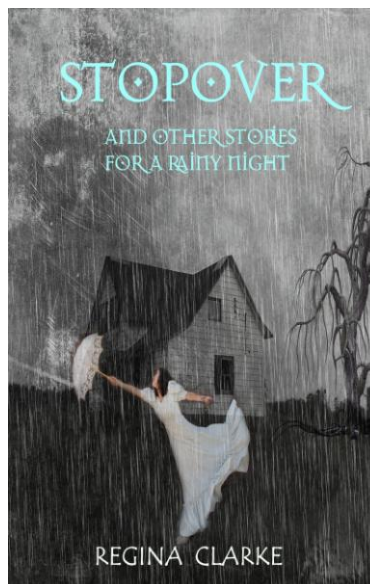
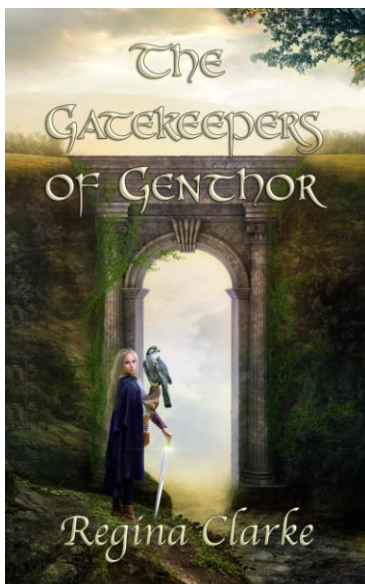
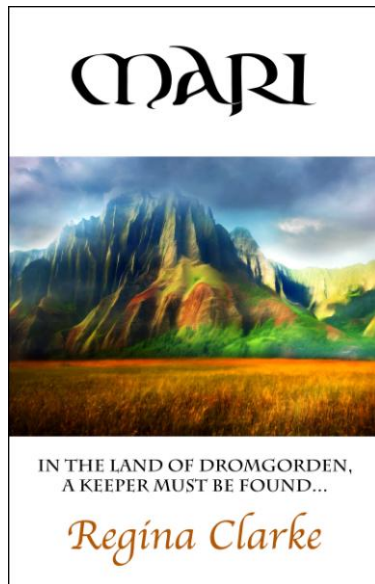


# FANTASY



MARI

# THE DESERT

## Chapter 1

THE GIRL WOKE at night in a fever. Marta was there, and in the candlelight she spoke in soothing tones and listened.

“Wide spaces of sand that change in the wind. I see marshes and a mist, and a darkening sky, and high ice cliffs. I’m alone. Everything is so quiet, and I call out a name. I’m looking for someone.”

“What name do you call?” old Marta asked her.

“I don’t know . . . I can’t remember!”

“The dreaming’s caught you, again, Mari. It happens. Don’t worry. They’ll take it away soon enough.” Marta sat down in the deep chair near the window and lifted a gold thread from her basket to weave into the cloth on her lap. The girl watched the flame of the candle bend in a sudden draft and fell asleep once more.

Outside the window the hills loomed high in the moonlight, their rolling slopes marked out in darker lines against the sky. The sight was plain enough to Marta, and as familiar as her own hands before her. She glanced over at Mari and again out into the night.

“Other ways. There are other ways, God willing.” She rolled the sleeve of the half-formed dress into her basket, blew out the candle, and left the room.

Clouds moved swiftly and the wind increased, a wailing sound climbing out of the desert. Mari tossed and turned in the bed, and sometimes spoke, but the words were obscure. Only when the thin green light of dawn lay on the horizon did her restlessness end, and she slept until the sun rose and a new day had begun.

In the afternoon light a crowd gathered outside to celebrate Mari’s thirteenth birthday. Conversations and laughter and the high-spirited cries of children playing at games rang through the air. Their small village lay on the edge of the desert, the houses built close to one another. No one noticed a familiar figure in the distance approaching through the scattered whirlwinds of sand.

Marta and Elene stood watching Mari dance with her friends.

“You’ve done well by her. No one can say you haven’t,” Elene said. “She’s happy here, you know.”

“Of course I do. But I also know it’s time for her to go back to Tamor for the ritual.”

“You are sure?”

“How else can I keep her safe?” Marta gave a sigh.

“The hareya will do that,” Elene agreed.

Sudden shouts alerted everyone. To their amazed delight, the Storyteller was coming toward them out of the desert. Her long leather cape with its spiral designs and her beaded headdress revealed her purpose.

“Look at that! You’d think she’d get tired of wandering about. She never gives up,” Elene said.

“It’s been a year,” Marta said. “She’s come from Tamor—she must have.”

“You love listening to the Storyteller as much as the children do. Do you just like the stories, or do you think the crazy one really knows things?”

“No! Of course not. She knows nothing. She comes to entertain. That’s all,” Marta said, as casually as she could manage, yet an apprehension filled her heart.

The Storyteller sat on the ground and beckoned everyone to do the same. Mari joined the listeners as they settled down. The woman looked at the girl now and then with interest, studying her.

“The songs of the riders rose over the city,” the Storyteller began. When she spoke, her voice was low-pitched, full of a curious vitality, and mesmerizing to her audience. “I listened to them all as they wove through the shattered glass and the screams.”

On hearing these words Marta gave a violent start, and looked over at Mari.

“No one was ready,” the Storyteller continued. “No one expected them. The day came and clouds rose swiftly, blotting out the sun. Everything was destroyed. Nothing was left. I came to warn you.”

“Warn us, old woman?” Elene called out. “Thank you so much. We can do without your prophecy. Last time you promised gardens would bloom here in Chadrons.” She bent down and picked up a handful of dirt from the ground, letting it fall in powdery dust from her hand. “This is what we got! It’s our Mari’s birthday party. Get on, get away from here. You know better!”

“Oh, no!” Mari cried. “We want more!” The children who were gathered there echoed her

words.

“I can tell you more,” the Storyteller said. “It is the truth I’m here to give. The city was a place they thought would last forever, but it broke under the weight of the riders.”

Marta uttered a sharp, involuntary cry.

“These riders—these Joraghi—have broken through when we all thought them forever gone. They are here again now. All our power cannot hold them back. They have a new leader, not one of them, but a stranger, it is said. He is like one possessed by demons, and untouchable.”

The Storyteller stopped. When she spoke to them again it was almost in a whisper. The crowd leaned forward to hear better.

“They are looking for something.”

Her listeners laughed, gave knowing glances to each other, but the crazy one was entertaining. Not many travelers came through Chadrons.

The sun was setting when the Storyteller turned again to the desert. It was Mari who ran after her, asking her name. Marta saw the woman stop and spit into the sand and give something to the girl, but the wind was high and she lost sight of the Storyteller in the swirling dust.

The three-pointed object glimmered in Mari’s hand when she showed it to Marta, who stepped near to see it better. The color deepened as the girl held it, as if from some inner fire, showing a dusky hue with splinters of light.

“What is this?” Mari asked.

“The light inside is from the crystals of rutile. I have no time to explain. Put it away!” Marta whispered to her.

“Why?”

“Just do it . . . please,” was all Marta said.

Elene came up close to Marta and they spoke together. The others had dispersed. After awhile Elene, too, went away.

That night, lying in her bed, Mari heard the soft knock on the outside door and Elene’s voice again, but the words were muffled when she strained to listen. Reaching under her pillow she drew out the offering from the Storyteller. She had wrapped it in a piece of soft cloth.

It was not very thick but almost as large as her own hand. In the moonlight through the open window the fragments inside it sparkled like fireflies, and the surface was smooth, the three facets polished with care. The heat that came from it puzzled her, yet in a strange way it gave her

comfort. No one she knew had anything like it, and she could hardly wait to show it to her friends in the morning, until she remembered Marta had told her not to.

“This isn’t a toy!” the woman had said, and Mari heard the fear in her voice, just for a moment. But that was impossible. Marta had no fear, not for anything.

Others came and their voices mingled with those of Elene and Marta. Their murmuring sing-song tones lulled her until she felt herself drifting into sleep.

*The dream came quickly, seeking her. It was the same landscape wrapped in winter. Before her lay canyons and rising mountains covered with ice.*

*The sky was filled with clouds, and the wind increased, sweeping past in cold, whistling currents. Ahead lay a path of sharp stones. There were dry grasses that seemed to have their own voice as the wind brushed through them.*

*“Mari!” The sound came down through the shadows and out onto the valley floor where she stood.*

*The fear grabbed her then, as it always did, and she wanted to cry out, but she held back.*

*“Mari!” It was more insistent this time and the whispering crowded in, filling the space around her. It was night suddenly and the moon rose above the farthest range, giving its cold light to peaks and to the edges of ravines. Fog wove through the lower land, but where she stood was clear.*

*It was then she heard the familiar, bitter laughter and reached out her hands in dismay, knowing what would come next. Down below even further, where the valley descended into a frozen plain, she saw flames appear and climb the ice. Great bursts of fire roared upwards, soaring against the black sky, and she felt their heat across the distance.*

*“This waits for you. Remember it!” As the voice spoke, figures appeared, silhouettes before the orange light, all of them moving toward her. She found her own voice this time, afraid and angry at once, and shouted down the valley, hearing the wild echo of her cry through the cliffs, and again she shouted, feeling a power rising within her.*

“Hush, Mari, hush.” Marta’s hand was cool on her forehead. As she opened her eyes she saw it was still night. Somewhere in her mind she heard the reverberation of a name, but it faded before she could grasp its meaning.

“It was the dream of the fires,” she began.

“I know. You called out, and I came.” The woman walked over to the table and once again lighted the candle.

“What did I say?”

The woman was silent and didn’t answer.

“What did I say, Marta!” she demanded. “I can’t remember!”

Marta pressed her hands against her head. After a moment she spoke, with reluctance. “It means nothing, sounds only.”

Mari waited.

“All right. Mat-mor. Or Il-mor. It was hard to tell. Forget it now. Here, drink this,” and Marta handed her a cup that was filled with her favorite tea, something with blackberries and honey and cinnamon, and something else Marta would never reveal that gave a sharp but pleasant edge to the drink.

Mari felt disappointment. Everything else was clear in her mind, like a vivid memory, except the name. She was sure that if she could remember it, she would understand all the rest. For now, as always, it was simply the old dream, terrifying but meaningless.

Marta studied her a little while, watching the girl’s serious face as she drank the tea and stared unseeing at the curtains blowing in the night wind of the desert. She went over and sat at the foot of the bed. Some other feeling had entered her heart, and she smoothed her hand over the quilt in repeated strokes, as if the motion would erase the worry that had grabbed at her.

“We must leave here soon,” she said quietly to the girl, not looking up. “There’s no other way, child.” She smiled. “I forgot. You’re not really a child after today, now.”

“Of course we’re leaving. We’re going to visit Tamor.”

“No. We have to cross through the desert to another place.” To her dismay, Marta could hear the tremor in her own voice.

“What do you mean? Why?”

“I can’t explain right now. You have to trust me.”

“But we’re coming back here after that!” Mari said with conviction.

“I don’t know.”

“Elene and the others, they came tonight. They made *you* afraid!” the girl said, with a perception that surprised Marta, for it was all the truer because the girl had said it aloud. “And the Storyteller, too,” Mari went on, “you believe her, what she said, her silly lies. Marta, we can’t

leave here. This is our home, where we've always been."

"Not always," was the answer.

When Marta was silent, Mari dared to go on, reminding her of the things that mattered, that were so important, after all, not to be ignored.

"Besides," she said, sure of the meaning of the words, "Liam is coming, and he's going with us to Tamor, to be with me for the hareya."

"NO!" The violence in Marta's voice startled her. "Forget Liam! Forget them all!"

The girl felt the tears well up and didn't trust herself to say more. None of it made sense.

"Sleep," Marta said, her tone softer. "I have a lot to do. We leave tomorrow." She leaned over Mari, tucking in the covers. "Sleep without dreams, now. The tea will help." Almost before she had left the room Mari felt herself sinking against her will into the darkness, and there were no dreams.

The next day everyone came to their house. The younger ones played, indifferent to the women who talked with Marta and took away the things she gave to them, nearly all that she and Mari owned. By dusk the rooms were empty and Marta stood at the front door, looking out toward the desert.

"It's past time," she said, and turned back into the house, muttering something inaudible. "Come now!" she called out, seeing that Mari had stayed in the same spot, watching her last friend wave to her across the road. "Hurry!" Marta remonstrated, her voice sharp.

When the girl entered the small front room her case was already set on the floor. Through the window the early evening light filtered in and cast a warm, fading glow over the wide boards. From where she was she could see her own room and the deep chair where Marta had sat at night and told her the stories so many times. Only, the chair was gone. Elene had it now. How could they leave this place? Why did they have to go?

Marta came out of the kitchen with some metal plates in her hand and a bag full of dry food. Over her shoulder she had thrown a shawl and the blanket from Mari's room. She handed the girl a wool jacket.

"The nights are cold out there," she said simply. "Ready?"

How could Mari say no? Here was everything she loved. But she had no choice. Marta would not let her stay there alone. Yet why weren't the others leaving, too?

No one came out to see them go. The village was silent. The two walked hand in hand along



the center street as night came and brought with it a cold wind. Stars filled the sky until the girl's eyes ached with looking at them. They walked until the moon had risen and its light had cut across to guide their way. For a long time neither spoke, and the route ahead of them went on like a ball of Marta's thread, unraveling. The stillness enveloped them like a cocoon.

"Here. Here'll do." Abruptly Marta stopped and turned off the road and led them rapidly into a small ravine. Mari could see the slopes of the hills in the silver light and helped Marta set up the camping place. They made a small fire to get warm and ate a cold supper. The heat went only a few yards beyond them before the desert cold settled in.

Marta drank from a flask she had brought with her, sometimes staring out, as if she were trying to see what lay past the firelight.

"All gone. They're all gone." She pulled at the frayed bag at her feet, trying to get at something there.

"Why'd the Storyteller give you anything, eh? Think of that. Why'd she pick you?" The words were almost sneered at her, yet Mari knew Marta, knew the love that bound them both, and paid no attention to the woman's tone. She understood its source.

"See here." She held a small painting in her hand near the fire, the figures in it dim and faded. "My three brothers. Happy boys, yes. They loved me."

"Where are they?" Mari asked her.

"I told you! Stupid girl! Gone. All gone. They wanted to feel like men, and so they put themselves in harm's way." She mumbled something Mari couldn't hear, while a light wind rose and waved over them in filaments of sound the way the desert held it, muffled and close.

The orange light of the fire flickered and shifted across the sand hills near her. Further lay the black sky and starlight.

"I don't like it this way," Mari began.

"Hah! Don't like it! You're a one, 'don't like it' . . . wouldn't we all share the thought, girl, if we could." Marta tossed her a blanket and rolled up in her own and said nothing more.

Mari waited until she was sure Marta was asleep, and moved nearer to her. In the distance, a faint animal cry, then nothing. Beside her lay the gift, its inner light glinting against the fire in the night. "Liam, where are you?" she whispered as she pulled the thin blanket close around her. After awhile, she slept.

*Flames covered the edge of the sky. Rain came down in sheets across the valley floor.*

*It was unnatural. She felt the power of the storm and heard the sound of her horse straining to keep up the pace. A thousand men and women rode with her in the darkness, and through the silent white flashes of lightning she saw the mountains ahead of them.*

*“HA-YI!” Through the chaos of ringing hooves and the shouts of the other riders she heard her brother’s voice and in a second he was beside her, racing with her, his black hair streaming down his back like a cloak and his face pale against it. Four men rode with him and kept close, all of them worn out with the fighting but holding on just the same. Each one had been given a reprieve by Liam and would live out their allegiance to him.*

*“Isira’s gone!” he called out, and a sudden dizziness clutched at her and she nearly fell. A hand reached out and someone was there side by side with her as they crossed the rutted surface of the ground and she could gather the reins in her own hands again. She could barely see the man who slowed and veered back to the ranks. Yet he had been there for her.*

*But there was more. The sky heaved with the thunder that rolled out of the red glare and the ground trembled as the clouds of fire broke before them. In the night there was only confusion and she watched in despair as most kept going forward. She kept goading her horse to get to the ones farthest away, when strong arms lifted her against her will onto another mount and they rode together to the high shoulder. It was too late.*

*She heard the screams as others saw with her, through the curtain of rain, the streaking flare rise high into the darkness, lighting the smoke-thickened sky, and fall to earth, into their midst, rising once more in a brilliant white light that blinded them and consumed them all into itself.*

Her screams woke the old woman, who put her arms around her and rocked her gently until she slept again. The night cries of unknown things made the woman tremble, but Mari’s dreams frightened her more.

Liam was already dead, along with the others. They had gone with the city, she was sure of that. The warning had come, just as the Storyteller had said, and no one had believed. But Mari saw them where she had never been, and had described the plains as they were.

After a time Marta laid the girl down gently and covered her with the blanket. She watched the dying fire. Above her the stars were clearer than she ever remembered seeing them, like the vivid crystal forms Liam had once shown them that he had created in a closed chamber and set

sparingly against a blue-black velvet casing. Here in the desert the stars were not artificial things at all. They ruled the heavens, Mari had told her, long ago, hearing it from her mother and believing. The stars are the voice of God, she had recited, and if she and Marta knew how to listen, they would hear the music, and find within it all they needed to know.

Marta closed her eyes. She felt the familiar dull ache and rested her head on her arms. Sleep overcame her and shut out the sounds and tremors that would sometimes send sand sifting downhill from dunes, or open unexpected tunnels into the earth.

**BANSHEE**

## Chapter 1: The Inn

Winter was upon the land and a wind swept in from the far north. Fields lay under snow, white and gold-tipped, fading into the distance. Trees leaned over the path in the darkening light. Shafts of wild grass appeared here and there in the cold landscape, making faint rustling sounds. The woman was almost hidden, the coat she wore covering her completely and a scarf wrapped around her throat. She burrowed her head down against the wind and walked beneath the trees. Dusk fell sharply, suddenly, and she was absorbed into the shadows ahead.

The lamp hanging from the sign outside the inn was a welcome thing, for she was colder than she had ever been, and so tired that she wondered that she had reached it at all. Pushing open the heavy oak door, she felt dizzy from the sudden heat and the commotion of many voices talking at once. No one took notice of her, but she saw the owner, he had to be the owner, his eyes busy watching everything, checking the workers and the customers and her, as well.

“We’re full up,” he said when she approached him and asked for a room. He studied her and relented. “It’s a hard night out there. If you aren’t particular, you can have a coat closet at the back. I can put in a cot. It’ll be warm enough.”

She thanked him and took out her purse and drew out a silver coin.

He fingered it with appreciation. “That’ll get you a meal tonight and breakfast tomorrow, plus the room. Sit anywhere. I’ll have my wife bring you a plate. Lamb’s all we have.”

She chose a table in the corner away from the door. She unwound her scarf and took off the outer coat, but kept her sweater on. The chill had penetrated to her bones, or so it felt. People were crushed together at the bar, exchanging vulgar jokes that brought much laughter.

“Don’t mind them. They own the land around here, but have the manners of pigs.” It was the wife. She set out silverware and a glass into which she poured dark ale.

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t hear what they’re saying.”

“Well, I can. Food’ll be ready in a minute. Where’re you coming from, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Near the sea cliffs of Cruachán.”

“Well, you can’t have walked from there to here.” The innkeeper’s wife leaned against the

table, as if she had nothing else to do. Her hair was a wild tangle of red hair, and the lines on her face spoke of age, though her body suggested a much younger woman. It was something the newcomer had noted often, the early resignation in the eyes of those who lived in the isolated regions, and the pallor of their skin.

“No. I got a ride most for most of it. I’m on my way to find . . . to see a friend who’s been taken ill.”

“Pity that, and in this cold season. I’m Henges. Named after the stone circle out there. Well, you can’t see them for the snow, and they’re more flat than upright, old as they are, and it’s a name that did me no favors as a child. I hated it. Now I like it. It’s history. What’s your name, if I can ask that as well?”

“Anann.”

“The mother goddess. A strong name, and not often used. Your own mother must have had great hopes for you at your birth.”

“She told me she just loved the sound of it.”

“Maybe so. Who am I to talk, with a name like my own? Well, let’s see about that meal.” She walked away toward the kitchen at the back of the inn. As she opened the door a riot of noise emerged along with the steam and the smell of charcoal until she closed it behind her.

Her curiosity was familiar. Anann had encountered it constantly on the road. It seemed a part of the custom of the people of the moors, as if they kept a running inventory of what they were seeing and hearing, though they seemed to subject little of their thought to scrutiny.

It had occurred to her early on that she should keep the purpose of her journey hidden, though even so, the truer she stayed to her original nature, the better. It was not wise to reveal everything, and far too dangerous. But some level of truth was essential, and giving her name and origin could be part of that. So be it.

She devoured the food when it arrived and drank deeply of the ale, ready for another.

“They say your name is Anann. I like it.” It was one of the men from the bar. His hair was a dark brown and longer than the custom. In the candlelight his eyes showed a vivid green. She saw the confidence of a man who had succeeded most of his life, who didn’t need to second-guess himself, much less look below the surface. He was certain she would respond to him—she could see that, too. She had to deflect him, but she wasn’t there to make enemies, not his kind.

“So does my husband,” she said, and smiled. “My mother called me Ananndais, and

fortunately for me he shortened it when we married.”

“Did he now? And where is this inventive man? How has he let you walk so far alone?”

“I am told he is near Scáth Coille.”

Without another word the man turned and went back to the bar. When his friends tried to learn what had transpired with the newcomer, and whether a conquest was made, he didn’t answer, but instead pounded his hand on the counter and ordered a whiskey.

It was always like that, Anann thought. That she had a husband would not have stopped anyone from making advances toward her. That she sought to reach the land of the Lianhan Sidhe was another story. If men entered there, they never returned. None of them wanted to deal with the unknown. None of them would want to touch her now. She had the freedom to go where she chose.

Was it a fool’s mission she was on? Perhaps. Only God willing, she would not play the fool.

Outside the window the snow was coming down heavily and swirling in the wind. For now she could rest. Too many nights had been spent in barns or on hard boards on the back of a farmer’s wagon.

“Now then, dearie, let me show you to your room and here’s another ale to help you sleep.”

Henges was clearing the table in haste and Anann noted two customers from the bar were standing at the front now, looking for a place to sit.

“Of course.”

They walked into a long hall that ran alongside the kitchen. At the end of it was a half-open door. A cot had been placed against the side wall. Above it was a row of empty hooks, and coats had been piled high on the floor in disarray.

“There you go. No one’ll need their coat tonight, for there isn’t a soul who wants to walk about in this storm. You just make yourself comfortable and you can lock the door from the inside with this handle, see? No reason to worry about anything but just in case someone loses their way and tries to get in by mistake.”

“Thank you,” Anann said, meaning it, aware what the opportunity of her presence in this place would mean for some of the men she had seen.

Henges set the mug of ale and a candle in its holder on the floor. “Mind you put that out before you fall off to sleep. No need to burn the place down.” With that, she was gone.

The cot took up most of the space. It had a mattress filled with straw and smelled like sheep,

but it was clean. A woolen blanket lay across the foot of the bed. The closet was at the back of the house and the room was cold. She would sleep in all her clothes. A split in the wood served as a window, and she could see the snow moving even faster as it fell. She lay down and pulled up the blanket and rested her head on her pack.

All during her long journey there had been a restlessness, an anxiety that clouded her focus and awareness. She had to restore the feeling she had had at the outset, that all would be well.

Anann sat up again, remembering the ale. She lifted the mug from the floor and drank the amber brew, slowly this time. Then she blew out the candle and lay back down again. Tonight she would not think or dream anything. Only sleep the sleep of the dead.

Too many dead. God willing her Morand was not one of them, she thought, and closed her eyes. God willing as well, she would find him. She knew her husband was near Scáth Coille. Her greatest fear was that he may already have entered the forest alone.

The scream woke her. It had been a woman's voice, she was sure of that, high-pitched as it was, and rising still. It stopped, cut off suddenly. Not a sound followed. No footsteps running, no one calling out. Only silence, as if the air itself were stilled.

Anann put on her shoes and got up and pushed back the handle of the door. The hall was dark but an ambient light came from somewhere. She turned her head and saw it was the lamp outside the inn, a faint beacon that penetrated into the empty bar and beyond. Walking in soft steps she passed rooms, stopping outside each one and listening. Nothing. She reached the main room in front and sat down at a table. Had it been an animal, after all? Had she dreamed the sound? No. It had been real. She had no doubt of that.

The next moment the piercing cry came again, from outside the inn, and she stood up, knocking over the chair, clutching her hand around the knife she kept hidden in her dress. The sound should have shattered the glass over the bar, but instead fell into pieces of itself, fading away into a low mutter.

Footsteps startled her. She hadn't sensed anyone near. Once again she wrapped her hand around the knife.

"It scares us all, not just you."

She saw a man before her in silhouette.

"The banshee. You've woken her. We want to know why." He moved around the counter



and leaned against it, just a few feet away. It was the owner of the inn. “My Henges, she said you would beckon the other side to visit us. And you have.”

“I’m a traveler,” Anann said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Maybe not, and then again, maybe my wife knows best. She has a sense of these things.”

“Your wife treated me with civility. She gave no sign of such thoughts.”

“She didn’t know until she heard the creature. The banshee is a messenger of death. You arrived, and it has come with you.”

“I’m just a traveler,” Anann repeated. She picked up the chair and set it right. “What makes you decide I’m the source of this creature? Your inn is full of people.”

“All known to us. None are strangers.”

What an auspicious beginning to her journey. She wanted anonymity, not to be singled out.

“Why have the others not come to join us, since they surely must have heard it?”

“They’re afraid.”

“And you are not?”

“My fate has been read by a seer. My life will be a long one. The banshee has no power over me.”

The room was not cold, for dying logs in the hearth still held the warmth of the fire that had been burning hours before. The man moved back behind the bar, leaning his forearms on the hard wood. Once again she could not see his features, only a black outline of them.

The wailing began softly, rising into one long note of sorrow, but this time it was all too human in its voice. A door opened and a deep sobbing followed. A moment later Henges had joined them. She looked only at her husband.

“It is Gareth.”

“It can’t be! He is young and strong as an ox.”

“Falech, he is gone, I tell you! Come, see for yourself.”

The owner went to his wife and the two of them entered into the room she had just left. Anann followed, though she stayed in the doorway, watching.

The room was hardly bigger than her own. A woman was kneeling by the bed, cradling the head of a man whose body was contorted, the limbs at odd angles to one another. Her crying was quieter now, more as if she were singing a lullaby. She stroked his blond hair and patted his face, as if she might wake him from a nightmare. But there was no question he was dead.

Falech left, so quickly Anann barely had time to step aside. She turned and went after him.

“There must have been something wrong with him.”

Falech lighted a candle behind the bar and he looked at her with mistrust.

“Gareth is my brother. There was nothing wrong with him. Except that you have come here, and just as Henges said, you have brought the Otherworld with you.”

“You know the banshee warns of death, but she is not the one who causes it!”

“You defend the presence of the creature? That seems to me as much proof as I could need. You’d be better to leave here.”

“Now?”

“Morning will do. Though none of us will get any sleep in what’s left of the night.”

In her room Annan sat on the edge of the cot. She lighted the candle again, using the flint she had brought with her. Falech was right, there would be no sleep now. The chill of the wind persisted and she was freezing. Why had she not condemned the banshee and kept her own counsel? Did she think she could persuade the others, or in some way hold off doom? The banshee chose its own time and place. No human could alter that.

The knock at the door was gentle. When she opened it, Henges was standing there.

“I saw the light. Falech tells me you are leaving. I agree with him, but I am sorry for it. We have no choice.”

“Sending me away will not protect you from death.”

Henges did not answer, but instead pointed to the candle on the floor. “Wait, how did you get it to light? What power is this?”

Annan showed her the flint and tip. “Nothing but this stone taken from the earth itself. I keep this with me, for the dark nights of my journey, when I have needed a fire.”

Henges was both curious and wary. “I am afraid of what your being here can mean. You are not like most women, who would be afraid to travel alone. Even men hesitate to go far.”

“As I have told another here already, I am looking for a friend, and my own safety is of far less a matter. But have no doubt, I am afraid. This is a strange land to have entered, and as alien to me as my northern home would be to you.”

“Yet here you have chosen to come. This is why Falech and I stay where we are. To go elsewhere is to invite trouble. Better to stay with what you know, with who you know. I wish my son had never—” Henges stopped. Her expression changed, a shadow crossing her face. Then

she shook her head and thrust a bottle into Anann's hands. "Here, I came to give you this. I made it myself. Have it now or take it with you. It'll keep you warm in either case." She left, closing the door behind her.

The bottle was a stump of a thing, old green glass with a piece of cloth as a seal. When she pulled out the cloth a sweet scent filled the air. Without hesitation Anann drank from it. If the innkeeper and his wife wanted to poison her, this would be an excellent way to do it, but she was sure they did not have such a plan. It was a honey wine, with something else in it that held a sudden heat and took away the cold. She sealed it with the cloth after a second draught.

A clattering noise came through the wall that separated her from the kitchen. Footsteps outside the door told her the other residents of the inn had begun their day. With a sigh Anann glanced around the tiny room. For all the commotion of the night, it had offered her a little respite, likely the last she would know for a long while.

"So be it," she whispered as she gathered up her pack, securing the bottle of wine inside.

# VOICES FROM THE OLD EARTH

## ENYA

We were together in the gardens of Lahore, walking along terraces where masses of red flowers bloomed against the white clay walls. The morning light was muted there, hidden by leaves of willow and eucalyptus. I saw a child run past in the distance, racing down a stone walk, disappearing around the corner of a long white shed that lay beneath the trees, and it made me think of being underwater, flickering shadow and sun.

“What is it that haunts you the most?” Hannah asked us.

A red flower has grown out of the rocks that lie just beyond my door here, just one alone. I hear our voices again, so vivid now.

Gideon was with us that day, with Janus, Hannah and me. We were going to head up toward Srinagar in the afternoon. There was something he had never forgotten, he said, that haunted him. We had come to a wide plaza set in a maze of narrow streets, where people were buying spices that lay spread out in a hundred colors on mats all around us, the mountains rising behind. He stood very still in the bright sunlight, looking at an old woman who was holding up red peppers, her smile embracing him. I thought he’d changed his mind, but he began in that stilted way he had, as if he were reciting something, not talking to us at all.

“I once watched a child fall into the water, and his father made no move to help. ‘He’ll float,’ the father said, ‘and then I’ll save him,’ for he lived, you see, by the laws of physics. And of course the child did float and his father pulled him out of the water and he was fine. Those were the father’s laws, and so they worked for him. For the child, that terribly rational perception wasn’t true, just like his mother’s useless panic, which worked for her. What was true for the child was that no one came right away. That is what he remembered, what became a law in his life.”

Hannah clapped her hands together.

“Exactly. Gideon has described it perfectly. There are laws that govern everything, but we make them. The only reality is our own perception!”

He turned toward Hannah with a blank face, so empty of expression, and it frightened me, the soft voice he used as he spoke.

“I was that child.”

Gideon. I can't remember your face, your features, clearly anymore, my friend. That is what haunts me now, this forgetting that I can't stop. This is why I must put it all down somehow, soon. Before it is too late.

In the desert morning I watch an eagle fly. It comes alone out of the mountains, gliding on the currents of air, hovering almost out of sight. Golden in the light. And then it drops, sweeping down in a long straight dive without warning, near enough to touch the earth. Just in time the wide wings spread and it soars upward into the sky again, high above me. The earth and sky and bird are one, their rhythm all one at once, so sure is the creature of its dance.

The wind is high today, filled with voices as it passes through the ravine. I thought after a while I would have enough time alone, that the craving for it would pass. Not yet. I can't explain this. Perhaps until I understand, I have to stay on. Perhaps there will be nothing to find if I leave. Here inside these adobe walls I begin to know more, and in time could learn how to match the brightness of the dance, as well. That is what I hope for.

Radha told me once, when we were in the hills of Linad near the sea of her childhood, that the dreamers were the ones among us who sought the true name of things—not the name we give to them, out of which we each make our local magic and offer, sometimes, revelations. "The true name of a thing," she said, as she pulled at plants in the ground, shoving them into her bag, "is revealed when we know its secret and act upon it—through it." She stopped, staring at me, her wild white-silver hair stretching around her in the wind. "This knowledge, from the naming, is power," she said to me, and looking into her black eyes I began to feel afraid. She smiled, and the fear vanished. "If one brings the naming closer, if there is no separation, one to the other, it is a good name. We choose which way we want it."

I didn't know what she meant. I was a child and she was my guardian. That was enough. I told her I would be careful in the choices I made. I had no idea how difficult that would be, or how absolute each outcome would be that followed.

She is gone, too; they are all gone. Do I remember them as they were? I wonder. If not, then what is it I have from them? I listened to the music again today, the old cylinders that Radha left behind. Most of them have dried out in the desert air, so I'm left with three I can count on. I went to the clearing where there is a circle of boulders and a cave set into a rise in the land. I walk to it each afternoon, step inside the circle of stones and feel a change, the same each time, a feeling that is strange, in a way, as if I had only the sense of a single moment, each one at once, so that I

always stay longer or for a shorter time than I think. The cave is worn at the edges with the floor inside beaten down until it has become hard. I keep thinking I must enter and explore it before the weather gets too cold.

Sometimes I stay there until dusk and sit on the day-warmed sand and watch the desert. If the twilight haze is heavier than usual, a blue and mauve indigo, the sand seems like a sheet of white silk in the distance. Less often, a trick of the light, the strewn rocks and brush merge before my eyes and I see the city again, as it once was, rising out of the darkening plain. Memory is a deceiver. Or is it something else? In that circle there seems no room for deception. Do I create the city, so that it is there, after all, because it is what I want to see?

I set up the cylinders on one of the boulders. It was early, too hot for me, but I needed to listen. "Each voice has a name, someone is singing, each one alone, and that is what you will find, the separate sounds, but in time you will see them together, at once," Radha said, as she gave the entire collection to me.

"What about you?" I asked her, "What will you do without these?"

"I have the sounds, now," she answered, tapping her head and her heart "and I can listen to them whenever I want. As it will be with you, when you're ready."

The cylinders were all in order, and meant to be known in sequence, but that's impossible now. There is only the third one, the fifth, and the last one, the seventh, which I've never opened. I took the third one today, and laid it down on the rock, one end facing west, as she had told me to do. "Make it a ritual," Radha said, "to help you listen. Otherwise, it is too easy to think of something else and miss a phrase. Even a single note can change all the rest, if it goes unnoticed."

I still don't know what she meant. The sounds are sweet or filled with passion or hardly felt, and sometimes seem to me without purpose, and there are a lot of notes that I miss. Yet I find if I let too much time pass, there is a restlessness, a yearning, even, to hear them again.

The harmonies move into the air one at a time and join at a point beyond me, invisible convergence, and what had been whole notes vanish, fused together into another, unfamiliar cadence. The voices come first, or seem to, and then I think they are instruments after all, for what voice could reach and move in swelling waves like the soaring wings of an eagle in the noon sun? Yet how quickly the notes fall back to me, whispering, sliding around and through the spaces between the random stones, but always circling back to me. When it is over, each time, I

feel a loss. Because I haven't listened well enough, Radha might tell me, if she were here.

At night the light is soft in my single room. The arch of the window looks out on the blackness that grows deeper beyond the reflection of the lamp. I hear the wind only, no creature calls. I use a feather I found on the ground as my pen, though there are other tools here. The slight scratching sound it makes on the paper soothes me, like hushing a child.

Tell what you know, Radha declared often. And I answered that I could only explain what I remembered. "No," she insisted, "Tell what you know."

I am not sure that the words I choose are the right ones, but they are the only ones I have.

When I resist my own voice, I go again to the clearing and open the third cylinder and I listen to the others and through their voices I see their worlds. Through them I begin to understand. Yes.

## ***The Third Cylinder***

### **SIMMA**

The city was silent. No wind, no sound, except her own steps. Find the missing ones. That was what she was there to do.

She walked through the streets, turning at random down one or the other. Between the high buildings everything was in shadow, when suddenly the way would open again and again into the massive plaza in the center, its thick uneven stones covering six hundred feet or more in a vast circle. Weeds grew through the spaces between, brown in the fierce sunlight. Five worn paths led at intervals into its center.

Halfway through the city she took off her boots and moved on more quickly. By late afternoon she had covered most of the assigned territory, using the accelerator only a few times, conserving its power source.

The changes would occur unpredictably, but she had been warned. It was as if the walls of the buildings were moving, some said, who had been there before her and returned, things in motion behind the dark glass of a thousand windows. Sudden images like ghosts would arise and fade of people hurrying through the streets and disappearing into thin air.



But some who had come to analyze it all had never returned. They were the ones she had volunteered to find, the anomaly she was sent there to fix. It was finally agreed. They had lost too many. It was worth the risk to send her there.

Words came to mind. Memories. Perhaps because everything was so silent around her in that place. Simma remembered the moors where she was born. The early November days, when it rained often and the ground was always damp, and she walked with her grandmother in the late afternoon across sparse hills of heather and bracken that stretched in all directions. Wide gray mists rolled in, hovering low. Nona would wear the faded blue sweater against the wishes of her only daughter and told stories to her grandchild, speaking in the way of the few who were left to remember what had once been, a lilting, hidden voice. Simma listened, and tried to understand, because she loved the old woman.

“What dreams are yours, child, when the light changes?” Nona would ask. “Quickly, now, choose one, before the night wind comes and shifts the ground before us.”

When the girl couldn’t think of anything to say, her grandmother would walk ahead faster, muttering angrily to herself. By the time Simma caught up with her again, the old one had forgotten it all, and started in another way, waving her arms wildly as she tried to explain.

“The ground we walk on is no more real than the time before—remember that! There are three worlds, little one, and this one we share together lives inside and beside the other two, at once. Find them, or else you will always . . .” That one she never finished either, forgetting again what it was she wanted to say. Simma could see her clearly still in the frayed sweater against the desolate land near the sea as the dusk entered in.

When night came over the city, she chose to sleep not in the central plaza where they had set her down, but along a narrow street close to it. The Council had recommended against that, but there was enough moonlight to see by. It reached into the streets, a moving arc leaving half in darkness and half in a cold metal white. Still no sound.

Was it the silence that frightened them, she wondered, the others, the Travelers who didn’t return, who didn’t make it home? The thought lingered with her as she lay down to sleep in a small alcove against one of the buildings.

It was then she saw the man through the reflection of a window at the corner. She was lying in shadow, and her clothes were dark. He couldn’t know she was watching. The light was full around him, more vivid than it had seemed before, until she realized it was because his clothes

gave off a metallic sheen. As he crossed over, nearer to the glass, she could see that his hair lay long on his shoulders, and that he carried a child in his arms. He moved rapidly down past her, on the other side, feet tapping against the stones.

Of course she followed him. He was far ahead of her, crossing through the squares of light and dark along the street. Surely the child would cry out, afraid and cold.

And then there was nothing.

She was at the edge of the plaza. All of it was bathed in moonlight, out to its borders, and yet she couldn't detect any movement anywhere. There must have been a side street, an alley unknown, unseen as she passed. Retracing her steps, she looked carefully and found no possible route. The buildings crowded in, windows dark, inviolate, one after the other, until she reached her own place again. She understood patience, and knew the Council had accepted her for the job in part because she did, and so it shouldn't have been hard to sleep. But that night she stayed awake.

River had told her not to go. "They aren't explaining everything to you. You know that."

She did. It wasn't a factor. The assignment mattered, but most of all she would be alone. How could she tell him it was what she wanted?

She knew how unfair that was. Yet she would not change anything, and neither would he, given the choice, she was certain. More than anyone else, River understood, and accepted how she was. Because of that, he deserved better from her.

Dawn rose over the city and she walked through it again more carefully in the light. In the middle of the plaza she shouted, hearing the echo move among the buildings on all sides, but when it ended the silence returned, seeming more complete than it had been before. Knowing better, she wondered if she had dreamed of the visitor. She waited until late afternoon. The ship would come, not allowing her another night there, but for a little time the city lay in the familiar stillness and she slowed her breathing to match it, to receive it.

"You want to believe in what we're doing, our work, Simma, and maybe you do believe, and then you drop the lot and let in the fog and the sound of the sea and the visions and the voices. I can't stand it some days, you know." So Conor had said. They had shared the same ambition along with, for a very short while, the same marriage.

That was before River.

Conor had known a part of her, too, and so understood he couldn't keep her, though he tried

hard enough, in his way. She couldn't breathe, with him, but there was no way to say that. She left him, in the end.

Conor was the first one to vanish from the city, the first of many. And now she had volunteered to find him and the others, certain that she could.

The signal came at dusk, a flare of orange light from the eastern horizon, and soon after, the ship arrived. No one got out; the Council was there to see that the search rules had been followed, nothing more. She and the Council members had never gotten along, Simma reflected, except for River, of course. Still, she was the only one who had offered to do what they wanted and so they needed her. Now here she was intact, visible, after an entire day and night on the deserted planet. They were pleased.

As she went to meet with them and reached the top of the ramp, hearing their voices from the inner corridor, she turned to look again at the city. The haze was thick in the dimming light, muted violet with pale pink and gray hovering there. The buildings rose in straight lines before her, disappearing above into the coming night. She saw the plaza, and beyond that, the street where the man and child had been. Then someone called to her from inside, and she had to turn away. The ship ascended soundlessly toward home.

Later that night they came from the city, she was certain, the images, sent to her while she lay with River. If she had taken him with her the next time, perhaps he would have lived. This thought held her, afterwards, more than almost anything else. Darkness filled the dream and in it she heard a sound like breaking glass, only it continued and she realized it was wind chimes, a high, abrupt music that seemed to come from somewhere nearby. Gradually there was a light, diffused and dim, but a light all the same. She couldn't locate its source. For one brief moment she thought she saw a place, an empty land under a threatening, clouded sky, but she wasn't sure. In the next moment she saw a sea of lights dancing in the deep darkness. Suddenly a wide white light filled her brain, with a warmth like an embrace, until it was all she could sense. She woke to hear River's soft, steady breathing beside her.

The next night the dream began the same way, first the darkness, and then the sound of the wind chimes. She woke remembering it, staring out at the moonlight that covered the valley below their house. River had gone with the rest of the Council to gather and decide whether to let her go back to the city, and so she was alone. She remembered the last part of the dream, like a current beneath the sea, only carrying her faster than that, shooting past an infinite distance, until

she walked on a planet of gray stones with a giant's step, as if she saw the stones through the wrong end of a telescope. And on it she found a fluid curtain that rose like the ocean before her, and within that she felt the voices of all the missing from the city, crowding together to reach her. It was dawn before she could fall asleep again.

None of the images made sense to her. She had never dreamed anything before. Still, she didn't tell River, when he returned. It was the first time she had kept something from him.

The Council had met twice in two days, and they had decided to let her continue the search.

"Why are you doing this, Simma?" River had asked her, while they stood waiting for the ship to be readied. She studied him, surprised, and uncomfortable.

"Do you doubt me?" she asked him, gently.

The look in his eyes puzzled her. It was too intense, overwhelming her, and right away it made inroads into the course she had chosen, pulling her back to him, and so she let the distance between them grow, inviting it in the last moments. But he had done nothing to deserve that. He was not like Conor.

"You won't answer," he said to her. "In everything else we've met as we are, except this. Why won't you tell me?"

She turned to leave finally, knowing she should help him, unable to begin.

How could she explain? Would he be able to see, as she saw? It was more than fear. His love, in the end, created more loss. Its power took away her own. And yet he was, Simma knew, the one least likely to want that, to ask for that. For River their passion for one another was a source, and she loved him for it. But it wasn't enough.

The silence of the city seemed greater the second time. In the plaza she lay her hands on the stones and their heat was strong, though the sunlight had faded hours before. The lines of the buildings drew angular shapes across the horizon, darkened into silhouettes, faded gray, some of them invisible.

The street was empty, the same one where she had stopped before. This night there was no moon. The blackness soothed her, the wind soft, and Simma lay down in the same place, knowing she should sleep, but waiting instead. The dark was almost impenetrable, only the glow of starlight, everything hidden.

She must have slept after all, for when the wind changed she opened her eyes. Its sound was a whistling, not shrill but deep, and then it shifted, so that she heard more levels of sound, and as

she listened they blended and flowed in and around each other, gathering. The force of it drove against the sides of the buildings, but there was nothing else, no debris or dust or stones lying scattered on the city streets. Her small corner was protected and she waited in the darkness, seeing little, but feeling the energy of the wind increase still more.

The movement caught her eye, a figure appearing at the closest corner, gone before she could get there. Nothing but an empty street and blank windows.

“What is it?” Simma whispered. “Tell me.” As if the stone itself could answer her.

The force of the wind shook the window she was leaning against. It became a cold wind suddenly, like the wind at night on the glaciers she and River had climbed one late summer in the north. He had fallen asleep immediately, wrapped in the warmth of his suit. But Simma wanted to feel it as it was, standing open to the sound and buffeting of the winds that crossed swiftly from the ridge beyond. She had been afraid of the dark heights, yet the excitement had run through her, and she had found in the solitude a beckoning, not complete, but as if some expectation had begun.

So it was in the city, too.

“Mine,” Simma said, sitting on the ground, her back against the building. “Mine!” she said again, while the sound of the wind grew louder and drowned her voice.

In the morning she awakened to the rising sun, feeling with surprise the stones of the plaza beneath her instead of the street. When had she walked there? Another dream lingered, fragments only, of spiraling points of light, a darkness filled with them, some like snowflakes, others multicolored, spinning closer and accelerating away. They looked like atoms, she might have told River, or the pure symbolic structures of elements. And gradually, appearing at an unnameable distance, came a single burning flame of light, a tiny cauldron of light in the dark energy of space.

She stood up and looked at the reflection of the early morning sun on the tips of the high towers that surrounded her. The air was gentle now, a soft, warm breeze. The buildings were white angles of light against the blue sky. She felt the absolute silence, saw the empty streets leading away from the plaza.

With a quick motion she disconnected the communications strip that tied her to the Council. It was a selfish gesture, but there was no choice, after all. They might come and try to find her, but she doubted it. She would have cried for River’s sake, if she could. Instead, Simma crossed

the plaza to the other side.

## BEORNAN

The turning works, a swift spinning to the left. Near him the rocks were wet from the morning rain. He held out his arms and raised them to the sunlight that filtered down through the hemlock and oaks that circled the glen. Such a little thing, wanting this, he thought.

“Condemned, Beornan. Not for you,” his father had said, over and over again. But here he was safe, far enough away that no one would hear him. He drew his hands to his sides and waited, listening. The wind brushed softly through the leaves, and behind him was the faint scurrying of small creatures. Water dripped intermittently into a worn place in the rock where a pool had formed. Gradually his breathing steadied and he felt the rhythms of the air and earth flow in, until the song burst out of his lips in one long pure note. He held it as long as he could and then changed the tone, deepening his voice and the vibration spun out in a circle around him, entering the damp wood and ground. His voice grew into the forest and penetrated beyond into the hills, and beyond them, into the town, where his fate was being chosen.

“You are my son,” his mother assured him, “and nothing you do will take away my love. Yet if this continues, the others will come and neither your father nor I can stop them. Nor would we try. Do you understand?”

He did. He had made them all afraid of him. Still he had chosen to continue. He was Beornan. Out of the name they had given him he created his songs.

This morning would be the last one in the glen. How many would obey the signal to find him, once the decision was made? Far away to the west beyond the trees lay the miles of fields.

I’m fifteen, he thought, and looked above at the sky that had grown gray-white, sign of an approaching storm. His feet were bare. His father had taken his shoes two days before. They had locked their door to keep him out.

He waited. The rain came but the sky cleared and darkened with nightfall. In the circle of pines he was protected. Moonlight showed above, a night beacon. No footsteps. He would have heard anyone approaching even from a great distance. Silver wheat bent in waves from the wind in the fields around him. Wearily he sat down, the bark of a tree rough against his back. It would have been better to leave before winter, but there had been no reason before.

“There were other ways,” he said aloud.

“Always.”

Beornan rolled to one side and in a twisting motion stood upright, his heart pounding, to face the speaker. Before him was nothing but a light mist rising from the ground. He moved slowly in the circle, his back to the center, but still there was no one to be seen.

“Listen to me!” The voice seemed to come from above him this time, and as he looked up a thin white piece of cloth fell into his hand. Touching it he felt a thrill run through him, for the threads of the cloth sang in his fingers, like the high sound of a flute in the distance. A sigh followed it and before he could move again a woman stood on the side where the pine trees were thickest, her face in shadow, yet her clothing shimmered in the darkness.

For a moment Beornan waited. He raised the remnant up toward her, resigned.

“You’ve found me. Very well. I am ready,” he said.

She moved into the light closer to him. Against his will Beornan waited for her to come close. Long white hair trailed down her back and covered her in silver like the fields.

“Listen to me. They will come here. You have to leave, quickly now. Take it.”

She pointed to the cloth in his hand, made of the same luminous material as her dress.

“You may find a use for it, where you’re going.”

“I don’t know where I’m going,” Beornan answered. He heard the clamor of metal from far away and the strange cry made by the ones in the village who had chosen to look for him. He turned back to her.

“Who are you?”

She was gone. The blood cries were closer. He jammed the cloth into his vest and ran east toward the plain his father had said was named the Horan.

## **JG’NAUT**

A gathering. High in the tower above the city, wind soundless beyond the glass. A spacious, darkened room. Those present in the room joined in perfect symmetry, as one mind, no papers to clutter the long, polished table. They had their own incantations, a language of spare and certain knowledge, born of numbers and agents of profit, both.

Fires burned in the desert, a thousand miles away. Another circle, shadows shifting in

silhouette against the black sky. A different language, born of ancient chants, seeking to keep hold of a breaking web. Stone cliffs flickered in the afterlight and beyond the dark line stood the shape of a bird, waiting.

Both images woke him out of a restless sleep, his body sweating in the cold winter dawn. He put out his hand to touch his wife's hair, and in the passing of the stroke remembered. Six months, and there were still times he forgot.

The dreams weren't like him, he thought, getting up and walking over to the window. The snowstorm that had begun the night before had intensified, already a foot deep. He'd work at home, call up any data he needed from the station, no reason to go out there.

In the mirror he saw the lines around his eyes, and graying hair. Some called it distinguished. Yeah. Roger Connay, true scientist. Purveyor of the double blind. Skilled researcher. Extremely good at—what had Henry said, introducing him at the lecture?—extremely good at defying nature's rules. Wouldn't that make a pleasant epitaph, he thought. Would that he could raise the dead.

There was coffee, but only stale dry milk. Adding water gave it a flavor like corn meal, but using it was easier than driving out on roads no one would have begun to plow yet. The station would be in great shape, though. They took good care of things out there. A steady supply of comfort and access for the best of the best. And remember, you're one of them, Roger boy, aren't you.

He dressed quickly in the cold and went to light the wood stove. Cynicism is a sign of the insecure, he thought. So what could he be afraid of? Easy answer. Death of a wife. A colleague's behavior. The rude clerk at the supermarket. Bereavement. Solitude. All of the above, in that order. Other things in-between.

He threw some birch logs on the fire, watching the flames fly up as the wood snapped, and the reflected light came back to him, reminding him of the windows and stone walls of his dreams. Or was it one dream, some kind of convergence, for he couldn't remember the faces, only the circles, muffled voices, things juxtaposed? He shook his head impatiently and sat down in the chair, facing the front of the house. Through the large, uncurtained glass he watched the eddies of snow in the wind that had swept up from the valley floor with an uncommon intensity for that time of year. It fits, he reminded himself, with every other event in the peculiar agenda of the station.



It was odd, really strange, this propensity on his part to even think about the anomalies, to care one way or the other. Sara's death had jarred something in him, broken down the objectivity he was so famous for. Yes, Connay, so famous that you've been quoted, in the not-so-distant past, as saying that true scientists cannot allow intrusions into research that impinge on its progress. And that includes anything scientists say it includes. Inalienable right to inquire—no, more than that. God-given right to define, and classify, and offer their truth to the people, a substantiated account of their powers. You never said “God-given,” Roger, now, did you—that was the reporter's interpretation. With the beauty of equations, of dissection, of blessed certainties, was the realization you didn't have to interpret anything at all. That was someone else's job. You abdicated that particular responsibility.

What had Sara said to him, two days before the accident? “You might convince each other you're neutral, darling, but not me. There's no way you guys are figuring things out without adding your own little stamp to it all. Look at Rick, working to prove our brains are just clever machines—no awe in the man, nothing even close to respect for the animals he tears apart or mutilates—he's a sadist in any other social sphere—science just gives him an excuse, a free ride. Or what about Henry, practically sitting inside that particle device of his, ready to place the foundation of life at our feet, wrapped in some fundamental unit, utterly willing to use logic to prove something he can't see or even be sure exists in the first place, but he'll scream bloody murder at anyone who mentions theology—tell me he isn't a frustrated—or is it surrogate?—priest?”

“Is that how you see me?” Roger had asked, feeling as if he wanted to yell and smile at the same time, as he usually did in their discussions. But he'd wondered. She'd never brought up things like that before.

“No. It's funny, you know. I see you as promising, like some kind of novitiate, looking for some Holy Grail, maybe—you have this innocence . . . it's nice,” she finished. He'd thanked her for assigning him the role of acolyte to Henry's priest, and she'd thrown his jacket at him and said she wanted a walk through the summer night and could they leave right away?

Roger finished his coffee and went over to the desk he'd set up in the living room. He stayed out of the bedroom as much as possible, was thinking seriously of putting a cot near the wood stove. It'd be a warmer place all round, after all. The desk was cluttered with the notes for his next paper, “Discussions on Post-Millennia: Problems in Mass Consciousness.” He should go

commercial with it, give it a new title, something like “The Twenty-First Century: Armageddon?” The hall would fill up, and he could use the additional money. Except, of course, Henry would never allow it. “You’re here, Rog, to insure that our experiments are properly recorded, to insure the media gets to hear only what we want them to, and to assist in any research, negotiation or presentation we have to submit to Washington. If you weren’t trained as a scientist I wouldn’t give you the time of day. Keep your opinions to yourself. Got it?”

Yes. Got it. The right report would get some increased funding for the station. It was a formality, in case some politician wanted “evidence.”

“Just explain to them the detriment to our research,” Henry had insisted, “if we were to broadcast our results too soon, but don’t make it sound complex. The public would panic, fail to understand the details, rush to conclusions that could be dangerous for everyone. We can’t have that.”

No, of course not. Give them lies, and make it pretty. This is what investment in anything is all about, isn’t it? That was their business, after all, getting people to invest in the research by telling them what they wanted to hear. That was their real business.

It had been a decade and more with a peculiar, feverish quality, Roger reflected. Not unlike the activities and viewpoints that dominated in the years after the first millennium, A.D., years that had spawned the eventual death’s head of the Crusades. Weren’t those a kind of delayed Armageddon, in fact? Perhaps it had to do with zeros, he considered, the absolute sound of three zeros—or . . . or what? The same frenzy to kill? Looks like it, every time he turned on the news. Maybe nothing really has ever changed, he thought.

But there it was. He was supposed to write only what should be dispensed on a need-to-know basis. Add a few remarks on the heightened public concern with prophecies of natural cataclysm and transformations that the new millennia could, unfortunately, witness if the global proliferation of weapons and fundamentalism is not stopped, the need to play into that a bit, in order to keep the questions at bay. Research has confirmed, he could say, that once the discovery of the true order of the universe is finally witnessed, just as we predict, just as our research continues to make possible, we can relax. No one will be able to touch us. All as tidy as a row of shells on a windowsill.

He would leave out the implications. They were only hints anyway, even for some of the researchers at the station. It wouldn’t do to inform the world that their research—or rather, the

work of their senior colleague Dr. Evan Jurneau— seemed to indicate that nothing existed at all, except in our minds, that the exterior, physical world was a numinous representation of our inner consciousness. Consciousness didn't just shape our measurements and results, but in fact created them—all of it. Hover a nanosecond in an alternate perception, and we would understand this. All the probable realities would become evident by that one moment of allowing. All of it contained, and released, through particle access resonance, Jurneau's discovery. That's what we know now.

Ah, thought Roger, the "alternate perception." Just don't mention what happened when we began to manipulate it . . . them. Or especially, what didn't happen. And don't ask about Jurneau anymore. "Gone, no use to us now. Spilt milk," Henry had offered in his usual efficient tone.

Enough. This train of thought wasn't making him feel any better.

Something else nagged at him. He felt it on the edges of his mind, a certainty he couldn't articulate. About what? Jurneau had told him this could happen, once they moved into the second stage of the experiment. But surely it hadn't been long enough. Couldn't have been. Two months, that was all. Like Henry said—spilt milk. No chance of anything else happening now with Jurneau gone. Yet the sensation persisted. He found himself more and more often turning around swiftly, trying to catch whatever it was in the corner of his mind—but there was nothing. Shadows, fragments, left-over images, snatches of sounds from the music Jurneau had played for him.

Then there was Henry's behavior recently. Roger would look up from his writing and see Henry standing just outside the door, watching him, a strange expression on his face. Roger knew more meetings were taking place without him, though he had full clearance to attend. The logs showed a meeting had been held in Henry's conference room every night for a week, long after most of the staff had gone home. Who attended those? He'd asked around, at first, but quickly realized people who used to volunteer information weren't so forthcoming. Not a real surprise in the private sector, which sometimes made even the military look friendly. When he had asked Henry about them, he'd gotten a noncommittal answer, which was worse than none at all.

"They all know how to deceive, darling," Sara had said to him, after she attended one of the few social gatherings at the station.

"What do you mean?" he'd asked, his hands relaxed on the steering wheel as they drove

through the long dusk of the plain towards home.

“I just want you to be careful. They are in their own league. I have the feeling . . .”

“What?” he’d prompted her when she stopped, feeling the tension rise in him.

“Well, just that—hey, you’ve known them a year now, this can’t come as a surprise. I just think they’d do whatever they thought they had to, you know? To get their way, maybe, or maybe, to get the job done, something like that. I don’t think there’s a lot holding them back. It’s not that they are immoral. Amoral, perhaps.”

“Where’d this come from?” he’d asked, feeling confused by her words.

“Maybe I’m wrong, maybe it’s nothing!” she said, suddenly dismissing it, and looked at him with a smile. “Forget it. You know me, a little wine and I get so dramatic!”

But her words had followed him for days afterward. He didn’t know why. He trusted her judgment, but Sara had no contact with the station outside those parties. What could she know from a bunch of people who were on their best behavior, anyhow?

That’s another odd thing, Roger thought, remembering. The wind rattled the shingles on the roof and a low, hollow sound swirled through the stovepipe. The fire sparked and steadied. He thought about the socializing that went on. No one ever lost control, or drank too much. Except, sometimes, Jurneau, who wasn’t really part of the team, anyway. He was the maverick, the one making it all happen, but he was on his own wavelength for sure. Had been, that is.

He picked up the paper he’d been rewriting and tore it in half, and stared at the pieces in his hand. What am I doing? he wondered—the pages needed to be sent over to the station within the hour to get Henry’s approval.

Sara’s face smiled out at him from the picture frame on the desk.

What, he suddenly wondered, had really happened to Jurneau?

## **KAI-LUN AND MING**

At dusk, the garden changed. For Kai-lun it was the time of most promise, for the colors were not what they had seemed to be, and the late river fog would rise to cover the tall grass by the banks. In the daytime when he worked under a hot sun, waiting for the others to call him in, the garden seemed the enemy, a source of sweat and endless digging. A waste, too, he was quick to point out, for the weeds came up overnight.

“This is what we have been allotted,” his wife would say, whenever he complained.

“I’d rather be the owner,” he’d answer, but her look would make him smile, and he knew what would come next.

“Yes, and with all his money, I suppose—but he has his own kind of weeds, and he cannot get rid of them, night or day. And he has to remember all the time that he is better than other people—no wonder he has those headaches.”

Kai-lun entered the garden before the moon came up, as the last bit of day was held in the twilight, and first, as always, he watched the distant left side, where the grape arbors climbed almost sixteen feet. Their thick wooden pillars blended into the dimness, while all about him the flowers rustled together in the early evening wind. The next moment it happened, as it always did, the moon rising abruptly and its light radiating onto the vines so that the wood posts stood out in relief, like white monoliths, leaves crossing them in straight shadows. He would stand there a long time, until the light moved higher in the night sky.

It was the same every evening, unless it rained. On those nights, his wife insisted he stay in.

“Enough,” she told him. “You want to look at something, here I am.”

How he had found her still made him wonder. Both his parents had died when he was so young. Thirty-seven years he lived without a wife. And then the village had been possessed, as far as he could tell, by the appearance of an old woman heading east from Chinroon, who had declared he must marry Ming. Everyone had taken two days off from the fields, which had never happened before, and he found himself suddenly a husband, carried to his house with his wife, the old one’s daughter, just like that. Out of courtesy he’d never said a word, but he was certain they had drugged him from the first morning. There was no other way to explain why he had not resisted them. That it was, however, a fortunate event, Kai-lun knew.

When the soldiers came, the first thing they did was destroy the garden. He learned this later, for he and Ming had left three days before the soldiers arrived, having been warned by her mother that a war had begun between two provinces. As far as they could understand, something of great importance had been stolen out of the palace of Changli. For this already one hundred and fifty people had died. On the third day they found themselves in the forests beyond the second province, on the edge of a wide desert land that stretched empty and forbidding toward the western horizon. It was where the old one had told them to go.

“I don’t agree with your mother. This isn’t a very good place,” Kai-lun announced, as they

stared out at the view.

“Worse where we were,” Ming offered, “You know that. Besides, my mother said she will join us on the other side.”

“And how will she do that? Fly? She walks with a cane. The whole province is overrun with soldiers who laugh when they kill you. If that’s all they choose to do. We should have waited for her.”

But the old one required respect. If they were to cross the desert at her bidding, so be it. Kai-lun agreed in his heart. Only fear made him angry.

They camped where they were on the ridge above the plain that edged the miles of dry sand and brush. He thought he could see the faint outline of mountains on the other side, but perhaps that was only a trick of the light. They had water, some soy strips, the nuts from pecan trees they’d passed. It would last them four days.

“I’m thinking,” Kai-lun began, when night had come and they prepared to begin their trip across in the coolest hours, “I think that it is strange how one minute we are happy and content, and then someone who isn’t those things can change what we have, just like that.”

“You mean soldiers,” Ming stated. “It is not the soldiers. We can all act like the soldiers, maybe, who knows. The ones we should worry about are the ones who send the soldiers.”

Kai-lun pulled his pack onto his back. Ming took up the same amount. She was small, but willing and strong. He knew better than to offer help.

“Perhaps,” he answered, after a moment. “But I am still afraid of the soldiers.”

They moved down the steep incline to the foot of a basin and up another slope onto the desert plain. He had to admit it was beautiful. For years the merchants he knew had described the western border and their crossings at night, warning that creatures lived there who hated travelers. These, Kai-lun hoped to avoid. But the merchants were storytellers, too, and their words stayed with him as he walked through purple light and rocks that shone silver in the darkness, only the sound of the sand underfoot when everything else was silent. The stories told of the dreams that came in the night desert, too, but he and Ming would not have to be concerned with those. They would sleep by day—safe enough. And perhaps the old woman, her mother, would show up after all. He had great faith in her ability to overcome obstacles.

# GUARDIANS OF THE FIELD

## **BEGINNINGS**

“A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land.”

—Jeremiah 5:30

### **Chapter 1**

I summon the memory of Alcedama as I saw it last. On a long ago night I walked through the city, its streets thick with the blood of the dead and dying, seeking an understanding that never came. Maybe if just once something had been said, or done, something brought into life by a single voice of compassion, by that one sound, everything would have been different. How can I know? Instead, I know that out of betrayal comes a feeling of loss that keeps us from the truth of who we are. We choose instead to hate. I received this knowledge into my own blood, and welcomed it, because then I was given a reason to live.

So long in this cell. Am I still a victim? Or has the sudden revelation of what I feel brought with it the end of fear? I wonder, too, how long they will give me something to write on, something, thereby, to remember. I need these words. They play with that, keeping it an unknown.

Beyond the narrow bars I see the pale yellow light that always comes before dusk, rectangular shapes of color, four of them, the metal rods between. The hills are shrouded in fog and the courtyard is still. The others are at supper. I am in another place that serves as both my refuge and my retribution.

They will read every one of these words and not comprehend. I shape the intent again and again, each time changing it, each time new, each time a distance from their truth, each time a way out into mine. These are my words, I, Karin Anavid, in the prison of Tamach.



## Chapter 2

“I tell you the prisoner is uncooperative.”

“So? She has no choice, after all. Her resistance doesn’t matter.”

In the room a series of tapestries hung from the wall. The man who was principal guard and commander of the city of Tamach walked over to each one in turn, fascinated as always by their intricacy and color, by their stories, and the heroes who had lived them.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” said his companion, who stayed sitting in his chair near a narrow window that overlooked the courtyard and in the distance, the hills he had come to love dearly. “My Catherine chose wisely in her art.”

“No one better. Such detail of our history,” agreed the principal guard. “Her death is our loss.”

There was no answer.

“We have a larger problem than the prisoner,” he went on.

His companion looked at him in disbelief. “You misunderstand everything if you think that’s possible.” The threat was open.

“Jaramek, listen to me,” the principal guard continued. “I received a message, less than an hour ago. You have to attend to it.”

“When did you decide you can tell me what I must do? What right?”

“Because I’m your friend.”

The tension in the room dissolved in a slow current, as if a dam had risen to stop its course.

“Yes, Garac, I know that.” The man buried his head in his hands a moment before answering. “So, tell me.”

“We found Petras. He was caught outside the boundary. We have no idea what he might have told them. His body was left to be mauled by animals.”

“He would have given nothing away. That means we have no one out there.”

“Exactly.”

“I see,” said Jaramek. “I assume you already have a plan?”

In answer, the principal guard walked over to the tapestry that hung furthest back, in an alcove almost hidden from the light. Wide lines in gold crossed in every direction. He lifted a corner of it with his hand. “Do you remember?”

“You can’t mean you want us to use the old routes. They’re inaccessible, beyond the boundary, if they still exist at all.”

“Not the routes, no. This,” Garac said, pointing to a design a third of the way down the tapestry, in the center. The object was woven in red and copper thread and outlined in gold. It was many-sided, eight by count. Garac touched the design and it moved out from the cloth and turned in a full circle for them, so that they could see every aspect of the artistry of the weaver, who had carefully sewn each symbol that the object offered. He heard Jaramek’s intake of breath.

“The Halaj. I destroyed that.”

In answer, Garac moved his hand closer to the edge, where two of the routes of gold ended inside a circle.

“But not its pattern. There’s a model, and it was stored here,” he tapped his finger on the circle, “in a priory, on the outskirts of Alcedama, during the truce. I saw it. It’s what we can use to build another.”

“You have kept this from me!”

“For good reason. This model of the weapon was all I knew of it, and I wouldn’t have seen even that if the truce hadn’t relaxed their security. I had no idea what it was. At the time, the actual Halaj was still hidden away, remember. After you destroyed it, I was certain in time you’d come to regret your decision.

“You were angry, when Catherine was killed. I knew that later on you might see things differently.” Garac fingered the tapestry. “So did Catherine.”

The two men were silent, neither willing to give ground. Shadows entered the room as dusk approached. Through the narrow window the sky was pale and fading into night.

“What do you want of me?” Jaramek said, his voice so low it was almost a whisper.

The principal guard picked up a candle from a small table near the door of the room. He lighted it and carried it over to the tapestry, close to the circle that stood out more distinctly, a shimmer of red and gold.

“Right now this location is out of our reach. The filters at the boundary are impenetrable, no matter what we do. There is only one person who can access the model for us.”

“NO!” Jaramek’s voice roared through the room. “Are you mad? Do you think for a moment I would agree to that?”

“The prisoner is the only one, I tell you. We can’t seem to find any way across that territory, as you know well. The region of Najoras, and therefore Alcedama within it, is protected by the Esarad. You know it is. Catherine prophesied the path, do you see that? Here, she has shown us what we have to do. She knew, as she always did, what would happen. She knew even her own death would come first.”

Garac hesitated. He had not meant to say so much so soon. There was still too much room for failure.

“You expect me to release the prisoner, after what she has done? No. I want her to linger in that cell a long time. I want her to die there.”

“I’m not arguing in her favor, and she won’t be free. I’ll go with her. When I’ve secured the model, she returns here with me. Nothing changes, except that we’ll be able to build the weapon again.”

“Are you forgetting what she is? Her abilities? And what would make her do this, knowing that at the end, she would be captured again, with nothing changed?”

Garac suppressed his elation. The very question implied Jaramek’s growing acceptance of the idea.

“There is one thing we have that she wants. We promise it to her.”

“Promise what?”

“We assure the prisoner that we’ll let the child go free, send her over the boundary, to her own people.”

“She’s no fool. She’ll see the trick of it.”

“Not with the plan I have in mind.”

“You don’t mean to actually send the child home? It is the threat of harm to her daughter that keeps her agreeable to the needs of your men, isn’t it?” Jaramek stared into space. “It is her fear for the child’s well-being that I enjoy using most of all.”

Garac traced his hand across the stone ledge of the window. Full night had come. He turned back to the other man, who was half in shadow in the dim light.

“I don’t intend to send the child beyond the boundary into Alcedama, only to convince the prisoner that I will.”

“You have not been with her?”

“No.”

“So for the duration of your journey she will feel safe, as well as motivated.”

“Yes, that’s what I’m counting on. And we have to let her continue to write. That will keep her off guard.”

“I see.” Jaramek leaned forward, his hands balanced on the arms of the chair. “You are certain she will believe you?”

“I’ll make sure she does. We need to rebuild the weapon. So we have to re-enter Alcedama. That’s what matters, isn’t it? It’s the only way you can destroy the Esarad once and for all, as Catherine desired.”

“Yes. She wanted that more than anything else. Instead, it took her life.” Jaramek paused, gazing into the fire. “All right. Do it. Soon.”

Garac let out the slightest sigh. “Of course. I’ll make the arrangements tonight, and leave with her before dawn.”

“Good.” Jaramek leaned his head on the back of the chair.

Garac waited a few moments before slipping soundlessly out of the room.

# THE GATEKEEPERS OF GENTHOR

# CHAPTER 1

## Prospects

“What would they have me do in this empty hole of a place?” Will Nash slammed his fist against the wall, knowing it was useless, feeling the pain shoot through his arm. Beyond the narrow bars he could see very little outside the compound, just a sliver of green that climbed the hillsides of the Genthor summer. No one called out from other cells that surrounded the courtyard below.

The outer gate clanged open and he heard the heavy step of the guard.

“You have a visitor,” the man said, pulling back bolts and unlocking the door.

“Since when? They said I wasn’t allowed--”

“Will, at last!” The girl pushed past the guard and hugged him. She was dressed in a deep royal blue cape, her dark hair wild around her face.

He stared at her. “How on earth did you get here? How did you get past them? Why did they agree to let you see me?”

“I’d almost think you weren’t glad I’ve come, with such questions. The ride was easy. I took Marjon. She went like the wind. Our mother told me how to get past obstacles, don’t you know.”

Will gave a half smile. “Yes, I’d forgotten. Ma would know what you needed. I am glad to see you, of course I am. There’s nothing you can do. They’ve made their decision and I’m their pawn.”

“So much gloom! There’s nothing to worry about. When I leave here, you’re going with me.”

“Really. How do we escape—through that?” He gestured to the stone casement. It was hardly a slit in the wall. “Or are you suggesting the guard will escort us?”

“More questions. Some trust would be welcome. I got here, and I can get you out of here. Are you ready?”

Will studied his sister. She had been strong-minded from the day of her birth. Their mother had said often that Gwendolen began life with a howl so loud the midwife covered her ears.

“I’m delighted to join you, no doubt of that.”

“Good. Just walk beside me.”

She went to the door and called through the small window to the guard. He came and opened the door and she walked out. Will stayed in the cell.

“Now,” she hissed at him. “For heaven’s sake, walk beside me now!”

Will stared at her and then at the guard, who was watching him. Waiting for the blow to strike and against common sense he stepped out of the cell. Gwendolen grabbed his hand and they started walking toward the central gate, which had been raised. The guard shut the door to Will’s cell and locked it. He went over to a small table and sat, lifting up a container at the same time and drinking it down. He didn’t seem interested in them at all.

“You gave him that ale?” Will said.

“Mama’s version of it.”

In another moment they were outside the prison.

“The sheriff will send a dozen to capture me again, and likely come himself.”

“Not where we’re going,” Gwendolen said. She looked at Will with irritation and affection at once. “I am not on a fool’s errand here. I have exact instructions and I’m carrying them out. All you have to do is come along with me.”

“Whose instructions?” Will asked. “Apart from you and Ma, there’s no one in all of Genthor who believes in me. I am guilty in their eyes and that’s been proven in their ridiculous trial twice now.”

Gwendolen gestured around her. “Look here, Will. What do you see?”

Before them the hills rose in waves of deep green grass and trees and the sky was blue and cloudless. A warm breeze crossed over them.

“Freedom,” he said.

“Let’s keep it that way. Marjon is waiting in a hollow over beyond that hill. Hurry now.”

The rounsey lifted her head as they approached and willingly took them both on her back. Gwendolen held the reins and led them to a path that was rarely traveled.

“Aren’t you going to render us invisible so we can ride on the main road? It’d be a lot faster,” Will said.

“You’re mocking me, but I tell you, you’re safe. I’m not trying to hide us but to get to our destination.”

“Home.”

“Sort of...Mama attended your trial, you know,” Gwendolen said, changing the subject.

“Yes, I saw her at the edge of the crowd. It helped me stay calm, a bit. These people love nothing more than to torture a man, in mind or body or both. They’re predictable in their thirst for blood and unpredictable in when they want to exercise it. They aren’t going to be happy to find me gone.”

“They won’t know you are,” said his sister.

He almost missed her words. The sky had grown overcast and a strong wind had picked up, obscuring her voice.

“What do you mean?” he called out.

Gwendolen turned her head to look back at him briefly. “Wait till we get where we need to be. I can explain more easily, then. We must leave this place, and quickly.”

She leaned forward and spoke in Marjon’s ear. The next moment they were racing along. Will could see a sweep of rain coming down in the distance. Soon it would be on them.

Minutes before he had been in a stinking cell, certain he would be dragged out for the crowd to jeer at yet again as soon as the sheriff and his followers returned from presenting the case to the Court, a one-sided argument and no one asking Will Nash for his opinion. Now he was heading into a distinct unknown, but whatever his sister and mother had planned, there was no way he could stay undetected for long. Anyone refusing to help in the search for him would be fined, or worse, his friends included. None could afford that.

He had acted with intent, and he would again if given the opportunity. His skill at falconry might be something the sheriff wanted to exploit, but that required Will’s cooperation. They couldn’t force him.

The storm hit them as they rounded a curve in the road and faced the open plain of Leeve, but once again he had underestimated his mother, and his sister’s apprenticeship under her. While the rain came down in sheets around them they rode untouched, an unseen shield protecting them from the downpour and the lightning that struck repeatedly. He watched as always in fascination as small trails of fire rose up from the ground to be met with jagged strikes from the clouds, the outcome of their joining together changing the landscape into a brilliant, stark white. He could feel the thunder that followed deep in his bones but the rounsey seemed oblivious to the sound and didn’t hesitate.

They rode out of the storm ten miles later and he saw the derelict remains of a building on a



low rise. It was the monastery that had burned in a fire, displacing the monks until a new one was built closer to the town. The guilds had shared housing of the abbot and the monks themselves held to their vow of poverty and lived with the lay peasants. Will remembered the abbot's stay with them very well. He had tried to order their mother about like a servant. He had had no idea who he was dealing with, Will remembered, smiling.

To his surprise Gwendolen guided Marjon off the road and toward the ruins. She rode behind a retaining wall and stopped the horse.

"Here. We'll wait for Mama here."

Will got down and reached up his hand to help her, but she was already beside him.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get to you," Gwendolen said. "I would have been there much sooner, but on his way to court the sheriff visited us and stayed for two days. He pretended to be going to plead your case. His attraction for our mother shows you how stupid the man is. Does he think she would be drawn to him when he has imprisoned her son? It wouldn't do to antagonize him or let him know our plans, so that is why the delay."

"Not to forget that the sheriff is more than a little interested in the land that we own, that our father so carefully protected, and that still belongs to our mother outright."

"How could I? He marries her and it all becomes his in an instant. No, not an outcome Roana Nash would accept," Gwendolen said with a laugh.

"Indeed it is not."

They both turned around to see their mother before them, her cloak wrapped around her, its dark green cloth covering all but her face. She drew it off and embraced her children and then stood a few steps away to survey Will.

"You don't look worse for wear, overall. Well done, Will. I'm sure you would have been happier without that experience, but in the end it has served you."

"Everything is a lesson?" offered Will, grinning at her.

"Exactly. Nothing is ever wasted."

"I don't see anything amusing in this," Gwendolen said. "Having association with Edmund deMobray comes to mind as something we could have lived without. As sheriff he has brought his own desires to the fore and ignored the rest of us."

"Gwendolen, you are impatient as usual, and it is both your best trait and your least helpful, depending on how you use it. The sheriff is in our world. You know that means he has value for

some reason, whether we understand what that is or not.”

“If something brings us grief, I can’t see why we have to sustain it at all,” Gwendolen said, and she would have stamped her foot but knew how childish that would appear. Still, it worried at her that anyone had the power to arrest her brother and make assumptions about her mother.

“No one has such power, haven’t I told you that many times? It is an illusion,” Roana Nash said, reading her thoughts. She rested her hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

“Not if Will has to spend time in a filthy prison! I saw it and it was very real.”

“Ah, yes, we are back to that. I’ve neglected your training. I’ll have to correct that. Though Gwendolen is to take over my path eventually,” she said, turning to Will, “you know that you will always be a vital part of my intention and outcomes. For now, I must act without help. You can both watch and witness what I am about to do. Leave Marjon here. She’ll find her own way home.”

Gwendolen took an instrument from a sack she had placed across Marjon’s saddle and handed it to Will.

“Ah, my lute! Thank you. I have missed this most of all,” he said, as he fingered the strings. His father had secured it for him at some cost years before. He brushed his hand across the yew heartwood back and the ivory lines that lay between the ribs. “As every star in the firmament sings praise to thee, dear Son of God, so may this lute lend pleasing sound to those who hear it play,” he said softly as he swung its carrying strap over his shoulder.

Gwendolen took her purse of red velvet from a hook on the saddle and touched her horse’s head in a gesture of affection. “Take care, Marjon. I’ll be back soon enough.”

“Receive my thoughts and dismiss anything else from your head,” Roana Nash said to her children. She was proud of them, but all too aware how much more practice they required to carry out a purpose neither of them as yet understood.

However, they both knew how to travel with her, how to receive the impulses and allow passage through the curving scrolls of color that would absorb them and fade when they arrived at their destination. It would take only a moment, and yet seem so much longer to the traveler. That element of mysterious time never failed to intrigue them. This journey was no exception, but the destination when it appeared startled them.

“What on earth are we doing here?!” Gwendolen said in dismay.

Will surveyed the valley below them. They were in the middle of the sheriff’s property,

acres of land in all directions, bordered by a forest on two sides that was also under ownership of Edmund deMobray.

“Our favorite sheriff has something of mine. I want it back. There’s nothing for you to do, as I said. Just observe, and of course, stay close to me.” Roana Nash began to walk toward the residence that lay in the center of the valley, its stone turrets and extended walls signs of royal dispensation. The king appreciated deMobray’s assiduous collection of taxes as well as his predilection to mete swift judgments on anyone he felt had transgressed the latest set of laws.

“They’ve already seen us coming,” Gwendolen said.

“Why not? There’s no harm in my visiting the sheriff, especially if I am apparently unaware he is away. They’ll give us some food and drink and I can explore his rooms and find what I want, and then we leave. Minutes only.”

“So we should entertain everyone while you search?” Will said. He tapped the lute.

“I will sing. Only this time remember to accompany me and not go off on your variations where I cannot follow in the least!” Gwendolen said.

“I will play exactly as you sing, then, whether you are on the right note or the wrong one,” Will said.

“Hush. Let me talk to the guards.” Roana Nash approached the mercenaries who guarded the entrance. As she did so the steward came out and met her at the gatehouse.

“Greetings to you, Roger of Wynclose. I’ve come to see Edmund deMobray,” she said.

“Of course, milady, but he is gone from here. He won’t return for two more days.”

The man was deferential. He knew that Roana Nash was a prize the sheriff wanted to possess. Along with the fifty hectares that her husband as a freeholder had left her at his death. He seemed to take no notice of Will, but gave a quick nod of his head toward Gwendolen.

“We have come a long way. Surely you intend to give us some relief from hunger and thirst?”

“I ordered food and drink as soon as I saw you in the distance. Where are your horses?”

“We chose to walk a little. I’ve left them with our servant,” she said, flicking her hand toward the forest. “They can rest and drink from the stream that flows there.”

Gwendolen had a quick vision of Marjon undoubtedly back at their home by then and in her stall eating the oats left for her.

“Please come with me,” Roger said, with a slight bow.

The three of them followed him through the gate, across the inner courtyard and up one flight of stairs to a large hall. No one was in it, though a fire burned in the hearth at one end. The walls were decorated in tapestries woven with gold that showed scenes of battles. Under their feet sweet-smelling straw muffled the sound of their shoes. Little light showed through the slits in the stone but small torches scattered here and there brightened the room. Close to the hearth a table had already been set for three. The steward had indeed seen them arriving and was extending rapid hospitality. Their report to Edmund deMobray must be a good one if he should ask the family how they were received. He would ask, Roger knew.

As servants came in with plates of food and cups of wine and ale he hovered about them as they began to eat.

“We are most comfortable, thanks to you,” Roana Nash said to him. “Please go and continue your own work. I know all too well the care such a large manor requires. We are fine here. My daughter will sing for me after we are finished eating and then we’ll take our leave.”

“As you like,” Roger said, aware that he had a quandary, for if the visitors lacked anything while he was gone it would be his fault. Yet in the end he counted it best to agree with the request and he was also impatient to return to his own hectic schedule. Although the sheriff was away, management of the estate remained worrisome. Several pigs had been stolen over the last few days. If Edmund deMobray returned and the thief had not been found, it would be unfortunate.

“I will come back before you leave, then,” he said, again giving a slight bow and leaving the room.

“Are you done eating?” Roana Nash asked her children after a few minutes had passed.

“Not quite,” Gwendolen said as she tore off a piece of ham from its bone and swallowed some ale.

“Yes, of course we are,” Will said, moving the food and drink away from her. “I think it is time for us to do something else,” he said.

Gwendolen understood but regretted they had so little time to spend dining. The sheriff always presented a good table.

“Ah, but everything here has been taken by force from the tenants of this manor,” said her mother, again reading her mind. “That makes it less difficult to turn away from the gift of it, do you not agree, daughter?”

Will adjusted the strap of his instrument and tested the strings. "Since he does not seem aware of my presence, will the sheriff's steward imagine Gwendolen is also the lute player?"

His mother smiled. "It is possible.

Gwendolen stood up and walked near the fire, enjoying its warmth. The air had a chill in it, held too long by the stone walls. When she turned around Roana Nash had left the room.

"Sing," Will said. "Hurry. Mother has but a quarter hour at the most." He started to play a song she had never heard before.

"Something else!" she said.

Will relented and began to play the haunting notes of an old melody Gwendolen had learned in her childhood. She sang in a soft voice: "Stond wel, moder, vnder rode, cross bihold thi child wyth glade mode," when Will signaled her to go louder. She took a deep breath and her voice rang through the hall:

Blythe moder mittu ben, might thou

Svne, quu may blithe stonden? who

Hi se thin feet, hi se thin honden, I see

Nayled to the hard tre.

A servant passing by the door had stopped to listen. When they caught sight of him he rushed away.

"That is such a sad song. Choose another," Gwendolen said.

Will fingered the strings at random before sliding into one he felt sure would please his sister.

"Remember this one?" He gave her the opening phrase.

"Of course. Our father taught us that when he took us over to the sea to watch the fishermen. The sun was so hot and our mother had given us a basket of fruit and bread."

"Sing it. Be sure you keep singing this time until Ma is back with us. If we are quiet for too long Roger of Wynclose will hurry to make sure we're all right. He'll discover she isn't here and perhaps that I am! Go on."

Gwendolen listened to the first notes and began to sing the words. They spoke of spring arriving and daisies in the valley and the songs of birds, and her heart felt light as she let her voice fill the large room again:

Lenten ys come with loue to toune,

With blosmen ant with briddes roune,  
That al this blisse bryngeth.  
Dayeseyes in this dales,  
Notes suete of nyhtegales,  
Vch foul song singeth.  
The threstelcoc him threteth oo;  
Away is huere wynter wo  
When woderoue springeth.  
This foules singeth ferly fele  
Ant wlyteth on huere wynne wele  
That al the wode ryngeth.

Will looked up in surprise. His sister usually raced through the music, impatient to be done and off on some other task of her own liking. This time her tone was rich in its timbre and held a lilt and rhythm she had not offered before.

The singing surprised Gwendolen just as much. It had felt different than any time she could remember. It was as if she had entered a trance.

“You are an artist, daughter, and just coming to know of it.” Their mother had entered the hall.

Will and Gwendolen looked at what she held in her hands, a sheaf of papers and a necklace made of amber.

“This necklace belonged to your father’s sister,” she said, holding it up so that the firelight gleamed through it.

“Alina. I never knew her. It’s very beautiful,” Gwendolen said. “Why have you taken it?”

“Because she told me when she was dying that she wanted you to have it, but Edmund deMobray took it from her neck while she lay in the bed. He heard the words of his own wife but the man can’t help his greed. I’ve retrieved it for you to fulfill a promise I made to her. I’m grateful I have managed to do so now.”

“And the papers?” Will asked.

Roana Nash brushed her hand across the pages of parchment. “These are your father’s journals. All I could find, at least. They were stolen by deMobray’s men, along with other things, while you father was staying at an inn on a journey to the city. You were young. He stopped

writing them after that, afraid the things he had to say would get into the wrong hands and place both of you and me in jeopardy.”

“Why haven’t we ever heard about this before?” Gwendolen asked. She couldn’t remember a time when her mother had spoken so much of their father at once. She had loved him a great deal, she had said, so that it was hard to think of him even now without the sadness overwhelming her. She kept it all at bay.

“I didn’t know the sheriff could read,” Will said. “He’s had no schooling, has he?”

“He cannot. His desire was to own something of John Nash, though he claims no role in the robbery, but I learned of it.”

“From our Uncle Rafe,” guessed Gwendolen.

“Yes,” her mother said, smiling at her. “Father Eadmer—Rafe—is always in great demand for his herbs and people enjoy talking to him.”

“Monks go just about anywhere,” agreed Will.

“Exactly. He listened to a description of this kind of theft in this very hall only days ago. Edmund deMobray’s steward had had too much to drink and was explaining how well he helped the sheriff part travelers from their goods on a regular basis.”

Roana Nash tucked the papers and necklace in one of the deep pockets of her dress.

Seconds later the steward appeared at the entrance.

“You have eaten very little,” Roger said with disappointment, looking at the table.

“I would have had more,” Gwendolen said, “but—.” She stopped, unsure what to say.

“We must leave, as we must get home before dark,” said her mother.

“Yes, of course. Should I have someone go and get your servant and the horses?” he asked.

“No, not at all. I can manage that. Just let Sir Edmund know we came here.”

“Easily done.” With yet another slight bow the steward led them to the entrance and waved them on their way.

“He’ll watch until we’re out of sight. Go straight across the valley and up the hill to the woods,” Roana Nash said.

As they walked at a deliberate pace across the field Will noticed the sky had darkened, though it was still far from dusk. Another storm was brewing. There had been more than usual this season, he thought, wondering why.

“Remember what I told you?” his mother said, in answer to his unspoken thought. “The

weather is not fickle or unpredictable. It follows exactly the state of mind of the people who live in a given area. This can be evidenced in many ways. For some, it can be earthquakes or cyclones. For us, it is heavy rain and thunder. Each will appear when there are disturbances in the mindset shared by a people.”

He did remember. It had fascinated him to discover what an earthquake could do, how it was formed, or to stand at the center of a massive, swirling vortex of wind and water and hail. Their mother often took them on her journeys, so long as they stayed witnesses and didn’t try to participate. That wasn’t difficult, since the strangeness of the worlds she could enter often left both him and Gwendolen rooted to the spot, watching everything but fearful that their slightest movement could send them into that world with no way back.

“Edmund deMobray is going to see that the papers and necklace are missing. He’ll know it’s you!” Gwendolen said to her mother.

“I don’t think so. He had them both together in a box behind other storage, and none of it had been disturbed for some time.”

“When he does, he could accuse someone else,” Gwendolen persisted.

Her mother looked at her with approval. Her daughter was headstrong, and Roana Nash liked that, even though it meant Gwendolen would find herself in difficult circumstances more often than not. She would also learn how to measure her temper and her curiosity, to let both show when they were to her advantage. What struck Roana Nash most, however, was the passion for fairness that Gwendolen showed. That would help to make her a leader in her own way, just as Will would be in his. Both of them would pursue and honor their father’s legacy, along with hers.

“If he should discover the loss, though I am quite sure he will not, and links it to me, I’ll explain to him that if he attempts to cause trouble for me he can forget any prospect of marriage.”

Both her children stopped walking and stared at her.

“You can’t mean that otherwise you would consider his proposal?” Will asked.

“Never,” she said, laughing. “Just because I mention marriage doesn’t mean I have any intention of pursuing it. Come now, let’s get to the forest quickly.”

They turned when they reached the edge of the woods. Roger of Wynclose was indeed still watching them as he stood beside a large stone well that lay some yards away from the manor,



half covered by flowering vines. They entered the canopy of trees. Once out of sight they stepped into a clearing.

“Receive my thoughts and dismiss anything else from your minds,” Roana Nash said again to her children. The next moment they were in front of their own home, and Gwendolen ran to the stable to visit with Marjon.

“The first place the sheriff will look to find me is here,” Will said to his mother.

“True, but he won’t see you, anymore than his steward did. When I tell him you aren’t here he’ll have to believe me. If I had not been away, Edmund deMobray would never have been able to capture you. He’ll pay for this, that I have promised myself. If Gwendolen had not been able to release you, I would have come, but I was sure she would manage and she needed the practice.”

Will laughed. “She didn’t hesitate even a second. You’d have thought she’d been training in your Esoteric for seven years, not one.”

“Good. Now, let’s decide what we should do next. There’s the problem of unfair grain distribution. The forest is also at risk and if they clear much more of it the land will become prey to more severe weather patterns. Then there is the matter of trade. It’s governed by greed, as always, but now there is the additional problem of tainted goods being sold to the freeholders. Most of all, there are the soldiers.”

Will knew that administering to her own estate was not the limit of his mother’s desire and interest. Like her husband, she wanted to create a land that could be shared equally by all. Following a path that mattered to her heart was most important. At the same time, her special skills could not ensure solutions all the time. They could only work with events in which she herself was involved. She could protect others, but she could not be everywhere at once.

There were not many who practiced her craft. The Esoteric was something one was born to, and only women received it. More than once it had occurred to him that for Roana Nash there had to be a great loneliness given the nature of her essential self, and especially since the man she had loved so much had been killed and taken from her. She had no one to talk to. He and Gwendolen were close to her, but it could not be the same thing.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked her.

“What I cannot. Find a way to enter a soldiers’ camp at night as if you’re one of them. Listen to them. There are plans to advance on property held by freeholders and even that owned

by some of the knights who are away in the East. See if you can find out when this is to happen. It is likely to be soon. They have increased in numbers.”

Will had seen the fires from the camps at night scattered over the northern slopes of Genthor. In the course of the last year their ranks had strengthened.

“They’re likely to recognize me,” he said. “When I was taken to the prison, crowds gathered to watch, even calling out for a worse punishment for me, people I didn’t even know. Soldiers lined the route. They heard from the sheriff that I was a traitor and assumed I was. No law is going to protect me.”

Roana Nash gazed at her son and put her arms around him for a moment. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. A crowd is like its own creature, as if all the minds in it had become welded into one. The loudest voice often sways the rest.”

“That would be Alan Tanner. He walked beside me shouting insults that the crowd picked up. One moment I was checking a fallow field, seeing whether it was ready for cultivation, and the next I was arrested, and he was the one who had made the accusation. No proof required, just his word.”

“The Tanners have always chosen a path of expedience. He assumed with you gone my land could be seized. The sheriff had not hesitated to encourage him.”

Will smiled. “How very much Edmund deMobray underestimates you.”

“As do others. In many ways, that’s to my advantage,” his mother said with an answering smile. “In any event, in the camp you enter you will be received well. That much I can ensure.”

Gwendolen appeared from the stable, her cloak wrapped around her. “It’s gone cold,” she said, shivering.

“Let’s go in,” said her mother. Roana Nash put an arm around each of her children and they entered the house together.