

STORIES YOU NEVER HEARD OF



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A CERTAIN TALENT

Maggie tightened her grip on the steering wheel, as the rough road bucked and shimmied under her, and reminded herself for the dozenth time that she was *supposed* to be on the wrong side of the road. Somewhere off to the right there was the old pine tree that did duty as a signpost, and if she missed that (the old man in the general store had assured her) she'd get so lost that even God couldn't find her.

But she didn't miss it: it pointed with its one living branch into a tangle of weeds that opened into a narrow lane paved only with fallen pine needles. At its end the spiny-leaved oaks opened into a little valley.

There was a cottage there, made of logs and no bigger than a shepherd's hut, and a garden whose neat drills of vegetables ran almost down to the burn that threaded its way down to the Eel River. And there, standing in the garden, was a man dressed all in black—

Maggie caught her breath. He wasn't dressed at all; that was *him*. Not black like an African, unless it was an African gorilla: black as a raven, and shaggy. Maggie groped one-handed over the passenger seat for her camera.

But as she raised it, fumbling for the shutter release, the creature raised its head and saw her, and turned and ran. All she would have was a rear view of something dark in full flight: and blurred too, no doubt.

Still, it meant she was in the right place.

She pulled up and parked the car, rather at an angle, in front of the cottage. It was old; the logs it was made of had had time to shed all their bark and take on moss instead. But the door was newer, only fifty years old maybe, and had

a window in its top. The window was fifty years old too, and let the light through reluctantly; but she could see someone moving inside.

She smiled and waved; she must be rather hard to see as well, but surely with her red hair and white face she couldn't be mistaken for the fellow in the garden.

The door opened a crack, then a little wider. The woman inside was a wee thing, only about five feet high, with long brown hair and pretty, frightened grey eyes. "Miss Barbara Tolliver?" Maggie said. "I'm Margaret Ogilvy, from Inverness, Scotland. I did write—but the man at the general store said you hadn't been in to pick up your mail in a while—so I don't know if you've been expecting me."

"Expecting—you," Miss Tolliver said, as if the words were French that she had learned in the fourth form and not used since. Then she glanced upwards, over Maggie's shoulder, and said rapidly. "Come in, please, and let's shut the door."

Maggie did so. Miss Tolliver was holding onto the back of a kitchen chair, and its feet were beginning to chatter against the floor. "You sit down," Maggie told her. "I'm going to make some tea. That fellow won't be back soon."

"What fellow?"

So it was going to be like that? Maggie didn't try to answer. She waved Miss Tolliver to her seat, and the camera swinging from her wrist nearly hit her in her own nose. She took it off and set it on the table.

The pump in the sink worked, and she filled the kettle with water; lifted the stovelid and set the kettle over the heat. There was firewood stacked neatly beside the stove, and she fed the fire and closed the firebox door before it could spit cinders into the room. "I'm impressed," Miss Tolliver said. "It took me months to figure out that stove."

"Oh, I learned on my old grannie's, back home," Maggie said. "She was the caretaker at Urquhart Castle. That's how I got into the business, you see." Then she drew up the other chair and sat down opposite Miss Tolliver.

"Now I'm going to come directly to the point if I may, for I don't want to waste your time. It's come to our attention that you have a certain talent."

Miss Tolliver looked at her hands.

"I've been searching for you over the past two years, ever since that story about the alligators hit the news. But by the time I got to New York, you were gone and so were the alligators."

The kettle started to sing, and Maggie spooned tea into the warmed teapot and poured in the water. Mugs; sugar; powdered milk. She brought them all to the table.

"Why did you leave New York? The alligators were relatively harmless, weren't they?"

"So long as you stayed away from the sewers. It wasn't them, it was the things that came out of Central Park. There were too many people there to get hurt; that's why I went to the small towns."

"Where there weren't any creatures?"

"I wish it were that easy." Miss Tolliver reached out and put her hands on either side of the teapot, as if she were cold. "There are creatures everywhere. Every place has its own. Most of them sleep most of the time. But where I go, they wake up. So you've heard of the Wendigo on the shore of Lake Winnipeg, and the alligators in the New York sewers, and the things that walk in Central Park—though even the New Yorkers think they're only junkies in search of drug money, till it's too late. You've never heard of the little red man of Crowheart, Wyoming, have you; or the eagle women of Fort Grant, Arizona; or the wicker walkers of Shallow Creek, Kansas. Because once I left, they went back to sleep again before they could get into the papers.

"That's why I came here, to Bigfoot country. If I went to, to Twodot, Montana, or Muleshoe, Texas, no telling what I'd waken there. Here, I know it's Bigfoot country, and the Bigfoot is suppose to be mild, and timid, and harmless. So I came here. It was a good idea, while it lasted."

The tea had steeped long enough; Maggie poured it out and added milk and a lot of sugar to the mugs. "Drink that; you need it. So he didn't turn out as timid as he was painted?"

Barbara Tolliver sipped at her tea. "He was at first. I guess it comes under the heading of 'familiarity breeds contempt.' It's like the squirrels in parks where people feed them; they don't stop being wild, they don't *like* you, but they know you've got food and it makes them bold. After the first couple of months, I'd see him standing on the edge of the forest. Then he'd come and raid my garden at night. Now he comes in the daytime. He tries the door, but he doesn't know how the doorknob works, not yet. Another time he climbed the roof and tried the chimney-pipe, but some hunters driving past took a shot at him; but they missed, and he ran away."

"Missed with their guns, but not with their camera," Maggie corrected. "The photo made the front page of the *Sun*, and then I knew where to look." There was a thump at the door, and Maggie looked up and said. "Oh, dear me."

Framed in the misty glass he stood, black and shaggy as a gorilla, with a man's face and wild, wild eyes. Miss Tolliver cried out and hid her face in her arms, moaning something about a curse; but Maggie snatched up her camera from the table and fired it in his face. He gaped and jumped back.

She rose from the table, nearly knocking her chair over, and snatched open the door. The Bigfoot was fast on his feet; she got only three shots of his retreating back before he vanished under the eaves of the forest. She took a few more of his footprints—with her own foot beside them for scale—just for good measure. Mph'm. If Miss Tolliver had realized that a camera was what this walking legend most feared, she might have had an easier time of it.

"Now listen," Maggie said, re-entering the cottage. "I really do need to get to the point. I'm here to offer you a job."

"A job? Doing what, where? If you think there aren't any creatures in, in wherever it was—"

"Inverness, Scotland. Dear lady, I am employed by the Loch Ness District Association for the Promotion of Tourism."

"Oh, my God."

"I don't know if you saw it in the papers a few years back; some well-meaning fool confessed on his deathbed that he'd faked that photo of Nessie he'd taken back in 1934; one of our best. After that, our tourist trade dropped off quite appallingly—and of course, the fewer tourists we have, the fewer sightings; and the fewer sightings, the fewer tourists; it's a downward spiral. But if you will come to Loch Ness and accept a reasonable salary and the tenancy of a very pleasant little cottage near Urquhart Castle, then Nessie will come back. It goes to show, our Heavenly Father does nothing without a reason. Your gift may have been a curse for you up till now, Miss Tolliver, but to us it'll be a blessing."

Miss Tolliver sat, mouth open, while one might have counted ten. Then a long howling sound echoed out of the woods, like a wolf's howl but with words in it. "Right," she said. "Let's go."

She had her bits of things packed into a rucksack in three minutes, and was in the car in four. She sat guard at the window, camera in hand, until they reached the main road, and then curled up into a corner of the seat and slept the sleep of deep exhaustion all the way to Ukiah.

She woke as they drove into the airport. "Uh-oh. I don't think this is going to work. It's not safe for me to fly."

"Why not?"

"Any plane I ride on for more than a few hours attracts gremlins. They hang off the wingtips, they cut the control cables—the plane I took to New York nearly crashed. By the time we landed even the pilots could see them."

"Not to worry," Maggie said calmly. "I thought of that one. Look, there's our plane waiting for us."

It was a rounded propeller-plane, bigger than the little private planes all round it but smaller than a commercial jet. "It's an old Dakota, and Pilot Officer Bates, RAF, to fly it for us. It may take several days; but it'll get us there."

"A DC-3," Barbara said softly. The mists of evening swirled around its wingtips, soft as feathers, and for a moment they fancied they could see the bright eye and foolish grin of the Gooney Bird that flies forever.

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MOONRISE

Martin put on his professional smile and walked through the pressroom door. If CBS in its infinite unwisdom chose to assign him to the Mars landing, rather than to something crucial like the Senate confirmation hearings or the Pan-Arabian war, he would put a good face on it and acquire merit for future assignments.

This good intention lasted about ten seconds, or until he saw, through the wall/window that separated the press and VIP areas, the lean profile and pewter-colored hair of Senator Vilkas, three thousand miles from where he should have been.

Martin backtracked out the door and threaded his way between dignitaries to Vilkas's chair. "Senator? Martin Raymer, CBS News. Senator, what are you doing here?"

Vilkas's smile was his trademark, startlingly white against his tanned face. "Space Committee chairman. Rank still hath its privileges."

"Why aren't you at the confirmation hearings? If Davidson gets in as Secretary of State, he'll set American foreign policy back fifty years."

"I left a list of questions and a prepared statement with Senator McCartney. She can cope."

"India and Pan-Arabia could be at war by the end of the week," Martin reminded him, pulling his newsscan from his breast pocket. The Senator glanced at the headlines racing by, waved the scan aside.

"I know," he said. "That's why this is important."

"Vandenberg, Phobos," the wall speaker said. "We've picked up the *Bifrost* on its second pass. You ought to be getting the picture about now." The screen lit up, brick red from border to border, flecked with craters. A silvery triangle crossed it slowly from left to right, fragile-looking as a child's paper airplane. Vilkas muttered something in a language Martin didn't know.

"Senator," Martin began again.

"Marty, shut up," said the Senator firmly. "I said this was important."

Berkeley in August was empty of students. Most of the street people had drifted into San Francisco in search of tourists' spare change. They had taken the fog with them, and the sun was setting through clear air. Soon the moon would rise, and he was still on Telegraph. Nearly two miles to go. *Damn you.*

As he crossed Durant a gust of wind blew a fragment of newspaper into his face. He caught it and looked at it: a piece of an old *Chronicle*, with Herb Caen's column in it, from the day Apollo 11 had lifted off. "Today begins the violation of the last virgin..." He crumpled it and threw it back into the street.

Serve you right. Two weeks old, it would be, because they had lifted off at the new moon and tonight was the full.

He turned east onto Bancroft and began to climb, with the University on his left and a row of frat houses on his right. Both looked nearly deserted, the University left to faculty who were getting some work done, the frats left to caretakers who could relax and party every night. (Somebody would have to come and clean the plastic cups out of the bushes.)

He cut between International House and the football stadium and followed quiet hill streets to the beginning of the fire trail. The moon had risen by now, but he was sheltered by the hills for a few minutes yet. *Damn you. Why won't you let me be?*

He climbed the fire trail at a half-run that took him deep into Tilden Park before the moonlight began to discolor the evening sky. He met no other human on the trail, only a nearly-grown doe that ran away at the sight of him. People never came here at night, and the deer would have to take their chances.

Soon he reached a big bay laurel that stood in the ravine deep between two branches of the road. Nobody would be scrambling all the way down here, not even to answer any calls of nature. He undressed swiftly, stuffed his folded clothes inside the hollow between the branches of the bay laurel, and dropped his shoes and socks on top. That was the only thing he had any control over: to see to it that his clothes would still be there when he was done. Once, when he'd been late, he'd run off with his shoes on, kicked them off somewhere, and never seen them again. *And I'd had them only a week. Damn you.*

It had begun when he was fifteen and still living in Placerville. He'd woken from a confused dream, the kind of dream they'd told him in Health Ed. was only natural and normal, to find that he wasn't in bed any more. He was out in the foothills a mile from home, wearing nothing but the legless shreds of his pajama bottoms. It was four o'clock in the morning with the moon going down, and a sheep was lying between his feet with its throat torn out.

He had managed to get home and wash without anyone's seeing him. His mother eventually asked after the missing pajamas, but had taken "I dunno; I put them in the laundry and that's the last I saw of them" for an answer. By then it was a month later, and it had happened again.

After the third time there was an article in the local paper: somebody had seen a big timber wolf among the sheep. He had fired both barrels of his shotgun into it, but it had run away as though it hadn't been touched.

Of course not, stupid, he'd thought when he read that. *You need a silver bullet.*

They might have figured that out too, eventually, but at the end of that year he graduated from high school and went to Berkeley. It was easier to cover up

there; nobody knew what you did or where you went, and not even the University challenged you on it so long as you kept your grades up. His roommate was an engineering major who wasn't into noticing little things like a roomie who never came home one night a month.

He never remembered afterwards what had happened, though sometimes there would be clues left behind: a line or two of newspaper story, a sheep or deer or dog lying half-eaten at his feet. Never a human being, not yet, thank God.

Once he had gone to the Newman Hall just before moonrise, hoping—he didn't know what. Maybe that the holy influence would subdue him, or that some traditionalist priest would have the presence of mind to read an exorcism? In any event, he'd woken up in Tilden anyway—apparently the holy influence had been enough to send him running like hell into the hills. Occasionally he still toyed with the idea of telling one of the chaplains what was going on. They might even believe him—the Paulist Fathers were pretty practical types, and this was Berkeley, after all. Or he could go join a peace march and get himself arrested—but they might not put him in solitary, and God help anybody they gave him for a cellmate.

Six to ten hours a month, moonrise to sometime after midnight. If clouds covered the moon it didn't last as long, but he'd make it up the following month. It was worse than being a girl. His sister had rotten cramps for three days a month; he fetched her aspirin when he was at home, and hot water bottles, and carefully didn't mention that he would have traded any time. So far as he'd been able to learn—it wasn't the sort of thing you could come out and ask your parents about—he was the only one in the family.

But the family name meant. "wolf," so maybe it had happened before. He spent his first couple of years as a biology major, and learned a bit about dominant and recessive genes, but nothing that helped. After that he'd switched to pre-law, figuring he might need it.

Maybe he should have chosen pre-med instead, as an excuse for doing nothing at Berkeley but study. It went without saying that he had no social

life. He had few acquaintances, no close friends, and he'd never dared to get close to girls. Rumors were beginning to circulate—lurid ones no doubt, but soap-opera stuff compared to the truth.

He'd wanted to make something out of his life—something still fuzzy and unclear to him at fifteen, and since then he hadn't dared to plan for anything better than staying alive. He found he was leaning against the bay laurel, his fingernails dug into its bark, the pungent smell of its leaves strong in his nostrils, while the light of the cruel moon poured down on him.

Something strange was going on: or rather, it wasn't going on. He looked up at the moon, down at his hands: white under the moonlight, fragile long-fingered things with flimsy nails. He was standing man-shaped on two legs, while the full moon rode on high overhead, and even for August the air was cold against his naked skin. Something had happened.

He pulled his clothes out of the tree and got dressed. Slowly, not quite trusting his luck, he walked back down the path.

"The moon like a flower in heaven's high bower, with silent delight sits and smiles on the night." The speaker was invisible in the shadows where he stood, but easy to trace by his voice and a wisp of pot smoke that reached out and grabbed one by the nostrils.

"What did you say?"

"I said, wow, man, look at the moon. You wouldn't think, from here, those bastards had been walking on it. America's hero, Neil Armstrong," he said bitterly. "He's taken all the magic out of the moon. Hey, you got any spare change?"

"Will paper do?" He fumbled a bill out of his wallet, saw it was a five, and gave it to him anyway. He paced down Telegraph, avoiding curbs and power poles by dead reckoning, thinking hard. He would go into the space program—no, he couldn't, spacemen had to be small enough to fit into the capsules, and he was already six-foot-two and probably still growing. He'd go into

engineering like his roommate; no, by God, he'd stay in law and go into politics—

"Fifty meters," said the speaker. Chin balanced on his clasped hands, his eyes fixed on the readout screen, Senator Vilkas looked like an elderly abbot in prayer. Completing the image, his lips were moving silently, not. "Pater Noster," but."seventeen, sixteen, fifteen..."

"In fact, the *Bifrost* landed about half an hour ago," Martin was saying, while his autocamera panned slowly between the screen and his face. "But their signal, traveling at light-speed, takes half an hour to reach us. In a few moments we should know whether they made it. Senator Vilkas, do you have anything to say on this historic occas—"

"Hush," said Vilkas. "Let's listen."

There was a burst of static that flared up and died away. "The *Bifrost* has landed. Our touchdown time was 06:22:14—" but the room had erupted into cheers.

"The *Bifrost* has landed safely on the surface of Mars," Martin told the autocamera. "In about an hour, if everything checks out, Commander Hunter will open the hatch and become the first man to set foot on Mars—really, in half an hour, but because of the time delay—"

"That's a point," Vilkas said, suddenly taking notice of him. "Does it count when it *happens*, or when we find out about it? Marty, let's see your scan." He glanced over the headlines: war in Pan-Arabia, rioting in Calcutta, chaos in New York. Half an hour till man set his impudent foot on Mars. He settled back in his chair and waited for the fighting to stop.

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PARADOX LOST

Don't take on so about the universe (*she said, winding her shuttle with rapid flicks of her fingers*). The universe is tougher than you seem to think. What might look to you like the flimsiest of chances are made up of causal chains as vital as spider's silk, and at least as strong as this web of mine. (*She ran a thin finger across her warp, and it sang softly like a harp tuned all to one key*). It bends, or bellies out in the wind, but it won't break. And there are no paradoxes.

(*She set the shuttle to the web, throwing it swiftly from hand to hand, while the thunder grumbled high overhead.*) Some, like the Spanish barber, are no more than a trick of the language; others, like the man who murdered his grandfather, put themselves out of existence. The best you'll ever see is some poor little contradiction that looks as if it might grow into a paradox: but it always dies a-borning.

You might have thought there was the making of a paradox the day Peter Bannister fell through the time hole. He fell from the twentieth century A.D. to the fourth century B.C., and landed with a hell of a thump.

For the first few minutes he was occupied with getting the breath back into his lungs and the dust out of his mouth; he didn't have the energy to look around. It was daylight, he could tell that much, and the air was cold against his skin. And it was quiet; there was no sound to be heard but his own coughing.

Presently the dust settled, and he got up and brushed himself off. He was standing in the middle of a dirt road, and the light and the cold air had the clarity of dawn. On either side of the road were close-clipped meadows, thin

grass and a few yellow wildflowers. The soil was thin, and its rocky bones poked through.

He could tell he had come a long way. That long, timeless fall, longer than it would take to fall a hundred stories—and then he had only landed not quite hard enough to jar his back teeth loose. Something very strange was going on. Like the hijacker's or mugger's victim, he was suddenly exceedingly cool, his brain working at top speed, casting around for any possible advantage. Halfway to the horizon there was a clump of trees, and a thread of smoke rising out of it. The road led in that direction, and he followed it.

The farmhouse, when he found it, was made of clay bricks and roofed with red tile, Spanish fashion. A flock of dispirited-looking chickens scratched in the yard. The front door stood ajar, and early-morning sounds and cooking smells drifted out through it.

A woman came round the corner, carrying a bundle of twigs. "Excuse me," said Peter. "Could you tell me—"

But the woman dropped her bundle and squawked at the sight of him, ran to the door and slammed it behind her.

Peter followed her to the door and knocked on it. A moment's bustle inside, and a small brown-haired scowling man opened the door. "Houdoss," he said, or something of the sort. "De delace?"

(Damn, Peter thought... "Does anyone here speak English?"

"De pace?"

"American," Peter said. "Coca-Cola, Miami Vice, Luke Skywalker, MacDonald's?"

A woman's voice spoke from inside the house. "Barbaros dis." the man answered her, as he closed the door.

Peter leaned against the wall, his knees suddenly weak. "Barbaros" was one word he recognized; the ancient Greeks had used it for anyone who didn't speak Greek. And that meant...

But he was still thinking with the unnatural cool-headedness that is the reverse of panic. He knocked on the door once more. When the man opened it, just a crack large enough to see through, Peter held up the bundle of twigs the woman had dropped, and smiled.

By mid-morning, using their wits and a lot of hand-waving, Peter and Polos the householder had worked out an agreement. Peter fetched and carried, hauled sheaves of grain to the tiny barn. A subsistence farmer can always use an extra pair of hands, especially at harvest time. He slept in the stable, and at mealtimes the children of Polos's household taught him Greek.

By the end of the week, he could make himself understood, after a fashion. By the end of the month, he was reasonably fluent, though it took him a long time to get rid of the lisping American accent that aspirated all the wrong consonants. By the end of two months, Polos and his wife Eirene were wondering how they'd ever managed without him.

Peter spent part of the time dredging up old memories of high-school chemistry sessions. At the end of the slaughtering-season, he rendered down some scraps of fat and invented soap. His first batch was too harsh to use on skin, but it was good enough for the laundry. Eirene let him make a second batch. By spring he had perfected a mild olive-oil soap, scented with rosemary. He and Polos sold it in the Athenian market, four hours away by donkey, and Polos let him keep part of the profits.

It might have seemed an unfavorable time to start a new business. Hellas consisted of dozens of little city-states, each at war with one or more of its neighbors by turns. Athens and Sparta had been slugging it out since before anyone in Polos's household could remember, sixty years perhaps; Athens had briefly been conquered by Sparta, no more than twenty years ago. The Persians, long expert at playing both ends against the middle, had broken with

Athens and made alliance with Sparta, an agreement that had returned all of Asia Minor to Persian rule, and given Sparta the lion's share of Hellas.

It was hard for Peter to get an idea of when he was. He had not studied Greek history except as part of a poorly-remembered survey course, and the Athenians did not mark their dates in years B.C. Sokrates was already dead when he arrived; Plato was teaching in the Akademia and writing the dialogues that he said he had heard in the house of Sokrates. Peter had the vague idea that Aristotle would be next after Plato, and that Aristotle had been the teacher of Alexander the Great, but nobody here had heard of either one.

By his third year in Hellas, Peter was an accepted member of the community—as much as any metic could be. Athenian citizenship was by birth only. He and Polos went into partnership with Demodoros the fuller, and sold bleaches and dyes as well as soaps. They all became reasonably prosperous, and Polos took a house in Athens and sent his eldest son to the Akademia.

(There was another thunderclap, and the first fat drops of rain began to fall. The curtains bellied out in a puff of wind, cold and clean-smelling.) At some time during the next few years, Demodoros must have let the word spread about Peter's account books, that he kept in such outlandish notation and with such accuracy. In his fifth year, Peter opened a small school of his own, in a room of Polos's house, and taught basic arithmetic with Arabic notation (but not Arabic yet, it was still Indian). And he prospered, while all around him alliances were made and broken, Leagues constructed and destroyed, while Athens fought Sparta and Sparta fought Athens, and the other city-states turned again and again the coats they had cut to fit their cloth.

In the year Athens broke the Spartan blockade at Korkyra, Peter asked to marry the daughter of Demodoros. Demodoros refused him indignantly; it was unlawful for a citizen's daughter of pure Hellene blood to ally herself

with a metic. Instead, Peter married the quick-witted daughter of his half-Sicilian landlord, and never ceased to praise his luck.

In the year of the peace between Athens and Sparta (that is, as soon as anyone could hope to look for it, and all the old wives were counting on their fingers behind their own doors), Peter's wife bore him a son, and they called him Nikephoras.

(The web was taking shape now upon the warp, a close-woven dark green stuff as slick as an eel's back. The candles fluttered in the window, and the shadows slithered across the cloth like living things.)

Nikephoras was eleven in the year Philip the Second came to the throne of Makedon. Here at least was a name Peter recognized, and he began to teach Nikephoras a great deal that he didn't share with others. But he sent him also to school at the Akademia, and after Plato's death, he went to Aristotle, to learn as much as he could, and teach a thing or two.

Philip's son Alexander was sixteen, and men were beginning to hear of him, in the year Peter died. He was seventy-five, a happier man and older than he could reasonably have expected to be if he had stayed in New York. *(The rain was falling heavily now, and she paused in her weaving to close the shutters and latch them.)* Nikephoras gave him a noble funeral and the city turned out to mourn him, even though neither he nor his children were citizens. A few years after that, Philip conquered Athens, and the question of pure Hellene blood and hereditary Athenian citizenship became a lot less important.

A few years after that Philip died, and Alexander succeeded him. Alexander admired the Hellenic arts and philosophy, and made it his business to spread them wherever he went. He took as his teacher old Aristotle, the student of Plato; and when he set out on his conquests, since the old man could not travel so far, Alexander took as his tutor and advisor Aristotle's best pupil, a vigorous man of forty named Nikephoras.

Alexander died of a fever in Babylon. Dying, he left the governance of his empire to Nikephoras, and though his generals grumbled, some of them aloud, it seemed the sensible choice. Nikephoras married Roxana, the mother of Alexander's heir, and took them both under his protection; but the boy disappeared before reaching manhood and no one seems to know what became of him.

Alexander's empire fell apart presently anyway, of course (*she said, leaning on the ratchet of the cloth-beam to draw the warp tight*). It was, as we say, not steam-engine time. But it held on longer than might otherwise have been expected, and when it came time for the Roman Empire they were hard put to it to defeat what was left of Greater Hellas. General Pyrrhos came within thirty miles of Rome itself before a cavalry charge cut him down.

On the other hand, the Eastern mystery cults crept westward along the trade routes much faster than before. When Jesus was born in the Province of Judaea, practically everyone was waiting for him. When a mob of Zealots stoned him to death, the whole Empire went into shock; and when, the following week—well, you can imagine what effect *that* had.

And the world went on. Peter, asleep in his mother's arms, knew nothing of this, of course. But the world went on, and when the twentieth century rolled around the city on the island in the river's mouth was New Caerleon, not New York. And there was no Peter Bannister, not even anyone remotely like him, to fall down the time hole and land in the fourth century B.C. No Peter; no Nikephoras; no Empire, no changes.

The web of time rippled and shook, like a sail in a gale. (*My dear! Listen to it coming down!*) No changes, no New Caerleon, and Peter Bannister fell down the time hole again. But this time—here's the important part—this time, he remembered the last time.

There he sat, all breathless and dusty in the middle of the road, and he said to himself, "Didn't I just leave this party?" But this time, of course, he knew what to do. He went up to Polos's door and introduced himself in his best

Greek as a refugee from Mantinea (which had been destroyed that same year): the sort of story that dear Odysseus used to tell so well.

If he had prospered in his first lifetime, it was nothing to what he did now. He knew the outcomes of the battles before they were fought; he knew the scandals before they were hatched and the conspiracies before they were conceived. He acquired something of a name as a sorcerer, and if it hadn't been for that, I think the Athenians really might have offered him citizenship. But he didn't care, having his eye on other things now, and he took care to marry the landlord's daughter on the same day and bed her in the same hour, to be sure of begetting Nikephoras again.

He began his son's education early, which may have been just as well. Because in the boy's thirteenth year, Peter was killed by a footpad sent, so it was said, by one of his competitors. It didn't make much difference in the long run: Nikephoras knew already what was expected of him. And so the world went on, and the changes came and went, and presently Peter fell down the time hole for the third time.

Now at last it occurred to him, as he sat there spitting out the dust, that perhaps he just might possibly have had some kind of effect on history, and that history might have been bouncing back and catching him under the chin. *Take it easy*, he told himself. *Humility, that's the ticket. I don't want to set the world on fire. Better to be day-laborer to a landless man (as poor Achilles put it) than king over all the dead who perish.*

He went to Polos's house and introduced himself as a poor tenant farmer who had fled from the ruin of Mantinea. Polos let him sleep in the stable, and he stayed there for nearly twenty years. He never invented soap or arithmetic; he let Athenian business alone. He never married, but he fathered a daughter on one of the servant girls. When he died at forty-six, tired out and worked to death, nobody noticed much.

But his daughter Laodikē went to Piraeus and became the concubine of a Makedonian captain, and her daughter Philia became the mistress of Ptolemy 1. Ptolemy had four wives all told, and concubines not a few, but presently he

found that Philia had brains. She gave him the sagest advice for many years, and tired of him before he tired of her. She managed to get out of the palace with the jewelry Ptolemy had given her, changed her name, and bought a wineshop in Mareotis. She lived happily there to the end of her days, bearing six children to a person or persons unknown, children with a streak of ingenuity and common sense exceptional even in Alexandria. And the world changed, and changed back, and Peter fell down the time hole yet again.

This time he sat in the road's dust for a long time, mulling over his lives and how they had been spent. And he thought of another lifetime in Polos's house, and of speaking even less of what he knew, and of sleeping alone in the stable until he died old in middle age. He thought of going somewhere else, out of the mainstream of history, to some obscure people whose only fate would be to fall under the swords of empire. He thought of having children whose future was a blank, and he thought of having no children at all. And he thought of coming back, again and again, to sit in the dust of Attika with it all to do over again. Finally, he got up and walked away from Polos's house, down the road to the sea. He found a cliff where the surf ate caverns into the rock, and he threw himself into the waves.

The fish ate him, and so poor Peter made some contribution to the well-being of the Athenian people after all, for the fishers brought the fish to the market at Piraeus and sold them. But they were the same fish they would have been if they'd eaten somebody else—or as near as makes no difference. And the world went on, and that was the end of this story.

So don't trouble yourself, my child, for the welfare of the universe. She knows well how to take care of herself, without you or me lifting a hand to interfere. *(And she cut the cloth from the loom, and gave it to me to wear home against the rain.)*

"Back to Basics" first appeared in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, Spring 1991.

BACK TO BASICS

It was mostly the fault of the weather—the whole thing would never have happened in the middle of a rainstorm. And perhaps Rhadamanthos had something to do with it too, simply from being a cat and being there. But mostly it was the hot, dry, static-ridden weather, that set the amulet working.

It was the amber pendant she'd picked up in England while researching *The Sword and the Oak*. Keighley found it in the carton labeled *S/O STUFF: DONE*, in the midst of an attempt to clean house. This she did as seldom as she could get away with it, but she had come to the final and inarguable end of her storage space, and something was going to have to go. Her long grey hair bundled into a coarse knot and her sleeves rolled up past the elbows, Keighley sat among the boxes like the conqueror among the corpses, performing a kind of triage on the physical husks of her memories: this to the closet, this to the storage shed, that to the dump. Like any kind of triage, it was hard on the nerves, and the weather made it no easier.

She found the pendant under the London street map and inside the big scallop shell she'd picked up in Cornwall, a flat oval of dark matte amber with something, maybe symbols, carved around its edge, and she put down the other things and sat down to remember it. She'd bought it in a junk shop in Chelsea and worn it hanging from a ribbon, for most of a week damp with rain, till she packed it up with the other stuff to be sent home ahead of her.

Pity she couldn't have brought the rainy week home with her too; they could use it about now. The region was in the third day of the santana that blew with desert heat and dryness out of the east, wilting lawns and aspirations, crisping leaves and tempers. It was hard on the people and even harder on the cats.

Rhadamanthos had given up his favorite niche, the sunny ledge above Keighley's desk. Instead he crouched on the glass coffee table, the coolest place he could find to lie on. Paws tucked in, tail neatly draped, he looked like a smooth lump of sandstone with ears.

As she looked at him he opened his golden eyes and said *miarrr* softly in his whiskey-tenor voice.

" 'Smatter, cat? Hot? Me too. Thirsty, I'll bet." They went into the kitchen. She topped off the cat's water bowl, but of course he preferred people food and they split a can of ginger ale.

When they went back into the living room—a high-beamed hall that took up three-quarters of the house and served as office, library, and what-have-you—Rhadamanthos began nosing through the boxes. He batted an acorn across the floor until it vanished under the couch, and killed a silverfish that crawled out of an old copy of the *Sun*. Then he started in on the amber pendant, and Keighley took it back before it went the way of the acorn. She twisted its ribbon between her fingers and watched the pendant slowly rotate. Its dull smooth surface, like sand-scoured beach glass, spoke of long handling. The shapes carved into the edges were blurred and shallow now, some of them altogether wiped out. Too bad. The thing must be really old. Maybe she ought to get it photographed, or draw it. Here were two she could make out, one like three sides of a square and the next like two sides of a triangle. Then nothing, a hopeless blur, then a T-shape and a circle and a squiggle, T O N. More blurs and a shape like a Greek theta—it *was* a theta. The shapes were letters, Greek letters; she would have to get over to the University with this and let them look at it.

Rhadamanthos was under her elbow, forepaws on her knee, nosing at the pendant. "You read Greek, cat?" Rhadamanthos purred. "Do you really? Why do I find it hard to believe this?" Rhadamanthos continued to purr. "If it were Egyptian hieroglyphics, now, you might convince me. Watch it, cat. Your fur and this amber and this damned santana will generate static electricity, and if you don't—"

Too late. There was a faint sizzling noise. A spark flickered between the pendant and the cat's nose, and he yowled and lashed out, claws bared, and tore the ribbon from Keighley's hand and left a shallow track along her arm. Rhadamanthos vanished under the couch again.

The sizzling noise was getting louder. The santana must be getting worse. It sounded like static on the tube, or on the radio—but they were both turned off. Cripes! Had the static grown strong enough to foul up the electrical system? Clock, computer, coffeemaker—

A window must have blown open, or broken; there was a dust devil forming in the middle of the room. Picking up grains of dust and filaments of cat fur (the place did need sweeping badly), it swirled sand-colored into the air and drew into itself and took form.

It was a cat, and it was the same sandy golden-beige as Rhadamanthos. There the resemblance ended. This was a cat the size of a Great Dane, with massive forepaws and long forelegs that gave it a topheavy look; its slender hindquarters were crowned with not much more tail than a bobcat's. Its short-maned head turned from side to side; its tufted ears angled backward and forward to listen. Its pink nose sniffed the dry air, its golden eyes blinked, and the great mouth opened in a huge feline yawn, exposing two long fangs like six-inch daggers.

Keighley did not faint. She merely thought it the better part of valor to lie flat on the floor, behind what meager cover the boxes could give her, and concentrate on breathing. From this position she could see Rhadamanthos huddled under the couch, the ribbon still tangled in his claws. Her heart pounded painfully loud in her chest and drummed in her ears. Her mouth had gone paper-dry.

"Pi, lambda, alpha, tau," she muttered, too softly (she hoped) for the great beast to hear. "C'mere, cat. Greek. Plato. The Idols of the Cave. Oh, crap. Come *here*, Rhadamanthos." She wriggled on her belly behind the boxes, slithering over the polished hardwood, closer to the foot of the couch. "Mrowr? Archetypes. Goddammit. Here, kitty, kitty; catfood, catfood." Which

would be no more than the truth if the big cat took notice of them...so far, it was doing no more than stalking around the edges of the rug and snarling softly.

The Platonic Ideal of cathood (Rhadamanthos was edging closer, but he wouldn't come out from under the couch)—or what passed for it on this continent at least.(Keighley stretched out her arm as far as she could and groped for the leg of the couch, six inches from Rhadamanthos's nose.) In Greece, with a mistral blowing, the amulet might have called up the Nemean Lion.(She pulled steadily, trying to shorten her long torso like a crawling worm. She wasn't built for it. The couch creaked, and the sabertooth pricked up its ears.) Out of the mythic space in the mind of God or man, the amulet had generated the Cat Incarnate.

Thanks a lot, buddy. She couldn't imagine who would have invented such a thing or why, but she hoped he had to spend eternity cleaning out the Cat's archetypal catbox. She reached again, hooked her longest finger into a loop of the ribbon, and pulled. The amulet came away from Rhadamanthos's claws, and she dragged it out into the light.

The Cat turned toward her and roared, a sound like ripping canvas. Keighley couldn't hear her heart any more; perhaps it had stopped altogether. She got to her feet somehow and held the amulet over her head, as far from Rhadamanthos as possible. The Great Cat bunched its muscles to leap, and something like a little breeze came up and blew it back into dust and cat fur. Keighley sat down hard on the couch. The amulet dangled half-forgotten from her fingers. *I'm an old lady*, she told herself. *Middle-aged, anyway. They shouldn't do things like that to me.*

It must have been the static. Somebody had invented, or happened on, a spell that worked only inside a static charge. How do you get a static charge whenever you want it? Engrave the formula on a piece of amber; rub it when you want to use it. (Until somebody brought it to England. It had probably been centuries since the amulet had been activated.)

After a while Rhadamanthos crawled out from under the couch. There were dust-bunnies caught in his whiskers and his pride had suffered a daunting blow. Keighley only noticed him when he crawled into her lap and buried his nose in her armpit. Then she said. "Oh, no you don't. We don't want *that* again," and threw the amulet across the room.

But again she was too late. The little dust-devil was spinning in the wastebasket, lifting up scraps of paper and crushed milk cartons and dead rubber bands and the teacup she had broken last week. She got up from the couch, Rhadamanthos tucked firmly under one arm. It was between her and the front door. She couldn't go that way, but maybe if she moved quickly she could get into the kitchen before it took notice. She scuttled sideways, crab-fashion, across the room. The wastebasket was putting out legs, and something like a head.

From the kitchen doorway she watched it take shape. It had found things in her wastebasket that she had never put there. It would have made a great editorial cartoon against toxic waste, a muddled three-dimensional collage of trash: McDonalds' wrappers, plastic bottles, oily hoses, ominously bulging drums, dead fish. Its eyes glowed with sullen rainbows, like oil slicks. It stank. Its claws clutched around it on every side. It looked like Godzilla; like a Tyrannosaurus, like a dragon. Its toothed maw gaped. It was growing.

Rhadamanthos yowled in terror, and clawed his way out of her grip and vanished out the cat door. Keighley was past fear; her brain seemed to be moving at a glacier's pace, but at least it was moving, and presently it got her where she was going. She backed away toward the sink, keeping her eyes on the dragon shape in the living room. Groped for the cabinet handles; felt among the paper bags and Windex under the sink. A slick plastic bottle with a pump on its top. She grabbed it, glanced at it quickly to make sure; hauled it out.

The crumpled plastic spines on the dragon's head were brushing the ceiling beams. It had eaten all her "RECYCLE" and "FLEA MARKET" boxes, and was moving in on the old magazines. The wastebasket—with the amulet presumably still inside it—lay in the corner, half-hidden by the lashing tail.

Keighley loosened the pump top on the bottle, and threw it underhand. It skittered along the floor, under the tail, into the wastebasket, leaking iridescent petrochemical green.

Trumpets flared at the other end of the room. Drums rolled. Two young men in splendid tunics threw brilliant banners into the air, that somehow missed hitting the ceiling and fell back into their hands. There was the clatter of hooves, and a gallery full of spectators somewhere cheered.

He came like a flash of lightning out of the distant shadow—how had the room gotten so long and dim all of a sudden?—and Keighley knew him at once. "It's all in my *mind*," she muttered. A good thing this hadn't happened to some youngster. She was old enough to remember the commercials that hadn't run for a decade, maybe two.) His silvery lance tilted to the attack, the snow-white plume atop his helm, the White Knight galloped into battle.

I'll never be able to tell anyone about this, she thought. *They'd think it was funny*. Not a bottle of detergent, but Incarnate Purity warred against Foulness in her living room. The dragon's flexible spine had twisted away from the first thrust of the lance; the second thrust shattered the lance against the hard scutes. The reptile had taken some damage; dark oily blood was trickling down its side; but it still looked ready to put up a fight. The white horse danced back a few yards; the Knight put up his visor to look over the situation.

Skin like cream, and the features of an Apollo she had seen in the British Museum. His eyes were the deep blue of the zenith at midsummer, and when he caught her eye and smiled she felt herself blushing like a teenager. "Courage, fair maiden," he said, and lowered his visor and drew his sword.

After that it all happened quickly. The shining sword swung round, once, like a windmill; and the dragon lay not headless but disintegrating, fallen into its component cans and bottles, plastic and paper scraps. They sizzled and writhed like salted snails, shriveled into nothing, and blew away with the dust. The Knight saluted her with a sweep of his sword; the white horse reared and turned away. He rode away, triumphant, into a flower-spangled emerald

meadow that was somehow there, and the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

"Sorry, neither," she said. ("Hey neat. I always wanted to say that.")

The windows sparkled. The floor had been swept clean, her trash recycled into the Great Perhaps without her having to tote it. A cool breeze was blowing through the window; oh, blessed weather, the santana had finally broken. No more static. Just the same, she fished the amulet out of the wastebasket, rinsed off the detergent, and rubber-banded the thing firmly to the cold-water faucet over the sink, to ground it till she could decide what to do with it. She still couldn't guess at its original purpose: religious rites for Neo-Platonists, maybe, or inspiration for tale-telling bards. Archetypes: they were a writer's stock in trade, and she itched to put the amulet to use; but how could she do it safely? She had read her Charles Williams and knew what harm the Lion and the Eagle could do, let loose. It would be like powering her computer with a lightning bolt. Where was Doc Brown when she needed him?

Rhadamanthos, returning cautiously through the cat door once the noise seemed to have died down for good, found Keighley leafing through an old Edmund Scientific catalog, muttering incomprehensible human talk under her breath. "Electromagnets, electron microscopes, *electroscopes*."

As it turned out, what she wanted didn't come from a catalog, and she had to hire an undergraduate to build it for her. Your basic electroscope: static charge builds up on the sheets of gold leaf inside the glass globe, and then they fly apart. In this one, however, when the long golden leaves rose, they touched a pair of wires that led to a ground, and lost their charge and fell again.

Since they had had to make it themselves, they had made it pleasant to look at: a swirling globe of Venetian glass, with a silver mount on top to hold the amulet and ebony feet to protect it from the ground. Charging and discharging, the gold leaves fluttered like wings all day on the sunny ledge beside Rhadamanthos's nose. And Keighley, her hands flickering over the

keyboard, could almost hear the Eagle of Scholarship and and the Dove of Creation hovering over her roof.

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GROWING SEASON

The rains of three days back had filtered through the soil and left it in prime condition for weeding, neither dry enough to cling to the roots nor wet enough to cake underfoot into adobe brick. It was a pleasant morning besides, with thin clouds drifting in and out of the sun and the peach and apricot trees beginning to scatter petals over the earth. Keighley hummed bits of Handel as she knelt on the bank downhill from her house, where the driveway made a tight curve down to the road.

"Where'er you sit, the blushing flowers shall rise,"

Dig up the loose crumbly soil, sift out the long spiky fingers of the Bermuda grass, replant the oxalis with its little brown chickpea bulbs. Every year the grass moved in by three or four feet; every year she beat it back by five or six. Someday, if she lived long enough, it would go away for good.

"And all things flourish, where'er you turn your eyes—"

"Those are pretty flowers. What kind are they?"

The little girl stood on the edge of the road, where the Bermuda grass lashed and frothed against the asphalt, her shiny school shoes a cautious yard away from the fresh-turned earth. Marisela, that was her name, the youngest child of Keighley's next-but-one-uphill neighbor.

"They're oxalis," she said. "They're related to the ones you see all over the place, with the bright yellow flowers. 'Sour-flowers,' the kids call them."

"Oh, I know those. But these are prettier. They look like a plate in my grandmother's house, all blue and white."

"You're right." White and pale blue and edged with darker blue, they nodded in the light wind over the bank above Keighley's head, proper blue-willow china colors. "I like these colors too; I don't like yellow very much."

"Me neither. I like pink, though. If I had a garden, I'd have pink flowers in it. Do—" (pronouncing carefully) "oxalis come in pink?"

Keighley turned to look at her, toes shuffling in the mud, knees and hip-joints complaining. The child was maybe six or seven: second grade, anyway. Her dark eyes sparkled, and she was wearing a dress the color of peach blossoms, probably new, probably handmade. It had pink ruffles on the shoulders and the young sun shone through them like the peach petals. "Pink oxalis? I don't know, but I can find out. I'll ask around. You'd better get going, you don't want to be late for school."

Marisela hurried on, and Keighley turned back to her work. The oxalis dipped and bobbed above her head. "Well, what do you think, guys?" she said. "You think some of you could grow in pink for Marisela? I could put you in a pot."

She did not expect the oxalis to answer her in words—for that matter, she had no reason to think they understood English. Their response to human whims was in their own idiom and on a slower scale.

She had run into them five or six years back, in a friend's garden down on the flats near the sea. The friend had taken the notion to plant a white garden, from white heather in the borders, to white wisteria overhead. Then she'd taken ill for a season and couldn't do any weeding; the common yellow oxalis had invaded the borders. Before the gardener could regain her feet and take her trowel in hand, the oxalis had faded to a brilliant lavender-tinted white.

When Keighley had first seen them, the flowers had filled in all the spaces between the white azaleas and under the white roses. They bloomed in spring, died back in summer, and burst out in fall again when the rains came. The white oxalis left off and the neighbor's yellow oxalis began at the property line, which was not otherwise marked.

So Keighley, with her friend's blessing, had dug up a clump of white oxalis and planted them all over her downhill bank. By the following spring, as if they appreciated her confidence, they had come out in Keighley's favorite blue-and-white-china colors. It didn't seem unreasonable that they might turn pink for Marisela, if asked nicely.

Keighley was teasing out the brown bulbs from among the grass roots when she heard the squeal of tires downhill from her, where the road bent back along the mountain's side. A little later she heard sirens. Beginning to feel cold, she beat the dirt from her gloves and left her little pile of bulbs on them by the roadside.

By the time she reached the spot, things were being tidied up. She saw black tire tracks on the dusty asphalt where a car had swerved suddenly, trying in vain to take that sudden turn by the school. Big chunks of green-and-yellow turf had been carved out of the bank. Uphill from the road, behind the schoolyard fence, white-lipped teachers were trying to keep the children away. Shrill playground whistles blew intermittently.

"That's Jeff Cooper's car," somebody said. "but that wasn't Jeff driving it. He was a white kid, light brown hair, black jacket."

"You didn't see his face?"

"I got just a glimpse of him. He took off downhill, running. *He* wasn't hurt any."

The car that had made the tracks had started over the hill on the other side, but had caught on a tree. Its rear wheels and fender rested on the grass verge. The paramedics had their ambulance doors open and were lifting a blanket-covered stretcher with a little ruffle of peach-blossom pink visible on one side. Keighley shut her eyes.

A burst of static, and the distorted sound of a radio speaker. "That checks out. Dr. Cooper called in this morning to report the car stolen. Before eight A.M., that was."

"Who's going to tell the parents? I don't even know them."

"Get Father Carey to tell them. Isn't that sort of thing his job?"

Keighley went back uphill, found a suitable pot, and planted her bulbs.

By the day of the funeral, at the end of the week, the police had made no progress in finding the driver of the stolen car. Fingerprints taken from the steering wheel had found no match in the database.

"This is hard for us," Father Carey said, and stopped, and swallowed. Keighley pulled out her third handkerchief. Marisela's family were crying, up there in the front pews, but they had a right to; Keighley, who had been known to weep at everything from *The Seventh Seal* to *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*, sat in the back behind a pillar so as not to be an embarrassment to anybody.

"This is hard for us." Father Carey repeated. "Not for Marisela. If anything, we should envy her. All of us want to go to Heaven someday. Marisela has gotten there ahead of us." Keighley blew her nose, quietly, behind her pillar.

At the gravesite she found a tree to stand behind, a sturdy scrub oak just beginning to put out its new leaves. She sat there after the rest of the people had left, her back against the tree, scribbling in a little notebook for a story with a deadline on the 15th, and waited till the gardeners had come and gone. They had covered the small grave with strips of sod, neatly trimmed and fitted. Keighley opened her bag and got out her smallest trowel and a carefully-wrapped baggie full of little sprouts. She eased them gently into all the seams of the turf and sneaked away without being seen.

Driving back, she saw that someone had replaced the turves on the bank by the schoolyard, and the common yellow oxalis were showing as much cheer

as you could expect from them, under the circumstances. If it didn't rain in the next day or so, she'd haul down a few buckets and give them a drink.

It didn't rain till Sunday night, and then it thundered far out to sea for a long time before the rain moved in. Keighley, high in her sleeping loft under the roof, heard the big drops beating on the shingles and turned over, thinking that now she could rest.

Instead she dreamed of the turn in the road just before the school, where Jeff Cooper had had his car towed away and the grass was growing in, black under a red moon. The bells of oxalis tossed in the wild wind. She was walking, or trying to walk, her feet trailing along the ground: step, and drag the other foot to meet it, step, and drag again, like the basse dances they taught at the local branch of the SCA. Step; slide. The ground sloped beneath her feet. Someone cried out, words of warning or mourning she couldn't make out. She was sliding downward, down into the dark.

She woke into perfect silence, the storm having passed over her into the Valley, and only then, as usual with bad dreams, her heart began to race and the breath to catch in her throat. She lay still in the tangled bed, forcing her lungs to draw in slow deep breaths, four counts in, four out, till her heart quieted. It was only then that she thought to ask the dream, *Who are you?* But it answered only, *I am Retribution*, and she could have told it that herself.

But a little later it dawned on her that, also after the manner of dreams, the figure stumbling and sliding under the red moon, feet dragging along the ground, had been not herself but somebody else.

The following night, though the wind was calm and the sky clear, with the young moon floating like a magnolia petal on a lake, she had the same dream again. A tall dark shape with sliding feet, hop-pole slender and graceful with youth, went ahead of her under inky trees and a moon like an open eye. She followed, three or four paces behind, dancing his dance. He never stopped; she never caught up to him. The ground sloped under their feet; the scarlet oxalis clung to their ankles. It would not let them plunge headlong; it would not let them escape; slowly they spiraled widdershins into suffocating

darkness. Keighley woke gasping for air, her mind full of unpleasant images of drains, sewer rats, foul things flushed out of sight—

"And plumber's bills, no doubt," she said aloud, flinging open the window and stepping out onto the tiny deck. She stood there, letting the morning sun dazzle her eyes and the wind blow her hair about like flapping grey goose wings, till they blew the images out of her mind and she could go downstairs without shuddering.

This went on for most of another week. By day she finished her story and sent it out to meet its deadline, coped with an invasion of ants in the kitchen, fed the cat and washed the dishes, and dug the Bermuda grass out of another yard of her bank. By night she traced a slow basse dance under the wind while the oxalis danced the wild galliard.

By the third morning or so she realized why the dream was so frightening—not counting that she was obviously trailing the kid who'd driven the car. One of the basse dances she'd learned in that class had come out of the plague years: the Dance of Death. Slip and slide, your face averted from your partner's: up and down, hands linked, faces turned away till the very end. Reprise: out to arms' length, turned away; reprise: gather your partner in, turn inward to see that he wears the mask of Death. And so do you.

The day she went down to mail off her story, her next-but-one-downhill neighbor trapped her in the slow post office line with a clipboard. "This one you *will* want to sign," she said.

"That's what you always say, Carla—but this time you're right," Keighley conceded. It was a petition to bring a motion before the City Council to put reflective barriers along a certain curve in Las Casas Road—described in terms of land parcels and survey coordinates, but she could guess what curve they meant. She pulled out the ballpoint pen that rode the knot in her hair, and signed.

"I suppose they still don't know who was driving the car?"

"They haven't a clue—though the official reports phrase it a little more elegantly." Carla had been born about ten years too early for a policewoman's career to be feasible; instead, she ran petitions and drives, badgered the Council pro- and anti- as required, and sat in on the dispatcher's desk when the regular was sick. What she didn't know, the cops didn't know either. "Nobody saw the kid's, so-called, face. He could be any age from twelve to forty. Assuming he really was a joyriding teenager, this only narrows it down to several thousand in this county alone. Thanks, Keighley; I'll let you know if anybody does find out anything." She moved on with her clipboard to the next man in line, leaving Keighley to ponder.

She was saved at least the dilemma of whether to try to tell Carla about her nightly visions. She had never seen the kid's face; had no real information (however strangely acquired) to give, so there was no point in trying to convince anyone that what she had seen was true. If it was.

It wasn't hard to feel sorry for the kid, whoever he was. Leaving his other sins to one side, he certainly hadn't planned to go out on a fine spring morning and rub out a child. Given her druthers, Keighley would not have compounded his burdens by trailing after him like a bony grey old Nemesis every night. But she had been gifted with the job and presumably must do it.

He was trying to go somewhere—no, trying to get away from something, but the plants brushed across his ankles, caught at his feet. It was only when he turned his back to the wind that she saw that they were taking him somewhere, guiding his feet with endless soft strokes of their long stems tipped with flowers the color of blood. Leading him where he feared and longed to go, a place that had the taste of release, the dimensions of finality. But he turned away, and the ground knelt under him, the flowers curtsying as the bank collapsed, Keighley backpedaling frantically to keep from following him. And someone was calling out, crying and beseeching, and Keighley sat upright in bed cursing.

Enough was enough. Keighley was in any case too old to go out dancing every night with young men she didn't know. Her shoulders sagged with fatigue and her eyes felt like sandpaper. If she couldn't catch up with him, maybe she could get a head start on him. She had been going to bed earlier each night, but apparently her partner had too. She could imagine him, sleeping long hours, trying to escape the memories of the day, raiding his mom's medicine chest for sleeping pills—but escaping only into the dance.

Keighley was a day person by nature, who had never been able to sleep before the sun went down. She went into town and bought an eyeshade and a pair of earplugs and a packet of chamomile tea. This, when she brewed it, tasted sickly-sweet and she couldn't drink it, so she ate a lot of salad for dinner—lettuce was supposed to be a soporific, all the old herbals said so.

Black out the fading sunlight; plug out the birdsong and the occasional whisper of tires along the road below. She had made up her bed with fresh sheets and put on her favorite nightshirt, the faded green one with rips under both arms. Still she found it hard to sleep. It was too warm, and then it was too cold, and she twisted back and forth with sweat oozing damply out from under her scalp and down her back. Her mind wandered from its purpose, and she thought of gardening and new kitchen flooring and planting catnip and then she was going out the kitchen door to bury the dead salad under the compost. The oxalis waved in the wind before her.

But that's right, she thought with a burst of enlightenment. *You can't go through oxalis, the stems are always tangled together. You have to go over it or under it.* She leapt off the doorstep and glided over the heart-shaped leaves, the flowers swirling like foam in her wake. She bounded downhill in twenty-foot strides, lighter in heart than she had been in years, no, days. Hurrying to the dance. Her partner waiting below, a ballroom floored and walled with blossoms. Tall and lean in black, a cluster of crimson orchids over his heart, an Oedipus face weeping black blood drops as he turned and began to drift downhill. Keighley threw away everything they'd ever told her about its being unladylike to lead, and seized him by both hands and pulled.

Slowly she drew him uphill. There must be a crest to this hill, a flat place where they could rest and she could give the kid a piece of her mind. But before they could get there he stopped, mouth open in astonishment, eyes staring through their crusted rims. He wasn't looking at Keighley. She turned around.

Seated above her on a green bank starred with white, a woman sat with something in her hands, something in her lap. A woman she knew, a neighbor, murmuring. "*Ave, Maria, llena de gracia, el Señor es contigo...*"

Pale light streamed down on her from overhead, and in her lap something stirred, a shape hard to define, lifting a hand to touch the beads as they went by, shining with light as clear as the sun through peach blossoms.

This isn't my dream at all, she thought, suddenly lucid. *This isn't the kid's dream either. It's Marisela's mother who's dreaming – unless it's Marisela.* She looked higher. The woman with the child in her lap was seated in the lap of another, a giantess in a flowing robe, with the pale clear moonlight all around her. Later on Keighley would recognize her as the Virgin of the Pietà, who would be nine feet tall if she stood up, big enough to cradle a grown man in her lap, with a face that had gone through sorrow and come out on the other side. Light poured down like water over mother and daughter, flooding everything, washing the blood-red flowers white, washing the ground out from under them. Instead of slipping and falling, they began to float, and the roots of the oxalis sucked up the light and they flowered in a blaze of light too splendid to see.

Keighley didn't wake, but drifted away into other dreams that she could never remember afterward except in fragments: a cup, and a sword, and a green hill, and dawn breaking over the sea.

Back in the real world, she had just stepped into the shower when the phone rang. She wrapped a towel around most of the parts that counted, and left a trail of damp footprints to her desk.

"Keighley, guess what," Carla said. "The kid—"

"Turned himself in this morning," Keighley finished.

"How the hell did you know?"

"I dreamed it," Keighley said sweetly. "Hey—have I lost my grip on the calendar, or did they have a City Council meeting last night? Did they approve the traffic markers?"

"They did," Carla said. "Of course, they can't get to it till they finish the Drake's Landing overpass and the new traffic light on State Street. It'll be summer by the time they get it done."

"And school will be out. Oh, well. I hope they go easy on the kid. He's done a whole lot of repenting already."

"What the hell? You do know something about this!"

"Nothing you can use in court, so don't inquire me. Tell the D.A. it's all hearsay." She said good-bye and padded back to her shower.

Three white oxalis had seeded by the front doorstep, in a line for the carport, and this reminded her. She drove down Las Casas, musing on the power of dreams—or maybe it was the power of faith, or perhaps you should say the power of imagination—and the turn was in front of her almost before she knew it. A sheet of brilliant white suddenly blazed up before her, not bright enough to blind her, but enough to yank the wheel hard around and bring her around the turn with tires screeching. She found herself straight on the level stretch of road below the school, and she pulled into the parking lot and sat there till her hands stopped shaking. Then she walked back up the hill.

She had thought the flowers on her bank were white; these shone like the candidate's toga, brilliant with fuller's earth. Larger than usual, almost too heavy to move in the wind, they clustered thickly on the slope around the turn, their shining bells pointed towards oncoming traffic.

They wouldn't last, of course. When summer came they'd dry up and disappear, leaving only the little brown bulbs hidden in the earth. But of course by then school would be out and the barriers built. Keighley walked back to her car and drove down Las Casas, over the Arroyo Pequeño bridge to the churchyard, to watch Marisela's flowers dance pink under the morning sun.

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A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC

On the last night of the workshop, when all the seminars were over and the dead-dog parties were in full swing, Keighley leaned far out of Lisa Waters's window to catch a breath of air and caught a story instead. The hotel, a fishing lodge a century old, had real casement windows that opened outward. Far below her the Feather River glittered like a thread of silver in the moonlight, and she thought of an undine swimming upriver with the salmon. She pulled her head back in and began threading her way through her colleagues toward the door.

"Keighley, are you all right?" Lisa asked, her arms full of ice buckets.

"Got an idea." Keighley snagged a Calistoga for the road and went to her own room, powered up her laptop, and began plotting.

By the time the party noises were dying away, she had the basic concepts pinned down and a handful of felicitous phrases stored up for future use. There were one or two details that hadn't been cleared up yet, but she could put them on the back burner till morning. She backed up her file, finger-combed her hair and put it in a rough braid, and crawled into bed.

She woke out of dreamless sleep to the light of a thin decrescent moon setting in the west. The parties had ended, and the lodge was so silent that Keighley thought she could hear the fish jumping in the river below. And a thin thread of music.

At first she wasn't sure she was hearing it and not imagining it. No, there it was, a melody for dancing, played jauntily on a flute or maybe it was an oboe. It was really very difficult to hear.

She turned over to look at the clock-radio by her bedside. No, it was off. Some other radio, elsewhere in the hotel? She'd searched the dial in vain for a classical music station when she'd arrived. She'd inquire later. Turn over again with a thrash and a flop, review the plot—and ha, one of the unresolved elements had just gone resolved. She made herself sit up long enough to scribble, "A keeps M from castle till too late," on the notepad, semi-legible in the wan moonlight, but it would trigger her recollection in the morning. She turned over a third time and went back to sleep.

She woke again, when the sun was nearly up and the birds were sounding off, with the tingling sensation that meant it was no use trying to catch any more winks. The nervous system was waking and gearing up for work. Hurry, hurry, get up, write that story down, lady, write that mother down. Obediently her feet hit the floor. Down in the river a solitary fisherman in waders and a red cap cast his line into the middle of the stream. She brewed tea on the automatic coffee maker and sat down and wrote and wrote till breakfast time.

The front desk was thick with people checking out; the dining room was almost deserted. The teenaged waitperson who brought Keighley's breakfast had time to chat.

"A classical music station? No, ma'am, not that I ever heard of. The junior college used to have a station that broadcast a little of everything. One of the other guests could have brought a tape player, I guess."

After breakfast the checkout lines were as long as before—and at least six hours of driving ahead of her, while the undine cooled her heels in the fish-cart. She went upstairs and called the desk on the house phone. "Would it be all right if I stayed on a few more days?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, no problem," the desk clerk said, so enthusiastically that Keighley's suspicions were confirmed: this place was only just paying for itself, if that. It was a beautiful place, a sometime fishing lodge built around the turn of the century out of huge planks of redwood. The fishing was great in the Feather River, so they told her, but getting down the steep banks to where the fish were was a nontrivial problem. Whoever had found, or built, a

trail of only moderate slope down to the riverbed had recognized a resource worth money in the bank.

But times were bad now, and the young couple who ran the place had an anxious look. When things got tough enough, even the most fanatical of fishermen run out of disposable income. A few of them still came here, but Keighley got the impression Lisa's writers' workshop had been the first time the lodge had been full in a long while. She could well afford to give the kids a few extra room-nights. She pulled the little table nearer the window and got back to work.

By dinnertime, with the last workshopper coaxing his Volkswagen up the driveway onto Highway 70, the place was empty. Keighley's footsteps on the stairs fell into halls full of silence, and the mellow redwood echoed the sound like a well-aged concert hall.

Karen Connor popped up behind the front desk as Keighley came into the lobby. "Uh, Ms. Bracton," she said. "since you're the only guest left—maybe you'd like to have your meals with us in the staff lounge? That way you'd have some company."

And you won't have to open the dining room at all. And Keighley, for whom solitude was like bread, smiled and said. "Oh, yes, I'd love to." You can get along without bread for a few days.

The family gathered in the staff lounge was a largish one, Chris and Karen Connor and their three small children, and two of Karen's sisters who waited on table and made beds, and a couple of cousins who did gardening and odd jobs when they weren't in school. The depression had hit these rural areas hard, and the Connors could have employed another dozen eager youngsters if they'd had the business to pay for them.

The last seat at the table was filled by an old man with bright blue eyes and laugh lines scored deep into his face. Seeing him hang his red woolen cap on the antlered hatrack by the door, Keighley said. "I think I saw you down in the river this morning. How was the fishing?"

"It was fine, thank you," the old man said. "I'm Jerry Kerrigan, pleased to meet you. I did well enough that that's what we're having for dinner."

To which the oldest Connor child said. "Aw, gee, Mom, trout *again*?" To which his mother answered. "You can have scrambled eggs and toast." and the child subsided at once.

Trout is free, Keighley noted, and eggs are home-grown—I knew I heard a rooster go off this morning—and toast is cheap. These kids really are operating on a shoestring. And she put the matter on another back burner, to simmer till done.

"Thank you, Lord," Chris Collins said as he sat down. "for giving us trout, *again*." The trout was delicious, not many hours dead and dusted with golden-fried bread crumbs. Keighley kept up her end of the conversation with tales of places she had visited, and escaped the coffee and cigarettes (remarkable, how many people in the outlands still smoked) to return to the undine, who had painted herself into a corner halfway between Amiens and the sea.

By the time she reached a stopping place it was full dark, and she was hearing the music again.

She powered down her laptop and the hum of the disk drive died away. She even closed the window, to shut out the faint night noises. It was music, dammit, she couldn't be making this up. She listened for some minutes, trying in vain to identify the piece, or even to peg the composer. Late nineteenth or early twentieth century, if she was any judge. Sibelius? Elgar?—no, more guts than Elgar. Shostakovich maybe? It seemed to be a suite of dances for—gosh, you couldn't really identify the solo instrument. It could be anything from violin to theremin, and whatever accompaniment it had couldn't make it through the walls.

Or was it coming through the walls at all? She opened the window. The wind rustling in the trees, the river chuckling over a patch of rapids, the hoot of an owl. Definitely not coming from outside, echoing across the river valley

from some solitary transistor on the far bank—which was damn near straight up and down and thick with timber. She closed the window again.

No, it was definitely inside, not outside. She opened the door and listened in the hallway. Nothing there. She closed the door again. Oh, yes, definitely in here: a piece like a Baroque gigue, a foot-tapping beat, a piece to dance to, or a march for three-legged Martians. She sat and simply listened till it was over and the next movement began.

Let's see. Nothing in the hall meant it had to be under her or over her. She was on the second of three floors, and over her was another guest room. Under her—pause to map the layout of halls and stairways in her head—under her was probably the lobby. And this old building had old-fashioned keys that turned right around in the lock, and were left in the keyholes between guests, European fashion. Keighley slipped into the hall, soundless as an old grey ghost, and padded upstairs.

Her room number was 14, but the one directly above was 22. She checked her mental map to make sure. (So the third floor wasn't the same shape as the second; this wasn't a straight-sided highrise.) What would she find inside? A solitary flautist snatching practice time from the routine of the day and the disdain of relatives? Or a classical-music wannabee, listening in the dead of night to music unacceptable to his peers? You could bring in far-distant radio stations at night. The ionosphere lifted and reflected signals from further away; something like that. Surreptitious Sibelius. Bootleg Beethoven. *Samizdat* Shostakovich. The kid could probably use a friend—or at least a good set of earphones. The key was still in the lock on this side. She turned the knob and pushed the door open.

And nothing. Not a mouse stirring, not a sound. She flicked on the lights. The little room—it was a single, with a narrow bed in one corner and photos of memorable fish on the walls—was as bare of life as the dark side of the moon. Keighley closed the door quietly and padded downstairs again.

She came down the main staircase cautiously, walking at the edge of the treads near the banisters. The stairs were solid and didn't squeak—but the

high-ceilinged lobby, big enough for the great hall of a small castle, magnified every sound.

But still no music, still no sign of life. No one behind the desk, where a single light burned and threw whole Arabian Nights full of suggestive shadows across the lobby. They weren't expecting any business till next weekend, if then. No sound but her own breathing. Keighley went upstairs in a sour mood. She didn't like mysteries, not in real life; even with fictional whodunits she tended to peek in the back and find out whodunit. A mystery without its mystery becomes a novel of manners, which she did like.

Maybe some previous guest had left his false teeth somewhere in her room and it was picking up radio frequencies. That seemed as good an explanation as any, at this point.

But—she'd been listening to this bodiless wireless for some time now. And there had never been a single commercial. Not even a station break. Come now, you *had* to have station breaks, the FCC said so.

"Maybe it's all in my head," she muttered aloud, and the seasoned redwood took up the sound and made lace of it all up and down the hall. "But I don't have a bullet in my brain." At least, none that she knew of, though there had been that one spectacular party Saturday night, and a spectacular headache the following morning. Solemnly she felt her temples, ran her fingers over her scalp under her hair. No sign of an entry wound. No, her headache had been a matter of too much wine and not enough water, and six cups of tea had fixed it.

She opened her door. The music was louder now: if she'd had a good tape recorder with a sound meter, she bet she could get a reading on it. This was definitely a piece for solo flute. Bamboo flute was her guess, a sound rough around the edges, organic, like the song of a marsh bird practicing up for Carnegie Hall. A wandering melody, free-form, not unlike Debussy's *Syrinx*, if Debussy had been listening to Gershwin the night before. "Rest in the riddle, rest; why not," she told herself, and put herself still unpersuaded to bed. By the time she dropped off she had decided it was the ghost of a radio

station from early in the century, say the early twenties when they used a lot of unpaid local talent and lived in happy ignorance of the FCC. Or else it was time-traveling. Maybe when she finished the undine story she could get another one out of this. (But her last conscious thought was a wish that someone could have written down that gigue.)

Early morning brought the usual chorus of birds and the Connors' rooster, and once they fell silent Keighley heard a low droning sound, more like a human voice than an instrument, humming little tunes over and over. Keighley finally twigged that they were the several parts of a several-part canon. They faded away into silence before they could become irritating. The sun had just risen over the mountains. She'd read a story once called. "The Ghosts of the Heavyside Layer," ghosts trapped in the ionosphere, broadcasting when the sun was down. She couldn't remember who had written it.

The undine was headed for the finish line, neck-and-neck with the King of the Franks and the bishop's clerk, so Keighley skipped breakfast and lunch with the Connors. Karen's younger sister brought her tea and muffins and sandwiches and lemonade. By mid-afternoon the draft was done; it needed to cool now for twenty-four hours or so before she could take it up objectively for polishing. She could even go home now, rescue Rhadamanthos from the ignominy of dry cat food, gravity-fed from a plastic tower and good for a week and a half, but not as succulent as the canned stuff. Instead, she made a phone call to a friend in San Francisco.

Then she went in search of adult Connors, and found Chris raking leaves out of the front lawn. "I phoned a friend of mine and suggested he come up here for a few days. Can he have Room 15, next to mine?"

"No problem," Chris said, but she could see whole generations of speculation flicker over his face; the fact that 14 and 15 shared a connecting door; that Keighley was certainly of age and with any luck too old; that it was officially none of his business in any case and these were supposed to be the nineties. "Will he be here for dinner?"

Keighley looked at her watch. "He's driving from San Francisco and he'll probably have to go through the rush-hour traffic. I don't think so."

And at dinnertime there was no sign of him. Jerry Kerrigan was missing too, and instead of trout Karen served a very authentic French cassoulet. *Sausage is cheap, beans are cheap, and geese are home-grown.* Keighley stirred the ideas on her back burner; some of them were beginning to simmer. She let the conversation drift from her completed story (with sidebars on what an undine was and who the Franks were) to fantasy fiction in general to urban legends to haunted houses.

"You could use a ghost or two here, I imagine," she said. "The Psychic Research Society and CSICOP could fight over who got the best rooms. A poltergeist could be fun, if you could train it just to knock and rattle, and not break things. Hey, Melanie—" this was Karen's younger sister— "how old are you? Seventeen? A bit late. Have you ever had moments when you're so mad you feel you could explode, and the dishes start rattling on the shelves with nobody touching them?"

"No, darn it," Melanie said. "Though if I went into the pantry and stomped hard, I bet I could fake it."

"No poltering in my pantry," Karen said.

"*Has* anyone ever seen a ghost in this place? It's old enough—at least, for around here. You know what they say in Europe? 'America is the place where a hundred miles is a short distance and a hundred years is a long time.'"

"You'd have to ask Jerry," Chris said. "Only he had to go up to Quincy today to do some paperwork. He owned the lodge before we did, you see; sold it to us five years ago and retired to do some serious fishing. But you've noticed he hangs around a lot, advising us—keeping the kitchen stocked with trout—I don't know what we'd do without him. Ask him if there are any ghosts, or any ghost stories. We sure haven't seen anything."

"Or heard anything? Because I could've sworn I heard music playing Sunday night, and there doesn't seem to be anywhere it could have come from."

"Oh, yeah, I remember you asking about that," Melanie said.

"So you could have a musical ghost. Or I could be hallucinating. If I had a bullet in my brain it would be easier to account for."

"Ewww," Melanie said. "What've bullets got to do with it?"

"Ever hear of Dmitri Shostakovich? Russian composer, beginning to past the middle of this century. When he was a young man he fought in World War I, and he got shot in the head."

"Did he die?" the middle Connor child asked.

"No, dear, not then; he lived to a ripe old age. But there he was with a bullet in his brain, and it gave him auditory hallucinations. That means—" she said to the middle child. "he didn't see things that weren't there, like little green men; he *heard* things that weren't there, like music. Out of thin air—only it really came out of his head. Beautiful melodies that no one had ever heard before. He could write them down, play them on the piano, score them for a hundred-piece orchestra. So he made his living that way."

"Was that cheating?" said the oldest child.

"Of course not. It was his music, after all; it came out of his head and he didn't get it from anybody else. So years later, when Soviet medical science had improved a lot, they came to him and said, 'Comrade Shostakovich, we think we can safely take that bullet out of your brain now.'"

"And he said whatever the Russian is for 'Are you nuts? That bullet is my bread and butter.' And he kept it, and it gave him music for the rest of his life."

"And he lived happily ever after?"

"Well, yes." (No point in telling the child about the pitfalls of trying to be creative under the Soviet government. "And his son is a famous conductor and his grandson is a famous pianist. But he died in Russia, so that can't be him in Room 14.")

Oooops. She had said rather more than she intended, and several Connors were looking at her strangely. She was saved, appropriately, by a bell: the doorbell. "That'll be George."

George Karpathy was a big blocky man with squared shoulders and bushy hair, like a caricature of a commissar—or a Bohemian Hungarian artist. Keighley introduced him merely as a friend who needed a rest. Not wishing to pick up the dropped thread of the previous conversation, she did not describe him as a musician.

George was a first-rate musicologist and a competent orchestrator. He wrote brilliant reviews for the Bay Area papers and made a few bucks on the side doing musical arrangements. He was not imaginative.

But he could take a suggestion and run with it, so Keighley would have to be careful what she said to him.

"It's what—eight o'clock. George, did you get any dinner?"

"I had some Chicken McNuggets, consumed between lane changes in the Sacramento rush hour. I'm not sure you could call it dining."

The cassoulet was still warm, sitting over a tea candle. George finished it off and followed it, European fashion, with a salad that had still been rooted in the garden when he rang the doorbell. "Mrs. Connor, why are you not earning an impressive salary in a small but important San Francisco restaurant?"

"I like it here," Karen said, but her eyes were wistful.

"So what—" George began as they crossed the lobby, and broke off to listen to the resonance. "What a nice hall! I'd like to put about a fifteen-piece chamber orchestra in it. Lots of Mozart. So what is the big secret?" he continued. "Other than the pleasure of your company, what is the purpose of my visit, which I notice you were careful not to discuss during dinner?"

"I've been hearing things in Room 14," she said. "Strains of music. We're going to switch rooms tonight. If you hear it too, I'll know I'm not losing it—and knowing the repertoire the way you do, maybe you can identify it."

George stood in the center of the room while Keighley packed. "I don't hear anything."

"It tends to start later on, after midnight. You could get some sleep first if you like."

"Hmph," George said. "Probably a radio station in San Francisco. Maybe even Los Angeles."

"Maybe," Keighley said noncommittally. "These redwood walls are awfully live." And she left him to unpack.

Room 15 was quiet enough to make her nervous; she opened the window wide enough to let in the rustling and creaking of the trees, and went to bed.

She dreamed of ghosts dancing, musical ghosts, playing bone flutes, climbing moonbeams like ladders. But it all seemed strangely remote, neither frightening nor funny, and when presently the ghosts climbed into the sky and vanished, it was as though they had gone away long ago.

She woke as the sun was rising. There was no sound from George's room, and she didn't venture to wake him. One of her back-burner plots was ready to boil over anyway. She went down to breakfast.

Jerry Kerrigan had come back, and there was trout for breakfast for those who wanted it.

"I won't say no," Keighley said. "I'm off home today, where trout comes from Costco at five bucks a pound. It snows here in the winter, doesn't it?"

"You bet," Jerry said.

"Is it safe to drive up here in the winter? Are the roads passable?"

"Usually. This is a State highway, they run the snowplow over it pretty often. If you want to come here in the winter, better bring chains, or the Highway Patrol might not let you up here without 'em."

"Hmmm. What I was thinking of was a special Christmas package here. Because of the snow, which down in the lowlands we don't see from one decade to the next. And Karen could roast geese and things. You could probably fill the house just on the strength of her cooking. But you'd want to import games and carolers and things. Maybe it would be the better part of valor to bring all the guests up on a bus. Hey, I know, a murder weekend! or a haunted house."

"Where's something to write with?" Karen muttered. "Where's something to write *on*?" She pulled a pencil from her apron pocket and an envelope from a shelf and started taking notes.

"So are there any ghosts in the hotel, Jerry?" Keighley asked, deceptively casual.

"Not that I ever saw."

"I asked, because I've been hearing things in Room 14."

Jerry put his coffee mug down on the table, hard enough to send drops flying.

"Oh, not clanking chains." Keighley went on. "It's music. Classical music."

"Mother of God," the old man muttered. He had gone pale under his tan. Karen cleared her throat.

"Kids, have you finished breakfast? Then you can go and play." They watched silently as the children filed out.

"His name was Bert Butler," Jerry said. "Lord, it was a long time ago. 1933, the very bottom of the depression. The previous depression," he corrected himself.

"Bert and I both went to work here in the lodge after high school. I didn't mind, because the place was going to be mine someday, and besides it meant I could get some fishing in. But it chafed Bert. He wanted to get away and go to college, study music. But there just wasn't any money.

"He rigged up a radio up in the attic, ramshackle thing, one of our buddies built it. Wouldn't bring in anything but at night. He used to hang over that radio set for hours, listening to all the jazz and news and everything, waiting for them to play what he called real music. And sometimes they did. Don't know if that made it better or worse.

"Anyhow, one day he brought a hamper full of clean sheets up to Room 13—that's the housekeeper's closet, we put a number on it so's nobody'd get funny ideas about 14—and then he took something out of the bottom of the hamper and went into Room 14. Maybe it was because of that view to the southwest,'way down the canyon. And that's where he shot himself."

"Oh, no," Karen said. Keighley put her hand to her temple.

"Where did he get the gun?" George asked. No one had heard him come in, but there he stood, leaning against the doorframe like a man in the last stages of exhaustion.

"German officer's pistol, somebody's souvenir from the World War. The First World War," he corrected himself again. "If it belonged to anybody, they never claimed it."

"Damnation," George said. "What a wasted life, wasted talent. And he's still there."

"No, sir," Jerry said.

"Old man, I have spent the past six hours—"

"Are you a Catholic, by any chance, sir?"

"Good God, no."

"Then you wouldn't understand. But he didn't die there. He lived another three days. Father Petrini went up to the hospital and heard his confession and gave him his Last Rites. So he's at peace, and he can't be haunting Room 14."

"Something is," George said stubbornly. "May I have some coffee, please? Lots of coffee. I have to get back up there and transcribe."

"A bullet in the brain," Keighley mused. "It hit him where Shostakovich's did, only rather harder, and the psychic shock made an impression on whatever it is that records that kind of thing. Or maybe it just soaked into that live redwood paneling."

"In which case it might repeat itself from time to time, so listen, George. If you hear a sort of Baroque gigue for diverse instruments," she whistled a phrase, "for Heaven's sake get it down. You get some breakfast; I'm going up to pack."

"Well, I shall be here for several more days," George said. "I want to catch the third and fourth movements. Symphony for Grand Orchestra on Themes by Butler. What was his first name? Albert? Herbert? It begins like this—" Keighley heard his booming baritone all the way up the stairs.

Once she had cleared out Room 15, and made a note to talk to George later about composers' workshops, she went into 14 to see if she had forgotten anything. The bed had been slept in, for a few hours at least, and the covers

thrown violently to the floor. George's portable keyboard sat on a chair beside the table. All over the table, all over the floor, lay sheets of paper, mostly the wide-lined stuff George used for rough notes, all squiggled over with staffless neumes. Atop it all on the table lay a notebook of real music paper with a phrase on it in George's spiky hand.

It all seemed very good. Karen and Melanie would have to refrain from cleaning the room for a few days. Keighley stood by the window, watching the sun's light creep down the side of the canyon, listening. It was the wrong time of day to hear anything—but after a while she heard (or thought she heard) the sound of a flute, a simple tune like a shepherd's pipe, falling and rising until it vanished into the sky.

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SCREAMING BLOODY MURDER

The window rattled. Then the whole house rattled, and Keighley came back from distant lands to feel the chair shaking under her. She wrote and quit her file and logged out, slid under the desk and grabbed the CPU like a life raft or a straying toddler. One hand crept up to the power switch. The disk drive chattered and fell silent and she threw the switch, while the rattling and rumbling swelled to fortissimo and far down the hillside somebody screamed. The cat Rhadamanthos stood in the center of the room, the floor unsteady under his feet, dancing a little dance with the Earth Mother and snarling as if he'd been caught in a rainstorm.

And then it was over, at least for the moment. A lemonade glass on the desk tottered and fell with a belated crash. Something echoed it from the kitchen. *Ye gods, the cleaning up I'm going to have—*

Rhadamanthos got his feet under him and ran for the kitchen where the cat door was, Keighley in hot pursuit. "No, no, cat, you don't want out just now. Well, maybe you do, but you're not going." She'd have to put him in the carrier till he calmed down, or things did. She put a hand to the swinging door and took the long step inward that planted her right foot squarely in front of the catflap.

A whole world turned red and yellow, and she thought *Fire!* —

—and it was gone. Her kitchen looked the same as always, enameled white, muslin curtains blowing at the window, the pine table and chairs scattered across the floor. All the clean dishes from lunch had fallen from the drainer to ruin on the floor, but the cupboard latches had held. Keighley let herself fold up onto the floor, reached behind her to throw the latch on the catflap, and tried to remember. For just a moment, instead of the kitchen she

had seen— No, it had been the same kitchen but painted tomato red and mustard yellow like a fast-food joint. The sink had been in the same place, but instead of the big wood stove there had been—she looked at the image again, a single frame in the mind's archive—well, a console of some kind with a huge TV screen in it and God knew what else. And the pine table gone, and somebody standing at the other end of the room.

Rhadamanthos climbed into her lap, claws pricking through the tough denim of her jeans, every hair standing on end. Keighley stroked him. "Like quills upon the fretful porpentine," she murmured. "It's all right, cat. It's only an earthquake." But what that other thing had been, she couldn't imagine.

After a while, she got up and began cleaning and repairing. So did everybody else. The papers were full of the stories for weeks. The top deck of the Bay Bridge had fallen, and the Santa Cruz Boardwalk was in ruins. Keighley fared better than most, with ample supplies on hand and a woodstove that turned the stuff in the freezer into a huge stockpot. She even had good store of bottled water, since her well had gone nearly dry in the long years of the drought; she still had two quarts left when the Alhambra delivery truck was next able to make its way up her mountain road. She patched her windows with oiled paper till she could get glass, and wrote in longhand till the power came back on. Eventually things went back to normal.

Then the rains came back.

The clouds floated in like big rolags of grey wool, filling the sky from horizon to horizon, and the drops began to fall. First they soaked in; they they ran off in little trickles toward the dry creekbeds. Rhadamanthos vaulted into the living room through an open window as Keighley ran to shut it. The air smelled like heaven, like wet earth, and the drops rattled against the roof. "No more sponge baths," Keighley sang. "No more saving the grey water for the plants. No more tribute paid to Alhambra. C'mon, cat, want a ginger ale?" She pushed open the kitchen door.

Red and yellow, and a huge face on the huge screen saying, "—poration declared second—" and a woman standing with her back to the door, hands

clenched at her sides. And then it was gone, and Keighley brushed aside the wet curtains and closed the kitchen windows. She split the ginger ale with the cat and thought of adding something stronger to her portion, but *No, I better not mess with my head till I figure out what's wrong with it.* She ran over the clip in her mind, a whole second's worth this time, with sound. The newscaster's fragment was no problem. "XYZ Corporation declared second-quarter earnings of N dollars" was as stock a phrase as. "The organization known as XYZ claimed responsibility for the bombing."

That had been a heck of a TV screen, though, three by four feet or thereabouts, brighter and crisper than any projection system she'd seen. Most of the other bells and whistles on the console, she couldn't even guess what they were for; and the whole thing—she took a good look at the perspectives in the memory clip—the whole thing stood only eight or ten inches out from the wall. They weren't making stuff like that anywhere, not even in Japan.

So did I see a vision of the future?

Either that or a vision of the past. That woman had been dressed for the early 1940s—a belted shirtwaist dress with a tight skirt, elbow sleeves with silly little cuffs, made of green-and-white-striped seersucker, for heaven's sake. Her mother had dressed like that.

But no one had TVs of that kind, or any other kind, in Keighley's youth, so it must be the future she was seeing—if she was seeing anything and not merely raving. A time when Forties fashions had come back—a mistake, if you asked *her*—and huge flat entertainment centers were common enough that you'd put one in the kitchen. A time beyond her own lifespan, probably—well, darn it, of *course* she would be dead and gone by the time that woman stood in green seersucker listening to the second-quarter financial news. While she lived, she'd never see this kitchen redone in tomato red and mustard yellow.

Keighley felt no pang at this reminder of her own mortality; she'd come to terms with that long since. She only wished her successor could've had a little better taste.

She put the whole thing on the back burner, she wouldn't let it bother her

—but the next time she went into the kitchen she pushed the door in cautiously, breath held, in anticipation of what she'd see, and saw nothing.

Two weeks went by, and three more soaking rainstorms, and Keighley's well filled up again. She dug up a few square feet of her neglected garden and planted lettuce and broccoli, cool-weather plants that would grow happily through what the Bay Area inaccurately called winter. Rhadamanthos learned again to make the reluctant choice between going outside in the rain and using the cat box.

It was on the day after Thanksgiving that Keighley stepped into the kitchen, to check on the turkey carcass in the soup pot, and saw the colors again, "...and warmer, with highs reaching into the thirties," said the newscaster. (She hadn't noticed before: he was wearing a turtleneck, not a tie—and the Centigrade scale had finally invaded the United States. Two people stood in the kitchen. The woman dressed for the Forties wore blue chambray today, and a hairstyle of the same vintage: all the hair had been curled back around the face into a coronet look that had also been trendy in Imperial Rome. It was all coming down now, because the man was slamming her head against the wall; and his hands were around her throat.

And it was gone, and there was nothing in the kitchen but the smell of turkey and the sound of rain. Keighley made her way to the nearest chair and sat in it.

It was a cliché. *You witness a murder that won't be committed for another thirty years.* How many B movies had she seen, to say nothing of spoof articles on how to make the grade as a B-movie heroine? *The house changes size in the night, strange voices speak from inside the TV set, and you haven't seen the cat in days.* "—Rhadamanthos! Kit-kit-kit-kit?"

The door swung open, twice, and on the third swing Rhadamanthos shouldered his way through. He stopped and bristled and spat, glaring at the

place where the woman had stood, or was going to stand.

Faced with all this, you (a) Get out, (b) Call in a platoon of priests with a tankful of holy water, (c) Wring your hands and say, "Oh dear," (c) being the right answer, of course, if you wanted to achieve transitory fame and meager fortune in the movies marked B.

"Maybe I'm dumber than I thought," she said aloud, and the cat looked at her suspiciously and sat down to wash. " 'Cause I'm not getting out; this is my house."

Remembering what she had come in there for, she checked the turkey, gently simmering its way off the bone. Another couple of hours and it'd be ready to strip. She checked Rhadamanthos's food and water dishes, grabbed hat and jacket and went for a walk in the rain.

She came back with two plot ideas and something like a chip on her shoulder. How dared that creep do murder in her kitchen? She scraped mud from her shoes on the back doorstep, hung up her hat and jacket to dry. By Od's bodkins, she'd *get* a priest if need be, bell, book, and candle and a buffalo of holy water—and laughed in spite of her foul mood. The nearest priest was Father Carey at Holy Cross, an ex-Marine; she pitied any haunt he chose to tackle. She pushed the door open and took a breath.

From where she stood she got a different view of the tomato-colored kitchen. The shelves against the far wall had been replaced by rows of built-in cabinets (Keighley had been thinking of having that done; maybe she was going to do it.) The newscaster said, "—met with the King of Bosnia-Herzegovina..." The man and woman were still there, but the steps had changed. His hands were reaching for her throat, but weren't going to reach it, because she had raised a big kitchen knife and plunged it into his gut. A smooth upward motion, it would be a miracle if it didn't reach his heart.

Keighley must have come into the place beyond shock. She said. "Hmmm," and took a glass from the drainer, filled it at the sink, drank it down. So what did this mean? Was the future still fluid, not fixed, and what

she'd seen was just another of several possibilities? Or had it been a clip from slightly later in the sequence—he bangs her head against the wall and *then* she stabs him in the gut?

Pity there hadn't been a clock in view. Or maybe there had been a digital readout or something on that gigantic entertainment center, but Keighley hadn't been able to see it.

But there was the newscaster's voice: assuming that thirty years from now people still spoke coherent English sentences, she might be able to piece the fragments together in order and find out what was cause and what effect. She took the soup pot off the fire and put the bones to drain in the colander, and went out to rummage in her desk for three-by-five cards. They still shuffled faster than computer entries, at least under her hands, and her desk had a bigger desktop than her monitor. She entered each vision onto its own card and laid them out like a sparse Tarot deck: no guessing as to sequence yet. And the phone rang. "Bracton."

"Keighley, Marsha. I've got a scheme."

"Okay, tell me." Did the head-banging come just before the knife? It sure as blazes couldn't have come after.

"There's a project to raise funds to rebuild the Playhouse, you know about that."

"Uh-huh." The little theatre building where Marsha's group performed had taken heavy damage in the earthquake, and "rebuild" was probably a euphemism for "tear down to the ground and start over." Keighley flipped the cards again. "How much?"

"One script. No, listen. We're going to do a benefit performance in the Unitarian Church where we've been performing since the quake. If you could write us a new play full of the good feelings of the season without specifically mentioning babies in mangers—"

"A fantasy?"

"Sure."

"And I keep the rights."

"Of course."

And one of today's rain-soaked ideas would make a much better play than a story. "Okay, I will. But Christmas, jeez, that's less than a month, and you'll need time to rehearse. I better get cracking."

When it was time to strip the turkey, she took a pen and a stack of cards into the kitchen: they would live there till this was settled. In the red kitchen the woman stood alone, weeping with her face to the wall, and a different newscaster was saying—"closed down forty-one today, at 2102. To think it was only two years ago that it peaked at eight—"

Cripes. Was he talking about the Dow? Peaking at eight thousand and something? No wonder it's come down again. Up like a rocket, down like the stick. No wonder those two were going to be under stress: not that it excused them.

Keighley wrote on the top card of her stack and put the rest on the corner of the drainboard. She picked out the turkey meat and carefully wrapped the bones so the cat couldn't get at them. What was she going to do about those two? Leave a letter for them, "To Whom It May Concern: Stop acting like idiots"? Cross-stitch a text and leave it on the wall, "Thou Shalt Do No Murder"? Well, duh, as the kids said in the supermarket. Those two had presumably heard that already. Keighley looked at the wall where the woman had leaned, was going to lean; rested her own forehead there. It was cool; the heat of passionate tears had not made the trip back with their image. Keighley went back to the computer and began plotting.

The play took shape quickly. The protagonists were a King and Queen who had made a political marriage like Ferdinand and Isabella, but their personal

squabbles threatened to tear the united realm into more pieces than the original two. Magical undercurrents made the strife in the Royal House manifest itself as fire, flood, and earthquake, just as in all the best tales. She brought them to the brink of war before they were reconciled, their quarrelsome natures defused, by the innocence of a little child—no, not their own baby, that would have been much too trite, but the kitchenmaid's daughter. She shaped her cast of characters according to the actors Marsha had available. She made less progress with her attempt to order the fragments she saw: they were too widely spaced; the woman never wore the same dress twice.

On the last day of November she stepped into the kitchen and heard the man shout. "Who is he?" waving a page of printout under the woman's nose, an email message, it appeared—and Keighley thought, *Aha, so that's it*, and realized the man's jealousy explained not only his actions, but some of the King's. In fact, the fragmentary drama in the kitchen was informing the play with all kinds of storm and passion, and why not. They began rehearsal the first weekend in December.

Keighley slipped into the kitchen, keys in hand, to leave a glass in the sink. The woman sat in a chair, remote in hand, watching opera on the big television: 18th century costumes; Mozart; the last few bars of an aria. When it ended the woman pressed a button and the scene jumped back, without click or rewind blur, to the beginning. "*Mi tradì quest'alma ingrata*," over and over again. Keighley drove to the rehearsal musing on betrayal, on grudges long-held, on revenge served on ice like an oyster, and brought out of the parking lot two lines for the Prime Minister. And the King complained.

The man playing the King was the best actor the group had, a Silicon Valley computer guru: small, neat, light on his feet, with a dapper little beard and blazing green eyes. Not surprisingly, he had an ego the size of the planet Ceres, and though Keighley was happy to give him a part to tear a cat in, with many fine speeches, he always wanted more. She began to see him in odd moments in dark corners, head-to-head with Marsha, wheedling for this concession, that script change, the other bit of favorable blocking.

The woman playing the Queen was only a year younger than Keighley herself and ought to have learned some sense. But Keighley looked her age, whereas the actress might be this side of thirty. Part of it was her manner: she floated about and giggled and flirted and got on Keighley's nerves a lot. So, once they got onstage, did the Queen, and it was working very well. It was no trouble to justify the King's rage; Keighley would have been ready to throttle the Queen herself.

She finally let a word slip to Marsha, but the director didn't seem concerned. "Yeah, I see it too," she said. "but I don't think you need to worry too much. They wouldn't be such good actors if they weren't—" she shrugged—"actors."

But in the second week of rehearsal, with their lines down and their blocking set, when it should have been all tightening and fine-tuning, both of them turned on Keighley, wheedling for script changes. Just an extra line here or there; a reaction to someone else's speech that would cap everything he'd said; just another few sentences here, a little stronger language there; couldn't I do X or Y, it would make the scene so much stronger? Finally, Keighley grinned wide (not a pretty sight, rather sharklike) and put an arm round each of their shoulders. "Remember what Pilate said to the High Priest?"

"Uh—"

"What I have written, I have written," and went home.

That would make a good epitaph, she mused, pulling up the steep driveway. *Quod scripsi, scripsi, and not translate it, make 'em guess*. She went into the kitchen and saw the man on the floor, the knife handle rising out of his chest like an impudent mushroom, while the woman put her hands to her mouth and the television played *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and said. "Beyond 2001—the 2002 Volvo."

Two thousand *two*? No, that was the model year, they would be in the second half of 2001. Less than a decade away. How in God's name was all

that going to happen so fast? Keighley dead, the house sold, the kitchen repainted and murder done, all by 2001?

Dead before 2001, dammit, that was something she hadn't planned for. Keighley would never see nineteen again, but she was healthy and tough and had planned on living into her eighties at least. If the visions were true, there was something wrong, going to be wrong with her, that she didn't know about. And if they weren't true, then there was something wrong with her right now. She dialed her doctor's number, got his voicemail. "Bernie? Keighley. Something's happened to me, I don't know if it's physical or psychological, but it's getting scary. Not quite emergency-room stuff, but I'm going to come in tomorrow and camp out in your waiting room till you can see me."

But when she went in the next morning, no one was there but the nurse. "Oh, hi, Keighley, we got your message. But Bernie won't be in today, he went to a conference in San Francisco. Would you like a referral to another doctor?"

"No." It was going to be hard enough explaining this to Bernie, who'd known her for years: walk in off the street into a strange doctor's office, and what could he think but *Another postmenopausal California nutcase*. "No, thanks. He'll be back tomorrow?"

"Yeah, and—" the nurse flipped pages. "his ten o'clock canceled, so you can have her appointment."

"I'll take it."

She might have done better to go home and stay there, avoiding the kitchen—or go to a motel and stay there, avoiding everything. But she had a cat to feed and pages to write and a routine to follow, and she did. And in the evening she went to the rehearsal.

The day's dark visions had been uninformative: the man, muttering. "Bitch, bitch, bitch," while filling a coffeepot with water from the sink; the woman striding past from back door to console, while a commercial blared, to turn it

off with a slap. It occurred to Keighley she'd never seen a vision of the kitchen empty; whatever was displaying these flashes of the future was selecting for dramatic filmclips, knifings and bludgeonings, or at least a cross word.

She dug around in her books, stalked and found a quotation from C. S. Lewis. "The less you think of them as *your dreams* and the more you think of them—well, as News—the better you'll feel about them." But it wasn't true. Keighley in any case only listened to news when there was a war, and it seldom made her feel better: listening was only less dreadful than not listening.

Before the rehearsal began she told herself these were only human dynamics, after all: conflict, the stuff plots were made of. She would sit back and observe. The King there in the corner—well, okay, the actor playing him—chatting with someone in the shadows that Keighley couldn't see. No, there she was, Marsha's nine-year-old daughter who played the kitchenmaid's child who put everything right. Surely the King—but no, Keighley had known him for years and he had always limited himself to women between the age of consent and the age of common sense—say, forty. No, she could trust that he was only making conversation.

Where was Marsha, though? Just coming in the door, with an armload of props, cloaks and swords and a couple of really spiffy coronets borrowed from a colleague who moonlighted as the Baron of Darkwood in the SCA. She set them on a table, and the cast wandered over to see what Santa Claus had brought them.

Except for the Queen and the King's huntsman, who were hanging around upstage right, leaning on a piano that hadn't gotten moved away yet. Heads together, whispering unheard under the mixed noises in the foreground, planning a rendezvous or an end run around someone else's lines. The Queen had a slip of paper in her hand; they looked down at it, then up towards Keighley, and smiled.

The King had found his crown—jeweled brass that well-polished would pass for gold—and settled it over his temples. He glanced at the Queen, and at Keighley, and smiled into the darkness.

"Let's get going." Marsha said. "Wear your crowns or not; I don't care. Remember to take the aspirin forty-five minutes before the crown goes on. Places for Scene 1."

The players converged from the corners of the stage. King and Queen took the folding chairs that stood for thrones, Prime Minister to their right, herald to their left. Elizabeth the kitchenmaid took Marsha's daughter by the hand and drew her to one side; they weren't in this scene.

Courtiers massed in midstage, murmuring and shifting and trying to upstage each other in despite of blocking that had been set for a week. They turned and shifted, glancing at Keighley and away, while the shadows gathered out of the corners and the King on his throne smiled and smiled, glancing at one of his subjects and another, while they shifted and turned and looked away—

"That's enough." The voice was harsh, unsteady on the breath. "Do you think I don't see you? Do you think you're fooling me? I've seen it coming and it won't work. Forget it, You can do what you like with each other, but you won't mess with me or my work—" The voice was her own. The shadows had closed in till all she could see was the King's face, his expression blank and mild, *Who, me?* "And *you* can quit smirking—"

They were all silent. Her vision had cleared somehow and she could see them all staring at her, shocked and quiet.

Then the kitchenmaid's daughter tugged her hand free and stepped out of her corner. She crossed the stage with the blocking Marsha had given her for Scene 12, and the crowd fell back to let her pass. She took her place downstage and said, not the lines Keighley had written for her, but, "Aunt Keighley, you're sick. Is your forehead hot? I think you should go home and go to bed."

"Right." She turned away, looking for the steps. "Sorry." And she slipped away out of the hall, away from the silence. She went home shivering and took a long hot shower and still shivered. Her courage failing her, she didn't attempt the kitchen, but filled a glass at the bathroom sink and took it up to the loft. The child was right, she was sick, infected already with whatever was going to drive those two in the future to madness and murder. Something physical, or psychological? Bernie would figure it out: or if he couldn't, if there was a curse on the house beyond the power of medicine, there was always Mike Carey. If only the day would come.

She slept fitfully, with dreams full of shadows and mocking faces. She woke early and thought only of escape: not even for coffee would she go into that kitchen. She could go get breakfast at a café, or the doughnut factory—no, but what about Rhadamanthos? In the end she called him till he came out of the kitchen, dancing with the swinging door, fur bristling, and popped him into the car. They got doughnuts, indifferent coffee, canned cat food from the twenty-four-hour Safeway, and ate it parked in Bernie's parking lot, waiting for the office to open.

Bernie was old and huge and shapeless, seemingly wider than he was tall, like Nero Wolfe or a toad. And like the toad in the bestiary, he carried a precious jewel in his head: wisdom distilled from many decades of practicing medicine. He had dozens of detective stories to tell, tales of bizarre diagnoses come upon by shrewd and patient questioning. He listened to Keighley's story, saying. "Hmmm." He looked at her eyes and her mouth and her skin and listened to her heart and lungs. Then he flipped back through her file (two inches thick) to the first pages, the medical history he had taken over three hours when she was first his patient. "Nothing like this ever happened before? No, I didn't think so. Anyone in your family? I have a note here about your Aunt Grace—"

"Aunt Grace had twenty-one cats and wouldn't eat meat or wear leather. Around here that's practically normal. And she was as sharp as a tack, and never had sudden fits of paranoia."

"Hmmm. The place where you were rehearsing? Is it a new building? New carpets maybe?"

"It's the Unitarian Church on San Ramon – built in the 1950s, by the look of it. No carpets at all in the auditorium. You're thinking of solvents? I couldn't smell anything."

"Hmmm. You live way up in the hills, don't you? Do you get city water, or have you got a well?"

"I have a well. I've only just started using it again since the rains came back. During the drought I drank Alhambra and had a little tank trucked in to keep the plants alive. But I also used my well before the drought began, and none of this happened then."

"Hmmm. Well, I'd like you to see if you can get your water tested. And I want to get a blood sample and a urine sample, and you can call after ten tomorrow for the results. Try and find out if there's been anything dumped uphill of you, maybe after the drought began. Because the last time I saw anything like this, it was a dentist with sloppy lab technique who'd gotten mercury poisoning from mixing his own fillings."

"Mercury! Yucch. That's the Mad Hatter's madness, isn't it? From working felt processed with the stuff. Bernie, I think you've hit it. Anything we can do?"

"There are some treatments we can use, chelating agents and stuff. That's if the tests come out positive. Try and find out about your well. Drink bottled water till you do."

"Okay. I know somebody who can pull some strings." She left several gills of body fluids with the nurse, and went in search of Carla.

Carla cultivated the city government like a garden, the way another middle-aged lady might have the church or the Women's Institute. She found a chemist for the sample of well water, a friend in the USGS for the geologic

maps of Keighley's hillside, two environmental watchdogs to look for signs of illicit dumping, and a local historian named Ted. "Las Casas Road," he asked. "Wasn't that the Trumbull Mine? No, it was further up." He peered at the map. "I don't even think that road's even got a name, but it's up there. 1925 to 1931, that was." His pencil point hovered over a dip in the contour lines. "This little canyon here. Maybe we should go take a look."

"What were they mining there?" Carla put in. "We're hunting mercury, remember."

"Trumbull was hunting gold," Ted said. "If he found any, well, they used mercury to extract it. Let's go. Your car or mine?"

"Mine." said Carla. They dropped Rhadamanthos at her house and took her Land-Rover up the hill.

"I think this is the right place." Ted muttered twenty minutes later, comparing the cliffs that rose on their right with the contour lines on his map.

"I think so too," said Keighley, clinging to a twisted oak and peering down the hillside. "See that white patch down there? That's my roof."

"There used to be a road here, all right," Carla said. "But I don't think even the Land-Rover'll make it through all this second growth. C'mon, it's this way." She led the way through clumps of prickly bush and slender trees, avoiding the scarlet poison oak as best she could. A hundred yards farther on the brush thinned; water had washed away most of the topsoil. A little creek ran out of the canyon, flattened out into a wet muddy spot and disappeared beneath the undergrowth. Piles of weathered rock and earth lined the path to a cave mouth in the cliff's side: cautiously they stepped inside, to find that the ceiling had fallen a scant dozen feet from the opening, blocking the passage.

"This looks fresh," Carla said, touching a rock embedded in the fallen earth and watching it tumble to the ground in a shower of dust. "Probably fell in the earthquake. We won't get any farther today."

"It's the tailings outside we want samples of anyway," Ted said. "That's where the mercury would've been used. If it's mercury."

They took samples of rock and earth from several of the piles. There were no deadly little silver droplets to be seen, but there wouldn't be; the testing services would have to perform their arcana to extract the golden answers from the the twice-tried ore. Carla had them lined up already.

"If we're right, it's going to have to be hauled away," she said. "I dunno if I can get the county to pay for it, though I'll certainly give it a try. Who owns the land now?"

"It's possible I do," Keighley said. "The plot runs six hundred feet uphill from Las Casas. I'll pay for it anyway if I have to. If it's mercury."

"You're sounding awfully chipper about the whole thing," Carla observed. "You act as if finding mercury would be *good* news."

"Compared to the alternatives, sure," Keighley said. "My cousin Ruth went to the doctor once with mysterious pains in her hands and feet. Turned out to be diabetes; she was awfully relieved. She'd been thinking brain tumors. Mercury, we can do something about; Bernie says so."

They returned to the flats and Carla took the samples away to be tested while Ted went back to his books. Keighley collected her car and her cat and bought four gallons of Black Mountain water at the Safeway. She was just this side of singing and dancing as she opened the front door and lugged in her load of water. Mercury, lovely poisonous mercury, that was the culprit; Carla's testers would find it in the soil, in the water; Bernie would find it in her blood and set about getting rid of it. Nobody was going to die of poison in her house, nobody was going to go mad as a hatter and do murder in her kitchen.

Her hands full of plastic jugs, she backed into the kitchen and turned to face a forest of fragments. Rippling like silk in the wind—but there was no wind—a torrent of faces, motions, hands and eyes, lights and shapes without meaning or name. She backed out again and set the jugs on the floor; but then

she must creep in again, as into a roomful of flames, to get a drinking glass and Rhadamanthos's water dish. She filled them from the plastic jug, sitting on the floor, and they drank. They'd camp in here as long as they had to, drinking Black Mountain till she could get Alhambra delivery set up again, and eat at McDoggie's or out of cans. Rhadamanthos would get spoiled, refuse to eat the dry cat food out of the gravity feeder; she didn't care.

C. S. Lewis was right after all. It wasn't her mind: it was News about her mind, or News about what the future was going to do to it, and because it was in a way no longer her responsibility she could look at it calmly.

Things were falling into place now. The earthquake had shaken up the hillside and changed the flow patterns in the hidden strata: when the rains came back, the water was able for the first time to flow from the tailings into the well. And it was on those days that she had seen the first visions, a token of things to come.

You could liken the future to a spreadsheet: enter some value into line One and watch the numbers ripple forward to line Ninety-Nine, next year's figures derived from today's by some rational process. But take away the premise—years of unwitting consumption of tainted water—and the conclusion fell apart. The future was in flux, at least for Keighley and her successors in this house; and we are both bound and free.

It might be days or weeks before things settled down, before Keighley's determination to drink no more well water, to haul the tailings away, rippled forward across the cells and made her future clear again. Or it might be as soon as tomorrow, when the test results came in.

Meanwhile, she'd not risk another embarrassing scene like last night's. She called a florist and a caterer, and sent the Unitarian auditorium a sheaf of roses and a note saying. "Sorry. Keighley," and a smorgasbord and a tub of Calistoga water. Another caterer made the trip up the hill with a tub of boeuf bourguignon for two and a quart of ginger ale.

"We struck out on the well, hit a home run on the tailings," Carla said the next morning. "Those piles are lousy with the stuff; Trumbull must've been using way too much, no wonder he went broke. Practically nothing in the water, though; he's got ultra-sensitive equipment, he found a trace. Not enough to do you any harm, though; you must've caught it in time."

"I've got good news and bad news," Bernie said. "The good news is, there's nothing in your blood: no detectable mercury, no detectable cell damage. The bad news is, there's nothing in your blood. Maybe we're barking up the wrong tree."

"I doubt it," Keighley said, and told him about the soil tests. No point in mentioning the fluxing fragments in the kitchen, not yet, not unless they didn't go away. Madness from mercury in the brain, that was a medical problem, unlike madness from mercury in the indefinite future.

Opening night overflowed with publicity, with enthusiasm, with champagne, and even a reasonable take at the box office. Nobody mentioned anybody's temporary aberrations. The local papers took pictures of the King and the Queen and the kitchenmaid's daughter and even of Keighley, and she got her own curtain call.

The house was dark when she got home, no flickering at the kitchen windows, and Rhadamanthos opened one eye and closed it again. Keighley took a deep breath and opened the kitchen door.

A blaze of daylight: the white walls had taken on green trim and painted trellises hung with ivy where walls joined ceiling. The television was the size of a bedsheet and almost as flat; a gateleg table had been folded and moved aside so that three small children could mimic the steps of the folk dancers on the screen, in a future much farther along than 2001. The light dimmed, faded to black. There would be no more visions. Keighley flipped the light switch and put her souvenirs, a doggie box of pickled mushrooms and a half-litre of champagne, into the fridge.

"The Death of Ranat's Pass" first appeared in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, Summer 1992.

THE DEATH OF RANAT'S PASS

Mathali opened the door and closed it behind her as quietly as she could, but the children heard her anyway. They came scrambling out from behind the tapestries, their eyes big and dark. Most likely they had never gone to sleep at all. They stared at her: strange and pale she must look in the dark mourning robes. "I'm glad you're awake," she said. "We have to talk."

With a rattle of bronze rings she pulled back the tapestries that covered the children's sleeping space. The nurses sat up on their pallets, and she pointed to the door.

"Out."

"But, Highness—"

"Out. Yes, you too. Wait on the landing."

She made the circuit of the room, pulling back the woven hangings and rousing the maids from sleep. When all the room was revealed and she was certain there were none in it but the children and herself, she bolted the door. No one was going to hear anything through so many inches of oak.

The Tower Hall that had been the royal apartments for so many generations was round and had a heavy-beamed roof. Its stone walls were dark behind the bright hangings, and the windows were tiny slits. Still, she had been happy here once. She went to her wardrobe, unlacing the black velvet gown as she walked. She threw it onto the bed and stood in her undertunic as she sorted through the clothes she had worn before the world changed. Ceremonial robes, garden gowns, bedgowns with bits of lace.

"Mama." Eight-year-old Madus was at her elbow. "Is my father gone now?"

"Yes," she said. She turned to face him. "Yes, Madus, your father had a kingly funeral and he has gone back to the fire from which he came." The boy nodded, his expression sober, perhaps not really understanding. "And now I must go too."

"Go? You too? Go where?"

"Let me get dressed. Then I'll explain."

A tunic and trews she had worn to hunt firebirds in the mountains, a tough dark green cloth with leather at the knees and elbows. That would do nicely. She put them on, hampered by Madus who was crying now and clinging to her waist. Small Janli held onto her leg, crying because her brother was crying. A cloak. Boots. Somehow she managed to get them on. Another hunting tunic, a change of linen. A leather backsack. Flint and steel. A water bottle. Her bow and quiver.

At the bottom of the wardrobe, fallen from its peg, was the silk bedgown Corus had given her when Janli was born. Her vision blurred for an instant. *I will not cry*. She tossed it onto the bed.

Everything but the bow and quiver went into the backsack. Food and drink stood on a sideboard, and she filled her water bottle and wrapped some bread and meat in a square of waxed linen.

"Now," she said. She sat down on the end of the bed. "Janli, come here in my lap. Madus, I want you to listen carefully. I have to leave now because your uncle Idurus wants me to."

"Why?"

"Because he feels I don't belong here. Because my blood is not royal, because I was not brought up in a King's house; he feels I would not be able

to teach you the right things. He says—"

"That's stupid," Madus said. "I've got as much of your blood as Father's, and if—"

"Madus, *don't argue*. We haven't time, and you know you won't be able to argue with your Uncle Idurus. He and Aunt Kalvai are in charge of you now, and you have to do what they say. Except for one thing."

"I won't." Madus insisted. "If you can't stay, why can't we go with you?"

"Because Idurus *won't let you*." She reached around Janli and gave the boy's shoulder a little shake. "You are King's Heir, but you can't be King till you're grown. Idurus is Regent for you till you grow up and have a little boy of your own." *Unless*—she cut the thought short. "Idurus has soldiers with swords and spears. He might use the spears on me, but he'd just tell Big Jo or somebody to pick you up and hold you off the ground till you were tired of kicking and screaming. You can't argue with your uncle; don't even try. There's just one thing I want you to do."

"What?"

"Remember me." *I will not cry*. "Your uncle—I can see the signs already—is going to make up a story about how your mother was a royal princess who died young, and not a merchant's daughter from Karsten whom he put out of the house once the King had gone to the fire. Don't argue with him, but don't believe him. Madus, your father was already beginning to teach you how a King must conceal his thoughts behind his speech."

The boy nodded. "Out of courtesy, or out of policy."

"That's right. Well, you can practice on your uncle. Don't dispute anything he tells you—but don't believe him either. Wherever I go, I am still your mother, Mathali Hegdist's daughter of Karsten. Whatever happens to us, you are still my children. Remember me. And when she's old enough to conceal

her thoughts too, then you must remind Janli." Janli was howling again, and Madus was crying in earnest. "And some day I'll come back."

"How? How will you come back, if Uncle Idurus won't let you?"

"I haven't figured that part out yet," she admitted. "I'll think of something. Maybe I'll wait till you're King; that would make it easy."

"That's too long." Madus sniffled and blinked. "Maybe *I'll* think of something."

Now Janli broke off in mid-howl and spoke for the first time. "Mama *have* to go away?"

"I'm afraid so, dear."

"Get you a present." She slid off Mathali's lap and trotted across the room to a basket by the hearth. In it lay a cat with five kittens. Janli scooped up one of them and brought it back. "Kitten."

"Dear, I can't take a kitten with me. I'm going down the mountains, maybe across the desert."

"Sure you can," Madus said. "They're all weaned really, they just don't act like it. It can eat meat or cheese or nut butter or anything, and it'll keep you company. Which one have you got, Janli?"

The kitten was a black tom with the grey eyes of babyhood and a face like a flower, but Madus said, "That's the Captain. He's the best of the lot, and he's already learning how to fight. You need him, Mama, don't *you* argue. Take him to remember us by. Or Janli anyway. I wonder what I can give you?" He went to search in his chest while Mathali settled the kitten atop the other things in her backsack.

"Here," Madus said. He was holding the shortsword his father had given him last birthday. It was no longer than her forearm, hardly more than a knife.

"You can remember both of us by this."

"I can't," but something was pounding against the door, muffled by the thick wood. Mathali slung her sack on one shoulder, her bow and quiver on the other. Then she unbolted the door.

Idurus stood on the landing, his thumbs tucked into his belt. The nurses and maids were nowhere in sight; he must have sent them running. He was a big man, past the prime of life, and his beard was streaked with grey. "Are you ready?" he asked, and before she could answer he said. "Put off that bow. I'll not have you going from my house armed."

" 'Armed'?" she repeated; the bow was a light one, better suited to bringing down deer than armored men.

"Put it off."

"A man with a castle full of soldiers," she said slowly. "is afraid of a woman with a bow." She dropped the bow and quiver to the floor. "I suppose that's right." She turned her back on him and knelt. Janli's plump baby arms went tightly around her neck. Madus approached slowly, his hands behind his back. She put an arm round him, and under cover of her cloak he slipped his shortsword into her boot—she felt the cold metal slide along her ankle. The boot-top was just high enough to conceal it. She hugged him once more and whispered. "I will be back. Remember me." Then she rose and followed Idurus down the tower stair. The shortsword fit snugly in her boot. An inch higher and it would have shown; an inch lower and it would have played havoc with her ankle. She held her head high and concentrated on walking normally.

In the Great Hall fires were burning on all the hearths, for it was nearly midnight and the air was growing cold. Idurus's wife Kalvai stood between two fires, her tame mage Gethfen at her shoulder. Mathali felt suddenly cold in spite of the fires. Idurus had been her husband's elder by several years, and would have been King if he had been able to get an heir on Kalvai. But the royal families were old and cold, and the seed withered in the wombs of the

princesses and noble ladies, while her Corus had fathered two children on the merchant's daughter.

Kalvai's eyes were alight with triumph, and Gethfen's with anticipation. If those two got together to give Idurus something he could call his heir, no bookie in the Mountain Ring would give even odds for Madus's life. *The High One forbid it*. With any luck, Kalvai would be too old to conceive, even if she smuggled a firedrake into her bed.

Idurus walked straight through the Hall to the big iron-bound door and thrust it open: cold air drifted in and made the fires leap. Idurus stood beside the door, thumbs in belt. Kalvai took a step forward; Gethfen laid a pale-gloved hand on her sleeve. Mathali stood where she was. For a long moment no one spoke.

"Well?" Kalvai burst out. "Go, then! What are you waiting for?"

Mathali smiled, just a little. "My dowry."

Idurus glared at Kalvai. Kalvai looked at Gethfen; he was looking elsewhere. One could almost hear them: "I told you she wouldn't forget; but no, you had to try to be clever."

It was always like pulling teeth to get Idurus to lay out money, and she felt a moment's pity for the people of the Kingdom; under his Regency they would eat roots and wear rags. But a widow being sent away took her dowry with her; that was good law all around the Mountain Ring. If Idurus tried to break it, her father's House would make common cause with the rest of Karsten and Gaii to hire the best army money could buy, and send it to burn him out.

"It's on the table," Idurus said. (A point to her.) A pile of shining coins, with a sash to carry them in, sized for a larger waist than hers. They were not the same crowns she'd brought with her, of course, that her father had collected over some years of trade. These appeared all to be from the same mint, and that was interesting. She counted them swiftly by fives and tens, as

she had learned to do as a child, while her watchers fumed. The count was correct. (Another point to her.) She bundled the coins into the sash and tied it round her waist.

"There's been a rockfall on the Great Road," Idurus said as she tied the last knot. "You'll have to go by Ranat's."

"Ranat's Pass, at this hour of night?"

"Why not?" Kalvai said. "You're not afraid of those old tales, are you? You've been down Ranat's a dozen times, and it's on your way to Karsten."

That was true, as far as it went. She had been down Ranat's before—though only in the daytime—and it was on the way to Karsten—but she wasn't at all sure she was going there. She walked out of the Hall, through the courtyard where troops stood under torchlight, and paused at the gate. The guards glanced at her out of the corners of their eyes, then stared straight ahead as the corporal of the watch went by. Outside, a troop of men with mattocks over their shoulders were filing down the right-hand pass into the Great Road. Maybe it was true, what Idurus had said; maybe there had really been a rockfall. Maybe the men were going off to start one. She was not going to find out just now. She stepped off the threshold of the gate, onto the path that led off to the left toward Ranat's. (A point to them.)

A moon in its last quarter had risen behind her, and for the first quarter mile it lit her way down the gorge. A mountain river had run here once, in days of wetter weather, and the sand still tended to be damp. You could scratch a hole in the sand and find water, bad-tasting but drinkable, and the tales told of caverns full of water underground, but she had never seen any caves that might lead to them. The rocky walls had risen high overhead, and the waning moon behind her threw a long filmy shadow ahead of her on the path.

The tales told...she sifted through her memories. She had studied minstrelsy when she was young, might even have gone to the College of Bards if she hadn't met Corus. Of the hundreds of songs and tales she knew,

perhaps five mentioned Ranat's Pass. In four of these, someone had simply gone down the Pass—in the dark, or on a cloudy day—and never been seen again. The fifth, in a catalogue of monsters, listed. "The Death of Ranat's Pass,/as dark as dreadful night."

Here the path turned, as the Pass angled toward the south, and a few steps would take her out of the pale moonlight into complete darkness.

Again she searched her memory. The Pass ran southward for another half mile or so. There it turned west again and down to the desert floor in a steep flight of broken rock, like steps sloppily built by apprentice giants. There were no branches, no wrong turnings, and only one blind alley off to the right somewhere. If she kept her left hand on the wall all the way, she should be all right.

Something shifted in her backpack: the kitten stretching, with a faint mew, and curling up to sleep again. She took a deep breath and stepped into the inky shadows.

She went a hundred paces, two hundred, and nothing happened. A dozen stars shone in a thin line overhead. Three hundred. The darkness that muffled her eyes had sharpened her other senses, and she heard the gravel shift under her feet with every step she took. The rock wall was silky-smooth under her fingers, as if polished by long years of wind or water. The air was heavy with the scent of fog, like the dense fogs that rose out of the lowland valleys outside the Ring. Yet the thread of stars overhead was still bright and clear. Four hundred paces. Her feet were slowing down. The smell of mist was thick in her nostrils, a rank smell like the acid engravers etched brass with, and she stopped. The sound continued, a gently rustling sound like the sifting of sand. Her feet seemed rooted to the ground, her fingers frozen to the wall. The stars still glimmered overhead, but in her mind the lights were going out. Like the sand, she sifted downward into a darkness like sleep or death.

Something was crying in the darkness, a thin wail that set her bones itching. *Shut up and go away*, she thought, but the crying would not let her sleep. If she could sleep for a thousand years it would not be enough, and she

was not to have even ten minutes. "Nurse, bring her here," she said. There was no answer. The baby went on crying, resonating up and down her spine like wind in the temple columns, a sound impossible to ignore, a cry fit to wake the dead. "Nurse, wake up!" Damn whatever godlet had chosen to perpetuate the human race this way, by giving babies mothers who couldn't sleep when they cried. "Nurse? Corus, would you shout for her, please?" She kicked sideways to wake him, but Corus was not there. She was lying on her belly on the sand, half-propped on her elbows. The kitten mewed and wailed in her pack, and under that was the soft persistent rustle over the sand.

She struggled to her knees and turned. Two spots of misty white hung in the darkness, perhaps reflecting the pale starlight, perhaps making a faint light of their own. Impossible to tell how big they were, or how far away: coin-sized, maybe, up close, or melon-sized a bowshot off. They swayed from side to side, slowly. They were growing larger, or closer, or both. Mathali clambered to her feet, her back against the wall, and fumbled for Madus's sword in her boot.

The sifting noise was loud in her ears, and the lights must be close; they were the size of apples, gliding along at shoulder height. She braced her feet and swung the sword, waist high and at arm's length, like someone beating a rug. One of the lights went out, and the other danced crazily back and forth in the darkness. There was a hissing sound like a kettle boiling over, and at her feet a choked bubbling sound. And at that moment the westering moon rose over the rim of the gorge and flooded its sandy floor with light.

To her eyes, long in the dark, the quarter moon's light was as bright as day. Against the stark white of the sand the creature lay black and glistening. It was long and smooth, like a drop of pitch from the World Tree, like a dragon's turd, about a fathom long. It looked, in fact, like a great slug, like the great-grandfather of the yellow slugs that attacked her garden boxes in the summer. Like them it crawled along a trail of slime, a thick acidic slime that fumed and stank in the moonlight before sinking into the sand. And like them it had worn its eyes on two long stalks that rose from the front end of its body. Her sword-stroke had severed the left eye stalk, and it lay against the creature's back, stuck fast by its own slime. The other eye, bent almost double on its stalk, was

rubbing the base of the stump and gingerly touching and peering at its severed end, as the beast whistled and bubbled with pain. Mathali did not stop to sympathize; she ran.

But she could hear the whisper of the sand behind her; the thing was following her, faster than she'd have thought a slug could move. The ground was growing rougher, the sand giving place to boulders; here the vanished stream had run foaming over rapids, and the Death of Ranat's Pass was gaining on her. In all this scrambling about she had not let go of Madus's shortsword. She clambered over piles of rocks, climbed onto a stone as big as a horse. She swung at the eyestalk as the thing slithered past; missed; swung again. The eyestalk fell to the sand and Mathali took advantage of the beast's few moments of agony to climb higher among the rocks. She might be safer with the thing blinded, but not by much; could it hear her, or smell her? Could it feel her footsteps through the ground?

The kitten in her backpack wailed again, and she had her answer; the creature's forward end rose from the ground like a snake (she caught a glimpse of a toothless, sucking mouth) and pointed toward her. Laboriously it crawled up the side of the nearest rock and down the other side, following her. She retreated cautiously, stepping from one stone to the next.

The acrid slime it left on the rocks hissed like soda in the wash, and she realized why the walls of this gorge were so smooth: they had been eaten away by the acids the slug secreted. She glanced at the shortsword. Its blade was dark and discolored, and she must clean it quickly if she ever got out of this. And all at once she understood why Idurus had sent her this way. He had never meant her to take her dowry away; he had other plans for it. He had sent her along this path to be dissolved and eaten by the Death of Ranat's Pass, skin and flesh and bone and clothing all together, leaving only the gold to be picked up in the daylight. "You son of a whore," Mathali said, not addressing the slug; and never mind what this implied about her own Corus. Corus would have understood. The slug shifted its course and slithered toward her.

"You abuser of putrefying goats. You gold-fondling inhabitant of a stopped-up drain," she said, stepping carefully from boulder to boulder as the

beast followed her. "What are you doing with all the gold, Idurus? Buying yourself a new wife, or her a new lover? Not corrupt enough for you yet? Stake them out on the sand and let the blowflies at them." Somewhere around here, the ancient rapids had poured down a cliff in a cataract three or four fathoms high.

With a final taunt, comparing Idurus's virility and personal hygiene unfavorably with those of the slug, she found the dry cataract and climbed to a rocky outcrop above it. A series of little pebbles tossed into its path led the beast right over the edge.

But, as she'd half-feared, it didn't fall. It clung to the rock and oozed its way down. So she took a melon-sized rock, hefted it thoughtfully, and dropped it. While the beast twisted and whistled with pain, she rolled a larger rock into position and pushed it over. It landed with a satisfying splash, and there was a very pleasant silence.

"Another point to me," she said presently. "And what *were* you planning to do with the gold, Idurus?" The thing for which small princes in the Mountain Ring most often needed money was conquest of their neighbors, and she couldn't imagine how Idurus would be doing this for Madus's benefit. "I shall have to keep my ear to the ground. But not around here." She cleaned Madus's shortsword with a bit of rag and some wet sand till it shone again, and put it through her belt at the small of her back. Then, avoiding the steaming slime trails where the beast had passed, she made her way down the uneven steps of the rockslides. By the time she reached the bottom, the Death of Ranat's Pass was dissolving into its own acids, seeping into the gravel beneath it. Mathali kept going. Where there was one of these creatures there could easily be more.

She was near the end of the Pass; only a few hundred more paces till the gorge opened out at the rim of the desert, where the Round Road ran over the shallow sand at the foot of the Mountain Ring. There was an inn there where she could get breakfast and news. After that she could decide on her road—but she knew already that it would not lead back to Karsten. Not yet; and not as herself.

(She could imagine clearly the reception she would get in her father's house. *You poor dear. Go upstairs and rest in your girlhood bed, while I put your dowry back in the strongbox.* And there she'd stay till her father found her a new husband to his taste, and she would never go back to Madus and Janli.)

The kitten was wailing again, probably from hunger. "Hush, Captain," she murmured. "You're a fine brave cat and I'll feed you in a bit." When they reached the road it was still an hour before daybreak, and the inn was still fast shut, so she sat on a bench outside and fed the Captain on shreds of meat from her pack. When he was full, he curled up on her breast and went back to sleep. She cradled him in her arms, rocking him back and forth, crying and crying until the sun should rise and the inn open its doors.

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PENELLI'S HARP

Without intending to, Mathali had come to Moldbar on market day, and the streets were lined with stalls, roofed with lengths of fabric that had been bright red or blue before the sun had faded them. And there were lesser vendors who had brought whatever goods they had bundled up in a blanket to be spread out on the cobbles, and little old women from tiny settlements in the Rind of the Waste who had walked all night to squat here in the sun with a single egg offered for sale on the palm of a skinny hand.

Mathali had found a corner where she could sit and share a cup of milk with her cat, and get her head into the shade of a tall tower, and try to think. Indeed, high time she took thought; for the last two days she had fled along an arc of the Mountain Ring as though hounds were on her heels, but likely she was safe now; Idurus didn't even know yet that she was still alive. Her mind ran over a table of kennings for "hound," most of them fit for describing a man to his discredit, and chose several for use on her brother-in-law.

But though cursing made her feel better, it didn't get her any forwarder, as the country folk said. She had a beltful of gold (most of it now sewn into the hem of her tunic), a change of linen, a shortsword, a kitten, and her wits. None would last forever. One day she would take vengeance on Idurus and get her children back, but before she got that far she would have to make her living. The gold might be enough to pay a small army—if she decided that was the way to do it—but not if she paid it out in living expenses.

Sitting with her head in the shade, watching Captain lap up the last of the milk, she reviewed her choices. She had already decided against going home; her dear father would welcome and protect her, but wouldn't take kindly to her mounting an expedition of vengeance from his comfortable premises.

Besides, royal grandchildren made a better boast living in the royal house, not as exiles at home.

She could take up the bard's art again, whose study she had left off when she married Corus. That would probably mean going to the College and studying for her baldric, spending some of her gold as an investment in the future. Or she could go to work for a merchant, records-keeping and the like, earning her keep and slowly adding to her savings till she knew how best to use them. She turned the alternatives over in her mind, her eyelids drooping, till her attention wandered and she saw Corus going to the funeral fires, saw her children's stricken faces as she left the room under Idurus's eye.

Her eyes flew open and began to shed tears. Muttering "Damned dust," she brushed the drops away. No one had ever a better cause to weep than she, but best she not do it under the eyes of strangers. But she must choose, and that soon. And her chances were best here in Moldbar, where merchants were six-a-penny and some of them must be hiring—and where caravans were forming to cross the Waste, cutting the chord of the Ring to Kelmath and Pittiwig and the Hall of Bards. Oh, for the days of legend, when the gods would send you a sign and tell you what to do!

And she looked across the street and saw the harp.

It shone dully on the merchant's blanket, in front of the ironing board and behind the seven nested cooking pots from Kiriyan. Mathali's glance must have passed right over it half-a-dozen times without seeing it. It was either an imitation of the Amorgan style from a century ago, or (possibly) real Amorgan and very old indeed. The gold mounts inlaid with bright enamel, the twisted shapes that close up would be the interlaced bodies of animals and men, told her that from where she saw across the street. She got to her feet, tucking the empty cup into her backpack and Captain into the crook of her arm.

The merchant was a cat lover, which gave Mathali a useful entry into the encounter. While the old woman cooed and mewed over Captain, how small

he was, how black, even his whiskers the color of ink—Mathali turned over bits of trash and examined the harp.

It was small, standing only as high as her knee, and it was old, all right. The imitation Amorgan work never had the depth of color of the original. Incredibly, it still had all its strings but one, and they were the sooty black of long-tarnished silver. She tapped the soundboard and it answered like a drum, hale and lively, with a faint ring as all the strings sounded together. She touched one string, and the sound rose through the marketplace chattering like a bright fish through murky water. Many people fell silent, and the merchant looked up. "Try it if ye like," she said.

So Mathali sat and took the harp between her knees and began to tune it. The pegs were still sound. She ran an experimental fingertip across the strings—her nails had been cut short for the funeral, she would have to grow them back—and found the tuning adequate. She played soft chords and runs, working around the missing string, testing her hands and her ears. A melody took shape that went with the chords, and after a while she recognized it.

"I grew within a garden green,
A golden rose was I;
The scarlet rose has pierced my heart
And left me here to die."

Penelli's Lament. A sad song, that, and fitting to her state of mind. But Penelli's lover had played her false, hadn't he, whereas Mathali's had been true till death.

"Oh, maidens all, take heed of me,
Give not your heart away:
For when it's gone from out the breast
It leaves you naught but clay."

If she had wanted a sign from the gods, this was plainly it: a harp no musician could let pass from her hand. Why was it sitting in a petty merchant's pitch between the ironing board and the cooking pots? Did the

merchant know its value? How high a price would she insist on? How big an investment in Mathali's future was this going to be? She had a vision of herself, concealed in a privy somewhere, ripping the gold crowns out of her hem that she had just sewn in. She looked up and saw the merchant looking at her, her weathered face gone pale under the tan.

"How much?"

"Two crowns," the merchant said guardedly.

But that was absurd, that was about the price of a good harp of recent make. The merchant should have named her opening price much higher, expecting to be beaten down. There must be something wrong with the harp after all. *Hopes risen high fall back to die*. It would do for a practice instrument, at any rate.

The small crowd that gathered to hear the dickering got a disappointment: the merchant and the harpist, who should have been dueling with glee over the pretty thing, beating the price up and down, went through the motions as if neither cared a straw. Within minutes they had clasped hands on a price of ten shields, just under half-a-crown and about what a student's beginner-piece would bring in a decent shop. She took up the harp in one arm and Captain in the other and set off in the direction of the Waste Gate. She glanced back once and saw the merchant rearranging her stock, looking neither downcast nor triumphant—only relieved, as if she had now one less thing to worry about.

Mathali's next purchase was a soft quilt to wrap the harp in, and next a leather strap to carry it by. By then she had reached Harpmaker's Street and spent a shield on a coil of new strings. But her destination was still the Waste Gate, where she found a caravan bound for Kelmath in the morning. She paid a tenth of her passage on the spot, as the custom was: five parts on departure, four on arrival. That left her with the rest of the day to kill. Plans of all kinds ran through her head, but in the end she went back to the inn where she'd taken a room and practiced till nightfall.

If she'd been listening closely as she played, she might have been forewarned: but she hadn't touched a harp in years and her fingers were stiff and slow. And her heart was heavy; and the leaden sounds she drew from the silver strings suited her mood. Even when she played. "Moonflower," and what was supposed to be a dance of seduction came out like a funeral march, it didn't tally in her mind. She played lullabies for dead infants, keens for plains full of fallen warriors, winter songs, famine songs. And she kept drifting back into "Penelli's Lament."

"O that I had a pair of wings,
With feathers strong and fair,
To bear me from this hateful place
Away into the air."

A knock on the door made her jump. She opened it a cautious thumb's-breadth. But it wasn't an irate innkeeper; it was a young man with a spotty complexion and a cheerful grin and a mug of beer in his hand. "Hey, harper. We've been hearing you through the ceiling. Come downstairs and play for us, and we'll make it worth your while."

Mathali considered this. "Now, I won't deceive you: I'm only recently come back to the trade after years away, and my fingers are still stiff. But I'll do my best for you, and you pay me what you think is fair." (After all, even a few coppers was something gained.)

So she came downstairs, where a dozen young men were celebrating their half-holiday. She played them. "Misty Morning" and. "Where the Trumpets Blow" and "The Unquiet Grave" and, of course "Penelli's Lament."

"But since that mercy cannot be,
Nor ever was before,
Oh then may Death come soon to me,
That I may weep no more."

The room was quiet when she finished the song, with one or two of the lads wiping his eyes where he thought his fellows wouldn't see.

But one of them, a big man with the arms of a journeyman smith, looked round the room and said. "This'll never do. Play a tune to dance to, harper." He pushed his neighbor to the opposite end of their table, and together they began pushing it toward the wall. When a space was cleared, Mathali began a dance called. "Tetti's Round." a lively dance for as many as will.

But it came out sounding like a dirge.

"Sorry," she said, and started over. But the sound was slow and mournful, and even when she forced it up to speed it sounded like a dance for ghosts, not men. The big smith was glaring at her. "I cry your pardon," she said. "My fingers are stiffer than I thought." And she drew a deep breath and began,

"Oh, clearly I remember,
It was on a sunny day,
The honeywagon came to town
To haul the slops away.
A worthy act, a noble deed,
We felt no fear of ill,
Until the wagon foundered
At the bottom of the hill."

A cheerful song, long and improper, with an appropriate meter for a round brawl. The young men seized the barmaids and drew them into the ring: there were still more men than women, but that didn't matter in a round brawl. During the many verses, each with chorus, Mathali had a chance to lay out the rest of her list. She gave them. "Green Willows," a gliding long-dance for partners that gave a few of the boys a chance to flirt with the barmaids and the rest to clown about with each other. Then she sang. "Cross-Quarter Day," a fast piece suitable for a spiral dance that left them shorter of breath than she was and ready to buy her as many mugs of ale as she wanted. She wanted only one; she needed to think.

After the second set she went back upstairs, the good ale warm in her innards and her belt heavy with coppers and double-coppers. Nearly a shield

and a half. She'd never get rich on such takings, but it was a good omen for things to come.

Before she slept she opened the window shutters and looked out over the square. The late moonlight picked out the corner where the old woman had sat on her blanket with the ironing board and the seven nested cooking pots from Kiriyan and the Amorgan harp. The place was empty now: the merchant had gone her way, probably out of the city, not to be found again before daybreak and the caravan's departure.

Nor was it likely she could have answered Mathali's questions if she'd found her. She'd known she had some unchancy thing, that was certain, and was glad to be rid of it. Probably she knew no more.

Mathali drew the shutters in and fastened them, and made sure her door was well-bolted. There were some who'd cut a throat for a shield and a half, but they wouldn't get in tonight.

The caravan left just after daybreak. Not having a mount of her own, Mathali got her choice of what they had to spare: a surly horse with a cast in its eye, or an equally surly pack camel already piled high with bales of cheap embroidery. She chose the camel, as further off the ground and less likely to spook if its rider started making funny noises. And indeed the camel made no objection to the sound of harp music; it turned its head round to look at her, decided the harp was neither edible nor dangerous, and ignored her thereafter.

The Rind of the Waste was thin and dry in these parts, with more sheep-stations than farms. Here and there a little cluster of trees and huts, a few green garden patches, marked places where deep wells had been dug to draw water out of bedrock. On the very edge someone had carved out a hopeful assart, a hut and a few fields fenced in with brushwood. He must have dug a new well, Mathali mused, and wondered what it would do to the flow of his neighbors' wells. This far out, maybe nothing.

Captain woke mid-morning, and crawled out of Mathali's pack to groom himself on her lap. He ate bits of meat and cheese and drank water poured

from her waterskin into her cup; then she must turn the camel out of the path and stop it so that Captain could alight and irrigate the brush.(But, really, for so young a cat he was being very good about spending so much time in her pack. She would have to get him a basket or something.)

All day she practiced, and experimented, and pondered. By the time they reached Vossum's Rocks, their stopping-place for the night, she had decided to believe for the present that the harp was cursed or enchanted, that it would play only sad songs and turn all merry songs into dirges. She could play scales and fingering exercises as fast as she liked, though, so it would do for practice until she could get another harp.

(And get rid of this one? Not unless it turned out to have some other ill effect. The tone was beautiful, and there was a certain market for sad songs. There was a limit to what she could carry, of course. Maybe she'd get a *small* second harp for the merry tunes.) She got down from the kneeling camel, whistling and stretching out her aching limbs. She did not have to unload the camel—a guide did that—but she led it to water and gave it its hay. If she couldn't win its friendship, at least she'd maintain their current armed neutrality.

That night, by a tiny fire of brush and thorn, she sang merry songs for her fellow travelers, and played them sad ones.

"O treacherous is shining ice,
And rotten wood, and mud,
And friends and kin who smile before
They leave you in your blood.
And woman's heart is falser still,
I say it well who can:
No falser thing's in all the world,
Except the heart of man."

Nobody paid her anything for them; they must think it was all laid on. No matter; it was practice.

The following day, once the sun was up, she took the harp and examined it closely. One version of the story told that Penelli had been an Amorgan. Too much to ask of coincidence, that this should be her own harp—but maybe it wasn't coincidence, maybe it was cause and effect. And by the revealing morning light she could see that here, worked in amongst the foxes and thornflowers at the base, was something that must be writing. Mathali didn't read Amorgan, but presumably it used one of the common scripts of its day, which had all descended from the Kendrian syllabary. Here was certainly an A, and this thing that looked like an R must be a P. She puzzled out several words that meant nothing to her, but the last (still assuming that R was a P) read *Penellas*.

Very well; she would assume for the moment that this was indeed Penelli's own harp, cursed or enchanted by her or for her, that it could play only sad songs. She could live with that. There were sages in the world, not a few of them in the Hall of Bards, who could read the Amorgan script, maybe knew how to disenchant the harp. And if they could—even if they couldn't, she could sell it if she chose (at a nice profit) to an antiquary, curse and all. So it would all work out. She had reached this stage in her thinking when the bandits attacked.

They were now some twenty miles deep into the Waste, with no living thing to be seen but scrub and brushrats. Nor could the bandits live out here; they must retreat to a settlement in the Rind between forays. But here they came, their headcloths wrapped round their faces, their swords glinting in the sun.

They were still far off when the caravan turned. The guidemaster on his tall camel rode up and down the line to speed up stragglers. "We are going to shelter in those ruins to our right, the old necropolis. Move it; I say, move it," he shouted at an elderly merchant who protested. "Shelter with the dead is better than none."

He gave Mathali's camel a switch on the hindquarters as he rode by, and the animal snorted and glared and picked up speed. Slowly the necropolis drew nearer. So did the bandits.

The sun was westering now, and hot on their backs. Mathali's mouth had gone dry, but she didn't reach for the skin that held her water allotment. She might have to make it last a long time.

The guidemaster was taking a risk leading them here, in the hopes that the old tombs would give shelter to the pack animals and noncombatants, leaving the armed men free to fight. There might be no shelter. Or it might prove a trap, if the bandits knew the place and could herd them into a corner. But it was the best chance they had.

The camel trotted on, slapping one broad foot after another into the sand. Mathali, sitting perfectly still, felt her heart race as if she were running herself. The mocking cries of the bandits grew louder as they closed in behind. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as she'd been taught. It was said that in the epics was contained all wisdom, including strategy in war. She couldn't think of any that applied—except the old saw, "When desperate, attack." Maybe the guidemaster was planning to do that, once he'd got the rest of them stowed somewhere.

Four armed horsemen went down the line at a gallop, to round up stragglers perhaps, or to guard the rear. The head of the line had reached the ruins.

The pursuing bandits had changed their tune. They were talking to one another in their own harsh tongue, and sounding less enthusiastic, less certain of easy pickings. Mathali turned and looked, peering past the mound of cheap embroidery. Waving their arms, turning to shout at each other, yes, they were falling back. Perhaps they feared the necropolis. That could be good luck or ill—they might know something about it worth fearing.

Mathali's camel stepped over the low line of stones where part of a wall had fallen, and followed its leader between two massive ruined towers into a

wide street, big enough to hold market in. What use in a necropolis for such a thing? Funeral processions perhaps? Here was a fountain, long gone dry, its marble basin filled with sand and thick with scrub. Here a shapely arch, its carving worn smooth by wind and sand, opened into a roofless chamber.

The column halted, or Mathali's part of it did. Behind her the last beasts came trotting into the street, one of the armed men bringing up the rear. They were going to shelter here, she realized: the two towers and the narrow breach in the wall gave the guidemaster a bottleneck that his men could defend. Other openings into the street could be blocked with rubble. There, for example, where that leaning roof had crumbled away to reveal a row of public privies—

In a city of the dead?

"Guidemaster," Mathali called out as the man rode down the line again. "This isn't a necropolis; this was a city."

"Yes, harper, I had begun to think so myself. Can you tell what city it was?"

"Not from what I see here. If I get a chance, I'll go and explore."

"Do so, if you like. We shall be here a while." And he rode on. Mathali signaled her camel to kneel, and it gave her a look of unspeakable disdain and knelt.

Captain yowled, and she opened the pack and let him out. She slung the harp over her shoulder, leaving her pack on the camel. (Anyone who cared to steal a heel of bread and a set of dirty underlinen needed them more than she did.)

Captain was walking, tail high, toward the bank of privies. Finding a drift of sand in a corner, he used it for its intended purpose. Now there was an idea—but Mathali would have to wait till they reached a set out of sight of the crowd in the street.

She followed the kitten between the ruined buildings, though narrow back alleys and grand streets, wide enough to hold a triumphal procession in. The soldiers marching to the sound of gongs and drums; the captives shuffling forward in their chains; the men of the city cheering from the sidelines; the veiled women leaning out from latticed windows to throw flowers to their heroes—

Mathali caught herself. No city had put its women in veils, except for Kiriyan of course, for hundreds of years. What had put that image in her mind? Granted, the city was old enough; but any latticed windows had crumbled to powder as the walls eroded to shoulder height— Ha. Privies.

Inside, shielded from the wind's blast, graffiti she couldn't read overlapped one another on the walls. She began looking for other sheltered places.

A bit of carving here. A trace of paint there. An armless, headless statue fallen from its decorated pedestal—Oh, turds. Where was the kitten. "Captain! Mrrow? Kit-kit-kit-kit?"

She heard him answer, faint and far away, and ran toward the sound, leaping fallen walls and plowing through drifts of sand. Her daughter Janli had given him to her, and he was all she had.

She found him climbing, as though he owned it, a broad terrace that rose a few steps at a time to the largest building she had seen yet, and the best preserved. Some of the walls still reached to the second story, and in a far corner a roofless tower rose above all. The royal house, maybe. She lifted Captain to her shoulder and climbed to where the great doors had been. All their figured bronze had long since been stripped away, and their wooden cores lay crumbling in the sand. She stepped over them and went in.

Even with no roof to shut away the sky, it was dark inside. The sun was ready to set, and the copper-colored light poured in through the door. Once her eyes adjusted she could see that the floor was inlaid with mosaics—and then she was on hands and knees, sweeping the sand away with her hands and

the tail of her cloak, while Captain stood on her back and purred encouragement.

An interlace that ran from square to square, the Great Chain of Being from stones to plants to beasts to men to gods, all interwoven till it took thought to say whose toes were whose. All in the bright, unfading colors of gold and glass. Amorgan work.

So this was Amorga, then, or one of its colonies—it had had several, in the days when rain fell here and the Waste was a vast green field starred with cities as with flowers. Truly, this was beyond chance. Some fate had brought her here, directing the merchant, the caravan, camel and Captain and bandits alike, to bring her here to Penelli's city with Penelli's harp.

Slowly she got up, giving Captain time to climb to her shoulder again. Slowly she unwrapped the harp, and carried it in her arms through the shadowed rooms, looking for a sign. Maybe, when she had brought the harp back where it belonged, they would let her go.

Another fallen door, a layer of windblown sand filling in the crevices where rich carving had been. A curving staircase, all its steps in place. She tested the first with her foot, and with her whole weight, and it held. The wood was sound, even the bronze fittings bright and in place. The stair was enchanted; here she must go. Captain hunched close to her neck as she climbed, his back bristling, his eyes staring greenly into the shadows. Whatever he saw was invisible to Mathali.

But she went on climbing, and a light began to seep down from above; not the red light of sunset but a golden light, more golden than midday, richer and sweeter than remembered summers. Here was the top of the stair, and the door still hanging; it opened as she reached to touch it. Here was a chamber hung with tapestries, and a silken curtain veiling the single window, and the rich Amorgan ornament painted on the roof beams. But she had seen that the tower was roofless; this was all illusion and enchantment. Surely she was doomed. Maybe the stairs had already crumbled; maybe she was lying at their feet, dead already, and didn't know it.

Captain hissed and spat." Hush," she whispered, lifting him from her shoulder, and put him inside her tunic. There was a little bench beside her, and she sat on it and set the harp on her knee.

"My foolish heart, that flew to him
On wings of my desire,
When once he had it in his hand,
He dropped into the mire.
The scarlet rose, all brazen bold
For all the world to see,
Crept down the wall and twined around
And stole my love from me."

There was another sitting in the room, two others; she could not see them, but then she never could see the audience when she was singing.

"Now fare you well, you scarlet rose,
Whom once I loved so well,
And shining halls, and glowing hearth,
And garden green, farewell.
And fare you well, you city streets,
And folk in fine array,
And little houses, little shops,
And children hard at play!"

A man and a woman, sitting together on a wide chair, made for two who were very friendly. She could see them if she didn't look, as certain faint stars can be seen only out of the corner of the eye. His arm was around her shoulders; her hand was on his knee.

"O curse the day I saw him first,
The garden, and the grass,
My chamber, and the window small
By which I saw him pass!
Let brush and thorn possess it all,
No respite let them see

Till scarlet rose and gold entwine,
And that shall never be."

It wasn't like that at all.

Wasn't it?

The bench was longer than she had thought, and someone was sitting beside her. A pale, young face, a wealth of golden hair pulled tightly back into a long tail and bound with pearls; all under a silky veil that trapped the golden light like a cloud in the late afternoon.

Before the gods, Meira, I never knew. The voice was scarcely a whisper, but the meaning was clear.

Nor did I, till it was too late. Be at peace, Kennerick; it wasn't your fault. Penella, you would never have been happy with him if he had married you. You would have had to go out of the house, to the forum or the fields or the hunt, if you wanted to see him. Do you remember, Kennerick, where and how you first caught sight of me?

Do I not? We were hunting the deer in the groves of Elaya, and your horse shied and you were hanging on hand and foot, red-faced and laughing. You'd lost your veil, and your father was not best pleased, but I knew then I'd come to Amorga for better reasons than affairs of state.

And our marriage was true. Did you think, Penella, that you would divide us, when you bound me here? No: Kennerick has remained here all these centuries, for love of me.

The shape beside Mathali bowed its head. In the silence voices sounded far below, a sentry's challenge and response.

Just as his men remained, for love of him. And greatly did he inspire love, Penella, but you could have had a brother's love and a husband of your own, if you had condescended to go on living with us.

"Did she die of a broken heart?" Mathali whispered.

Oh, don't be a fool, harper, Meira snapped. She took poison and bound her curse upon me with her last breath. But every binding must have its release. Since she didn't specify one, that last line of her song—'till scarlet rose and gold entwine'—bound her too, until the release should come.

Penella, Kennerick said gently, we can forgive you, if you can forgive us. Come.

And Penella rose like a wave and moved across the floor like a sunbeam, to fall into her sister's lap and be twined in her arms. Kennerick's hand rested upon her hair. The golden light began to fade. "May I go now?"

What? Oh, yes, harper. Go safely, with our thanks. What chance brought you here?

"No chance, I think, but fate. The proximate cause was a troop of bandits that drove us here for shelter. They're laying siege to us now."

Before Amorga's very gates! The insolence! Kennerick, call up your men. We'll drive those rabble away, and then we can go home.

The light went out like a snuffed candle, and a hot wind blew up and blotted out the stars. "Wait," Mathali began, but her mouth filled with sand, and bench and floor fell away beneath her and the wind picked her up and whirled her away.

Something silken fell across her face, keeping off the hard-blown sand. After a moment she ventured to open her eyes. She was flying, like a shadow in a dream, over the roofless ruins of Amorga. Around her moved the shapes of armed men, a mighty army in the tunics and bronze cuirasses of the old days, the plumes of their helmets whipping wildly in the airstream. Before them soared their well-loved commander, Kennerick armed cap-a-pie, with a lady on each arm. Like hellriders they wailed, veils cast aside, long hair

streaming, hands crooked like claws. It was enough to frighten any bandit into instant disgrace.

They swooped down along the crumbling walls, where travelers huddled among their indignant camels and where bandits strove to mount horses that were already running away in panic. Mathali landed, with a thump, in a drift of sand at the foot of a tower.

She tried taking a breath, and when that worked, she made her arms and legs unclench. She was still holding the harp, and under it Captain, yowling and squirming under her fingers. On her third attempt she got to her feet and made her way back to the street and her companions.

The guidemaster rode back through the breach, leading by the reins a pale desert pony, its flanks still shuddering, its eyes rolling with fear. "Pitti's balls, harper," he said. "Did you have anything to do with that?"

"Well, yes, I might have," Mathali admitted. "I seem to have stirred up something."

"Hmph. Then we won't wait for its return. Mount up!" he bellowed. "We ride *now*. We'll make Kinda's Springs by midnight and drink and eat before we sleep. Move it!" and turning back to Mathali, he handed her the pony's reins. "Here," he said. "If you can ride her, she's yours."

It took perhaps a quarter of an hour for the caravan to form up again, and it took fully that long for Mathali to calm the pony enough to be ridden. She loaded her pack behind the saddle, and her waterskin, and commended the camel with the cheap embroidery to whatever gods it might deign to associate with. Captain, asleep inside her tunic, she left where he was. She played a chorus of. "The Day the Honeywagon Caught Fire," just by way of a test. It sounded fine, a merry tune, fit to dance to. She wrapped the harp up again and took her place in line.

She would have to change the ending, before she sang that song again.

"Till scarlet rose and gold entwine,
And (something) sets us free."

As the pony stepped through the breach in the walls, the starlight fell on something that shone on her shoulder—the fragments of a silken veil. As she lifted them they melted and vanished like new-fallen snow, and the wind blew free between her fingers.

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A VOICE IN THE NIGHT

A hundred voices fell silent, in the brief pause the countryfolk called "a sprite's passing," and for a moment Mathali heard something outside, something like the howl of a distant stormwind, shrill and sweet as a soprano in a fit of temper. But that was absurd: the weather had been as calm as milk all day long.

The Great Hall of the College of Bards was lit with many torches, though it was Midsummer and still bright daylight outside. At the high table Mistress Kleili sat among her honored guests, Finjar the harpist and a pair of lutenists from the south, and the legendary Mai.

The feast was drawing to an end at last; the wine bottles, dead soldiers, stood in uneven ranks along the floor behind the tables, and apprentices on serving duty collected the voiders full of fruit rinds and well-picked bones. Mathali sat in her place among the seniors to whose ranks she had this day been admitted.

"...and then I spent a month in Karsten," Lassarina was saying, "where all the trade routes cross, and anything can be had for the right price; and two City Councilors gave me rings for my ballads, and we rode along the river every day."

Mathali, who had grown up in Karsten, smiled a little and nodded, and emptied her wine cup. On her breast, over a gown of green and gold, lay a broad band embroidered in many colors, the baldric of a trained and accomplished bard, announcing her rank and skill to the patrons and audiences of the Mountain Ring.

She bent her head to stretch the taut muscles of her neck and shoulders, and the folds of a silken head-veil fell around her face: the gift, not of a Councilor, but of her voicemistress. "To hide the grey hairs singing all round the Ring will give you. Look at me.") Three heavy bronze pins held it in place. She wore the gift tonight for gratitude's sake; tomorrow it would go into the saddlebags.

At the high table, Kleili set down her wine cup and rubbed her eyes. She was still very beautiful, with the shining bronze hair framing the perfect oval of her face, although hard work had begun to draw lines around the dark eyes. She had taken up the rule of the College in panicky haste, when the Master her husband had fallen ill or gone mad or whatever he had done—no one ever saw him now—and made it a better place, a temple of music, the gods' workshop.

"...and in Celidor where it's all up and down," Lassarina went on. "rugged peaks and little green valleys set between them, bright as emerald. But my heart wouldn't take all the climbing, and the air is too thin, so I had to go away again."

And Mathali, who had been wedded and widowed in Celidor and driven off while her own heart broke, raised a finger to call for more wine—and lowered it again. She mustn't get to the point of saying things she'd later regret. Instead she murmured an apology—something about visiting the necessary—and rose from her seat. But she slung her harp over her shoulder (the silver strings whispered) as she got up, leaving Lassarina to serenade her neighbor on the other side.

As one shipwrecked, on regaining the shore, turns to look back upon the sea, she stopped in the shelter of the stout pillars that supported the galleries and turned to survey the scene. Lassarina was also in gold-threaded green, and her nervous little fingers ran along the edge of the baldric she had won today. A voice like a dove's, and a deft hand with a melodic line—but unless she or someone else was singing, the woman never stopped talking. All her classmates knew everything about her, nine times over. Mathali found a staircase and climbed into the gallery that ran around three sides of the hall.

It had been a hard seven months, challenging the many examinations on her own skills, without having taken the years of training first. She'd gambled that her years of practice at home, her study of old manuscripts and shop talk with every wandering minstrel who went across the Mountain Ring past the castle door, would serve as well as formal study in the College of Bards; and her gamble had paid off. She had saved money, every crown of which might go to pay soldiers, or spies, or whatever she might have need of, and she'd saved time, whose value she could not even estimate. She'd listened to every performance in the hall, read every book in the library, practiced incessantly, and had no social life at all. Her only confidant had been Captain, but he had grown, as kittens will, from a small inky blot into a good-sized tomcat whom she could no longer carry about in her bodice. (She had shut him into her chamber with a plate of fish, and by now he was either asleep or climbing the heavy fish-nets that a prudent housekeeper had substituted for the usual curtains.)

But it had been worth the risk and the work: she had not only saved time and money, she'd endured only seven months of Lassarina. Like her late-met classmates, she could now go out into the world to charm and delight and move to tears the people of the Mountain Ring and maybe even the wide lands beyond.

And she felt as though she had climbed to the peak of a mighty mountain, expecting to see the countryside all laid out like a banquet before her, and found instead a grey and featureless plain stretching out to the horizon.

It was the sort of thing that happened. She had read, or heard sung, often enough of men who had spent their lives in pursuit of a goal, a kingdom or a treasure or a truth, and having attained it sat down by the fire and grew old.

She shook her head. Not time for that yet, worse luck! With her baldric she could earn her living, go anywhere—yes, anywhere except home to Celidor, where she was known. And yet she must get home, to see how her children were faring under their uncle's hand.

And how to do it? "Well, it'll come to me," she muttered, as one said of a difficult rhyme, a verse that would not jell.

Something rattled overhead, loud even through all the noise from below. Overhead, a man was making his way along the walk underneath the clerestory windows, closing the shutters over each window and fastening its latch before going on to the next. As if a great storm were expected—but it was Midsummer's Day, without a cloud in the sky.

Yes, and the great windows that lined the gallery's outer walls had been shuttered too. What in the world was to do?

The last shutter dogged into place, the green-clad workman climbed down the clerestory ladder and set his foot to the gallery floor with a thump. "Evenin'," he muttered.

"Good evening. Tell me, why are the shutters being closed?"

He stared at her. "Say what?"

"The SHUTTERS," she said at full voice. "WHY?"

"It's Midsummer Night," he said, "same as every year," and walked past her toward the kitchen stairs without another word, leaving Mathali to muse, *Hmmmm, a deaf man in the Hall of Bards, there's a song in that...*

Below, the bards and guests had risen from table and milled about as the trestles came down. The general conversation had swelled into a roar that drowned out even Lassarina's clear voice, and Mathali saw, rather than heard, that the woman had actually cornered Mai.

Mathali was the second to win her baldric in months, not years, by challenge and competition. Mai had been the first, ten years before. She had a great mane of coppery hair and a heart-shaped face deceptively sweet; and a voice like a bell, and a wit like a razor. As Mathali watched, Mai deftly turned

the bubbling Lassarina in someone else's direction and made her escape. Then she glanced up, caught Mathali's eye, and grinned.

"She means well," Mai said some moments later, as they leaned over the gallery railing together and looked on the merriment below. "She's worked hard to earn all she's won—in spite, as I understand it, of indifferent health."

"Her heart's weak, she said."

"Her fleshly heart, maybe," Mai said. "There's nothing wrong with her spirit. If only she never opened her mouth except to sing."

They laughed, and watched the dancers circle round the Hall. "It's warm even for Midsummer," Mathali said. "Perhaps you know: Why do they close all the shutters on Midsummer's Night? The workman said he did it every year."

"It's a new custom since I was here ten years ago," Mai said. She steepled her hands, every finger bright with silver rings, and rested her chin on them and frowned.

"That was a misbegotten drab of a year," she mused. "Nobody had ever challenged for her baldrick before; I had to go through ice and fire to do it. And there was a suicide that year, as I recall, and then right after Midsummer was when the Master fell ill."

"What like was Master Hreder? I never saw him."

"Tall, fair, handsome enough," Mai said. "A musician of the first rank, with a fine tenor voice. Not so admirable as a man. He had favorites, and he was terribly vain—but you understand, he had something to be vain about."

"And then two days after Midsummer—I was there when it happened—he was coming down those tower stairs with Kleili right behind him, and his knees buckled and he fell. Kleili grabbed his shoulder, but he fell out of her

grasp, down to the foot of the stairs. And when they picked him up, his face was as blank as a baby's, and he never spoke again."

"And he's still up there?"

Mai glanced toward the stairs behind the high table, that led up through a blue-tiled archway into the Mistress's tower. "So they say. I've never seen him since. Look, they're opening a new barrel of cider. I'm for another mug. You?"

"Later, thanks."

Mai waved a casual hand (rings glimmered) and hurried down the stairs. The hum and chatter were dying down below, as the guests turned their attention for the moment from talking to drinking. And there it was again, a howl like a bitter stormwind, the kind that snarls and scratches all round the house and tears the shingles off the roof if it can, with a voice in it like the last act of *The Demon Queen*. Ridiculous; she had come to the College in time for all the winter weather they had to offer in these parts: rain and snow, yes, and some nasty storms, but nothing that sounded like this—and as she worried it in her mind, she turned toward the head of the gallery. There was one big north window in its far wall, and its heavy shutters had been drawn across it and dogged tight. Storms hereabouts came from the northwest. Mathali unfastened the latches, clenching teeth and eyelids against the expected gale, and opened the shutters—and nothing. A little pale moonlight, the rustle of a few leaves, not even the call of the night birds: peace and quiet, a placid Midsummer's Night. Mathali raised her hands in a bewildered shrug, and the well-balanced shutters softly fell closed again.

Whatever was to do, it couldn't be the weather. Some whim of Mistress Kleili's, maybe? A symbolic act of shutting out the world, like a mourning veil, to commemorate the living death of a well-loved husband?

But if Mai had her chronology right, it was still two days from the day Hreder had fallen ill. Perhaps they had quarreled on this day and never made it up before he lost his wits, and she had repented it ever since. *You could make a song of that*—a remark her fellow bards and bard-aspirants made a

dozen times a day. It wasn't finding the stuff wherewith to make songs and stories; it was putting them together and polishing them till they were fit to hear in public, that meant work. But with a quiet corner in which to mull it over—and this end of the gallery was quiet and remote, with no stair leading to it, no door opening off it, only the shuttered window at the far end.

No, there was a door in that shallow alcove opposite the window: she hadn't seen it at first because it had been whitewashed, wood and ironwork and all, to blend in with the walls. And its latch had been taken off: it must be no longer used. It had a keyhole, though, big and round as Mathali's eye; her brother Didomus could have picked it in a heartbeat. But he wasn't here; so Mathali sat down on its threshold and drew her harp forward into her hands, the bright enamel inlays muted in the dim light, the silver strings faint as cobwebs.

She sat there for some minutes, fingering over soft chords and short melodic lines, turning over phrases in her mind, rejecting or selecting as possibilities to be left to ripen. She had not yet been able to make a song for Corus; maybe a song for Hreder would lead her into it by degrees.

A *real* bard, of course, would be expected to have a plaintiff for a well-loved patron ready for performance by the morning of the funeral. If she ever acquired a patron, the gods must defend him in good health till Mathali learned that kind of detachment.

Corus was dead and gone to the fire; Hreder as good as dead in a body that still must be fed and turned and cleaned. Maybe she was fortunate; but her heart turned over at the thought.

Now a voice was rising above the distant murmur in the hall: a clear voice, running on and on like a little brook, oh, by the powers, it was Lassarina, Lassarina on approach up the gallery, with (a quick look around the arch) one of the southern lutenists in tow, looking from side to side for means of escape. He was a courteous man, he wouldn't abandon Lassarina in the middle of her sentence; but if he caught sight of Mathali he'd scrape Lassarina off onto her like a muddy boot scraped across a bootjack, and small blame to him. She

shrank back against the whitewashed door with its crude old keyhole. What would Didomus have done? She pulled two pins from her veil and set to the lock. It opened with a scrape and a reluctant click, and she slipped through and pulled it to again.

Inside, half a dozen steps rose to join a landing where a long staircase paused before continuing its spiral upward out of sight. Mathali took a moment to lay the Hall out in her mind's eyes—yes, this was the Mistress's tower, that staircase ascended to her private rooms; this door had been shut off perhaps after Hreder fell ill.

And a great and shameful curiosity rose in Mathali, to steal a look at him, the musical champion felled, the brilliant light in eclipse; but what an outrageous act, to go and stare at a man who couldn't stare back—

—*But perhaps it will help in making the song.* And shaking her head at herself, she slung her harp onto her back and began to climb the stairs.

The tower rose two stories above the rest of the hall, with one round room in each. The lower room was the Mistress's study; Mathali had been here twice, to be accepted into the College and to receive her baldric from the Mistress's hands. A pair of lamps, trimmed low, gave just enough light to make one's way by; the wooden paneling glimmered like polished stone and whispered like a soundboard at every step she took. A big floor harp murmured as stray air currents touched its strings. At the far side of the room another staircase led upwards into darkness. She set her foot on the first step, and listened, and stood still.

Sounds: not music, not snoring even, sounds she had been familiar with once. A man's heavy breathing, with little grunts, like one who dances a lively dance; a gasp, and a woman's long sigh... Oh, heavens. Mathali turned away, face flaming, and sat on the bottom step. Either the Mistress had taken a lover that no one (not even Mai) had ever heard about, or Master Hreder was not quite as dead as reported. Now all was quiet above, and Mathali sat without moving, wondering if she dared rise to steal away, or if she had better give

them time to fall asleep. And that would teach her to go exploring other people's bedchambers—!

"Mmmmmm. Gods, I'm weak." The man's voice, clear and resonant. "Have I been ill?"

"Yes." (Kleili's voice, without a doubt.)

"Those curtains—are they new? How long have I been asleep?"

"A long time. Don't think of it now. Come here."

A long silence. Then the man spoke again. "What day is it?"

"Midsummer."

"What, again? Have I been asleep a whole year?"

"...Several, actually," Kleili said reluctantly. "Don't worry about it now. Everything will be better now."

"Gods." Over Mathali's head the bedslats creaked. "But I've got to worry about it. Who's been running the College while I've been ill?"

"I have. And we've done very well. We've just given the baldric to fourteen candidates, all of them splendid musicians."

"Gods. Fourteen? Tonight? I've got to hear them." The bedslats creaked again. "Where's my bedgown? I've got to hear them tonight before they can get away, make sure they're good enough. I mean, my dear girl, you're a fine musician, but you're no administrator. You'd be tempted to give the baldric to anyone, just because he's a good fellow or needs the work so badly. Where *is* my bedgown?"

"In the wardrobe, I imagine." Kleili's voice was heavy with resignation, and something else. "Must you hurry? You've only just wakened, after so

many years, and we've had only a few moments together. Must you run downstairs this instant, to seize hold of a College that's been running very well without you."

"My dear Kleili." There was an edge in his voice. "The reputation of the College is my reputation, and I won't have it marred by slipshod sentiment. I've got to hear those fourteen candidates first, pull their baldrics if I have to. Then I'll start a new series of competitions, masques, pageants, find some new soloists."

And the wind howled again, louder, closer, angry; and Mathali shivered where she sat. Maybe there was going to be a storm after all. But Hreder said sharply. "What's that?"

"That?" Kleili's voice was smooth as cream. "Why, that's Alma."

A cough. "Alma?"

"*You* remember Alma. She spent her whole five years here scheming her way into your bed: *she* knew how soprano solos were achieved in this College! By the gods, you two deserved each other. Then in her last year you caught sight of somebody else and let her drop again, and on Midsummer's Day you denied her her baldric. Remember?"

"Who told you that?"

"You fool of a tenor, I was *there*. Do you remember what happened after that? She hanged herself in your stairwell, and every Midsummer she comes back, knowing you'll be awake again, hoping that *this* time she can make her way to your throat."

And the howling was growing louder, nearer, and Mathali remembered that she had never fastened those shutters again, just as the heavy panels swung open below and crashed like heavy drumbeats against the wall. The voice of the stormwind resonated in the stairwell like an organ pipe, less like weather now, more like an anguished voice. Something was fumbling at the door.

The door, she had left that unlocked too. It rattled on its hinges, sprang open and slammed back against the alcove wall. A gale wind came pouring up the stairs, hot against the skin, cold in the bone. Sheets of paper flew through the room, books fluttered their pages, dust devils took shape in eddies behind tables, aumbries, the great floor harp. Clutching her harp against her breast with one hand, Mathali beat flying fragments out of her face with the other. Step by uncertain step, cautious of loose things on the floor, she made her way across the chamber to the spiral stairs.

A step downward, another, while the wind whistled in her ears and that damned head-veil whipped about like a battleflag. At the foot of the stairs, backlit by the gallery lamps, something hung in the air.

Paint a woman's face and body on the wind, sculpt it in flowing sand: moments later, it would look like this. The wide mouth, the staring eyes, the rounded breasts were still recognizable, but the arms and legs were flowing away in wisps like the long fair hair. The eddies behind the eyes gathered the torchlight as dewdrops gather sunlight: they shone with a deadly fire. And all the time the wind howled and raged, pouring up the stairwell with blinding speed, but the shape within it drifted upwards slowly as the shadow of a cloud. The wide, distorted mouth was moving, the thin voice rose clear and true above the howling. It *was* the last act of *The Demon Queen*, the glorious death song that only one voice in fifty could sing.

Mathali, too, seemed to be moving slowly, as if underwater: there was time to feel a great pity well up inside her and to think, *Merciful gods, what a waste, a wasted talent, a wasted life—Hreder has a lot to answer for*, all while she raised her arm to shield her eyes and Alma's tattered feet drifted up another step.

She was getting close now, Mathali could have reached out and touched the fingerwisps. Instead she took the harp by its base and held it before her like a shield. All sorts of unchancy things feared silver—

And the windborne thing broke like a cresting wave and fell back upon itself, back down the stairs, leaving something like quiet in its wake. Mathali

followed it down as best she could, for her ankles felt weak and her knees wanted to shake. If it had fled outside, if she could slam and bolt the shutters on it again—

The wind hit her like a slap from a giant's hand, and knocked her sprawling along the polished floor in a muddle of pain and fear. She clutched at her scattered wits and discovered that the pain was mostly in her ankle, twisted under as she fell; the fear was for her harp, but it had fallen atop her and should be safe. She felt a moment's idiotic fear for Captain, before one memory kicked another in the tail and reminded it that she no longer carried a kitten in her bosom.

She got to her knees, not daring to trust her ankle yet. Alma's shape hung in the air before the open window; a good strong push with the harpstrings might drive her out altogether, but Mathali couldn't muster one at the moment. The fiery eyes were turning this way and that, between the staircase that led to Hreder and the corner where Lassarina crouched beside the trembling lutenist. If Alma would only stay put for a moment, maybe to choose between targets, there might be a chance.

Then the cloudy mass burst open and blew out a wind that knocked Mathali flat again, tore the harp out of her hands and sent it sliding along the floor. It came to the bottom rail, teetered for a moment on the floor's edge, fell into the Hall below.

For a moment, Mathali despaired. Then a clear voice that was certainly not Alma's said. "Oh, turds." And a moment later something was fumbling at her head. "What is it? Can't you walk? Here, let me fill in." It was Lassarina bending over her, plucking out the bronze veil pins. She tossed the veil over her own head and thrust the pins in at random. ("I'm hoping that thing can't see too good.") Heyo! Wraith! Your top A was flat! Can't catch a flea—" and she danced in place, and set off at a run, the wind-thing roaring and drifting behind her.

Mathali got up cautiously. The pain was receding, her foot was willing to hold her up, just. How long before she could follow the wraith that followed

Lassarina round the three sides of the gallery?—but she had no weapon: no silver, no garlic, nothing holy.

"Here." An impatient hand turned her round by the shoulder.

"Mai? How did you get up here?"

"Kleili's stair, it was the closest. It fears silver, right, like all the best ballads?" She was stripping the rings from her fingers as she spoke. "That veil won't deceive it long, it'll be back, maybe you can slap it to death. To something."

Mathali began covering her fingers with rings. Behind Mai, just outside the alcove, stood Hreder, mother-naked, gaping, and Kleili in a frost-white silk robe. Her hand was on his shoulder. Mathali jammed the last ring onto her thumb, a wide band engraved with rose leaves, and turned away. Something about Hreder was in her mind, but it would have to wait. At the other side of the gallery there was a wild cry, a stumble and a thump. The wraith had turned back, glaring at Mathali across the width of the hall, its wisps and tendrils drifting like foam about a whirlpool. It passed through the railing like a cloud of smoke and drifted toward her. Those below turned frightened faces upward to watch the wraith pass overhead.

Mathali stood still, her arms at her sides, her hands in the folds of her skirts, and watched Alma drift across the open space. Now that her ankle would permit her to run, now she must not run. A little closer. The gale wind blew tendrils of her hair out of the confining braids, whipped them about her face and into her eyes and nose. The distorted mouth sang rage and vengeance. Closer, closer, close enough. She raised her arms and clutched with silvered fingers below the mouth, where the throat might be.

There was *something*. It flexed in her hands like a snake, fluid as a stream of water, but she tightened her grip and hung on. Dragged this way and that, she clung as if to a rope and slowly sank to her knees.

And it was gone. She fell flat to the gallery floor again. The sudden quiet was like going deaf. A few yards away, Kleili stood in her white robe, Hreder fallen at her feet.

"Gods' teeth," Mai said. The copper-haired bard was as pale as milk. "Are you all right? We'd better see to Lassarina."

They walked together round the three sides of the gallery. Lassarina lay at the farther end, a crumpled heap of gold and green, the white veil hiding her face.

"Ah, no. Is she dead? Dead of fright?"

Mai's eyes flashed. "Of fright? Never." Gently she turned the body over. Lassarina's face was tranquil, as though she slept. "I've seen men that died of fear; it lingers on their faces. No, it was her fleshly heart that gave way, too feeble to keep pace with her spirit.

"No matter." Mai got to her feet. "I'll make a song for her, and her name will outlive us all."

Mathali's eyes stung. She bent to retrieve the silken veil and the bronze pins, which she would have good reason now to keep. The simplest disguise—and the word *disguise* began to ring in her head like a great bell. "Mai? Where do they know most about disguises?"

"Theatrical paint, or magic?"

"Either. Both."

"Plenty of makeup artists on Theatre Street in Pittiwig, only fifty miles from here. You might find a few mages too, in the special-effects houses."

"Very good." She pulled another ring from another finger. Now she knew how she would return to Celidor. Tugging absently at the wide ring on her thumb, she raised her eyes and looked down into the Hall. There sat Finjar

with her harp, running his fingers happily over the strings; he must have caught it as it fell. And above, at the other end of the gallery, stood Kleili with tears trickling down her face, like the final tableau of *The Demon Queen*, while men lifted Hreder's unconscious body onto a stretcher.

Kleili grabbed his shoulder, and he fell, and never spoke again. That wasn't how Mai had told it, but she'd bet that was how it had happened. *And every Midsummer you'll be awake again*—Kleili had done this of her own will, by poison, magic, or leechcraft, silencing her husband for the sake of the College and its students—and for her own pride. She looked up sharply and caught Mathali's eye. Her lips narrowed.

Mathali shook her head "no." *I'll never tell if you don't.* And Kleili turned away, to follow Hreder up the stairs.

Mathali realized she was still pulling at the ring on her thumb. It fit loosely enough where it lay, but she couldn't get it up over the joint. "I'm sorry. Maybe if I get some soap?"

"No, keep it, I make you a gift of it," Mai said. "I suspect you've earned it. Either that, or you're going to need it. Now we'd better go downstairs: you need to get your harp back from Finjar before he makes it an offer of marriage, and I want just one more cider. Then I've got to get to work."

In the morning, under the mild sunlight, Mathali packed her saddlebags and rode away, her harp on her back, her cat on her saddlebow. From a window of the Hall she heard Mai singing:

"So raise your glasses high, me lads,
The candles set aflame,
And honour well the memory
Of Lassarina's name..."

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THE MASTER OF KANTHURI

Peace is a good thing, Valmai told herself without enthusiasm. *The arts flourish, and children grow up underfoot without fear*. She tugged at the swordbelt whose buckle was trying to dig a hole into her waist. *And released mercenaries get the opportunity to lose that extra stone of weight*.

It had probably been a mistake for her to come to Kanthuri looking for work. The City of Sorcery, far from seething with intrigue, an ill-luck spell on every back and a dagger in every belly, a ready market for bodyguards—

The place was an immense bazaar. Little hedge-witches sold their herbs and charm-bags under every tree in the square. Glowing runes on the shopfronts offered locks, wards, self-starting rug cleaners, and cures for the gripes. Costlier spells could be tailored to your needs in expensive offices whose chastely labeled doors opened discreetly off the arcades. Nobody used so much as flint and steel any more, when he could buy a little daemon to light the fire for him. And nobody troubled to hire a sword, when he could buy an Eye to guard his back for the price of a mutton chop and a loaf of bread.

Wrong phrasing to have used. Valmai swallowed and set her jaw a little tighter. And a little shiny thing came fluttering down past her eyes, twinkling like an aspen leaf, and fell at her feet with a little *plop*.

A silver piece with wings, small transparent wings, and as she watched, it shook them off like an ant-queen on her bridal day, and lay still in the dust. Valmai covered it with her toe and look casually upward.

One of the window-shutters of the floor above, soft blue against the dusty white of the walls, was open just a hand's breadth. An eye peered through for

an instant and a white finger beckoned and withdrew.

Valmai yawned, stretched, and bent her back till it creaked. She tucked the coin into her boot and, scratching casually, wandered toward the front door of the house. The doorknob opened a blue eye and looked at her, blinked, and let her in.

The chamber upstairs was hung with dark silk, swathes of black and violet and midnight blue. The dark-robed occupant wore the gold mask of a Master Sorcerer.

"I think you are for hire," the dove's voice said, quiet in the quiet room.

"You think correctly, Mistress," Valmai said. "I can fight, shoot, ride, swim, carry messages, and hold my tongue."

"And you are not a magician."

"No, Mistress. I had a cousin once took up the trade, but it never called to me."

The gold mask tilted a little to one side, considering this. "Good," she murmured. "I propose that you shall go tonight to a feast at the house of the Master of the City. You'll be disguised, of course. You will eat and drink, but not so much as to get sick or drunk. You will keep your eyes open. If you bring me back the news I need, I'll give you a gold piece. If not, you have my silver already, and you'll have eaten. Are we agreed?"

"Sounds good to me, Mistress," Valmai said. "What news am I to seek?"

"Since the Trout Moon was new," the sorceress said. "there have been four attempts on the life of the Master of the City." She raised a finger, and the sight unrolled before Valmai's eyes.

A cool morning after rain, grey dawnlight shining on the wet flagstones, the last few torches still burning at the doors of a great hall. The heavy doors

opened and three men appeared, dressed like princes for the hunt. Grooms led their horses up to the stairs' foot, the horsemen began to descend—and the one in scarlet caught his right spur in his left boot and stumbled, and would have fallen headlong if his companions had not seized his cloak. He sat down in a heap on the topmost stair, rubbing his ankle, while the horses shied and danced and clattered on the flagstones.

A gold mask floating like a full moon above a brazier. Deep in the coals, small manlike figures danced, gold and glistening. A hand passed over them like a cloud; they crouched and crept like lizards, blue and cold. And the hand came down again, and they were gone. The gold-masked sorcerer covered the brazier with its lid, shrugged, turned away—and his flowing sleeve caught in the brazier and set it flying. Coals scattered, the sorcerer's robe smoldered and flared. He shrugged out of it, cursing and stamping as servitors ran up with buckets of water.

A garden where blue-flowered vines hung heavy on trellises and white lilies lay on ponds that flanked the path. A lady walked between the lilies in a gown tailed like a peacock. A man in a scarlet cloak followed her, walking softly like a cat after a bird. But as he drew near her, he trod on her skirt, and she shrieked and jerked it from under his feet, and he did a little dance of imbalance on the path's edge and went headlong into the pool, while the lady screamed and screamed.

A high-vaulted hall, the scullions sweeping the floor and lighting the lamps before the tables should be set up for dinner. A man in cloth of gold striding among them, accepting their awkward bows with gracious little nods, till his spur caught in his boot (again!) and he staggered against the wall where a cleat held a fell-rope that stretched toward the ceiling. The man in gold pushed himself off from the wall and strode on, not realizing the rope had sipped from the cleat, strode on into the middle of the hall, where the great chandelier was falling from the vault—but at the last moment he saw or sensed the thing, threw up his hand with a word of power, and the chandelier with all its flaming lamps came to rest in the air, an arm's length above his head.

"Well," Valmai said as her sight returned to her. "any one of those could have been a simple accident. But all four? I find I share your suspicions, Mistress. And you fear that someone's sorcery is working the harm of the Master of the City."

"Just so. Discover for me who it is, and I shall pay with gold."

"I'd have thought your own power could trace that power to its source."

"No," the mask said coldly. "Either the power is too well shielded, or the wielder knows me too well, and distracts when I search by showing me what I want to see. That is why you are going to this feast in my place." The white finger lifted again, and Valmai's own shape appeared to her, more closely mirrored than in any polished silver. As she watched, the image changed, grew darker, sprouted a pointed beard, put on a robe of gold-embroidered green and a well-fed paunch. Valmai patted it and felt emptiness, and the comforting hilts of her sword beneath the insubstantial silk.

"While wearing this concealment, you must not speak," the sorceress said. "I have given you the appearance of a rich trader from the southern deserts. Whatever anyone says to you, nod and bow and smile—yes, that's right—as if to keep them in doubt of how much you understood.

"This is your admittance to the feast; and this, put it in your ear." The white hands held out a gilded leaf of parchment and a golden earring set with a green jewel. "Through this I shall be able to see what you see; perhaps I'll pick up something you might miss. Evening is falling; if you set out now you'll arrive as the doors open. Go: keep your eyes open, and *don't speak*."

Valmai reached the Master's Hall as the torches sputtered into light and the doors opened. Standing between a Tarkish princelet and the guildmaster of the coopers, she presented her gilded leaf and was passed in without a word.

She spent her first quarter-hour discreetly feeding. Tables lined the walls, full of little morsels that could be eaten without plate or knife. In the center of the hall a firepit had been filled with coals, and a little wizened cook stood there, glazed with sweat and the heat of his own fire, grilling little birds and sausages on skewers. Fountains flowed with wine. The feast proper, when the guests would sit down, was a couple of hours in the future. It was bad manners to eat as though you were hungry, but a nibble at one table and another added up. Valmai drank as much flavored water as she did wine, to keep her head clear. She prowled up and down the hall, looking at the tapestries and the furnishings and the glittering guests, and if anyone spoke to her, she bowed and nodded and smiled.

Trumpets sounded, and a murmur went through the crowd. Eyes turned toward the bronze door behind the dais. A gong shivered in the air, and the Master of the City stepped out in his cloth of gold.

It came to Valmai suddenly that in all those charmed visions she had never seen the Master's face. Now she saw it, and blinked above her dapper little beard: the Master of Kanthuri was a fresh-faced youth, perhaps twenty years old, perhaps not even that. Was the Mastership of the City a hereditary office? Must be, to light on such a young (if richly gifted) sorcerer rather than on his experienced peers. Well, if it worked, it worked. The Master had bright blue eyes and a rather engaging smile on his long-jawed face; he bowed to the company and waved to a friend across the hall. Then he put his foot to the steps and everyone in the hall froze, their sentences left unfinished, the food or drink halfway to their lips, watching. It was like the story of the enchanted palace where everything slept for a hundred years, from the prince on his throne to the flies on the dungheap, and the candles shone without flickering or burning down and the fountains paused in midair.

But the Master descended the steps without slipping, and the guests shook off the moment of rigid attention, and went on as if nothing had happened. And of course nothing *had* happened. But it showed that others besides Valmai's employer had noticed the Master's string of near-misses.

He strolled among the tables, tasting and talking to the guests. Valmai circled, staying not too close to him, not too far, and watched him.

It was some minutes before she noticed that there was another circling the room as she did, watching the Master of the City: a man of forty or forty-five, his grey hair and beard neatly trimmed, wearing a grey robe that would have looked too plain to be in this hall, except for the light of gold threads that shone in the shadows of its folds. Pace, turn, a polite word to a guest, a nod or a bow to another; but always five or six paces away from the Master, and always watching him. The man did not look evil—but in this city of sorcerers and illusions, what did evil look like?

After a few more minutes she discovered two other watchers—constant watchers, as distinguished from those who glanced and looked away and glanced again out of the corners of their eyes between sips. These were two ladies, young and richly dressed, and one of them—if she would only turn her head *away* for a moment—yes, one who had walked in a peacock gown the day the Master fell into the lily pond. She was dark and the other was fair, and they stood together like sisters, whispering and watching the Master.

And he knew they were watching, and he too was glancing out of the corner of his eye. Valmai told herself to watch and observe, not speculate: there could easily be no more in this than young men and women looking at each other with desire. She took another turn round the firepit; passed the two watching ladies; bowed, and nodded, and smiled.

A singer's voice rose into the air, and many of the guests turned to listen. The Master of the City half-turned and took a step, his eyes still on the ladies, and (so it seemed) his ankle turned under him and he fell to one knee. For two measures the singer's voice hung suspended in the air, with no other sound to compete – and then the Master waved aside an offered arm and got up, his face flushed. Everyone started talking again, drowning the music out. The Master continued his progress along the tables, but he seemed to be favoring his right foot, as though it hurt, or its sole were slippery.

Valmai, with four people to watch closely and the rest of the crowd to keep an eye on, felt her heart beat faster. It was like being in a skirmish, where she might be attacked from any side without warning and must watch all ways at once; it felt like familiar ground.

No wonder, though, that the sorceress had sought out Valmai to do her watching for her. Magicians had to learn to concentrate on one thing at a time, blotting out all else. Only the greatest could handle several spells at once. It made it hard for a sorcerer to fight, unless he could reduce the whole equation to *one* army equals *one* firestorm, flood, or elemental to take it out, and one purpose of the golden masks of Kanthuri was to induce a psychic tunnel vision.

The Master had turned away from the ladies now—his suspicions confirmed, perhaps, or maybe he was ashamed to meet their eyes after his stumble. Valmai reminded herself again how young the sorcerer was, most of his life taken up with a regime of training that had left him little time to notice girls.

The man in grey moved in closer to the Master. Valmai did the same, slipping in behind the Tarkish princelet to shield herself from view. She stood so close behind the Tarkite that she heard him mutter to the courtier standing next to him. "The man in grey, now, who's that?"

"The Lord Isvan," the courtier whispered. "The Master's uncle."

"Uncle, ha. And if the Master dies without issue, does the uncle succeed?"

"Oh, no," the courtier said. "he's uncle on the mother's side. No, the title would pass to one of the noble families, whichever could show the closest kinship. Descent is complex in this city; we've all married each other over and over again." And he laughed, a humorless bleat, as if his mind were uneasy.

Futter it, Valmai thought. there goes my best suspect; unless he's been bribed.

The Master had reached the far end of the room and was making the turn back, limping slightly; the guests used their respectful bows as opportunities to back away. The Master was walking through a little bubble of empty space, and he had realized it, and the red flush was returning to his face. If the steward of the house had any sense, he would call for the dinner tables now and get everyone seated before there was trouble. (But *Knives*, Valmai thought, *fish bones, glass goblets, a careless swallow that leads to choking.*)

Someone tittered—not the courtier in front of Valmai—and the Master whirled about to confront the man. But what stood there was no man. The first thing Valmai saw clearly was a thing like a seal's flipper, parting the air like a curtain and passing through it into the hall. At first it seemed to have no head; then it seemed to have several; and its body was like a thundercloud. Flashes of light flickered over it, like heat lightning before a storm, and the hall was growing very warm.

Those guests who were sorcerers muttered and gestured, raising shields for themselves; the others hid behind them, or tried to escape from the hall. Lightning was moving over the walls now; and the torches were going out. And the Master of Kanthuri grinned like a wolf and raised his hands, a faint golden light growing steadily between them.

The thing bent like a breaking wave, and threads of lightning danced between its body and the walls, and it raised its flippers to throw a great bolt at the Master. The glare fell away from him like waves from a pillar of rock, and he laughed. The golden light, glowing like a tiny sun in the hall, rose from his hands and hovered above his head. A second began to grow between his fingers.

The Tarkish princelet and the nervous courtier had gone to ground, and Valmai found at least partial shelter behind a fast-chanting sorcerer squatting toadlike behind a shimmering green barricade. She gripped the hilts of her sword and remembered that she need only say something, anything, to drop the fat merchant's semblance like dirty linen. And part of her was saying, *Well, this is more like it: rumbles, monsters, sorcery, maybe a need for a sword.*

Another bolt, another glowing ball—there were three hovering over the Master's head now. (*The boy's good. Blood and training, you can always count on them.* The thunderous shape cast its bolt at his feet, as if the unseen shield were open at the bottom like a bell; but he leaped aside, light as a leaf, and the lightning burned itself out on the pavement. (Was this the same man who had tripped over smooth floors and his own feet?)

The three golden suns rose together and began to circle (three of them at once! The boy was *very* good.) They swooped through wider arcs as they approached the thundercloud. It twisted and turned, trying to follow them, casting bolts almost at random; but they danced rings around it, and apparently it had nothing like eyes in the back of what might have been its heads. Fringed paddles raised, their tips blue-white with heat lightning, it tried to trap the golden spheres against the wall. Then, while two of them distracted it, the third ducked in and got it from behind. It roared like an earthquake and began to collapse. The air tingled; its pungent smell was agreeable, like clean laundry.

Just as the thing was shrinking out of sight, the Master called out three words in a tongue unknown to Valmai, and a little, ugly, manlike thing appeared, no bigger than your hand. The master spoke to it again, and it dived into the thunderous darkness just as it shrank to the size of a pumpkin and disappeared.

The guests picked themselves up and cheered. The Lord Isvan, sweat pouring from his face, embraced the Master of the City with what seemed like real affection. Valmai reminded herself to breathe.

The torches burned brightly again; the servitors crept out of the corners to right the tables that had toppled, sweep up the debris and mop up the wine. The little cook at the firepit turned his skewers and threaded fresh ones to replace what had burned. The Master slapped his uncle's back and turned toward the firepit, and—oh, gods, there on the floor where the brooms hadn't reached yet, that was a bunch of grapes under his foot—

"LOOK OUT!" Valmai shouted, but the Master's foot had already slid over the grapes and his impetus was carrying him straight into the firepit. Valmai took a flying leap, met him in midair and knocked him aside. (The sorceress's earring had fallen from her ear; she heard a little golden clatter on the floor somewhere.) They crashed to the floor together in a tangle, as close as lovers but not nearly so private. Valmai muttered. "Sorry," and rolled off the Master's chest, and in that moment she realized, *I know what's wrong. I know what the problem is.*

The Master was getting his breath back. "Who are you?"

"I was the fat merchant in green. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Who *are* you?"

"Valmai is the name, Master; a hired sword from the west."

"Who hired you?"

"One of your fellow sorcerers, Master—she didn't favor me with her name—offered me gold to learn who's been casting spells against your life."

"I'd pay gold for that myself. Did you find out? Who is it?"

Valmai held up her hand to check the flood of questions. "Let me be clear: I haven't a clue as to who sent that thing." She gestured over her shoulder towards where the thunderbeast had stood. "I have a few ideas, maybe. That little creature you summoned—it's gone off to follow the monster back to its patron?"

"If it can."

"Then, while you're waiting for it: where I come from, we have a saying, 'Who gets his hauberk?' In other words, if you died, who would benefit?"

The Master looked blank. "I don't know."

"Here's my idea, Master: set the genealogists to figuring out who would succeed you if you died without an heir—and then find out who would succeed *him*, just in case."

"I will." Valmai got up, and so did the Master, and saw the dark lady standing at the edge of the crowd, tears streaming down her perfect cheeks, while the fair-haired lady tried to tug her back. "Don't cry, Lindia," he said gently. "It's going to be all right." He turned back to Valmai. "Now. You were saying?"

"As for your other problem, Mater, I think I also have a few ideas."

"You needn't keep saying 'Master,' " he said. "My name is Ardani. I think we're going to be friends."

"I don't know if that's what you'd call it," Valmai temporized. "First, listen to what I have in mind."

The doorknob opened a blue eye, squinted at her in the morning sun, and let her in. The sorceress sat in her golden mask above the dark panels of silk. "You managed to lose my earring at a very interesting moment. What happened?"

"Sorry, Mistress. It was knocked out of my ear during the scuffle when the Master nearly fell into the fire. But he escaped unhurt; don't worry. I've come to collect my payment, Mistress. You wanted to know who was casting spells against the Master of the City, that he might die in an accident. The answer is: Nobody."

"What?"

"I said,'Nobody,' " Valmai repeated. "The Master is seventeen years old. Since the time he learned to speak, he's been trained in sorcery and practically nothing else. They did teach him to ride—he's never awkward on horseback, or at his bench—but they left him to struggle through his adolescent clumsiness on his own. Sword practice or dance lessons might have helped him, but there was never time to spare; and because he saw so few people his own age, he never realized that youthful clumsiness comes to everyone; he thought there was something wrong with *him*.

"Do you remember your youth, Mistress? When it seemed that all eyes were watching you, and the more you tried to walk like a lady, the likelier you were to stumble? The gods know I do. Never mind. The trouble's named, the answer's found. The Master's going to be trained, with the sword and in the dance, until he learns not to trip over his feet. I give him half a year, maybe a little more; he's a quick study."

Cold eyes glittered behind the golden mask. "Get out."

"My payment, Mistress. I did bring you the news you asked for."

"You brought me nothing. Get out."

" 'Who spelled the Master to trip and stumble?' 'Nobody,' " Valmai said. "I'll have my agreed-on payment, Mistress, or my lawshark will see your lawshark in the courts."

"You fool. Lawyers in this City don't work on speculation. Where will you find the fees?"

"I hocked your earring," Valmai smiled blandly as the sorceress hissed behind her mask. "You can have the token for a gold piece. Or would you rather traipse round to every pawnshark in the City, looking for it?"

"Take it, then." With her right hand the sorceress flung the gold; with the other, a bolt of darkness that seemed to go around Valmai or through her without doing harm. Valmai smiled again, and tossed back the pawnshard.

"Thank you, Mistress, it's been a pleasure doing business with you. Let me give you another bit of news for free. The Master's searching the underworld to find the chap who sent the monster; the temple clerks are searching the genealogies to find who might benefit from the Master's death. So if you were planning to find him and join forces, my advice is, Don't.

"Oh, yes, and Lord Isvan has opened negotiations with the noble family I-forget-its-name; the Master is going to marry and get an heir as soon as he possibly can. Good morning."

"Go, then," the sorceress spat. "Go and we'll see how long it takes you to drink up my gold; how long before you're starving in the streets again."

"Oh, please don't be concerned on my account," Valmai said. "I have employment for this half-year at least, maybe more. Training." And she walked through silence down the stairs and into the morning sun.

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AS THREE TO ONE

And the moral of the tale is, Valmai told herself, don't buy the pig in the poke, or the cat in the bag, or the horse without looking at his teeth. The Prince of Almora had hired her to command a century in the defense of Huffsford at his eastern border against Ulvaeus and his mages and his unnatural armies. She had ridden out expecting to find a hundred rough native troops, and found a hundred shivering farmers with spades and hayforks and their hearts in their boots.

The place stank of fear. After walking through the near-deserted town, empty of any scent of life, to descend the bank into the water-meadow was like wading out into a sewer—and the laundries were not open for business. All the noncombatants had been sent away west, days ago—young children, women with child or giving suck, the feeble elders—and *these* were the best Huffsford had to send into battle. They sat or lay on the short grass, one by one or in little groups. Few spoke. Many hid their faces.

And what more could she expect, after all? They weren't soldiers; they'd had no training; to them a fight meant two or three young hotheads punching each other's noses behind the alehouse of an evening. Nothing in their lives had readied them for a day when they would have to stand, billhooks and pitchforks in hand, shoulder to shoulder—if none of them broke and ran—against an army of gangers.

It was the fear of being recruited, of course, that frightened them so deeply. Fall in battle against an ordinary foe, you were worms' meat. Fall to undead gangers, you'd soon find yourself fighting again, against your own people. None of the Prince's mages were prepared to say whether you would realize it, know who you had been and what you had become.

It was true what the fellow had said—who had said it? probably Baron Bodo; he had said practically everything in his long life—"in combat, the moral is to the physical as three to one." These were strong young people, with muscle enough to put up a fight—but unless Valmai could put the heart back into them, they wouldn't lift a hand even in defense of their homes.

Gods, Valmai said, I shall do the best I can with this material, such as it is. Afterwards, we shall discuss this at greater length. Wherever we happen to be.

"We've got, what, about an hour before sunset?" she said to the man beside her. "I'd better look the place over. The river's that way, right?"

"Yes, Captain," the man said; she would remember his name in a moment. "Among the trees there. And on the other side another water-meadow, it's where the river spills out in the winter floods. Then it slopes up again to the plains." Kember, that was his name, son to the town headman, left in reluctant command till Valmai came.

Little enough traffic there'd been this spring, but the wheel-ruts still showed faintly through the green grass. Valmai and Kember followed them through the trees to the water's edge. The river was about a bowshot in width. Nodding irises, their blossoms a brilliant blue, marked a path through the shallow water to the other side. "Any other places near here where you could get across?"

"I'm afraid so." Kember, no fool, realized why this was bad news. "About a quarter-mile downstream there's a big shallow place. And a few shallow patches upstream. You can tell where the shallow water is; the blue-flags grow there."

Valmai considered this. "Hmmmm. Are there any particularly deep places? A bottomless pit with a strong undertow would be ideal."

Kember forced a smile. "I dare say it would, Captain. There's nothing like that around here, just the younglings' swimming-hole. Nice and deep, safe to

dive in, but no undertow."

"Upstream from here, or down?"

"Downstream. Right before the other ford; it's a good place for fishing, too, if you can keep the children out. Captain, you're smiling. What have I said?"

"Later," Valmai said, and splashed across the ford to the eastern bank. She followed the wheel-ruts up the bank till she reached the plains. Tough, close-nibbled turf covered them, good sheep country, but the sheep had all been sent west before the advancing troops could reach them.

"How far away are they?" Kember asked.

"Don't know yet. When I left the capital, the Prince's mages were sending out birds that reported the enemy some five days' march from the river. And that was four days ago."

"So we could see them here as early as tomorrow."

"We might." The sun had disappeared behind the trees, and the shadow was pouring over them, but there would be some daylight left on the other side of the river. "One more thing. Where's a good tall tree? You grew up here; you must know where the good climbers are."

"Yes, Captain. In fact, this one here." He led her to a tall horn-oak, its bark rough under the hand. "There's a place high up on this one where a limb broke in my dad's time and there's a clear view eastward."

Valmai swarmed up the trunk and found the stub of the broken limb; it gave a good foothold and a fine view of nearly ten miles of grassland, flat as a calm sea: empty but for the faint track of the road, little-used since the snows melted and the war began. Good. She dropped through the branches and landed with a thump at Kember's feet. "No sign of 'em. We'll post a sentry tomorrow."

"What if they attack tonight?"

"Well, now, they never have, not that anyone's told of. They can't see in the dark any better than we can."

Kendrick stared. "They can't?"

"Of course not. I see I need to make a speech to you and your folk. It's full moon tomorrow night, though, isn't it. 'Trust in the gods and tie up your camel,' as they say. Let's post the sentry tonight. Good thinking, Kember. See to it, will you?"

"Yes, Captain." They splashed back through the river, blue-flags brushing against their knees. "I'll find three or four wideawake lads, to climb the tree by turns and keep company at the foot. And whistle like a woodlark if they see anything."

"Do you have woodlarks in this part of the country?"

"No, Captain."

Back at the water-meadow, Valmai mounted a haywagon and called for attention. Slowly, the pallid faces turned toward her. "Move up! I've got some things to say, and then I've got an errand for you before the light goes." Squinting, she held up her hand to the west: two fingersbreadth between the sun and the horizon meant half an hour of daylight.

"Now then. Tomorrow or maybe the next day, as you know, the army of Ulvaeus will get here, and you will have to fight them. As you also know, most of them are gangers. What you don't seem to know is that there are ways of fighting gangers, and I'm here to tell you about 'em."

This appeared to be news to practically everyone. Eyes widened.

"How do you make a ganger in the first place?" she began rhetorically. "You need one corpse and one amulet. *He's* got to have his arms

and legs and head, somewhere to hand, and *it's* got to have the proper spells on it. String the amulet around his neck, and all the detached bits and pieces latch on where they belong and he gets up and does what you tell him to."

Kember was moving among the people, speaking to a long-legged youngster here and there. They followed in his wake and clustered together near the meadow's edge: three, four of them.

"The problem with a ganger, of course, is," she said, shrugging, "you can't kill him. Slice off his head, he picks it up and puts it back. Cut off his arms and legs, tear out his guts, the same. That's the one thing he's got over you. He can't do anything he couldn't do before, except resist death.

"He can't see in the dark. Does that surprise you? He can't fly; he's no stronger, no better a fighter than he was before; he's no *smarter* than he was before—and probably a lot less so. The wits seem to be the first things to go."

The people were sitting up straighter now, paying attention. A young man and woman practically at Valmai's feet glanced at one another, held each other's hands.

"So never mind killing him, how do you take him out of the battle?" She paused. "First, as ought to be plain enough, you can take his amulet away. Get it off his neck—or break it—and he's dead meat again. Trouble is, it's hard to get that close without his doing something to *you* first.

"In the south they had a company with some very good archers. One of them—he'd made his living winning fancy competitions—had some crescent-shaped arrowheads, mounted 'em horns forward, the inside edge sharpened. He could cut the amulet cord right off the enemy's neck. Any archers here? No?

"Well, this is sheep country: how many of you are shepherds? How good are you with a sling?"

Several hands went up. "Well, now, a slingstone doesn't hurt a ganger any, won't even bruise him; but if you can hit the amulet, you'll break it—they're only baked clay—and that will drop him.

"And the only trouble with that is that they all carry spare amulets on them. Ulvaeus's mages made a mold, and his thralls press clay into it and turn 'em out by the hundreds. But it slows them down nicely; and if you take out the one in front, the one behind is likely to trip over him. Yes, Kember, what is it?"

"I have the sentries ready. Should they go now, or wait?"

"Let 'em wait; I don't have much more to say. Suppose you're not a slinger or a prizewinning archer?" she went on. "What can you do? Well, you can cut his head off, if you're strong enough.

"Even a ganger's not much use without a head; he can't fight without it because he can't see or hear without it. Of course, he'll try at once to take it away from you and put it back. If you can keep it, though, you've put him out of action, and if you keep him out long enough he'll decay enough that the amulet won't work any more. Takes about a day and a night. In one place the fighting came into the town and the people had very good luck throwing the heads up onto the rooftops.

"Or if the fighting here comes up to the riverbank, anything you drop into the water will float downstream at least as far as the swimming-hole. The bodies will try to crawl after their heads, which should keep them busy till you can get around to them—or until the amulets fall from their headless necks. In which case you can take your time."

There was some nervous laughter, and people shifted where they sat, alert enough now to realize their backsides were going to sleep.

"But I've saved the best for the last," Valmai said, and took a bundle from her back: long and narrow, it reached from her shoulder nearly to the ground. She unwrapped it and showed them a dozen long wooden sticks with sharp

splintery ends."What's the traditional way to lay an undead lich? One without an amulet, one that's had the enchantment laid directly on him? What do all the old tales say? You bury him with a wooden stake through his heart. If the heart isn't whole, no magic can make the body move. The stake simply keeps the heart from growing back together. And, yes, an arrow through the heart works too—till someone pulls it out.

"Well. Imagine I'm standing on your riverbank tomorrow, and here comes a ganger straight for me." She took one of the sticks, held it point-forward like a lance."He's been dead for months. His flesh is getting a little soft. His clothing is going to rags. Armor? He never had any. So I let him get within my range, and I go *POKE*—" she thrust into the air. "I've pierced his heart and he drops. Now watch." She took the tip of the stake with her left hand, a span below the point, and broke it away."I've broken it off in the wound. I take a moment, if I've got a moment, to step on it, drive it further in. Now *he's* got a stake through his heart that will be very hard for his ganger comrades, with their tiny wits, to pull out. And *I've* got a fresh point on my stake, to stab with again—or if it isn't quite sharp enough, a few strokes of a knife will fix that. This is spicewood, by the way; it splinters nicely; cedar or copperholm will do too, or any softwood. It does have to be dry, to break properly. If there's a carpenter's shop in town?"

"There is, and I've got the key," a young woman called."We'll see what we've got that splinters."

"One more thing," Valmai said. "The worst thing about fighting gangers is the fear that you may suddenly join them." Ah, now she had their undivided attention."I invite you to think about this: the same stake that takes out a ganger can keep you or me from becoming one. If I get my throat cut tomorrow, say, Kember here takes his stake and drives it into my heart." (He'd have to cut the straps to her breastplate first, but never mind that.) "He can go back into battle, leaving me where I fell, knowing all the amulets in the world can't make me rise up against him.

"We say in the army, 'Bare is brotherless back,' and that goes double for us now. I advise each one of you to pick out a partner, one to whom you can

swear, 'If you fall, I'll see to it you stay safely dead,' and who can do the same for you." All across the meadow pairs of eyes met, hands clasped for bargains sealed. The young couple at her feet gripped hands tightly, and the woman bent her head to her man's shoulder.

"Now we're almost out of daylight. Those who can sleep tonight, do. The rest, I've got some work to do once the moon rises. I want dry brushwood and digging tools, whatever you can find, right here." She pointed to the ground at her feet, under the haywagon. The young couple looked startled. "I'll explain later what it's for. That's all."

She jumped down from the haywagon, and the people began getting up from their seats on the grass—and, yes, their morale seemed to have risen to the two-to-one level at least. Pity she couldn't give them time to practice, raise their confidence further. Some went to seek brushwood; others turned toward the town in search of supper and bed. Valmai followed them: Kember had spoken of stew at the alehouse, and she had not eaten since daybreak. As she climbed the bank, she found a heavy-set man climbing beside her, legs bowed from long hours in the saddle, his dark jerkin embroidered in a northern style. "Captain, I wanted to speak to you," he said.

"Speak," she said, not pausing in her march toward the alehouse, and beckoning him to follow.

"My name's Andvar," he said. "I don't live here; I was visiting my kin when this blew up. I live in the north, in cattle country, and to catch the wild cattle we use this." They had reached the alehouse door, and Valmai paused to look at what he held up before her: three cords, knotted together at the near end, each of the far ends tied round a small stone.

"This is a balbo," he said. "You hold it by one cord and swing it around your head to work up speed, and loose it at the cow's legs. The cords wrap round her hocks and she drops. But it'll work on two-leggers just as well."

Valmai nodded slowly. "Come inside and let's eat. Do you have any more of those?"

"Not on me, but I can make more." They found places at the table, and small loaves and bowls of stew were set before them. "All they are is cords and stones, which I can find as soon as the sun's up."

"How long does it take to learn the thing?"

Andvar shrugged. "Several days, I would have said. I know, we don't have several days. But you were talking about how a slingstone's no use unless it hits the amulet dead on, and I thought a slinger, who's already got an eye and arm used to throwing—"

Valmai swallowed a mouthful of bread. "—Might pick it up faster. Good. Try it. Talk to Kember, have him send some slingers your way." She applied herself to her food, wondering if she should try one of the things herself. No, better to use her crossbow at a distance, put a few quarrels through a few breastbones, and switch to spicewood slivers for close work.

When she had eaten she left the alehouse and returned to the water-meadow. The moon was just rising above the trees, and people were gathering with piles of brushwood, with hoes and mattocks. Valmai collected their attention.

"Suppose you didn't live here," she said. "How would you know where the ford was?"

Some looked puzzled, one muttered something about wheel-ruts, and then a tall burly woman shouted, "The blue flags!"

"Right," Valmai said. "Because they like to grow with their feet wet, but their heads have to reach the air, they show you where the shallow water is. We're going to move them. Come along."

The river water sparkled under the moon, broken into ripples by fifty pairs of feet. Under Valmai's direction they stretched a rope across the water, just downstream of the ford. They let the brushwood drift up against it, tucking in

loose twigs here and there. It would float for a while, and bear the weight of the blue-flags uprooted from bank and ford.

By midnight a blue-flowered path curved away from the shore, arced gracefully and returned to the shore opposite. "How deep is it under there?" Valmai asked.

"Seven, eight feet," Kember said. "Can those things swim?"

"Not if they couldn't before," Valmai reminded him, "which is to say, probably not. They may float, though. You folk," she added, "go and sleep now, if you can. If you can't, go downstream to the other ford, below the swimming hole, dig up the flags there. If you can't find some deceptive place for them, then cast 'em downstream, let 'em mark somebody else's ford. You've done a good night's work."

"What now?" Kember asked.

"Now, sleep for me, and for you if you can, and I'd surely advise it. We'll be up again at dawn, gathering sticks and stones."

"Right. There's a bed for you in my house, my dad's house that is, opposite the square, with the crownbuck's antlers over the door."

Valmai thanked him and began to climb the bank. Bed, that word sweeter than gold, let alone love: at this time of year she might get all of five hours' sleep between midnight and dawn. The night airs were gentle on her skin, and a woodlark was singing—

Oh, hells, a woodlark where no woodlark ought to be. She turned back toward the river, Kember at her heels, hearing feet landing with a thump on the riverbank, splashing through what was left of the ford.

"There's only one," the dripping young man said as he ran up from the bank. "On horseback, coming straight this way; I think he's following the old wagon-ruts."

"And my bow's still tied to my saddle," Valmai muttered. "Where are those splinters?" She took a fistful from the haywagon and headed for the water. "Everyone, grab something and hide among the trees. This might be quick."

On the far bank the moon shone like silver over the grass. On the horizon a little dot moved, swelled, became a single rider on a hard-driven horse. Slowly, not to draw attention, Valmai slid down against the nearest trunk, squatted on her haunches. If he came this way—

He was almost upon her before she moved: a little man's shape atop a tall horse, its eyes white and staring, its nostrils flared; his eyes were sunken and he seemed not to breathe at all. Valmai stood up almost under the horse's nose, and it reared; she dodged its hooves, stick at the ready. As the horse descended, she raised her splinter and let the ganger's own momentum drive it smoothly up into his heart. He fell, snapping the stick off squarely at the skin: she'd have to give it a new point.

The townspeople were cheering under their breath. (*There you go, m'lord Baron*, she thought: *there's your three*. "Well, yes, that's the way it's *supposed* to go," Valmai said, bowing right and left like a juggler. "It's not always that simple, but you get the idea. Somebody catch the horse: it's probably drugged, so be careful. You others, get the body across the river and under at least a thin layer of earth so the scent doesn't travel. Wait a minute." She took the amulet from the corpse's neck, and found another in the pouch at its waist. "Now I'm off to bed; I'll see you at dawn."

"Captain, I want to talk to you." A woman's voice this time, the young woman who had sat at her feet while she spoke from the hay-wagon. Valmai shrugged and signed her to follow.

"I'm Brenna," she said, pattering along Valmai, three paces to her two. "Kolim the baker's wife."

"If he baked the bread I ate this evening, he's good." Valmai answered politely.

"He is good," Brenna said. "He's good, and quiet, and innocent. He's not the kind of man that makes a fighter."

Valmai raised up in her mind the image of Kolim sitting beside his wife that evening: tall, rangy, with broad shoulders and a stubborn jaw and arms heavy with muscle, and considered that perhaps they hadn't been wedded that long. "He may surprise us, when day comes."

"He'll be *killed*, when day comes. He's *not* a fighter. Why did the Prince bid us raise a hundred fighters? If he'd only said, 'raise whoever's best-fitted,' they would have sent Kolim away."

"I've been in places where, in like case, they'd have sent all the women away, even the fit ones, and kept all the men, even the old and ill. Surely this is a better way: Kolim will go to battle with the best, the most dedicated comrade to guard his back."

"You won't send him away?"

"I have no authority to send away, only to lead into battle. Your town council chose your century before I ever got here."

"If he dies—" Brenna ran up ahead of Valmai at the headman's crowned door, blocked her way, fists clenched. "If he dies, I promise to live just five minutes longer, so I can put my splinter through your throat."

"Tomorrow, when it's over," Valmai said, "if we're still in the same world, we'll discuss it. Meanwhile, to bed with you, and get some rest. Those are your captain's orders, soldier; get moving."

"If he dies, you die," Brenna repeated, and stalked away.

Valmai heaved a weary sigh and pushed the door open. Not that she couldn't count on warding off a green recruit's rage-blinded attack; but an extra complication was not what she needed tonight.

Gods, a fresh straw-tick, sheets that smelled of sweet herbs, warm blankets. She lasted long enough to pull off one boot, maybe two, before falling into darkness.

In the hour before dawn, when (so men say) the veil between this world and the next wears thin, and the truth seeps outward in strange shapes, Valmai dreamt. Baron Bodo sat beside her, that crafty old man, peering out of his single eye as he did from the wall-painting at the Academy. "The magical," he told her earnestly, "is to the physical as three to one."

"Yes, but—" Valmai began, and the old man raised his hand and pointed into the distance. "See there?"

She looked, and saw a pair of ugly dream-monsters, venomous and spiny; and one walked on many legs, and the other seemed to have no legs at all, but floated like gossamer from weed to weed in the autumn winds. Valmai had a cord in her hand with a weight at its end, and she whirled it and cast it and watched it wrap about the two beasts, drawing them closer together till there was only one left: they had run together like two raindrops. The remaining monster had no legs, and it was too heavy to float about, and now it would be an easy task to kill it—

And something cried out, and she drifted up out of the dream saying, "This means something, in dream-reasoning—"

"Captain," said Kember again.

"Hush a moment," Valmai said, "if I could cut their legs out from under them, and it's moral or maybe magical. Is it dawn?"

"It's full daybreak." Kember said. "At dawn there was still nothing on the horizon, so I let you sleep a little longer. We've been gathering splinters."

"Just as well. I dreamed—Curse! it was something important! What was it I said?"

Kember repeated what she had said, keeping his face politely grave.

"Oh. Well, it must mean something, or I think it must. What did I do with —" her hand searched her pouch and brought out the two amulets, unglazed baked clay marked with the spidery characters of the spell.

"That northerner's collected stones and cords," Kember went on, "and he's made a great heap of his balbo things, and people are out practicing with 'em. He was right, the slingers are picking up the skill faster than anyone else."

"Good. Remind 'em a ganger can't get at you if his feet are hobbled and his fellows are walking over him."

"Yes, Captain. Breakfast's at the alehouse."

So Valmai belted on her shortsword, went and got small beer and more of Kolim's bread, and pondered the two amulets that lay on the table before her. Oval, flat, the size of one's ear; exactly alike so far as she could tell, with the same marks, the same meaningless dents around the edges, because they had been formed in the same mold. The markings meant nothing to Valmai, who had never studied magic.

She picked up one at random, brought it closer to her eye— Gods! What? she could've sworn the *other* had moved, slithered a span's distance across the table toward Valmai's brisket. The hairs rose on the back of her neck. And in that moment a chorus of shouts broke out in the street outside, and one shrill scream. Valmai's arm jerked, the amulet went flying; without looking after it she drew her sword and ran for the door. More shouts, and the hoarse bubbling cry that was the only sound that could come from a ganger's slack throat.

Ten paces from her it lay, a sharp splinter protruding from its chest. A woman leaned on the splinter to drive it in further, broke it off flush, and stepped on the stub, all according to orders. "Right," Valmai said, and stepped over the softening body. Kember sat on the doorstep of the house opposite, his shirt stained with blood. Gangers don't bleed.

"Captain," he said softly as she reached him, "if I die, you'll see to it—"

"It's a promise," she said, "but I don't think you're dying just yet. Came near, though." The knife-wound along his shoulder was long and bled freely, but it was shallow. "It aimed for your throat, I'll bet, and missed."

"Just."

"How'd it get this far without your scouts seeing it?"

"I think it forded further north. It came into town from the north. Funny—" He grimaced and reached up gingerly to feel of his shoulder. "Just as it struck, the amulet around its neck jerked sideways and the cord broke. The stroke went awry and it fell. Captain, you're smiling; have I said something useful?"

"I think, I think so. You—" Valmai pointed at an onlooker. "Get him bandaged. You, set more sentries to north and south, in case they try that again. You, you, and you, get this buried so they can't smell it. Only first let me—" she found six amulets in the ganger's pouch, and the other in the street, but it was broken.

Inside, the amulet she'd thrown against the wall had broken too, but the other had slid only six or eight feet and was intact. She stuck it in the pouch with the rest and went in search of Andvar.

An hour's practice taught them the trick worked best if only one amulet, not three, flew with the balbo, lest the motions cancel each other out. Best, in fact, to loop the amulet through its own cord where the three balbo-cords joined, and hold the amulet with one stone in your hand while winding up, and let all fly together.

They also learned that the other amulets would not move unless the balbo came within fifteen feet of them. Never mind, it was still a gain, and they had learned all at the cost of only one amulet broken: the ground in the water-meadow was soft. And overhead came the call of the woodlark.

This time it was no scout, the youngster reported, but a company on the march, five hundred at least, maybe a hundred on horseback. Valmai spaced out her people: a line of splinterers shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the trees, others waiting here and there at the water's edge, a dozen sent to guard the southern ford. She set Andvar and his balbo slingers before all, well spaced out, and last of all she wound up her crossbow and placed herself behind Andvar's right elbow, far enough removed that his balbo would not strike her and she could shoot clear of him.

"Captain, when do we start?" That was the slinger on Valmai's other side.

"Andvar, what do you think?"

The man looked dubious. "Well, with the regular balbo you want to trip up the ones in front so the others will trip over them. But the special ones should go over their heads, to fly as far as possible. Two regulars first, maybe."

"It's your call."

"All right, two plain first, to catch their feet, then the special, over their heads. And then as you please, I guess."

"At Andvar's command," Valmai said, and the slingers looked toward her and back to him.

The ganger army came on at a brisk walk, the horse only a little ahead of the foot. Behind Valmai's back she heard the soft-footed thump of the last sentry dropping from the tree to join the splinterers on the riverbank.

The gangers were coming near, their forward lines in good order, the frightened horses kept in check by the gods knew what alchemy. "I'll—" Andvar began, and his voice cracked. "I'll count to five. One plain balbo each, throw on 'five.' One." Six sets of stones began winding through the air, whirring softly like locusts: oh, good, no one was hitting himself with an ill-aimed stone. "—Five," Andvar shouted and the six balbos flew over the grass, wrapped themselves about the horses' legs. Valmai heard a bone snap, and a

shrill scream. Six horses went down, and the others milled and reared behind them.

Behind them, the second rank regathered itself and began to push through. Valmai chose one that had made its way through the turmoil, raised her crossbow and spitted the rider through the breastbone with the wooden shaft. The ganger toppled and the horse reared and turned away. Valmai rewound her crossbow, judging that she had time for one more shot. The gangers were now very near.

Andvar loosed his second volley of balbos. Again they took out six horses—no, seven, by the gods, one insanely lucky balbo had wrapped itself about the forelegs of two close-pacing horses and brought them both down.

Andvar was sweating now, glancing between the turmoil a scant bowshot away and Valmai where she stood behind him. "At your command, Andvar," she said.

He nodded and muttered. "Might as well. Special balbos," he cried aloud. "Hold 'em by one stone and the amulet. One."

The gangers moved close. Valmai could make out individual faces now, dull-eyed and marked with many wounds. Wait! that fellow in the center, in red on a white horse, that one was alive still! Valmai raised her crossbow and loosed her bolt straight into the rider's throat, and he fell under his horse's hooves. *Well done, wench*, she told herself, *that may have been the only brains they had*. She set her crossbow against the tree—too close now for another shot—and picked up a handful of splinters.

"—Five," Andvar shouted, and six balbos ceased to whirl and roared over the heads of the enemy like three-headed death sprites, singing as they flew.

The cords and thongs that held the amulets, Valmai decided later, must have been old and worn, soaked with the dead sweat of the wearers and exposed to all winds and weathers. Most of them snapped and loosed their amulets into the air. Gangers crumpled like flowers in the frost.

But there were more to come up from behind, and now they were close enough for splinter work. Valmai got one of the last riders and was nearly crushed under the hooves of his panicky mount. From somewhere nearby she heard Andvar shout, "Hold your balbos! Wait for fallen amulets," and then it was all mud, blood, and confusion for the next quarter hour.

Once she paused long enough to watch two fresh balbos, amulets in tow, go sailing into the enemy to the confusion of that many more gangers. Another time she saw a ganger with its hands around Brenna's throat—and Kolim, sharp-pointed stake like a spear in his hands, roaring to the rescue. She saw Andvar fall with a sword through his guts, and herself stepped over to give him his quietus and a wooden shaft of safety through his heart. The enemy were growing thin; in fact, there seemed to be no more of them, only the survivors of Huffsford, and a few bewildered horses, and the dust.

It was becoming quiet again, broken only by the sounds of feet splashing through the ford or a wondering, "Gods, I'm still alive." Little splinters were stuck under Valmai's nails, painful and likely to fester; she pulled them free with her teeth and sucked at her fingertips. And through the dust came Kolim and Brenna, dragging between them a limp body dressed in glittering armour. "Captain, is this one still alive, can you tell? I hit him over the head, but Brenna thinks he's still breathing." Gods! Ulvaeus—?

Not Ulvaeus, but one of his captains, and he was still breathing: a valuable prize. When he woke he retched and cursed and could not stand. Valmai had him locked inside an empty smokehouse with a cot, water, and a chamberpot.

Kember was still alive, now bleeding from the other shoulder too. He had thrown the splinterers of the rear guard now here, now there, taking out the gangers that had made it through the front ranks; scarcely any that had drifted down to the southern ford had been in any shape to fight.

Of the Huffsford century, twelve had died. The survivors cheered and wept by turns as they impaled and buried the dead.

And the sun was only halfway up the sky. "I've got dough to punch down," said Kolim, and went away to do it. Brenna, trailing behind him, avoided Valmai's eye. She'd catch her up and say, "I told you so" later.

"Now what?" Kember said.

"Now, back to your old lives," Valmai said. "unless some of you want to come to the capital and join up. You, maybe? You'd make a fine sergeant, with a bit of training." But Kember only shook his head and laughed.

"It's back to the capital for me in any case," she said, "with the tidings about the balbos, and the prisoner. But then, he's not fit to travel yet, so I can afford to spend a few days here."

"We'll be happy to make you welcome." Kember said. "Bed and board are at your disposal. Captain, you're smiling. Did I say something?"

"Not yet," Valmai assured him. "But you will."

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THE LITTLE PINK WORM

"For I have seen with my own eyes the Cumaean Sybil hanging in a bottle; and whenever the boys asked her, *Sybil, what do you want?* she would answer, *I want to die.*"

Petronius, *Satyricon*, ch. 48

The only warning Valmai had was the cooling of the sun. She had started across the High Waste at dawn, hoping to reach Kennemai's Pass before the worst heat of the day. All morning she had seen no other living thing but a carrion crow high overhead and a little pink worm inching its way along the edge of the road, while the rising sun kindled and burned behind her. One moment hot on her back, casting a long shadow before her toward the foothills of the Claws, it grew suddenly cool in a little whiff of wind and her shadow faded out into a shadow that covered all the plain. And then it was upon her. Valmai cursed—silently, to keep the dust out of her mouth—and drew her headrail over her face. It was too scorching late in the season for duststorms (else she would never have taken this route across the High Waste to the Claws)—but here it was nonetheless. She unbound her scabbarded sword from her back and used it like a blind man's cane, tapping her way from one markstone to the next.

Blind in her headrail within the choking dust, deaf within its howling, she breathed shallowly to avoid drawing dust through the tangled fibres of the cloth. She felt, rather than heard, her scabbard strike against each of the markstones as she shuffled along the invisible road. That was what the markstones were for: they'd lead her all the way to the foothills, if the storm lasted that long, and there with any luck she'd find shelter. It could be no more than three or four miles now. It was only midmorning, the sun wouldn't set for hours. The storm might die down before that.

But it was still raging when she reached the thigh-high wall that marked the end of the road. Behind it—she remembered the terrain from years ago—a gully fell between two hills from a culvert shaped centuries past, when rain still fell here. And behind the culvert was a cave, and shelter: always assuming no wandering wastebear, cavecat, or bandit had set up camp there first. She slipped round the edge of the wall, found the gully, crept on hands and knees into the culvert, her sword clutched to her breast.

Inside, she heard the wind hoot across the mouth of the culvert like a gigantic child with a winebottle, then die away as the storm's direction shifted slightly. She unwound the headrail to listen. Something there, sure enough: a faint shuffling sound; she brushed the fine dust from her eyelids and opened them to a glimmer of light, fire-colored and flickering. No wastebear or cavecat ever yet kindled fire, so that narrowed it down to bandit or legitimate traveler. She drew her sword and tucked the scabbard onto her back again, and crept forward.

The cave was small, with a round floor big enough for five or six to lie on it, assuming they were friendly. Overhead it rose out of sight like a well-shaft, and must break the surface of the hills somewhere. The fire laid on the stone was no more than two crossed sticks, but it burned brightly and its smoke rose rapidly into the air till it blended into the darkness above.

The man kneeling by the fire squeaked as Valmai crept point-foremost into the cave, and started to rise from his knees, and thought better of it. Instead, he clasped his hands like a suppliant. "Oh, please. I'm a poor man. I've nothing you can take but my wretched life."

"I won't harm you," Valmai said, sheathing her sword. The man was little, aged and spindly, and his hands trembled. "I came in to get out of this curst wind, same as you did."

The little man sat back on his heels, crumpling like a pricked bladder in his relief. "I thought you were a bandit."

"I thought you might be," Valmai said. "Since you're not, I ask leave to share your fire. I've got bread and cheese; I'm short of water, though."

"Oh, I've got water," the little man said. He drew both hands over his face as if to wipe the sweat away. "Lots and lots of water. We came through Kennemai's Pass last night." He leaned into the shadows at the cave's edge and brought out a waterskin. "Please. Make free."

"Thank you." Valmai took several long swallows—the water was fresh; the little man might well be telling the truth—and accidentally-on-purpose spilled a little over her face and mopped the last of the dust from her eyes. She closed the waterskin and gave it back. "Are the roads clear over the Pass?"

"Oh, yes. A little snow, a little rock, but I made my way across without difficulty, and I'm not a strong man."

"I", Valmai mused. *He said "we" not long since.* Her eyes better adjusted now to the cave's shadows, she could see there was no other traveller in them, only a little back-sack and the waterskins and a wicker basket the size of one's head, such as bakers used to carry raised pies to market in. *I doubt he's a king, and he can't be pregnant. Perhaps he has a tapeworm, or else he's mad.*

"Do you intend to take the Pass?" the little man went on. "To Tashka, yes?"

"Tashka, or wherever I can get work. There's peace in the East now, and little need for the likes of me."

"Ah." The little man nodded and took a quick swallow from the waterskin, almost furtively, as if stealing milk from someone else's cow. "You are a sword-for-hire, yes? And come all the way from the Eastlands? You must have traveled far in your life."

"Barring the Roof of the World, most places in Middle-Earth, I've been there."

"Ah. Do you know these mountains? Have you travelled high into the Claws?"

"Not to say *high*. I know these foothills well enough. Most folk don't trouble to climb into the mountains, since there's nothing to find and nothing lives there."

"Nothing to find," the little man repeated. "And nothing lives there, ah, that's true. But it was not always thus, yes? Once, when the clouds sailed higher in the heavens, instead of dropping all their rain t'other side the Claws, sailed over the mountains and watered this land, and the High Waste was a fertile plain and the heart of the Empire."

"So I've been told."

"But you know the foothills, yes? Do you know a place called Hakkahawn?"

"Not by that name."

"Hawks' Haven in the modern tongue. No? Do you know a place—it was called the Almona River, but it will be dry now."

"Dry at least a thousand years," Valmai confirmed. The uneasy hairs were beginning to rise at the back of her neck. Who was this little man, who knew the placenames of a thousand years ago better than the ones of today? The legends told of immortals and long-livers, but only a few of each—thank the gods. "That would be Kharmon's Gap, only a dry ravine that cuts down out of the mountains. I know the place."

"Ah. And where is it?" He leaned forward eagerly. "Is it far?"

"Ten or twelve miles to the north. It's one of several ravines in that part of the hills, that fan upwards into the mountains. They used to converge into one great river down on the plains, but that's all buried now." She settled back

against her pack and waited. If the little man really wanted to find Kharmon's Gap, he'd make an offer.

"Ah. One of several. And how do you tell one from the other?"

Valmai shrugged. "By having been there and seen them, I suppose. It's nothing you could put into words." *And may the gods forgive me the lies I'm telling. If I were less hungry I might be more truthful.* The little man couldn't be as poor as he was making out.

"Ah me." The little man wrung his hands. "I have only a few coppers, no fee worthy of an experienced guide such as yourself; but—" he looked from side to side. "but at Hakkahawn," he gulped and lowered his voice to a whisper. "at Hakkahawn there's treasure. Yes, treasure from the old Empire."

Valmai closed her eyes for a moment to hide her dismay. Her last guess had been best, the man was mad. So then: should she leave him here, to make his way back to Tashka and safety, or tell him to take the third ravine to the north and let him die at his own convenience?

"Take me to the Almona," he whispered, "and I'll fill your mouth with gold."

And a voice spoke out of the shadows, "If you take his offer, you're a fool." The voice was hoarse, as if the dust itself had spoken.

Valmai sat like a stone, the breath frozen in her throat, all her hairs on end. And the little man clapped his hands to his ears and murmured, "Ah me, ah me." Then he lowered his hands and tried to smile. It was a sickly effort, and did not convince. "Listen to the wind! It sounds like voices at times, does it not?" and suddenly Valmai was very angry.

She got to her feet and walked round the fire toward the small pile of belongings, while the little man yelped and cowered. Either he was a mountebank, a voice-thrower (but why give himself the lie then? why look so frightened? unless he was mad and that was all)—or he had a perroquet or a

jackpye hidden in his baggage and it had just woken and begun to speak—or it was something else—

She nudged the backpack with her toe; it fell over and spilled a copper and a little bottle of what might be spices. The waterskin she'd already sampled. The basket had a low bottom and a high-domed top, held on by leather straps. She slipped them aside and raised the lid.

Inside the basket lay a shrunken head, its skin grey, its long black hair bound into a knot. *Ha*, Valmai thought. *A mountebank, after all, and this is his performance prop. A good one, too: I don't see any control strings—*

The head opened its sunken eyes and stared at her. "But not as great a fool as you are, Maltus. Give me water."

But Maltus was still kneeling with his hands clutching his head. Valmai picked up the skin and poured a stream of water into the open mouth. She poured for a long time, expecting the liquid to run out through the bottom of the basket; but it did not. Every spilled drop seemed to sink into the skin. At last the mouth closed, with a little sound like a sigh. Valmai closed the skin and turned back to Maltus, who was beginning to get control of himself again.

"You would have found it out anyway, if we traveled together," he said, getting to his feet. "Know, warrior, that I am Maltus, mage of the order of Erkuna, and that by my dread arts I have summoned and bound a Power out of the past."

"Oh, stuff it, Maltus," the head said. The voice was clearer now, as if the water had done its shrunken flesh some good. "It's no doing of yours that I ride in a basket for yet a little while. Greater than you they were who brought me down, and greater than any shall I be when I come again into my own. Take care. I am Essebai; and I do not forget."

Now Valmai began truly to be afraid. She knew that name. Changes in language and custom over the centuries had made her Ishti, a pointed-toothed bogeywoman who ate naughty children; but she had been Essebai, the witch-

consort of the old Empire. The tales told that she had been torn to pieces, not long before the Empire fell. The tales also called her an immortal. Apparently both were true, and Valmai returned to her original opinion of Maltus—he was mad, to risk dealing with such a creature—while she rose to her feet and bowed deeply. "Your Excellency. You honour me with your presence."

The head sniffed, and smiled: a little twisted smile full of bitterness. "You've been properly trained, at least. What is your name?"

"Valmai Tronsdaughter, Excellency."

"Valmai," Essebai repeated. "Slay me that rogue and wizard, and take me to Hakkahawn, and I shall reward you."

"Don't," the mage said. "Don't trust her. She'll slay you with her magic."

"Or you, with yours?" Valmai said, stalling for time. Essebai's magic had been powerful and her deeds horrible, all the tales said so. But she had used neither herbs nor wands, but only a word and a gesture. And how could she gesture, without arms or hands?

The order of Erkuna, on the other hand, had been in decline for centuries; its remaining members put beans on the table with sleight-of-hand and fortunetelling. Still, Maltus might have read a book or two; he might have a few tricks yet, and they would require a wand and magical herbs and many other little objects that no doubt were in his backpack—and she stood between him and it.

She looked from one glowering face to the other and said, "Your Excellency, Master Maltus, this looks like a stalemate to me. Each of you is trying to hire me with a treasure that neither has in hand. I must consider. By your leave." And she sat down with Essebai's head and the rest of Maltus's baggage on one side of her and Maltus on the other, backlit by the fire. And tried to think.

Her choice would have been to walk out and leave each of them to the mercy of the other, but the storm was still raging; she could die out there faster than in here. And besides—Essebai, the poison of the Empire, the consort of generations of wicked Emperors, none so vile as herself. Her deeds were tales to be told late at night, when the children were asleep and the grown folk left to listen and shiver. If there was any chance of Essebai's coming to power again—never mind how she could regain her powers as a bodiless head, if anybody could do it it would be Essebai—then Valmai could not let it alone. The gods knew what she could do, but there had to be something. And while she mused, she heard a little whispering sound, a little scratching sound like a twig in the wind against a wall, echoing in the culvert under the hoot of the wind.

Everyone's head turned (including Essebai's; how did she manage that?) and all eyes were on the culvert. And out of it crawled what looked like a little pink worm.

It crept to the rim of the culvert and paused. It faced a fall of no more than a foot's distance to the sand, but it appeared to have no eyes to tell it so. Unless that flat scale atop the head end protected a simple eye—

It wriggled, fell to the sand, and began to crawl forward again. Now, Valmai thought, she must have gone as far as fear could reach: her heart could beat no faster, her blood run no colder. The little creeping thing was not a worm, but a finger.

Valmai sat, still as stone, while it crawled (passing two inches from her knee) to where Essebai lay smiling in her basket. It hooked its nailtip into the wickerwork and climbed the basket's side, tumbled over the edge and fell past the sorceress's cheek into the chaos below. Shapes were moving in the faint light, six or eight separate fingers inching back and forth, bearing the head on knuckleback. And that was how she was able to turn her head.

"They tore me to pieces." Essebai said softly. "They stormed the castle and pierced my heart with spears. I laughed at them; and then they tore me apart. My heart they burned with fire and scattered to the winds. Parts of me they

threw into the sea, and fishes ate of me. Parts of me they hung on branches for the birds of the air to devour, and when the birds died of me they fell in every corner of the land. That was when I wanted to die; but I could not.

"For two hundred and thirty years the two halves of my skull hung in two apothecaries' shops, one in Tashka and the other in Kanthuri. A merchant who travelled between the cities saw me for twenty years before the notion struck him. He bought both halves, put them together—and I opened my eyes and his heart failed him and he died. It was another seventy years till his grandson found my lower jaw. It was another century till this fool Maltus stumbled by and knew me for what I was. A wise fool."

"If not for me, Essebai," Maltus said, stung into speech at last, "you would still be hanging in that shop, wrapped in a Ginzan mudcloth and labeled 'dried head of a Southern ape'."

"True, and I do not regret it. You may. Valmai Tronsdaughter, what of you? Will you now slay him and take me to Hakkahawn?"

All her delays had got her no forwarder. Valmai opened her mouth; and in that instant the wind died. They listened for a moment, but there was no sound; the storm had passed.

"Well," Valmai said, "my answer is no, and yes. I will slay none today, but we'll all go together to Kharmon's Gap and to Hawks' Haven if we can find it, and see if it's worth the journey. After that, we can speak again. By Your Excellency's leave." And she fastened Essebai's basket cover and slung her pack onto her back. Maltus gathered his other bundles and took the two sticks of the fire in his free hand. Their flame faded to a dull glow and lit his way into the culvert.

Valmai followed. In the echoing silence of the culvert she could hear Essebai muttering to herself in a language Valmai could not even identify, let alone understand.

Outside, the storm was a smudge on the northern horizon, and the sun was high over the peaks of the Claws. Maltus stood at the edge of the road, resting his backsack on the top of the wall, tying its cords tight. As Valmai set off northward, he slung the sack onto his back and followed. Occasionally he glanced at the basket, as if to offer to take it back, but Valmai ignored him.

As the sun westered behind the peaks of the Claws, the world grew dim, every color flattened into a general brownish-grey, every sound magnified. Their own footsteps, the beating of Valmai's heart, the subtle rustling within the basket. *Essebai. Essebai*, Valmai's heart chanted. *Essebai, who took Queen Lalla's newborn child from her breast, and—* She cut off the thought with an effort.

Essebai. This is that Essebai who took a platoon of young recruits, none older than nineteen, and—

She shifted the straps of the basket in her hand. *This is that same Essebai who took the old cobbler from his deathbed and—*

She choked, and tried to swallow. *Gods, what shall I do? what a towering task you have given me. I have to lay this undead flesh, not only for now, but for generations to come. How do you kill an immortal?*

The thought kept recurring that she could burn head, fingers and all and dig them into the soil. But that had been tried before, if she could believe what Essebai said, and hadn't worked. Besides, there was an old tale out of the Northwest, about a village that had burnt a vampire to ashes, and that was where mosquitoes came from.

The sun had gone well behind the Claws, and there was only skyglow to see by, when they reached the remains of a stone bridge. Blocks of stone the size of horses had fallen into the ravine and lay scattered among the piers that had once upheld them. Valmai led the way into the gap and found a place where the stones provided shelter from the worst of the wind that poured down the ravine, as cold as the water of the river that had gone.

"Here we'll camp," she said. "Master Maltus, if you'll rekindle your fire? I still have some bread and cheese. Uh—Your Excellency, do you *eat* in your current state?"

Essebai smiled that bitter smile of hers: not a reassuring sight. "No. I have food that you know nothing of. But I will take water." And she took long swallows from the waterskin, while Maltus set his two crossed sticks again and muttered over them till they burst into flame. Hard to tell in the uncertain light, but the head of Essebai seemed larger, its cheeks smooth and turning pink as the age-old tissues took in the water. Essebai had been beautiful in her day, the tales said, frighteningly beautiful, with her young fresh face and eyes full of old wickedness. One of the fingers reached up beside the jaw to catch the last drop.

Valmai set out the bread and cheese—they toasted before the magical fire just as if it had been real—and Maltus unwrapped the half of a jellied veal pie (the kind of pastry that usually rode in a basket like Essebai's, and perhaps it had) and cut it into slices.

"You do ill to trust her," he whispered to Valmai, passing the food to her; but the head overheard and chuckled evilly.

"Oh, I'd be several kinds of fool if I trusted either of you," Valmai said, and bit into her pie and chewed and swallowed. "Yet here I am leading the pair of you up into the mountains in search of a treasure neither of you can prove exists. But if I'd wanted an easy life, prosperous and free of danger, I would've been a plumber, like my mother." And again the head of Essebai laughed, and a little pink finger crawled up to the rim of the basket to scratch the tip of her nose for her.

As it fell back, she looked at Valmai and said, "This makes nine: one to go. It's further north, making its way across the Ronan Valley. It may catch up with us before we're done."

"And it found you," Valmai said, "without sight, or any sense but touch. I'm impressed." (Any who might have marveled at the diplomatic tone in the

warrior's voice had never heard her mother the plumber negotiating to replace a course of broken pipe.)

"Oh, I know where my parts are, and mine know me," Essebai said. "My arms are—is that east? —One is east, and one north of me. My legs and feet have been travelling for centuries, hunting down my torso and thighs and other such parts that can't move by themselves. Soon, as the elders reckon time, I shall have all myself again; then I shall have vengeance."

Valmai shivered, hoping it couldn't be seen in the dim light. "But, Excellency," she ventured, "upon whom will you be revenged? All your enemies are dead."

"Not Kelison."

"Kelison also, Excellency; dead and gone to make a tale to frighten children."

"Kelison is an immortal, like me; he cannot die."

"May it not displease Your Excellency, Kelison was not an immortal, but a long-liver, and he died. Shall I tell you the tale?"

"Do."

"After he aided in—um—deposing Your Excellency, Kelison took the Imperial Throne and held it till the Empire fell—about a hundred years later, would you say, Master Maltus?—and then he took a sack of gold and his favorite concubine and disappeared. A while later, he reappeared as warlord of a castle overlooking a mountain pass—not here in the Claws, but farther north. He collected tribute from all who went through the pass, and they soon learned it was easier to pay him than to fight him. For centuries they paid, and that was how Kelison made his living.

"In between caravans, he devoted himself to another interest. He had taken his concubine with him, as I said, and he begot upon her sons and daughters.

The sons he drove out to starve or survive as best they could, but the daughters he kept in the castle. And when they were grown, he lay with them and begot upon them sons and daughters, and the sons he drove out, and the daughters he kept.

"Any stockbreeder will tell you, of course, that this is how to strengthen a trait in your stock: breed the dam back to her sons, or the sire to his daughters. Kelison was trying to breed others like himself. I believe he did think he was an immortal, and that any true son of his would survive any hardship—or if he didn't, he didn't deserve to." She cast a glance to one side: Essebai's head was nodding in its basket, nodding in agreement.

"But the stockbreeders will also tell you that too long inbreeding will weaken a line. Toward the end, they say, all the walls of Kelison's castle were hung with beautiful webs made by his women. But there were none left but Kelison himself and two women, a mother and her daughter. Upon the daughter he begot a son, and drove him out, and there were no more children; and the three of them went on living there for years with the gods know what bitterness in their hearts.

"Then one day a caravan came through the pass, and Kelison came down sword in hand to demand tribute. But there was no caravan, but his son with a small army at his back, bent on revenge. And he slew his father, and—"

"Are you sure of this?"

"I wasn't there, Excellency. The tales say that when the sword went through his heart he bled and fell, and that when his head was severed from his body, they never, never came together again and he died. And while the men were sacking and burning the castle, the young man took his mother and his grandmother by their hands and led them away to safety, and so they go out of the story.

"Except there's another tale that says they settled in Lakh."

"Lakh? And are the people there long-livers?"

"Not after Kelison's fashion, but they're strong and healthy. A man will live to see his threescore and ten, as like as not. It's a fertile place, and well-watered."

"It will do." Essebai said with that bitter smile. "They shall have the honor of going first. I shall water the plains of Lakh with the blood of Kelison, before I move on." (*Oh, yes, Valmai thought. This is the very same Essebai who.* "How far away is Lakh from here?"

"Oh, a good ways," Valmai lied. "A hundred leagues at least."

"There will be time."

"No doubt. Just now, however—" Valmai glanced upwards: the Scythe was high overhead, a disturbing omen— "it's time to get some sleep." She unrolled her blanket and laid it out by the fire.

Maltus had already put out his own bedding: now he took up a short wand and a jar of herbs and began setting wards, not around the whole camp, but only around his own bed. He finished the circle near where Valmai stood, and sidled up to her. "You should not have told her that tale. You should not have told her anything."

"Probably not," Valmai agreed. "What of you, mage? You should not have taken her out of that apothecary's shop. Pleasant dreams, Master Maltus."

As for Valmai herself, she expected nightmares, and got them. She, who had never given suck, wept as Essebai tore the baby from her breast. She, who had come through a life full of battles without losing anything more than a tooth, knelt among the new recruits, waiting to see who went next. Down the long, long corridor that led away from light and air, she heard the sound of Essebai's bitter laughter.

And woke. There had been some sound. Her years on campaign and her uneasy thoughts had made her sleep lightly. The fire still burnt on its two

sticks, and Essebai's smooth knot of hair glistened in her basket—and Maltus—ah! it was a nightmare still—!

No, she was awake, and Maltus lay with his neck broken between two long-fingered hands, two hands on strong slender arms that had made their way here with no chest or shoulders to join them. Maltus's wards might have guarded him from spells, but not from this.

Valmai flung her blanket away, grabbed her sword and leapt to her feet. Essebai's eyes rolled toward her, and her lips seemed to move (Valmai's ears were deaf with the roaring of her blood), and one hand reached to take the elbow of the other arm, raising it like a torch. The lifted hand shaped signs, raised a finger to point; and Valmai's sword cut hand from wrist before the spell could take hold. Essebai hissed. Valmai severed the other wrist and stepped closer.

One glance was enough to confirm that nothing in this world would ever do Maltus any good. She took his backpack by its bottom and upended it. Bottles and bags and books tumbled out, sacks full of sacks full of nameless fragments of things. Essebai's hands were creeping backward, crabwise, backing toward their severed wrists. Valmai planted her boot on one hand and her swordpoint on another. There weren't really enough sacks; she ended by putting each arm in a sack of its own and the two hands in a smaller sack together. She tied the drawstrings very tight and bundled everything into Maltus's backpack again.

"Traitor," Essebai murmured.

"Why, no," Valmai said. "I'm no subject of yours, nor am I sworn to you. And what I do here, we call it self-defense. It doesn't grieve me that you throttled Maltus, but if you had tried the same on me, I would have raised serious objections.

"But look, the sun is rising. I'll break my fast on the last of the pie; will you have more water?"

Essebai accepted water. "Anyway," Valmai went on, as she consolidated her own pack and Maltus's into something she could carry. (Some of those things had to be salable in the right market.) "What if you had killed us both, what would you have done without us? Stayed here, with a pair of arms to move your head about, waiting for the next fool of a traveler to come along?"

"Possibly," Essebai said, as if it did not matter much. (Her remaining parts were not far off, then. Valmai might soon have to deal with all of the witch, in few or many parts, and keep her somehow separated and off her road of vengeance: might the gods aid her.)

"Whither now, Excellency?" she said, with as much cheer as she could muster. "Up the ravine?"

"Upwards, on the northern bank," the head answered. "You'll pass two waterfalls, or so they were once. After that, you'll have to carry me so that I can see, to direct you."

"Very well." She fastened the basket and took it in her left hand as she began to climb. Her right hand she kept free to grasp for handholds, or to keep her balance—and from time to time her fingers reached up to touch the hilt of her sword.

They passed the lower rockfall at midmorning, the upper one shortly after noon. Valmai uncovered the basket and said, "Excellency? Whither now?"

The head opened its eyes onto the dry slopes and sighed. When she had last seen this place, Valmai supposed, it had been green and wooded. On the way up they had passed the remains of many terraces where gardens had grown a thousand years ago. "Go on up this bank a little further," she said, "perhaps a hundred paces. There should be a path."

Valmai slipped a finger through one of the straps of the basket lid and cradled the bottom in her arm so that the head could see. Even after a thousand years, the dry air that had killed the trees had hindered their return into dust, and Valmai found the path at last by noting the bare spots where

there were no withered stumps, where even in the days of rain no tree had grown. "How long are your paces?" Essebai asked.

"Two feet exactly, at a walk."

"Good. Take eighty-five paces up this path."

Valmai obeyed. The counted paces must have been all-important once, when the forest was thick, but now the cleft in the rock was plain and Valmai caught sight of it before Essebai said, "There. On the left."

Valmai looked at the crevice and said, "Well, Excellency, this crack will let me pass, or you, or this backpack. Not all three together. I'm going to have to fasten you up again—lest I drop you—and carry you before and drag the sack behind. It won't hurt your hands, they're on the top of the load."

"Very well," Essebai said, so mildly that Valmai knew there was something dreadful at hand. She raised the basket ahead of her like a lantern, and slipped inside.

"Well," said Essebai after a moment's pause. "Is it as dark out there as it seems in here?"

"As dark as the inside of a black cat in a charcoal-burner's hut at midnight," Valmai said. "The ground seems level enough. Let me set you down and find my firebox."

"Did you bring those firesticks the mage was using?"

"In fact, I did." The fire had died as she touched them, and she had tucked the cold sticks between the three bags of Essebai's body parts. "But I don't know how to light them."

"I do. Bring them out." When Valmai did this, Essebai spoke a word that sounded like a hen trying to bark, and the two sticks blazed up like two pine torches. Valmai stuck them in the sand.

"Now. What are you waiting for? Uncover me."

"Yes, Excellency." Valmai uncovered the basket, and turned the rim so that the head could see every side of the cave. "Is this where the treasure was supposed to be?"

"Gone," Essebai said in a terrible voice. "Stolen. Kelison has stolen it."

"Some of it, maybe," Valmai agreed. "It's said he and his concubine got away with only what they could carry on their backs. Somebody else must've found the rest; a lot can happen in a thousand years." She picked up one of the torches and made a survey of the cave.

It had been hollowed and shaped by the long-vanished water, and the broken stumps of stalactites still hung from the ceiling. The sandy floor was smooth, but for her own footsteps. "Hmmm. Here's something they missed: a spool of wire. Gold wire, a jeweler's supplies. This must have been worth a lot once; they didn't invent wire-drawing machines till Akarrian times, did they?"

Essebai's mouth, working hard, found enough moisture to spit into the sand. "Wire." The dark eyes glared. "Keep it if you will, traitor. I know you have been plotting to keep me from my vengeance, but you will fail. You have not long to live."

"I am an old soldier, witch-queen," Valmai said, "and I have no intention of dying before I am paid." *As for a plot, I wish I had one. I have only half of one, which wouldn't keep you off your road for nearly long enough. Rope rots; leather rots; barren wasteland comes under cultivation.* "Pardon me, witch-concubine I should have said; I don't believe any Emperor was ever fool enough to wed or crown you. I shall keep the wire with pleasure; now, how about teaching me the word to make these torches light?"

But there was a shuffling noise outside, as if something was stumbling against the stumps and stones, coming nearer. Valmai snatched up the basket and slapped the lid over the head, dogged the straps in place. Essebai

screamed, and screamed again, while Valmai loosened a thong from its place on her belt and hoped to all the gods that the thing outside couldn't hear.

Here was a roughened place on the stump of a stalactite, higher than her head, but within reach. She bound the basket to the stony spur and pulled the thongs tight.

She turned, just as the little light filtering in from outside went dark—and there lay her sword, just inside the entrance, atop Maltus's backsack. She skirted the edge of the cave, while something else stumbled inside.

It emerged before she could reach the sword, stumbling in the soft sand: a forked shape, a mandrake root, its shoulders as high as Valmai's own: a torso all complete. No, one breast was still missing, and through the bare ribs she could see its heart pulsing still, glowing with the fires that had burnt it once to ashes.

It paid her no heed, stumbling past her toward the place where its head hung, its shoulders turning this way and that as if its single breast was an eye that could see.

It came to where the basket hung, and stood there for a moment, like a dog begging for a treat. There was a murmur from the basket, and the body turned toward the spilled sack, whose mouth was twitching from the struggles of the prisoned hands inside. Valmai crept forward to snatch the sword, drawing it back as the headless figure approached the sack.

No hands to pluck with, no teeth to gnaw with. The poor accursed thing began to pick at the sack's mouth with its toes, balancing on the other foot. But it got nowhere, and brought its foot down again with a slap.

"Tell your feet there," Valmai remarked, "that if they don't want little bits of broken glass in their toes, they'd better stop that."

But that had been a mistake, for the basket murmured again, and the body turned toward Valmai. "Release me," the basket whispered. "Give my arms

and my head back to my body, and I shall let you live."

"Yes, and there's a river of gold in the next gully." Valmai edged to one side and watched the body lumber past like a sweat-blinded bull. *Poor damned beast*, she thought, *as we are all beasts without our brains*.

Then the basket murmured again, and the body turned to face her, raised one foot and pointed its toe. And the head within the basket spoke one word, with a vowel clear as ice that pierced like a spearpoint: and she could not move.

Her body, stiff and deprived of balance, fell backward a handsbreath and leaned against the wall. Essebai's headless trunk stepped back, ran forward and rammed Valmai in the chest.

Her corselet spread the blow, but it still hurt. The blind torso backed up again, ran and rammed again. She heard someone's collarbone snap, and hoped it wasn't hers. Essebai was probably taking more damage from each blow than Valmai was, but the witch could heal more quickly from greater hurt—whereas with five or six more blows like this, Valmai would probably be dead.

The body rammed her again, just off-center, and she fell sideways to the sand. She drew a cautious breath, while the body stepped back again, ran forward and struck the wall where she had been. Her limbs tingled with savage pins-and-needles, but she was able to move, and she crawled painfully away from the cave wall. Unfortunately, her sword was way over *there*, with the blind torso's path between her and it. She would have to creep the long way round. Her hand fell on something hard: the spool of golden wire, and a great light lit up in her head. *O fool! There are two brainless beasts in this cave. Here was my solution all along, and I never realized it till now.*

Now all she had to do was to live long enough to carry it out. And Essebai had finally realized that her shoulders were striking rock, not armoured flesh: the body was turning slowly, its feet shuffling through the sand, searching for her. Valmai grinned like a wolf, and raised her hand and threw the golden

spool against the far wall. It struck and fell heavily to the sand, and the torso turned in that direction. Valmai let it get several feet away, then crept behind its back to reach her sword. With two good strokes she cut off its feet at the ankles.

After that it was merely a matter of hard work. The sharp knife at her belt was a better tool for the job than her sword. She'd butchered many a stag and boar with it, but never a man before now. She took the hands from their bag and bound them to a stalactite with the fingers pointing upward, so that it was safe to walk underneath them. She did the same with the feet. Then she severed the other joints and hung them high, each from its own spur of rock, while Essebai cursed inside her basket, mostly in tongues Valmai didn't know.

It was after Valmai had run out of thongs, and so must sit astride the struggling torso cutting a leather bag into strips, that the head dropped back into the common speech. "Release me," it said, almost pleading. "Release me, and I will make you my Vizier, and you shall have power over the whole earth, and wealth undreamed of."

"You're a fool," Valmai said calmly, cutting thongs, "if you think I'm fool enough to listen to you. I know what happened to your other Viziers. You're Essebai. Remember the Queen's baby? Remember the young recruits? Remember the old cobbler? Why do you suppose I should trust you?"

"Anyway, since the happy gods seem to've decided that death is too good for you, and have punished you with life, I see it as my task to make sure you serve out your sentence where you can't hurt anyone else. There, now." Her fist full of thongs, Valmai rose to her knees and set to work on the torso.

When she was done, the cave looked like an ogre's butchershop—but a tidy ogre, who had hung up each joint neatly and securely from its own hook. She cleaned her knife and repacked the backpack; some of those tools and herbs of Maltus's would fetch a few coins at the right market. Shuffling through the sand as the blind beast had done before her, but with greater effect, she found six gold coins and a ring set with a ruby. Almost a mouthful; old Maltus had been right in that at least. There was probably more, she

guessed, and added a sieve to the mental list of provisions she would buy in Tashka.

"You still have not defeated me," Essebai's head said from its basket. "You'll go away, yes, live your miserable little life, while I remain here. Years will pass, centuries maybe, but these thongs will rot away, fall into dust; and I shall rise up whole again from the ground. And you will be dead, and nothing will stand in my way when I go forth to do my will on your descendants and all mankind."

"Well, actually, I've thought of that," Valmai said, and left the cave without another word. Those thongs were stout and good, and they needn't last centuries, only a year or two.

In fact, it didn't take nearly that long: a few days through the Pass to Tashka; a few days to buy mounts and provisions; a few days to come back. Her task reached its end within half a year. Out on the Waste, a thin cloud veil putting a rainbow ring around the sun and the Claws only a vague smudge on the horizon, she stopped for the last time and dismounted.

"I don't want a warhorse," she had told the trader. "I'm going to far, unchancy places, and I want a horse so brave, or else so stupid, that she won't bolt no matter what she sees."

"That brave," the trader had answered, "the gods have not made any horse. That stupid, I think I can provide you."

And he had found her a horse and a pack-mule, so innocent of all intellect that it never occurred to either of them to wonder why their mistress should have stopped yet again in the middle of the trackless waste and taken pick and shovel to dig yet another deep hole in the sand.

She was done before midday, and cleaned the pick and shovel carefully before tucking them back into the mule's pack. She ought to be able to sell

them back for some fraction of what she'd paid for them. Then from her saddlebow she took a pair of small leather sacks.

The first sack contained her toolkit: a sharp-pointed awl and what remained of the spool of golden wire. No more than a foot of it left, but that would do. From the other sack she took what looked like a little pink worm. It twitched irritably when she touched it.

She pierced the finger with the awl and threaded the wire through it; it thrashed like a worm on a fishhook. She wound the long end of the wire two or three times round it, and reached for a stone she had noted earlier. It was a chunk of wind-smoothed granite, about the size of her fist, longer than it was wide: it might have made a grinding-stone for some simple tribeswoman. Valmai wound the wire around stone and finger together—there was just enough—and twisted the ends round each other. Then she slid into the hole she had dug, and laid the finger gently on the ground with the stone on top of it. She climbed out, took up the shovel again, and began to fill in the hole. By noon she was done. She drew the shovel across the surface to smooth it out; in any case the next sandstorm would smooth out every hole she had dug beyond all recognition. And the storm season was about to start again.

And the golden wire would never corrode, and the stones would last as long as the world did, probably. And no wolf or bear would ever dig so deep. Even men with pick and shovel—a burial party for one who died in mid-journey? she could think of no other reason to dig here—even they, having found one bit of dried meat wrapped up in gold wire, would have no way of finding the rest of them. With a little luck, and the gods' favor, Essebai might be settled till the end of the world. Valmai tucked her little sacks away and mounted, turning the animals' heads toward the Claws, and Kennemai's Pass, and the markets of Tashka.

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THE LAST QUARREL

The shadow had been passing over their heads since midday, back and forth like a blot over the ground, rising up like a solid body when it passed through the dust clouds the King's army left in its wake.

The high arid plains of Thesh stretched out for miles in every direction. A day's march behind them lay the inhabited lowlands, safe for the moment behind the shelter of the hills, but the plains were scoured bare with the wizard's malice; not even grass grew there now. Four days ahead of them, already visible among the mountains, the wizard's keep rose like a smooth-pointed fang in the jaw of a great cat.

It was not till two hours past the noon, when the sun had fallen from its highest point, that they caught a glimpse of the flying thing that cast the shadow. Captain Andraia held up a hand to block out the sun, and peered into the deep autumn sky. "What do you make of it?" he asked those who rode near him. "Bird, beast, or bat?"

"It's big, whatever it is." said Valmai. She had taken her crossbow from its sling across her back and was giving it the dozen turns it took to wind it up. "See how it glides, hardly flapping its wings. It's riding the updrafts, like an eagle. But I wouldn't say it had the shape of a bird." She squinted up at the thing, deepening the lines that years of service had carved round her eyes. "Whatever it is, I doubt it means us well. Some spy of the wizard's, unless I miss my guess." She reined in her horse, and motioned those who rode behind her to pass by on either side.

Skill is one thing, and luck is another, and when they happen to coincide the damndest things can happen. Valmai's bolt shot up as swift and vicious as

gossip, and skewered the flying thing through the wing. It tumbled through the sky and fell.

They rode up to where the thing lay, downed but not dead, and stood at a cautious distance as it thrashed about with the quarrel through its wing. It was a long-necked serpent with bat's wings, like a dragon out of an old tale, but no larger than a man. The sheen over its scaly body was like glass, greenish and transparent. It wrapped its tail around itself, drew in its wings, and changed. A man lay on the ground before them, a thin, beardless, grey-faced man in a shimmering green cloak, Valmai's arrow thrust through the palm of his hand.

He pushed himself to a sitting position with his good hand, and looked around the circle of watchers. When his eye fell on Valmai and her crossbow, the hood of his cloak spread like a cobra's and he began to speak in a hissing whisper. Andraia drew his sword and took a step toward him, but Valmai motioned him back and began to wind the crossbow again. The wizard smiled thinly and made a little gesture, as if throwing a handful of nothing toward her. Then he put his hand over his face and disappeared. The quarrel fell to the ground in a little puff of dust.

"Curse it," Valmai said without heat. "I should've shot first and asked questions later."

"No matter," said the captain. "We won't have him overhead now, not till that wound heals in his wing. Well done, Valmai." He looked about him, where the army had come almost to a stop with gazing and confusion. "Form up those lines, there! Where's the sergeant? Get them moving again; the circus is over." He turned back to Valmai. "Dine with me this evening? I've a piece of that venison left and we ought to eat it before it goes off."

But by evening, when the army stopped to make camp, Valmai was feverish and unable to eat. Her companions brought her water and sponged her body and her aching head, and eventually she slept. By morning she was able to ride again.

All day she could barely keep her eyes open, and her head kept nodding toward her saddlebow. She put it down to her lack of sleep the night before, and when they camped that evening she swallowed some bread and tumbled into her bedroll before the sun was well down.

In the morning she was too weak to rise at first, and she lay long in her tangled blankets before she could muster the strength to rise and dress. She went straight to the physician's tent. He listened to her story and looked her over, and then he stood turned away from her, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Is it a sickness," she asked, "or the wizard's work?"

"Yes," he said, "It's both of those. And I fear there's no cure. I've seen it before, in the Koriath campaign. The man lasted three weeks, growing tired and weaker all the time, till finally he stumbled and fell in the midst of battle and tripped up two of his fellows as he went. I don't know how long he would have lived if he'd stayed out of combat; a year or two, maybe."

"Well," said Valmai. "Will you send for Andraia, master physician? We've campaigned together a long time; I'd as lief he struck off my head as anyone."

"There's a better course," the physician said, "if you have the courage."

"Try me."

"Go back to the lowlands," he said, "and live there till you die. It's a cloud of his power that's on you, his chains on your limbs, his silk that entangles you. He can't draw it from you while you live. Live as long as you can, and you'll hamper him every day of it."

"So I will, then."

She drew her back pay and as much of her pension as the paymistress was willing to allow her, and she sold her sword and her armour; but she kept the crossbow. It was all her arms could do to wind it, but the trigger would

loose at a feather's touch and she had no wish to cross the plains again alone and unarmed. She tied a bag of coppers to her saddlebow, and packed a few days' rations next to her bedroll, and she said goodbye to her companions. When the army was ready to march, she turned her back on them resolutely and rode back the way they had come.

Since it was herself that was ill and not her horse, it took her only a day and a half to retrace the path that had taken the army two days. She rode slumped in the saddle, her eyes half-shut and her wits dulled, but no living thing came near her. She spent the first night under the unsympathetic stars, her horse towering over her like a forest.

The next morning she had to clamber into the saddle like a bear into a tree, and she was glad that her companions could not see her. That day the road began to descend, and a little rivulet sprang up beside it and lined its verge with green. As she descended, the stream widened into a brook a tired woman could bathe her face and her feet in, and keep awake a little longer. Bushes grew up beside it, and the air grew sweet and heavy with the scent of water, and when at last the stream fell in a little cataract of a dozen feet, she saw small fish flashing in it, and a pool beneath it where the shadows were deep and green. Beyond the pool was the village,.

They had passed through it on the way up, but she had scarcely noticed it, her mind being set on her business and full of preparations for battle. Now the place seemed a paradise on earth, a shelter maybe for her weary bones as long as her flesh could hold them together. She had intended to ride farther from the plains before she stopped, but instead she turned her horse and went into the village.

The last of the crops were in and the men were plowing the upland fields for the winter wheat. The caller went before the plow, coaxing the oxen forward, and the plowman followed after with his whip laid at right angles to the plowshare, to space the furrows evenly. Three men followed him, breaking up the largest clods with heavy wooden mallets. They paused and stared at her, and one left the furrow and leaped over the hedge that rimmed the field.

"Good evening, mistress," he said. He was a youth of fifteen or so, grown tall and gangling but not filled out yet, a drift of yellow fuzz on his chin like the backside of a baby chick. "Is the battle over already?"

"Not begun yet; but I've fallen ill and had to come back. I need a place to live."

"We'd be happy to put you up for the night."

"Longer than that; I can't travel further."

The youth raised one sandy eyebrow. "Well, my great-aunt Kinda died last month, and left my Dad her cottage. He doesn't need the cottage, and he needs a new cart-horse. Dad!" he shouted, his voice breaking in the middle, and the plowman rested his plow against the headland and joined them.

By nightfall the trade was agreed on, and in the morning Valmai moved into the cottage. The youth Kendrick carried water in for her, and helped her sweep out and build a fire.

The house was tiny, only a single room, a dozen feet from wall to wall and not quite square. There was a door in the front wall, a window in the back, and a hearth built in at one side. Kendrick set Valmai's bed against the fourth wall, and she collapsed into it gratefully while he set the place to rights.

Most of great-aunt Kinda's possessions had been shared out among her kin. A few other pieces Valmai sold, leaving the house almost bare. She had a shelf to hold a few dishes, a chest to hold a bit of clothing and the souvenirs of a dozen campaigns; she had a kettle and a broom and a water bucket, and (a touch of luxury) a change of bedlinen that Kendrick's mother would launder from time to time. There was a kitchen garden with a few turnips still left in it, bordered by a fence of rough split stakes, and a privy tucked discreetly around the corner of the house.

Thus she established the narrow limits of her life, in the hopes of keeping them within her grasp, and settled down to wait out the winter.

On her good days she could get up and cook her meals, draw the broom across the hard-packed earthen floor, even sit on the doorstep and watch the crows drifting across the sky. She found that she could portion out her time and her strength: half an hour to cut up a chicken and some vegetables and put them in the pot, an hour to rest while it simmered over the fire. Sometimes she could even walk a fathom's distance to a neighbor's house, sit for an hour swapping battle yarns with the stories of these strange quiet people who had lived in the same place all their lives, lives as rich and complex as her own.

On her bad days, she never heaved herself out of bed except to go to the privy. She slept all night and half the day. She quickly learned that the week before her courses fell due would be the worst week of the month, and made arrangements for Kendrick or his sister to come in and clear out the undergrowth, simmer the kettle and wash the crockery, and haul buckets of water from the well on the village green.

Her wits grew as weak as her body, and her soldier's life seemed a tale told of somebody else, long ago and in another country. Perhaps it was a mercy, since it kept her from longing to go out again and on the march; there were days when she could not even remember any more whether she had held her sword in her right hand or her left. Her ambitions were shrunken, and she dreamed not of marching into new lands, but of walking in her garden and pulling up young carrots that her jaws had the strength to chew.

When the Frost Moon was new in the west, a cat invited himself into the cottage, a rangy young tomcat with grey stripes from his nose to his tail. Thin as a hop-pole when he came to her, he grew sleek on her broth and bread and spent hours lying heavily in her lap, purring soft and deep as distant thunder. It was a comfort. To eat, sleep, and watch the crows fly past was enough for him, and she tried to follow his example.

Kendrick also took to coming by, even on her good days, to stir up the fire and listen to her battle stories when she could bring them to mind. He had decided to go for a soldier himself when he had his growth, and whenever the weather was dry he borrowed Valmai's crossbow and shot at a target he'd set in a dead tree.

Once or twice during the winter a messenger would go by, picking his way over the frozen road between the army and the King. Valmai learned that the wizard's keep was besieged, his goblin troops faint for lack of fresh meat and his mercenary men deserting in droves. Some of them made their way to the camp and bought their freedom with what they knew.

Kendrick passed on these bits of news in a voice afire with eagerness. Valmai, barely listening, drew her blankets closer around her and tucked her hands under the cat's striped flank to keep them warm. The time now seemed incredibly long ago when she had marched in order of battle, wound up a crossbow and loosed a bolt at a gliding shape with a man's wicked heart wrapped in a green serpent's skin.

The spring came at last, with the distant honking overhead of the wild geese flying north and the steady drip of meltwater from the roof. Kendrick's sister came with an iron griddle and taught Valmai to bake oatcake as thin as leather. On her good days she sat by the fire, her face splendidly scorched by the heat, casting the thin batter over the hissing griddle; on her bad days she need only stretch an arm to break it down from the rafters where it hung in folds, slowly growing stiff and brittle.

Spring, and she was still alive despite the wizard. She counted over her shrinking pile of coppers, and thought of hiring Kendrick to spade her garden.

Then the message went out that the King's army had broken camp and stormed the wizard's fortress. His tower was fallen, his armies dispersed; the wizard himself had taken to the air and barely escaped with his serpent's skin.

It was the warmest day they had had so far that spring. Valmai sat in bed with her back to the wall and the cat in her lap, watching two flies dance in the doorway. From the yard outside came the occasional thump of a quarrel hitting dead wood, as Kendrick practiced his aim. He was losing her quarrels in the forest, one by one; soon she must collect herself and teach him to make some more.

A shadow drifted over the ground, too swiftly for a passing cloud. Valmai went cold, and the warm burden of the cat in her lap was suddenly a crushing weight, too heavy to shift aside. Kendrick shouted, and came inside at a stumbling run, the crossbow in one hand and a single quarrel in the other. "A flying thing," he said. "It came in low over the trees, I think it's landing on the green. I'll run and see."

"Set down the crossbow," Valmai snapped. "Never run with it wound. Besides, he might know it again. Ah! cat, you're made of lead."

Kendrick ran off. Far in the distance there was a murmur, a rumor of disturbance like a shaken beehive. The cat rose and stretched, sinking its claws into the blankets and opening its pink mouth wide in a yawn. The flies swirled in the doorway and made off for quieter places.

Kendrick came back at a dead run; scorning the gate, he leaped over the fence and burst through the doorway. "He's coming! Ai, ai, he asked them where you were, and they told him! He's coming this way."

"Get out of here," Valmai commanded. "Take the cat and go through the window. That's orders." Already the shadow was at the gate.

Kendrick snatched up the cat with one arm and plunged headfirst through the open window. There was a thud outside, and a scrambling sound that died away in the forest.

The shadow in the doorway was not quite solid; the sun at its back seeped through in a green mist that swirled aimlessly on the floor. Deliberately the wizard advanced to stand at the foot of the bed where Valmai huddled silent under all her blankets, her knees drawn up as if with cramp.

"Archer, you have failed in what was expected of you," the thin voice said. "I meant you to be a weight on the arm of your comrades, a hobble on the feet of your army. Instead, you have inconvenienced *me*."

"I should have sought you out before this, but that my wing pained me. Now I shall pay you out, and returning to my own place wipe your army from the map." His shadow was dark now on the floor. He raised a hand like a bundle of twigs, and smiled.

Valmai kicked off the blankets, and the crossbow that rested on her knee sang briefly as the bolt loosed from the spring. It buried itself in the wizard's breastbone, and he fell backward into the doorway flapping his arms like a half-fledged stork. The green shape writhed and darkened, by turns like a man on the rack or a snake with a broken back. It shriveled in the sunlight into a little dried-up thing, twisted around the shaft of Valmai's quarrel, looking like neither reptile nor man.

Pushing with her hands, Valmai got her backside under her and sat up. There was a clean smell to the air. Her lungs drew it in deeply, as if she had put on too tight a corselet in the autumn and only just now cast it off. A certain freshness was creeping into her body, slow and promising as the first drops from the frozen thatch under the sun. Maybe her strength would come back to her. Perhaps she would redeem her horse from the plowman's cart, leave the village and the forest and go back to the battlefield. She got to her feet, and her sight went dark; she must clutch at the doorpost till her blood rose to her brain again and the dizziness passed.

The earth, steaming under the hot sun, was furry and green with young weeds. She must borrow a hoe and clear a few rows; it was too cold for beans or turnips yet, but she could have a few lettuces ready to go with the venison, when Captain Andraia brought his troops back down the road.

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THROUGH FROST AND FIRE

An icy wind poured down the mountainside, through the pungent-smelling trees, over Father Piedro's bare scalp and down his neck. Strange, an east wind in the middle of winter; the Heller Wind, just as icy and a lot stronger, should have been blowing out of the northwest and over his shoulder. But no wise man trusted the weather to do what it was supposed to. Doubtless it would shift back in a few hours.

Under this mild wind, the world was full of whispers: the rustling of the trees, the soft shuffle of the donkey's hooves through the fallen needles with their thin drift of snow, the murmuring of Father Piedro's prayers. Two hundred psalms sung in four hours and round again, keeping the prattling lower half of his mind occupied while his soul meditated on the holy mysteries that bound together the world and all that was in it—and, incidentally, that kept him warm even in the snows of Nevarsin.

He was a tall, gangling young man, his black hair tousled around his shaven crown, the scars of youthful skin trouble still visible on his cheeks. The sandaled feet at the ends of his long legs reached almost to the ground under the donkey's flanks. He had just completed his twentieth year, just been ordained as a Father of the *crisoforos*, and Father Master had granted him leave to spend the Midwinter Festival with his family in the world. His belly was still full of his aunt's spicebread, and his saddlebags bulged with bundles of healing thornleaf from her garden.

The donkey lifted its grey head and brayed softly, almost a whimper. Father Piedro brought his attention back to earth. "You smell something, little brother? So do I." The scent was stronger as the wind blew more gently: resinous smoke. Somewhere, the forest had burned, or was burning still. It had been a dry winter.

Any able-bodied man, even a monk, was bound to take his place on the firelines at need, but where was the fire? He didn't know whether to pray to find it, so that he could help to extinguish so deadly a menace, or to give it a clear miss, so that he could continue on to Nevarsin without delay.

Cormac's Station was just ahead, its few mossy roofs becoming visible through the trees. He would give the alarm there—but surely it had already been given. The mountain men were not likely to lie asleep while smoke drifted through the trees. He slapped the donkey's angular backside just the same, and urged the little animal on to a reluctant half-trot.

There were no men in the road between the half-dozen rough huts of the settlement; no women collecting water from the little spring that trickled out of the rock to fall a thousand feet into the valley; not even the children who should have come out, curiosity overcoming shyness, to look at the stranger. The men might all be off on the firelines, but where were the others? Was there sickness in the place? He put his foot down the last handsbreath to the ground, and swung his long leg over to meet it. The donkey took another few steps before realizing that its rider had dismounted and it was time to stop.

He bent his head to peer into the nearest hut. It was deserted. His foot struck against a wooden cup, abandoned on the threshold; it clattered across the floor. *Sickness*, he thought, *or else they feared the fire was coming this way, and then it veered off*. He looked into another hut. It was empty. He pushed open the door to the third, scraping on its leather hinges, and a voice inside cried, "Mikhail?" A woman's voice, shrill with fear or anger. He pushed the door wider and went in.

The woman lay on a resin-needle pallet near the fireplace, covered with a patched quilt. The quilt was stained with blood, but the woman seemed hale, though her face was very white against her dark hair. She had risen on one elbow and was trying to peer into his face, indistinct as it must be with the bright winter sunlight behind it. As he knelt beside her, she sank back onto the mattress. "You're not—I'm sorry, Father. For a moment I thought you were my husband."

"I'm Father Pedro. Are you all right, my daughter? Where are the others?"

"I'm Catriona. The men are on the firelines. Mhari and the others, they left yesterday. The fire was coming. But then it didn't come."

"They *left* you here?"

"I was in labor, I couldn't travel." Her eyes closed for a moment. "It hurt so much, I couldn't walk. I couldn't even stand. I *made* them go, or they would all have died with me. But the fire didn't come, and in the night I had my baby." She tugged down the edge of the quilt, and Father Pedro saw the matted dark hair and flattened face of a newborn infant. "Isn't she lovely?"

"Lovely." he agreed. To him the baby was identical to his sister's new son and as ugly as a half-drowned mudrabbit. But every child was beautiful in its mother's eyes. He tried to remember what little he had read about the care of mothers and infants. The Father Healers didn't teach midwifery. "Did you tie and cut the navel cord?"

"Yes, and burnt the afterbirth in the fire. And then we just stayed in bed. Her name is Alanna. My husband—" She broke off, her eyes wide, and outside in the road the donkey screamed. Pedro rose to his feet, his head brushing against the underside of the thatch. The smell of smoke was strong in all their nostrils. The wind had changed.

"This east wind was sent out of mercy," he said. "to let you bear your child alive. Now the fire is coming on again, and we must move quickly. Can you get up?"

"Yes, I was up this morning, getting clean linen." She rose to her knees. "I need some now, Alanna's wet, or worse." She reached for a little pile of folded fabric: the baby's breechclouts, carefully collected out of every worn rag the settlement could find her. "But I don't think I can walk far."

"You needn't. You'll ride my donkey." He half-turned from her as she deftly cleaned the baby's tiny body and tied the new breechclout in place. It wasn't

really fitting for him to watch, and yet he had always wondered how the things fastened.

He looked around the hut for anything worth salvaging, but Catriona's kinswomen had stripped the place. There was part of a bannock and a leather bottle of sour beer on the hearth, and he picked them up. They might be needed before they reached the next settlement.

"Do you have warm clothing for the baby? A fur sack? We'll be going through the snow to Maclidan Keep. Yes, and give me the rest of the clouts. No, not the soiled one, not in my saddlebags full of simples. You'd better take my arm." He lifted her to her feet and led her out of the hut into the road.

The smell of burning resin was strong now. The donkey stood trembling in the middle of the road, his ears laid back, the whites of his eyes showing, almost ready to bolt. "All right, little brother. We're getting out of here." He tucked the baby's clouts into the saddlebag, and helped Catriona to put her foot into the stirrup.

She mounted easily enough, but then rose at once in the stirrups with a shocked look on her face. "Ai! Father, it hurts to sit down."

"Then sit on one hip," he said firmly, feeling his face flush red hot. From what little he knew about the mechanics of childbearing, he could well believe the woman's bottom parts were sore, but she couldn't stay here to recuperate. "Swing your other leg over and ride side-saddle like a Comynara. That's right." He returned to the hut to get the baby, securely tucked away in a leather bag with a tiny hood for her face. The fur around the opening was shabby and the leather well-worn. Alanna could have been the dozenth or the fiftieth baby in the little settlement to have used it. As he picked her up, she opened her eyes. They were a strange blue-green, like his little nephew's eyes, but deeper: the color of thunderclouds, or perhaps of the sea that none of them had ever seen. She wasn't really looking at him, but her eyes were devastating. He suddenly realized that he was in the presence of a real person, not just a kind of egg with legs, but a human being in her own right, even though small enough to hold in his arms.

"Hello," he said softly. The baby stared past his nose at whatever it was she saw. "Hello, Alanna." She sneezed, a tiny sound like an exasperated mouse, and he laughed and carried her out of the hut.

Catriona had managed to settle herself in relative comfort on the donkey's back, her quilt folded under her and her heavy cloak around her. He put the baby into her arms.

"There you are, little one." She rubbed her nose against the baby's little button and made a foolish sound like a drunken dove. Alanna gurgled. (Pietro felt like a rejected suitor.) "Isn't she lovely?" she said again.

"Beautiful," he said, meaning it this time. "In a dozen or thirteen years, you'll have to keep the lads off with clubs." *What a way for a priest to talk*, he thought. He took the donkey's reins and led it up the road. The beast needed no urging at all.

He tried to calculate how much time they had. With the wind out of the northwest again, the fire would rise straight up the mountainside till it reached the snowline and starved for fuel. How long that would take depended, not only how fast the fire could burn, but on how far down the mountain it had been to begin with. He had planned to reach the little shelter at the timberline by dusk, a matter of two or three hours, but that was walking, not trotting. Not that they could run all the way up the mountain. But then, Catriona and Alanna together didn't weigh as heavily on the donkey's back as he had. He realized with a sense of frustration that he had no way of finding out ahead of time whether they would escape the fire or not.

And therefore, it clearly wasn't his problem. It was a matter for Blessed Cristoforo, Bearer of Burdens, or for the Archangel Rafael who cared for helpless children. *He has given his angels charge over thee, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. The fire shall not consume thee by day, nor the cold by night.* All Pietro had to do was to trust in them and keep the donkey moving. He lengthened his stride a little. Soon he was singing again, his lower mind busy getting from one psalm to the next, his upper mind contemplating the Holy Archangels. Some part in between kept him on the road.

The trees thinned out; the snow grew deeper underfoot. A bowshot's length away the trees ceased altogether before a pile of snow-covered rubble at the foot of a small and dirty-looking glacier. "Praise the holy one, you his children, praise his name; from the sun's rising to its setting, praise the—" Pedro came out of his meditations, breaking in the middle of a psalm, to realize that they were almost clear of the timber and safe from the fire. But he also realized that he heard a crackling sound not so far behind him. Something was crashing through the trees: an animal? No, it was above his head, breaking branches as it went like an impossible huge bird—and then he tugged at the donkey's bridle, shouting. "Hold on," and pulled the frightened beast out of the path, in among the trees, five feet from the road, ten feet. Above their heads a great tree was falling, a great-grandfather of trees, dead at the roots and tinderous about the trunk, snapping branches as it fell. Little flames sprang up all round it. Pedro scrambled among the trees, dragging the terrified donkey behind him, unsure of the path, but hoping that uphill was the way to safety. The light was increasing ahead of him, and for a moment he feared that they were surrounded by the flames; but then he found himself stumbling through the open, the trees behind him, the fire behind him, reflecting from the snowfield.

"Are you all right, my daughter? What about the baby?" *Daughter*, he thought wildly. *She's older than I am.*

"We're all right, Father. Alanna, if you'll believe me, is still asleep."

Pedro looked over his shoulder: the fire's glare mingled with the fire of the setting sun. The trees behind were catching, but it was clear that they had escaped. A hornbuck came plunging out of the forest, its coat singed; it shied away from them and leaped away across the foot of the glacier. And snow began to fall.

First a few flakes, drifting crazily in the updrafts from the fire, till its warmth melted them into raindrops that fell sizzling into the fire. But a dark cloud was rolling overhead, and the snow fell thicker and heavier as they watched, half-melted flakes clinging together in clumps that hit the snowy ground with audible little *plops*, a fall of slush rather than of snow, wet and

dirty from smoke and ash. The fire's advance slowed and faltered. The blazing twigs on the nearest tree were snuffed out one by one. The roaring of the flames died away, leaving the mountainside in silence but for the faint patter of falling slush.

"Thank you, Holy Rafael," Pedro said. "Most of this isn't even killed, and will grow back in the spring."

"Perhaps they found a *laranzu* to bring the snow," Catriona said.

"Maybe," said Pedro. He didn't care to argue the relative powers of men and angels. "If they did, he's a good one. Look at it coming down! We'll never get over the ridge to Maclidan Keep tonight; we'll shelter in the cave." He led the donkey across the snow-covered rubble to the scarp of rock that marked the bottom of the pass. Here, longer ago than anyone remembered, strong men had piled three slabs of rock to give a rudimentary shelter: a roof and two walls against the foot of the scarp. There was barely room for all of them with the donkey. As Pedro had hoped, the tree boughs that earlier travelers had cut for bedding were still there, dead now, but better to lie on than snow or rock. He put Alanna, still encased in her bag, in a bed of tree needles and helped Catriona to get off the donkey. She slid to her knees and lay down beside her daughter. Alanna began to whimper, and Catriona opened her tunic and put her to the breast. Pedro took the quilt from the saddle and spread it over them.

"Don't get settled yet," he said. He fumbled in the near-darkness for the saddle-girth. "If my little brother will do as he's asked, I'll make you a lovely warm pillow." He persuaded the donkey to kneel, and settled Catriona against its flank, Alanna in the crook of her arm. In one of the saddlebags was a small bag of grain for the donkey, and he spread it out under its nose. In the other bag were Catriona's bread and beer, and—he burrowed deeper under the sweet-smelling thornleaf—the packet of his Aunt Adriana's honeycakes. He found it by smell and feel; the sun had now set and the darkness was almost absolute. "Liriel is nearly full tonight," he remarked. "When she rises over the mountains, we ought to have a little light. In the meantime, we can eat." He

settled down beside Catriona against the donkey's side, divided the bannock and one of the honeycakes, and set the bottle down between them.

"I don't suppose we can make a fire."

"I'm afraid not," he said. "There's nothing here to burn but the litter underfoot, and I'd rather keep that between us and the rock. Nor would it last long. We'll huddle together like three little donkeys and keep warm that way."

They sat together for a time, with no sound but a faint munching—the donkey with its oats and the adults with the scarcely softer bannock—and the damp snuffling sound of Alanna taking in her own supper.

"Mmmm," Catriona said indistinctly, her mouth full, the scent of honeycake strong in the air. "This was never baked in a monastery."

"No, I brought that from home," Pedro said. "My Aunt Adriana has a great gift. Her cooking is the only thing in the world that I really miss at Nevarsin."

"Really," said Catriona in a surprised voice. "I would have thought—well." Clearly she had decided not to say whatever had been on her tongue. "Why were you thanking the holy Rafael? Is he good with fires?"

"He's the patron of children," Pedro said. "It's told in the Book of Burdens that once when there was pestilence in the Dry Towns, the holy Rafael took on human shape to rescue two children, Tobias and Sara, who had been left orphans. They were to be sold as slaves. The Dry-Towners saw the angel as a beautiful young man, and thought to sell him for an evil purpose. But when they threw him into the compound, he picked up the two children in his arms and walked straight out of their midst unseen, and left the gates locked behind them. And he brought the children into the hills, and recovered a debt left to Tobias's father, to provide for them, and he found fostering for them, and then disappeared. And when the children grew up, they married each other."

Catriona did not answer. There was a little moonlight in the shelter now, diffused by the tumbling snowflakes, and he saw that she was asleep, curled

up against the donkey's warm side, Alanna asleep in her arms. Carefully, not touching her, he pulled the folds of her tunic over her breast. He tucked the quilt securely around them, and settled down to watch the snow fall. He would do better not to sleep himself. He went back to the psalms.

But he couldn't keep his mind on his prayers. He kept turning to look at Alanna, motionless in her mother's arms. Father Colin had taught him all he knew, all that a man without *laran* could learn, but almost nothing about infants. He had the vague memory of being told that they sometimes died without warning, simply stopped breathing. Catriona was snoring faintly, but he could hear no sound from Alanna at all. He touched her cheek with his fingertip; it was cold. *Well, of course it's cold*, he told himself sensibly, *it's snowing out there and not far above freezing in here*. But he bent over in near-panic just the same, and put his ear near Alanna's face till he could hear the tiny sound of her breathing. Then he sat back again, trembling with relief, and told himself he was a fool.

He really didn't know anything about children, not little ones. Boys came to Nevarsin, as he had, at the age of ten, when they were already almost reasoning beings. His brothers and sisters had been tiny like that once, but he hadn't paid any attention to them, nor to his sister's baby. Clearly he had been missing something.

He leaned along the donkey's back and peered over Catriona's shoulder. Alanna's tightshut eyelids might have been carved out of translucent wax, one delicate stroke of the chisel apiece. Her mouth was shaped like a hunter's bow, a tight-strung bow for a hunter the size of his thumb. Her inconsequential lower lip twitched, as if she dreamed of nursing. So very small. She had pushed one hand up to her face; her fingertips were visible through the hood's opening, tipped with nails like pink flower petals. *I could never have invented those little fingers*, he thought, *not if I tried for ten thousand years. Only a god could make something as perfect as that*.

Then her face crumpled, and her mouth opened with a thin scratchy wail like an indignant kitten or a very distant banshee. She had just been fed, so he couldn't understand it. A goat's real milk didn't come in until the third day she

had kidded, but the kid didn't need more than the firstlings that came in before the milk. If Alanna needed something more than what her mother could give her that night, he didn't know what he could do. Could she drink melted snow? The faint sound of her crying made it very hard to think.

"If it cries," said a woman's voice in his memory, *"you feed it."* His mother's voice, he thought, or possibly Aunt Adrianna's. *"If it isn't hungry, you bubble it. If it's wet, you change it. There's not much else it needs."*

He picked her up and held her upright against his shoulder. She drew in a fresh breath and cried again. He patted her back, awkwardly, not sure where the leather sack left off and Alanna began. "I think I understand you," he said. "They're in the saddlebag, and if you don't mind smelling of thornleaf, and I can't think why you should—" he laid her down again. She hiccuped, glared at him, and continued to cry. Catriona must have been exhausted from the previous night's labor, to sleep so soundly. He found a clean breechclout in the saddlebag. It seemed fairly straightforward, with bits of cord to be tied on each side.

The leather sack was fastened by half-a-dozen bone buttons down the front. He unbuttoned them and hauled out a double handful of warm damp baby. She squirmed and twisted in his hands. Her head lolled forward on her chest, and he quickly put her down on the edge of the quilt.

The hem of her woollen gown was drawn up with a cord, enclosing her feet in a second bag. The cord was wet and difficult to get untied. Inside the gown the breechclout was sodden, and the cords even harder to untie. There ought to be some easier way of fastening the things, he reflected as he tugged and Alanna complained, considering that they would almost always be wet when the time came to untie them. Maybe they should have buttons, like the sack. He would ask Catriona about it when she woke. The knot came loose, and he tossed the wet clout outside to freeze. He might be able to dry it later, but he wasn't going to put it in his saddlebag wet if he could help it. He still hoped to get that thornleaf to Father Colin in usable condition. He turned back to Alanna and discovered that what he had heard was true: little girls were shaped differently from little boys. How clever, how simple: a smooth shape

like an almond's shell, no more. One of nature's inspired designs; though some day she would have trouble making water in the snow. He put the clean clout under her bottom and tied it around her waist.

Never to lay hand on any unwilling woman, the lower part of his mind reminded him nervously. Never to look with lewd thought on child or pledged virgin.

Shut up, he told it. There's no offense here to Alanna's modesty, or mine. He tied the gown around her feet. It was cold by now, and she started to whimper again. *If Alanna's father were here, he'd change her clouts for her, now wouldn't he?* "Come here, child. Let's keep your feet warm." He loosened his tunic and slipped her inside. He settled back with her little weight on his chest, her head tucked under his chin, and thought about Mikhail, a forester of Cormac's Station. Did the man know his blessings? No, of course not, he had been out on the firelines since before Alanna was born. Pedro hoped he was all right. Perhaps he would be at Maclidan Keep when they got there. How delighted he would be. Sons were more important to a man in the world, of course, but certainly no man could help but love such a perfect little daughter.

The donkey turned its head around and brayed, not too loudly, but Alanna jerked as if she had been struck. "Hush, little brother," said Pedro, and stretched out his free hand to scratch behind the animal's ears and pat its velvety nose. Its breath was warm on his fingers, like Alanna's on his neck. He wrapped his arms around the little bundle in his tunic, and sighed. *I am the picture of a fool, he thought. I have just been granted the right to be called "Father," precisely because I have vowed never, among other things, to have any children. And now look at me.*

Not that he really yearned for physical fatherhood. Or he didn't think he did. Certainly his imagination recoiled from the idea of begetting Alanna on Catriona's mysterious body. And a man in the world had to spend most of his time working in farm or forest, not in the house tending children; that was a woman's job. And yet, and yet—all the work of the world and all the holy work of the monastery, prayer and music and reading and history and even the instruction of the novices, seemed stale and drab now, on this night, with this

little child in his arms. *Peace, prattler*, he told himself. *You'll feel much more like yourself in the morning*. And he began to sing again, taking up where he had left off. "He raises the weak from the dust, and the poor man from the midden, to set him with the lords of his people." Only Father Gabriel's ten years' patience had made even a passable singer of him, but Alanna seemed to enjoy it. Perhaps the low notes tickled. "He makes the barren woman to keep house, the joyful mother of children."

"Father, I'm thirsty."

He glanced down at Catriona. The leather bottle lay between them, empty. "Here, take the baby; I'll get you some snow." He put Alanna in her arms, tucked the quilt around them, and went outside.

A still wind was blowing, but the snow had almost stopped. The clouds were drawing back across the sky, revealing Liriel's bright disk overhead and Mormallor dim and yellow on the horizon. Pedro scooped up a double handful of clean snow and took it inside. Catriona, bred in the mountains, knew how to take it in little sips, not throat-freezing gulps.

"Thank you," she said at last. "Father, you sing very nicely, but who is your song about? Does the Bearer of Burdens make it his care to provide us with little burdens of our own?"

He laughed. "I'm not sure, A lot of the old psalms don't name names. Perhaps it's the holy Archangel Rafael again, providing for children by giving them mothers."

"Anyway, I wasn't a barren woman. I've borne four other children, and two of them are still alive."

"I doubt the holy poet had you specifically in mind." He settled down beside her again. "This psalm goes back to the beginning of time, anyway."

"Father, haven't you ever wanted to be married?"

He stared at her in astonishment. "Daughter, have you ever been tested for *laran*?"

"Of course not, I'm no Comyn by-blow. Doesn't it fret you, that you can never lie with a woman?"

"Not really," he said, shocked into plain speech. "I've never done it, after all. They say that the rebellion of the flesh only dies half an hour before we do—or maybe it's half an hour after. But it's hard to feel rebellious with flesh that's nine parts frozen, and by the time the novice is enough in the mold that he isn't frozen, the flesh is tamed and doesn't rebel much."

"And you never wish you'd stayed home with your family?"

He looked out of the shelter, where the growing moonlight shone on snow like new milk. "We'd better get moving. The wind's pouring in from the west and if we stay here we'll freeze, but it's blown the snow away and we can get over this ridge." He got the donkey to its feet and saddled it, while Catriona buttoned up Alana's sack and folded her quilt. He loaded the donkey and led it out of the shelter and up the trail at a brisk pace, and in fact the wind was strong and bitter out of the west. But anything was better than staying in the shelter and continuing that conversation.

The trail wound narrowly between rock walls, mere accidental tracks where the mountain had seemed to present a solid front. Here it was dark, the moonlight never reaching the bottom of the chasms, but they were protected from the wind. But when they came out onto the cliff face, where the long trail wound down the mountainside to Maclidan Keep, the wind struck them like a giant's hand. It had shifted again toward the northwest, the true Heller Wind with snow on its breath, and either the path would keep free of snowdrifts long enough, or it wouldn't. Another matter to refer to the holy Archangel Rafael, while Pedro and the donkey concentrated on keeping their footing.

While the moonlight lasted, they made good time, Pedro's sandals shuffling over bare rock and the donkey's small hooves clicking behind. But

then the light dimmed, and Pedro looking back over his shoulder saw clouds slipping across Liriel's face, and Catriona's anxious eyes beneath them.

The snow began quietly, a few big flakes drifting ahead of themselves on the wind. They struck face or sleeve or rock and fell away without clinging. Other flakes followed, smaller but just as dry, crunching like powder underfoot, as likely to be blown away from the rock as onto it. They diffused what was left of the light, rather than obscuring it, so that Pedro was in effect walking in a narrow gorge again, between a dark wall of rock and a smoother wall of dim violet moonlight. But only one of them would support him if he stumbled and fell against it.

"Father, are we going to make it?" Catriona asked after the first hour's descent.

"I have every hope that we will." he said. "We're halfway down the trail already; beneath that there's only the Stair."

"Should I get down and walk?"

"No. The donkey's firmer on its feet than you are. Is the baby all right?"

"She seems to be. I've got her under my cloak and she's not too cold."

Pedro walked on without answering. The Stair at the foot of the trail, whose last steps came up against the walls of Maclidan Keep, was a collection of broken granite blocks, steeper than the trail, but with easier footing to be found. But to find it one needed light, and between the setting of Liriel and the rising of the sun there was going to be more than an hour of darkness.

His feet were actually on the Stair before the light died. He took the next three steps from memory, before the image of the rough granite vanished from his eyes in the blank white phosphorescence of the snow. After that he had to pick his way, slowly sliding his feet along each step till he found the edge, testing the drop to the next step, finally lowering his foot onto it. Twice he

found no step at all below the one he stood on, and had to work his way back upward and across before trying to descend again.

The second time he stopped to catch his breath, leaning against the donkey's shaggy head. He mustn't let himself give up. If he went on working his way downward, carefully enough, he would eventually fetch up against some part of Maclidan Keep's curtain walls and could make his way to the gate. Or in an hour the sun would rise. He tried not to remind himself that the wind was growing colder, cold enough perhaps to fell even a monk if he got tired enough. There was nothing to do but go on. He had neither the breath to pray aloud nor the concentration to pray in silence. He didn't know what he might ask for, anyway, nor what it might accomplish. He was walking not through snow and rock but through the wills of higher powers, and he could only acknowledge that he was in their hands and keep moving as they permitted. He led the donkey a dozen paces along the shelf they stood on, and then began to descend again. And he heard a voice.

"Hey, man! Not that way."

Piedro stood still, not believing what he heard. Footsteps, crunching through the snow, and the voice again. "There's nothing down there but a hundred-foot drop. Come on. Give us your hand." Piedro stretched out his hand, and felt it clasped: a man's broad hand, strong but smooth-skinned, like the hand of a nobleman, and warm.

"Who are you?"

"Your fellow servant. Mind this next step, it's a long one."

Piedro made a long leg to the bottom of the step, and guided the donkey down it. Catriona was a rough-textured shape, huddled in her cloak, clinging to the donkey's neck. Seeing nothing but the blank white of the snow, he followed the lifeline at the end of his arm.

The hand holding his was astonishingly warm. Only by the strength flowing back into him could he tell how close to the edge he had been. If this

astonishing stranger had not materialized out of the snowstorm, he might—he didn't like to think of it. No decent monk feared death, but what would have become of Catriona and Alanna? "We live under the Rule in exceptional freedom," he remembered the Novice Master saying, "but a man in the world, with wife and family, has given hostages to fortune." He thought of Catriona and Alanna lying at the bottom of the Stair, and his heart turned over. "It's all right," said the voice out of the snow, as if he had spoken aloud. "Bear left here."

He bore left and felt the wind slacken; he had come into the lee of something high and solid. The cliff face? No, by all the angels, it was the wall of the Keep. "Twenty paces will take you to the gate," said the voice, and the warm hand let go of his.

"Thank you," Pedro called into the wind. "Who are you?" But there was no answer. He tugged at the donkey's bridle and made his way toward the gate.

The man at the gate gaped at him, appearing out of the snow in the dark before dawn, a mere sandal-wearer and alive. They led him, donkey and Catriona and all, through the great doors. The hall was packed with people, the inhabitants of a dozen villages burnt out or threatened by the fire. Most of them were asleep. The warmth of the three wide hearths felt like midsummer. Pedro unwrapped Catriona's hood from around her face, and was relieved to see her straighten up and look at him. "I'm dreaming again," she said. "I thought you were talking to somebody in the snow."

"I was," he said. He helped her slide off the donkey and make her way to the hearth. There was an old woman there, caring for some tired women and sleeping children. She put Catriona on a pallet by the fire and gave her a cup of soup. "Father, I'm fair pleased to see you," she said. "Are you a healer? We have some burns here, and some frostbites, and six or seven people all numb because they don't know what's become of their kin."

"I'm about two-thirds of a healer," he said. "Father Colin isn't finished with me yet. I'll do what I can. Have somebody get the saddlebags off my donkey."

Catriona unbuttoned Alanna's bag, to let the warmth in. "So who were you talking to?" she asked. "The holy Rafael again?"

"Perhaps I was," he said. "Whoever it was, he appeared out of nowhere and led me to the curtain wall. Probably one of the rangers belonging to the Keep."

"No road," said the old woman, giving Pedro another cup of soup. "There are none of our people out there. But they say there's a *laranzu* over the ridge at Corbie, come to bring down the snow on the fire. They can do strange things, walk in the overworld and I know not what else besides. He'll have sent his mind out to find you and bring you in; that'll be the answer."

"Maybe," said Pedro. He drank his soup, which he didn't really need. He remembered the warmth flowing out of the stranger in the snow. But he wasn't going to argue the relative of *laranzu'in* and—

But now there was a great bellow in the air, rather like a lovesick Ya-man, calling Catriona's name, and she was snatched up in the embrace of a huge black-bearded man. Mikhail, for it was obviously he, sank down onto the pallet with his wife, nuzzling his prickly face into her neck and weeping. Pedro hurried to pick Alanna up before someone sat on her.

She was awake again, looking almost at Pedro with her blue-green eyes. "Your father, my dear," he told her. "I'll make you acquainted later." He found a spare foot of hearth-ledge and sat down.

There were two older children at his feet; they had waked at the sound of Mikhail's enthusiasm. There was a little girl of about five, who was crying, and a boy of about nine, who was trying to comfort her. They both had a look of Catriona. Finally the boy took his sister over to where their parents still sat embraced on the pallet, and helped her to climb into Catriona's lap. Then he came back to Pedro.

"I'm Brion, Mikhail's son," he said. "Thank you, Father, for taking care of Mama."

"I was happy to," he said. "This is your new sister, Alanna."

Brion gave her a brief glance. "I already have a sister. Oh, well."

"How old are you, Brion?"

"Eight. But I passed for ten today, on the firelines." He held up his arm, showing Pedro a nasty burn on the back of his hand and forearm.

"You shouldn't have done that. Even though you're big for your age. Let me get something for that burn."

"It doesn't hurt much."

"If you're going to do a man's work, you need to obey like a man and do what your healer tells you. Ah, thank you, daughter." The old woman had brought his saddlebags. *(And this "daughter" is old enough to be my grandmother, he thought, and what do I care? The holy Rafael brought me out of the storm!)*. "Let me dress this burn and then I'll go to the other ones. Brion, what's your sister's name? The other one."

"Marguerida."

"Marguerida, would you like to hold your baby sister?" He settled Marguerida beside her mother on the pallet and put Alanna on her lap.

The little girl smiled like an enchantress. "Oh! The baby's *cu-u-ute*."

"Quite right," he said, and went back to Brion. He found the kit of salves and bandages at the bottom of the saddlebags, and dressed the boy's arm.

"Keep that clean, and I'll look at it in a few days if I'm still here." The sun was rising at last over the Hellers, pouring down into the slopes before Maclidan Keep: a valley and a hill and a valley, and then the great ascent to Nevarsin.

"This way, Father, if you're ready." He followed the old woman across the hall to where a man lay moaning with a burn all down one side of his body.

"Father, make it stop."

"Gently, my son. This will numb the pain."

Father Piedro knelt to his work, hardly thinking now of his encounter in the snow, though he would have to tell Father Master about it later. His sons and daughters needed his care. *Many are the children*—the line went through his head. *Many are the children of the barren, more than of her that hath a husband.* He would have to rephrase it.

"Daughter, I'm going to need sterile water. Do you understand me? Boil water and cover it and let it cool."

Many are the children of the vowed, he thought, *more than of him that hath a wife.* No, that wasn't right. It needed a disyllable in the first line. He would think of one. He would have time.

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THE SUM OF THE PARTS

After the crash, Marguerida found herself curled up like a bedraggled mudrabbit in the tail of the plane. The cushions that lined the passenger compartment had fallen into the tail ahead of her and broken her fall. She took stock of herself: no bones broken, no serious bruises, her nervous system intact on all its levels—but tired and depleted of energy, almost dangerously so. Briefly she recalled the doings of the past two hours—the mob at the door; someone's hands pushing her into the plane; the flight over the dead slopes of her own mountains, into lands unknown to her.

Ah, if they could only have given her more time to practice! Alba Tower had had the plane—acquired through what dubious means, she had not inquired—for a year before the matrix drive had been perfected and installed. If only they could have brought in Terran fuel for the Terran drive, she might have been a pilot by now, and not be so weary from battling the air currents.

Well, she must sort it out later. *All the smiths in Zandru's forges can't mend a broken egg*—which this plane closely resembled. The door hung crazily from one hinge, high above her head—standing as tall as she might, she could just hook one hand over the doorframe. Once she caught her breath, she could climb out—*but not in these clothes*.

She was still wearing the formal dress of a Keeper, the loose-bodied stiff robe with its long skirts and the sleeves that came down over her fingertips. She could not scramble about in it; nor could she remain here; it was late afternoon and would soon grow dark.

Her veil had fallen away some time back and now lay half-buried among the cushions. Pulling it free, she uncovered a corner of a storage locker, its lid sprung, something dull grey visible underneath. This proved to be a garment

of some kind, once the property of the unknown Terran who had owned the plane. It was shirt and treads all together in a single piece, absolutely plain drab grey without even a line of embroidery, consummately ugly like most of the Terrans' works. But it ought to be admirable clothing to climb in. She cast off her robe and stepped into the ugly thing, discovering by accident as she tugged it on that the metallic tab at the crotch was the business end of some kind of fastener that closed the garment up to her throat. Piling the cushions against the wall gave her a few extra inches' height, and she gripped the doorframe and pulled herself up and out.

The plane had landed in a tree, its nose wedged between two limbs, its frame twisted, one wing-surface crumpled like a grass blade beneath its body's weight. From where she perched, half inside and half outside, there was nothing between herself and death but seven thousand feet of air. But just above her head stretched a branch that looked sturdy enough, as branches went... She swallowed hard. *I am no worthy Keeper if I cannot rule myself.* She pulled herself up onto the branch, and somehow (she was never sure quite how) scrambled like a brush-rat out of the tree, up the bank and onto flat ground.

She got to her feet, brushed off her hands, and looked round. She had traveled farther than she'd thought; this timber was still healthy. The blasted pine that had nearly skewered her as she took off had been only the tallest in a forest of naked trunks, their needles stripped away by the unnamed blight that had raged since last summer. But these mountains were still green, and showing such indications of spring as could be expected at this altitude: new shoots poking out of last year's dead bracken, sticky buds, and bright young needle clusters on the trees.

She was standing on a ledge a dozen feet wide, on one side an incalculable drop into the lowlands, but on the other side a quite reasonable four-handed climb onto the mountain saddle she had seen as she fell.

For a moment she concentrated on the memory. A great gulf of air before her, the lowlands beneath it hazy blue with distance. A sheer wall of granite above the timberline, blood-colored in the late sunlight, and a fall past the

mountain's flank into a dark-wooded saddle between two peaks. And a momentary glimpse of a white shape against the green.

Yes, a second plane, much like her own, but undamaged perhaps? Another fugitive from the confusion and bloodshed that had spread over Darkover in the past chaotic year? There might be fire, food; perhaps a way of traveling on; at the very least, these people might know where they *were*! She scrambled up the slope onto the flat ground.

It was dark under the trees, even with the red sunlight falling almost horizontally between the trunks. It was by *laran* more than sight, and by scent more than either of them, that she found the plane at last. It was much like the one she had flown, but larger, with room perhaps for five or six instead of one or two. Its pilot had made a landing more orderly than her own, and had splintered only one wing, instead of the whole craft, against a clump of trees.

She looked inside and saw no one. The plane's fittings had been tossed about, and its front window cracked, but not shattered. To get inside, she would have had to climb over a tangle of wire sprouting from the guts of some Terran machine lying just inside the door, so she let it be.

Here was no fire, no sigh of life; at first she thought the craft abandoned before she saw the shape that lay a dozen feet from the door. A dead man? No, to her trained *laran* the signs of life still showed, dim and faint like the last glows of a dying fire. He was—she passed her hand above his body, not quite touching—he was unconscious, half-starved, and feverish; his lungs were badly congested, and there was a long festering wound along his left arm, trying to work its way inward. Nothing she could not handle—Avarra grant the man did not die before she could get to work.

Perhaps he had been knocked senseless by the fall, and never awakened? No, there were signs of an attempt to make camp: the man was lying on a strip of carpet torn from the plane's floor: some protection from cold and damp, but not much.

She could not spare time for speculation just yet. Swiftly she gathered dry moss from the southern sides of the nearest tree, a few dry twigs that hung from a tangle of needles overhead, and cleared a space of ground to receive them. She knelt down and took her matrix stone from its leather bag; she was weary still, but on balance she would be likelier to raise fire by *laran* than by contriving a fire-drill out of dry wood and a strand of her own hair. On the third try she was able to kindle a spark, and it caught the dry moss and flared up like a flower. Hastily she fed it dry twigs, and tended it till it grew into full life and could be left to digest its dead bark and fallen branches with little supervision. Then she turned her attention back to the man.

He was a man in middle life, she judged; past his first youth, but no greybeard. His close-trimmed hair and beard were as black as her cousin Rafael's. He was wearing a plain one-piece garment almost identical to her own, and there was a bracelet on his wrist marked with characters she could not read, had never even seen before. Like his plane, the man was from another world, a Terran probably; she would ask him someday, if she could contrive to keep him alive.

His bit of carpet tore under his weight when she tried to pull it toward the fire. She looked at her hands, white and smooth-skinned except where the scars of old burns marred them. But that part of her training was past her; she could touch the man if she would; she forced down her aversion, took him by the shoulders, and dragged him nearer the fire. He was not so very heavy, and she could feel the thin flesh under the Terran garment, and the bones beneath. Wasn't there anything to eat in his plane? She made a torch out of a branch from the fire and went exploring.

She found the food without recognizing it at first, for it was all wrapped in strange coverings with more of the alien writing on them; they crackled when she unwrapped them. Inside were hard blocks, like wood, but faint odors rose from them: this was dried meat, not so far removed from what a Darkovan would pack for a journey, and this was bread (she supposed; it was even drier and more tasteless than any journey-bread she had ever encountered), and this was something sweet and luscious, a taste not unlike *jaco*. Licking her fingers, she looked around for something to use as a pot. Nothing leapt to the

eye; well, she could contrive. She'd make a soup or a stew, and hope she could get some of it down the man's throat.

There was a stream nearby, and a clump of web-waders growing inside it with leaves big enough to boil water in. She put blocks of the sweet stuff to dissolve in the water as it warmed, and in another leaf put blocks of dried meat to soften; tomorrow she'd make a stew. The leaves burned down from the top to the water level, but no farther. She'd found a spoon among the miscellaneous trash in the plane—its inside was in a state of disorder that couldn't be explained by the relatively minor damage to its outside—and as soon as the liquid was warm she began spooning it into the man's mouth. The first few spoonfuls ran out again, soaking his beard, and then he began to swallow. She got almost a cupful of the stuff into him before the last of the sunlight faded from the sky. The fire was blazing well now, and both of them were growing warmer. She laid one hand on his forehead, and with the other took up her matrix.

There were poisons in his blood from his infected arm, she would have to deal with them presently; but the chief danger to his life was the thick clotted stuff in his lungs. She turned him onto his side, and with the finest filament of her attention reached out to touch his phrenic nerve and make him cough.

After an hour she let him rest, for they were both growing weary. The upper lobes of his lungs were clear, and she had opened enough of the tiny alveoli to let him breathe adequately. He had spoken a few times, in a language she didn't know, but had never really come up as far as consciousness. She propped him against a cushion from the pilot's seat, and he sighed, shifted his position a little, and fell into something like normal sleep. It was a pity there was nothing with which to cover him, but the bulk of his plane behind him reflected much of the fire's heat back toward him. She banked the fire, and drank the last of the sweet stuff herself, then lay down behind the sleeping man. Her last conscious thought was that there were not many of those food-blocks left.

She woke with the dawn, quite hollow with hunger. A Keeper was trained to pay little heed to pain or pleasure, and she had ignored the cold, but she must not allow her body to become weak. She fed the fire and made a soupy stew out of the softened meat blocks, some breadcrumbs, and one of the sweet bars for flavoring. She had not cooked anything since she had gone at the age of nine to the old house that sheltered Alba Tower; on the whole, the stuff turned out rather well, savory with the stuff that was not quite *jaco* and rich with the juices of the well-stewed meat.

The man still slept, his life signs stronger now with the food and warmth. She fed him some broth from the stew and turned her attention to the wound on his arm. It was covered with a crusty scab and the flesh surrounding it was puffy and red. Poisons from the infection were seeping into the rest of his body; that and the cold must have made him too sick to eat. Well, food was the best medicine, but she was going to need more. She brushed the earth and moss from her clothing, and set another leaf to heating water, and went back into the forest.

She would rather have had soft cloths, and the concentrated distillates of Alba Tower's storerooms, but what she got was more of the soft moss she had used as tinder, and the first hardy shoots of thornleaf that had thrust themselves up through the litter of the forest floor, dry needles and last year's bracken, into the meager sunlight of early spring. She carried them back to the fire and put them into the hot water, and she saturated some of the wads of moss and laid them on the wound. It would take a while for the virtues in the thornleaf to steep into the water, but she could begin by softening that crusty scab. Then she took another damp pad of moss and washed the man's face. The film of dirt had been streaked by a few tears, but only a few, and under the dirt his skin was fair and smooth, not weatherbeaten like a mountain man's. Was there no weather where the Terran lived? Her teachers had told her almost nothing about the place; it represented much that they had wanted her to avoid.

The man's dark lashes lifted, revealing eyes of a startling brilliant blue. Before she could speak, he had lifted his good arm, taken her hand, and raised

it to his lips. She leaped to her feet and put the fire between them, so quickly that a careless observer might have thought she had teleported.

"I'm sorry," the man said in the spaceport dialect. His voice was deep and resonant, the accent strange but not too hard to understand. "Please come back; I won't hurt you." His arm fell to his side. "My god, I'm weak. I couldn't hurt you if I tried."

Slowly she circled the fire and knelt beside him again. "I know. I'm sorry, too. But I am the Keeper of Alba Tower, and you must not touch me."

"My apologies, *vai domna*," he said in *casta*. "I mean, *vai leronis*. I didn't know." His grammar was flawed, but his voice made subtle music out of the respectful inflection.

"There's no offense," she said. "I left my robe and veil in my plane when it crashed; this grey thing was better suited for climbing mountainsides and walking in forests."

"Your plane? You don't live around here?"

"Oh, no. I came from—here, lie back." For the man had struggled up onto his right elbow, spilling the pads of moss from his injured arm. "At least, sit up, it will help you to get your lungs clear, but don't move your arm." She settled him against the cushion again. "Now I'll soak these again, and put them on your arm—yes, they're hot," as the man drew in a sharp breath, "—they're supposed to be hot, to draw the poison out of your wound. Now sit still and don't spill them again, and I'll get you some food."

She took a little more of the hot water to wash off the single spoon, and filled another leaf with stew. The man's brilliant eyes widened after the first spoonful. "My god," he said again, without specifying which one. No doubt it was unlike what he was used to eating. Was all Terran food compressed into hard bricks? Had they no cooks in their travels between the worlds? But he made no objection to the stew, and went on swallowing till it was gone. Then

he closed his eyes again and said, "Thank you, *vai leronis*. You lend me grace. Indeed, I think you've saved my life."

"I've tried my best," she said. "You *are* a Terran?"

"Oh, yes." He opened his eyes again, blue as the sky on the very hottest day of summer. "Donald Stewart, formerly navigator on the TMS *Domina Anglorum*, and very much at your service. Or I would be if I could get up."

"My name is Marguerida Elhalyn, and I'm the Keeper of Alba Tower," she said. "That's on the Kadarin, not far from Carthon. I'm not sure where we are now; I headed east, but I don't know how far I've come."

"I could show you on a satellite photo, but there are no detailed maps of this region," Donald Stewart said. Cautiously he flexed his shoulders, wincing as the cramped muscles stretched, and the hot pads fell off his arm again. "Sorry. We're better than halfway towards the Dry Towns. How do you come to be this far from your Tower?"

"All the land around Alba has been very hard hit by the plague," she said. "The forests are dying, the fields are barren even of weeds, there have been forest fires, famine, murders. The people turned to us for help, and we had none to give them. Then, today—" She fell silent, and gave her attention to replacing the hot pads along his arm.

The man said nothing. His silence was comforting, almost; he would not press her, but his silence encouraged speech. "Today some hothead got up and told them that the Comyn had set the plague to punish the people because they would no longer obey them. Maybe he believed it, I couldn't say. But they attacked the house. My teachers just had time to put me on the plane and send me away."

"You have a plane?" he exclaimed, sitting bolt upright and spilling the dressing from his arm yet again. "Where is it? Can you fly it?"

"It's down the slope and I can't fly it because it's broken; will you sit still?" Marguerida cried. She soaked the pads once more and applied them again. Then she went to collect more moss, because the abscess was within a few minutes of bursting, as she judged, and she would soon need to clean it up.

On the second day, even before he could walk more than a few paces, Donald Stewart insisted on having his plane's radio brought to him. This turned out to be the pile of wires and junk that Marguerida had seen lying, like an eviscerated worm, just inside the door of the plane. With only two craft on the mountain, neither of them usable, his sole option was to use the radio to call the Terrans at Thendara Spaceport for help. The radio, however, had been damaged in the crash and was not responding to treatment nearly as fast as its master. As for Marguerida, she dug a privy pit, and cleared out the plane's cabin so they could shelter in it at night; and she made some string out of twisted bark, and tied three round stones to its ends, and went hunting.

"What about the radio in your plane?" the Terran asked when she came back. "Is it still working?"

"I don't believe it has one," she said. "We send messages through the relays—or we did. The relays are empty now, the matrix technicians have all gone to Thendara. I got a bushjumper—see? It's a relative of the mudrabbit, but not so muddy. And spiceleaves to wrap it, and some clay to bake it in."

"Good," he said. "Yes, all the technicians, and all the Tower folk have gone to Thendara, at the summons of Lord Regis Hastur. Why aren't you with them?"

"My teachers did not altogether approve of Lord Regis, nor of what he is doing." Marguerida said.

"Such as trying to persuade his people that Darkover must part with tradition, adopt new ways, and make alliance with the Terrans?"

"You have it," she said. "Especially the part about the Terrans—no offense meant."

"None taken."

"Though mind you, it's not Lord Regis's fault that we have fallen so far from the old ways." She had skinned and gutted the bushjumper with her little belt knife, the only sharp tool they had between them, and was wrapping it in leaves before encasing it in the clay. "It was in my grandmother's day that Callista of Armida built her forbidden Tower, and demonstrated that a Keeper can be Keeper, and yet be no virgin. If she had let well enough alone, we would have had fewer griefs in these latter years—or so my teachers always said. That is why they brought me and my companions to the site of Alba Tower—the Tower itself fell a thousand years ago; the house is made of its stones—to train us in the old ways. They did their best to make sure Lord Regis and the Comyn Council never heard of us, and I think they must have succeeded."

"I think so," the Terran agreed. "I was in the spaceport hospital last week having a tooth fixed; I talked to Lord Regis and his group. They seem to think they've got every telepath on Darkover up there in Comyn Castle, and they're sending off-planet for more. What will you do when we're rescued? (Assuming I can get this bloody radio to work.) Will you go to Thendara with the rest, or back to Alba?"

"I don't know," she said, and set the clay bundle in the ashes. "I've tried to call my teachers and my Tower circle; I get no answer. I think it's very likely they are dead."

They were both silent. "I wish there were something I could do," he said at last. "If you weren't a Keeper, I could put my arm around you and let you cry on my shoulder. Or if I were a great hero instead of a middle-aged second-rate spaceman, I could sling you over my shoulder and climb down this mountain in an afternoon. As it is—" he looked at the radio— "I'm not a great deal of use."

"Have you found out what's wrong with it?"

"I've eliminated most of the things it could be," he said, "and I'm afraid it's the tuning crystal. And if it's that, I don't know what I'm going to do about it. Whoever stocked this plane should've included a replacement in the emergency supplies, and I wish he was here and had to fix it instead of me."

"Show me the crystal."

He slid it out of its niche in the radio's interior and held it on his palm for her to see: a little sparkling thing like salt, the size of a barley grain. "It's cracked, I'm afraid. It's supposed to resonate at its own natural frequency—like a bell—which is the same as all the other crystals like it, so that all the radios are tuned to each other."

"Yes, the technicians do the same kind of thing in the relays." Marguerida reached inside the neck of her ugly Terran garment for her matrix. "Yes, it's cracked," she said after a moment. "I can hear the note at which it ought to sound, but it's too high for my voice to sing. But it occurs to me—"

"Oh, no," he said, quickly withdrawing his hand. "I know my limitations, I hope. I don't want to get near that stone of yours."

"No, you don't. If you touched it, it would knock me senseless and quite possibly kill me. No, but I've seen veins of quartz here and there in the mountainside. If I can get a bit that sings the right note—"

"Do you know, that might work." He peered inside the radio once more. "What you'd get will probably be the wrong shape, but I can deform the contacts to fit. My god, you're clever. What did you do before you were a Keeper?"

"I was a child. I came to Alba for training at nine. Before that I lived with my mother, walked in the woods, rode horseback. My uncle Pablo taught me woodcraft; every child has to learn how to survive on the land. Is it any

different on Terra? If you don't have blizzards or banshees, there must still be something. Don't you have to teach the children how to stay alive?"

"I haven't any children," he said. "Yes, they have to be taught to look out for traffic, and heavy machinery, and strangers. I grew up on a fishing station—it's an artificial island in the middle of the sea—and the first thing I had to learn was not to fall off."

"And when you became a spaceman, you had to learn—let me think—not to open a window?"

He laughed. "They don't open. No, the first rule is never to be out of reach of a handhold. And the second is not to get on your shipmates' nerves. Cooped up in a small ship for months on end sometimes, the smallest irritation can magnify itself into an outrage. There've been murders done, or at least attempted, over a sneeze or a lisp."

Marguerida looked around her. On one side lay the forest, tree after tree standing in cool green shadows till they faded out like fishes in the depths of a pool. On the other side the mountainside fell away steeply, the nearest peak fifty miles away, a worldful of clear air between. "Why do people go into space, if it's so oppressive?"

"Ah! have you ever seen the stars? When all the little moons are down, have you looked up and seen them bright against the darkness, shining like jewels, like water after thirst, like music? From the time I could walk, I wanted to go among them. Six years of math I slogged through, when I could've been playing soccer or chasing girls or sleeping. And when you finally get there, and the long evenwatch ahead of you and the navigator's viewport curving around your head and nothing to see but stars! That's worth everything."

"It must be," Marguerida said. The sun was falling into evening again, and tiny Mormallor was glowing pale white above the western peak, and above it the bright evening star (but the Terrans said it was another planet). "I wish I could go out there," she said, and knew it was the truth, "but I never can."

"Your planet needs you," he said. "That does happen." He folded his hands under his chin, and stared at his radio as if he did not see it.

Now it was she who said nothing and waited. She put more wood on the fire, and blew gently on the ashes to quicken them, and waited while the time grew ripe. Let the fruit hang on the tree long enough, and it will fall into your hand. "My first planetfall was on Megaera—that's Theta Centauri Four," he said at last. "There's an old Terran settlement there, older than Darkover. The chemistry of the air is strange; it changes human biochemistry, and it turns out that only certain women can be sure of bearing children safely. The others, the rest of the population, can only have children with the aid of these special women. Rhu'ad, they're called. They're telepaths, too; in fact, Alina was a lot like you, but pale; her skin and hair were like a pearl. And from the time she was born, it was arranged that she would marry the Lord of Mount Kali—not for his rank, I'll give them that, but for his genes—and do maternity duty to her co-wives, and her sisters-in-law, and her cousins twice and thrice removed. Nobody ever bothered to ask if that was what she wanted." He set the radio down, very gently. "And that was ten years ago. She's probably got fifty or sixty children by now."

"And that is why you never married?"

"That and being stony broke. Though Alina might have taken me even so, except that her planet needed her."

"I'm sorry." There seemed to be nothing else to say. She put another branch on the fire. "And it is the same for me, isn't it? You're right. When we get to Thendara, I shall go to Comyn Castle and offer my services, such as they are, to Lord Regis. And you'll go back into space?"

He shook his head. "I've made a bad name for myself with the Merchant Service, I'm afraid. The Captain and I agreed to disagree, and I was given the opportunity to jump before I was pushed. I've been on Darkover most of this year, living off Distressed Spaceman's Aid and odd jobs. I'm up to my ears in debt."

"So is all of Darkover," Marguerida said. "You ought to feel at home here."

"At home? No," he said. "But it's as fair a world as any planet could be. Anyway, last week somebody hired me to deliver a message—to a chieftain named Barakh, in the Dry Towns—and lent me this plane to carry it in. I hope it's salvageable. All it really needs is fuel and a new wing, which could be flown in and bolted on in an afternoon."

"Red Barakh of Shainsa? Who, in Avarra's name, would be sending messages to him? What was the message?"

"A Thendara merchant named Tamiano, and I don't know what the message is; I can't read Darkovan script."

"Show me." And when he hesitated, "Show me," she cried. "This means more than you know."

After a moment he rose and went to the plane, pulled a little scroll out of a compartment in the pilot's console. Marguerida scanned it quickly. "I thought so," she said. "This says, 'Tamiano to Barakh, greetings. I send you the aircraft you commissioned of me. I got it of a Terran who no longer needed it. As for the pilot, I no longer need him; do as you will, but remember that flies cannot enter a closed mouth.' I thought as much. Tamiano killed the owner of this plane, and Barakh would have killed you as soon as you brought it to him. Donald Stewart, have you no nose for trouble at all? I thought you said Terrans taught their children to beware of strangers."

"Oh, Christ," the Terran said, clutching his head with both hands. "Now it fits together. Tamiano asked me if I was willing to get my hands dirty—for a substantial fee. I said I'd do anything that was legal. And Tamiano smiled, and offered me this messenger job instead."

"So that you shouldn't be able to tell anyone Tamiano is hiring assassins," Marguerida said. "I wonder who is hiring *him*."

"And now the Terran Empire police will be after me for receiving stolen goods. Damn! My friends always did say I needed—" he broke off, and looked away.

"We'll ask Lord Regis to intercede," she said. "That is the least of our worries. The bushjumper is done, and I'll get you your crystal tomorrow."

"The Keeper did a-hunting go,
And under her cloak she carried a bow,
All for to shoot at a merry little doe,
Among the leaves so green, oh."

The Terran was singing when Marguerida came out of the forest the next day, and standing on his two feet, and using both hands to straighten the cushions inside the plane.(He had mentioned that spacemen had to learn to be neat.)

"I don't have a bow," she said when he had translated the old Terran words, "and there are no chervines on this saddle; there's very little game of any kind. I did find some tubers, we'll stew them with what's left of the bushjumper, and I got you some crystals." She fumbled half-a-dozen bright fragments of quartz out of the pocket of the Terran coverall. "I think this one will sing the best, but you try it. If it's too flat, I can probably trim it down a bit. Try it in your radio, while I cook supper."

The chunks of tuber, stewed in thin bushjumper gravy and a few herbs, were beginning to smell like the food of the gods by the time the Terran's curses became audible. Marguerida set down her knife and the bit of nutwood from which she was carving a second spoon. "Won't it work?"

"Oh, it works, as far as that goes. I'm getting a carrier wave. But I'm not reaching anybody with it, not on any of the frequencies it's supposed to reach. I'm afraid you were right, it's not quite the right size and it's singing either sharp or flat."

"Flat," Marguerida said. "I knew it was a bit large. Here, give it to me."

She took the matrix in her left hand, and the quartz crystal in her right, and held them up together. The blue shining light of the matrix played over her face, and the Terran thought of old stories of mermaids. He could see no change in the crystal, but after a moment she handed it back and said, "Now try it."

He put the crystal back in its place while she finished the spoon, and he turned the radio's controls this way and that, chanting, "Mayday, Mayday."

"If it's not going to work, we had better eat," Marguerida began, but the radio squawked like a frightened fowl and began to talk very fast Terran in a voice that sounded like the bottom of a well. Donald answered it, and they disputed back and forth (at least, it sounded like an argument) for a minute or two. At last he sat back and turned the radio off with the kind of exaggerated gentleness a man will use when he'd rather kick the damned thing (whatever thing it might be) down the mountainside.

"I gather the news is not good," Marguerida said. "We'll eat first, and then you can tell me."

"What it comes down to," he said presently, "is that there's a good-sized revolution going on—not so much in Thendara, but in the countryside. Think of what happened to your people at Alba, and multiply it by a hundred or a thousand desperate mobs. There've been assassination attempts inside the hospital—no, it's all right," he said quickly. "They caught them. Lord Regis and his people are all right. But the long and short of it is that none of the authorities can spare a plane to come and get us for a couple of tendays at least, maybe longer. Can we hold out that long?"

"I don't think so. I said game was sparse around here; I think most of the inhabitants of this forest are birds who migrate to warmer regions in winter, and haven't come back yet. There's not much plant food either, not at this time

of year. I can probably find a few of last fall's nuts, but the birds seem to have eaten most of them. There are a few more bushjumpers, but I'd hate to wipe them all out; this forest is one of the few that hasn't had its natural balance ruined already. And most of your Terran food bricks are gone, too."

"Were there any on your plane?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, let me think." He stared into the fire for a few minutes. "Was there any fuel left in your plane?"

"I have no idea. We weren't using the Terran cerberum engine; my teachers reconstructed the old matrix drive. I was flying off my own energy, and I crashed because I'd gotten tired. It's hard, making your way from one air current to the next when you're not used to it."

"Of course it is. How many hours' flight time had you had?"

"Two or three, I suppose."

"No more than that? If you weren't a Keeper, I'd like to shake your hand. We could make a pilot of you yet. Now let me think." He folded his arms and brooded.

Marguerida also had time to think. How many of her unquestioned assumptions the Terran had knocked base-over-apex in the last two days, all without meaning to. All men were not coarse brutes, prevented only by the threat of destruction from profaning a Keeper's sanctity with their crude touch. All Terrans were not barbarians, unable to make the distinction in *casta* between "All men are brothers" and "You are a pack of boy-lovers." Donald Stewart had shown her the greatest respect both in deed and in word—even his grammar was beginning to improve. And her teachers were not always right, and Regis Hastur was not always wrong.

"Is your matrix drive still working?" he asked finally.

"I should think so. It was attached to the pilot's console, where I was sitting, and a blow hard enough to crack its crystal would have killed me."

"Could it be modified to run a welding torch?"

"Not by me."

"You don't think there's *any* cerberum fuel left in your plane?"

"I told you, I don't know. We'll have to go there and look."

"So we will," he said. "First thing tomorrow morning. If there's even a tenth charge, I can rig a torch, and I *think* I can repair this wing. At the least, I might get us to Carthon."

"Very well," she said. "Have you ever climbed mountains before?"

"No."

"Is there any rope in your plane?"

"Don't think so."

"Very well," she said again, and got up. "I'd better get more bark while the light lasts. Will you put some more wood on the fire?"

Morning found them on the cliffside, the Terran belaying Marguerida's bark rope round a tree trunk while she scrambled down the steep face to the wreckage of her plane. "I ought to be doing this," he protested once more.

"Oh, be sensible for once," she said. "Would you know a matrix drive if you saw it, to say nothing of the ten contact points that have to be taken off in one piece? There, now, I'm in the tree and it's rock steady; it must have roots as deep as the mountain's own. Make the rope fast, will you? Then you can come to the edge and watch." She climbed over a branch, ducked under another, and slid cautiously down the gaping hole where the plane's

windshield had been. The matrix drive looked all right, *felt* all right: now to get at it without putting her foot through it.

"How are you getting on?" he asked a little later, his face dark against the morning sky.

"Just got it." She coiled the last fragile contact strip, wrapped the drive in her gown, and tied the whole bundle in her veil. Soon she might be needing them again, even if they were a bit stained and creased.

"What about the fuel cells? They're the black cylinders in the aft compartment, and there should be a readout panel on each one. Aren't Darkovan numerals the same as Terran? If you can just read the figures off to me—"

"No numerals," she said.. "No black cylinders. No aft compartment. I think they must have taken all that out to lighten the weight. Now what?"

"Come back up where I can see you."

"All right." She took the end of her knotted veil in her teeth and climbed back into the tree. "Here, pull this up." She tied the bundle to the end of the rope. "It's not all that fragile, but try not to hit it against anything."

"Got it," he said a moment later. "Now, I'd like you to take a look at that wing—the right wing, the one near you. Is it badly damaged?"

"It isn't damaged at all," she said. "It's the only part of this plane that's in one piece. Wait: here's a hole in the skin the size of my thumbprint."

"Trivial," he said. She couldn't see his face clearly, but his voice was gleeful. "Did I bring that wrench? Yes, I did. Would you say this rope was strong enough to haul up the whole plane?"

"No, and neither are we," she said.

"And we haven't the time to carve pulleys," he said. "Hang on, I'm coming down." There was a scrabbling sound, and a shower of pebbles from above, and to Marguerida's dismay the Terran came down the rope hand-over-hand and came to rest in the tree beside her. He had taken off his boots, and the thin stockings on his feet were divided, each toe in its own separate mitten. "Look at that wing," he said, and pointed to it with his wrench. "A functional right wing is the major thing my plane is lacking, or hadn't you noticed?"

"Not really," she admitted. "Do you mean you can cut that wing off and—"

"Cut it, hell," he said. "Unbolt fourteen bolts, that's all. The wing'll be a little shorter than it's supposed to be—mine's a TC-3, and this is a TC-2—but the base plate's exactly the same."

"And you can fly with it?"

"As far as Carthon, I should think. Maybe as far as Thendara, if you and your matrix hold out. Look, will you sit over on that branch, and just steady the wingtip with a coil of your rope? I don't want it falling away as soon as it's free." He slithered down the plane's side, gripping with fingers and toes like a Trailman, till he reached the base of the wing. Marguerida secured the wingtip as she was bidden, and settled down to watch.

"Make that thirteen bolts," he said after a few minutes' work. "One of 'em got torn out by the base of this branch. That's all right; it'll be stable enough without." He said little else that morning, but sang almost constantly: old ballads, she supposed, with tunes that she recognized, though the Terran words were strange.

The sun was reaching into noon when he called out, "That's the lot!" and tucked his wrench away. "Is the wing secure? Let me up there and I'll take a look at it."

But if the wing was free of the plane now, so the plane was free of the wing, and it began to slide. (Later, after it was over, she had time to realize that that right wing, caught over the branch, had been the only thing holding

the plane in the tree.) "Lord of Light!" Marguerida cried, not knowing she did so, and slid down the trunk, reaching down with her right hand as she gripped the rope's end with her left. "Donald, grab hold."

He swarmed up the plane's side with desperate speed as it slid away under him, like a man swimming upstream against the current, gaining only a little. He flung up his arm, and she grasped it. Fear gave them both strength, and she gave one mighty pull and somehow they were both standing on the same branch, each clinging desperately to the other and to the trunk of the tree. Far below them, the plane struck a ledge and exploded into splinters.

"O god, O Marguerida," Donald muttered into her collar. "I am such a bloody fool, I forgot about gravity. You do that, till it reaches out and grabs you. Gravity is the enemy—right after stupidity—and the universe never forgives a mistake."

"It let you off easy this time," she said. "Can you let go now? We have to get back up there. Will you go first, or shall I?"

"I'll go," he muttered, and climbed up the rope again, gripping very cautiously and not looking down. Then he hauled up the wing, careful not to damage it, and lastly he let the rope down for Marguerida. When she reached the top he took her hands and gripped them hard for a moment. "Oh, sorry," he said, and let go her hands as if they were fiery hot.

"No harm done," she said, and set to rigging branches and the rope into a travois for the wing.

Once they had brought the wing to the plane, reaction set in. Marguerida felt icy cold, and sat by the fire trying to warm her hands, but Donald was full of nervous energy and bustled around the plane, unbolting the damaged wing and trying to get the replacement into position. At last Marguerida had to get up and help him build a framework of branches to hold the wing in place. Somewhere in the process her thoughts, like a batch of jelly, finally cleared and set into shape.

"Two hours, maybe, till sunset," Marguerida said, when Donald's plane had been hauled out of the trees and the new wing and the matrix drive were in place. "Do we go now, or wait till morning?"

"It's up to you," he said. "I'm just the pilot; you're the Chief Engineer. Do you feel up to it? You've had a rough day."

"I've had?" she said, smiling. "As for me, I feel splendid; I think I could fight a banshee with one eye blinded. Let's go."

A Keeper must set an example for her people, she thought. And if Darkover must break with tradition and make alliances with Terra, why, so must I.

She took her seat beside him. The matrix drive sat just in front of the altimeter, so that she could reach it with one hand while Donald used the flight controls. There was, as he'd said, room for two in the cockpit, so long as they were friendly. "I'll take you to Thendara if I possibly can," he said. "They need you; they may not know it yet, but they'll find out."

"What about you?"

"I'd better tell the Terran authorities about Tamiano," he said. "Maybe they'll let me keep the plane, but I doubt it. After that, I don't know."

"And I used to think Terrans were practical men. You'd better come to Comyn Castle with me. I'm not sure yet what you'll do there, but I think you're my responsibility. By right of discovery, or something."

"Am I?" They glanced at each other, suddenly almost shy. "If you say so." He released the plane's wheel brakes, and the craft rolled down the bank, picking up speed, and launched itself into the air. The matrix sang in Marguerida's mind, a perfect fifth above the singing of her own delight. The plane fell and rose again in an elegant curve. Donald smiled. "My friends

always said I needed a keeper." The plane was drifting just a little into the right, and he gave the controls a nudge to bring it back on course. It soared like an eagle into the westering sun.

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FESTIVAL NIGHT

The south wind was warm only in comparison to the icy breath of the Hellers, but Marguerida drew it into eager lungs and threw back her veil to feel it against her face. "Smell that," she said. "There's goldenthorn on the wind, and roses. It's spring, Donald, do you realize that? Spring, and a conjunction." She turned her head to see the moons riding the sky, three close together and the laggard fourth hurrying to join them. "*Cozid' Evanda, dia vivais: sovrei dovan al deyn' anvada.*" Raising her arms to greet them, she took a step, and tripped, and sat down suddenly. "Damn," she said: the first word of Terran she had learned.

"Are you all right?" Donald appeared in all haste from beneath the wing of the small bedraggled plane.

"I'm all right." She pulled herself upright and tucked the grimy hem of her formal Keeper's robe around her feet. "Only tired."

"Me, too," he said. "Rest yourself; we may have a walk ahead of us...oh, yes, that's torn it." He stepped away from the wing, out into the moonlight.

It would have taken a second look to recognize him for a Terran. The mingled light of the moons spilled like silver over his black hair. He had the rugged bones of any mountain man. But he had seen twenty worlds, and the light in his blue eyes was strange.

"I was right," he said. "It's the aileron cable that's snapped; the metal crystallized with fatigue. Even if you could get the plane in the air again, I couldn't steer it. We'll have to walk. There's some kind of habitation over that way; I can see lamplight. A mile or two, no more. Can you manage it?"

"Can you?" A tenday stranded in the mountains, fighting off blood-poisoning and what came as close to pneumonia as made no difference, had done more to weaken Donald than a few hours' matrix work could do to Marguerida. *Crystallized with fatigue*, she thought. *That's us.*

"And who are you?"

Marguerida looked up, and peered into the darkness. The man was sitting in a cart laden with boxes, drawn by a dispirited-looking stag pony. "And why aren't you in the Hall?"

"We just got here," Marguerida said, getting to her feet. She shook out the stiff red skirts of her robe, and put her veil over her face again. "I am Marguerida Elhalyn, sometime Keeper of Alba Tower, and this is my servant Donal." ("Sorry, Donald." she murmured in a voice that would not carry two feet. "I'll explain later.")

"Well, get in the cart," the man said after a pause, "and I'll take you to the Hall. *Dom Jeral* will want to see you."

"We thank *Dom Jeral* for his offer of hospitality," Marguerida said sweetly. "Just a moment while I collect a few things." She stepped back into the plane, and Donald followed her.

"Donald, I apologize for giving you less than your proper rank," she said as she swiftly coiled up the long strips of the matrix drive that had brought the plane here. "I think it's best that no one knows you're a Terran, not till we get to Thendara; there has been some bad feeling."

"*Domna*, I haven't any rank and I admire your restraint in describing planet-wide rioting as 'bad feeling.' I shall be pleased to be anything you choose to call me. In fact, it might be better if I didn't come with you at all."

"Whyever not?" She glanced at him. She was not the telepath her foremothers had been, but the man's emotions were as tangible as pease-porridge. Doubt, fatigue, a double measure of embarrassment, and the lucid

fragment, *If they see us together, they will think*— She averted her mind from the rest.

"Are you concerned for my reputation? I forget you've only been on Darkover a year. No one accuses a Keeper of misconduct; at least not without wagonloads of evidence. There's a very old saying: 'Who shoots at the king had better kill him.' I shall say you're my paxman, sworn to protect me, if you're worried about your own good name. Is there anything here you want to take with you?"

"There's the medikit, what's left of it. I used up the bandages and the antibiotics, but there might be something of use." He tucked the flat box of Terran metal into his loose-fitting jacket, and they left the plane together. Donald lifted Marguerida to a seat beside the driver, and climbed in behind with the boxes.

Up close, the source of the lamplight was neither farmstead nor village, but a large building in a bastard style: walls of the local stone, corrugated Terran plastic for its roof. It had been a warehouse of some kind, a storage depot for the trade that had gradually increased in the recent years of Empire membership. Trade that had dwindled to a trickle again in this plague year. Emptied of goods, the place was full of people; their voices could be heard in the still cold air outside.

A stocky man stood at the half-open door like a guard, his thumbs hooked in his belt. He wore a conical helm, a battered antique that shaded his eyes. A sword hung at his side. "Get inside, you two," he growled as Donald and Marguerida approached. But as Marguerida stepped into the shaft of lamplight before the door, the man started, and muttered. "Zandru! *Another* one." Then he smiled, showing broken teeth. "Welcome, *vai domna*," he said. "You lend us grace. Please go inside; supper's almost ready."

The man's voice put up the fine hairs along Donald's spine. But Marguerida only inclined her veiled head, and passed by the grinning guard as if he were a tree. Donald followed without a word.

Inside, most of the building was one huge room, with heavy timber beams supporting a loft that ran around the near wall and sides. The far wall had a single door, leading perhaps to what had originally been the warehouse's business office. A rough dais had been constructed in front of the door, with a table on it that could seat a dozen. Something hung from the roof overhead; Donald had to blink a few times before he recognized it as a block and tackle, drawn up to the ceiling and out of the way. The fall rope that raised and lowered it stretched down to the loft over his head; tied to a beam or something, no doubt.

The center of the floor was clear, but all the space under the lofts was filled with people. Thin-faced, tired-looking people with the stain of fear on their faces: refugees from fire, from plague, from the ecological disasters that were striding across Darkover like the Fifth Horseman—and from the vicious winter that was only now coming to an end. Their breath showed faintly in the cold air, but it was warmer inside the building than outside. Each family had staked out a bit of space and spread blankets across it. Emaciated women sat holding children with shadows in their eyes. Their men stood against the outside wall, looking about the room as if it were the woods outside. A child began to cry, and its mother hushed it quickly, looking from side to side.

A rough kitchen had been set up to one side of the door, with firepits and a plaster bake-oven. Women were bending over big country-style cauldrons set over Terran energy packs whose radiating surfaces glowed dull red. The woman nearest Marguerida started as she saw the tattered Keeper's robe, and wiped her hands on her apron as she hurried up to her.

"*Vai domna*, how did you come here? Oh, but I shouldn't say that, you lend us grace, I'm sure. Have you only just come in, you and the other? Oh, you'll be starving of the hunger. Here, start in on these, and supper will be ready soon. *Dom Jeral* provides for us most generously," she added in a louder voice, her eye on the door.

"Oh, and *domna*, are you a healer? There's a poor woman in labor up there in the loft, and the midwife says she can't sort her. Could you go up to see her?"

"I'll see what I can do." Marguerida took the basket the woman gave her and led the way up the ladder into the loft.

"I haven't even met this *Dom Jeral*, and already I don't like him," Donald said.

"Me neither," said Marguerida, "but I wouldn't mention it just here."

The loft floor just above the kitchen area had been cleared for an infirmary: it was the warmest place in the building—unless the mysterious *Dom Jeral* had a Terran space heater in his little room behind the dais. The rest of the loft was full of crates, hay bales, old pieces of abandoned Terran machinery. Donald noticed with some amusement that the fall rope from the block and tackle had been secured around an anvil whose design hadn't changed in millennia.

There were four people in the infirmary. Two of them were plainly suffering from some kind of stomach upset, and they lay curled up in the blankets, groaning softly, with beakers of water and sour-smelling basins laid beside them. The third lay flat on a pile of straw matting, her fists clenched above her head, and the fourth was the midwife who knelt beside her. Marguerida put back her veil and went to speak to her.

The midwife was a hillwoman, with an accent so far removed from the Thendara dialect that Donald couldn't understand a word. He took his share out of the basket—dried fruit and slices of bread spread with nut paste—and settled himself with his back against a post.

After a week's semi-starvation he could cheerfully have devoured the carter's stag pony, horns, hooves, and all, but he made himself eat the fruit and bread slowly lest they all come back up again. Besides, the leathery fruit took its fair share of chewing. He laid a golden raisin next to a deep red cherry on a slice of Terran pineapple, and admired the effect: like unpolished jewels. After the second bite of nut paste, he began to smile.

The laboring woman's teeth were clenched, and her face was grey with exhaustion. Marguerida held her matrix between the fingertips of her right hand, and passed her left hand slowly over the woman's body. The midwife crouched beside her, hands clasped reflectively under her chin.

"The baby is lying crosswise," Marguerida said in a low voice. "Perhaps you already knew that?"

"Suspected it," the midwife said. "Is the baby alive?"

"Yes," Marguerida said. "The heartbeat's strong, and all the signs are good."

"Avarra have mercy on us all," the midwife said. "Now I've got to choose which of them to save. I should've been a plumber, like my mother."

"If only I'd had my hands on her earlier! But she came in last night and went into labor this morning, like the rest of them, poor souls. Or perhaps you already knew that." She gave Marguerida a sidewise glance, not without humor. Her short hair was spattered with grey and she'd run a linen thread through her earlobe in place of the earring she'd had to sell, but her spirit was undaunted. "A pregnant woman who's been in danger or on the run, if she's within a month of her time, will go into labor within a day and a night of reaching shelter. If I'd gotten to her sooner I could have turned the baby, but now her womb's clenched tight around it. Unless—" she glanced at Marguerida again. "Unless you could stop the contractions for a few minutes."

"Maybe," Marguerida said. "Donald, come here, please. You've got that box of medications; what's in it?"

He pulled the box out of his jacket and opened it. "No antibiotics left, as I said. This. umm—" he read the label on a vial. "this will speed blood clotting in a wound. I used half of it when I crashed, but the other half would still be good. Sunburn lotion. Hay fever medicine. Practically everything that would be useful on Darkover has been used up already. Scissors. An instant ice pack for bruises and sprains."

"We can use that afterwards," Marguerida said, "if we get that far. Nothing that makes contracted muscles relax?"

"Nothing like that. Wait a minute, this," he pulled the last vial from its place, "my god, it's a Mickey Finn. For bone-setting, I suppose. There must be ten or fifteen doses here."

"Mikhail who?"

"Michael Finn was a legendary Terran innkeeper who put sleeping potions in the drinks of unruly customers. He would have used chloral hydrate, I guess, and this is Edrin, but the principle is the same. But I wouldn't use it on the patient; it'd knock her out for hours, and I don't suppose it'd be good for the baby."

"No. Thank you, Donald." He returned to his post, and she to the midwife.

"You said you could turn the baby, *mestra*? I didn't know that could be done."

"Ah, well now." The midwife grinned. "There's them that says it's possible, and there's them that says it's impossible." She stretched her fingers and wiggled them, as if to warm them up. "And as for me, I've done it."

Marguerida smiled back. "Let's try." Her hand stretched out over the woman's abdomen again, and her attention slipped between her fingers, down toward the nerve centers that ruled the smooth muscle fibers. *Knots, be loosed; rivers, flow; doors, stand open.*

The woman drew a deep breath and let it out again. "Ah." the midwife said, and laid her fingertips against the swollen abdomen. She pushed at the hard lump that marked the child's head, firmly but without haste. The lump shifted a trifle. A push on the other side, where the folded legs lay flat against the rump. Another push to the head, and another perceptible shift, east-by-south to east-southeast. The patient grunted, and the midwife said without looking up, "Shout all you want to, but don't go tense." She pushed again.

Donald, having finished his bread and fruit, had almost fallen asleep when the gong sounded: a bar of salvaged Terran iron that hung from a rope. The inner door had opened, and two men came out. Like the guard who had let them into the place, they wore bits of armor: helms on their heads, an old mailshirt on one and a Terran riotproof jacket on the other. (There was a great deal of Terran material around this room, one way and another. He was beginning to suspect where it might have come from.) Spears in hand, they stood to either side of the door like an honor guard.

The man who stepped out between them was also dressed in a mixture of Terran and Darkovan, but exaggerated almost beyond belief. He reminded Donald of a fellow who'd come to a costume party once as an "Explosion in a Time Machine." He'd belted a brocaded tunic over a pair of Terran military trousers; a white fur cloak lay over his shoulders; a golden belt held an antique longsword to his side. A crown of gold and garnets that must once have belonged to a real king was perched on a Terran police helmet with the faceplate removed. His face was pasty white, paler even than most Darkovans' after the long winter, and smooth and unlined as a baby's. His eyes were small, a pale ice-blue, and expressionless, but his mouth smiled.

The room rustled as the people got to their feet and bowed. Four more men in motley armor followed their chieftain out the door and up the rough stairs to the table on the dais.

Marguerida joined Donald at the loft's edge, just far enough from the edge for safety's sake—and out of the light of the torches below. She was eating the last of her bread and licking the nut paste off her fingers.

"Do you know what that stuff is?" Donald said. "Terran peanut butter."

"Yes, most of the foodstuffs here are Terran. Dried and potted and—what was the word?—freezedried emergency staples, and I gather there are rooms full of the stuff in Thendara. I should like to know where it was when my people were starving in the Hellers."

"Where it is now," Donald said. "They've been feeding the refugees that get as far as Thendara, but there isn't enough air transport to carry it out into the countryside, and your ground transport is limited to pack animals on narrow mountain trails. I'm sorry."

The crowned man went to the center of the dais and turned to face the room, his arms spread wide. "My people," he said. "I welcome you to our Festival Night. Spring is here, and in this spring we shall go forth and conquer. The Domains will rise to aid us as we go forth, sweeping all opposition before us, till we have burnt out the nest of the usurper, Hastur of Hastur."

"He's insane," Donald said.

"I know," Marguerida said. "He thinks he's living in the Ages of Chaos."

"Hastur is gathering *leroni* in Comyn Castle, to channel their witchery against us. But he's doomed to fail. We'll see what *laran* can do against blasters!

"Tonight, however, it's a time for celebration. Eat and drink—I believe our cooks have come up with something exceptional—and dance and be merry. Remember," the pasty face creased into a roguish grin that made him look like a diseased cauliflower, "what's done under the four moons will never be held against anyone. Let the feast begin."

The people dutifully cheered. *Dom Jeral* seated himself at the high table and his men took seats around him. The two guards by the inner door closed and locked it, and took up positions at either side of the table. The people began lining up with their wooden plates and bowls, to have them filled at the kettles. A nervous-looking serving man brought to the high table what looked like a brace of rabbithorn, roasted and gilded with egg yolk and surrounded by herbs. The rat-faced man on *Dom Jeral's* right rose to carve them.

"I don't want to be seen if I can help it," Marguerida said. "Donald, could you go down and get our share? There are dishes over there by the water pot."

"Sure." He rose and bowed. "*Z'par servu.*" He collected three sets of dishes and made his way down the ladder. No one noticed him but the doorward, but that one looked at him suspiciously, as if trying to put two and two together and coming up with at least three and a half.

There was a stew rich in meat and onions, fragrant with Terran chocolate and cinnamon, and loaves of bread green with vegetables, and little pies filled with fruit that had been soaked till it was soft. Donald brought it up to the loft and served Marguerida and the midwife before he sat down to his own portion. For long minutes there was no sound in the loft but the grunting of the woman in labor, and the soft encouragement of the midwife.

The stew was dark and rich, and the pungent gravy soaked happily into the soft heavy bread. The pies were crisp outside, soft and juicy inside, full of dried fruit that had died and gone to a heaven of honey and spices. "Where did all this come from?" Donald asked when there was nothing left but the warmth of the bowl.

"More of your Terran emergency supplies," Marguerida said. "Most of it's big boxes of ready-made stew, just add water. They eat it practically every day. But for tonight's dinner they had the children picking over the bits, separating the meat from the vegetables, for two days to be able to make this. People will go to extra effort to celebrate a festival, even in thin times like these.

"Donald, I'm frightened to think of what this madman may do. He is not, of course, a Comyn lord, or even petty hill-nobility. Nobody knows where he came from, but about fifty days ago he turned up with that band of cutthroats and a wagonload of Terran food. It's assumed he stole it. Whatever, it made him very welcome to the people, and he took over this building and started bringing people into it. He does feed them; he takes care of them. He sent two of his men, trained to tell a plausible lie, all the way into Thendara to fetch that midwife. He believes they really are his people, and he their lord.

"But he also believes he's the rightful King of the Domains, and he intends to lead an army against Lord Regis Hastur as soon as the weather is a little

warmer. I don't know whether the men will march, and be slaughtered by the Guard, or refuse to march and be slaughtered by Jeral's men."

"It's worse than you think," Donald said. "Didn't you hear what he said about blasters? I don't know where he's getting his Terran food supplies, but if he's half as clever a thief as he seems, he may have entry into a spaceport armory as well."

"Then Aldones help us," Marguerida said. "And he won't let any of them leave the building, Donald, even to go to the necessary—there are privies there in the far corner, but they're not enough for so many people. Already, as you see," she gestured toward the two enteritis patients behind them, "sickness is beginning to spread. We have to do something."

"We? You and I?"

"Do you see anyone else? We'll simply have to think of something."

"On Terra," Donald said, "there's an old piece of folklore, a drawing that's been redrawn hundreds of times. The picture is always the same: a dungeon where two poor wretches are chained, hand and foot, to the wall. One says to the other, 'Now, here's my plan....' "

Marguerida smiled. "We'll come up with something. We have to."

Midway through the meal the guard changed, so to speak; three men got up from the table to relieve the doorward and the honor guard. The doorward knelt before Jeral and said something to him, and the chieftain's head snapped up. His tiny eyes peered into the loft without finding anything. He rose.

"I've just been informed that we have a noble guest this evening," he said. "A powerful *leronis* from out of the hills, come to fight at my side with the power of *laran*. A gift from the Gods for our righteous cause, an answer to Hastur with his pack of traitors in the Castle! Let her come forth at once."

"Don't move," Donald said. "You rank him, that's the line to take. I'll go."

He hurried down the ladder and went to the middle of the open floor. He bowed deeply before the suspicious-looking Jeral. "*Vai dom*, I serve the noble lady, Marguerida Elhalyn, Keeper of Alba Tower," he said. "What is your will?"

"Let her come before me, curse it!" the chief spat. "I've no time to waste with underlings; I want the *leronis* where I can use her."

"I will say so," Donald said, and bowed again, and returned to the loft.

He found Marguerida veiled again, her hands tucked into her sleeves, her head high. "You stay here," she said. "Let me deal with this."

Donald said nothing. His eyes searched around the loft, as if something might suddenly appear from under hay bale or scrap heap and suggest a better plan. His battered medikit lay open where she had been sitting. He looked a second time. "Marguerida," he said, "where's the Mickey Finn?"

Marguerida looked up, her eyes masked by the veil. "Mikhail?" she said innocently, "He had to leave. He said to give you his regards."

Shaking his head, Donald sat again at the edge of the loft. He had to assume she knew what she was about; God knew there was enough in that vial to lay out a dozen men. If she could give it to all of them simultaneously — He crossed his fingers.

Marguerida crossed the floor and approached the high table, greeted the chief with the graceful nod of one slightly higher in rank. "*Dom* Jeral, I think you for your hospitality. May the Gods look on your endeavors, and grant them the reward they have earned." (*Ouch*, Donald thought, but the jibe seemed to pass over the chief's head.)

"Welcome, lady," Jeral said. "Come and sit at my side. We'll drink together," he indicated the Terran bottle the serving man had set on the table, "and make our plan of battle. Can you make me *clingfire*?"

"No, milord," said Marguerida. "Nor can any other; the secret is lost." *Thank the Gods*, her tone suggested, but not her words. She took the seat the rat-faced henchman held for her, her hands still tucked modestly into her sleeves, and bent forward to examine the bottle on the table. Donald could not read the label from where he sat, but the shape suggested whiskey.

"I fear I cannot drink with you, *vai dom*," she said, "lest I set my powers in disarray. But I will pour out for you and your men."

She picked up the bottle, only the tips of her fingers visible, and went up and down the table, filling each man's cup. She even called up the servers to carry cups to the doorward and the table guards. "To victory!" she cried, holding the bottle high, and set it down. "Victory!" the men shouted, and drained their cups.

Marguerida stood waiting. One breath drawn, two...and Jeral and his men slumped into their seats and let their heads rest on the table. The standing guards fell to the floor in a rattle of armor. The people, watching, caught their breath and began to murmur with the beginnings of hope. And one inarticulate shout of rage echoed through the building, as one more armored man leaped onto the dais, spear in hand.

He had been in the privy, maybe, or annoying some woman among the refugees. Now he strode up to Marguerida, and his spearpoint was at her throat.

"You did this, witch," he cried. "What did you do? You can undo it, or you can die."

Marguerida held up a hand. "Be warned," she began.

"I know," the man said, with an ugly smile full of rotten teeth. "If I touch you, I die. So I won't lay a hand on you, only this." He raised the spearpoint a finger's breadth.

For a long instant Donald could not move. At last he stretched out an arm and touched the cold iron of the anvil beside him, the anvil tied to the fall rope of the block and tackle. From where he sat, the man's ugly face was cut in two by the line of the rope.

But Marguerida was beside him; if he loosed the thing, it would strike her as well. Maybe she would move. Would he let her move? Donald got silently to his feet and looked around for a pole.

The guard's face was contorted, and oily sweat ran over his skin. Marguerida stood tall and silent, unmoving. Then suddenly the palms of her hands turned up, and she slumped to the floor like a dead woman. The guard stood stupidly, clutching his spear, and in that moment Donald pried up the anvil and let it fall.

The rope stretched and creaked under the sudden weight, but it held, and the anvil swung across the room in a graceful curve that cut the space in half. The people drew breath with a sound like wind in grass. One foolish voice cried out, and the guard raised his head, just as the anvil swung over the table, caught him up, and stopped when it reached the beam that supported the roof. There was an audible crack. The anvil swung back and forth, back and forth, slowly losing momentum, while the people began to shout and sing, and Marguerida picked herself up and got off the dais before the blood could soak into her hem.

Behind him, almost drowned by the noise below, Donald hear a thin sound like the mewling of a cat. He turned to see the midwife laying the newborn child in the arms of its mother. The woman was breathing hard, and could hardly raise her arms to hold the baby, but her face shone. "Congratulations," Donald said. "Do you know, if this were only winter instead of spring, it'd make a great Christmas story."

"A what?"

"Never mind." He showed the midwife how to strike the cold pack into action, and hurried down the ladder so that she could apply it where it was

needed in privacy. By the time he reached the floor his knees were weak with reaction, and he had to clutch at the loft pillar to keep on his feet. Dizziness swept over him, and receded. When he could see again, Marguerida was standing before him.

"I told you we'd think of something, did I not?" she said. "Let's go get some air."

She took his arm and led him outside. The air was bitter cold, but many of the people had already run out of the building, to sing and dance in a ring. Overhead, the four moons lay as close as buttons in the palm of your hand.

"As soon as we get to Thendara," Marguerida said. "we've got to have you tested for *laran*."

"Whatever for?"

"You foresaw where the anvil would hit, just as I did, and knew when to fall out of its way. Precognition is one of the old Gifts."

"Precognition, nothing," Donald said. "From where I sat, I could see him bisected by the support rope. A pendulum will always pass beneath its point of suspension and swing in a straight line. That's simple physics."

"Physics? What's that?"

"I'll explain later. Do you suppose we could sit down?"

"Of course." They pulled up two empty containers marked MEAT AND VEGETABLE STEW/ADD WATER/MAKES FIFTY GALLONS and sat on them. One of the refugees, a wiry man with knotted muscle along his thin arms, came up to them with an armload of hardware.

"We took care of them, *vai domna*," he said. "These are their weapons." Marguerida looked them over. She selected a serviceable-looking dagger and a shortsword the length of Donald's forearm.

"Do you suppose you could kneel for a moment, Donald?"

He shrugged. "Why not? Easier than sitting up." He slipped to his knees before her.

She put back her veil again. "Now, pretend for a minute that this one's yours, and this is mine." She handed him the dagger, and took it back. She laid the two weapons hilt to blade.

"Donald Stewart, be from this day paxman and shield-arm to me; may this blade strike me if I be not just lady and shield to you. The Gods witness it, and the holy things at Hali."

She put the sword into his hands, and stopped, suddenly realizing what she must do. *What do I know about Terrans? What will he think?* But the rite demanded it. She leaned forward and gave him the brother's kiss on his cold cheek.

After a moment he returned it, and bowed his head. The dance whirled about them while they sat there, silent as moonlight under the dancing moons.

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DEATH IN THENDARA

The man had not been dead long. The heat of his blood still rose like smoke from his body, making the dust motes dance. The little flies were only beginning to descend to see what they could find.

A single blade of sunlight slanted over Marguerida's shoulder, splitting the darkened room in half, lighting up the dust and the flies. *Laran* showed her more: a shabby table with a dust-smeared top, a rickety chair thrown sideways to a filthy floor, a family of crawling things slipping through cracks in the walls to fight the flies for their dinner. It was not a likely place to find a man, even a dead man, so well-fed and so richly dressed. The silken folds of a scarlet cloak rippled about the mound of the dead man's belly. Marguerida took a step forward, and the sunbeam slipped over the glimmering silk to strike green fire out of the dagger hilt that rose out of his chest.

Someone has saved me the trouble.

Marguerida took a deep breath and let it out again. There was a fragrance in the air, pungent, medicinal, and almost strong enough to drown out the stench from the street. The building against which this shabby little hut leaned looked like a warehouse; there might be hay in it, or resinwood—but it didn't smell quite like resinwood. She might have put a name on it, if her mind weren't so dulled with fatigue, and she might have put a name to that other thing as well—

There were voices behind her, down at the end of the twisted alley, voices in the spaceport dialect and the sound of footsteps. "Are you sure? I never heard a damned thing." The flat inflections of a Terran's voice; Marguerida had heard a dozen like it already.

Three men came into view as she turned in the doorway: a Darkovan wearing the tunic of the Guard, and a pair of Terran city police in their drab uniforms. "*Vai leronis*," the Guardsman said, shock in his voice. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"I heard a scream," she said.

"So did we," the Guardsman said. He was a short, mouse-colored man, perhaps twenty or twenty-two, handsome but for a scar that ran down one side of his face. "Did you kill him, *vai domna*?"

The two Terrans glanced at each other. Plainly they had been about to ask the same question—and in no such respectful tone. One of them was tall and beefy, almost fat, with skin like curdled milk and hair as red as Marguerida's own. The other was little and slight, with delicate features and skin the color of a Terran chocolate bar; she had never seen anyone like him before.

"I did not," she said.

"Did you see anyone?"

"No." Then her senses sharpened a little and she said. "But there is someone near here—in that warehouse, perhaps—who is badly frightened and trying to hide. Anyone who lives around here might feel like that at the approach of the Guard. I would still suggest, if I may, that you go and look for him."

"We'll do that." the big Terran said after a moment. To the Guardsman he said. "Rafael, why don't you see the lady home?"

But Marguerida had gone into the hut and was bending over the body. "Don't touch anything," the Terran said sharply.

"I shan't," she answered. "A Terran of my acquaintance told me how you can tell who's been handling a thing from the patterns of his skin. I don't want to disturb them. He hasn't been dead very long; but long enough, I fear. His

personality is dead. There's nothing left but a whiff of basic identity, like the smoke from a burnt-out candle."

"Do you know who he was?"

"Oh, yes; a petty criminal named Tamiano, no job too low, no reasonable offer refused." She bent lower. "Now, this is interesting."

"*Rafael*," the Terran said.

"He's right, *vai domna*," the Guardsman said. "This is no place for one of your station. Please let me take you away."

I've been living off the barren side of a winter mountain, and last night I helped to kill eleven men, Marguerida thought, *and will you now offer to shield my sweet innocence from the harsher things of life?* But she rose in apparent meekness and let the Guardsman lead her away. The man's offense had been wiped out in his blood; if not by her own hand, then by any hand whatever that the gods had chosen for their instrument. She was not inclined to be finicky about it.

"Well, I can't say I'm sorry." Donald said, and began to cough. The breathfire he had been keeping at bay this tenday was making another attempt on his weakened defenses, and the Terran physicians had put him to bed as soon as they had their hands on him. The black of his hair stood out like ink against the pallor of his skin and the unnatural whiteness of the Terran bed linen. "Not that I bore any personal grudge, not really; but this planet will be better off without him."

"He tried to kill you. I resent any man's attempt to interrupt the life of my sworn paxman."

Donald smiled, for she had sworn him to her service only the night before. "Even retroactively? You lend me grace, *domna*, but please don't take the

trouble. As you say, the gods took care of it."

"...She was using *what?*"

"Thornleaf. It grows up in the mountains." The door had opened and a pair of Terrans had walked in. Marguerida brushed her veil back over her face, though she knew at least one of them. Dr. Jason Allison had received them when they came in to Thendara that morning, and had some kind of liaison office with Lord Regis Hastur. The other man Marguerida didn't recognize: some tall thin Terran wearing sterile Terran white and looking out of cold Terran eyes.

"On the third day after the crash—*s'dia shaya, Domna Marguerida*, good morning, Mr. Stewart—the patient developed an inflammation of the lower respiratory tract, locally known as 'breathfire,' and resembling pneumonia in most respects, but the infectious agent is fungal. By the evening of the fourth day the patient was febrile and comatose, at which point, fortunately, this lady appeared on the scene." Jason turned to Marguerida again and bowed. "*Vai domna*, may I present Dr. Ronald Curtis, who has just arrived from Terra. Dr. Curtis, Lady Marguerida Elhalyn, of Alba Tower."

The Terran raised one pale eyebrow and extended his hand. Jason made a jittery motion as if to try to stop him, but Donald had explained this Terran custom and Marguerida was long enough Keeper to touch whom she would. The thin hand in hers was warm and moist. *I suppose the reverse of the old saw may hold as well: warm hands, cold heart.*

"Thornleaf..." Curtis mused, as he looked at the panel of strange-colored shapes at the foot of Donald's bed. "Well, you could easily have done worse." (He sounded as though the admission hurt him.) "This white count is a lot higher than I'd like, but with the infection he had that's hardly surprising. Yes, you did the best you could."

"Thank you," Marguerida said. Her voice was mild, and perhaps the Terran could not see the glint in her eye through the red mist of the Keeper's veil.

The door opened again. "Mizz Elhalyn? Oh, there you are." There were two more Terrans in uniform, wearing insignia of a spaceship crossed in saltire with a sword. "Come with us, please, we've got some questions."

"Now, just a minute," Jason Allison began.

"It's just routine," the other Terran answered, and indeed he sounded bored and indifferent. "We've got the body of a murder victim down in the morgue, and we need Ms. Elhalyn to make the identification."

"Surely the city police who brought him in can do that."

"Probably they could, but we can't find them."

"Can't *find* them?" Marguerida murmured. She and Donald exchanged glances. "Why don't I go and look at this dead corpse, Donald, and I shall bring you word." Donald inclined his head, and Marguerida walked between the pair of Terrans like a queen reviewing the troops, and out the door. Jason followed. The uniformed men hurried to catch up on her.

They fell into step on her right and left side, an action designed to make her feel like a prisoner under guard, but Marguerida's bearing kept them from bringing it off. It is possible for one person dressed in green, among a thousand dressed in red, so to walk and stand and hold herself as to make *them* feel out of place. Marguerida, her head high beneath her tattered veil and her frayed robe flowing behind her, made her Terran escort look like stable boys pressed into service as honor guard, and more than one Terran office clerk dressed in sensible shorts or jumpsuit felt uneasily that she had too little on.

The dead man was cold now, lying in a cold room under a cone of blue light that made him even colder. A servitor dressed in deep red turned back the cloth that covered his face. "That is the man," Marguerida said. "At least, I can tell you that's the man I found dead this morning. When the doctors allow my paxman Donald Stewart to get up, he will identify him for you as

Tamiano, all-purpose middleman in that unpleasant quarter where we found him."

"That won't be necessary," Jason told her. "The Thendara police know all about him."

"But that's not the knife that killed him," Marguerida went on. "Did you find it in the body like this?"

The guards exchanged glances. "The autopsy hasn't been done yet," said the man in red. "He's just as he was brought in. What do you mean, it's not the knife?"

"The knife I saw in his body was old," she said. "It was well-made and the stones in it were real. It was Tamiano's own knife and had been with him for a very long time; I think his family must have come down in the world."

"How did you know that?" said one of the guards.

"When an object has been with a man for a long time, when he has used it often and is familiar with it, then it takes on an image of his nature. I don't know how to say it in Terran."

"Psychic resonance," Jason put in.

"Resonance, thank you, that's a good word. That knife had resonance with Tamiano's life, and also with his death, because it was the knife that killed him. The shock of the death lay over the pattern like a film of dirt. This knife —" she moved closer and held her hand near it.

"Don't touch it," Jason said. "Not till they've checked it."

"I don't need to. This knife is new; no one can have owned it for more than a few days. It hasn't even any trace of its maker, because it was made quickly and impersonally and without care."

"Yes, it looks like standard Terran Zone trade goods," Jason said. "Take home a souvenir of scenic Darkover. Who's doing the autopsy? Dr. Ching? I'll leave him a note." He touched a panel on the wall. "To Dr. Ching from Dr. Allison. When you do this Tamiano autopsy, I'd like to sit in; there's some indication that the knife in the wound was substituted after death. I can get hold of an endonanoscope if you like, to look at it *in situ*. See you then."

He turned around and smiled blandly at the scowling guards. "Will that be all, officers? Thank you very much. *Domna* Marguerida, I'll take you to lunch and explain what parts of the menu you'll want to avoid."

"She's not to leave the Complex," one of the guards said.

"Really?" Jason said, still with that smile. "Is she under arrest?"

The guard glared at him.

"By your leave, *vai domna*," Jason said, and led Marguerida away.

"Why should I not leave the Complex?" she asked when they were out of earshot.

"Because they suspect you of having killed him," Jason said.

"Is that all? What would they do if I had killed him, as I intended to do?"

"Attempt to arrest you, get overruled by the Legate once Lord Regis had spoken to him, grumble a lot, and close the case as officially unsolved," Jason said. "I am surprised, frankly, that they're putting as much diligence into this case as they are. Like most of us, they're overworked these days, and they don't really care who did in a petty hoodlum from a Thendara slum."

"But what about the knife?" Marguerida said. "I can understand someone stealing the old one, which was valuable, but why put that piece of trash in its place?"

Jason shrugged. "Maybe someday we'll find out. This is the cafeteria."

A jumble of sights, sounds, and smells, stuck through at odd angles with the random thought fragments of people who had never had to learn to keep their minds in order. It was like a bowl of poacher's stew with all the claws and spines left in, and Marguerida clamped down her thoughts as hard as she could. "I'm sorry," Jason said. "It is rather confusing, isn't it? One learns to shield against it. I can get you a telepathic damper to help you over the hard parts. Would you rather do that before lunch?"

"No. I can cope with this, and I'm hungry."

He led her to a wall full of Terran machinery and showed her how to push the buttons. They carried their own trays with their own hands (*get used to it, Marguerida told herself, the Terrans have thousands of machines and no servants at all*) to a cluster of tables by a window looking out over the spaceport. Two men were rising from a table as they came to it, trays full of wrappers and trash in their hands. One smiled at them and said. "Hi, Jason. We're done here," but the other dropped his tray, scattering his little shreds of plastic all over the floor, and knelt down to pick it up.

Jason and Marguerida set their own trays on the table and bent down to help. As they both reached for the same shred, the man's hand brushed against Marguerida's and jerked back as if her fingers had been red-hot. But when they all got to their feet again, his face was bland. " 'Scuse me," he said and carried his tray away to dump it in a trash bin.

"What's the matter with him?" Marguerida said.

"Well, it could be your Keeper's robe, and the color of your hair," Jason said. "That's Robinson, the Trade Commissioner, he's been on Darkover long enough to acquire a certain respect for the Comyn, even if it's mostly based on legends and street talk. In addition to that—forgive me if I speak frankly—you are not an unattractive woman. I know, I know, you spent years being trained never to notice things of that kind, but if you spend much time in Thendara, let alone in the Terran Zone, you will have to take them into

account. Robinson would have seen you first as a pretty woman, and then the tales would flash into his mind about how a Keeper can burn a man to death with a touch—"

"But not in an ordinary social gathering," Marguerida said. "He would have had to do something threatening. Step on my toe, at the very least." And they laughed, and Jason asked how Marguerida had come to acquire a Terran paxman, and they sat down and ate their lunch.

They put their own trays into the trash can, to be recycled (as Jason explained it) back into more plastic. The two guards met them at the cafeteria door, standing shoulder to shoulder like a barricade. "We've found Kevin Price," one said.

"Congratulations," said Jason politely. "And who is Kevin Price?"

"He's the police officer who brought in the body of Tamiano," the guard said.

"And did he explain how or why the knives were exchanged?"

The guard grimaced. "Price will never explain anything again. We found him in a supply closet with an oxygen tube around his neck."

"Dead?"

"You bet, dead. So now we need to ask Ms. Elhalyn: Where were you around 1300?"

"Twenty minutes ago? We were both right here, eating lunch," Jason said. "You can have your pick of five or six hundred witnesses."

The guard said a Terran word Marguerida did not know. "Then it's the man."

"What man?" Marguerida asked.

"Stewart. He was right down the hall."

Marguerida took a silent breath, and tucked her hands into the depths of her sleeves. "And where is Donald Stewart now?"

Donald was still in his bed, with a guard outside the door. Another man in a guard's uniform was inside, tall and narrow-eyed, pale from years under Darkover's cool sun. "*Mierda*," Jason muttered when he saw him. "That's Commissioner Grey, Security."

"There you are, Dr. Allison," the Commissioner said. "I've just been explaining to your—uh—patient here, ordinarily there would be difficulties in deporting him before he's released from the hospital, but as I understand it his condition is stable and he can be transferred directly into the sickbay of the *Crown Imperial*, which lifts off at sunset. They'll continue the treatment you've outlined."

"Do you think you'll get my cooperation on this?" Jason asked quietly.

"I think I'll do it with your cooperation or without it, Doctor. Perhaps you'd rather discuss it in the privacy of your office."

"I'll stall them for a couple of hours." Jason told Marguerida in *casta*. "I can't promise more. You'd better see Lord Regis, and quick." He followed the Commissioner out the door.

"All right," Donald said. He was lying back against his pillows, and his expression was almost cheerful. "Now it all makes perfect sense. It's a frame."

"A what?"

"Somebody is working to make it look as if you or I killed these people, in order to cover up who really did it. And Security believes it, so they won't investigate any further. Which means we're going to have to find the real murderer ourselves. Blast it, why has it been so many years since I read any

murder mysteries? I've forgotten a lot of the techniques. However, I've got a couple of hours to think about it."

"I've got a couple of hours to get up to Comyn Castle." She put her veil down and turned to the door.

"There are aircabs at the spaceport gate," Donald called after her. "Most of the drivers are Darkovans, they'll take you for free." The door closed sharply behind her. "Because you lend them grace," he added softly, and settled down into his bedding and stared up at the ceiling.

"He left orders not to be disturbed," the young man said as he led Marguerida through the hallways of the Castle. "But this is important. You can't let those good-for-nothings lay hands on your sworn paxman, can you? I'd like to think Lord Regis would do as much for me, if there were need." He smiled, and opened a heavy wooden door into a dark-paneled room where Lord Regis sat with a tall, thin woman whose hair was fading from the sunset color into twilight.

The Regent looked up as the door opened. He was a young man still, under his mane of white hair, but his eyes were tired. "Dani, I thought I said—" he began, and broke off. "Marguerida Elhalyn, I believe," he said. "Welcome to Comyn Castle. You honor us with this visit, but I understand it isn't merely a social call?"

Marguerida explained in a few sentences how matters stood. "That's strange," Lord Regis said. "I know the Commissioner of Security, and this kind of action isn't typical of him. He's a decent and conscientious man—in his public life, at any rate. It feels as though someone had been putting pressure on him. Very well, as the Terrans say, 'fight fire with fire.' I understand it actually works on Terra." He rose and went to a Terran communicator on a side table, its slick plastic in garish contrast with the age-darkened wood and the faded tapestries of the deeds of Varzil the Good that

hung behind it. "The Legate had this installed a few days ago, when things were so unquiet in the streets. Now, if I can only remember how it works."

"Let me," the woman said. Her fingers flickered over the controls and a face appeared in the viewscreen; she backed away quickly so that the Terran could not see her. "Don't worry," she said softly to Marguerida. "If by any chance Lord Regis can't win over the Legate, there are other steps that can be taken. If need be, I can keep the *Crown Imperial* from taking off."

"Thank you, Legate; I wish you a quiet day," said Lord Regis, and touched the control that blanked the viewscreen. "*Domna*, your paxman is safe for the next few days at least. At least till your doctors pronounce him healed. In the long run, though, what he said is right; you need to find out who really killed those men."

"Donald suggested it might be the person who had hired Tamiano," Marguerida said. "To keep him from talking, just like Price."

"Tamiano did a number of jobs for me," the woman said. "but I didn't kill him. I've been here with Lord Regis since dawn."

"Who else might have killed him?"

"Anybody," she said. "I'm not the only person he worked for."

"*Domna* Marguerida," Regis said. "I hope we'll see you here again as soon as you get your threads untangled. We have a few of our own here. Thank you, Dani, that'll be all. Andrea, what do you suggest for—" and the door closed behind them.

The aircab, in defiance of spaceport regulations, sailed in through the gate to deposit Marguerida at the door of the Terran hospital. As she stepped into range of its sensors, the door swung open and the tall figure of the Security Commissioner blocked it.

"You were told not to leave this Complex," he said.

"Really?" Marguerida asked, remembering Jason's words. "Am I under arrest?"

"It could be arranged," the Terran said. "You set foot off this base again and I'll personally arrange to put you in a cell with guards outside. And then I'll put more guards on the guards."

He's afraid, Marguerida realized. Lord Regis is right; someone has put pressure on him. He fears disgrace, he fears...disclosure, maybe. What has he in his past that's so dark, this decent and conscientious man?

"And that's all I've got," she told Donald. "At least I've bought us some time."

"Well, I've thought as hard as I could," Donald said. "Classically, murder—I mean the business of solving and proving it, not committing it—rests on three legs. There's motive, means, and opportunity. Two murders, that's six possible leads. But most of them don't seem to go anywhere.

"In both cases—Tamiano and Price—anybody could have had the opportunity that didn't have an alibi."

"A what?"

"Proof of having been somewhere else at the time. I have one for Tamiano, you have one for Price; but that doesn't help because they think we've been conspiring, each to cover the other. It also doesn't help that you went there *intending* to kill him, and if you had told me, *vai domna*, I would have felt it my duty to advise against it." They both smiled. "You didn't file an intent-to-murder on him, did you?"

"On that piece of street garbage? Of course not. Though if my suspicions are right, that he came originally of good family, perhaps I should have."

"I thank any God who may happen to be listening that you didn't. The means, in both cases, were right to hand. The oxygen tube that throttled Price was there in the supply room, and we can assume Tamiano had his dagger on him."

"Day and night," Marguerida said. "And have you any idea why the knife was taken, and that piece of pot metal left in its place?"

"If you hadn't been around to interfere, they would have assumed that was the murder weapon—and not go looking for any other, that might have the murderer's prints on it. In the old days they checked for fingerprints that could be wiped off, but now they go for skin cells that get into the crevices of whatever you touch.

"We're left with motive, traditionally the weakest leg to rest a murder case on. Especially for Tamiano: anybody who knew him, and quite a few who didn't, could have had a motive to murder him. As for Price, it's likely he was killed to shut him up before he told what he knew about Tamiano. (This is assuming they were killed by the same person, and somebody else didn't kill Tamiano for a different reason altogether.)

"Somebody must be running fairly scared at this point. The Security Commissioner, for example."

"I don't know," Marguerida said. "He's done something, I'm sure of that, but it doesn't feel like murder. Taken bribes maybe, or some kind of unauthorized woman."

Donald blushed under his dark beard. "Well, I trust your judgment. Who else do we know of that's scared?"

Before she could answer, the door opened again. It was the Terran doctor—what was his name? Carter—with a clipboard in his hand and an

unexpected light in his eye. "Have you seen Dr. Allison? I wanted to tell him—maybe he mentioned it to you, about the Pantophage?"

"It probably slipped his mind," Marguerida said. "He's been having problems with—" she looked at Donald.

"Administrative jurisdiction," Donald supplied. "What's Pantophage?"

"It's what we're giving you now," the Terran said. "Dr. Allison suggested it because its effects on fungal infections of this sort are remarkably like the results you got out of your thornleaf, Ms. Elhalyn. He thought there might be a possibility of exporting thornleaf for medical use—I gather Darkover could use a lucrative trade item or two. I was curious enough to go over to the analytical laboratory and look them over."

He held up his clipboard and waved it a little, like a flag of victory. All his Terran standoffishness had vanished. "The active agent in thornleaf is the same molecule that Solar Spices and Pharmaceuticals sells as Pantophage. They've been testing it over the last couple of years, and brought it out just before I left Terra. Interesting, isn't it, how different life forms on different planets can use the same basic chemistry? How do you prepare thornleaf for consumption?"

"Pick it when it's young," Marguerida said, "and steep it in water. It's best fresh, but the dried leaves will serve, too. You have to pick it before it flowers, or it's no good; all the virtue draws out of the leaves and gets into the seeds."

"Can't you process the seeds as well?"

Marguerida shook her head. "There's something else in them that's poisonous. The hill people do make pillows of the seeds sometimes, for children who have chest trouble, or old people. You sleep on it all night and inhale the fragrance, and..." Her voice trailed off.

"Are those the little pillows you used to be able to buy in the bazaars?" Donald asked. "With the leaves embroidered all over them in red thread? I remember those. When I first came to Darkover they were in every stall; in fact, they were a drug on the market. Nowadays you don't see them any more."

"Pity," Dr. Curtis said. "I'd like to see one, analyze the seeds." A soft chiming filled the air, seeming to come from nowhere, but Dr. Curtis stopped it by touching a band on his wrist. "Sorry. That's my pager. I'll see you later." And he was gone.

"*That's* what I smelled in the hut," Marguerida said slowly. "Thornleaf seeds. They must have been in the warehouse next door. I suppose we could get some for you—Oh, has he gone? Dr. Curtis?" She opened the door again, and Donald heard her draw in her breath. "Wait! You, sir. What's your name? Come here, please."

She led a man into the room, a small Terran in the uniform of the city police, with skin the color of a Terran chocolate bar. "Sousa," he was saying. "Fernando Sousa. I remember you; you're the lady who found the body."

"And you and Price delivered it to the hospital, yes. What did you do after that?"

"I don't know what he did; I went to bed in my quarters. We were working watch and watch putting down riots over Festival Night; I've been running short on sleep. I just got up half an hour ago to visit a friend who's in here with a cracked head. Why?"

"Do you remember someone changing the knife that was stuck into the body? Substituting one for the other and taking the first knife away?"

"Not while I was there. But I wasn't there all the time, you know. That little alley isn't on the maps, so I went up to the street to guide the groundcar in. You'd better ask Kevin Price."

"Some other time," Marguerida temporized. "Tell me one other thing. Do you know where the Commissioner was all morning?"

"You mean Robinson?"

"No, no, Commissioner Grey," Donald said. "Your boss."

"My god, you want an alibi for the Commissioner? He was in the Ops Room from 0700 onward, and I suppose he's still there. He was there when I called in to get the groundcar."

"All right," Donald said. "Why'd you mention Robinson?"

"Well, I saw him coming in late. He's a fussy old bird and keeps very regular hours, but this morning I saw him coming in the gate just ahead of Price and me and the body."

Donald and Marguerida exchanged glances. "But there's no motive," Donald said.

"None that we know of," Marguerida said. "Anyway, you said motive was the weakest of your three legs."

"That may be, but you'll find Security will still want to find one before they try to bring it before a court. Mr. Sousa, what do you know about Commissioner Robinson? Any skeletons in his closet?"

"There must be one someplace," Sousa said wryly. "He got assigned to Darkover, after all; you usually do that by screwing up somewhere else. But he seems to like it here; he finished his term, and went back to Terra for a year, and then came back here. That was about a year and a half ago Standard. That's all I know about him."

"Thank you," Marguerida said in an abstracted voice. "Mr. Sousa, you'd probably better go and check in with your superiors; I have a feeling they

have been looking for you. Thank you for your time." She opened the door for him, and closed it for him.

"The timing is right," she said.

"You still don't have a motive."

"I know where I might find one," she began, and broke off. "Zandru's hells—if it's still there! He's had all day!" and she ran out of the room.

Donald sat bolt upright, and with some effort of will made himself lie back again. It was her planet after all, and she was well able to take care of herself. He, on the other hand, was under doctor's orders to stay in bed. She would be all right. Even though it was getting late—why, the sky outside his window was practically dark. He touched the controls at his bedside that closed the curtains and brought up the room lights. He lay back and took a deep breath, and coughed, and breathed again. And the door opened.

Three men walked into the room, dressed in civilian clothes that did not seem quite to fit. They were all wearing Darkovan-made boots, but they had Terran blasters in their hands. "All right, Mr. Stewart," said the tallest of the three. "Get up and get dressed; you got a ship to catch. I know you don't feel so good, so if you can't walk that far we'll carry you."

"I believe Lord Regis Hastur spoke to the Legate about this."

"That may be," said the other, "but once you're off-planet, Lord Regis has got nothing to say about it. Come on." He made an upward gesture with the muzzle of his blaster. The hand that held it wore a cuff of heavy leather, studded with brass.

Donald got up in silence, put on the nondescript spaceman's coveralls they handed him. Off-planet back into space where he belonged: the thought was bittersweet. For a man who called no world home, Darkover was as fair as any planet might be. *Maybe it won't matter*, he thought. *The breathfire will probably solve all my problems at once.* "Is it cold outside?"

"Not too bad. The sun's just gone down."

"I'd better get my jacket." He found it in the small locker behind the bed, and struggled into it with an effort that made him cough again. He stumbled, and brushed against the bed's controls—and the light went out.

The curtains kept out the meager twilight. Their eyes adapted to the bright artificial light, none of them could see. But Donald knew where things were in that room, and the others didn't. He heard two of them stumble against each other, and curse. Something brushed against his arm, hard and knobbly, and at some level he realized it was the leader's wrist cuff and that meant his gun was not pointing at *him*. He reached out, grabbed the weapon and twisted it free, and ran for the door. He knew where that was, too.

Out in the corridor he nearly stumbled over the body of the guard that lay before the door; righted himself, and plunged onward. Adrenaline shot through his blood; he would worry about breathing later. *I'm coming, Marguerida*. He heard stumblings and cursings behind him, ducked into the lift, and drew one long gasping breath as the door slid safely closed behind him.

It was almost totally dark in the street, dark as Zandru's cellar in the alley. Marguerida found her way by feel, *laran*, and scent. The hut where Tamiano had died was dark and empty, but a thin line of light showed under the next door down, that opened into the warehouse. Cold emptiness inside, and one Terran atom lantern, and one man. The door opened inward.

The first thing she saw was a small shape like a half-emptied sack, embroidered with leaf-shapes all over one side. A seam had ripped and spilled its filling across the floor. Even in the cold air, there was a faint smell of thornleaf.

The man had a blaster, and its muzzle was pointed at her head. "Get inside," he whispered in the spaceport dialect. Marguerida smiled.

"Thank you, Mr. Robinson," she said. "Once again, you've saved me the trouble."

"Get *inside*," he hissed. "What do you mean, saved you the trouble? What do you mean, *again*?"

"Why, you killed Tamiano for me," she said. "He owed me blood for attempting the life of my paxman. Then again, I wasn't certain why you felt a need to kill him, so it's good of you to tell me."

"I'm not going to tell you anything."

"You're telling me right now. I'm not much of a telepath, you must understand, but fear screams like a banshee in rut. You're shouting it into my ears."

Robinson clutched at his mouth with his free hand, as if to stifle the silent voice. His blaster hand was trembling, but its focus never went very far from Marguerida's head. *He is searching for the strength to pull the trigger.*

The door behind her pushed open, and sent her staggering almost into Robinson's arms. The man made a little whining sound, and steadied his blaster with both hands, but he didn't fire. A tall figure filled the doorway.

"Elhalyn, you're under arrest. I warned you, if you left the Complex again —" Then he caught sight of Robinson, and the blaster.

"Move, and she dies," Robinson whispered. Grey didn't move. The blaster lay so still in his hand that a star in the sky behind him could be seen mirrored on its surface.

"Let me tell you quickly what's been happening," Marguerida said. Robinson's fear still shrilled like a banshee in her mind, chilling her blood, but she forced her voice into steadiness. "He's been sending thornleaf seeds to Terra, selling them to Solar Spices and Pharmaceuticals, who can steep the virtue out of them without the poison. Tamiano was doing the day-to-day

work of collecting and shipping. Why he bothered to have them sewn into pillows I don't know, unless the Empire charges an import duty on medicines."

"They do," Grey said. "Solar would have had to pay it, not Robinson; they probably paid him a cut of what they saved."

"So. And Tamiano wanted a cut too—or a larger cut than he was already getting—or maybe just silence money. So Robinson killed him with his own knife, then changed it for another that hadn't his handprints on it. But Price saw him. Perhaps he wanted silence money, too; perhaps he wouldn't take it and promised to report him. Where does Terra send men who have failed on Darkover, too?"

"You don't want to know," Grey said. "What about it, Robinson? Are you ready to come along quietly?"

"If you move, I'll kill her," Robinson said again.

"If you fire, I fire." Grey said. The star reflected in his blaster was perfectly steady. "If you shoot me first, *then* her, you might get us both. But I've got eight men out here, Robinson, at every door and on the roof. I didn't come here to arrest one unarmed woman, not after the autopsy report came in. You can't escape all of us."

"You're bluffing," Robinson whispered. "And we're leaving." And he took another sidewise step toward Marguerida, and flung his arm around her throat.

It was his last conscious act. The sounds that he made, as the flames raced across his body, were not the speech of any creature that still had its mind. Marguerida backed slowly away from him as the flames crackled and whispered, beating out the sparks that had caught her sleeve. The blaster fell from the remnant of his hand and skittered across the floor into a corner. He was ashes and cinders before he hit the ground.

Donald appeared out of the dim shadows into the pool of light that poured out of the doorway, and skidded to a stop. He looked at Marguerida, and at Grey, and at the pile of ashes on the floor. "You didn't need me after all, did you?" he said, and laughed, and coughed, and sat down on the floor. Marguerida steadied herself against the doorpost, and sat beside him.

"This is just as well," Grey commented, and put his blaster away. "Because I *was* bluffing." He folded his long legs and sat down beside them.

The sky was very dark now, and a double handful of stars had come out. The four moons made a loose cluster about a wash of purple-red where the sun had set. "Except about the autopsy findings," Grey said. "They showed that a narrow blade had been substituted for a wider one. So I began to think you might have something there."

The sky outside lit up for a moment, and through the open door they could see a long streak of green rising against the stars.

"That's the *Crown Imperial* lifting off," Grey said. "Maybe I should call in, have her held in orbit. There's I don't know how many tons of thornleaf seed on board, on its way to Terra."

"Let it go," Marguerida said. "Send them a few more shipments, even. Let them build up a market."

"They don't even need to know Robinson's dead," Donald said. "We'll collect his share of the proceeds in his name. We'll need the funds, for a good Earthside lawyer."

"Let them build up a market," Marguerida repeated. "Then we'll make an honest company of them. Donald, here." She reached behind her and held up the half-emptied pillow, torn seam upward, like a sack. "You can breathe this till we get you back to the hospital."

Donald took it obediently, and got to his feet. "That was Robinson, wasn't it?" he said. "Look, he had the dagger on him all the time." The green stone

glinted among the ashes, and a little wisp of smoke rose through the lantern light till it vanished among the shadows in the rafters.

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AVARRA'S CHILDREN

For any Darkovan cutpurse worthy of the name, a Terran spaceman was a Goddess-given target of opportunity. Not only did he carry money to burn—literally, in the form of that flimsy Terran paper that was worth more than copper in Thendara these days—but he carried it in a fabric pack nestled against his backside, easier to cut than a proper leather beltpouch and much easier of access than those tight flat pocket things the Terran merchants wore. It was singularly unfair of this particular spaceman to have pulled his pack around and slung it over his belly like a sporran, but since he was standing there in the marketplace, staring up at Comyn Castle on its high hill and paying no attention to what was going on around him, he looked worth a shot.

It was especially unfair that he had such quick reflexes and such strong hands. The boy tugged and twisted, but Donald Stewart kept his grip on the skinny wrist and looked him up and down with the deceptive mildness of a prize bull in his own meadow.

"That wasn't a very good idea," he said. "Take it easy, kid. You don't have to make a living picking pockets. What's your name?"

But the boy said something crude, and twisted again and kicked Donald hard in the shin, and broke free. The Terran ran after him, kindness forgotten, leaping over the carpenter's horse the boy had ducked under and weaving through a platoon of space marines with scarcely an "excuse me."

Thendara's market square was beginning to show signs of life again, after months of planetwide depression and the days of near-anarchy that had culminated in the strange coup of Festival Night. The cloth merchants had brought out their bulky wares into the public view, and bread was being baked daily and would probably come off rationing within the week. Even a

goldsmith had risked the clement air of spring and brought out a trayful of rings that glowed like coals under the ruddy sun. There were no customers at his booth as yet, and he snatched up his tray and backed up against the wall as the child skidded by with the angry man close on his heels. They took a sharp turn at the onion-seller's and disappeared into an alleyway.

Here it was darker, and the pavement uncertain, and Donald thought he had lost his quarry till he turned another sharp corner and nearly collided with him. A man in nondescript Darkovan grey woollens had wrapped the child up in his arms and pinioned the feet between his own. Donald looked the man over while he caught his breath.

A Terran, in spite of the clothes: tall and thin, with smooth golden skin. "Picked your pocket?" he asked.

"Tried to. You know this kid?"

"I've seen him about. There are a lot of these homeless children in the city. Now, I'll tell you what." He took the boy by the shoulders and held him out of kicking range. "I'm going to take you to my house, and we'll talk. My name's Peter Yoshida. What's yours?"

The child looked him up and down. "How much?" But the tall man only laughed.

"Silver and gold have I none, but I can give you lunch. Care to come along, sir?"

"Sure," Donald said. He supposed the man's motives were nothing but good, but there was no harm in making sure. He thought he'd caught a glimpse of something familiar and disturbing under the worn grey cloak. He fell into step beside them.

Yoshida lived in a shabby small house not far from the market square, a timber building that over the years had leaned against a taller house till they almost touched. A single room inside served as living space and kitchen, and

a ladder against the back wall led to a sleeping loft above. Yoshida closed the door firmly, and hung his cloak and Donald's jacket on hooks in the wall, and Donald's suspicions were confirmed. Under a woollen tunic the man was wearing a clerical collar and a cross.

There'd been rumors that missionaries were coming in to Darkover. Donald, who had had no use for religion since he was not much bigger than this kid, went through the mental motions of washing his hands and concentrated on being polite.

Yoshida brought out a Terran foil-packed meat roll and Darkovan bread, and a better small beer than Donald had tasted in weeks; the breweries must be getting back online. The boy, after a first suspicious taste, chewed his way steadily through everything that was offered him. He could have used a few more kilos of flesh on his small bones—the child could be no more than seven or eight—but he hadn't the look of one who is really starving, such as Donald had seen in the hills. Someone had been taking care of him, at least till recently.

"I still don't know your name," Yoshida said after a few minutes.

"Anndra."

"Anndra what?"

"Just Anndra. Did you think I was one of those dumb girl Renunciates who go by their mothers' names?"

"Well, no," Yoshida said. He and Donald exchanged glances. Unusual for a little boy to use the proper word "Renunciate," instead of the commoner "Free Amazon," but the kid had clearly been brushing up on his language skills; his fluent Thendara trade-talk was already spiced with *cahuenga* obscenities and a few choice words of Terran.

"Where do you live?"

The child's mouth was full; he only shrugged. So did Yoshida.

"I'd like to start a shelter for these street children," he said. "Traditionally, on this planet, the poor and abandoned move in with their kinsfolk and they manage somehow. But with the famines and the riots, these kids haven't got any kin left—or none that are willing to claim them. Some of them are half-Terran, like this one. Some are Renunciates' sons, who have to leave the House at the age of five—the worst age I can think of for a boy to have to leave his mother. That's why—" and he gestured toward a picture hung on the far wall, a woman in a long blue cloak, sitting on a bank of turf starred with flowers. She had a baby in her lap, and a dozen or so more children of all ages clustered around her.

"I want to start a halfway house where they can eat without having to steal, and learn how to be civilized again. I've got the funds; the trouble is finding a large enough house."

"The city's full of empty buildings."

"Whose owners are escaped into the countryside, or dead, and nobody knows who their heirs are. There's no red tape like a family-based society whose records are kept in the memories of people who aren't here any more."

"Well," Donald said, "I'm in the service of someone who has Lord Regis Hastur's ear. I'll ask her if there's anything he can do. There ought to be."

Anndra, licking his fingers, had got up from the table and wandered over to the nearest wall, to look at the picture the priest had hung there. "Who's that?" the boy said now. "Is it the Lady Evanda?"

"No," said Yoshida. "Her name is Mary, and once she was a poor man's daughter, but now she is the Queen of Heaven and the mother by adoption of all mankind."

"Not mine," the boy said, and spat. "I belong to Mother Avarra." And seeing them glance at each other, he made a dash for the door and was gone

before they could catch him.

"I am not going to make you do anything you don't want to do," Marguerida said. "I couldn't if I wanted to. This is your house—" they were sitting in the entrance hall of Thendara House, and the traffic in and out was fairly brisk—"and any time you cared to, you could go inside and get a dozen of your sisters to throw me out."

"My sisters are not such fools as to lay hands on a Keeper," Raquel n'ha Mhari said; but she smiled with one side of her mouth and seemed to relax a little. "I think all the fools have moved into the Castle. Do they really expect to find *laran* in a hillwoman whose grandmothers and grandfathers have all been nut-farmers since the memory of mankind runneth not to the contrary?"

"That's a long time," Marguerida said. "Gifts don't go with bloodlines any more, I thank the Gods. I am an Elhalyn, and the Elhalyn Gift was the multiple foreseeing that drove its owner mad as often as not. I'll settle for the small skills I've got."

"You, they tell me, are a tracker, and you can trace and find things the Gods themselves would have given up on. Everyone tells me so, from the beggarwoman whose child you found in the forest, to the Terran Commissioner whose escaped murderer you found in the scullery of the Officer's Club. Did you never wonder how it happened that you could do those things? Have you no idle curiosity? Come, it'll take an hour of your time, and if they don't find anything you can come home, and if they do find anything you can come home anyway. Lord Regis isn't forcing anyone into anything. If he did I should have to speak to him, and so would the Lady Desideria."

Raquel had been glancing at Marguerida from under her eyelids and digging her toes into the cracks between the flagstones—if she had been a horse she would have dug her hooves into the earth—but now she laughed.

The front door opened again, and a crowd of children came in, nominally under the charge of two sisters who seemed very glad to be home. Most of them were carrying bundles and all were talking at the top of their lungs, girls of all ages and boys of no more than five. Raquel put her hands over her ears and got to her feet. "Getting crowded in here. I'll go with you."

"According to what I've read," Father Yoshida said as they came out of the alley. "there used to be an order of priestesses of Avarra, before the Compact; they were healers and contemplatives. Under Varzil the Good they became an active Order and merged with the Swordsisters."

"The Renunciates still swear by the Goddess, I'm told," Donald said, "but the oath doesn't call her by name."

"And in any case," Yoshida went on, neatly sidestepping a dung-cart that limped on one wheel. "I don't believe those devout ladies would have sponsored pickpockets. Not unless they've fallen on very hard times. Now over there—see the tiled roof, over behind the cobbler's shop? That's the house I'd like to get my hands on. It belonged to a merchant prince named Bran mac Adhil who died of plague last year, and nobody can find the heirs... What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," said Donald. "Look there." A path was opening, right in the thickest part of the crowd: people stepping hastily aside, dragging their sacks and goats and servants aside lest they brush against the hem of the Keeper's gown. A small dark woman with the short hair of a Renunciate followed in her wake, glancing from side to side and concealing her amusement as best she could.

They met in the center of the market, and introductions were made. "I'm fortunate in meeting you, *mestra*," Donald said. "Perhaps you know the answer to the question we've been puzzling over. Do you know anything of a cult of Avarra surviving into the present day? People who say 'I belong to

Mother Avarra' and don't scruple at cutting purses?" (Sudden image of the boy, eyes glowing, face grubby.)

"No, I haven't," said Raquel, the color draining out of her face,"and now I hear of it I don't like it. If I hear anything, perhaps I can let you know. We should be getting on, *vai donna*." And Marguerida led her away, clearing her path through the crowd like Moses parting the Red Sea (the mythic image bubbled up into Donald's mind out of a quarter-century of oblivion. It must be the company he was keeping).

"There's not that much of a hurry," Marguerida said. "They'll be ready for us whenever we get there."

"I want to get there," Raquel said. "There's a bad smell about this place. Haven't you noticed it?"

"No," said Marguerida.

"Yes, I know about them," Security Commissioner Grey said. His prefabricated Terran-style office was almost unnaturally neat, a place for everything and everything in its place, with no ornament but a long mural behind his head of a lunar landscape and a crescent Earth rising. The room felt cold, and the Commissioner looked tired. (Donald had been lucky to find him in. He had been doing three men's work ever since the troubles had started, and unlike most Terran officials he lived outside the Terran Zone.)

"Not the part about Avarra, but the kids. They're running in packs all over Thendara; no parents, or none that will admit to them; thieving and begging and living on I don't know what. One of them was caught in the act on Monday and his throat cut on the spot. About nine years old, we think." Grey's voice was level, but his jaw was tight. He was a tall man, with a long

face and a long neck and long fingers that turned a stylus over and over along the desktop.

"Just one more pixel in the picture. Fire, plague, erosion, homeless children—and the woman who's responsible for it all is up at Comyn Castle under Lord Regis's protection. I don't know what he thinks he's doing."

"As I understand it, she's helping to undo what she did," Donald said. "We'd all have a harder time of it without what she knows. I shouldn't have thought she was the type to play Fagin to a gang of street kids, but I'll ask her if she knows anything about them. I'm living up at the Castle now; God knows there's room. There'd be room for Yoshida to set up his shelter in a wing of it; only I don't suppose the kids would come there."

"Thanks for reminding me," Grey said. "I need to send Father Yoshida mail and tell him he's got my support."

"I don't think he's on the network," Donald said. "He's living in that little shack just off the market."

Grey shrugged. "I'll send him hardcopy. We've got messengers. Thanks, Stewart." He half-rose as Donald went to the door, and sank back into his chair as if he were tired. As Donald went out he thought he heard Grey whisper, "Oh, God—" which was so unlike the reticent, efficient Commissioner that he thought he must have imagined it.

"So I asked Andrea," Donald said, and broke off as the door opened and the chambermaid came in with the hot water. Servants were invisible, and never heard what was said in their hearing, that was the convention; but Donald couldn't bring himself to subscribe to it. He had grown up on Terra, where there was a machine for every task, and up in the mountains he had learned to do all for himself with natural materials; but Comyn Castle was a blend of primitive luxury and unexamined hardship that kept taking him by surprise. The maid was a woman of thirty-five or so, thin and hard-faced and

frail-looking, but she hefted the heavy stoneware water jugs without apparent effort. Donald found it embarrassing. He could have carried the water up himself, and would rather have, if it couldn't come out of a faucet the way normal water ought to do! But the woman needed the work, and seemed glad to have it. "Dinner in half an hour, *vai domyn*," she said, and closed the door behind her.

"You asked Andrea, yes?" Marguerida prompted.

"I asked her if she knew anything about these kids. She said she hadn't had anything to do with these particular ones, but she had dealt with street gangs in the past and might have some ideas. She said she'd do up a *précis* for Grey and be available for his questions. And she doesn't know anything about a cult of Avarra."

They were silent for a moment. "Maybe I'm overreacting," Donald said finally. "What do you think? How serious is this?"

"Very serious, I think," Marguerida said, "from the way Raquel is taking it. She is one whose Gift is to sniff things out, if you follow me, and she smells something bad in this business, and she won't discuss where it is. The Gods know," she said, rising to her feet and clenching her small hands into fists, "that it is a very bad thing for little children to be followers of Avarra. They should belong to Evanda and Aldones, growing up in the sun without fear. It's the old and sick who call on merciful Avarra, and mothers worn out with childbearing and the deaths of their children, who pray for sterility. The mercy of Avarra is that you die and are released from pain. And whenever little children come to know about this, it is a sign that times are very bad. Which they are." She sighed.

"If you weren't a Keeper you could cry on my shoulder," Donald said, and because this was an old joke between them she sighed again, and smiled. "Where has she gone? Raquel, I mean."

"Home to Thendara House, with her test results," Marguerida said. "to think them over and decide what she wants to do with them. She'll come to us, I

think; by the day at any rate. She'd be happier going home at night than living here."

"I didn't know Renunciates could live in—" he gestured at the wall, to indicate Comyn Castle's echoing halls and its current population of about two hundred (males, females, and several *chieri* to whom the question did not apply "—mixed company."

"Oh, they can live wherever they want, once their half-year's novitiate is over," Marguerida said. "They prefer their own Houses where men are not allowed. Most Renunciates I have met are willing to acknowledge that there are some decent men among all the bullies and brutes; just the same, they don't trust them on the premises. Put a man into a group of women, they seem to think, and by his very nature he'll take over. I wish they had more confidence in themselves. It's time we washed and went down to the Hall."

Over the next few days, they began clearing fire debris away and bread went off the ration and a fleet of airtrucks came in from Regulus Base to ferry supplies into the hills, and Commissioner Grey set his men to rounding up the young pickpockets. They caught three, and brought them in to shelter inside the Base, with the other homeless children who had been trickling in ever since the troubles began. The three boys, the oldest perhaps twelve, cried nonstop and said they wanted to go home. Asked where home was, they shrugged. Their faces appeared with the others on posters in the marketplace, but no one identified them; and one night they tore out the screening over an airduct and escaped. Commissioner Grey began to look very grim, and it took the luck of the Gods to find him at his desk any more. People would see him, stalking through the narrow streets with one or two of his men, searching, searching.

The next day there was a heavy rainstorm that washed filth from the gutters into the wells, so that Terran water trucks had to be set up in the city again. The day after that, one of the city police tried to catch a pickpocket, and was brought in on a stretcher.

"Not a mark on him," Commissioner Grey said to Lord Regis when he reported to him in the mid-afternoon, "except the bruise on the back of the skull that he got from falling over. The doctors say 'catatonia'."

"I don't know the word," Regis said.

"No reason why you should. It's Greek for 'he's pulled himself back into his skull and thrown away the key.' He lies in bed, doesn't speak, doesn't move. Could be brought on by shock. And I thought some of your people might like to take a look at him—at the least they might find out what it was that delivered the shock."

The Commissioner looked uncomfortable. Long used to giving orders, he had almost lost the knack of asking favors. Regis smiled. "We'll be right down."

Lord Regis came to the Base Infirmary himself, and brought with him his promised wife and her grandmother. They stood together, fingers just touching, alongside the bed where the unconscious man lay, curled up like a small bud among a great many papery leaves.

"He's very deep," said Desideria after a long while, more to herself than to the Commissioner. "I don't—" she glanced at Linnea and at Regis. "I don't think there's anything we can do here. This room is too small, and many of our people wouldn't like the idea of coming here. Could you bring him up to the Castle? Say, tomorrow?"

"Whenever you like," Grey said. They left him standing by the bedside, drumming an irregular rhythm against the wall with two fingertips; and on the way back to the Castle they spoke of the Commissioner and his virtues, and how he had aided them so many times during the recent troubles, and how they might contrive to take some of the load off his shoulders. Of his fallen guardsman they did not speak at all; they'd shear that sheep when they got him home from market.

"I'm sorry, Donald," Lord Regis said. "A shelter for homeless children is a splendid idea, and I want to help Father Peter any way I can. And you're right, if there are no heirs the property comes to me in default of a surviving King. But even if we knew for certain that Bran mac Adhil left no heirs, I'm not going to bestow any more Darkovan land on Terrans, not at this time with feelings running so high. I could grant it to your Lady Marguerida, if you think she'd be willing to sponsor a project run by Terran priests, or to some other Darkovan. Not to Father Peter; not just now. I'm sorry."

Marguerida woke to a presence in her room, a whisper by her bedside: Raquel n'ha Mhari, crouching on her rug and murmuring, "*Vai leronis*, please wake up. I have to show you something."

"I'm awake. Show me what? What's the hour?"

"It's the middle of the third watch. I have to take you down into the town, before the bakers and flower-sellers begin to set up. Please, *domna*; there's no one I can trust but you."

"Why such secrecy? How did you get into the Castle at this hour?" But as she spoke she was dressing, not in her Keeper's finery but in a tunic and treads she'd hidden in her wardrobe against need. She knotted her bright hair up under a dark cap, and took down the warmest cloak she had.

"You mean, past the guards?" Raquel said. "They don't know how to listen." That was all she said, but she led Marguerida down the stairs and out the gate under the guards' noses without even interrupting their conversation.

Raquel led the way through the town to the market square, and skirted its edge, slipping from the shelter of one building to the next, till they reached the western side. Even in their fleece-lined boots, their feet left prints on the frosty stone. Liriel, now visibly past the full, was high overhead and turned all the square to cold silver. Raquel stopped in front of a heavily boarded-up stall

with the boot-shaped sign of a cobbler swinging overhead. "You can feel it here," she whispered. "I didn't want to track it further without help. Listen."

The square was utterly silent, not even a breath of wind or the crack of a stone in the frost breaking the stillness. They waited; and after a time Marguerida began to sense a light somewhere behind her eyes, a thin warm reddish light that the violet frost of the moon could not reach, and a sensation of drawing inward, of contracting into a place that was very deep. It was beating like a heart. Form and texture melted in the warmth. She was slipping into the overworld without intending to, an overworld soft and red with blood and hidden things. She was walking among planes of warmth, no, crawling hands-and-knees, drifting down into darkness. There was nowhere to breathe.

(She lay in state upon the couch of darkness, arms outspread. Her head was crowned with shining shapes, a thousand little moons. Her dark hair flowed into the shadows.) Come to me and rest. The whole world came out of my womb, and shall return there. Come to my embrace, and I shall never let go. (A womb that—) Wherever you go, I shall be with you. Drink peace (A womb that refuses to give up its fruit) drink peace and forgetfulness from my breasts. (—is diseased, and will die.) (The crown upon the shining head was made of little skulls.)

Marguerida brought her head up with a jerk. She was back in the square, and Raquel was saying, "*Domna*, come back, come back."

"I'm back," she said. The sweat was icy on her face. "Aldones! What was that?"

"Ai! I was hoping you'd tell me." They looked bleakly at one another. Across the square, a door slammed, and a man ran briskly from one building to another, slapping his arms against his chest to ward off the cold.

"It's like a parody of the Goddess," Marguerida said. "All of Avarra's traits amplified and extended to a conclusion that is logical and insane."

"Was it She?"

"I don't know."

"Can the Goddess Herself go mad?"

"I don't *know*," Marguerida said firmly. "But I know whom to ask. There's only one who's dealt with the Gods in our day, mad or sane, and that's Lord Regis Hastur."

Lord Regis sat in the back row of seats, under the wall that once had borne the Alton banner. Not that such things mattered any more; all the banners had been torn down by hands unknown on Festival Night, and the Crystal Chamber had been converted into what Jay Allison called an operating theatre. For the purposes of today's work, the telepathic dampers had all been turned off; they sat idle in their niches like so many worn-out shoes. On the central dais, where once the Comyn had debated the future of Darkover, the unconscious Terran guardsman lay on a low cot. By his side sat a circle of ten. Two of the circle were *chieri*, and a third sat in the second circle that surrounded the first—learners and observers, these, and what the Terrans called "backup" and "redundancy check."

Marguerida sat in the second circle, Raquel n'ha Mhari at her elbow. If anyone could have proved that the man's illness had nothing to do with what the women had sniffed out this morning, Regis would have filled his mouth with gold. He shifted uneasily in his chair. Behind Marguerida sat her paxman, his cold blue eyes glancing this way and that under his dark brows, on watch against anything that might threaten his sworn lady and would have to chew its way through him first. And far back on the opposite side, where the Aldaran banner had not hung for generations (but such things didn't matter now), Commissioner Grey sat like a kyorebni perched above the earth, waiting to see what he could find.

Deep, Desideria had said. (She was sitting halfway back, not far from Commissioner Grey, and appeared to be paying more heed to the observers than to the circle: so it seemed. She caught his eye and smiled briefly.) The

circle went into the upper chambers of the man's mind like one who walks down a mountain path, around and around, and finds it empty. Regis had not their training, and they left him behind. He stretched again, and caught sight of a man sitting by the door. Heavy cloak tossed aside onto the chair next to him, he sat there in his formal Terran clerical black — *so as not to deceive us by false appearances*, Regis thought. It was unnecessary effort, perhaps, since many of the room knew the priest by sight, but one could appreciate his good will. Regis would have to take the opportunity to speak to him—

Someone in the circle drew breath noisily: less a gasp of surprise than a desperate gulp for sustaining air. A silent rustle of unease went through the room.

One moment, please, the Keeper said, and Desideria got up to relay her words to Grey. *We've found something; a memory, or a command: it's pinning him down. Chained down in the dark. If we cut him loose from it we'll lose it; if not, we'll lose him.* Regis shifted again. Back in a dark room in his mind where he had hidden her, dead Sharra leered at him suddenly, and sank again into darkness.

Desideria spoke softly, and Grey stared at her as though she had grown an extra head. "You're *asking* me? Of course I— Sorry. Yes, please, cut him loose. Bring him back."

Everyone, make ready to observe, please, and the circle joined its severed ends and there was a moment when nothing moved, and then instantly it had been over for some time and the Terran thrashed convulsively on his cot and opened his eyes. Grey let out a long breath, and so did many others in the room. They were exchanging glances—*You saw it, too? Buried alive. Buried unborn.* Regis had felt no more than an instant of claustrophobic warmth that had spread through the hall and vanished, leaving a foul taste in the mind. He caught Marguerida's eye, and she nodded.

The circle was dissolving, humans and *chieri* helping one another to rise and stretching out their cramped limbs. The Terran was sitting up, grimacing,

reaching backward to dig his knuckles into the muscles of his back. "What happened? Geez, my back is stiff. Commissioner, what am I doing here?"

Commissioner Grey had well-nigh teleported over the railings and slipped through the circle to reach his guardsman's side. Two Terran medical staff followed him, chilly in their lightweight coveralls. They got the man to his feet and led him away.

They met later in Regis's own rooms: Raquel and Marguerida, and Commissioner Grey, and Donald (who as usual had come in unrequested, trailing Marguerida) and Father Yoshida (who had come in with Grey).

"I can understand your not wanting to alienate any more Darkovan land," the priest said. "Perhaps we could arrange a long-term lease, with yourself as trustee? What I'd really like is to get a roof over the children's heads now, and do the paperwork later. I have two in my house now, and there's not room for more."

"Names? ages?" Grey asked, and Raquel. "Where did you find them?"

"Anjali is three, I think, and has no idea who her parents were. Mikhail is ten. I found them in the streets, begging because they hadn't the skill to steal. Mikhail came originally from your House," he nodded toward Raquel, "but had to leave at five, because of your rule, and his foster-mother abandoned him when things got tight."

His tone was carefully nonjudgmental, but Raquel flushed. "That rule is a halfway mark," she said. "between those of us who would like to be more lenient, and those who complain about having 'baby men' in the house at all, and would prefer to toss them out at birth." (The Terrans winced.) "There's one woman in Thendara House, the staunchest friend the Terrans have there, not because of the way they keep going on about equality, but because with their technology males could be diagnosed and flushed at conception."

"In any case," Grey said, his voice level, "I brought Father Yoshida along today because he shares my opinion that we have one problem here, and not two."

"Homeless children picking pockets," Father Peter clarified, "and something nasty in the telepathic woodshed, somewhere near the marketplace. Now, I have no psionic talents at all, and what people like me do is to extrapolate what other people are thinking from how they move. Body language, they call it. It's below the verbal level, and I find it hard to explain what I see in these children. But if I stand like this, the feeling it brings into my mind—" He stood up, his arms curled against his body, his head slightly to one side, and through every telepath in the room there went a quick shudder as they sensed his thought, a dim echo of what had been touched in the Crystal Chamber.

"Retreat-to-the-womb, I'd call it, if I had to call it something," Father Peter said, sitting down again. "The two things have something in common, and I think it's centered near the market."

"West of the cobbler's shop," Marguerida said. "And someone has to go and find it. That's really all this meeting is about, isn't it, Lord Hastur? Raquel has to go, to track it to its source; and yourself, to deal with it when you find it; and whomever else you choose to go with you."

"I won't go without *Domna* Marguerida," Raquel said. "Saving your presence, Lord Hastur, she's the only person here I can trust."

"Very well," Regis said. "I'll choose a few of the Guard—we don't want too large a force—Commissioner, can you lend a few of your men?"

"As few or as many as you like," Grey said. "But I'm going, too."

"Commissioner, I hardly think—"

"I have a right to go," Grey insisted. "One of my people was attacked; I have the right to avenge him."

"Old Darkover hand," Donald murmured behind his hand to Father Peter.

"Very well," Regis said again. "I want to do this at night, when the markets are closed and the square is empty. We'll meet there at midnight, will that suit everyone? Thank you, then; I'll see you tonight."

"And are you going to let your lady go on this mission, and not insist on going with her?" Father Peter asked as he and Donald made their way out of the Castle.

"Of course I'm going," Donald said calmly. "*Domna* Marguerida knows it and Lord Regis probably knows it, too; I saw no point in prolonging the discussion by mentioning it."

Father Peter chuckled. "Sam Gamgee," he said. Still talking, they went out the great door and down the ramp into the city.

Liriel, rising a little later each night, was high overhead when they met in the square. They were ten all told, booted and trousered and wrapped in short bulky cloaks and muffling hoods. The Regent and the Commissioner each thought the other had brought more troops than he had, so that they were deep into the streets behind the cobbler's shop before anyone had a chance to notice either Donald or Father Peter. The priest kept his face well back in his hood. Donald had a leather bag slung over his shoulder.

The night was bitter with the cold of a Darkovan spring, but the close-set houses cut the wind and made it warmer in the narrow alleys. Raquel walked slowly down the alley to a wider cross-street where a whitewashed wall shone in the moonlight, frost glittering on the nails that fastened a dozen planks across the heavy door.

"Can we get in without making a racket?" Grey murmured. But Raquel led the way around the house into another alley, to another door criss-crossed with planks, and when she nudged the door with the toe of her boot it swung silently open inside the barricade. One by one, cautiously stepping over the planks, they filed into the house of Bran mac Adhil.

Inside, it was at least ten degrees warmer; the house had been securely built. The door had let them into the Great Hall where once the merchant Bran had kept a princely state in his high seat. The tapestries were torn from the plastered walls, the high windows shattered, the fires in the fireplaces long burnt out. "And from here, I'm not entirely sure," Raquel said. "The stink is all around us. Does anyone have any preferences?"

A warm draft was coming down the main staircase, so they went that way. Donald lengthened his stride and came up behind Marguerida's elbow. When had she changed back into her red Keeper's robe? The light swirled around her face like a fine veil. It was warmer here, but not that warm. Donald checked that he still had his bag, and drew his plaid closer around his shoulders.

The torches in the hands of Grey and his men were smoking and going out, and presently they let them fall to the ground and crushed them underfoot. The walls were giving them enough light to see by, the deep red light of the hidden sun. In the shadows before their feet something moved, a figure like a little man with the face of a mouse; it ran ahead of them, tittering, for several yards before ducking aside and vanishing into the dimness.

One of Regis's men half-drew his sword, and put it back again. Raquel looked at him with disdain, and took her bow from her back and an arrow from her quiver. She did not put the nock to the string, not yet, but her eyes kept glancing about for targets. Regis kept his sword in its sheath; his skin glowed faintly from the Hastur blood within. His feet left prints that shone for a while after he had gone past.

Grey's men carried their crossbows casually under their arms. Their mailshirts chimed faintly as they walked. Grey's steel breastplate shone like

copper in the rich light, but the torn place over his heart showed blackened edges. The tears trickling from his eyes had worn long furrows in his cheeks, and the sword in his hand flickered like flame along its edges. Donald glanced again at Marguerida, still safe at his side; strands of her coppery hair drifted through the light like plant tendrils through water. His bag was still strapped over his shoulder, snug under his arm, and he could feel the comforting hard lumpy shape inside.

There was a light up ahead, a silvery light that stood out against the general red dimness of the place, and a dark figure stood outlined against it. A manlike shape, bigger than the little mouse-man, and it had an arm raised in greeting. "Welcome," it called, the high fluting voice of a child.

Grey took a step ahead of the party, toward the figure. "Who are you?"

"Me," the child said. The light was brighter now, almost revealing the child's face. A shaft of it seemed to come through the throat, as if it were hollow. His brown hair fell in tangles to his shoulders, and he had a long face like a fox. "You don't know me."

"Dammit, I do know you!" Grey cried. "You're dead!"

"In my Mother's house we're all alive," the child sang. "Come and live in Mother's house where we're all alive, all dead. It's all the same."

But Grey bellowed, "NO," and fell back a pace as the shaft from the child's throat touched the fissure in his armor. He recovered and raised his sword, but the child had vanished.

The attack came without warning, a long streak of darkness that swung like a whip. It knocked Grey off his feet, casting him back against his own men and the Darkovan guards. Donald scrambled to put Marguerida behind him, and from her other side Raquel was doing the same, but she put them both impatiently aside and raised her hands. From the light in her hair she drew a handful of fire, shaped it like a snowball, and threw it into the heart of the darkness. The tentacle drew back. Grey and the others scrambled to their feet.

Both crossbows shot at once, but the quarrels found no target. Marguerida shaped another fireball and threw it.

It was answered by a shower of darts, dark and cold as ice. One of the Terrans was down. Lord Regis was on one knee, raising over the fallen man like a fold of his cloak a shield of light that seemed to repel everything that hit it. One of the second volley of darts got Donald in the shoulder, and his arm and his side went cold and numb. He couldn't tell any longer if he had the bag on his shoulder, and he tried to twist his head round to look for the strap. His feet were uncertain under him.

A light was growing behind him, a golden light like the sun of Earth, and Father Peter stepped forward. Naked, or nearly naked, his skin glowed like Regis's, but he had no shield. The cold darts struck him, and struck again, but through every rent in the bright skin, as through rents in the clouds, poured streams of sunlight that seemed to melt the rest of the darts in mid-flight. Deep in the darkness something groaned. Donald was beginning to feel his arm again, and he fumbled with the fastenings of his bag.

Regis, Grey, and Father Peter stood together: shield and sword, and armor and sword, and those glowing wounds that admitted no martial metaphor. Marguerida stood behind them, her fingers twisting light into a net of many strands where little sparks pulsed like stars.

Another tentacle swept out, low over the ground, and caught Grey's feet out from under him and began to drag him away. Gently Marguerida cast her net, and it hovered over the cursing man as he bumped along the ground, hacking with his sword at a tentacle that seemed not to feel it. But Raquel cried, "You bitch, let go of him!" and shot her arrow into the shadows.

The net of light was growing overhead, and shapes were becoming visible. She lay upon her couch of darkness, arms curved round the children huddled around her. Some of them were still alive, and some shone with the silvery light of death, but they slept together in her arms. Grey lay unmoving at her feet. Raquel drew her belt knife and stepped over the fallen guardsman,

throat-cutting plain on her face. And Donald finally had his bag open and drew out what had been inside.

It was a shape that made no sense, a thing with neither light nor color. The eye could hardly see his hand as he held it, let alone the thing itself, and the Goddess raised one arm to shield her eyes. One of the children looked up and said, "My God! *Mama!*" and ran to clasp his arms round Raquel's waist. And Donald raised the thing he held, and turned it on.

Most of the light was gone. A shaft of violet moonlight poured through a crack in the window screen, and Donald stepped carefully around the couch and pulled the screen open all the way. Then he laid the damper on the windowsill, safely out of reach.

The woman lay on the couch, her arms over her face, the children beginning to stir around her. A vast shape, white-haired, white-eyed, doubly blind now with her *laran* disabled by the damper. She moaned and wailed, the incoherent sounds of one who has never heard human speech, and the children wept and began to pull away. (The silvery dead had vanished, with no one to make them real in their minds. "Anndra," Grey said.

The child started and looked up. "Oh. Hi, Dad. How'd you get here?" he said in good colloquial Terran and with seeming nonchalance. "Cold, isn't it?"

"Come on." He laid his hand on the boy's shoulder and caught Raquel's eye. "Come on," he repeated. "We have *got* to talk."

"Who was she?" Donald asked. "Did she live here?"

"Oh, I think so," Marguerida said. "Hidden away, so the neighbors wouldn't talk. Bran died of plague and the servants ran off and left her—if they knew she was here at all. She reached out with her Gift for people to tend her and feed her—and to love."

"Most of these kids are boys," Donald remarked. "Terran anthropologists have known for centuries that the most fervent worshipers of the Mother

Goddess are men—in cultures where boys are taken young from their mothers to learn men's work."

One of the Terran guards had retreated down the corridor and brought back the flashlights, which luckily still worked. He returned Grey's to him without quite meeting his chief's eyes. Lord Regis, one hand to his head as if it ached, sent his two men looking for materials to make a litter, "so we can get her into isolation as quickly as possible and take this misbegotten damper off us."

"Clever Donald," Marguerida said. "to think of a damper." She sat on the end of the couch, stroking the wretched woman's matted hair, giving her the only kind of communication she could feel. Father Peter had taken away the bewildered children and was sitting with them in a corner, talking about Mary.

Donald smiled, and shrugged. "Those dampers were the second piece of Darkovan technology I'd ever seen," he said. "Once I found out what they did and what they were for, it seemed logical to pick one up. Put us all on an equal footing." He looked down at the pallid, blind face. "So to speak. Is there anything that can be done for her?"

"Maybe. Those up at the Comyn Castle may be able to reach her mind. Your Terran doctors might give her her sight and hearing back, make her less dependent on her *laran*."

"The Alton Gift: the forced rapport," Regis said. "I wonder where she got it."

"Where did the Altons get it in the beginning?" Marguerida said. "I'm not going to worry about it. Look there."

Commissioner Grey and Raquel n'ha Mhari stood halfway down the corridor, leaning against opposite walls, speaking by fits and starts. Between them Anndra sat on the floor; he had found a bent spoon and was blasting imaginary monsters with it. Even Regis could not make out what they were saying, which was just as well.

"Grey is one of those old-fashioned Terrans," Donald remarked, "who wants to support and protect the people he loves. This is not the same as the other old-fashioned type who wants to isolate the people he loves for his exclusive possession. Trouble is, from where she stands they look like the same thing. They need to meet each other halfway."

"That's what I was thinking." Marguerida said. "Lord Regis, how would you like to give this building to the Thendara Guild House, for them to lease to Father Peter? A 'halfway house,' he called it. I am thinking of a house where Renunciates could live, when they chose, under a slightly modified Rule, in the company of other people such as their sons and—others of their choice."

"I'm sure I've no objection," Regis said. He looked down the hall where Grey and Raquel still stood backed up against their walls, grim-faced, but at least speaking to each other. "Who's feeling very brave and wants to volunteer to tell them?"

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THE WIND MAN

" 'Didn't we just leave this party?' " Donald murmured, as the little snowflakes drifted into his face and powdered his beard.

His classical reference was lost on Marguerida, but she agreed that things were being awkwardly cyclical of late. The Terran spaceman and the Keeper-in-training had met like this, months back, on an inaccessible mountain between two wrecked aircraft. Here they were again, high in the Hellers' meager summertime, with a plane that no amount of plastic surgery could reclaim. Donald had been piloting this time, not Marguerida, but a gust of wind had caught them aslant, and here they were.

"Fortunately, there does seem to be a way down," Donald said.

Marguerida was not so sure. That streak of white below them was probably a road, cut into the mountain's side and now filmed over with the light snow. The problem was in getting down to it, twenty fathoms or so down the steep rock. "Donald, I do not think I can climb down that."

"You won't have to." His voice came muffled from the inside of the plane; he was filling backpacks. This time, at least, they had adequate provisions: lightweight Terran shelter bubble, thin insulating blankets, and freeze-dried food, enough for weeks. Marguerida would have been happier with thick Darkovan wool and canvas, but they could not have carried it all on their backs.

"You won't have to climb it," Donald repeated as he emerged from the plane. "I'll lower you on a rope, and myself, too. We've got plenty of rope. Here, *domna*, put this around your waist. That's the vaccine." He handed her a small waist-pack colored virulent orange, and helped her to fasten it at the

small of her back. She settled the little cluster of vials against her belly, slight and precious as an unborn babe. Without the vaccine to deliver, they could have camped in near-comfort in the wrecked plane till Thendara Base could spare a flyer to pick them up—but without the vaccine to deliver, they wouldn't have been out there at all.

The morning sun had just cleared the eastern peaks and was creeping down the slopes, and the fierce morning wind had died almost to a murmur. When Donald had lowered Marguerida to the road, and their laden backpacks after her, he doubled the rope around the plane's landing gear and made his own way down the mountain's face. While he did this, Marguerida explored the road a hundred paces in each direction. When he reached the bottom, she was waiting for him with a grave face. "There's something you must see."

She took him to a little gully that ran down out of the rocks above. Coarse rock and gravel provided drainage where the roadbed crossed it, and in the little hollow upstream of the road lay a heap of weather-bleached bones. They had been scattered by water or scavengers, washed together again by water; most of the skeleton seemed to be still there. Donald retrieved the lower jaw and fitted it gently to the skull. The nameless man had fallen to his death long ago: the crown of his head had cracked and splintered away.

"A dozen paces along," Marguerida said, "there's a flat place where we can lay the bones and build a cairn."

"We? You and me?"

"We're here: the task is for us. So may some kind friend do as much for us when our time comes. Come *on*, Donald." She gathered an armload of the long leg bones and set off along the road.

Donald sighed, but he had sworn obedience. He picked up the skull and followed. "I *was* hoping to have reached the village by sundown," he muttered. "No offense, Yorick, old chap."

They laid out the bones in some approximation of a human shape, and Marguerida laid a Terran chocolate bar among the heaped finger bones. They laid stones over the place till the pile rose to shoulder height and was plainly a cairn made by men for their fellow man, not a chance-fallen heap of stones. And Donald took from a pocket of his trews a small Terran blaster, set it to its lowest notch, and carved a cross in the rock wall behind the cairn.

"There's no religious significance," he explained as he turned back to find Marguerida staring at him. "It's a conventional mark, a way of saying, 'Here lies...whoever.' "

"I don't give a straw for your religious significance," Marguerida said. "That is an energy weapon, forbidden by the Compact."

"I know it is," Donald said, and made it disappear. "But in a year when most of Darkover's values have fallen about its ears, when there are brigands and masterless men prowling between here and the Kadarin, I want an ace in the hole."

"An ace—Never mind, I don't want to know. Very well." She picked up her pack. (It was bulky but light: he must have taken the heavy stuff himself and given her the freeze-dried food and the latrine paper. "Which way do we go from here?"

"Let's see." From a jacket pocket he pulled a folded sheet of thin plastic, and shook it out flat. It was printed with aerial photographs, tessellated together to make a rough map of the mountains.

"That way is south—this way is north—and we were flying that way." His finger traced along a winding mountain pass. "We're somewhere along here—see? there's the road. If we follow it north and northeast, we'll reach MacKenna's Halt in—" he marked off rough distances with his thumb, "—eight or nine hours, if nothing gets in our way. Shall we go?"

Marguerida was still looking at the map. The machines that had taken the photographs had also done radar scans. Marguerida was unclear about just

what radar meant, but the analogy about shouting down the valley and waiting for the echoes made sense. So the photos were overlaid with red contour lines, whose use was also still fairly unclear to her, but that place where six or seven lines ran together must represent the steep cliff above their heads. "What's this?"

"What's what?" He looked where she was pointing. "That thing? A building, I'd say, or a cluster of buildings." He looked up. "Nothing to be seen from here. It could be centuries old and ruined. Shall we go?" he repeated.

"We'd better have some water for the march. We can carry the bucket till it melts." Marguerida dug the collapsible bucket from her pack and looked around for snow.

In spite of the old saw, "as cheap as snow in the Hells," there was not much to be found. It was summer, after all, and the wind had blown away every flake it could reach. She found a drift between two rocks, crusty from freezing each night and thawing by day, but it was red with mountain algae and would make them sick. Unless Donald could contrive to boil it.

"There's some clean ice over here," a voice said, and Marguerida almost dropped the bucket. There was a young girl standing on an outcrop of rock, a girl of maybe twelve or fourteen years, wearing a shabby jacket and trows and boots that had been good several years ago. Her hood was thrown back to expose short-cropped red hair that glinted in the morning sun. Something inside Marguerida's head woke up and started ringing like a tiny bell.

"Thank you, I could use some," she said aloud, and followed the girl into a shadowed crevice where long icicles hung like a row of crystal teeth. They picked up stones and hammered at the ice till the bucket was full of shining fragments. They carried it between them back to the road.

There are people with red hair but no laran at all, Marguerida told herself. Terra has islandsful of them. Or, she could have never heard the call that went out to gather at Comyn Castle—or hearing, it, assumed it didn't mean her—or

else she didn't choose to come. Marguerida had had to shed a few layers of anti-Terran prejudice herself.

So she said only, "I am Marguerida Elhalyn, once Keeper of Alba Tower, and this is my paxman Donald. We came from Thendara, and we hope to make MacKenna's Halt by evening. Do you know the place?"

"Down the road, yes, about a day's journey. I know it. My name is Shaya. I was traveling, too, but I lost my companions and—" she smiled ruefully —"my bearings, too. I am *supposed* to go to Armida, but I'm not sure where it is any more."

"West of here," Donald said. "If you come with us to MacKenna, we can set you on your road from there."

"I was hoping you'd say that," the girl said, and grinned. "What takes you to MacKenna? It's a tiny little place, no more than an inn and a few houses."

"There's plague abroad," Marguerida said. "It hit the valleys last year and we thought it had gone, but now it's come back and running through the mountains. We've got medicine for it, and we need to get it to MacKenna's folk, not only for their own safety but for those who pass through."

"Plague." The girl's green eyes were shadowed. "I've been out of touch longer than I thought. Has it reached Armida?"

"Last year, I believe," Donald said. "I'm sorry, I don't know what kind of losses they had. Communications have not been good lately."

"Well," Shaya said. "I won't find out any sooner by fretting about it. If you'll take me with you, I'll do my best to be useful. Do you have anything to eat, or should I keep my eye out for rabbithorns?"

"We have plenty of food," Marguerida said. "Donald, do you have the breakfast bars? No, here they are." She shared out three and shouldered her pack. Shaya took the water bucket in her free hand and tore the wrapper from

her breakfast bar with her teeth. "Chocolate!" she exclaimed gleefully. "I haven't seen chocolate in I can't remember *how* long." Chewing briskly, she set off down the road.

They walked at a steady pace, through patches of blistering sunlight and frosty shadow, along a tolerably smooth roadbed. Only once did they have to stop and clear fallen rocks and rubble.

The girl Shaya led the way, unaware perhaps of how her companions watched her. Her name meant "grace," Donald recalled, but it was a common nickname for girl-children before they grew up. Donald had had an Aunt Grace at home, a tall old lady with iron-grey hair and an eye that could spot a little boy's unwashed neck through two shirts and a windbreaker. So he was ready to treat this confident mountain woman with respect.

And after all, Marguerida thought, she may not have reached the age of puberty and threshold sickness yet—though she's certainly tall enough. The important thing is not to press her or frighten her; by the time we've dealt with things at MacKenna, I may know her well enough to know how to deal with her.

The air was dry, and they took pieces of ice from the bucket to melt slowly in their mouths. The wind sang softly in their ears, a thin mountain summer song, full of sneers and sarcasm but not much serious threat. *Just wait till I grow up*, it said, *just you wait till I'm a big wind, I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down.*

"Hold," said Shaya suddenly, and stopped. The path ahead was growing narrower as it ran on toward a hairpin turn a bowshot away. It might have been a trick of perspective, as if the gods before the gods, the ones who had made the mountains, had wanted to make the road look longer than it was.

"I'm afraid we may have had a rockfall since I was here last," Shaya said. The cool, measured voice made her sound older than her years. "If you'll get out your rope, Donald, I'll investigate." She tied one end of the rope around her waist, and Donald belayed it around a spur of rock.

Shaya picked her way along the narrowing track, testing each step before putting her weight on it. By the time she reached the turn, she was walking on a ledge no more than a span wide and keeping her balance by gripping the rock wall with her hands.

"Donald, stop her," Marguerida said softly. "We can't let a child take such risks." And Shaya looked no more than a child out at the end of the rope, but maybe it was the perspective. She shifted her grip and slipped round the turn. In a moment she was out of sight.

Donald and Marguerida looked at each other. "I can't pull her back now," he said. "She'd fall."

"May I have a little more slack, please?" Shaya called. Donald paid out a few more meters and snubbed the line around the rock again. Slowly they saw the slack taken up. Then it loosened again, and in another minute or two Shaya reappeared, inching her way back.

"There's not much of the road left," she said, "but there is a foothold all the way round. Then it widens out again. I think we can get across, but I'll have to do something different with the rope. Here, double it—and give me the two ends," and in a moment she was out around the turn again.

Donald put the single loop of rope around his rock, and Shaya from her end drew it snug, running breast high around the turn and out of sight. "Will you go next or shall I?" Marguerida asked.

Donald hesitated for a moment, as if trying to decide whether it would be less dangerous for Marguerida to go second or third. Not coming up with any answer, he shrugged. "Alphabetical order," he said, and slipped in between the rock-face and the rope. His feet turned sideways, his body close against the wall: like a bas-relief or an espaliered tree, he made his way around the turn and out of sight.

Then it was Marguerida's turn. She pressed forward along the wall, one foot shuffling ahead of the other, the rope tight under her armpits. As she

came round the turn the wind hit her in the face, dry and bitterly cold. It chuckled in her ears, *gotcha gotcha gotcha*. She set her teeth and kept moving. The rock was crumbling under her right foot. She angled her left ahead, her knee braced against the rock and her back against the rope, till she found solid footing again. The wind whined in her ears like whole generations of swamp gnats. It blew dust into her eyes and mouth. She closed them and shuffled on. *Gotcha gotcha gotcha. Gonna freeze your fingers off, drop you down the shaft and flatten you like a pancake—*

And a hand was gripping hers so hard the bones ached, Donald pulling her onto the road and out of the wind. He half led, half dragged her to shelter, an inward curve of the road with a gravel shoulder that gave them all room to sit. "The vaccine," she mumbled, and felt Donald unzip her waist pouch and finger through the vials.

"They're all right," he said.

"Aldones!" Marguerida said when she had her breath back. "What a malicious wind! Why didn't you warn me?"

"Sorry," Shaya said, coiling up the rope. "Around here they don't call the wind anything, lest it come."

"Oh," Marguerida said. "You mean this is the Wind Man's country?"

"So they say."

Donald looked from one to the other. "Who?"

"Is it safe to tell him?"

"Tell me what?"

Marguerida touched Donald's wrist, then Shaya's. "We all need a rest," she said, "and something to eat. Something hot would be good, if you think you

can boil water at this altitude, Donald. And we'll tell you. Because if we don't," she said to Shaya. "he'll *think* about it, and that will be just as bad."

Donald opened a package and added water to the chips and flakes that would turn into soup. When it was heating in its pressurized bubble over the pale glow of the little Terran campstove, Shaya began. "Once upon a time there was a wicked wizard."

"A *laranzu* from the Ages of Chaos," Marguerida translated.

"He was the brother of a king," Shaya went on, "and served him in the wars, making *clingfire* and poison dust, breathing fire and destruction wherever he went. He had a starstone that shone like the bitter heart of a glacier. He was proud of its power, and of its size," Shaya said dryly. "His royal brother was feared, and he was feared, from the Dry Towns to the sea. And then came Varzil the Good, and the king swore to the Compact."

Marguerida gave Donald a sharp look, and he turned away to shake the bubble of soup, where smaller bubbles were starting to rise.

"And when the wizard realized that his dominion was done and his skills forbidden, and that no one would fear him any more, he became angry; and he said, 'If I must lay down my power, none will ever pick it up again,' and he slew the king his brother and laid waste the country for a day's march all around, so that even now nothing but scabweed will grow there."

"Mostly because of erosion," Marguerida added. "The dust he used—no, I don't know what its 'half-life' was!—but it burned out long ago."

"Soup's done," Donald said. He took the bubble from the stove and carefully let the pressure equalize. When the bubble had deflated, the soup was cool enough to drink, and he poured it into cups.

"Then the wizard's own people rose against him, the *laranzu'in* in their Towers, and he cast many of them down, but even so they overcame him and drove him into the mountains."

"He overturned Alba Tower, so they say," Marguerida said. "That's how I come to know the tale."

"They drove him into the mountains," Shaya repeated. "and no one ever saw him again. But they hear him in the howling of the wind. It's said the wind blew his skin away flake by flake, and carved his bones into lace, till nothing was left but his starstone."

"And that's what you hear in the wind, that evil murmuring, that poisonous laugh: the Wind Man."

"Interesting," Donald said, collecting the empty cups and rinsing them out with a little water. "Have you ever heard him yourself?"

Both women stared at him. "Just now," Marguerida said. "Rounding that outcrop," Shaya said. "You didn't hear anything?" Marguerida demanded.

"Only the wind," Donald said. "A nasty sound, I'll grant you—it sounded like a leak in the hull—but quite inanimate. Of course, I haven't any *laran*."

"Neither have I," Shaya said firmly; and if neither Donald nor Marguerida quite believed this, they said nothing about it. "We had better get moving again."

It was not long after noon by Donald's watch. They walked in silence for a couple of hours, slowly climbing through thin air and drifting strands of mist to a smooth saddle where the road ran like a ribbon over the shoulder of the high-crowned peak. Donald struggled for air, and wished in vain for just a little *laran*, the kind that might have let him foresee this adventure and bring along some supplemental oxygen. Marguerida sucked in deep lungfuls of the diamond air, and seemed to find it adequate. Shaya strode along steadily, like one born to the place. Once she stopped long enough to refill the water bucket with clean snow. They passed over the saddle and descended for another hour, a steep descent that made their toes ache and their ears pop.

The grasses grew thick beside the road, and small indigo-colored flowers began to appear, and even insects and a few birds, taking hasty advantage of the short Darkovan summer. The landscape began to remind Donald of the Alps instead of the Himalayas, and the tops of the highest trees rose ever closer to their feet.

After another brief rest they descended into a gorge whose depth Donald's map could only guess at, because of the trees. The leafy branches closed in over the travelers' heads, slim paper-barked poles like birches, and the pungent resin trees. Donald shifted his pack on his shoulders and breathed in the richer air with gratitude. Marguerida was still silent, but Shaya had begun to sing, rhyming couplets in a minor key and in a dialect Donald couldn't quite follow: something about a lonely shepherd.

They found the bottom of the gorge in the shadow of the trees: three meters across and a hundred meters deep, and the bridge gone. Shaya flung the weighted end of Donald's rope around a branch and they swung across, one by one. After taking that exhilarating leap they were all merry, even Marguerida, who had been quiet and abstracted since mid-morning. The air was just cool enough to be pleasant, the sun warm enough to comfort their bones as they climbed out of the wooded gorge.

They had risen out of the trees, out of the bushes and flowers, out of the whine of the insects into the whine of the wind. The road was curving back and forth again in narrow switchbacks. Shaya broke off in the middle of her song, and stopped and listened.

"What is it?"

"I thought I heard something." She listened again. "I guess not." She stepped around a lichen-crusting spur of rock. They heard a gasp of suddenly taken breath, and a muffled grunt.

Donald put Marguerida firmly behind him, and peered round the curve. Two unpleasant-looking mountain men were holding Shaya against the rock wall, a woolen rag stuffed into her mouth.

The third man had a sword in his hand, flecked with rust around the hilts but very bright along the edges. He took a step toward Donald, his shiny sword point tracing little figures-of-eight in the air before him, grinning with a mouthful of dirty broken teeth. Donald sighed, and looked at the man with distaste, drew out his blaster, and fired. The brigand fell flaming into the abyss.

His companions retreated hastily, dragging Shaya with them. They vanished between two rocks, where the hooves of small chervines had worn a path into the shadows. There were sounds of scuffling, and a howl of pain. Shaya was putting up a good fight.

Donald was about to go after them when Marguerida caught his arm and pulled him back. "Wait," she said. "And watch out..."

"Ugly bitch," said one of the unseen men. "Take that cord and tie her hands."

There was a moment of silence. Then the sounds began. They were not the kind of sounds that normally come from the throats of grown men. A pair of banshees, put to torment in the fire, might have sounded like this. Marguerida stepped back against the wall, drawing Donald with her. She was paler than usual and looked ill. Donald, attending to her, missed the moment when the brigands came stumbling out of the shadows, their faces torn and bloody from their own nails. He never saw them step blindly off the road and into empty air. What Marguerida saw, she forbore to tell him.

She took a breath and let it out again, and called out, "Shaya, do you need us?"

"I'm all right," came the answer. "Be with you in a moment." She came down the path, unwinding a cord from her wrists. She flung it into the gulf. "Dirty *bresu'in* made me drop the bucket," she said. "Good, there's some left." She lifted the bucket and drank, then passed it to Marguerida and Donald.

Shaya looked at the sun, westering toward the peaks across a sea of air. "If we're to reach MacKenna by dark, we shall have to pick up our feet," she said. She took the bucket back and led the way down the road.

"What did she do to them?" Donald whispered.

"One learns a lot of strange things in the mountains," Marguerida said. "Perhaps she showed them something they didn't want to see."

They were climbing again; the road bore eastward. The falling sun was warm on their backs and tinted the rocks around them to the color of blood. And the wind began to pick up again.

It sang in Donald's ears, *Pressure dropping, hull leak, meteorite, bad gasket, losing air*. He drew deep breaths and looked sternly at the world around him, whole cubic kilometers of air, a natural storage tank. He had been trained to let his mind rule over his emotions, and for the most part he succeeded.

Little rabbits on the road, it said. *Little rabbits on the run. Run away, I'll let you run, and then I'll bring you back, and I'll—*

They were almost to the top of the ridge, and the wind's ugly whisper was at their backs. Marguerida ran nervous fingers over her waist pack. The vials were still there. It would be hard for the worst malice of a Wind Man to blow open the Terran zippers, and once they got over the ridge the wind ought to let up.

They stood at the summit for a moment to judge how much daylight was left, and how long a road. "I don't know if you can see that little spot down there," Shaya said. "I don't know if I can either, but it's there. We should get there in an hour, maybe an hour and a half, and," she held up two fingers to the horizon and squinted at the sun. "We've half an hour before the sun falls behind the mountains. There'll be enough twilight to get us there."

They stepped forward onto the descending road, and the wind came round and hit them like a bludgeon. They staggered forward, and Shaya fell to hands and knees. Marguerida clutched at her hand and pulled her to her feet, and stretched her other hand backward for Donald to catch. Hand in hand they stumbled down the road, keeping close to the rock wall on their right lest a sudden gust twist them off the road.

Welcome to my house, it muttered. It has a floor and no roof, and one wall, but you don't know where it is. Is it there? No, that's only me, and you're falling away, falling, falling.

It had begun to snow again, and the white flakes billowed around them till they could barely see each other, much less the road.

Down and around, the wind howled, down and around. You're walking right into my lap. Right into my mouth. I'll chew you up and spit you out.

Down and around. The wall was still at Marguerida's shoulder, but she could hardly feel it. She knew her hands were still tightly gripping Donald's and Shaya's, but she couldn't feel them at all. Yet it didn't feel like the numbness of cold. The shining white of the snow was shading, not into the rose of sunset, but into a luminous bluish-grey that seemed to radiate from all around and from very far away. Marguerida had walked out into the overworld without seeking it or knowing.

The wind had died away from her ears, but not the voice that muttered hate and greed, death and cruelty in a breathless stream like a poisoned river. Her Keeper's training let Marguerida follow the wicked voice upstream without listening to the obscenities it said.

There was a sharper light ahead, sharp and painful to the sense, and a human shape stood in it—two shapes?—no, only one. No, beside the human shape that drifted past, feet dragging like one who walks in fetters or against a gale, there was something else. It had been a man once, or manlike, but something had taken the image and a pair of shears and cut it into lace. Its flesh was tatters that fluttered in a wind of their own making; its bones were

perforated like the casts of sponges. Through the holes in its skull the light shone like bitter stars.

Marguerida looked at it with disdain. It could not touch her. Here in the overworld she wore not her ugly Terran jumpsuit but the red robe and veil of the Keeper's office, the garb that was hers by right. Centuries-old rituals and lessons, the dedication of her teachers who had trained her and were dead: these armored her. The shreds that had been hands reached toward her and drew back as if burnt by her fire.

But the other figure, the one that was still human—Marguerida saw her as if with the eyes of a god that looks out of the high places and sees all time and human history together. Past, present, and future wrapped together like a nut in the palm of the hand. Young girl, maiden grown, woman heavy with child, battered body with its last breath on its lips, all at once. She held out her hand. "Come, Shaya. We're getting out of here." As their hands met, they fell back as through a sieve and were back in their bodies with the wind howling about them, thick with snow, brilliant with a poisonous blue.

Marguerida drew in both her arms, tugging gently at the hands she could not see, till they met. She set Donald's hand in Shaya's and fumbled her way up his arm, like a lifeline, till she found his ear. "Donald. Give me your blaster."

He said something, she couldn't hear what, and with his free hand dug out the blaster. She felt it cold against her cheek, took it carefully in both hands and found its muzzle and its trigger. Donald's hand moved over hers and did something—opened the mysterious safety catch, she supposed, that Terran stories were always going on about. She moved a few steps forward, till Donald and Shaya were both safely behind her, and fired into the wind where the blue light was strongest.

All the colors of the spectrum erupted around her, spiraling outward like deadly rainbows. Everything was dancing in it, images of men and horses, chervines and trees and tall towers bright under the moons, all fading, fading. The wind was slackening, the great wheels of color slowing down.

Marguerida held the little blaster steady, trying not to wonder how much power it had in it, how many breaths of firing time before it was exhausted. She understood drained batteries; she'd often felt like that herself.

But the power held. The blue light died just as the blaster began to chirp and flash its "CELL LOW" panel.

The wind fell away so suddenly it was like going deaf. The sun was just vanishing behind the mountains, but the sky was still light. They were standing on uneven ground in the bottom of the crevasse; a few meters ahead of them, the rock walls were still glowing orange-red. Whatever had lain between them was atoms now.

They made their way back to the road. Donald found a single bone fragment among the gravel, and carefully ground it to powder under his heel.

"All those centuries," Shaya said.

"Just bad luck he fell into the crevasse," Donald said. "where the walls would protect his starstone from the elements."

"Bad luck, or bad purpose," Marguerida said. "Can't you see him, at the end of his life, creeping into that shelter so that the evil will he'd poured into his stone would outlive his body? Here's your ace-in-the-hole, Donald. I'm afraid I've drained it."

"And I've dropped the water bucket somewhere," Shaya said. "But look, that light down there is MacKenna. We can probably make it before dark."

They nearly did. Two little moons gave a pale illusion of light for the last mile of their march. Then the lamps shone through the inn's horn windowpanes, and the smell of nut-porridge leaked round the edges of the door.

"I won't be coming in, if you don't mind," Shaya said. "I know my road home now, and I'm ready to take it."

"Don't be silly; you can't go out in the dark," Donald protested.

"She isn't," Marguerida said. "The gods go with you, Shaya, and thank you."

"Thank *you*," Shaya said. "But—yes, I think my debt is paid. Good night."

And she was gone into the darkness, only a swirl of snowflakes where she had been. Donald opened his mouth to protest again, but Marguerida took his arm and led him inside the inn.

The people were gathered around the fire, telling stories, as they did every night of their lives. Hard to judge in the dim light, but only a few showed the bright eyes of fever. They had come in time.

"—So he took the child behind him on his horse and rode with her to Armida. But as he rode up to the great house, she slipped from the crupper and was gone. He searched in the darkness, but he never found her. So he went up to the house—"

Donald put his hand to his mouth. He had heard this kind of tale before, they told variants on every planet, but this time—

"And when he told the tale, the people wept and said—"

"She died long ago," Marguerida said in his ear. "She's been trying to get home ever since; but the unhallowed dead wander and can't find rest. We gave her burial, and she paid back the favor, and now she can go home. Not, of course, to Armida, but to her real home. Now that it's safe." She drew him closer to the fire, and smiled at the astonishment in his eyes. "Didn't you realize, when you touched her, that she wasn't *there*?"

"In the middle of a howling blizzard? Was I supposed to take her pulse?"

But the people in the inn had seen them now, and beckoned them in to places at the fire. Marguerida put on a smile and sat down next to the old man

with the copper armring. If she could talk the MacKenna into being vaccinated, the rest of the village would follow him without argument. The wind outside moaned softly, like an old scold grumbling herself to sleep.

"Priorities" answered a challenge on USENET: "Write a story that takes place within five minutes." It was posted on rec.arts.sf.composition in January 2005.

PRIORITIES

The hull was breached, the Ioroni somewhere on board, the klaxon sounding. "There are now five minutes till lifeboat separation. There are now four minutes and fifty seconds till lifeboat separation." Feet pounding in the corridors, noses counted in the airlock, and nobody could find Pyewacket.

I didn't even bother to meet the eye of someone who would have told me, "No." I turned around and ran.

She wasn't in the galley. She wasn't in the lounge. She might be in Hydroponics basking under a sun lamp. All the time my mind kept chanting, *This is what makes stupid movies stupid, that with certain alien death stalking the corridors, somebody runs off to find the cat.* She wasn't in Hydroponics, but a trail of wet pawprints led outboard and spinward. Now I could hear other feet pounding in the corridors, heavy feet in chitin plate. "There are now two minutes and thirty seconds till lifeboat separation." A grey shape just in view, calmly turning the corner. I ran, I bent, I snatched her out from under the chelicerae of a startled Ioron and backpedaled. *No one has ever seen them run. Maybe they can't run fast.*

But they ran like the wind. One of them came up even with me, ahead of me, raised a mallet claw to crush me: and another came up even faster and brushed its fellow aside with a careless gesture that sent it ringing like a gong against the bulkhead. The mechanism glued to its thorax sputtered. It moaned like a whale song, sputtered again, chirped. It cleared its throat, or whatever it used for a throat, and said, "You gave—" Sputter. "You willed to give—" Chirp. "You risked your life to save a cat. Good heavens. You might be human after all."

I backed up against the wall, slapped the comm-panel open. "Hold the last lifeboat. They're talking." I sagged against it, breathing, while Pyewacket purred and the Ioron raised one delicate feathery palp, cautiously, to rub her ears.