

# **A Pool in the Desert**

**Robin McKinley**

Robin McKinley was born in Ohio and grew up all over the world because her father was in the army. She now lives in the south of England with her husband, writer Peter Dickinson. She is the author of several fantasy novels published for young adults but loved by readers of all ages, including *Beauty, Rose Daughter*, *The Blue Sword* (a Newbery Honor Book), and *The Hero and the Crown* (winner of the Newbery Medal). Her most recent novel is *Spindle's End*, based on the *Sleeping Beauty* fairy tale. McKinley's short fiction has been published in *The Door in the Hedge*, *A Knot in the Grain*, and *Water: Tales of Elemental Spirits*. The latter volume is the first book in a projected series based on the four elements, written in collaboration with her husband.

*"A Pool in the Desert" first appeared in Water. The story is loosely connected to McKinley's "Damar" novels (The Blue Sword and The Hero and the Crown), though readers needn't be familiar with Damar to enjoy this fine work of traditional fantasy.*

*—T. W.*

There were no deserts in the Homeland. Perhaps that was why she dreamed of deserts. She had had her first desert dreams when she was quite young, and still had time to read storybooks and imagine herself in them; but deserts were only one of the things she dreamed about in those days. She dreamed about knights in armour and glorious quests, and sometimes in these dreams she was a knight and sometimes she was a lovely lady who watched a particular knight and hoped that, when he won the tournament, it would be she to whom he came, and stooped on bended knee, and... and sometimes she dreamed that she was a lady who tied her hair up and pulled a helmet down over it and over her face, and won the tournament herself, and everyone watching said, Who is that strange knight? For I have never seen his like. After her mother fell ill and she no longer had time to read, she still dreamed, but the knights and quests and tournaments dropped out of her dreams, and only the deserts remained.

For years in these desert dreams she rode a slender, graceful horse with an arched neck, and it flew over the sand as if it had wings; but when she drew up on the crest of a dune and looked behind her, there would be the shallow half-circles of hoofprints following them, hummocking the wind-ridges and bending the coarse blades of the sand-grass. Her horse would dance under her, splashing sand, and blow through red nostrils, asking to gallop on, but she would wait for the rest of her party, less wonderfully mounted, toiling behind her. Then she would turn again in the direction they were all going, and shade her eyes with one hand, talking soothingly to her restless horse through the reins held lightly in the other; and there would be the dark shadow of mountains before her, mountains she knew to call the Hills.

As the years passed, however, the dreams changed again. She left school at sixteen because her parents said they could spare her no longer, with her mother ill and Ruth and Jeff still so little and her father and Dane (who had left school two years before) working extra hours in the shop because the specialists her mother needed were expensive. When Mrs. Halford and Mr. Jonah came to visit them at home (repeated efforts to persuade her parents to come into the school for a meeting having failed), and begged them to reconsider, and said that she was sure of a scholarship, that her education would be no burden to them, her mother only wept and said in her trembling invalid voice that she was a good girl and they needed her at home, and her father only stared, until at last they went away, the tea and biscuits she had made in honour of so rare an event as visitors in the parlour untouched. Her father finally told her: "See them out to their car, Hetta, and then come direct back. Supper's to be on time, mind."

The three of them were quiet as they went down the stairs and through the hall that ran alongside the shop. The partition was made of cheap ply, for customers never saw it, which made the hall ugly and unfriendly, in spite of the old family photos Hetta had hung on the walls. The shop-door opened nearly on the curb, for the shop had eaten up all of what had been the front garden. At the last minute Mrs. Halford took Hetta's hand and said, "If there's anything I can do—this year, next year, any time. Ring me."

Hetta nodded, said good-bye politely, and then turned round to go back to the house and get supper and see what Ruth and Jeff were doing. Her father had already rejoined Dane in the shop; her mother had gone to bed, taking the plate of biscuits with her.

Ruth had been told by their father to stay out of the way, it was none of her concern, but she was waiting for Hetta in the kitchen. "What happened?" she said.

"Nothing," said Hetta. "Have you done your homework?"

"Yes," said Ruth. "All but the reading. D'you want to listen while you cook?"

"Yes," said Hetta. "That would be nice."

That night Hetta dreamed of a sandstorm. She was alone in darkness, the wind roaring all round her, the sand up to her ankles, her knees, her waist, filling her eyes, her nose, her mouth. Friendly sand. She snuggled down into it as if it were a blanket; as it filled her ears she could no longer hear the wind, nor anything else. When the alarm went off at dawn, she felt as stiff as if she had been buried in sand all night, and her eyes were so sticky, she had to wash her face before she could open them properly.

It had been a relief to quit school, because she was tired all the time. There was more than she could get done even after there was no schoolwork to distract her; but without the schoolwork she found that her mind went to sleep while her body went on with her chores, and for a while that seemed easier. Sometimes months passed without her ever thinking about what she was doing, or not doing, or about Mrs. Halford, or about how she might have used that scholarship if she had got it, if her parents had let her accept it, which they wouldn't have. Months passed while her days were bound round with cooking and housekeeping and keeping the shop accounts, looking through cookery books for recipes when her mother thought that this or that might tempt her appetite, sweeping the passage from the shop twice a day because of the sawdust, teaching Ruth and Jeff to play checkers and fold paper airplanes. When she had first started keeping the accounts, she had done it in the evening, after supper was cleared away and there were no other demands till morning, and the kitchen was peaceful while everyone watched TV in the parlour. But she found she was often too bone weary to pay the necessary attention, so she had taught herself to do it in the edgy time between breakfast and lunch, when the phone was liable to ring, and her mother to be contemplating having one of her bad days, and her father to call her down to the shop to wait on a customer. One afternoon a week she took the car to the mall and shopped for everything they had to have. After the narrow confines of the house, the car park seemed liberating, the neon-edged sky vast.

The months mounted up, and turned into years.

One year the autumn gales were so severe that ruining the harvest and breaking fences for the stock to get through out in the countryside wasn't enough, and they swept into the towns to trouble folk there. Trees and TV aerials came down, and some chimney-pots; there was so much rain that everyone's cellars flooded. The wood stored in their cellar had to come up into the parlour, whereupon there was nowhere to sit except the kitchen. Everyone's tempers grew short with crowding, and when the TV was brought in too, there was nowhere to put it except on counter space Hetta couldn't spare. The only time there

was armistice was during programmes interviewing farmers about how bad everything was. Her father watched these with relish and barked "Ha!" often.

That season in spite of the weather she spent more time than ever in the garden. The garden had still been tended by her great-grandfather when she was very small, but after he died, only her grandmother paid any attention to it. As her mother's illness took hold and her father's business took off, it grew derelict, for her grandmother had done the work Hetta did now, with a bad hip and hands nearly frozen with arthritis. Hetta began to clear and plant it about a year after she stopped school; gardening, she found, was interesting, and it got her out of the house. Her father grumbled about having to contain his heaps of wood chips and discarded bits too broken to be mended, but permitted it because she grew vegetables and fruit, which lowered the grocery bills, and she canned and froze what they didn't eat in season. No one else even seemed to notice that the view from the rear of the house looked any different than the front—although Ruth liked bugs, and would sometimes come out to look at the undersides of leaves and scrape things into jars—and so long as Hetta wasn't missing when someone wanted her, nothing was said about the hours she spent in the garden. Their house was the oldest on the street and had the largest garden. It had been a pretty house once, before the shop destroyed its front, but the shop at least made it look more in keeping with the rest of the row. There were proper walls around their garden, eight foot tall on three sides, and the house the fourth. It was her own little realm.

That autumn there was a heaviness to the air, and it smelled of rain and earth and wildness even on days when the sun shone. Hetta usually left as much as she could standing over the winter, to give shelter to Ruth's bugs and the birds and hedgehogs that ate them, but this year she brought the last tomatoes and squashes indoors early (where, denied the wet cellar., she balanced them on piles of timber in the parlour), and she cut back and tied in and staked everything that was left. Even with the walls protecting it, the wind curled in here, flinging other people's tiles at her runner-bean teepees and stripping and shredding the fleece that protected the brassicas. Sometimes she stopped and listened, as if the whistle of the wind was about to tell her something. Sometimes at sunset, when there was another storm coming, the sky reminded her of her desert. But she didn't dare stop long or often, even in the garden; her mother's bedroom window overlooked it, and the sight of Hetta standing still invariably made her hungry. She would open her window and call down to Hetta that she just felt she might eat a little something if Hetta would make it up nice the way she always did and bring it to her.

When the meteorologists began predicting the big storm on its way, the family gathered round the TV set as if the weather report had become a daily installment of a favourite soap opera. Her father snorted; he hated experts in clean business suits telling him things he didn't know. But he didn't protest when the TV was turned on early and he didn't declare the forecast rubbish, and he told Hetta to do her weekly shop early, "just in case."

Two days later the sky went green-yellow, grey-purple; soon, sighed the prickle of wind against her skin, and for a moment, leaning on her hoe, the sky was some other sky, and the smooth wooden handle in her hands felt gritty, as if sticky with sand. Her fingers, puzzled, rolled it against her palm, and she blinked, and the world seemed to blink with her, and she

was again standing in the back garden of the house where three generations of her father's kin had lived, and there was a storm coming.

When the storm came in the deep night, Hetta was asleep. She knew she was asleep, and yet she knew when the storm wind picked her up... no, it did not pick her up, it plunged her down, forced her down, down into darkness and roaring and a great weight against her chest, like a huge hand pressing her into...

She was drowning in sand. It wasn't at all as she'd imagined it, a peaceful ending, a giving up: she did not want to die, and what was happening hurt. She gasped and choked, nearly fainting, and the sand bit into her skin, sharp as teeth. She could feel the tiny innumerable grains hissing over her, offering no apparent resistance as she beat at them, pouring through her fingers, down her body, into her eyes and mouth, the unimaginable multitudes of them covering her till they weighed as heavy as boulders, a river, an avalanche...

Where were the others? Had they set out knowing a storm was on the way? Even in this area a storm this severe gave some warning...

*In thin area? Where was she? There was nothing to tell her—nothing but sand and wind roar and darkness. And... who were they? She could not remember— she would not have set out alone—even a guided party had to take care—in the last few years the storms had grown more violent and less predictable—parties rarely went mounted any more—she—remembered—*

*Perhaps she slept; perhaps she fainted. But there were hands upon her— hands? Had her party found her again? She tried to struggle, or to cooperate. The hands helped her up, held her up, from her wind-battered, sand-imprisoned crouch. The wind still shouted, and she could see nothing; but the hands arranged the veil over her face and she could breathe a little more easily, and this gave her strength. When the hands lifted her so that one of her arms could be pulled around a set of invisible shoulders, and one of the hands gripped her round her waist, she could walk, staggering, led by her rescuer.*

*For some time she concentrated on breathing, on breathing and keeping her feet under her, tasks requiring her full attention. But her arm, held round the shoulders, began to ache; and the ache began to penetrate her brain, and her brain began to remember that it didn't usually have to occupy itself with negotiating breathing and walking...*

*It was still dark, and the wind still howled, and there was still sand in the heaving air, but it pattered against her now, it no longer dragged at and cut her. She thought, The storm is still going on all round us, but it is not reaching us somehow. She had an absurd image that they—her unknown rescuer and herself—were walking in a tiny rolling cup of sand that was always shallow to their feet just a footstep's distance before and behind them, with a close-fitting lid of almost quiet, almost sandless air tucked over them.*

*When the hand clutching her wrist let go, she grabbed the shoulder and missed, for her hand had gone numb; but the hand round her waist held her. She steadied herself, and the second hand let go, but only long enough to find her hand, and hold it firmly—As if I might run off into the sandstorm again, she thought, distantly amused. She looked toward the*

hand, the shoulders—and now she could see a human outline, but the face was turned away from her, the free hand groping for something in front of it.

She blinked, trying to understand where the light to see came from. She slowly worked out that the hand was more visible than the rest of the body it was attached to; and she had just realised that they seemed to be standing in front of a huge, rough, slightly glowing—wall? Cliff? For it seemed to loom over them; she guessed at something like a ledge or half-roof high above them—when the fingers stiffened and the hand shook itself up in what seemed like a gesture of command—and the wall before them became a door, and folded back into itself. Light fell out, and pooled in the sand at their feet, outlining tiny pits and hummocks in shadows.

"Quickly," said a voice. "I am almost as tired as you, and Geljdreth does not like to be cheated of his victims."

She just managed to comprehend that the words were for her, and she stepped through the door unaided. The hand that was holding hers loosed her, the figure followed her, and this time she heard another word, half-shouted, and she turned in time to see the same stiff-fingered jerk of the hand that had appeared to open the door: it slammed shut on a gust of sand like a sword-stroke. The furious sand slashed into her legs and she stumbled and cried out: the hands saved her again, catching her above the elbows. She put her hands out unthinkingly, and felt collarbones under her hands, and warm breath on her wrists.

"Forgive me," she said, and the absurdity of it caught at her, but she was afraid to laugh, as if once she started, she might not be able to stop.

"Forgive?" said the figure. "It is I who must ask you to forgive me. I should have seen you before; I am a Watcher, and this is my place, and Kalarsham is evil-tempered lately and lets Geljdreth do as he likes. But it was as if you were suddenly there, from nowhere. Rather like this storm. A storm like this usually gives warning, even here."

She remembered her first thought when she woke up—if indeed any of this was waking—Even in this area a storm this severe gave some warning. "Where— where am I?" she said.

The figure had pulled the veiling down from its face, and pushed the hood back from its head. He was clean-shaven, dark-skinned, almost mahogany in the yellow light of the stony room where they stood, black-haired; she could not see if his eyes were brown or black. "Where did you come from?" he said, not as if he were ignoring her question but as if it had been rhetorical and required no answer. "You must have set out from Chinilar, what, three or four weeks ago? And then come on from Thaar? What I don't understand is what you were doing alone. You had lost whatever kit and company you came with before I found you—I am sorry—but there wasn't even a pack animal with you. I may have been careless"—his voice sounded strained, as if he were not used to finding himself careless—"but I would have noticed, even if it had been too late."

She shook her head. "Chinilar?" she said.

He looked at her as if playing over in his mind what she had last said. He spoke gently. "This is the station of the fourth Watcher, the Citadel of the Meeting of the Sands, and I am he."

"The fourth—Watcher?" she said.

"There are eleven of us," he said, still gently. "We watch over the eleven Sandpales where the blood of the head of Maur sank into the earth after Aerin and Tor threw the evil thing out of the City and it burnt the forests and rivers of the Old Damar to the Great Desert in the rage of its thwarting. Much of the desert is quiet—as much as any desert is quiet—but Tor, the Just and Powerful, set up our eleven stations where the desert is not quiet. The first is named the Citadel of the Raising of the Sands, and the second is the Citadel of the Parting of the Sands, and the third is the Citadel of the Breathing of the Sands... The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth Watchers are often called upon, for our Pales lie near the fastest way through the Great Desert, from Rawalthifan in the West to the plain that lies before the Queen's City itself. But I—I have never Watched so badly before. Where did you come from?" he said again, and now she heard the frustration and distress in his voice. "Where do you come from, as if the storm itself had brought you?"

Faintly she replied: "I come from Roanshire, one of the south counties of the Homeland; I live in a town called Farbellow about fifteen miles southwest of Mauncester. We live above my father's furniture shop. And I still do not know where I am."

He answered: "I have never heard of Roanshire, or the Homeland, or Mauncester. The storm brought you far indeed. This is the land called Damar, and you stand at the fourth Sandpale at the edge of the Great Desert we call Kalar-sham."

And then there was a terrible light in her eyes like the sun bursting, and when she put her hands up to protect her face there was a hand on her shoulder, shaking her, and a voice, a familiar voice, saying, "Hetta, Hetta, wake up, are you ill?" But the voice sounded strange, despite its familiarity, as if speaking a language she used to know but had nearly forgotten. But she heard anxiety in the voice, and fear, and she swam towards that fear, from whatever far place she was in, for she knew the fear, it was hers, and her burden to protect those who shared it. Before she fully remembered the fear or the life that went with it, she heard another voice, an angry voice, and it growled: "Get the lazy lie-abled on her feet or it won't be a hand on her shoulder she next feels"—it was her father's voice.

She gasped as if surfacing from drowning (the howl of the wind, the beating against her body, her face, she had been drowning in sand), and opened her eyes. She tried to sit up. to stand up, but she had come back too far in too short a span of time, and she was dizzy, and her feet wouldn't hold her. She would have fallen., except Ruth caught her—it had been Ruth's hand on her shoulder, Ruth's the first voice she heard.

"Are you ill? Are you ill? I have tried to wake you before—it is long past sunup and the storm has blown out. but there is a tree down that has broken our paling, and the front window of the shop. There are glass splinters and wood shavings everywhere—you could drown in them. Dad says Jeff and I won't go to school today, there is too much to do here, although I think two more people with dust-pans will only get in each other's way, but Jeff will somehow manage to disappear and be found hours later at his computer, so it hardly



matters."

Hetta's hands were fumbling for her clothes before Ruth finished speaking. She still felt dizzy and sick, and disoriented; but the fear was well known and it knew what to do, and she was dressed and in the kitchen in a few minutes, although her hair was uncombed and her eyes felt swollen and her mouth tasted of... sand. She went on with the preparations for breakfast as she had done many mornings, only half-registering the unusual noises below in the shop, habit held her, habit and fear, as Ruth's hands had held her—

—As the strange cinnamon-skinned man's hands had held her.

After she loaded the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher, she dared run upstairs and wash her face and brush her hair... Her hair felt stiff, dusty. She looked down at the top of her chest of drawers and the bare, swept wooden floor she stood on and saw... sand. It might have been wood dust carried by yesterday's storm wind; but no tree produced those flat, glinting fragments. She stared a moment, her hairbrush in her hand, and then laid the brush down, turned, and threw the sheets of her bed back.

Sand. More pale, glittery sand. Not enough to sweep together in a hand, but enough to feel on a fingertip, to hold up in the light and look again and again at the flash as if of infinitesimal mirrors.

*She fell asleep that night like diving into deep water, but if she dreamed, she remembered nothing of it, and when she woke the next morning, there were no shining, mirror-fragment grains in her bedding. I imagined it, she thought. I imagined it all—and it was the worst thought she had ever had in her life. She was dressed and ready to go downstairs and make breakfast, but for a moment she could not do it. Not even the knowledge of her father's certain wrath could make her leave her bedroom and face this day, any day, any day here, any other person, the people she knew best. She sat down on the edge of her bed and stared bleakly at nothing: into her life. But habit was stronger: it pulled her to her feet and took her downstairs, and, as it had done yesterday., led her hands and feet and body through their accustomed tasks. But yesterday had been—yesterday. Today there was nothing in her mind but darkness.*

*She struggled against sleep that night, against the further betrayal of the dream. It had been something to do with the storm, she thought, twisting where she lay, the sheets pulling at her like ropes. Something to do with the air a storm brought: it had more oxygen in it than usual, or less, it did funny things to your mind... Some wind-roused ancient street debris that looked like sand had got somehow into her bed; some day, some day soon, but not too soon, she would ask Ruth if there had been grit in her bed too, the day after the big storm.*

*She took a deep breath: that smell, spicy, although no spice she knew; spice and rock and earth. She was lying on her back, and had apparently kicked free of the tangling sheets at last—no, there was still something wrapped around one ankle—but her limbs were strangely heavy, and she felt too weak even to open her eyes. But she would not sleep, she would not. A tiny breeze wandered over her face, bringing the strange smells to her; and yet her bedroom faced the street, and the street smelled of tarmac and car exhaust and*

dead leaves and Benny's Fish and Chips on the opposite corner.

She groaned, and with a great effort, managed to move one arm. Both arms lay across her stomach; she dragged at one till it flopped off to lie at her side, palm down. What was she lying on? Her fingertips told her it was not cotton sheet, thin and soft from many launderings. Her fingers scratched faintly; whatever this was, it was thick and yielding, and lay over a surface much firmer (her body was telling her) than her old mattress at home.

An arm slid under her shoulders and she was lifted a few inches, and a pillow slid down to support her head. Another smell, like brandy or whisky, although unlike either—her gardener's mind registered steeped herbs and acknowledged with frustration it did not know what herbs. She opened her eyes but saw only shadows.

"Can you drink?"

She opened her mouth obediently, and a rim pressed against her lips and tilted. She took a tiny sip; whatever it was burned and soothed simultaneously. She swallowed, and heat and serenity spread through her. Her body no longer felt leaden, and her eyes began to focus.

She was in a—a cave, with rocky sides and a sandy floor. There were niches in the walls where oil lamps sat. She knew that smoky, golden light from power cuts at home. When she had been younger and her great-grandfather's little town had not yet been swallowed up by Mauncester's suburbs, there had been power cuts often. That was when her mother still got out of bed most days, and her grandmother used to read to Hetta during the evenings with no electricity, saying that stones were the best things to keep the night outside where it belonged. Cleaning the old oil lamps and laying out candles and matches as she had done the night before last still made her hear her grandmother saying *Once upon a time...* The only complaint Hetta had ever had about her grandmother's stones was that they rarely had deserts in them. Hetta had to blink her eyes against sudden tears.

*A cave, she thought, a cave with a sand floor. She looked down at glinting mirror-fragments, like those she had found in the folds of her sheets two nights ago.*

*I have never heard of Roanshire or the Homeland, or Mauncester. The storm brought you far indeed. This is the land called Damar, and you stand at the fourth Sandpale at the edge of the Great Desert we call Kalarsham.*

*Her scalp contracted as if someone had seized her hair and twisted it. She gasped, and the cup was taken away and the arm grasped her more firmly. "You have drunk too much, it is very strong," said the voice at her ear; but it was not the liquor that shook her. She sat up and swung her feet round to put them on the floor—there was a bandage tied around one ankle—the supporting arm allowed this reluctantly. She turned her head to look at its owner and saw the man who had rescued her from the sandstorm two nights ago, in her dream. "Where am I?" she said. "I cannot be here. I do not want to go home. I have dreamed this. Oh, I do not want this to be a dream!"*

*The man said gently, "You are safe here. This is no dream-place, although you may*

dream the journey. It is as real as you are. It has stood hundreds of years and through many sandstorms—although I admit this one is unusual even in the history of this sanctuary."

"You don't understand," she began, and then she laughed a little, miserably: she was arguing with her own dream-creature.

He smiled at her. "Tell me what I do not understand. What I understand is that you nearly died, outside, a little while ago. because your Watcher almost failed to see you. This is enough to confuse anyone's mind. Try not to distress yourself. Have another sip of the tiarhk. It is good for such confusions, and such distress."

*She took the cup from him and tasted its contents again. Again warmth and tranquility slid through her, but she could feel her own nature fighting against them, as it had when the doctor had prescribed sleeping pills for her a few years ago. She had had to stop taking the pills. She laced her fingers round the cup and tried to let the tiarhk do its work. She took a deep breath. The air was spicy sweet, and again she felt the little stir of breeze; where was the vent that let the air in and kept the dangerous sand-tides out?*

"Tell me a little about this place," she said.

*He sat back, willing to allow her time to compose herself. "This is the fourth of the Eleven Sandpales that King Tor the Just and Powerful set round the Great Desert Kalarsham some years after the battle of the Hero's Crown and the second and final death of Maur, when it became evident that no easy cure for the desert would be found and that Damar's ancient forest was gone forever, and Geljdreth, the sand-god, would rule us if we let him. This Fourth Pale is called Horontolopar in the Old Tongue, and I am its Watcher, Zasharan, fifteenth of that line, for it was my father's mother's mother's father's"—his voice fell into a singsong and she did not count, but she guessed he named fourteen forebears exactly—"mother, who was first called Zasharanth, and installed by Tor himself, and kissed by Queen Aerin, who wished her luck forever. And we have had luck"—he took a deep sigh—"even tonight, for I did find you, though it was a narrow thing. Much too narrow. I would like you to tell me more about Roan-shire, and Mauncester, where you are from, and how you came to be in such state, for no guide would have led or sent you so, and my eye tells me you were alone."*

"Your eye?" she said.

*"My Eye," he replied, and this time she heard. "I will show you, if you wish. The Eye may see more to this puzzle that you are: how it is that a sandstorm should have come from nowhere to bring you, and yet pursue you across my doorstep so viciously that the wound it laid open on your leg took eight stitches to close. My Eye lies in the place where I Watch, and it is much of how I do what I am here to do. It is only Aerin's Luck that I looked tonight, for this is an unsettled season, and no one has set out from Thaar in weeks. Perhaps you did not come from Thaar."*

*She laughed, although it hurt her. "No, I did not come from Thaar. And— and I have gone away—and come back. The storm—you brought me here two nights ago."*

He looked at her calmly. "You have not been here above an hour. You fainted, and I took the opportunity to dress your leg. Then you woke."

She was silent a moment. Her head swam, and she did not think another sip of tiarhk was advisable. "Are you alone here?"

He looked astonished. "Alone? Certainly not. Rarely does anyone else come to this end of the citadel, for I am the Watcher, and no other has reason to know of the desert door I brought you through. But there are some few of us, and the caves run far up into the Hills, and where they come out there is the filanon town Sunbarghon, although you would not find it unless they decided to allow you to, and Ynorkgindal, where they ring the Border, that the music of their bells may help keep us safe from the North, and the dlor Gzanforyar, which is mastered by my good friend Rohk. Perhaps you will meet him one day—" He blinked and gave a tiny shiver, and said, "Forgive me, lady, that was presumptuous."

She shook her head. "I should like to meet him," she said, but she heard in her voice that she believed there would be no such meeting. Zasharan heard it too, and turned his face a little away from her, and she saw how stiffly he sat. Her first thought was that she had offended him, but she remembered, *Forgive me, lady, that was presumptuous*, and before she could think, had reached to touch his arm. "But I would like to meet your friend, and see the caves, and your Eye, and—" She stopped. *How long would the dream last this time?*

He turned back to her. "There is something strange about you, I know that, and I see—I think I see—I—" He looked down at her hand on his arm, which she hastily removed. "You trouble me, lady. May I have your name?"

"Hetta," she said.

"Hetthar," he said. "Do you think you can stand, and walk? Do you wish food first? For I would like you to come to the place of my Eye, where I think you and I may both be able to see more plainly."

"I am not hungry," she said, and tried to stand; but as she did, her head swam, and Zasharan and the room began to fade, and she began to smell wood shavings and wet tarmac. "The sand!" she cried. "The sand!" And just before she lost consciousness, she flung herself on the floor of Zasharan's cave, and scrabbled at the sand with her hands.

She woke lying on her back again, her hands upon her stomach, but her hands were shut into fists, and the backs of them hurt up into her forearms, as if she had been squeezing them closed for a long time. With some difficulty she unbent the fingers, and two tiny palmfuls of sand poured out upon her nightdress. Slowly, slowly she sat up, pulling up folds of her nightdress to enclose the sand. She stood, clutching the front of her nightdress together, and went to her chest of drawers. She had been allowed to move into this room, which had been her grandmother's, when her grandmother died, but she had always been too busy— or too aware of herself as interloper—to disarrange any of her grandmother's things that weren't actively in her way. But they were friendly things, and once the first shock of grief was over, she liked having them there, reminding her of her gran, and no longer wondered if it might be disrespectful to keep them as they were. On the top of the

chest there was an assortment of little lidded boxes and jars that had once held such things as bobby pins and cotton balls and powder, and were now empty. She chose one and carefully transferred the sand into it. She stood looking at its lid for a moment. She had chosen this one because it had a pretty curl of dianthus flower and leaf painted on its surface; her gran's dianthus still bloomed in the garden. She lifted the lid to reassure herself that the sand was still there—that it hadn't disappeared as soon as she closed the box—and for a moment, faint but unmistakable, she smelled the spicy smell of Zasharan's cave, and *tiarhk*.

*When she dreamt of nothing again that night, she almost didn't care. When she woke up, she looked in the tiny box on her chest of drawers and the sand was still there on this second morning, and then she went downstairs to get breakfast. Today was her day to drive to the mall. Usually, if her list was not too long, she could spare an hour for herself. And today she wanted to go to the library.*

*It took more time to get to the mall than usual; she had had to go the long way round their block because of the fallen tree that still lay in the broken remains of their front paling, and there were other trees down elsewhere that the exhausted and overburdened county council had not yet cut up and hauled away. In one place the road had caved in where a flash flood had undermined it. There were detours and orange warning cones and temporary stoplights, and when she finally got there, some of the car park at the mall was blocked off. She'd have barely half an hour at the library, and only if she pelted through the rest first.*

*She didn't go to the library very often any more, since she had had to stop school. She didn't have much time for reading, and she couldn't think of any book she wanted to read: both fiction and nonfiction only reminded her of what she wasn't doing and might never do. She did read seed catalogues, intensely, from cover to cover, every winter, and the off-beat gardening books and even more bizarre popular science books Ruth bought her every birthday and Christmas, which, because Ruth had bought them, were friendly instead of accusing. The library felt like a familiar place from some other life. There were calluses on her hands that scraped against the pages that hadn't been there when she had been coming here several times a week.*

*None of the encyclopedias had any listings for Damar, nor the atlases, and she didn't have time to queue for a computer. They had added more computes since she had been here last, but it hadn't changed the length of the queue. She went reluctantly to the help desk. Geography had never been a strong suit, and by the time she was standing in front of the counter, she felt no more than ten and a good six inches shorter. "Er—have you ever heard of a place called Damar?" The librarian's eyes went first to the row of computers, all occupied, and she sighed. She looked up at Hetta. "Yes," said Hetta. "I've tried the encyclopedias and atlases."*

*The librarian smiled faintly, then frowned. "Damar. I don't recall—what do you know about it?"*

*It has eleven Sandpales and a Watcher named Zasharan at the fourth. "Urn-It—it has a big desert in it, which used to be ancient forest." The librarian raised her eyebrows.*

"It's—it's a crossword puzzle clue," said Hetta, improvising hastily. "It's—it's a sort of bet."

The librarian looked amused. She tapped Damar into the computer in front of her. "Hmm. Try under *Daria*. Oh yes—Damar," she said, looking interested. "I remember... oh dear. If you want anything recent, you will have to consult the newspaper archive." She looked suddenly hunted. "There's a bit of a, hmm, gap... up till five years ago, everything is on microfiche, and in theory everything since is available on the computer system but, well, it isn't, you know... Let me know if I can find... if I can try to find anything for you." She looked at Hetta with an expression that said full body armour and possibly an oxygen tank and face-mask were necessary to anyone venturing into the newspaper archive.

"Thank you," said Hetta demurely, and nearly ran back to the reference room; her half hour was already up.

*Daria. The Darian subcontinent in southwestern Asia comprises a large land-mass including both inland plains, mostly desert with irregular pockets of fertile ground, between its tall and extensive mountain ranges, and a long curved peninsula of gentler and more arable country in the south... Its government is a unique conception, being both the Republic of Damar under its own people and a Protectorate of the Homeland Empire and legislated by her appointed officers. See text articles... V*

*Damar. It existed.*

*She had been nearly an hour at the library. She ran out to the car park and banged the old car into gear in a way it was not at all used to. It gave a howl of protest but she barely heard it. Damar. It existed!*

*The ice cream had started to melt but her father never ate ice cream, and there were scones for tea with the eggs and sausages because scones were the fastest thing she could think of and her father wouldn't eat store bread. She ignored more easily than usual her mother's gently murmured litany of complaint when she took her tray, and in blessed peace and quiet—Dane and his girlfriend, Lara, were having dinner with her parents, Jeff was doing homework in his room, their father was downstairs in the shop, and Hetta had firmly turned the still-resident TV off—began washing up the pots and pans that wouldn't fit in the dishwasher. She was trying to remember anything she could about Daria—they had been studying the Near East in history and current events the year her grandmother had died and her mother had first taken seriously ill, and the only-thing she remembered clearly was *Great Expectations* in literature class, because she had been wishing that some convict out of a graveyard would rescue her. This had never struck her as funny before, but she was smiling over the sink when Ruth—whom she hadn't heard come into the kitchen—put her hand on her arm, and said, or rather whispered. "Hetta, what is with you? Are you okay?"*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"You haven't been yourself since the storm. I mean, good for you, I think you haven't been yourself in about eight years, except I was so young then I didn't know what was going on, and maybe you're becoming yourself again now. But you're different, and look,*

you know Mum and Dad, they don't like different. It'll turn out bad somehow if they notice. At the moment Dad's still totally preoccupied with the storm damage but he won't be forever. And even Mum—" Ruth shrugged. Their mother had her own ways of making things happen.

Hetta had stopped washing dishes in surprise but began again; Ruth picked up a dish-towel and began to dry. They both cast a wary look at the door; the hum of the dishwasher would disguise their voices as long as they spoke quietly, but their father didn't like conversations he couldn't hear, and the only topics he wished discussed all had to do with business and building furniture. "I—I'm embarrassed to tell you," said Hetta, concentrating on the bottom of a saucepan.

"Try me," said Ruth. "Hey, I study the sex lives of bugs. Nothing embarrasses me."

Hetta sucked in her breath on a suppressed laugh. "I—I've been having this dream—" She stopped and glanced at Ruth. Ruth was looking at her, waiting for her to go on. "It's... it's like something real."

"I've had dreams like that," said Ruth, "but they don't make me go around looking like I've got a huge important secret, at least I don't think they do."

Hetta grinned. Hetta had always been the dreamy daughter, as their father had often pointed out, and Ruth the practical one. Their grandmother had teased that she was grateful for the eight-year difference in their ages because telling stories to both of them at the same time would have been impossible. Hetta wanted fairy-tales. Ruth wanted natural history. (The two sons of the house had been expected to renounce the soft feminine pleasures of being tucked in and told stories.) The problem with Ruth's practicality was that it was turning out to have to do with science, not furniture; Ruth eventually wanted to go into medical research, and her biology teacher adored her. Ruth was fifteen, and in a year she would have to go up against their father about what she would do next, a confrontation Hetta had lost, and Dane had sidestepped by being—apparently genuinely—eager to stop wasting time in school and get down to building furniture ten hours a day. Hetta was betting on Ruth, but she wasn't looking forward to being around during the uproar.

"Do you know anything about Daria?"

Ruth frowned briefly. "It got its independence finally, a year or two ago, didn't it? And has gone back to calling itself Damar, which the Damarians had been calling it all along. There was something odd about the hand-over though." She paused. International politics was not something their father was interested in, and whatever the news coverage had been, they wouldn't have seen it at home. After a minute Ruth went on: "One of my friends—well, she's kind of a space case—Melanie, she says that it's full of witches and wizards or something and they do, well, real magic there, and all us Homelander bureaucrats either can't stand it and have really short terms and are sent home, or really get into it and go native and stay forever. She had a great-uncle who got into it and wanted to stay, but his wife hated it, so they came home, and you still only have to say 'Daria' to her and she bursts into tears, but he told Melanie a lot about it before he died, and according to her... well, I said she's a space case. It's not the sort of thing I would

remember except that there was something weird about the hand-over when it finally happened and Melanie kept saying 'well of course' like she knew the real reason. Why?"

"I've been dreaming about it."

"About Daria?—Damar, I mean. How do you dream about a country?"

"Not about the whole country. About a—a person, who lives on the edge of the—the Great Desert. He says he is one of the Watchers—there are eleven of them. Urn. They sort of keep an eye on the desert. For sandstorms and things."

"Is he cute?"

Hetta felt a blush launch itself across her face. "I—I hadn't thought about it." This was true.

Ruth laughed, and forgot to swallow it, and a moment later there was a heavy foot on the stair up from the shop and their father appeared at the kitchen door. "Hetta can finish the dishes without your help," he said. "Ruth, as you have nothing to do, you can have a look at these," and he thrust a handful of papers at her. "I've had an insulting estimate from the insurance agent today and I want something to answer him with. If Hetta kept the files in better order, I wouldn't have to waste time now."

She did not dream of Zasharan that night, but she dreamed of walking in a forest full of trees she did not know the names of, and hearing bird-voices, and knowing, somehow, that some of them were human beings calling to other human beings the news that there was a stranger in their forest. She seemed to walk through the trees for many hours, and once or twice it occurred to her that perhaps she was lost and should be frightened, but she looked round at the trees and smiled, for they were friendly, and she could not feel lost even if she did not know where she was, nor frightened, when she was surrounded by friends. At last she paused, and put her hand on the deeply rutted bark of a particular tree that seemed to call to her to touch it, and looked up into its branches; and there, as if her eyes were learning to see, the leaves and branches rearranged themselves into a new pattern that included a human face peering down at her. It held very still, but it saw at once when she saw it; and then it smiled, and a branch near it turned into an arm, and it waved. When she raised her own hand—the one not touching the tree—to wave back, she woke, with one hand still lifted in the air. "\*"

She did not dream of Zasharan the next night either, but she dreamed that she was walking past a series of stables and paddocks, where the horses watched her, ears pricked, as she went by, till she came to a sand-floored ring where several riders were performing a complicated pattern, weaving in and out of each other's track. The horses wore no bridles, and their saddles, whose shape was strange to her eyes, had no stirrups. She watched for a moment, for the pattern the horses were making (while their riders appeared to sit motionless astride them) was very lovely and graceful. When the horses had all halted, heads in a circle, and all dropped their noses as if in salute, one of the riders broke away and came towards her, and nodded to her, and said, "I am Rohk, master of this dlor, and I should know everyone who goes here., but I do not know you. Will you give me your name, and how came you past the guard at the gate?"



He spoke in a pleasant voice, and she answered with no fear, "My name is Hetta, and I do not remember coming in your gate. Zasharan has mentioned you to me, and perhaps that is how I came here."

Rohk touched his breast with his closed hand, and then opened it towards her, flicking the fingers in a gesture she did not know. "If you are a friend of Zasharan, then you are welcome here, however you came."

On the third night she was again walking in a forest, and she looked up hopefully, searching for a human face looking down at her, but for what seemed to be a long time she saw no one. But as she walked and looked, she began to realise that she was hearing something besides birdsong and the rustle of leaves; it sounded like bells, something like the huge bronze bells of the church tower in her town, but there were too many bells, too many interlaced notes—perhaps more like the bells of the cathedral in Mauncestor. She paused and listened more intently. The bells seemed to grow louder: their voices were wild, buoyant, superb; and suddenly she was among them, held in the air by the bright weave of their music. The biggest bell was turning just at her right elbow, she could look into it as it swung up towards her, she could see the clapper fall, BONG! The noise this close was unbearable—it should have been unbearable—it struck through her like daggers—no: like sunbeams through a prism, and she stood in air full of rainbows. But now she could hear voices, human voices, through the booming of the bells., and they said: *Come down, you must come down, for when the bells stand up and silent, you will fall.*

*She looked down and saw the faces of the ringers., hands busy and easy on the ropes, but the faces looking up at her fearful and worried. I do not know how, she said, but she knew she made no sound, any more than a rainbow can speak. And then she heard the silence beyond the bells, and felt herself falling past the music and into the silence; but she woke before she had time to be afraid, and she was in her bed in her father's house, and it was time to get up and make breakfast. That afternoon when Ruth came home from school, she bent over Hetta's chair and dropped a kiss on the top of her head, as she often did, but before she straightened up again, she murmured, "I have something for you." But Lara, on the other side of the table, was peeling potatoes with a great show of being helpful., and Ruth said no more. It was a busy evening, for both the hired cabinetmakers from the shop, Ron and Tim, had been invited to stay late and come for supper, which was one of Hetta's father's ways of avoiding paying them overtime., and it was not until they had gone to bed that Ruth came creeping into Hetta's room with a big envelope. She grinned at Hetta, said, "Sweet dreams," and left again, closing the door silently behind her. Hetta listened till she was sure Ruth had missed the three squeaky stairs on her way back to her own room before she dumped the contents of the envelope out on her bed.*

*Come to Damar, land of orange groves, said the flier on top. She stared at the trees in the photo, but they were nothing like the trees she had seen in her dream two nights before. She shuffled through the small pile of brochures. As travel agents' propaganda went, this was all very low-key. There were no girls in bikinis and no smiling natives in traditional dress; just landscape, desert and mountains and forests—and orange plantations, and some odd-looking buildings. What people there were all seemed to be staring somewhat dubiously at the camera. Some of them were cinnamon-skinned and black-haired like Za-sharan.*

There were also a few sheets of plain stark print listing available flights and prices—these made her hiss between her teeth. Her father gave her something above the housekeeping money that he called her wages, which nearly covered replacing clothes that had worn out and disintegrated off their seams; she had nonetheless managed to save a little, by obstinacy; she could probably save more if she had to. Most of her grandmother's clothes still hung in the cupboard, for example; she had already altered one or two blouses to fit herself, and a skirt for Ruth. The difficulty with this however was that while her father would never notice the recycling of his mother's old clothes, Hetta's mother would, and would mention it in her vague-seeming way to her husband, who would then decide that Hetta needed less money till this windfall had been thoroughly used up. But over the years Hetta had discovered various ways and means to squeeze a penny till it screamed, her garden produced more now than it had when she began as she learnt more about gardening, and the butcher liked her...

Perhaps. Just perhaps.

She did not dream of Zasharan that night either, but she smelled the desert wind, and for a moment she stood somewhere that was not Farbellow or her father's shop, and she held a cup in her hands, but when she raised it to taste its contents, it was only water.

She thought about the taste of desert water that afternoon as she raked the pond at the back of the vegetable garden. She wore tall green wellies on her feet and long rubber gloves, but it was still very hard not to get smudgy and bottom-of-pond-rot-smelling while hauling blanket-weed and storm detritus out of a neglected pond. She didn't get back here as often as she wanted to because the pond didn't produce anything but newts and blanket-weed and she didn't have time for it, although even at its worst it was a magical spot for her, and the only place in the garden where her mother couldn't see her from her window.

She had wondered -all her life how her great-grandmother had managed to convince her great-grandfather to dig her a useless ornamental pond. Her greatgrandfather had died when she was four, but she remembered him clearly: in his extreme old age he was still a terrifying figure, and even at four she remembered how her grandmother, his daughter, had seemed suddenly to shed a bur-

den after his death—and how Hetta's own father had seemed to expand to fill that empty space. Hetta's father, her grandmother had told her, sadly, quietly, not often, but now and again, was just like his grandfather. Hetta would have guessed this anyway; there were photographs of him, and while he had been taller than her father, she recognised the glare. She couldn't imagine what it must have been like to be his only child, as her grandmother had been.

But his wife had had her pond.

It was round, and there was crazy paving around the edge of it. There was a little thicket of coppiced dogwood at one end, which guarded it from her mother, which Hetta cut back religiously every year; but the young red stems were very pretty and worthwhile on their own account as well as for the screen they provided. She planted sunflowers at the backs of the vegetable beds, and then staked them, so they would stand through the

winter: these sheltered it from view of the shop as if, were her father reminded of it, it would be filled in at once and used for potatoes. It was an odd location to choose for a pond; it was too well shaded by the apple tree and the wall to grow water lilies in, for example, but the paving made it look as though you might want to set chairs beside it and admire the newts and the blanket-weed on nice summer evenings; nearer the house you would have less far to carry your patio furniture and tea-tray. Maybe her great-grandmother had wanted to hide from view too. Hetta's grandmother had found it no solace; she called it "eerie" and stayed away. "She was probably just one of these smooth, dry humans with no amphibian blood," Ruth had said once, having joined Hetta poolside one evening and discovered, upon getting up, that she had been sitting in mud. Ruth had also told Hetta that her pond grew rather good newts: Turner's Greater Red-Backed Newt, to be precise, which was big (as newts go) and rare.

Hetta paused a moment, leaning on her rake. She would leave the blanket-weed heaped up on the edge of the pond overnight, so that anything that lived in it had time to slither, creep, or scurry back into the pond; and then she would barrow it to the compost heap behind the garage. She looked down at her feet. The blanket-weed was squirming. A newt crept out and paused as if considering; it had a jagged vermilion crest down its back like a miniature dragon, and eyes that seemed to flash gold in the late-afternoon sunlight—she fancied that it glanced up at her before it made its careful way down the blanket-weed slope and slid into the pond with the tiniest chuckle of broken water.

That night she woke again in Zasharan's rocky chamber. She lay again on the bed or pallet where she had woken before; and she turned her head on her pillow and saw Zasharan dozing in a chair drawn up beside her. As she looked into his face, he opened his eyes and looked back at her. "Good," he said. "I dreamed that you would wake again soon. Come—can you stand? I am sorry to press you when you are weary and confused, but there are many things I do not understand, and I want to take you to my Eye quickly, before you escape me again. If you cannot stand, and if you will permit it, I will carry you."

"Dream?" she said. "You dreamed I would return?" *She was sitting up and putting her feet on the floor as she spoke—bare feet, sandy floor, her toes and heels wriggled themselves into their own little hollows without her conscious volition. For the first time she thought to look at what she was wearing: it was a long loose robe, dun-coloured in the lamplight, very like her nightdress at home—it could almost be her nightdress—but the material was heavier and fell more fluidly, and there seemed to be a pattern woven into it that she could not see in" the dimness.*

"Watchers often dream," he said. "It is one of the ways we Watch. No Watcher would be chosen who had not found his—or her—way through dreams many times." He offered her his hand. "But you—I am not accustomed to my visitors telling me they are dream-things when I am not dreaming."

*She stood up and staggered a little, and he caught her under the elbows. "I will walk," she said. "I walked here before, did I not? The—the night I came here—nearly a fortnight ago now." He smiled faintly. "I would like to walk. Walking makes me feel—less of a dream-thing."*

His smile jerked, as if he understood some meaning of her remark she had not meant, and they left the room, and walked for some time through rocky corridors hazily lit by some variable and unseen source. At first these were narrow and low, and the floor was often uneven although the slope was steadily upward; both walls and floor were yellowy-goldeny-grey, although the walls seemed darker for the shadows they held in their rough hollows. The narrow ways widened, and she could see other corridors opening off them on either side. She felt better for the walk—realler, as she had said, less like a dream-thing. She could feel her feet against the sand, a faint ache from the wound on her ankle, listen to her own breath, feel the air of this place against her skin. She knew she was walking slowly, tentatively, when at home she was quick and strong, and needed to be. Perhaps—perhaps they were very high here—had he not said something about hills?—perhaps it was the elevation that made her feel so faint and frail.

They had turned off the main way into one of the lesser corridors, and came at last to a spiral stair. The treads twinkled with trodden sand in the dim directionless light as far up as she could see till they rounded the first bend. "You first, lady," he said, and she took a deep breath and grasped the rope railing, and began to pull herself wearily up, step by step; but to her surprise the way became easier the higher they climbed, her legs grew less tired and her breath less laboured. They came out eventually on a little landing before a door, and Zasharan laid his hand softly on it and murmured a word Hetta could not hear, and it opened.

There were windows on the far side of the room, curtainless. with what she guessed was dawn sunlight streaming in; she flinched as the daylight touched her as if in this place she would prove a ghost or a vampire, but nothing happened but that its touch was gentle and warm. The view was of a steep slope rising above them; the room they were in seemed to grow out of the hillside.

There was a round pool in the middle of the floor and Zasharan knelt down beside it on the stone paving that surrounded it. "This is my Eye," he said softly. "Come and look with me."

She knelt near him, propping herself with her hands, for she was feeling weary again. Her gaze seemed to sink below the water's surface in a way she did not understand; perhaps the contents of the pool was not water. And as her sight plunged deeper, she had the odd sensation that something in the depths was rising towards her, and she wondered suddenly if she wanted to meet it, whatever it was.

A great, golden Eye, with a vertical pupil expanding as she saw it, as if it had only just noticed her...

She gave a small gasp, and she heard Zasharan murmuring beside her, but she could not hear what he said; and then the pupil of the Eye expanded till it filled the whole of her vision with darkness, and then the darkness cleared, and she saw—

She woke in her bed, her heart thundering, gasping for breath, having pulled the bed to bits, the blankets on the floor, the sheets knotted under her and her feet on bare ticking. It was just before dawn; there was grey light leaking through the gap at the bottom of the blind. She felt exhausted, as if she had had no sleep at all, and at the same time grimly,

remorselessly awake. She knew she would not sleep again. Her right ankle ached, and she put her fingers down to rub it; there was a ridge there, like an old scar.

She got through the day somehow., but she left a pot of soup on the back of the cooker turned up too high, so it had boiled over while she was scraping the seeds out of squashes over the compost heap, and her mother had called out, a high, thin shriek, that the house was burning down, although it was only burnt soup on the hob. Her mother had palpitations for the rest of the evening, was narrowly talked out of ringing the doctor to have something new prescribed for her nerves, and insisted that she might have burned in her bed. Her father complained about the thick burnt smell spoiling his tea, and that Hetta was far too old to make stupid mistakes like that. She went to bed with a headache, remembering that the blanket-weed was still waiting for her to haul it away, and found two aspirin on her pillow, and a glass of water on the floor beside it: Ruth. Their father believed that pharmacology was for cowards. The only drugs in the house were on her mother's bedside table, and Hetta would much rather have a headache than face her mother again that evening; she had forgotten Ruth's secret stash. She swallowed the pills gratefully and lay down.

When she opened her eyes she was again by the pool in Zasharan's tower, but she had moved, or been moved, a little distance from it, so she could no longer look into it (or perhaps it could no longer look out at her), and Zasharan sat beside her, head bowed, holding her hand. When she stirred, he looked up at once, and said, "I have looked, and asked my people to look, in bur records, and I cannot find any talc to help us. I am frightened, for you sleep too long—it is longer each time you leave. You have been asleep nearly a day, and there are hollows under your eyes. This is not the way it should be. You live elsewhere— you have been born and have lived to adulthood in this elsewhere—where you should not be; you should be here; my Eye would not have troubled itself to look at any stranger, and my heart welcomes you whether I would or nay. There have been others who have come here by strange ways, but they come and they stay. If you wish to come here and we wish to have you, why do you not stay?" She sat up and put her other hand on his and said, "No, wait, it is all right. I have found Damar in the atlas at home, and my sister has found out about air flights, and I will come here in the—in the—" She stumbled over how to express it. "In the usual way. And I will come here, and find you." She heard herself saying this as if she were listening to a television programme, as if she had nothing to do with it; and yet she knew she had something to do with it, because she was appalled. Who was this man she only met in dream to tell her where she belonged, and who was she to tell him that she was going to come to him—even to herself she did not know how to put it—that she was going to come to him in the real world?

"Air flights," he said thoughtfully.

"Yes," she said. "Where is the nearest airport? I could not find Thaar, or Chin—Chin—" As she said this, her voice wavered, because she remembered how hard it was to remember anything from a dream; and she was dreaming. *Remember the sand, her dream-thought told her. Remember the sand that lies in the little box on your chest of drawers. "Oh—you will have to tell me how to find you. I assume there is a better way than..." Her voice trailed away again as she remembered being lost in the sandstorm, of being led blindly through the sand-wind, her arm pulled round Zasharan's shoulders till her own shoulder ached,*

remembered her curious sense that they were somehow kept safe in a little rolling bubble of air that let them make their way to the door in the cliff. That is why he is a Watcher, said the dream-thought. *There is little use in Watching if you cannot act upon what you see.*

*"I do not know where the nearest airport is. What is an airport?" said Za-sharan.*

*She knew, sometimes., that she spoke some language other than Homelander in her dreams; but then it was the sort of thing you felt you knew while you were dreaming and yet also knew that it was only a trick of the mind. The words she spoke to Zasharan—the words she had heard and spoken to the other Da-marians she had met in other dreams—felt different. It was just a part of the dream., as was the different, more rolling, growlier, peaked-and-valleyed sound of the words Zasharan and the other Damararians said to her than what she spoke in Farbellow, when she was awake. (I am awake now, said the dream-thought.) It was only a part of the same mind-trick that when Zasharan said "airport," it sounded like a word that came from some other language than the one he was speaking.*

*She looked around, and saw a table in the corner, and books upon it (were these the records he had been searching for stories like hers?), and several loose sheets of paper, and a pen. She stood up—carefully, prepared to be dizzy—and gestured towards the table. Zasharan stood up with her. "May I?" she said. He nodded as anyone might nod, but he also made a gesture with his hand that was both obviously that of hospitality and equally not at all—she thought; her dream-thought thought—like the gesture she would have made if someone had asked her to borrow a sheet of paper.*

*She took a deep breath, and picked up the pen (which was enough like an old-fashioned fountain pen that she did not have to ask how to use it) and drew an airplane on the top sheet of paper. She was not an artist, but anyone in the world she knew would have recognised what she drew at once as an airplane.*

*Zasharan only looked at it, puzzled, worried, both slightly frowning and slightly smiling, and shook his head, and made another gesture, a gesture of unknowing, although not the shoulders raised and hands spread that she would have made (that she thought she would have made) in a similar situation.*

*Frustrated, she folded the sheet of paper, lengthwise in half, then folding the nose, the wings—she threw it across the room and it flew over the round pool where the Eye waited, bumped into the wall on the far side and fell to the ground. "Paper airplane," she said.*

*"Paper glider." he agreed. He walked round the pool, and picked her airplane up, and brought it back to the table. He unfolded it, carefully, pressing the folds straight with his fingers, smoothing and smoothing the wrinkles the bumped nose had made—as if paper were rare and precious, she thought, refusing to follow that thought any farther—and then, quickly, he folded it again, to a new pattern, a much more complex pattern, and when he tossed his glider in the air it spun up and then spiralled down in a lovely curve, and lit upon the floor as lightly as a butterfly.*

*She looked at him, and there was a sick, frightened feeling in her throat. "When you*

travel—long distances," she said, "how—how do you go?" She could not bring herself to ask about cars and trucks and trains.

"We have horses and asses and ankaba," he said. "You may walk or ride or lead a beast loaded with your gear. We have guides to lead you. We have waggoners who will carry you and your possessions. There are coaches if you can afford them; they are faster—and, they say, more comfortable, but I would not count on this." He spoke mildly, as if this were an ordinary question, but his eyes were fixed on her face in such a way that made it plain he knew it was not.

Slowly she said, "What year is it, Zasharan?"

He said, "It is the year 3086, counting from the year Gasthamor came from the east and struck the Hills with the hilt of his sword, and the Well of the City of the Kings and Queens opened under the blow."

"Gasthamor," said Hetta, tasting the name.

"Gasthamor, who was the teacher of Oragh, who was the teacher of Semthara, who was the teacher of Frayadok, who was the teacher of Goriolo, who was the teacher of Luthe," said Zasharan.

*Gasthamor, she repeated to herself. Goriolo, She doubted that the encyclopedia would tell the tale of the warrior-mage who struck the rock with the hilt of his sword and produced a flow of water that would last over three thousand years, but an encyclopedia of legends might. "You—you said the Queen's City, once before," she said. "What is the name of your queen?"*

"Fortunatar," he said. "Fortunatar of the Clear Seeing."

*She woke to the sound of her own voice, murmuring, Gasthamor, Fortunatar of the Clear Seeing, the year 3086. Her heart was heavy as she went about her chores that day., and she told herself that this was only because it was two more days before she could go to the library again, and look up the kings and queens of Damar.*

*She made time to finish cleaning the pool at the back of the garden, hauling the blanket-weed—now a disgusting sticky brown mat—two heaped barrowloads of the stuff—to the compost heap. When she was done, she knelt on the crazy paving that edged the pool, and dipped her dirty hands in the water. The sting of its coolness was friendly, energising; her head felt clearer and her heart lighter than it had in several days. She patted her face with one wet hand, letting the other continue to trail in the water, and she felt a tiny flicker against her palm. She looked down, and there was a newt, swimming back and forth in a tiny figure eight, the curl of one arc inside her slightly cupped fingers. She turned her hand so that it was palm up. and spread her fingers. It swam to the centre of her palm and stopped. She thought she could just feel the tickle of tiny feet against her skin.*

*She raised her hand very, very slowly; as the newt's crested back broke the surface of the water, it gave a frantic, miniature heave and scrabble, and she thought it would dive*

over the little rise made by the web between her forefinger and thumb, but it stilled instead, seeming to crouch and brace itself, as against some great peril. Now she definitely felt its feet: the forefeet at the pulse-point of her wrist, the rear on the pads at the roots of her fingers., the tail sliding off her middle finger between it and the ring finger. She found she was holding her breath.

She continued to raise her hand till it was eye level to herself; and the newt lifted its head and stared at her. Its eyes were so small, it was difficult to make out their colour: gold, she thought, with a vertical black pupil. The newt gave a tiny shudder and the startling red crest on its back lifted and stiffened.

They gazed at each other for a full minute. Then she lowered her hand again till it touched the pond surface, and this time the newt was gone so quickly that she stared at her empty palm, wondering if she had imagined the whole thing.

She heard bells ringing in her dreams that night, but they seemed sombre and sad. On the next night she thought she heard Zasharan's voice, but she was lost in the dark, and whichever way she turned, his voice came from behind her, and very far away.

She stormed around the supermarket the next day, and when she found herself at the check-out behind someone who had to think about which carefully designated bag each item went into, she nearly started throwing his own apples at him. She arrived at the library with less than half an hour left, but her luck had found her at last, for there was a computer free. *Queens of Damar, she typed. There was a whirr, and a list of web sites which mentioned (among other things) internationally assorted queens apparently not including Damarian, paint varnishes, long underwear, and hair dressing salons, presented itself to her hopefully. She stared at the screen, avoiding asking something that would tell her what she feared. At last she typed: Who is the ruler of Damar today?*

*Instantly the screen replied: King Doroman rules with the Council of Five and the Parliament of Montaratur.*

*There was no help for it. Queen Fortunatar of the Clear Seeing, she typed.*

*There was a pause while the computer thought about it. She must have looked as frustrated and impatient as she felt, because a librarian paused beside her and asked in that well-practised ready-to-go-away-without-taking-offense voice if she could be of service.*

*"I am trying to find out some information about the queen of Damar," she said.*

*"Damar? Oh—Daria—oh—Damar. Someone else was just asking about Damar a few weeks ago. It's curious how much we don't hear about a country as big as it is. They have a king now, don't they? I seem to remember from the independence ceremonies. I can't remember if he had a wife or not."*

*The computer was still thinking. Hetta said, finding herself glad of the distraction, "The queen I want is Fortunatar of the Clear Seeing."*



The librarian repeated this thoughtfully. "She sounds rather, hmm, poetical, though, doesn't she? Have you tried myths and legends?"

The computer had now hung itself on the impossible question of a poetical queen of Damar, and Hetta was happy to let the librarian lean over her and put her hands on the keyboard and wrestle it free. The librarian knew, too, how to ask the library's search engine questions it could handle, and this time when an answering screen came up, there was a block of text highlighted:

Shortly after this period of upheaval, Queen Fortunatar, later named of the Clear Seeing for the justice of her rulings in matters both legal and numinous, took her throne upon the death of her half-brother Linmath. Linmath had done much in his short life, and he left her a small but sound queendom which flourished under her hand. The remaining feuds were settled not by force of arms (nor by the trickery that had caught Linmath fatally unaware) but by weaponless confrontation before the queen and her counsellors; and fresh feuds took no hold and thus shed no blood. The one serious and insoluble menace of Fortunatar's time were the sandstorms in the Great Desert which were frequent and severe.

"Hmm," said the librarian, and scrolled quickly to the top of the document. *An Introduction to the Legendary History of Damar:*

*All countries have their folk tales and traditions, but Damar is unusual in the wealth of these, and in the inextricable linkage between them and what western scholars call factual history. Even today...*

*Hetta closed her eyes. Then she opened them again without looking at the computer screen, made a dramatic gesture of looking at her watch, and did not have to feign the start of horror when she saw what it was telling her. "Oh dear—I really must go—thank you so much—I will come back when I have more time." She was out the door before she heard what the librarian was asking her. Probably whether she wanted to print out any of what they had found.*

No.

*For three nights she did not dream at all, and waking was cruel. The one moment when her spirits lifted enough for her to feel a breeze on her face and pause to breathe the air with pleasure was one sunny afternoon when she went back to her pool and scrubbed the encircling paving. She scrubbed with water only, not knowing what any sort of soap run-off might do to the pond life, and she saw newts wrinkle the water with their passing several times. When she stopped to breathe deep, she thought she saw a newt with a red back hovering at the edge of the pond as if it were looking at her, and it amused her for another moment to imagine that all the newts she saw were just the one newt, swimming back and forth, keeping her company.*

*That night she dreamed again, but it was a brief and disturbing dream, when she sat at the edge of Zasharan's pool where the Watcher's Eye lay, and she strained to look into the water and see it looking out at her, but the water was dark and opaque, though she felt sure the Eye was there, and aware of her. She woke exhausted, and aching as if with*

physical effort.

She dreamed the same the next night, and the oppression and uselessness of it were almost too much to bear. Her head throbbed with the effort to peer through the surface of the water, and she fidgeted where she sat as if adjusting her body might help her to see, knowing this was not true, and yet unable to sit still nonetheless. There was a scratchy noise as she moved and resettled, and grit under her palms as she leaned on them. Sand. The ubiquitous Damarian desert sand; Zasharan had told her that usually there was no sand in the Watcher's chamber but that this year it had blown and drifted even there. She dragged her blind gaze from the water and refocussed on the sand at the edge of the pool: the same glittery, twinkly sand that had first given her her cruelly unfounded hope when she had woken at home with grains of it in her hands and nightdress.

She shifted her weight and freed one hand. *Help me, she wrote in the sand at the edge of the pool, and as she raised her finger from the final e, the dream dissolved, and she heard the milk float in the street below, and knew she would be late with breakfast.*

*A fortnight passed, and she dreamed of Damar no more. She began to grow reaccustomed to her life above the furniture shop, housekeeper, cook, mender, minder, bookkeeper, dogsbody—nothing. Nobody. She would grow old like this. She might marry Ron or Tim; that would please her father, and tie one of them even more strongly to the shop. She supposed her father did not consider the possibility that she might not be tied to the shop herself; she supposed she did not consider the possibility either. She had raised no protest when her parents had sent Mrs. Halford and Mr. Jonah and the possibility of university and a career away; she could hardly protest now that she had a dream-world she liked better than this one and wished to go there. The paperback shelves at the grocery store testified to the popularity of dream-worlds readers could only escape to for a few hours in their imaginations. She wondered how many people dreamed of the worlds they read about in books. She tried to remember if there had been some book, some fairy-tale of her childhood, that had begun her secret love of deserts, of the sandstorm-torn time of Queen Fortunatar of the Clear Seeing, of a landscape she had never seen with her waking eyes; she could remember no book and no tale her grandmother told that was anything like what she had dreamed.*

*It took three weeks, but Ruth finally managed to corner her one Saturday afternoon, hoeing the vegetable garden. "No you don't," she said as Hetta picked her hoe up hastily and began to move back towards the garden shed. "I want to talk to you, and I mean to do it. Those dreams you were having about Damar lit you up, and the light's gone off again. It's not just the price of the ticket, is it? We'd get the money somehow."*

*Hetta dropped the hoe blade back behind the cabbages, but left it motionless. "No," she muttered. "It's not just the money." Her fingers tightened on the handle, and the blade made a few erratic scrapes at the soil.*

*"Then what is it?"*

*Hetta steadied the blade and began to hoe properly. Ruth showed no sign of going away, so at last she said: "It doesn't matter. It was a silly idea anyway. Doing something because you dreamed about it."*

Ruth made a noise like someone trying not to yell when they've just cracked their head on a low door. She stepped round the edge of the bed and seized Hetta's wrist in both hands. Ruth was smaller than Hetta, and spent her spare time in a lab counting beetles, but Hetta was surprised at the strength of her grasp. "Talk to me," said Ruth. "I have been worrying about you for years. Since Grandma died. You're not supposed to have to worry about your older sister when you're six. Don't you think I know you've saved my life? Father would have broken me like he breaks everyone he gets his hands on if I'd been the elder—like he broke Mum, like he's broken Dane, like he's broken Tim and Ron and they were even grown-ups—and Lara's going, for all that she thinks she just wants to marry Dane. You are the only one of us who has been clever enough, or stubborn enough, to save a little bit of your soul from him—maybe Grandma did, when she was still alive I wasn't paying so much attention, maybe you learned it from her—and I learned from you that it can be done. I know it, and Jeff does too—you know, with that programming stuff he can do, he's already got half his university paid for. When the time comes, nobody'll be able to say no to him. We're going to be all right—and that's thanks to you. It's time to save yourself now. That little bit of your soul seems to live in that desert of yours—if I were a shrink instead of a biologist, I'm sure I could have a really good time with that metaphor—I've wondered where you kept it. But you're going to lose it, now, after all, if you're not careful. What are you waiting for? Lara can learn to do the books—I'll tell Dane to suggest it, they'll both think it's a great idea—I'll teach her. We'll eat like hell, maybe, but there's only a year left for me and two for Jeff, and the rest of 'em are on their own. Who knows? Maybe Mum will get out of bed. Hetta. My lovely sister. Go. I'll visit you, wherever you end up."

*Hetta stood trembling. In her mind's eye she saw Zasharan, sand, trees, bells, horses, tree-framed faces, the Eye, the pool. For a moment they were more real to her than the garden she stood in or the bruising grip on her wrist. She realised this—realised it and lost it again as she recognised the landscape of her real life—with a pain so great, she could not bear it.*

*She burst into tears.*

*She was only vaguely aware of Ruth putting an arm round her shoulders and leading her back behind the storm-broken sunflower screen and sitting her down at the pool's edge, vaguely aware of Ruth rocking her as she had many times rocked Ruth, years ago, when their mother had first taken to her bed and their father shouted all the time. She came slowly to herself again with her head on Ruth's breast, and Ruth's free hand trailing drops of cold water from the pond against her face.*

*She sat up slowly. Ruth waited. She began to tell Ruth everything, from the first dream. She stumbled first over saying Fortunatar's name: Queen Fortunatar of the Clear Seeing. And she paused before she explained what had happened in the library the day before. "It's all imaginary. It's not only not real, it's not even history—it's just legends. I might as well be dreaming of King Arthur and Robin Hood and Puck of Pook's Hill and Middle Earth. If—if you're right that a little of my soul lives there, then—then it's an imaginary soul too." Nothing, whispered her mind. Nothing but here, now, this. She looked at the walls around the garden: even from this, the garden's farthest point, she could hear the electric buzz of woodworking tools, and the wind, from the wrong direction today,*

brought them the smell of hot oil from Benny's Fish and Chips.

Ruth was silent a long time, but she held on to one of her sister's hands, and Hetta, exhausted from the effort of weeping and explaining, made no attempt to draw away. She would have to go indoors soon, and start supper. First she had to pull the fleece back over her exposed cabbages; there was going to be a frost tonight. Soon she had to do it. Not just yet.

Ruth said at last: "Well, they thought for hundreds of years that bumblebees couldn't fly, and the bumblebees went on flying while they argued about it, and then they finally figured it out. It never made any difference to the bumblebees. And I met Melanie's great-uncle once and he was no fool, and Melanie and I are friends because she's not really a space case, it's just that if she pretends to be one, she can tell her uncle's stories. Haven't you ever thought that legends have a lot of truth in them? History is just organised around facts. Facts aren't the whole story or the bumblebees would have had to stop flying till the scientists figured out how they could."

Hetta said wearily, "That's a little too poetical for me. Legends and poetry don't change the fact that I have to go get supper now."

Ruth said, "Wait. Wait. I'm still thinking. I'll help you with supper." Her head was bowed, and the hand that wasn't holding Hetta's was still trailing in the pool, and she flicked up water drops as if her thoughts were stinging her. "You know, I think there's a newt trying to get your attention. One of these big red fellows."

"Yes, I've met him before," said Hetta, trying to sound lighthearted, trying to go with Ruth's sudden change of subject, trying to accept that there was nothing to be done about Damarian dream-legends, and that this was her life.

"Not very newt-like behaviour," Ruth said. "Look." There was a newt swimming, back and forth, as it—he or she—had swum before. "Watch," said Ruth. She dabbled her fingers near the newt and it ducked round them and continued its tiny laps, back and forth, in front of the place where Hetta sat. Ruth dabbled again, and it ducked again, and came straight back to Hetta. "Put your hand in the water," said Ruth.

Hetta was still in that half-trance mood of having told her secret, and so she put her hand into the water without protest. The newt swam to her and crept up on the back of her hand. She raised her hand out of the pond, slowly, as she had done once before; the newt clung on. She stared into the small golden eyes, and watched the vertical pupil dilate as it looked back at her.

"Maybe Queen Fortunatar of the Clear Seeing is trying to send you a message," said Ruth.

Hetta dreamed again that night. She came through the door she had first entered by, when Zasharan had saved her from the storm. She came in alone, the sand swirling around her, and closed the door against the wind with her own strength. She felt well and alert and clear-headed. She dropped the scarf she had wrapped around her face, and set off, as if she knew the way, striding briskly down the corridors, the sand sliding away under her

soft-booted feet, and then up a series of low stairs, where the sand grated between her soles and the stairstone. The same dim light shone as it had shone the night that Zasharan had guided her, but she often put her hand against the wall for reassurance, for the shadows seemed to fall more thickly than they had done when she was with him. She was not aware of why she chose one way rather than another, but she made every choice at every turning without hesitation.

She came to the spiral stair, and climbed it. When she put her hand to the door of the Eye's chamber, it opened.

Zasharan was standing on the far side of the pool. Hetta raised her hands and pushed her hair back from her face, suddenly needing to do something homely and familiar, suddenly feeling that nothing but her own body was familiar. *She let her palms rest against her cheekbones briefly. The sleeves of the strange, pale, loose garment she was wearing fell back from her forearms; there was a shift beneath it, and loose trousers beneath that, and the soft boots with their long laces wrapped the trousers around her calves. Her right ankle throbbed.*

Zasharan made no move to approach her. *From the far side of the pool of the Eye, he said, "I thought you would not return. It has been a sennight since you disappeared. If there had not been the hollow in the sand beside the pool where you had lain, I might have believed I had dreamed you. I went back to the little room by the lowest door where I first brought you, and the dressings cabinet still lay open, and the needle lay beside it with the end of the thread I had used on your ankle, and one bandage was missing; and I could see where your blood had fallen in the sand, for no one goes there but me, and I had not swept nor put things to rights. I—when you first came, I—I thought I knew why you were here. I thought—I thought I had read the signs—not only in the sand, but in your face. I was glad. But you do not wish to come here, do you? That is what I missed, when I searched the records. That is why your story is different. Sandstorms are treacherous; I knew that; I just did not see what it meant here. It is only the blood you shed here that brings you back, the blood you shed by the treachery of the sand. That is all. I must let you go. I am glad you have come back once more, to let me say good-bye, and to apologise for trying to hold you against your will."*

There were tears under Hetta's palms. She smeared them away and dropped her hands. *"I—I dream you." She meant to say I only dream you, you are just a dream.*

*Zasharan smiled; it was a painful smile. "Of course. How else could we meet? You have told me of Roanshire, in a land I do not know. I should have realised... when you never invited me to come to you in your dreams..."*

*"I only dream you! You are just a dream!" Hetta put her hands to her face again, and clawed at her hair. "I looked up Queen Fortunatar in the library! She is a legend! She is not real! Even if she were real, she would have been real hundreds of years ago! We have airports now, and cars, and electric lights and television and computers!"*

*Zasharan stepped forward abruptly, to the very edge of the pool. "Queen Fortunatar is in your library?" he said. "You have read about her—you sought to read about her in your waking Roanshire?"*

"Yes, yes," said Hetta impatiently. "But—"

"Why?"

"Why? Why did I?—because I wanted her to be real, of course! Because I want you to be real! You do not want to waste your dreaming on my life—you do not want to visit me there!—although I wish Ruth could meet you—oh, this is absurd! I am dreaming, and Queen Fortunatar is a myth, a fairy-tale—she is not real."

*"Everything that is, is real," murmured Zasharan, as if his mind were on something else. Then he walked round the pool and held his hand out towards her. "Am I real? Take my hand."*

*Hetta stared at him and his outstretched hand. This was only a dream; she had touched him, dreaming, many times on her visits here; he had half-carried her out of the sandstorm, he had dressed her ankle, he had held a cup for her to drink from, he had led her to this room.*

*She raised her hand, but curled it up against her own body. What if, when she reached out to him, her hand went through his, as if he were a ghost? As if he were only imaginary, like a legend in a book?*

*Like a dream upon waking?*

*She held out her hand, but at the last moment she closed her eyes. Her fingers, groping, felt nothing, where his hand should be. She felt dizzy, and sick, and there was a lumpy mattress against her back, and sheets twisted uncomfortably round her body, and a fish-and-chips-and-wood-shavings smell in her nostrils.*

*And then it was as if his hand bloomed inside of hers; as if she had held a tiny, imperceptible kernel which the heat of her hand had brought suddenly to blossoming; and her feet in their boots were standing on sand-scattered stone, and she opened her eyes with a gasp, and Zasharan drew her to him and he let go her hand only to put both arms round her.*

*He said gently, "You must find your own way to come. The way is there. I do not know where; I do not know your world, your time, with the cars and the electricity. If you wish to come, you must find the way. I will wait for you here."*

*She turned her head as it lay against his shoulder, and stared at the water of the pool at their feet. Somewhere deep within it, she thought a golden eye glittered up at her.*

*She woke feeling strangely calm. It was just before dawn. The first birds were trying out the occasional chirp, and the chimneys across the street were black against the greying sky. She climbed out of bed and put her dressing gown on and crept down the first flight of stairs, careful of the creaking boards, to Ruth's room. Ruth woke easily; a hand on her shoulder was enough. She put her lips to Ruth's ear. "Will you come with me?"*

*They made their way noiselessly downstairs, past the shop, into the back room and the garden door. There they paused briefly, baffled, for that door could not be opened*

silently. Hetta stood with her hand on the bolt, and for a moment she thought she saw Zasharan standing beside her, his hand over her hand. He was looking at her, but then looked up, over her shoulder, at Ruth; then he looked back at Hetta, and smiled. I thank you, he said: she did not hear him, but she saw his lips move. *My honour is yours, she said, formally. Then she pulled the bolt and opened the door, and it made no sound. "Whew!" Ruth sighed.*

*When they reached the pool at the end of the garden, Hetta pulled Ruth into a fierce hug and said softly, "I wanted to say good-bye. I wanted someone here when I—left. I wanted to thank you. I—I don't think I will see you again."*

*"You are going to go live in a legend," said Ruth. "I—I'll remember the bumblebees. I—make up a legend about me, will you?"*

*Hetta nodded. She knelt by the pool. Its surface was still opaque in the grey dawn light, but when she put her hand to the surface of the water, the newt crept up immediately into her cupped palm. As she knelt, an edge of her dressing gown slipped forward—"You're bleeding!" said Ruth.*

*Hetta looked down. The scar on her ankle had opened, and a little fresh blood ran down her leg. The first drop was poised to fall...*

*She jerked upright to her knees and thrust her foot out over the pool. The blood fell into the water: one drop, two, three. The newt was still clinging to her hand. "Ruth—"*

*"Go," said Ruth harshly. "Go now."*

*Hetta slipped forward, into the water, and it closed over her head.*

*It was a long journey, through water., through sand, through storms and darkness. She often lost track of where she was, who she was, where she was going and why; and then she felt a small skipping sensation against the palm of one hand, or the weight of a small clawed thing hanging to the hair behind her ear, or saw a goldy-black glint of eye with her own eye, and she remembered. She swam through oceans, and through deserts. She was swallowed and vomited up by a green dragon in a great stinking belch of wet black smoke. She eluded sea serpents by drifting, for, like sharks, they respond to movement; and water goblins by hiding in mud, because water goblins, being ugly themselves, are determined to notice only beautiful things, even if this means missing dinner. She was guided on her way by mer-folk, who have a strong liking for romance and adventure, and in whose company she sang her first songs, although they laughed at her for only being able to breathe air, and said that her little gold-eyed friend should teach her better. She spoke to sand-sprites, who have small hissing voices like draughts under doors, and she listened to the desert feys, who rarely speak to humans but often talk to the desert. She was almost trampled by the sand-god's great armoured horses till her little friend showed her how to hide in the hollow behind their ears and cling to their manes; but Geljdreth stood between her and what she sought and longed for, and at last she had to face him with nothing but her own determination and wit and the strength of her two hands, and a little friend hanging over one ear like an ear-ring. And, perhaps because she was from Roanshire in the Homeland where there were no deserts, and she had not lived her life in fear of him, she won out*

against him., and loosed his horses, and crippled his power.

At last her head broke the surface in a small calm pool; and there was Za-sharan, waiting to pull her out, and wrap her in a cloak, and give her tiarhk to drink, as he had done once before, though he had wiped her face free of grit then, not of water. She turned to look back into the pool, and she saw a gold eye looking back at her. and she could not tell if it were a very large eye or a very small one. "Thank you," she said. "I thank you."

Somewhere—not in her ear; in her heart or her belly or the bottoms of her feet—she heard *My honour is yours. "Welcome home,"* said Zasharan.

*Ruth had grown up, married, had two children, and written three best-selling books of popular science concerning the apparent impossibilities the natural world presents that scientists struggle for generations to find explanations for, before she found herself one day tapping the legends of Damar on her computer. Her search engine produced few relevant hits; after a brief flurry of interest for a few years following independence, Damar had again drifted into the backwaters of international attention.*

*It only took her a few minutes to find a reference to Queen Fortunatar of the Clear Seeing. It described her half-brother, her success as an adjudicator, and the sandstorms that particularly plagued her reign. After a few compact paragraphs the article ended:*

*One of the most famous Damarian bards also began telling stories during For-tunatar's reign. Hetthar is an interesting figure, for part of her personal legend is that she came out of time and place to marry Fortunatar's Fourth Sandpale Watcher, Zasharan, and it was said that after she came, no one was ever again lost to the storms of the Kalarsham, and that the sand-god hated her for this. But her main fame rests on the cycle of stories she called *The Journeying*, and whose central character has the strangely un-Damarian name of Ruth.*