciaran. He was staring up, face working in horror.

"The sky," he gasped. "Blue and white. One sun. How?"

She looked upward but saw only the familiar red glow of the sunballs.

"Kiri?"

Mouse felt dizzy for a moment. The sun-balls faded. In their place, one terrible, white, burning orb glared down at her. Around it, the sky was a soft blue, filled with thin white clouds.

The red walls of the Fourth had vanished. She stood with Ciaran upon bright yellow sand. Green water lapped at their feet. Mouse began to laugh hysterically. Beside her, Ciaran gaped. With a thunderous commotion, the ground began to shake. Huge

shadows moved toward them, resolving into strange, four-legged creatures, huge and scaly. Each leg was as wide around as a tree. Two by two, the gray beasts lumbered past, pausing at intervals to crane snakish necks topped by tiny heads and peer with dull red eyes at the two thieves. Biting down on her inner cheek, Mouse stilled her panic. She pulled Ciaran out of the path of a mammoth, three-toed foot moments before it flattened him.

"Kiri, where are we?"

The harpist shook his head.

"Damned if I know," he said.

"Perhaps Luca put a spell on us."

"He's not that kind of Weirder," Ciaran said. "Gods, have you ever seen such monsters?"

The last of the beasts passed them and the herd moved down the beach, into a stand of trees with black, spadelike leaves, and out of sight.

"I don't think we're in Fourth anymore," Mouse said.

Now it was Ciaran's turn to laugh. Clutching his stomach he hooted and capered, tears steaming down his cheeks.

"Not in Fourth anymore?" He gasped, his tone mocking. "Not in Fourth?"

Mouse's eyes burned with anger. For a moment, she endured his japery. Then she kicked him, hard. The harpist's laughter subsided. He sat down heavily on the warm sand, holding his knee. When his voice returned, it was somber.

"Have you ever seen such a sky as this? Such a shore?" he demanded. "I've heard tell of such lands, the Atlantean coast and such. But even in my travels, I've never seen them."

"And I've never been out of Bergamel." Mouse said. "But what does that mean? Where are we?"

"I don't know," Ciaran said. "Nowhere familiar. Perhaps nowhere known." Mouse sank down next to him. "And how did we get here?"

"You're asking too many questions, Mouse. I'm a minstrel, not a sage."

With a loud rumble, Mouse's stomach announced that it was empty and had been for too long. She stood up, peering at the odd trees that rimmed the beach.

"I'd wager those are nuts in the crowns of those trees." she said. "I wonder if we can eat them?"

She trotted up to the nearest sturdy trunk and shimmied up its smooth, ruddy surface. It was quick work for a limber thief to knock two of the dark, oval nuts to the ground. Mouse threw in a third one for good measure. By the time she'd reached the sand, Ciaran was shelling one of the large green pods with his knife. The nut opened easily, coming away in three parts. The meat within was a creamy pink color with a mild aroma. The harpist took a generous mouthful. He chewed it for a moment. Then he spit as hard as he could.

"Aagh," he said, gagging. "Like rotten mead."

Mouse swore with disappointment. They had to find something to eat soon. She cast about, up and down the beach. Nothing. Mouse turned toward the water, Ciaran was washing his mouth with the green, briny liquid. Perhaps they could catch fish? The ground shook. A shadow fell, cutting off the warmth of that eerie, lone sun. Mouse turned. And screamed. A horrible monster stood slaving over her, a full

seven lengths above, with a head as large as a trestle table and a mouth filled with cruel, knife-edged teeth. It walked upright on huge muscular legs. Two small withered arms ending in claws hung down in front. The thing regarded Mouse with wild yellow eyes and roared. Mouse felt Ciaran grab her hand and yank her backward. Floundering, she staggered into the warm water as the monstrous lizard came after her. The waves broke against her knees, then against her thighs. As she began to float, Ciaran towed her farther out, still. Salty water filled her mouth.

I can't swim, she thought. But better to die here, hand in hand, than alone in the jaws of that horror. Mouse closed her eyes. When she opened them, she was standing, soaked to the skin, by a white stone bench in a garden filled with verdant bushes topped by bell-shaped flowers. The air was soft and balmy. Ciaran sat on the bench wringing out his tunic.

"Gods," Mouse said. "What now?"

"Perhaps we're both asleep and having the same nightmare," the minstrel replied. He eyed his dripping harp ruefully. "I hope."

"Kiri, the flowers. Look!" The crimson blooms stirred, petals turning toward the two thieves as though following the sun. Stamens waggled like tongues. Slowly, the flowers began to open and shut, like pink haakon beaks. Like hungry mouths. Mouse turned her back on the obscene things.

"This will make a wonderful song," Ciaran said.

She glared at him. "Later," he added. The sky above them was hazy, indistinct, with a white glow to it that hurt the eyes. Something glinted in front of them. Mouse blinked, leaned forward, and felt her nose hit an invisible barrier. "Ouch!"

Eyes tearing, Mouse pulled back. And gasped. A tan, rubbery face, elongated with saucerlike eyes and no ears, swam upward into view. It was attached to a thin neck that, in turn, connected to a thin body whose arms and legs appeared soft and jointless. The thing hovered beyond the invisible barrier, staring. Then another joined it. And another. Mouse snarled at them. "Get on with you!" Ciaran roared. "What are you staring at anyway?" The humanoids turned to one another, twittered, turned back to stare some more. Mouse stuck her tongue out at them. They twittered again. Her stomach rumbled. Hunger made her bold.

"Do you have anything to eat?" she yelled at the apparitions.

This time, a great deal of twittering and gesticulating went across the barrier.

"Hey!" Ciaran yelled. "It worked. Look!"

Mouse turned to see a pedestal materializing on which two platters of pellets, some green, some black, were piled.

"Do you think we can eat these?" Mouse asked.

"I'm sure as hell going to try." The harpist scooped up a handful of the strange pebbles and tossed them into his mouth. Chewed. Reached for another handful. Mouse grabbed the pellets and chewed greedily. They tasted of peppermint and cloves, of sugar and curry and a few other things she couldn't identify. She swallowed and grabbed for more pellets. For a long time, neither thief said anything. They even forgot the others watching them. Finally, Ciaran leaned back and burped. The humanoids gawked. He waved cheerily. Mouse put a few pellets in her waist pouch for later. Suddenly sleepy, she leaned back against the harpist. And found herself falling through air.

"Kiri!"

She landed hard, on some stone steps. In darkness. Fear clenched her stomach. Whimpering, Mouse scabbled in her waist pouch for a glowstone, but there was none to be found. Had she given them all to Ciaran?

"Mousie?" Ciaran's voice was thin with fright.

"I'm here, but I can't see you," Mouse answered, her own voice shaking. "Where are the sunballs? Oh, Kiri, why is it so dark?"

"I don't know. Maybe we're underground?"

"Do you have any glowstones?"

For answer, the harpist kindled one of the small lights.

His gray eyes were huge and fear floated in their depths. "I don't like this," he said. "It's always light."

Mouse's mocking laughter rang along the cobblestones.

"Always light," she said. "Yes. In Bergamel, it's always light. But we're not there, are we?"

Ciaran's reply was cut off by the sound of footsteps. All thieves, if they hope to live long, spend their days with an ear cocked for that very sound, and one foot poised for escape. But in this dark, unknown place, where could two thieves run?

"Get behind me," Ciaran whispered, and pulled his blade. Mouse did likewise, and tried not to shudder as the glowstone was extinguished. Metal rattled against metal as if a key were turning in a lock. With a squeal, a segment of blackness before them swung inward, taking shape as a rounded door on long iron hinges, illuminated by a guttering torch. A human hand held the faggot. Mouse sighed with relief.

A thin, bearded face peered in at the thieves.

"Grain filchers," he muttered in a thick accent. "Thought I heard ye. By sacred Bas, come out o' there."

The flickering light caught Ciaran's knife. For a moment, the stranger froze. Then he lifted his brown hemp sleeve to show a gnarled cudgel held in his free hand. A wicked sword hung at his hip. Reluctantly, the two thieves sheathed their weapons and crept through the doorway into a stone passage.

"Come along," their captor said. His voice was gruff but not unkind. "You'll have a brief stay in the hold, and some regular meals while you're there. This famine has made a thief of more than one honest man."

"Famine?" Ciaran's eyes glittered. "What famine?"

The bearded man squinted. "Are ye daft? Everyone west of Phrygia knows this third year of Bas's grace has been the worst yet for the crops."

"Third year?" Mouse said. "What do you mean?"

The passage ended in an open arch, beyond which Mouse could see grassy land lit by torches. Above, all was darkness punctuated by cold, white points of light.

"Where are the sunballs?" she asked.

The bearded man shook his head. "Sunballs? What mean you by sunballs? You've got an odd accent, little one. Do ye come from the border lands?"

"Near them," Ciaran said, giving Mouse a warning look.

She made a face, but kept silent. The minstrel pulled his knife silently and turned to their captor.

"I know you mean us no harm," he said, voice honey smooth. "But I don't think

we'd be happy in jail. We're just lost travelers, as you can see. We meant you no harm. Just blundered here by mistake."

"Into a locked grain house?" The bearded man rested his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Mouse swore softly and prepared to defend herself. But a throbbing sensation at her waist drew her attention. Her belt pouch was floating, a strange glow seeping out through its seams. The flap lifted to reveal the Portal Cube, shimmering with red and purple lights. She gasped and turned to Ciaran. The minstrel was frozen in mid-step, hand still brandishing his knife. His eyes were glassy.

"Kiri?"

He did not respond. Mouse turned toward their captor, but he was likewise still as a mummer's dummy. Upward and outward, glittering particles floated in waves from the Cube. Soon they were so thick Mouse could not see beyond her nose through the shimmering blizzard. She tried to call Ciaran's name, but her voice was lost in the brilliance. She felt herself lifted, floating end over end.

Make it stop, she thought. Please, Bas, make it stop. Strange sounds brushed past her, words she almost caught, voices she wanted to understand but they were snatched away and gone before she could make sense of them. Mouse began to fear she would be tossed in this strange gale of noise and light forever. She covered her face with her hands. And felt solid ground beneath her feet. Familiar noises filled her ears: the boasts of street hawkers, the cries of conjurers, the laughter of children in the Fourth Quarter of Bergamel. Overhead, the sunballs danced brightly in the sky. Mouse looked around and saw Ciaran standing nearby, white-faced.

"Kiri! Gods, we're back."

The harpist gave her a half smile. "Back from where, Mousie? Do you have a name for where we've been?"

"You're the minstrel," Mouse replied tartly. "Where do you think?"

"Between. Outside. In a dream world." Ciaran's voice was pinched. "I want a flagon of wine. Let's see if I can win us some drink with a song."

He led her into a small pub whose sign read "Bas's Dreams."

Mouse settled on a stone perch by the fire and watched Ciaran take control of the room. For a small, ugly man, he had much presence. He swung his harp over his shoulder and into his hands. Despite their salt-water bath, the strings responded obediently. The harpist soon had a good crowd gathered around, singing along to the Distance Cycle. Ciaran ended the song with a clash of chords. "Hey, harpist," a stout man near the bar called out. "Sing us something about the Dream Plague." Ciaran smiled uncertainly. "I'd be happy to, friend, if you'll tell me what that is." The stout one stared, goggle-eyed, at him.

"You don't know about the Dream Plague?" he said. "Where've you been all this fortnight, man? People've been falling into visions, like dreamweed, only worse. Walk through a marketplace only to find yourself stepping through green muck on some unknown shore. Go to sleep in your own bed and wake up on cold stone, in total darkness, someplace—nobody knows where— else. People have been chased by horrible monsters and strange apparitions. Surely you've heard tell of it?"

Mouse and Ciaran exchanged nervous glances.

"Oh," Ciaran said winking. "*That* Dream Plague."

He looked at the sawdust-covered floor and scratched his head for a full minute, as though carefully pondering the man's request.

"I'm not quite finished with the ballad of that one," he said. "But, speaking of dreams, brother, how about a song for this pub? You must know the words to Bas's Dreams."

He strummed the opening chords, nodding as the patrons joined in.

*"Sacred Bas lies wreathed in dreams,
So fast asleep, so far away,
Across the fields, across the plains,
Eyes closed against the endless day,
He gave us life and light and love,
For this we thank him gaily,
But most of all we thank him
For a cup of comfort daily!
Yes, we gladly lift our voices up
In honor of that friendly cup."*

Ciaran led the lot of them through the chorus three more times, until the smoky rafters rang with the raucous sound of their mingled voices, tapping feet, and cups pounded against tabletops. The barman beamed at him, ruddy cheeks glowing. A good minstrel always made for better business, and he hurried to fill all cups extended to him. When the harpist signaled for a pitcher, he nodded without hesitation. A server with hair the color of harvest grain brought the jug. As she set it down, she smiled brightly at Ciaran, a smile filled with invitation. The minstrel raised a shaggy eyebrow and gave her a long, appraising look. Then he hefted the wooden jug, took a healthy swallow, took another, and another, and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. His eyes never left the barmaid.

"What's your name?" he asked the girl.

"Melora," she said in a thin high voice. "How wonderful your song was." She leaned over, almost falling out of her low-cut blue tunic. The glowstones gave her flesh a soft, peachy color. Ciaran's eyes followed her every move, hunger burning in their gray depths.

"Can I touch your harp?" she asked.

"And anything else you'd like," Ciaran said, winking.

The barmaid giggled and pressed up against him. Ciaran put a muscular arm around the girl's waist and drew her closer. He seemed to have forgotten Mouse.

The little thief snarled. She'd watched the harpist's performance with some pleasure. But this encore was not to her liking. Not at all. Scowling, she jumped to her feet and strode over, a small red flash. Mouth set in a grim line, she pinched the girl, hard.

"Ow!"

Mouse pulled the small knife from her belt. The blade had a flinty shine in the light of the pub's glowstones and tapers.

"Perhaps you'd like to look at this as well," she said. Her voice was soft. Dangerous.

"Mousie ..." She spun on the harpist. "Would you like to take a look at it, too?"

Faithless Kiri. Perhaps I won't be so careful of your precious playing hand this time!"

The barmaid pulled back. Cursing, Ciaran drew his own knife. His face was hard with anger.

"No one tells me what to do, Mouse. No woman. And no thief." Mouse opened her mouth to suggest which of the nine hells of Cimmeria would best suit him.

But the walls of the pub began to waver and melt around them like heated tallow. Their stomachs roiling, the two thieves and the blond barmaid stood, gaping, on an open plain. Red fog swirled around them, and in the distance, a great army advanced, blue and white banners nodding in the breeze. A man in garnet-toned armor approached the threesome, his sword raised in challenge.

Ciaran dropped the pitcher of wine.

"The Dream Plague," Melora shrieked. "Now I've got it, too!" She began to cry hysterically.

I'm going to kick her, Mouse thought, balling her fists. And I'm going to enjoy it. The air around them flickered. The soldier wavered like a tent flap in a strong wind. In the wink of an eye, they were back in the warm, smoke-filled pub. Quickly Mouse looked around. There was no sign of the soldier in russet armor. Melora gasped and hurried away through leather curtains into the pub's private quarters. She went alone. Dark eyes burning, Mouse watched her go. Then she spun on the minstrel. He gave her a wry grin and put his knife back in his belt.

"I didn't think you'd be so touchy," he said. But his gray eyes glinted with new respect.

"That wench! I should have ..."

"Forget her, Mouse." Ciaran's tone was severe. "I think we've got a bigger problem to consider." A thin, high cackle cut through his words. Both thieves turned to find its source. Long and bony, a gray-haired fellow with a red hat and green tunic had his feet propped on a stool by the hearth. He gave them a glittering, malicious look.

"A problem indeed," he said. "The plague is everywhere. But the source is near." He pointed at Mouse and laughed again. "Old fool!" she said scornfully, still clutching her blade. "I'll give you a second mouth to laugh out of if you're not careful."

The gray-haired one cackled again. "Oh, they'll bring the Weirders and the conjurers. Maybe even try a priest or two. But the fools'll fail. All attempts to cure the plague will fail," he said.

"How do you know?" Mouse demanded.

Ciaran nudged her to silence.

"You're from the backwater, aren't you?" he asked.

The graybeard nodded.

"Born with the Sight," he said. "So I know the source of the plague. And who caused. They also must cure it."

"We caused nothing," Ciaran said sharply. "And if it's healing you want, you're in the wrong Quarter. I'm no healer."

The telepath smiled a gap-toothed smile. "No, minstrel and thief. I don't need the Sight to see that. But you have the means to put right what is wrong. And if you do

not, the Dream Plague will engulf more than Bergamel."

"He's just a trouble-making old sot," Mouse cried. "Have another drink and spare us your riddles!" Ciaran spat into the fire.

"Yes, father," he said. "Play backwater games with some others more gullible." He set down the empty pitcher and made for the door. Mouse was right behind him, her knife in her belt.

Out on the street, she tugged at the minstrel's yellow tunic. Still, it was several minutes before he slowed his pace and turned to face Mouse. When he did, his face was hard.

"Kiri, do you think he was right?"

"About what?"

"The Dream Plague. Us."

"He's an old fool," Ciaran said. "I don't have time for his maunderings. Come on. Let's concentrate on selling that damned Cube." A day later, Ciaran's harping had won them a full meal and mead, but still the Cube burned with cold fire in Mouse's pocket. At the edge of the best market in the Fourth, Ciaran was approached by a woman in fine silken robes of palest gray.

"You are the harpist they search for," she said. Her voice was low and musical.

"Not I," Ciaran said. He tensed, ready to run. The woman in gray smiled gently.

"Your companion is the thief who took the Cube, is she not?" Reluctantly, Mouse began to reach for her knife. It would be a shame to cut this fine lady, she thought. And difficult to get away unseen. The woman laughed openly now, shaking her long auburn hair.

"Put your weapon down," she said. "I mean no harm. My name is Anadir. I serve one who has searched hard and long for the holders of the Cube."

"Why should we trust you?" Mouse asked. "You may be planning to turn us in to the Cators." Anadir shrugged. "You will be caught sooner or later if you do not dispose of the Cube. But no, I will not betray you. Come." Mouse squinted at Ciaran. He nodded his assent. Together, they followed the woman down a series of narrow, cobbled walks, along winding side alleys and paths, away from the market and deep into the finest sector of the Fourth. Here, the streets were swept daily, the blocks of each building mortared, one upon the other, in neat lines. All was order, clean order and red brick. At the side of a great house built of dark stone, Anadir paused to unlock a small door. She turned right and left to survey the street, then beckoned the two thieves inside. They entered a hallway draped with rich tapestries in hues of blue and gold. The magisterial seal was emblazoned across them, glinting with golden thread.

"Is this the home of the Fourth's Magistrate-General?" Ciaran asked, his tone wary. Anadir shook her head.

"His brother," she said. "Wait here."

She left them in a small, blue-carpeted room whose overstuffed furnishings repeated the heraldic colors and motifs of the hangings. Great shelves displayed trophies and gifts in glittering metals. Mouse's eyes got bigger and bigger as she looked around the room.

"Kiri," she whispered, "we could live off one of those golden ewers for a year."

Melt it down and make coins. Sell the handles as ornaments."

"I know, Mouse," he whispered back. "And look at all the windows. Why, the valances alone would buy us meals for a month." Mouse's fingers itched to lay hold of the finery.

"Do you think we could find our way out of here?" she asked.

Ciaran frowned. "Not quickly. And do you want the Magistrate of Fourth to set his hounds on our heels as well? No, Mousie. Much as it hurts, we'd best act as respectful guests here."

"It's not fair!" Mouse stamped her foot. "In all my thieving days, I've never been able to get inside a place as fine as this. And now that I've been invited in, I've got to pretend to be something I'm not."

"Hush, Mouse." Ciaran took her hand. "It might be a test. If these people really do intend to conduct business with us, they might first want to see how civilized we are. If, the moment we're in their home, we start tearing things from the wall, they'll dismiss us as dirt and throw us in the deepest dungeon they can find. Or to the Cators. Besides, they can take the Cube at any time. They're doing us supreme courtesy, and we'd best return the favor." He sat down on a plush blue settee and placed his harp in his lap. Idly, he strummed it, noodling a soothing lament that filled the room up with sweetness. Mouse settled in beside him and put her head on his shoulder. In moments, the music had lulled her away into a dreamy reverie where goblets glittered in her hands and a full haunch of grilled meat sat, waiting, on a fine glass salver.

How long she slept she did not know. Mouse awoke to the tinkling of bells as the door to the room opened and a servant appeared bearing trays of food and drink.

"Anadir bade me bring you refreshment," the slave said, his lip curled. Obviously, he felt he had no business serving thieves. Ciaran stopped playing and put his harp away. He speared a hunk of meat with his knife and made a great show of chewing it noisily while the servant stood there, frowning. Between them, Mouse and Ciaran cleaned the trays of food and drained the wine pitchers. As the servant turned to go, Anadir entered the room.

"You've eaten," she said. "Good. Jodayn will join us soon. He has been delayed." Mouse stared enviously at the woman's fine clothing and regal carriage.

"Are you the lady of this house?" she blurted out. Ciaran gave her a sharp look. Anadir's laughter pealed through the room.

"No," she said. "I am house minister and amanuensis. Jodayn's lady is ill and keeps much to bed."

"I see." Mouse's smile was wry. The door opened again and a tall man entered, clad in midnight blue. He was as dark as Anadir was light, with thick black hair that fell in waves almost to his shoulders, deep-set eyes, and a strong nose.

"This is Jodayn," Anadir said, her lips curving upward. A look passed between them, fleeting and poignant. It was not that of master and servant. Jodayn turned to the thieves.

"So she has found you. Good." He settled heavily into a thick-legged chair by the window. "You possess the Cube?" "Yes," Ciaran said.

"I would have it from you," Jodayn said. "Fair price, of course. May I see it?" Mouse pulled the relic out of her pouch and let its strange fires dance before the dark lord's eyes. "May I hold it?" She pulled back, but Ciaran urged her forward. Jodayn extended his palm toward her. Reluctantly, she placed the Cube in his hand.

"Odd," he exclaimed, hefting the gem. "Warm, isn't it?" He held it up to the light, examining each facet. Leaning over, he showed it to Anadir, who stood close by, at his right.

"How it glistens, my dear, with the secrets of the ages."

She stared at the gem, entranced.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"If it pleases my lord, it pleases me." Jodayn smiled gently and brushed her cheek with his hand.

"I will buy it," he said, and turned back toward Ciaran and Mouse. "Is seventy decols enough?" Mouse grabbed Ciaran's hand in excitement, but he gave her a warning look.

"We'd like eighty, my lord," he said. Mouse scowled but said nothing. Jodayn chuckled.

"Eighty it is, then." He paused to admire the relic again. "The fabled Portal Cube. You will show me how to use it, of course."

Ciaran's smile faded.

"Use it? How can we use it?" Mouse asked. Jodayn's eyes blazed into her.

"You mean to tell me you have stolen the Portal Cube without knowing what it is you have taken?" The two thieves stared at him. Throwing back his head, Jodayn laughed heartily.

"If I were not an honorable man, I would toss you both out onto the street, without payment."

Mouse glared at him. He caught the look and waved a finger at her.

"Calm yourself, little thief. I am a man of my word. Anadir, have the decols brought in." "Done." With a graceful movement, she pulled a long, silken cord attached to a deep-voiced bell.

"The Portal Cube," Jodayn continued, "is the key to the the past. The path to Bas."

"Kiri, I think he's crazy," Mouse whispered.

"Shh!" But Jodayn had overheard. He smiled, but there was scant amusement in his dark eyes.

"You do not believe me, little thief? Well then, you will observe and learn."

"Learn what?" Ciaran asked.

Jodayn stood and stretched.

"My counselors have noted the wild time fluctuations that have swept Bergamel ever since the Cube was taken, this so-called Dream Plague." Mouse turned to stare at Ciaran.

"Time fluctuations," she said. "Oh, Kiri, that's what was happening to us. But he's saying that the Cube caused them." Jodayn nodded.

"I suspect you may have taken some, shall we say, unusual excursions." Eagerly, he leaned toward them. "I want to know about everything you saw. Anything that might lead me to Bas."

"Bas!" Mouse exclaimed. "The sleeping god?"

"Do you know any other?"

"If you're looking for Bas, why not scale Ben Beatha?" Ciaran said, his tone skeptical.

"No, no. I do now want Bas now. I want Bas *then*. And I will use this Cube to part the ages and find him." Jodayn's eyes shone like polished gems. Anadir smiled lovingly at him. Mouse was about to suggest that they both pay a visit to the healers when the door opened, and the servant who had brought them food walked in carrying a tray covered with golden decols.

"Ah, Eckmar. Please pay our friends." Ciaran and Mouse met him halfway and began scooping the coins into their pouches until the seams threatened to burst. Jodayn dismissed the servant. Then he turned back to the two thieves and held up the Cube.

"I believe I may consider this my property now?" Mouse nodded.

"And good riddance to it," Ciaran said. Jodayn's smile was knife-edged.

"Please accept my hospitality for the evening. My scribes will meet with you tomorrow."

"Thanks all the same, but . . ."

Two hefty young men in glassplate armor entered the room. They held wickedly pointed pikes in their gloved hands.

"I insist," Jodayn said.

"We wouldn't think of offending you." Ciaran said sharply.

"Then it's settled. We'll meet again tomorrow." With a nod, the dark lord rose from his seat, took Anadir's arm, and led her from the room.

"Kiri, I don't like this," Mouse said.

The harpist frowned. "Nor do I. But let's play along, Mousie. We have no choice." They allowed the guards to herd them into a nearby chamber containing pallets and a well-stocked table.

"At least we won't go hungry," Mouse said. Ciaran settled into a chair by the glowing fire.

"Time travel to find Bas!" he muttered. "The man's a lunatic. I hope it's not catching."

The next morning, Mouse and Ciaran awoke to the sound of rain on cobblestones. They filled their bellies with a hearty breakfast of porridge, steak, and ale. Then the scribes entered the room, and both thieves told of their adventures in time until their heads ached.

"Enough," Mouse snarled. "I can't remember anything more, I tell you!" Her eyes glinted dangerously. The pale young man who'd been recording her tale nodded and fled. With a kick, Ciaran sent the other scribe scrambling out the door. Mouse ran a hand through her wild black hair and yawned.

"Moneyed folk must not know what to do with their riches." A snicker from Ciaran encouraged her.

"Were we on white or yellow sand?" she mimicked. "Did the grain keeper say three or four years after Bas?"

Ciaran's expression hardened, but so intent was Mouse on her japery that she failed to notice the entrance of Jodayn. Grabbing her tunic, the harpist set his hand roughly over her mouth.

"Be quiet," he growled. Mouse started to jab him with her elbow, but saw the dark lord standing before them and dropped her hands.

"So," Jodayn said. "You think my task is foolish? Well, maybe so. We shall see. Your reports have given me hope. You said you encountered a man who called you grain thieves and referred to the famine of the third year. Our records show that there was such a famine soon after Bas brought our ancestors here. You were very close to the beginning of things. And this by mere chance." The dark lord prowled the room like a hungry cat.

"Bas sleeping is no good to me. But Bas awake, well, there's possibility!" He spun to face them.

"I have devised a framework for the Cube that may control it," he said. "If so, some initial testing is required."

He moved toward Ciaran.

"You, harpist, will accompany me on this test."

Ciaran pulled back. "Why?"

"I must have someone along who has already tread the paths of time. The place is still fresh in your mind. You will act as guide on the first trip out. Then, if it is successful, I'll carry the imprint as well. The next trip I'll undertake alone." Mouse watched the man's eyes glow. Her stomach shrank in fear.

"Kiri, don't go. He's mad."

"Mouse, what choice do I have?" the minstrel asked. His voice was soft. "Besides, this probably won't work." The two thieves followed Jodayn down into the belly of the house. In a dark workshop lit by tapers and glowstones, a sphere made of spun glass threads shimmered in a dark crucible. Nestled in the top of the sphere was the Portal Cube. Mouse no longer feared the peculiar fires that flashed along its surface, but she was relieved to be free of its burden. Let Jodayn fool with it all he liked. Anadir was waiting by the crucible. She smiled sweetly at the thieves, then went to Jodayn's side.

"Here, Mouse." Ciaran handed her his pouch bulging with decols, then his harp. "In case something goes wrong."

"Kiri!"

Suddenly frightened, Mouse clung to the minstrel's neck. He touched her face gently, then moved out of her embrace to stand with Jodayn by the glass sphere.

"Put your hands on the base of it, harpist."

Ciaran complied.

Jodayn mirrored his actions on the other side of the glass ball.

"Now concentrate on that grain keeper. The stone arch you described. Think, man. Think!"

For long moments, nothing happened. Mouse shifted uneasily, from one leg to the other. Perhaps this strange, dark man would give up in frustration. Perhaps there was nothing to his crazy plan. She looked at Anadir. Her gaze was set, unwavering, upon Jodayn. With a sigh, Mouse turned toward Ciaran. Sweat hung, glittering like gaming beads, on the minstrel's brow. He closed his eyes in concentration, lips trembling.

Flash! The Cube burst into eerie life, casting a thousand colors against the walls, upon the faces of the two men.

Mouse gasped. Ciaran's figure seemed to blur. Was he fading away before her eyes? She glanced at Jodayn. The dark lord was also growing indistinct, his features wavering. Ever so slowly, Ciaran and Jodayn thinned into the surrounding air until, with a whispering sigh, they were gone. The Cube subsided into muted flashes.

Sobbing, Mouse sank down against the crucible. "

"I'll never see him again. Never!" A gentle hand on her shoulder stopped her tears.

"Faith," Anadir said softly. "You must believe they will return. My lord has never disappointed me yet." Her face glowed with belief. With love. Mouse dried her tears. Her cheeks were burning with embarrassment. Why was she getting so upset over a silly harp player anyway?

The moments stretched until half a day had passed. Anadir sent for wine and food. Mouse would have none of it. She stared glumly at the plate of roasted quatrail and fenay roots as though it were covered with the red sand of the border lands. Bleakly, she stood sentry, her eyes hollow with fear.

"Little one, you should rest," Anadir said, and pressed her down into a chair.

Mouse did not have the spirit to resist. She dozed a bit, dreams haunted by images of Ciaran floating through ages, lost forever. A flash like lightning forced her eyes open. The Cube was afire again, casting gleaming light in glowing trails along the walls. By the crucible, vague images were taking form again, vague shapes that slowly resolved into the figures of Ciaran and Jodayn.

"Kiri! Thank the gods!"

Mouse threw herself at the pale-faced harpist. He almost collapsed in her arms. Leaning on her shoulder, as heavy as a full grain sack, he winked and swatted her rear gently.

"I'm all right, Mousie. I'm fine." Jodayn seemed less sapped, although he had his arm around Anadir's waist.

"We did it," he crowed. "Right blast back into that granary. Harpist, your aim was true!"

He swept Anadir up and swung her around until her long, silvery skirts fluttered like birds' wings beating for home. "We've done it, dear one," he said. "And next, I will go to meet the god awake. I'll meet Bas the Immortal. And learn his secrets."

"When, my lord?" Anadir asked, staring adoringly into his eyes.

"When? Now!"

Jodayn set her down and turned to the Cube.

"Stand back," he ordered the others brusquely. "I will go alone."

"Lord Jodayn, wouldn't it be wiser for you to rest first?" Ciaran said. The dark lord shook off the warning.

"No. I must go there while the place is still clear in my memory. All I need to do is arrive three years earlier. I know I can do it. Now." He gripped the sides of the crucible tightly and closed his eyes. His knuckles whitened. Veins stood out on his neck.

A sudden tremor moved through his arms, jarring the crucible. Just as Mouse was certain that the entire strange contraption would be jarred loose and smash into glittering shards on the floor, the Cube quickened. It enveloped Jodayn in a light so

bright the thieves' eyes leaked tears. For a moment, the dark lord stood as if blazing within the conflagration. Then he vanished. But the cold flames remained. And spread. Anadir froze, one hand lifted before her face. The blaze caught her up, engulfed her, and she was gone. Still the light moved across the room. Mouse opened her mouth to scream, to beg, but the eerie fires had stolen her voice. She felt the quick touch of Ciaran's hand on her arm. Then he disappeared into the coruscating gale. A moment later it had her also. Wailing silently, Mouse followed right behind the harpist, heading into—somewhere—on a nightmare ride.

Frigid gusts of wind tore at her hair, at her tunic. Great icicles formed on her fingers and toes. Tiny particles of ice cut her skin. She was being flayed alive by time's cold storm. Glittering particles resolved into a dizzying mix of images swirling around her. Faces of women screaming, men snarling, children waiting. They held out beseeching hands to her. She tried to reach for them, but they were swept past and away into the maelstrom. Shrieking and bellowing like a steam organ gone mad, the wind tossed Mouse upward through the cacophonous symphony of the ages. Voices wove together in a terrifying chorus of anguish never meant for human ears.

Just as suddenly, the choir halted, as though a giant hand had been clapped over the collected mouths. Their cries died into fading echoes and were gone. In eerie silence, Mouse floated on an updraft, her red tunic billowing like a sail on a sea wind.

A familiar city plaza sprang up before her: why, it had to be the green cobblestones of Thieves' Quarter, filled with shouting merchants, bustling gamers, playful children, and bright flowers.

Mouse felt a pang of nostalgia. Oh, how she'd give most anything in her life, even the Cube, to be back in that close, squalid, seamy, noisy, dear, familiar place.

Almost at once, the scene changed. Wavering before her eyes, it seemed to contract upon its own green stones. With a ghostly sigh, Thieves' Quarter began to dwindle.

Mouse's stomach knotted. Thieves' Quarter was shrinking, people rushing desperately through its narrow streets, clutching parcels and belongings in a blur of changing faces and clothing, a frantic diaspora. And then, brick by brick, the sector came down, demolished by squads of black-coated workmen who swarmed over its walls like Phrygian rock ants, stripping away the last stones to lay bare the red beneath its streets.

Tears filled Mouse's eyes, dripped out, and froze.

The wind picked up, and she spun, end over end, above the shifting sands of the open plain where Bergamel had been—or would be. She didn't know which.

As she watched, a splendid city took form beneath her, much finer than Bergamel.

Lofty towers sprang up, joined by high walls of pink stone. A wide highway streamed with traffic leading to the great doors of the citadel. In the shadow of the palace, families built humble shelters, domed ovens, and deep cisterns. Within the sheltering walls, children were born, grew up, grew old, died in a quick procession of generations. Birth, life, death. In each face Mouse saw a skeleton grinning under the skin.

Along the broad highway, a large contingent of armored men approached the city. A troop of defenders swelled at the base of the high walls. In noisy confusion the armies clashed. Men died horribly in flashing explosions, in black clouds of dust and

poison. Weeping, the women gathered bodies, buried their dead. Those who could escape the city's sackers abandoned their lives and memories, running for the sake of their children, for the sake of the future, onward. Behind them, the city crumbled into the red dust and disappeared from memory.

Out of the void, a small group of brown tents appeared. The encampment grew into a small brick village. The village spread into a town. Golden towers sprouted and once again a fine citadel emerged, the stones of its walls glistening in the brilliant midday light. Children played in the sheltered streets. Merchants sold their wares. Then, on the high road rimming the red horizon, a line of black dots appeared. Came closer. An army. Closer. A wall of grim faces—the flash of weapons—the cries of the fallen. Explosions. Flames. Destruction. The towers fell. But this time the dead lay unburied.

No more, Mouse thought. Please, no more. I'm so tired of all this killing. Of cities rising and falling. I'm so cold. I miss Kiri. Stop. Please. I'm so cold I want to die. A sweet, quiet voice answered her.

No. It is not your time.

She did not so much hear the words as feel them in her mind. The spinning slowed, halted. A warm gust of air stopped Mouse's shivering. She was floating now, drifting suspended in a calm, white space where the whole universe seemed to be at peace.

This journey should not have been attempted. But I see it was not your choice.

"No," Mouse said. "Where's Kiri? And the others?"

The others?

A pause.

Yes. I see them. I will save them if I can. But you I will send back, first. And be warned, little one. Some things are too powerful to risk stealing. Or using. Return the Cube or perish all. Past cannot mix with future.

"I promise," Mouse said, and meant it. "But who are you? Where are you?"

For answer, she heard lilting laughter and distant music. The image of a graceful, young boy, pale, with smiling, dark eyes and curling black hair danced briefly in her mind. The softness of childhood just past lent roundness to his cheeks. Despite his youth, the boy radiated power in waves that were almost palpable. He seemed supremely confident. Almost omnipotent.

"I think I know who you are ..." The youth laughed again.

You will forget. You must.

"I don't want to forget."

Even so. All such travelers must forget. Else, life such as yours cannot be maintained. Will not be. So forget, small one. Forget and live.

Out of nowhere and all time, a wind began to whisper in Mouse's ear. The whisper began to grow, grew to a bellow and beyond, until, howling, the wind swept away the youth's voice, his very image. And before she could protest, Mouse was snatched up by the gale, tumbled head over heels into the yawning darkness. When Mouse lifted her head, she was lying on the floor of a stone room, Nearby, Ciaran lay sprawled on a gray rug, white-faced, his eyes closed as though in sleep. Or death.

"Kiri!"

She scrambled over the hard stones to him, searching for a pulsebeat. The harpist shuddered, blinked, looked up. He stared at Mouse as though he had never before seen her. But after a moment, recognition blazed in his eyes. He smiled. She buried her head in his shoulder and felt his arms come around her. In all her short life, little else had ever felt as good.

"Mousie," he whispered. "Thank the Sods, Mousie." Their lips met, and for a long time, they said nothing more. A low sob broke into their embrace. Ciaran frowned. Mouse looked up in alarm. A tall, auburn-haired woman sat, crumpled and disheveled, by a glass crucible, trembling and clutching one hammered leg of it. She wept bitterly, with such force that it seemed her head was in danger of flying free of her shoulders.

"Who is she, Kiri?"

"Damned if I know," Ciaran muttered.

The weeping continued until Mouse could stand it no longer. Leaping up, she hurried over to the woman and took her hand.

"What's wrong? Please, ma'am, tell me." Wildly, the woman shook her head, sobbing harder.

"He'll never come back," she said. Her voice was thick and leaden. "He's dead. My love is dead. He went too far."

"Who?"

"Jodayn. My lord. You must remember." She stared up at Mouse, blue eyes brimming. "I am Anadir. The Cube. Remember the Cube?"

Mouse shook her head in confusion, then stopped. She remembered the Portal Cube. Where was it? A nudge from Ciaran pulled her attention away from the woman.

"The Cube," he whispered. "There, in that contraption."

Indeed, the relic sat in a spun glass nest in the center of the crucible. But its color was ashen. No bright spectrum flowed along its faceted surface. It seemed extinguished. Lifeless. Anadir stopped sobbing and stood up.

"That's how I knew he must be dead," she said bitterly. "Or as good as dead—lost to me forever. Now that the Cube is powerless, how can he ever return?" She hung her head.

"Return?" Ciaran said "From where?"

The woman named Anadir gave him a look emptied of hope, filled with sorrow. Quietly Mouse plucked the Cube from the glass sphere and pocketed it. It was cool in her hand.

Anadir nodded. "You must take it back to the Cathedral," she said. "We should never have tried to use it."

Head bent, she rose and walked toward the door. There she paused a moment, looking back as if to say one thing more. Her eyes met Ciaran's, then moved to Mouse. Her lips curved up in a sad smile. Then she turned down the hall and was gone.

"Kiri, should we follow her?" Mouse asked.

The harpist frowned. "Leave her alone. There's nothing we can do ..."

A brief scream, ending abruptly, cut off his words. Ciaran and Mouse stared at each

other in dread. He rose to his feet, cursing, and pulled his knife.

"Come on!"

Together, they raced down the hall in the direction Anadir had taken. They found her slumped like a discarded doll on the floor, rich auburn hair rayed out around her head, limbs stretched stiffly at odd angles. Her head was thrown back and her lips, blue-stained, were twisted in a grimace of death. A shattered vial lay near her outstretched hand. Ciaran sniffed the glass fragments and pulled back, coughing.

"Cyluthin!" he exclaimed. "Sacred Bas, but there's easier ways to go than that. And what if this Jodayn, whoever he is, finally returns from wherever he is?" He spat from the side of his mouth, then squinted at the still figure on the cold stones. "Poor, lovely woman," he said. "Bas grant her rest."

Mouse shut her eyes, feeling tears stinging behind the lids.

"I don't think her man will ever come back," she said, her voice small. "She must have known it. Else, why kill herself? What a great love they must have shared, to suffer such pain at the end."

She leaned over and with a quick touch of her fingers closed Anadir's sightless, staring eyes. Then she stood up, resolve straightening her spine. Mouth set, she turned to the harpist.

"Kiri," she said hoarsely. "We've got to take back the Cube. Now."

They left Anadir where they had found her. Gathering up their bulging purses and Ciaran's harp, they crept from the great house. As they passed through the meeting room, Mouse paused to stare wistfully at the golden goblets that were arrayed in glistening rows on the shelves and in the grand cabinet.

"So much for wealth and fine things," she said, and closed the door behind her. In silence, moving briskly, they passed through the dank, wet streets of the Fourth. The rain had stopped, but the place was deserted. Without difficulty, Mouse found a passage down below the gate of the Quarter. By light of glowstones, the two thieves wound their way back through the echoing tunnels toward Second Quarter and the Black Cathedral.

"I wish I knew what happened to the Cube," Mouse said.

Kiri eyed her sharply.

"What do you mean?"

She sighed. "It's gone all dull and flat. Do you think it got damaged by that sad woman . . . ?"

"I don't see how," the harpist replied. He strode ahead of Mouse impatiently.

"Come on, Mousie, will you?"

She scurried after him across the wide plaza and disappeared into the alley beside the Dark Cathedral. This time, their entry was easier. The little door in the alley was unlocked and gave way as soon as Mouse leaned on it.

"Strange. Somebody must have oiled the hinges," she whispered.

"Maybe they're expecting us," Ciaran snarled. His face was bleak. Returning stolen goods sat hard upon him. Mouse knew the only reason he had agreed to return the Cube was that it seemed to be worthless now. Dead or no, the Cube still burned a hole in Mouse's pocket, and the thing frightened her. She wasn't sure to what use the

Cube had been put in that great house, or in days before, but she felt a powerful compulsion to get rid of it. The woman Anadir's suicide throbbed like a too-fresh wound in her memory. The sooner the damned relic was returned to the Cators, the better. Of course, it grated on any thief's nerves to give back a prized object. But Mouse's resolve did not waver for a moment. Beyond any question, she just knew that she had to return the Cube. And quickly.

Without a sound, they crept along the narrow, musty passage beside the main worship hall. The muffled, distant murmur of a service in progress halted their steps. Mouse leaned forward and peeked between two black, spun-glass curtains. At the great altar, a somber-faced Cator wearing a flowing orange robe, his arms spread wide, droned a stream of incomprehensible words in a high, reedy voice.

"The hall is filled with Cators," Mouse said. "They're all over the place, juggling their beads and muttering their gibberish."

"Wonderful," Ciaran whispered bitterly. "Now what?"

"We wait for Mentlan. When they go home and do it all over again at their private altars."

The harpist sat down, cross-legged.

"Might as well be comfortable as possible until then," he said. Mouse did likewise, and together, they settled in behind the green draperies at the far end of the passage. The room was warm, and Mouse yawned. The smell of stale incense rose to her nostrils, thick and cloying. She shuddered. Next to her, Ciaran nodded, exhausted. Both thieves struggled to stay awake, but it was a vain effort. Slowly, their eyes closed, their heads sank onto their chests. Huddled together, Mouse and Ciaran slept like church mice.

The awoke to an uproar of blows and shouts. Three angry figures in black, hooded robes surrounded them, moving in wild frenzy.

"Thieves! Come to steal more?" cried one.

"You are unclean—blasphemers!" yelled another.

"Rascals! Scoundrels! Serpents!"

Each comment was punctuated by a blow. Like a pike through a knot, Mouse slipped past them, cursing furiously, pursued by a thick-bodied Cator. The little thief was nimble and quick, and across the great hall almost faster than an eyeblink. At the end of the wall, the exit loomed. But before she could reach it, a strong hand grasped the back of her tunic and pulled firmly. She kicked out but the Cator's hold was tenacious. Teeth clenched, Mouse pulled her knife out, twisted around, and sliced neatly through the hooded one's black robe. She felt flesh yield to her blow and saw a red gout of blood come spurting through the slash in the dark fabric. Yowling with pain, the Cator released his grip on her and spun around, clutching his thigh. He toppled to the floorstones of the Cathedral where he collapsed heavily moaning.

"All - we - wanted - to - do - was - return - something-dammit," Mouse said to no one in particular, between gritted teeth. But in the tumult, her voice went unheard. To her left, Ciaran was laying about him, pummeling first one, then the other remaining aggressor. One of the Cators swung a cudgel at him, missed, and swung

again, this time catching the minstrel squarely in the mouth. Ciaran grunted, careened backward, and would have fallen but for Mouse. She caught him, staggering under his weight, and planted her feet firmly to prop up the groggy harpist.

"Kiri! Stay awake. Come on. There are only two left."

His lip was badly cut and already growing puffy. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. Mouse swung around, supporting Ciaran with her back while she kicked viciously at the two Cators. One came too close, and she landed a solid blow to his groin. He sank to the floor, whimpering. The remaining Cator stepped back, watching her uncertainly. Ciaran's weight on her eased. Shaking his head, the harpist stood up straight and felt his swollen lips gingerly. With a look of disgust and anger, he spat out a pink and bloody tooth.

"Damn!"

He whipped his knife from his girdle and began to stalk the remaining Cator with deadly intent. He had the man by the throat when a thunderous shout froze his arm.

"You will not kill in this house of worship!"

The Cator began trembling in Ciaran's grasp.

"The Cator Primate," he whispered. "Let me go. I beg you."

Snarling, Ciaran shoved the man away from him.

"Be gone and be damned," he said. The Cator scurried away, into the shadows of the hall. His companions had already vanished.

"Cowards," Mouse sneered.

"Silence, thief!"

"Who demands our silence?" Ciaran asked, speaking thickly through swollen lips. A tall, spectral figure in a white, hooded robe slowly approached them. When he was within ten paces of the thieves, he pushed the hood back so that it sat in folds, a high collar about his neck and shoulders. His long face was pale and gaunt. Deep furrows worn by time ran through each cheek, and his eyes were dark and weary and deep-set, plainly carrying troubling memories in their hazel depths. His hair was a white crescent at the back of his head.

"Thieves, what brings you here?" he asked. His voice was deep. Quiet.

"To return something that belongs to you," Mouse said. The robed figure fixed her with a steady look.

"You are the one who stole the Portal Cube."

It was not a question. Mouse glared fiercely, shoulders pressed back in defiance.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I am. And I've got the brand to prove it. Look!"

With a sweeping flourish of her hand, she lifted the hair of her forehead to show the small red spot where the Cators' hot metal had left its mark. To her satisfaction, the primate flinched and looked away.

"I would not have allowed it, had I been present," he said. His tone was apologetic. "At times I regret the barbaric ways my brethren pursue. But what's done is done." He spread his hands out in a gesture of dismissal and his expression hardened into something almost hawklike.

"Have you the Cube with you?" he asked Mouse.

She pulled the relic from her pouch and displayed it in the Cathedral's dim light. The surface of it remained ashen, opaque. Its fire had been extinguished. The Cator Primate bit his lip and nodded curtly. There was a flicker of despair in his eyes.

"As I'd feared," he said with a sigh. "You attempted to use it, did you not?"

"We attempted nothing," Mouse retorted. "We merely stole it as part of The Race at Thieves' Carnival. I'd have won first prize, too, if you Cators hadn't slowed me down by branding me." The ghost of a smile lit the primate's features. Then it vanished as quickly as it had come.

"My apologies," he said, and she could not be sure whether he was mocking her. "You took this, then, without knowing of its powers?" Mouse drew herself up righteously.

"I knew the Cube was famous, all right. As for magical powers, well, a good thief steals first and asks questions later. What powers?"

Again, a fleeting smile passed over the Cator's face.

"I see," he said. "Then who was it that tried to employ the Cube?"

"We're not sure," Ciaran said. "A great man, we think, who died in the attempt. And another because of what he attempted." The Cator closed his eyes tightly, as though in pain. For a moment, he breathed deeply, muttering strange words in hurried cadence. Mouse hoped it was a prayer and not a curse. The primate opened his eyes and looked at both thieves sadly.

"As I suspected," he said. "The Cube can be ruled by no one save Sacred Bas. For it was he who first created it. And now, one much lesser has seized it and drained its magic."

Sadly, he put out his hand. Mouse deposited the Cube in his palm and pulled back.

"Is it ruined?" she whispered.

"I don't know," the Cator said. "Perhaps its strength will return. It has returned before, after such abuse. Best to keep it under lock and key until then." Shivering, Mouse nodded.

"Make sure you lock it up better than before," she said.

The primate raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps you could advise me?" Mouse paused, taken aback.

"I don't think so," she said, voice quavering. "We really should get back to Thieves' Quarter ..."

"Oh, go ahead, Mousie," Ciaran said. A chuckle warmed his voice.

She shrugged.

"All right."

The tall primate kindled a glowstone globe and gestured for them to follow. The two thieves accompanied him into the depths of the Black Cathedral. They passed inset panels of polished and etched glass, deep amber, blue-violet, or warm russet in hue. The first six panels showed scenes of ferocious battles; men on strange beasts carrying evil-looking weapons, their mouths open in song. Or panic. Behind each group of cavalymen came a procession of hooded figures on foot, carrying what looked like huge books or square cudgels. Mouse couldn't be sure.

From scenes of warfare, the artwork shifted to portraits of various people. Men, mostly, wearing antiquated clothing, standing in stylized poses with stiff facial expressions. One portrait in particular caught Mouse's attention. It showed a man whose angular face and huge eyes glowed with patience. He had long hair and a neat, small beard. His head was framed by a small, rounded aura like a soft cap.

"Who's that?" Mouse asked. The primate paused, looked at the portrait, and shook his head.

"We are not sure any longer," he said. "Probably an ancient magistrate-general or seer. The ages have not been kind to our records."

A neighboring glass panel displayed the face of a young boy with dark eyes and dark, curling hair. His lips were drawn back in a smile of surprising sweetness. For a moment, Mouse thought he looked familiar—or was he a face from out of her dreams? The Cator probably didn't know who he was either. She stopped dawdling by the portrait and hurried to catch up with Ciaran and the primate. As the passage curved and straightened, the artwork on the panels became cruder and cruder, faint scratches and patterns. These gave way to carved receptacles in the very walls of the Cathedral. Stepping up on tiptoe, Mouse peered deep into one of the recesses. Human skulls, brown with age, stared back. A faint odor of decay filled her nostrils. Grimacing, Mouse looked away from the reliquaries.

"You say that Sacred Bas made the Portal Cube?" she asked. "Do you really believe it?" The tall cleric nodded.

"Our legends have it that among the machineries the sleeping god created was the Cube, by means of which great distances and ages could be transversed." Behind them, Ciaran snorted.

"Tales to tell around a fire," he said. "After a good meal with wine." The primate smiled gently. Said nothing.

"If what you say is true, why hasn't this so-called magical Cube been used before?" Ciaran demanded.

"Oh, men have tried," the primate said. "Always with the same result. The Cube has been tremendous temptation for centuries. Cults flourished around it. And so, finally, the Cube came to us."

Ciaran's eyes glittered.

"I'd heard tales—in pubs, mostly, at closing-- that the Cators use the Cube in their rites. Now there's the stuff of song," he said, fingering his harp.

"Use it? Hardly," the primate said. "We consider it an icon. We worship it on certain occasions. But only a fool would try to use it. Or a god. We like to think we are not fools."

The Cator paused at a gloomy intersection and seemed to be deliberating. "Come this way," he said. He gave Mouse a sidelong glance. "I had no idea the Cube was considered a prize in a thieves' game." , Mouse blushed and rubbed the red spot between her eyebrows.

"Not a game," she said. "A race."

And I almost won, she thought. A narrow passageway slowly widened into a good-sized chamber filled with locked stone boxes. The primate pointed to one safe box set into the stone wall of the room.

"What do you think of that lock?"

Mouse inspected the device carefully. Then she snickered.

"It's a simple three-in-four combination, with two sets of tumblers. Any five-year-old child in Thieves' Quarter could open it."

The Gator frowned. "What do you suggest?"

"Well, for starters, put a lock on the door of the room. And make it one of those

fancy glass locks connected to a bar system." "Bar system?"

The little thief nodded impatiently. "You know. If the lock is forced, a series of bars fall, sealing the place. Then, hire a jeweler to make a special lock for the safe box. With a special combination that only the primate knows. A custom job is the only way to do it."

"And you think this would keep the Portal Cube safe?" She shrugged.

"There are at least three thieves I know who can disarm any bar system made. But bars slow them down and they don't like that. And custom locks can beat the best."

"What about a custom lock based on a series of musical chords?" Ciaran asked.

"Could a glass-smith make such a thing?" the primate asked.

"Easily," Mouse said. "And it would take a thief and minstrel to try and pick that lock." She gave Ciaran a warm look. "A special breed."

"And this one has had his fill of robbing cathedrals," Ciaran said wryly.

The primate nodded. "Then I've consulted the proper authorities. I thank you."

Footsteps resounded above their heads. The primate looked up.

"You must go now," he said. "Mentlan is over. A new service will begin soon, and if you are caught in the Cathedral by a mob, I suspect that even I could not save you." With quick steps, he brought them to a small door whose hinges protested as he opened it.

"Follow the stairs upward and you will find yourselves in the plaza. Farewell."

Sighing rustily, the door swung shut behind them and the two thieves were in darkness once more. Mouse turned to Ciaran, or where she thought he was in the gloom.

"Got a glowstone?"

"I thought you were the one carrying them."

"No."

Ciaran sighed, and Mouse did also. Neither wanted to show the other their hatred, their fear, of the darkness. With steps spurred by pounding hearts, the two thieves began the long climb toward the light. The sunballs' amber filtered down through tiny glowholes to light Ciaran's rooms. Mouse sat next to the harpist on his pallet, happily counting golden decols.

"Oh, Kiri. There's enough here to get us across the badlands and back. To buy you five new harps."

The minstrel nodded. "A nice haul. I told you that Cube would pay off after all."

"I wish I could remember more of what happened after I got branded." Mouse bit her lip.

Ciaran shrugged. "Did you get hit in the head, too?"

"Of course not." She gave him a sharp look. "Some of us are a bit nimbler than others." He swatted at her, but she eluded him easily.

"That Cube was just bad luck," the harpist said. "I could feel it from the moment we entered that Cathedral. Lucky thing we sold it." He paused, scratched his head.

"That is what happened, isn't it?"

"I think so." Mouse squinted at him uncertainly.

"Well, it doesn't matter," he said, brightening. "We've got the decols. Now give me some peace, woman."

Mouse crept off to brood over their treasure. Behind her, Ciaran noodled for a time with an elusive melody. She turned to watch his powerful fingers summon magic from the harpstrings. A slow smile played across his scarred mouth. Ciaran looked up, his gray eyes dancing with emotion.

"Come here, little thief."

Mouse put down a handful of coins and settled in beside him, red tunic next to yellow. Gently, she stroked his puffed lip. With a mock frown, he shook off her ministrations.

"I've written a tune," he announced.

"For the Cube?"

"For you."

The harpist swept his hand over burnished strings and the music leaped up, graceful and strong. The melody swelled until it filled the room, the world, their lives.

It was a song about love.