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First published in Analog, March 2001

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Jacob could hardly contain himself as he followed his family toward the spring festival where, he hoped, he would finally see a magician.

Until this year it seemed that there was always some reason for missing the magician. Sometimes the magicians did not come to the festival. In other years they came without warning, passing through the town so swiftly that, by the time Jacob learned of them, they had already departed. Three times they had arrived after the family had left the winter festival and once the entire family had been so sick that they had missed the festival entirely.

But maybe this year would be different. Maybe this year he would finally be lucky.

Jacob wondered if even a magician would be able to find his way through the town's dimly lighted streets. This older section of the town was a confusion of close-packed buildings and immense ancient devices, most of unknown purpose.

Perhaps the magician had no need to traverse the narrow streets. Perhaps he would descend from the sky on lightning bolts, amid claps of thunder. Maybe he would suddenly appear in a flash of light or through some more mysterious, magical method. But no, these were childish fantasies. The magician, if he arrived, would probably walk the streets like any other man.

The villagers had decorated the square with orange, red, and blue lanterns for the winter festival. The colored lights threw a pattern of complementary shadows in every direction. Jacob toyed with his own shadow for a few moments, observing the way the shadow's colors changed as he shifted position. Why, he wondered, were some of the shadows green instead of black? After a few moment's consideration he realized that each shadow's color was the complement of whichever lamp threw it. Not only that but it varied in intensity with the distance from each lamp. He moved back and forth, fascinated by the changing colors.

Evangeline, his older sister, rudely pulled him back into reality and an awareness of the crowd. She glanced around to see if anyone had been watching his antics. "Why are you doing that? Dancing around like a fool," she scolded. "Act your age for once, would you?"

He started to explain but stopped. Ev was smiling over his shoulder, no longer paying him a bit of attention. When he turned he saw that Lars Torfsen had captured her attention. Just as well, Jacob thought; Ev would never understand about the lights and, even if she did, she'd probably dismiss it as of no practical use.

He watched her walk toward Lars with that peculiar swaying motion she had adopted of late. "Huh, and she thinks I looked silly," he muttered.

The crowd's din assailed Jacob's ears. Everyone was in a festive mood. The group at the kegs were cheerily toasting one another and each passerby with raised mugs and shouts of recognition. The more sober among them were scarcely less restrained than those well into their mugs.

People pressed in on Jacob from every side, so close that he could smell their sweat and foul, malty breath. He couldn't understand how anyone could enjoy being so jammed together in this suffocating, constricting, and uncomfortable crowd. But he would endure it for the chance to see a magician.

His family's arrival caused no little commotion. People crowded around them, shouting and extending hands to be shaken and presenting cheeks to be kissed. A bustle of women greeted his mother and Pam with shrieks and embraces, then led the two away, all jabbering at once and so swiftly that Jacob couldn't understand a word they said. Nor did he want to.

Jacob winced whenever one of the villagers pinched his cheek or remarked about how tall and handsome he had gotten. He bridled at their constant observations on his red hair and striking lack of resemblance to his father. He held his tongue, wishing the whole while that he could escape. But no, for the possibility of watching a magician at work he would bear all this unwanted attention, all this squeezing, embracing, squealing, shouting, laughing, farting, sweating, overeating crowd of packed humanity.

Jacob looked around, alert for any sign of a stranger, for a glimpse of the bearded face that his father said always marked a magician. But how could he tell if a stranger were a magician? Most travelers, and many of the local farmers, wore beards, so that was no distinction. Would the magician be taller—larger than life? Would he be handsome or ugly, young or old? Would his hair be silver or gold? How would his appearance differ from the too-familiar faces of these people he'd known all his life? What would his clothing be like? How would he speak, walk, or laugh?

Jacob's imagination ran rampant, building a mental pastiche that changed with every random supposition. Perhaps the mage would come as a giant and loom over the town like a storm cloud; lightning bolts for his hair and thunder for his voice. That startling image came from a childish fantasy that he had long ago thought he'd outgrown.

While the carpenter was droning endlessly about how his son was about to become the mason's apprentice and asking how soon Jacob was to be apprenticed to the town's tinker, there was a commotion on the far side of the square. The crowd parted. Three strangers walked to the middle of the square. From the way everyone kept their distance Jacob knew that this had to be the magician. But why were there three? He supposed that a magician always traveled alone.

The three were like nothing he'd imagined. None were giants, nor was their appearance out of the ordinary, or so it appeared at his first appraising glance.

The tallest threw back the cowl of his frayed and tattered, travel-stained cloak to reveal a face the color of dark leather and in sharp contrast to his white beard and hair. Small white marks, as if he'd been burned with a brand, marched across both cheeks. There were deep creases around his eyes and mouth, as if he'd spent a lifetime of peering into the distance. His hands were as dark as his face, and as callused as a farmer's. His erect posture and quick movements were at odds with the signs of age. There was such an air of authority, of competence about him that Jacob knew that this was not a man easily ignored.

The shorter, stockier magician on white beard's right wore a dull brown cloak that was only slightly less travel-worn. His beard was black as night and trimmed closely to follow the curve of his jaw. His eyes were hidden behind the mirrored goggles that reflected the square's colored lanterns in miniature. His head swiveled from side to side, watching the crowd. Only one of his hands was visible, for he kept the other tucked deep inside his cloak.

In sharp contrast to massive bulk of the dark man, the third magician was slight of frame and had a long cascade of bronze hair that spilled from the back of a red cap. It was a woman, Jacob realized with a start. Somehow he had never imagined that a magician might be a woman! As she turned her head to glance in his direction he noticed that her eyes were very large and a wondrously luminous green. Even from this distance he could tell that those bright eyes were sprinkled with tiny golden flecks, much like his own. A slight smile played on her lips. Her movements were fluid and graceful, as if she were dancing to some languid, silent fiddler. She was the most beautiful woman Jacob had ever seen.

"Who speaks for the town?" the older magician asked quietly, but with sufficient force that his voice could be heard clearly throughout the square.

William Moore, the village headman, was roughly propelled into the empty space surrounding the threesome. He stumbled for a bit, as if he'd not expected to be so rudely presented as spokesman. To his credit he recovered quickly.

"Who be you?" he asked in his booming voice and then repeated it even louder, just in case he had not made the question sufficiently forceful. "And what be your reason for coming to our town?" He smiled, a darting, nervous, insincere little twitch at the corners of his fat mouth that disappeared in an instant.

"I am Arthur Thomas," white-beard answered as forcefully. "I am a magician and in your service." His tone made the bland statement sounded like a rebuke for the chill greeting. "I hear there is a tower on a farm nearby. Where can I find the owner?"

"There!" William Moore replied quickly and pointed directly at Jacob's father. "George Kettleman, over there, the demon's tower's on his farm." He did not sound pleased that anyone would want to see the tower. Like most villagers, he felt that such a mystery was better left alone.

The woman with the magician casually glanced where William Moore had pointed and then jumped as if a thorn had pricked her. She started to open her mouth to say something, and then closed it. Her hand

darted nervously to the arm of the white-bearded man like a bird seeking a branch.

What, Jacob wondered, had so alarmed her? White-beard brushed her hand aside and began striding purposefully toward them. The dark man with the hidden eyes stayed by his side, one hand still hidden beneath his cloak, his head still making that constant, sweeping motion.

“Kettleman? Is that your name?” Arthur Thomas asked with authority. When his father nodded the magician turned and motioned for the woman. “This is Tash Pallas, my, uh, assistant,” he introduced her. “And the other is Blade, just Blade.”

Arthur Thomas. Jacob was amazed that the old magician should have such an ordinary name. The woman's name, on the other hand, was mysterious, strange, exotic and quite what one would expect of someone with magical powers. Blade's name was as menacing as his appearance. A shiver ran through him. These were obviously people of power.

“I am,” Jacob's father replied to the magician's query, “and this is my son.” He put a protective hand on Jacob's shoulder and squeezed hard. Jacob wondered why his father was making such a point about him.

Arthur Thomas barely nodded, but said nothing. The lovely Tash was still tugging on his sleeve, trying to get his attention. The magician was clearly becoming annoyed, for he turned and spit out a string of harsh, angry syllables in a foreign language.

Tash Pallas replied softly in the same language. Unlike Arthur Thomas' jarring syllables, her lips produced a flow of sweet, musical words. Her voice was so sweet that Jacob didn't want her to stop.

Arthur Thomas' eyebrows rose and he glanced in their direction as Tash Pallas spoke. Only when she finished did he speak. “I think we shall stay here overnight to see what services the town might need. After our work here is finished we'll want to examine the tower. I would appreciate it if you could accommodate us. We will pay or even work for our keep, if necessary.”

Jacob felt a thrill run through him. Magicians, three of them, were going to come to his farm. He would be able to watch them, talk to them, and be with them. It was more than he could have hoped for, more than he had ever expected. Come what may, he would never forget this priceless moment.

But his father hadn't answered. He was staring at the magician in stony silence, taking the measure of the man.

“George,” mother said as she lay a hand on Jacob's shoulder. “George.” There was a note in her voice that Jacob had not heard before.

His father glared at her. “For your sake, then. All right, magician. I will see what we can provide.” There was no hospitable warmth in his voice.

The magician nodded knowingly—he had heard the exchange—and turned away. “William Moore, I'm starved! Can we get something to eat around here before we look around to see what's needful?”

“There's much in the town that you'll declare needs your attention, I'm sure,” William Moore answered dryly as Jacob's father headed for the kegs. His mother remained where she was, looking after her husband with a forlorn look on her face.

Perhaps, Jacob wondered as he followed the magicians, he could acquire magical skills by copying the

magician's behavior. He tried to emulate the way Blade kept his right arm hidden and to gesture with his stiff left fingers as Arthur Thomas had done. By evening's end he was even squinting to give his eyes a creased, learned look.

“Are you sick or something?” Ev asked when they finally met back at the stable. “Why are you scowling like that?” Her favorite scarf was in her hand and she appeared flushed. She fidgeted as she adjusted her clothing inside her cloak. She brushed a few strands of straw from her hair.

And she thought his behavior strange.

“Jacob, did you hurt your arm?” his mother chimed in when she noticed the way he was holding himself.

Jacob sighed and shook his head. “No, I'm fine.” The terribly ordinary women of his family would never understand the ways of magicians. Neither of his sisters would ever be as worldly as the wondrous, beautiful, and mysterious Tash Pallas.

* * * *

For as long as Jacob could remember he had wanted to learn magic. He had never felt comfortable around his dull, shallow, and unimaginative classmates. Not a one of them shared his interest in the ancient machines and all wondered what he found so interesting about them. Despite their taunts he maintained his burning desire to learn the mystic arts, a desire that set him apart. “Weird Jacob,” they'd say and shrug, “But then, what can you expect?” The last part no doubt overheard from their parents.

He'd gotten and given many a black eye after he learned what that oft-repeated slur implied about his dark-haired father and even darker-haired mother.

But, he sometimes wondered, perhaps there could be a kernel of truth in those veiled accusations. Could there have been a magician among his ancestors that had endowed him with this red hair? Maybe that would explain why he was so attracted to the old machines that lay scattered about. None of his classmates seemed to care about the mysterious forces that powered the mill, that heated some homes but not others, and that provided heat and light to a few. No one asked about the silent machines in the fields that refused to rust. They only accepted this without question, and went on with their dull, daily lives.

The old tales spoke of a time when those machines surged with power, letting a single man farm thousands of acres. The Kettleman tractor was one of the few machines that continued to function, and that fact was viewed with suspicious awe.

Dead or not, all of the old devices were both fascinating and intriguing to Jacob. He'd often imagined himself a magician as he probed the machinery's innards. When he was much younger he'd tried to restore a broken grinder with a wave of his hand, to fix the a broken plough with a touch of his little finger, and to bring a blackened lamp to life with a single intense stare. But none of these actions produced any result, no matter how hard he tried. Perhaps it took more than skill and desire. Perhaps it was a magician's inherent ability.

As he grew older and wiser he learned how to fix simple mechanisms, such as the broken linkage on the heater—much to his mother's appreciation—and which got him an extra large slice of warm apple pie. When simple repairs of household things no longer held his interest he turned his attention to the more complex, but inoperative devices stored in the barn, where they had been dumped for lack of a better place. Who knew, his father often said, but they might someday provide useful.

His attempts to study these ancient devices were frustrating. He couldn't understand the machines' innards. There were strange boxes that, when opened, revealed small cities with brightly colored houses and silver trails. The boxes were connected with solid pipes through which nothing could flow. And what was one of make of the heavy disks?

He often wondered what forces might lurk inside those tiny, closed, multi-colored dwellings, what mystical creatures hastened along those silvery avenues on their magical tasks, and what functions were performed when they reached their destinations. Despite a lack of revelations from his probes, he nevertheless dreamed of someday harnessing the inhabitants to do his bidding. But that day would have to wait; any attempt to remove and inspect the tiny towns was to risk the wrath of his father.

"Best to leave alone what you don't understand," his father had scolded when he first came upon one of Jacob's early exploratory surgeries. He had been sitting in the barn, surrounded by arms and levers, knobs and buttons, linkages and motors; the scattered entrails of his mechanical patient.

"But," Jacob wailed after his spanking, "How can I ever understand if I have to leave everything alone?" His father's silence was answer enough, so, ever since, he'd confined his studies to those times and places where no one could discover him.

His father had been harsh, no doubt because he himself was so often suspected of being not entirely unskilled in the arcane arts. The continued operation of the tractor and the fact that there was a mysterious tower on the farm supposedly lent credibility to this belief. To imagine he was in concert with the demon was not such a large leap of belief.

The tower stood taller than any building in the area, nearly three times the height of their silo. Thick glass surrounded its topmost section. The tower was so hard that not even a nail could scratch it. There was a ladder on one side and, by climbing it, Jacob could peer through the glass. He could see a bank of instruments just beyond the glass and, once, he'd seen them flash red and green. Once he'd pressed his ear close to the glass and heard a distant rumble, like the noise the tractor made before he put it in gear, which made him wonder if there was a mighty engine buried inside. Or was it the snoring of the demon who lay sleeping inside? Jacob never mentioned the flashing lights or the grumbling demon for fear his father would suspect him of meddling. Just as he tried to keep his fascination with the dead machines a secret passion.

But all that had been years before, when he was a child. Now he was almost fully grown—soon to be a man—and had to make a decision about being the tinker's apprentice after the harvest. But that was later, after the harvest passed. Now he would be able to watch the magician repair a broken machine or restore life to a dead building and, by watching him work, perhaps learn enough simple spells and magic to free himself from ignorance.

* * * *

Jacob's father was muttering to himself, but loud enough so that all could hear during the long ride home. "Put them in the barn, damn meddlers." Too many draughts from the keg slurred his words. "Should have said no. Nothing but trouble they'll be."

Jacob's mother softly corrected him. "They'll sleep in the house like proper guests, George. We'll not treat them otherwise. Pam and Evangeline can double up, and Jacob can sleep in the loft. Yes, we'll put the men in Jacob's room and the girl can sleep in Evangeline's room."

"Why can't she use Pam's," Ev pouted. She knew who would have a pallet on the floor for a mattress. But there was no arguing with mother once she decided. Even his father knuckled under to her decision

with a gruff, “Damn lot of trouble for nothing.”

Mother continued planning aloud, unmindful of his father's bitter comment; “We'll need to bring in extra food—George, you'll bring up the meat from the smoke house, a hock and some lamb, I think would be best. Then we'll need extra wood and the cistern will need filling. Oh, there's so much we have to do to get ready for our guests.”

“You don't have to be so damned friendly,” his father growled. “Isn't like they were family.” Jacob detected a note of uncharacteristic anger in his father's voice, but couldn't determine if it was directed at the situation or at his mother. “Jacob can get all of that for you. I have to be out early to work the valley fields.”

As soon as they reached home Jacob began gathering the things his mother had enumerated. He lugged hunks of meat from the smoke house and hauled boxes of dried fruit and preserved vegetables from the family's root cellar.

His mother fussed about, herself too wound up to sleep. “I do hope they won't be disappointed with dried and canned fare,” She fretted. “No, I'm sure they'll understand that it just isn't possible to have fresh food this season.” She produced two apple pies she had baked a day earlier and examined them as if they were to be entered in the contest at the annual harvest fair. “I think I will serve these.” There was nothing better than mother's pies. Neither Pam nor Jacob objected to the idea, but Pam did, and got a small slice for herself. Mother always spoiled her.

Hours later, exhausted by the excitement of the long day and the night's work, Jacob fell into bed and closed his eyes, waiting for sleep's sweet embrace that did not come. How could he sleep when, in a few hours the new day would break, the day the old magician might arrive to perform his magic. In a few hours the beautiful Tash Pallas could be here. He didn't know which prospect excited him the more.

She had smiled at him.

* * * *

When Jacob jerked awake he discovered that a cold mist had shrouded morning to gray unfamiliarity. He quickly bundled against the damp and set out to first feed the chickens and then see to the other animals' needs as they huddled in the barn's warmth. Dan and Brandy stamped their hooves, impatient for their morning ration of oats and dried apples. Throughout the day Jacob kept watch to the east, hoping to be the first to sight the magicians, but he was always disappointed.

By nightfall the mist had turned to a light, drifting snow. His father stared at the wintry scene. “Better check the fences near the tower tomorrow.”

Jacob nodded. He'd already assumed that had to be done. His father wouldn't want even a magician to think they were remiss in maintaining their fences. The tidy farm was a point of pride with him, a sign that he was properly husbanding the land, as did all of the farmers hereabouts.

Jacob enjoyed riding Dan along the fence line. It gave him a certain sense of pride to see the newer fence rows he and his father had added to those of his ancestors. He slowly rode Dan along the tall rock wall that formed the eastern boundary and turned at the copse of trees that marked the northern edge and the beginning of the stack pole fence. He noticed that some of the cross poles had become dislodged so he let Dan graze while he put these back in place.

On the western line he found a section of older wooden rails from his grandfather's time missing. It

looked as if a herd of mos-ox had blundered through. The rails were probably buried under the snow nearby. He tramped around and, as he located them, pried them free, and worked them back into place. By the time he was through his boots, jacket, and gloves were caked with mud.

He was halfway to the southern boundary of the field when he noticed a small figure kneeling down and looking at the edge of a pillar she had cleared of snow. It was the woman magician—Tash Pallas.

Tash stood and waved at him. Jacob waved back and turned Dan toward her. “What are you doing out here?” Tash asked. She pointed at his jacket. “You look like you've been working hard.” She had a strange, lilting accent.

“Checking and fixing the fences,” Jacob replied in answer to her first question as he dismounted. “Can I ask what you're doing?”

Tash laughed. “You can. It's a fair question. I'm just checking a subsystem.”

Jacob liked the way she laughed—a musical sound that ran up and down a scale, quite unlike Ev's raucous bark or Pam's high-pitched giggling. This close the bronze-haired beauty didn't appear as old as he'd first thought. As a matter of fact she looked to be close to his age, but so much more worldly, so much more sophisticated, and so very, very beautiful.

He came abruptly to ground when he recalled that a magician had the power to be any age they wanted. He could make no assumptions about Tash's age. She was no mere girl; she was a magician and that alone demanded respect. “I didn't mean to pry, ma'am,” he said apologetically.

Tash laughed again. “You weren't. Most people I've met wouldn't have asked anyway.”

Jacob coughed. “Yes, that's what everybody says, that I ask too many questions about things. It's like those old machines I keep trying to understand...” He stopped. Babbling was one of the things he hated about himself.

Tash raised an eyebrow. “You want to know how the machines work? Is that it?”

Jacob blushed with shame. He knew he shouldn't have mentioned it. But it was too late to call back the damning words. “Yes, ma'am,” he replied quietly. “I do.”

“Stop that ma'am business,” Tash snapped. “Why do you want to learn about them?” She leaned close, quite close. He could smell the warm aroma of her, practically tasting her sweet breath.

She didn't appear to be angry, Jacob noticed. “I don't know,” he said. “I just want to see what makes those machines work.” He grinned. “I even got one of them to start moving ... for a little bit, anyway.”

Just a few years earlier, when he'd barely a hair on his chin. It had been the big, dead harvester that stood next to the town's common stable. He had been messing around in the cab when he jiggled a key on the panel to see what would happen. Every kid in the town had done that at some time in the past, but never before had anything happened.

This time, however, he heard a soft click and, before the sound registered, the harvester lurched forward and threw him backwards. Before he could climb back onto the seat the prow of the harvester had smashed through the side of the stable. There was a crash of timber and a storm of falling hay as the harvester continued to grind forward, crushing all before it. Bales of hay tumbled from the loft on either

side, sacks of feed hit the ground and split open, and the two horses suddenly freed from their stalls bolted and ran, terrified, through the town.

Onward the harvester pressed, crushing two wagons under its massive tracks, until it came to rest against the stables' opposite wall, which teetered precipitously, creaked, leaned, and then fell to earth with a roar of splintering wood. When Jacob climbed down from the cab the entire building was nothing more than a jumbled heap of lumber and assorted debris.

"Thank God you're safe," the first person to arrive said when he saw Jacob climbing from the wreckage. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Jacob lied quickly. "I was feeding one of the horses when..." he stopped. The man was staring at the object in Jacob's hand. It was the key to the harvester.

The destruction of the old stable was a serious matter, but this was of less importance to most of the folk than the fact that it had been the red-headed Jacob who had managed to bring the machine to brief, if destructive, life.

"For certain," everyone whispered, "he does have magician's blood." Then they would smile, as if his actions had confirmed their worse suspicions. The resurgence of this cut his mother deeply, although she tried not to show it in public. His father glowered when he heard of this and perhaps that fueled the anger that warmed Jacob's seat for his part in the demolition.

The pain he had caused his parents was partially offset by the reaction of the other kids. Every youngster in town rushed out to jiggle the keys and switches of the dead machines in hopes of repeating Jacob's actions. He became a hero of sorts, at least for a few weeks.

Jacob stopped speaking. Why had he told her about that episode? As usual, his mouth had moved faster than his brain.

Tash closed her eyes. Without warning she spit out a series of words; "Seek, unknown, problem, logic, number." With each word her facial expression changed, quite at odds with the words that continued to roll so quickly off her tongue.

Jacob became confused by the torrent of words pouring from her lovely lips, so close to his ear. He tried to figure out why she was spewing such nonsense, but, before he could concentrate on one word, she had said another, and another. "Basic, failure, inside, twisted, puzzle." On and on they came until Jacob's mind was swirling in confusion.

Finally the torrent of unrelated words stopped. Tash opened her eyes and turned her head so she could look straight into his eyes. "Tash," she said simply. Then her face bloomed with a smile so bright that he felt as if the sun itself had suddenly blazed through the clouds, bathing him in its radiance.

He couldn't help but smile in return.

"Sorry," she said and her smile quickly faded. "That last was pretty unprofessional."

Jacob had no idea of what she was talking about. "Never mind," she continued as she took his arm and led him away from the pillar. "Let us talk of other things. Tell me of this farm, this place where you live."

"It would be better to ride," he suggested. The thoughts of being so close was quite appealing. He

mounted Dan and then extended a hand to help her up. Instead of taking his hand Tash placed one hand on the saddle and vaulted astride the horse. Dan snorted and jumped at the sudden addition, but calmed down after a tug on the bridle. Tash casually put her arm around Jacob's waist as Dan ambled forward.

Jacob spoke in brief bursts as they rode. He described the town, the locations of every dead machine and ancient device. "People say all of these things came here on a ship," he said, repeating the tales he'd heard. "But I think that it had to be a wagon because our river's too shallow for a ship."

Tash gave him another smile. "Indeed it was a ship, Jacob. A ship the like of which you've never seen. I've saw it two years ago, you know, sitting on the plain, far to the west. Larger than the biggest building you can imagine. Made of metal so hard no tool can cut it. Neither had the weather rusted it. A marvel it was. A wonder."

He tried to imagine a ship of that immense size and wondered about the oars it would need. "A ship," Jacob whispered. "Tell me more, please."

"And of what interest would that have to a farm boy such as you?" Tash teased. "I would expect you to be more interested in the crops I've seen and of the ways of other towns and people."

"I don't give a damn about that," Jacob spit out. "Tell me more about the ship!"

Tash jerked back. "My, you certainly are intense. Well, that's no surprise. I will tell you about the ship, Jacob Kettleman, but only after you tell me about yourself. But don't talk of old machinery or boring townfolk. Talk instead about yourself, your place in the world."

Jacob couldn't believe that Tash, a gorgeous, worldly magician, would have any interest in his dull and uneventful self. Still, her lovely eyes, her parted lips, her potential smile were too promising, too tempting. He could not refuse; not if she was going to tell him more about the mythical ship and who knew what other wonders of the world.

He stumbled at first, not knowing where to start. She blessed him with another smile and, encouraged by her obvious attention, Jacob began to speak in earnest of his life and dreams. Then he heard himself saying, "and that's when I wanted to learn how to do magic."

Jacob clapped hand to mouth, half-afraid that she would laugh at his unseemly ambition, half afraid that she would strike him down for having the temerity to aspire to such heights. He cursed his pride. He'd been deluded by the innocent look of a beautiful woman and forgotten the awesome power that she commanded. How pathetic she must think him to be.

"No, that's wrong," he apologized. "I just want to be a tinker," he declared suddenly. "Not a magician. Just a tinker!"

"No, I don't think so," Tash said quietly. "Jacob Kettleman will never be a tinker." She abruptly jumped down to the ground as Dan continued to plod forward.

"Forget what I just said," she shouted. "It was foolish of me to mention it." Jacob watched in disbelief as she raced across the field. She was indeed a magician: No ordinary human could run through the snow that fast!

He was heartsick for the rest of the day and finished the tour of the fences in a slough of despond. Surely Tash would tell Arthur Thomas of his boastful words, of the foolish pride that made him unfit to be a

tinker, of his arrogance in thinking he could actually learn magic. The shame burned like a fierce flame. His life was ruined. Ruined!

He took a long time wiping Dan down and cleaning the ice from his hooves. He knew he was just trying to forestall the inevitable truth that awaited him and tried to think of some way he could avoid the embarrassing confrontation to come.

Jacob finally screwed up his courage and entered the house. Everything appeared normal. The women were doing their chores; mother preparing dinner, his sisters at their lessons—Ev secretly reading a note hidden behind her book—and his father glowering over the tractor's crumbling maintenance manual. Neither Arthur Thomas nor Tash Pallas were present, nor was Blade, the dark one.

“Where are the magicians?” Jacob asked casually. Maybe they had not yet told his family the bitter news.

“Stowing their belongings, I imagine. Arthur Thomas said the others will be in later,” his father growled. “Damn it, I can't remember what all these words mean.” He was struggling with the pile of crumbling paper held together with stitches and glue. “I'm glad you're going to learn the tinker's trade. Maybe you'll be able to translate this for me.”

Jacob's heart stopped. If he hadn't spoken so boastfully maybe he could have looked forward to helping his father. But Tash had declared he'd never be a tinker. Now he would have to let someone else help his father.

The remainder of the evening passed in silence. Jacob sat still, dreading the magicians' arrival, but most of all anticipating the pain he would see on his father's face when they informed him that his son, the boastful Jacob Kettleman, could never be more than a simple farmer like himself.

He wished he would die now and be spared.

Neither Tash nor Blade accompanied Arthur Thomas. The elder magician graciously thanked them all for their hospitality in general and singled out Jacob's mother with praise for the fresh apple pies, praise that brought a warm smile to her face but obviously sat poorly with his scowling father.

“I have a warning for you,” Arthur Thomas said casually and Jacob leaned forward. The magician's portent might be about him, about what Tash had said. “Spring is advancing from the south much earlier than usual. You should soon be experiencing a line of storms.”

Earlier did he say? How could he know so much? Was he the creator of the warmth or merely the oracle?

“Spring storms aren't due for another month at least,” his father said firmly. Everyone paid close attention to the changing seasons because the growing season was so short. Luckily, the changes of the seasons were entirely predictable from the position of the sun. The spring thaw in particular was reason for concern. The storms that accompanied it loosed the water trapped in the mountains and made the river flood. “Storms always follow the sun's passage to the north.”

The magician did not contradict his father's declaration, not directly. “Nevertheless the storms are coming, but we shall talk of that later. I've come to speak of other things, private things, George Kettleman.” He gestured with his left hand, a dismissing fluttering of fingers, for the rest of the family to leave.

Fear clutched at Jacob's breast and, for a moment, he couldn't breathe. This was the time. Now his father would receive the dreaded news. Jacob desperately tried to think of how he could avert what must surely be coming.

"Come Jacob," his mother called softly as she led Pam and Ev into the kitchen. She glanced back at the magician with an expression that Jacob had never seen before—apprehension, fear, worry? Did she suspect that he was the root cause of the discussion? No, that was impossible.

Jacob took one slow step as he furiously tried to devise a delaying strategy, but, when no solution came to mind, he reluctantly, fearfully, followed the women.

"I'll bet they're talking about you," Ev said loudly as soon as Jacob shut the door. "I'll bet you messed up something, just like you always do."

His mother shook her head. She appeared preoccupied by something. "What? Oh no, I am sure this has nothing to do with my Jacob. Nothing at all." That was his mother, always the optimist.

Jacob smiled wanly at her defense, but he knew the bitter truth. He had let his pride take control and now he would suffer the consequences.

"Weird Jacob. Weird Jacob," Pam giggled.

"I'd better check the barn just to make sure everything's all right," he said and, before Ev or Pam could tease him further, he pulled his cloak from the peg near the door. His mother smiled as he marched into the dark night. No doubt she thought his departure was due to embarrassment, or did she suspect something more?

He climbed the ladder to get to the barn's roof as quickly as he could so he wouldn't encounter Tash Pallas or the dark man. It was better to avoid any further discomfort, he thought. The coming confrontation with his father would provide more than enough grief this day.

The fields were serene and quiet under the light of the lesser moon. Not that he expected otherwise: His reasons for coming were not at all related to the possibility that something might be amiss. In the distance he could just make out the dark form of the tower and its hidden mysteries, the mysteries that he had hoped to one day discover. But that was not to be. He had surely destroyed any chance he might have had if he hadn't let his stupid mouth run on without thinking. With those dark thoughts he sat and put his head in his hands. He felt like his heart would break. What would he ever do with his ruined life?

Long after the house lights dimmed and everyone else had certainly gone to bed, his father climbed the ladder. "Lonely up here," he said as he settled beside Jacob.

"Good for thinking," Jacob answered. "Helps me figure out problems without somebody interrupting."

His father started to get up. "Sorry, son. Didn't mean to..." Clearly, he had misunderstood.

Jacob reached out to touch his father's hand. "Sit down, Dad. I ... I need to talk to you about what I said to Tash Pallas. I was just bragging, trying to impress her. You know. I didn't mean any harm."

His father smiled. "I know how it is," he said quietly. "Good looking girl, that, for all her strangeness." He paused, "Ah, what did you say?"

“Didn't Arthur Thomas tell you? I thought that's what the two of you were talking about.” Then he couldn't hold back and poured out the whole story; all the stupid idiotic things he had said, all of the rambling dreams he had blurted out, all of the boastful statements that made her think him unfit for the tinker's trade.

His father said nothing for a long time. A strange, bemused smile continued to play across his face. “Sounds to me like the act of a boy that's a bit smitten,” he said at last. “Listen, trying to impress a pretty girl isn't a sin, Jacob. Done more than a bit of that in my own time,” He flashed a quick, embarrassed grin. “Just like you, I regretted it after, but that's normal. Wouldn't worry about it if I were you.”

Jacob was beside himself. He couldn't understand why Arthur Thomas had failed to deliver the bad news. Hadn't Tash told him of his prideful boast?

“Arthur Thomas did mention you,” his father drawled. “Said he'd like to talk to you a bit more about the test—find out what it is that you really want to do.”

Jacob was startled. A test? He hadn't taken any sort of test. All he'd done was talk to Tash. He thought hard, could that string of words she threw at him have been a test? If so, it was the strangest test he'd ever taken, one in which he'd given no answers at all.

Maybe Tash had been able to read the expressions on his face to see how he reacted to her words. No, that couldn't be, her eyes had remained closed the whole time. Besides, what could she possibly have learned from his dumfounded look of total incomprehension and confusion?

“When does he want to see me?”

“Tomorrow, after he finishes meddling with the tower. Says to stay away, doesn't want us at risk, but I think it's just an excuse to keep us from learning what he's up to.” His father stood up. “Well, time I got some sleep. Damn magicians making too much extra work for all of us.”

Jacob felt numb. Things were not as bad as he'd imagined. Tash Pallas' declaration seemed of little consequence to his father and the old magician wanted to speak to him, alone. It was more than he could comprehend. He had expected far worse.

“In the morning you'll have to haul snow,” his father continued. “With three more drawing on the cistern we'll soon run a bit short.”

Jacob nodded. The hard work involved with hauling clean snow to the cistern was the furthest thing from his mind at the moment. He had been granted a reprieve and that was enough. He followed his father back to the house with the glowing ember of hope in his heart.

The magician wanted to talk to him.

* * * *

Jacob dumped another cubic meter of snow, which would produce less than a liter of water, into the cistern as the clouds of an approaching storm gathered. Perhaps it was one of those storms the magician had warned about, but more likely just another of the many winter usually brought.

All day he had been carrying snow to the cistern. It took the time for Jacob to carry the next load for the previous load to melt. The cistern's ability to melt snow was part of the farm's residual magic that made

the townsfolk so suspicious. He didn't mind the repetitious work. He was thankful for anything that would relieve the tense anticipation that would surely have kept him on edge all day long.

On one of his forays for fresh snow Jacob noticed activity at the base of the tower. It looked like two people. He wandered over to see what was happening and saw that it was the two magicians.

Much of what they doing appeared incomprehensible. Arthur Thomas and Blade were struggling to open a heavy panel at the side of the tower by using a pry bar they'd taken from the barn and their straining muscles. Jacob loaned a hand even as he wondered why they weren't using a mystic spell instead of brute force. As he was about to ask, the panel gave way with a screech of tearing metal.

The opened panel exposed a complex of pipes and cylinders, the purpose of which was beyond Jacob's comprehension. Arthur Thomas said something in a strange tongue to Blade. The dark man responded in the same tongue and stepped back. Arthur Thomas then tugged on a red handle that was nestled among the confusion.

Nothing happened.

“Take this back to your father,” Blade barked abruptly as he handed the pry bar to Jacob. “We can handle it from here, boy.” Jacob felt his temper flare, but held his tongue. He understood dismissal when he heard it.

“Thank you very much for your help,” Arthur Thomas added as he glared at Blade. Jacob took the bar and headed back to the barn.

He'd loaded another one hundred cubic meters of snow into the cistern when he heard a shout.

“Look!” His father yelled from the upper level of the barn as he pointed. “That old man's done something! The snow's melting around that devil tower.”

Even at this distance Jacob could see exposed ground around the tower's base. This was certain proof of the old magician's power. If he could make the snow melt then he could probably control the storms, the weather, and even the sun and stars. He felt very humble. He would never be able to learn magic this powerful.

“Nothing good will come of that,” his father shouted.

Jacob looked forward to his appointment with Arthur Thomas with fear in his heart. After discovering their ability to melt cold snow in the depths of winter his dream of someday managing the inhabitants within the machines seemed a pitiful, trivial goal; one hardly worth considering.

Arthur Thomas sat at the table with a cup of steaming milk before him. He was dressed in a simple coverlet that left his arms bare. Jacob was fascinated by the designs he saw written on the old magician's biceps. Some of the arcane patterns might be words, but they were in a script that he could not decipher. There were images of magical creatures the like of which he'd never seen; sinuous creatures that coiled around the magician's forearm like a rope and had teeth like daggers.

“Sit down, boy,” Arthur Thomas gestured at the chair on the opposite side with his left hand. “Tash believes you to be a young man of promise.”

Jacob felt a start of surprise. Clearly Tash Pallas had powers beyond those of ordinary women if she'd

learned something promising from his jumbled, rambling, boastful speech. “She does?” he replied stupidly.

“I’m starting to think otherwise,” the old magician smiled. “Tell me why you want to know about machines so badly that you’d disobey your father and endure the taunts of your classmates.”

Jacob gulped. “I don’t know where to begin, sir.” Clearly he must have been far more candid with Tash than he realized, although he couldn’t recall telling her about those specific aspects of his life. Maybe his family had been the source of the old magician’s knowledge—Ev, in particular, was ever with the story about his misfortunes and he’d spotted his mother speaking quietly with the magician when his father wasn’t about. Even so, he was embarrassed that Arthur Thomas knew what an outcast he’d been.

Arthur Thomas sat back and sipped on his drink. “Just start from the beginning, lad. Let’s see, I understand you destroyed your mother’s oven when you were only six or seven. Why don’t you start there.”

Jacob felt his face glow. “How did you...?” he stuttered and then took a deep breath. The magician clearly knew more than he liked. “I wanted to see what made the oven so hot,” he began and then, put at ease by Arthur Thomas’ calm, uncritical attention, related the rest.

He withheld nothing as he spoke of his burning desire to know, to understand, to control the old devices. He spoke as if Arthur Thomas was the friend he’d never had, a person he could confide in, someone who provided steady, uncritical acceptance of everything he said.

Jacob had blurted out his entire life story, including the embarrassing incident with the harvester, before he realized that he had never been this talkative, this open, with anyone. Had Arthur Thomas cast a spell over his ever-loosening tongue? First Tash Pallas and now Arthur Thomas. What was it about these strangers that made him expose himself so deeply?

Jacob’s speech tailed off as Tash Pallas walked across the kitchen. She was barely clothed. A short shift exposed long, gorgeous legs and its clinging fabric hinted at the ample figure that lay beneath. He could hardly take his eyes off of her as she moved cat-like to pour a glass. As she did so she glanced sideways and blessed Jacob with another of her radiant smiles.

“That’s enough of that, girl” Arthur Thomas said sharply and Tash’s smile disappeared immediately. “Play your games some other time. I’m trying to focus the boy’s attention.”

Tash snorted and sent a venomous glance at the old magician before stalking haughtily from the room. Jacob couldn’t understand why she had become so angry at the magician’s words. What had he meant by “focus” and did that have anything to do with why he’d been so talkative?

Arthur Thomas leaned forward. “I will consider what you’ve told me, Jacob Kettleman. I can tell that you are clearly unsuited for this place and time. Tash might think you show promise, but I’d like to understand you more before I make a decision. You may go now.”

Jacob remained seated. “What decision? Can you tell me what this is all about?” The magician said nothing. “And why did Tash get so mad at you?” he added.

Arthur Thomas stroked his beard and, with the long fingers of his left hand, untangled the hairs where drops of milk had stuck them together. “In answer to your first question, I would rather not say right now, but I understand your impatience, Jacob Kettleman; that’s one of your less endearing characteristics.

Never fear; I will let you know when the time is right.

“As to Tash's behavior I can only say that it has little to do with you, directly. No,” he said wistfully, “it has more to do with my displeasure over her impulsiveness. But for all that she has been a wonder. Far more accomplished than my ... her predecessor.” The magician grew silent and remained so, his thoughts obviously elsewhere. Jacob watched a tear roll down the old magician's face and disappear into the gray beard.

Embarrassed at seeing this, Jacob left him there, staring into his cup.

* * * *

Tash was standing beside the cistern, not far from where Jacob was working. She was wearing a small pouch and, when she opened it to retrieve something, Jacob saw that it was filled with hand-sized devices. “Diagnostic Tools,” she explained when she noticed his interest. The words meant nothing to him. She knelt and waved a fist-sized box with a flashing light back and forth.

“Can I watch you?” Jacob asked timidly, half afraid that she, like Blade, would tell him to leave.

Tash gave him another of her dazzling smiles. “I'm going to check the power unit first, which probably means nothing to you, but sure. Why not?” She straightened and put the little box into her pouch. Then, with a touch of her fingers, the side of the cistern opened, an opening that Jacob had never suspected. Jacob felt his excitement grow when she withdrew a panel covered with silvery roadways. Now he could see how a magician tamed the tiny creatures.

An hour later Jacob reluctantly admitted that Tash had been right; he barely understood a thing she was doing, like moving a rod across the roadways and watching a blinking light on its end. Tash behaved as if she was doing something quite ordinary, like checking the water level in the cistern or making certain that the tractor had enough oil. The only thing that kept her activities from becoming boring was her casual conversation.

Tash spoke of where she'd been born, thousands of kilometers to the south. According to her, it had a warm climate the winter's snows never touched so that crops could be harvested throughout the year. She spoke of swimming in warm seas quite unlike the icy brooks and rivers he knew. It sounded so much like an idyllic paradise that Jacob wished he'd been there, beside her.

But this idea quickly died when she started to describe the rampant diseases, diseases that had taken her family when she was hardly more than an infant. She spoke of how the land grew infertile every few years and forced her people to move. She spoke of beasts aplenty that made it dangerous for one to go alone at night; the worst being the night stalkers who were larger than a man and would leave only the gnawed bones of their victim behind in the morning. Suddenly Tash's girlhood paradise sounded more like hell. Until then he'd thought their summer mag-wolves the worst predator imaginable.

Tash swore when the light on her rod glowed red instead of green. She removed a tiny disc from her pouch, affixed it to a roadway, and then continued her steady progress. By dinnertime she had placed four disks. “I'll have to finish this in the morning,” she remarked without further explanation.

Jacob glanced toward the tower as they walked back to the house. In the failing light he could barely make out the distant forms of Arthur Thomas and Blade. The exposed ground now extended from the tower's base to the hills. He wondered what they were doing. Melting snow seemed so pointless.

An entire day had gone by and he'd not seen the magicians do anything magical, which was not at all

what he'd expected. They'd probably do it tomorrow, when he was at lessons, he thought with regret.

* * * *

The warming effect around the tower was remarkable. Jacob wandered over to examine it before taking his sisters to lessons. Despite a flurry during the night the huge circle surrounding the black tower remained free of snow. When he felt the ground it was far warmer than the surrounding air, which was only slightly wondrous and not at all dramatic. This was subtle magic and unlike anything he'd expected.

At the weekly lessons Jacob and his sisters became the center of attention. Everyone, including those who normally shunned weird Jacob, fought for their attention. They all wanted to know what the magicians had been doing and if the Kettlemans had, you know, seen any actual magic being performed.

“There isn't any such thing as magic,” Eric Larson, one of those who had teased Jacob when they were younger, declared defiantly. “The strangers are just putting on an act to get free food and a place to stay.” Jacob wasn't surprised at the remark. Eric was getting to be just like his cynical father. Some of the other boys nodded agreement, indicating that they held that opinion themselves or, more likely, had heard the same opinions being voiced by their own parents.

The younger children had a different attitude. Had he, they asked in whispers after the scoffing older boys had left, noticed the magicians conjuring strange beasts, flying through the air, or changing their appearance? Had he noted anything at all out of the ordinary, they asked with doubt, fear, and fascination. Obviously, most had heard their parents' denial but wished the facts proved otherwise.

When Jacob admitted that he'd not seen them doing anything magical, they were obviously disappointed: Mysterious happenings would make the town a lot more interesting.

“They're making the snow melt from the around the old tower,” he volunteered at last. The children acted disappointed. That particular feat wasn't quite wondrous enough to satisfy them.

* * * *

When he returned home from lessons Jacob found that the horses had managed to nose open the gate and wander away. He grabbed a handful of leads and trudged through the snow, following their tracks to the lower pasture where he found them snorting angrily at the snow that covered the sprouting grass they expected to lie beneath.

He bridled both and mounted Brandy, the mare, and led Dan, the brown gelding. Both resisted, but grudgingly gave up their fruitless search for sprouting grasses. Jacob decided that, since he was already out, he might as well give them some exercise. He headed into the hills, following the small stream that ran along the valley's bottom.

Along the way Jacob noticed the snow was caving in on itself along the stream bed. It looked like the snow had turned to wet slush for meters on either side of the stream. He swept away the snow and saw that the stream was no longer frozen. He followed the stream upwards to where it emerged from the large snow cap that covered the high hills. At that point the water was so warm that it steamed into the crisp air.

Jacob traced the stream in the opposite direction, toward the river. An ice dam had formed where the stream bed narrowed and water was making a small lake behind it. The water here wasn't warm enough to melt the dam, yet not cold enough to freeze. He watched the flow and estimated that within a day or two the water would rise, overflow the dam, and pour into the river.

After he returned the horses to the barn he described the warm stream to his father.

“Strange that the snow should be melting like that. Best we keep an eye on it. If that storm Arthur Thomas warned us of ever arrives it might bring rain instead of snow. That could cause a flood.” His father thought for a moment more. “We’ll warn the townspeople when we go for supplies, but first help me finish stacking these bales.”

* * * *

His father set out to find William Moore shortly after their arrival in town. At the same time Jacob began to collect the items on his mother’s list. His first stop was Olaf Jorgensen, the miller.

“Be those sorcerers weaving their mischief at your father’s place?” Olaf asked as he filled a sack with freshly ground flour. “Asked them to cast a spell on my house to get it to warm again, but they refused: Said I’d not the proper keeping of the cistern—but I can’t see how they could know whether I did or not. Wouldn’t matter anyway, never use the damned thing and I have better things to do with my time than keep it full of water. If you ask me they either didn’t know what to do or just didn’t want to be bothered.”

“The magicians can tell all sorts of things without you saying a word,” Jacob answered. “They know everything. I’m sure they would have fixed it if they could.”

“Huh! They didn’t help William Moore either. Told him his tractor was beyond help, and that after he’d fed them and let them spend the night in his own home. Bunch of liars and charlatans, he says. You know, if it weren’t for their tracks I’d suspect they don’t have any powers at all.”

“Tracks?” Jacob was puzzled. “What do tracks have to do with anything?”

“Eric rode out the way they came. Followed their tracks up to the hills, he did, to where they stopped.” Olaf leaned forward and whispered. “Right in the middle of nowhere those footprints started, like they’d dropped out of the sky. I tell you, boy, there is magicians for certain.”

“So they do have powers,” Jacob replied and described the melting snow around the tower.

“No good will come of that,” the miller replied grimly. “No good comes of meddling in things best left alone. The tower’s demon going to get you, boy,” he laughed, but nervously.

Undaunted by the miller’s grim prediction, Jacob went on. “Tash Pallas said that they’ve been all over the world. She told me about things that we’ve never seen. She said she even saw one of the ships that brought us here.”

Olaf Jorgensen snorted derisively. “Aren’t you a little old to believe those children’s tales? Watch it, boy. She’s probably going to use that lie to cheat you.”

“The magicians aren’t here to cause us any harm,” Jacob protested. “Tash wouldn’t do that,”

“Oh, so it’s Tash’ now, is it? Clear to me that you’re smitten with her, youngster. I’d advise you to steer clear of that wizard’s imp. She’ll take your soul and leave you cursed, she will,” he cautioned. “Lad like you should be more careful with his heart—keep to ordinary folk and forget them wanderers.”

“I’m not smi....” Jacob paused. How could Olaf, not the most intelligent man in the town, know how he felt about Tash? Was he that transparent? He’d said nothing, done nothing to indicate his feelings. “Why did you say that?”

Olaf grunted. "Plain to see the way you gawked at her that night at the fair, the way you talk about her, like she was really human instead of some devil's sprite. Were I you, I'd be feared of why the old magician conjured her to tempt you. Very afraid."

"You're wrong. She's just as human as you and me." Jacob felt a flush of anger, but then stopped. Olaf could be partly right. Tash was more than ordinary, with those beautiful eyes and graceful movements. But did her marvelous attributes necessarily mean that she wasn't human, that she was merely a construct of the magician's art? Could that mean that he was under some sort of magician's spell?

No, he couldn't believe it. He was certain that he felt no different than before. There were no changes in him, although he did think Tash had something special, something he wanted to share, something to which he would willingly surrender his heart and soul.

His train of thought came to an abrupt halt. His soul. That was what Olaf Jorgensen was talking about. Suddenly he wasn't so certain that he might not be completely in control of himself, of his emotions. He felt the stirring of fear, a twinge of fright. Had Tash cast a spell to make him feel as he did? Had she thrown a net of deception over his thoughts? Was this what had earlier loosened his tongue? The doubts came faster than he could handle. How much did he really know? That uncertainty plagued him as he gathered the remainder of goods on his list.

As soon as the sleigh was loaded he searched for his father and finally found him in the inn with the headman.

"It's against nature for spring to come this early," William Moore was stating flatly and loudly when Jacob arrived. "No one can predict the weather. How could someone know of storms days in advance? I tell you, George Kettleman, these people are preying on your gullibility. Most likely to keep you feeding and housing them," he added with a snarl. "Cheated me fair, they did."

"Why don't you come out to our place? You can see the melting snow for yourself." Jacob interrupted quickly. "You'd have to believe their power then, wouldn't you?"

William Moore snickered. "I wouldn't believe anything I saw where them so-called magicians are concerned, what with all their damned magical tricks."

Jacob held his tongue over William Moore's obvious conflicting opinions about the magicians.

"If these magicians can melt snow in this cold weather then they certainly ought to be able to stop a storm," the headman continued. "Tell them that, George Kettleman. Tell them to make the weather behave." His final words exploded into guffaws.

"I will ask this of them," his father replied seriously. "But, just the same, you'd better prepare."

"Oh yes," William Moore said, barely concealing his laughter, "We will certainly prepare for the storms, but in a month or two, as usual. That's when they'll come, as they always have."

The reaction was much the same with the other townspeople they tried to warn. Even those who took Arthur Thomas' warning seriously would not believe that the snow was melting, neither would they trouble themselves to take the long ride out to check the facts. "Impossible," they'd remark smugly, and dismiss the idea out of hand.

This infuriated Jacob. “Why won't they listen? If that ice dam gives way the flood surge could destroy the dam.”

“Best not to press the issue, Jacob,” his father replied. “Done our part to warn the town. I'll ask the magician if he can do something about the weather, as William Moore asked. Let it rest there.”

Jacob fretted throughout the day and, after dinner, rode Dan across the fields to check the snow cap. They had just crested the hill when he encountered Blade, who waved Jacob to dismount.

“A word with you, boy,” Blade said, taking Jacob's arm in an iron grip. Jacob tried to pull free but the pressure of Blade's fingers only increased.

“Word of caution, boy,” Blade bit out. “Best you keep to your own.”

Jacob found the grip becoming painful. “What do you mean?”

“Better you not get ideas about Tash Pallas. She's not for your kind.”

Jacob's fingers were starting to grow numb. He unsuccessfully attempted to pry the dark man's fingers loose. “Why not? We like each other.”

Blade laughed, but with a singular lack of amusement. “Think someone fine as her would care about a simple fool like you? She's toying with you, boy. You're just a bit of amusement to her.” Jacob doubted this, not from the way she'd acted toward him. Her concern for him couldn't be an act.

“Now listen to me well; you stay away,” Blade continued through clenched teeth. “You hear me, boy? Stay away!” Blade released Jacob and turned to go.

“What if I don't do what you say?” Jacob said defiantly as he felt the numbness receding.

Blade quickly spun about. Jacob didn't have the time to even lift a hand to ward him off as Blade clutched Jacob's cloak and yanked him forward.

“What if I don't?” Jacob repeated defiantly, but heard his voice quiver with fear of what this dangerous man might do.

“Then I will see to you,” Blade replied venomously. He pushed Jacob backward. “I will see to you myself.”

Jacob was shaken. He considered returning home, but what could he do or say? Complain to his father like a child tattling on a bully? Tell Arthur Thomas or Tash about it? No, that would be a coward's way! He climbed back on Dan and continued up the wash, as was his original intent. He knew that he would have to deal with Blade on his own.

He thought about what Blade had said and what might happen if he disobeyed his order. A cold knot of fear grew in his belly over what Blade might do. The man was terribly quick and strong—witness the strength of his grip—so Jacob knew that he'd be no match in a fair fight. Even though Blade obviously had the advantage of strength and speed, there was no guarantee that he would fight fair. No, Jacob knew that he would lose in any direct confrontation.

At the same time he was furious that Blade would order him to stop speaking to Tash, stop this

relationship with the most beautiful, wonderful woman he'd ever met.

That thought gave him pause. Yes, Tash was all that, but what was he? He had nothing to offer her, was ignorant of the wider world with which she was so familiar, and knew nothing of magician's lives and ways. Could Blade be right; was Tash only amusing herself? Was he no more than a diversion before she moved on?

No, that could not be true, not the way she smiled at him, not the way she spoke his name, not the way she seemed to welcome his presence. Surely she felt something for him. Surely.

But the seed of uncertainty had been planted and he felt it growing. How could he discover the truth, and still avoid whatever Blade might do?

Just as he had predicted, the melting water from the snow cap was starting to overflow the dam. There was a bare trickle flowing over the rim faster than new ice could form. A glance at the hill told him that the lake would fill even faster if the melting continued. How much had that cap already been undercut, he wondered, and what was causing it?

* * * *

That night there was a sudden storm, the snow gradually changing to rain as the wind increased, and finally becoming a deluge. The pounding rain awakened Jacob from a troubled dream where he was being beaten by Blade. Tash had been standing to one side and patiently watching, as if she were judging the two.

Jacob wondered what this dream might mean as he listened to the rain. The old magician had been wrong. The storm had come much earlier than he'd predicted so, perhaps Arthur Thomas was fallible after all. But he did say the storm would be heavy, which meant there was more to come.

Rain! Jacob bolted upright. He could picture how the rain would be pouring down from the hills, adding to the lake. Yes, and the rain would melt more snow increasing the overflow or, worse yet, causing the ice dam to fail. Then the river would rise and the town would flood.

He knew that he had to open the gates of the town's dam to relieve the pressure before the surge hit. He dressed quickly and mounted Dan. There was no time to spare.

* * * *

The water had visibly risen when he reached the dam above the town. He thought opening the gates halfway might relieve enough pressure without serious flooding. Yes, and then he could ride into town and warn everyone.

But first he had to open the gates.

He took hold of the big wheel that controlled the gates and struggled to turn it. But, no matter how much he strained, it would not budge. Something was jamming the gates.

Jacob walked to the edge of the dam and looked down. There was a thick layer of ice coating the gate. That must be what was keeping it from opening. He thought for a moment and then decided that if he applied more torque he could overcome the ice's resistance. He removed a long steel bar from the rail, shoved it through the spokes to give him leverage, and pulled with all his strength.

The wheel moved a little. It was working, but the bar began to bend. Jacob threw all of his weight

against the bar and, with a sickening snap, the wheel broke from the shaft, clattered on the stones, and then splashed into the water. At the sudden release of pressure Jacob tumbled forward to within a handsbreadth of the dam's lip and narrowly averted an icy plunge.

Jacob pulled himself to his feet and examined the broken shaft. There was no way he could fix it, especially with the wheel far below the surface of the ice-cold water.

He used the bar to pry up the cover plate surrounding the shaft and looked inside. The lower portion of the shaft was a worm gear that drove a toothed gear attached to the long lever that lifted the gate. Maybe if he could just release the lever from the gear then perhaps the gates would move.

He shoved the bar into the gap between lever and gear and applied all the force he could, but it did not budge. He tried again and again with no result. Finally, in frustration, he jumped and landed on the end of the bar with both feet. The bar bent and then flew free. There was a satisfying snap as the lever broke loose, followed by the gate's creaking and the sound of rushing water. He'd done it!

Suddenly, with a thunderous roar, the gates flew completely open and the lake poured out. Jacob watched with growing horror as a wave of frothing, foaming water rushed toward the town. The water was rushing out far faster than he had anticipated. Instead of saving the town he had created a dangerous flood!

He jumped on Dan and drove him as hard as he could toward town. He had to warn them! Thanks to Dan's speed he might just get there before the flood waters.

But the torrent was rushing ahead of them. It had already washed away the first bridge and that forced him to head toward the next. Luckily the river widened between the two bridges and that slowed the surging flood. But that would change where the river narrowed as it passed through the town.

He rushed across the remaining bridge, pulled Dan to a halt, and leaped off to race through the streets. He could imagine how the flood was already overflowing the banks. He screamed as loudly as he could. "Flood! Flood! The river's flooding!" Jacob shouted even as the proof of his warning began lapping at the doorway of William Moore's house.

Sheila Moore opened the door and screamed when the cold water touched her feet. "My rugs!" she screamed with despair. "My furniture!" She slammed the door closed.

But Jacob had no time to spare for her belongings. He had to warn the folk inside of the advancing flood. He began banging on the doors of the other houses that lined the river bank.

It was a long night.

* * * *

William Moore looked over the flooded town as day broke. The river was now flowing a foot above the lintel of his house. Thankfully the rain had subsided to a dismal drizzle. "Apparently your father didn't ask the magicians to stop the storm," he said dryly. "Damn meddlers—looked what they have brought on us!"

Jacob gulped. It wasn't the magicians that had caused the flood; it had been his own meddling.

"You are a hero, Jacob Kettleman," William Moore said and threw an arm across his shoulders. "Without your warning more might have been lost. Your family will be proud of you."

“Er, I have something to say,” Jacob began and started to explain what had really happened, but was interrupted by a shout from the road. Someone was running toward them and screaming. He couldn't understand the words at first and when he did he felt his heart stop.

“Someone's damaged the dam; broke the wheel and opened the gates. It's nothing but vandalism!”

“I can't imagine who would do such a thing, unless...” William Moore began and then turned to Jacob. “How did you know about the flood before anyone else?” he asked, his face clouding. “Did you...”

“It was an accident,” Jacob said before the headman could complete the damning sentence. “I was just trying to lower the water level so the coming surge...”

A dark look came over William Moore's face. “You caused this?” he said with rising voice. “You flooded the town, washed us from our homes, and destroyed...”

“My rugs!” screamed his wife. “My furniture!”

Jacob didn't know what to say. “I'm sorry,” he said earnestly. “I was just trying to help.” He tried to explain the chain of events without sounding like a complete idiot but, to his own ears, that is exactly how he sounded.

“I will deal with you later,” William Moore promised in a voice drained of emotion. “Right now I need to find places for those who were flooded from their homes. I'd not think it wise for you to stay, Jacob Kettleman. Best you go home and await our judgement.”

Jacob left quickly. He had never seen the headman so angry.

* * * *

His father was standing in the rain when he reached home. “Where have you been all night?” He shouted, but not as angrily as when Jacob tried to explain. “Have to repay the town for the damage you've done,” his father said at long last, after he stopped cursing and muttering incomprehensibly about magicians, bastards, and responsibility. “Have to make amends for your mistake.”

“I was just trying to help.”

“As usual,” his father sighed. Then he patted Jacob's shoulder. “Admire your efforts to save the town, son, but that's no excuse for the destruction you caused. Take years to pay, this will. Years!”

Jacob wished that his father had vented his displeasure in a way that would make him feel that he was paying for his errors. Now, this quiet assertion that the family would bear the burden made him feel worse than he had. Guilt weighed heavily on his shoulders. Perhaps the townspeople would come to yell and beat him. That abuse, painful as it might be, might provide some feeling of absolution.

When William Moore and the townsfolk did not arrive the next day Jacob began to fear that they would not come until they had decided what to do with him. Yes, they were no doubt inventing a suitable, sufficiently horrible, lingering punishment.

The rain continued through the day, a steady drizzle that did nothing to dispel his gloom. What was disappointing was that this pitiful rain was far less than the fierce spring storm the magician had predicted. He decided that, when it came to the weather, Arthur Thomas was no more reliable than anyone else.

That night the storm Arthur Thomas had predicted struck with deadly ferocity. The pounding rain sounded fierce on the roof. All nightlong the rain was driven hard by a vicious warm wind that bent trees to ground and shook the house.

The water continued to pour down the next day and the following one, coming so heavily that even their well-drained yard began to flood.

Jacob worked with the rest of the family to erect an earthen dike, first to protect the barn and then the house, from the rushing water. Even the three magicians helped, shoveling and hauling the half-frozen dirt. Jacob was so tired when they finished that he didn't think to question why they hadn't applied their magic arts to ease the task. At least they could have thawed the ground enough that he could shovel it instead of having to swing the maddock until his arms felt they were about to fall off.

When he awoke the following morning the sound of rain had ceased. The storm had passed, leaving behind a glorious crisp day so clear that every color seemed vivid and intense. Here and there, in places where the unseasonably warm rain had melted the snow, stood exposed blades of emerging spring grasses. Jacob led the horses from the barn so they could browse on the fresh growth. It was a glorious day, but even that did not dispel his feeling of impending doom.

* * * *

Just before dinner a delegation of men arrived at the farm. William Moore's black buggy was among them. All the men looked dirty and disheveled; exhausted.

"We are here to see Jacob Kettleman," the headman announced when Jacob's father went out to greet them.

"You've no need to see my son," George Kettleman replied calmly. "The family will make amends. We'll do all we can to make good your losses."

William Moore was taken aback by the remark. "That's quite generous of you, but we still want to speak to Jacob."

"It's all right," Jacob said as he stood beside his father. "I have to take responsibility for what I did."

"What you did," William Moore began and then stopped as Arthur Thomas and Blade stepped from the barn.

The headman glowered at the magician. "It's all your fault!" he exclaimed as he pointed an accusing finger. "You brought the storm, you made the snow melt, you're the cause of all our problems!"

One of the men made a move toward Arthur Thomas but, before he could take a second step, Blade had placed himself between them. His hand was halfway out of his cloak, enough that Jacob could see that he was gripping some sort of metal tool.

"I'd not do that," Blade growled with such menace that the townsman took a step back.

"I cannot control the weather, despite what you may want to believe," the old magician said wearily. He acted as if he'd taken no notice of the man's implied threat nor of Blade's response.

"We warned you of the coming storm," Jacob's father said defensively. "Had you heeded the magician's

warnings none of this would have happened. You have no reason to blame them.”

William Moore didn't look convinced. “If it hadn't been for your son Jacob we would have lost the dam. If the gates hadn't been opened the flood waters would have destroyed it. The boy's meddling accidentally saved the town from worse damage.”

Jacob couldn't believe his ears. Weren't they going to punish him? He couldn't believe things had changed so quickly.

“We want you to leave,” William Moore continued, addressing the old magician. “We don't need your sorcery ruining our town and imperiling our lives.”

“But all they did was predict the storm!” Jacob said. “And they are the only ones who know how to repair the old machines. You can't make them leave.” The last thing he wanted was to have the magicians, especially Tash, depart.

William Moore dismissed his protest out of hand. “They've already told us most are beyond repair. But that doesn't matter. We can get along just fine without them. You hear me, magician? We want you to leave!”

Arthur Thomas acted amused by the remark. “I understand what you are saying, but our few repairs were only incidental to our visits—a courtesy, as it were, a way of gaining food and lodging on our journey. No, headman, we came to examine the tower and we shall not leave until that is done.”

William Moore spit on the ground. “Bigger fools you for meddling with that demon tower. All right, see what you will and then be gone—just leave our town alone. We want no more magic.

“And you, George Kettleman, its no surprise to me that you are so friendly with these people. I should have expected it.” He smirked as he nodded at Jacob. “Seems your family's always been friendly with their kind.” With that parting shot he turned and climbed into his buggy. In a moment and without another word all the men were gone.

Jacob's mother was crying and his father's fists were clenched so tightly that his knuckles were white.

“Fools.” Blade spit.

* * * *

Jacob found that if he arose earlier than normal and did his chores quickly, he would have time to watch the magicians. The first thing he had to do this particular morning was to climb in the loft and make a replacement strap for Dan's bridle since the mischievous gelding had chewed the old one in two. As he was cutting the strap from the long skein of tanned hide he heard voices below.

“That was an ugly scene yesterday,” he heard Tash remark. “Why are these people so angry at us and the Kettlemans? It was their own fault for not listening.”

“They are ignorant fools,” Blade said sharply. “Can't trust a settler.”

Arthur Thomas sighed. “They're just people, ignorant from too many years of neglect, too many years of declining technology, too many details of survival. It's no wonder they're suspicious of us—we represent the unknown, the unknowable, the mysterious skills that they've lost.”

“But we could have tried to explain...” Tash protested.

Arthur Thomas sneered. “What, how would you explain balancing Wilson tuners, scanning beacon scripts, firing up a pile, or awaring an ai from the archive? How would you do that without first giving them a thorough background in the physics, mathematics, and engineering involved? Perhaps you believe we could tell them how we plan to activate a daemon, as we hacked the tower's power bridge, without having them howling for our heads.”

“But we could have explained what we want to do in simple ways that...”

“It's been tried in the past and failed,” Arthur Thomas said sharply. “My...” He stopped abruptly, coughed, and cleared his throat. His voice was raspy when he continued. “Your predecessor tried that route, much to my regret. No, dearest Tash, I've learned through bitter experience that it's better protection to cloak ourselves in the aura of mystery, even if it does feed their suspicions.”

“Can you imagine how these dullards would react if they heard what we want to do?” Blade sneered. “Probably want to hang us all.”

“But we are just....” Tash protested, her voice fading as they moved away.

What he had overheard puzzled him. If he understood correctly then magic must have once been common, something that people had lost over the years. That implied that magic was a skill, not some inherent faculty blessed on a few individuals. He became very excited, for that meant that he too could acquire the skill with the proper training. He might be able to learn magic if he paid even closer attention to the magicians.

* * * *

Arthur Thomas was still working at the base of the tower as Jacob passed by on his way back from exercising the horses. He noticed that the magician was attacking a large box with a hammer and chisel he'd fetched from the barn. Jacob heard the magician mumbling a spell, but not too clearly. From what other words he could make out, the spell seemed to include a lot of profanity. He continued on to the barn thinking that the old magician sounded a lot like anybody else when they became frustrated.

After he'd put the horses away Jacob peered out the back of the barn and saw that Tash was again working near the cistern. He stood in the shadow of the doorway and unobtrusively watched her.

She was apparently finding fewer problems this day, judging by the sound of her incantations. She spoke barely above a whisper, but certainly with power, for the instrument in her hand sparkled green, green, and green as she moved across a small, hand-sized panel she held.

Then the instrument in her hand sparked red. Tash removed a small knife from her pouch and pried at the cover on the panel. Even from this distance Jacob could see the silvery writing on the board as she removed it from its case. She turned it this way and that for a moment and then chipped away a fleck with a fingernail before replacing the board. She wiggled it a few times to ensure a tight fit and then closed the lid. “Good,” she muttered when the thin instrument glowed green again.

Jacob stayed within the doorway as he watched the graceful movements of Tash's arms as she carefully and methodically worked the mechanisms she removed from the cistern..

What did she really think of him, he wondered as he watched. He'd not had a chance to speak to her since that day Blade had given his chill warning. Should he confront her, or should he try to find out her

true feelings in a more underhanded way? The question worried and rendered him speechless.

Tash must have finished her work for she stood and stretched, placing her hands in the small of her arching back and parting her legs to brace herself. It was a long, languorous stretch.

Jacob's eyes followed the line from her ankles, up her legs, across the swelling of her buttocks, past her tiny waist, and stopped where her breasts thrust forward to strain against the fabric of her blouse. He felt himself responding strongly, yet he hardly dared breathe lest she detect him. Gods, she was so beautiful. Surely Blade must have been right. She was far too wonderful for a simple farm boy like him.

She held the pose for long minutes and then turned to look straight at where he was hiding. "You can come on out now, Jacob. I'm pretty much finished with this module."

Jacob drew back, embarrassed that she had caught him watching her. But, since she now knew he was there he could not avoid her. As he stepped forward he had a sudden thought; if she knew he was there then all that she had done could have been an act for his benefit, which implied that she really was toying with him, manipulating him. It was just as Blade had said.

"What were you doing?" he asked innocently to cover his suspicions.

Tash grinned. "I was running diagnostics to see which units were still good. Most of these appear to be in fair shape, although I was worried there for a second. Replacements are hard to come by, you know. Our spares are pretty low."

"Spare? Replacements? Diagnostics?" Her words were a revelation. In an intuitive flash he realized what it all meant. "You aren't doing magic, are you?" Jacob declared in a rush as this new concept clarified. "You're just repairing the machines, just like I repaired the tractor. It's just a different kind of mechanics."

"Not exactly, but you're right in the ways that matter, Jacob." She smiled. "I knew you were a clever boy."

Jacob shrugged off the meaningless compliment. Now that he realized what she had been doing the wonder of it disappeared. If so, then this was a bitter truth, a fruit he regretted tasting.

"You're very perceptive, Jacob," Tash continued with a grin. "I told Arthur you would figure it out. No, there's no magic here, just maintenance of some old technology that almost everyone's forgotten about. Your tower is one of the few that remains of the landing control system the original settlers put up. We've been hoping for years to get one of them operational."

"But why? What use is the tower?"

Tash sighed. "Arthur Thomas hopes that there are still some supply ships in orbit." Seeing his puzzled expression she continued; "Up there, above the clouds!" She waved a hand toward the heavens. "Oh dear, I guess we will have to educate you, won't we?"

Quickly she explained how a ship could be parked in orbit, and that it could be called to the surface once a tower was operational. "If it exists, which is highly doubtful, then maybe it will contain some knowledge we can use—maybe data we could use to restore some of our older equipment's functions," Tash ended. "Then perhaps we can get ourselves back on the road to civilization after whatever happened to set us back."

“I don't understand,” Jacob said. He was having trouble absorbing so many new concepts.

“Something happened many years ago,” Tash explained. “Somehow we lost most of the knowledge of who we were and where we came from. You know, the myths and legends. It was along time ago,” she ended when she saw his puzzled expression.

“But after so long....” Jacob began. He didn't really believe that there could be something as large as a ship floating above the clouds, but if it were true and a lot of years had passed for it to be of any use it wouldn't do anyone any good. Old equipment died—that was the rule.

“Your tower might be the last chance we have, Jacob,” Tash said. “There are only a handful of people like Arthur Thomas left, people who still understand some of this technology. He learned some from his father, who learned less than his father. Each generation we think we lose a little of the old tech. That ship,” she pointed at the sky, “could do so much to restore what we've lost.”

“If it still works,” Jacob said. “If it exists.”

“If it exists,” Tash agreed. “It's all we can hope for. Arthur's tried to teach me what he knows, but there's so much to learn and so little time. I don't even have the basics so all I can do is simple mechanical checks; idiot stuff, really. Arthur has to do the real work.”

“And Blade?” he asked.

Tash shook her head. “He's not one of us—lacks the skill or the will, I think. But he has other talents that are just as useful.”

“Such as protecting Arthur Thomas and you? That's what he is, isn't he—a guard. He's supposed to keep people away from you so you can concentrate of whatever you are trying to accomplish.” He tried to keep the hurt out of his voice.

A look of consternation crossed Tash's face. “What did he tell you?” she demanded in a sharp voice. “I swear, if he stepped out of line I'll ... never mind. What did he say?”

Jacob scuffed the dirt with the toe of his mud-encrusted boot, the boot of a farm boy too ignorant to play magicians' games. “He said that you had no interest in a farm boy like me.” He looked at her expectantly and, when she failed to respond, continued. “He said you were just using me to amuse yourself.” Still, she did not respond. “I ... I guess he was right.” He turned to go back into the barn.

Tash grabbed his shoulder and turned him about so suddenly that he nearly lost his balance. “You fool,” she whispered, her lips were scant centimeters from his face, so close that he could feel her breath on his cheek, so close that he could fall forever into those beautiful eyes of hers. “Can't you tell how I feel?” she said ardently. “Don't you freaking know?”

Jacob didn't know how to answer. How was he to know? The only guide he had to their relationship was the ache in his heart whenever he saw her, the gnawing fear that she might leave and he'd never be able to speak to her again, the certainty that he was totally, utterly unworthy of her attentions. Gods, what was this spell that she had cast over him that made him feel so badly? All he wanted to do was lean forward and kiss those sweet lips that were scarce centimeters from his own.

“You are so sweet,” Tash said, brightening. “And here is your answer.” She threw her arms around his

neck and placed her lips upon his. Her body pressed against his, pushing her tool pouch into his side so hard that he could feel the shapes of the devices inside. But he didn't mind the discomfort, or even notice it as Tash's tongue explored his own, touched the inside of his cheek and plumbed the depths of his mouth. The kiss was so unlike those he had exchanged with other girls that he didn't know how to react. Surely, he thought, she had so much more experience at this than he, which was another mark of how utterly unworthy he might be.

“You are such a damn exasperating lout,” Tash exclaimed as she abruptly pulled away. “But maybe we can change that,” she said. “Let's talk some more later,” she said over her shoulder as she left and blessed him with another of her dazzling smiles.

Jacob stood in dumb silence, the taste of her lingering on his lips, the heat of her embrace surrounding him like a cape, and her invitation filling him with hope.

* * * *

Blade was standing just inside the barn as Jacob entered a few minutes later. “You are more stupid than I expected, boy. But then, maybe I just didn't explain the situation properly.” He pushed Jacob into one of the empty stalls and followed. Before Jacob could recover Blade's fist shot out and buried itself in his abdomen. As the air rushed out of his lungs and he doubled over in agony, only to feel Blade's fist strike his side, just below the rib cage. The next expertly placed blow came as he pitched forward, a hard punch in his lower back that sent a sharp stab of agony through him.

As he rolled on the floor swimming in a sea of misery and gasping for breath, Blade stood over him. “Did that make matters clearer, boy, or do you want another lesson?” Before Jacob could find the breath to answer Blade put a well-directed kick into his stomach. Jacob was still writhing and retching as he walked away.

* * * *

The next morning Tash came upon Jacob as he was feeding the horses. “Why didn't you come to see me last night?” She reached out for his hand. “Wasn't my invitation clear enough?”

Jacob jerked away. “I had other things to do.”

“Other things?” There was a chill undertone to her voice.

Yes, Jacob wanted to answer, such as trying to dream up a suitable way of getting even with that damned guard of hers. Lord, he still ached from the plummeting he'd gotten. Surely Blade must have dislodged something inside of him for it to hurt this much. This morning he had pissed blood and had trouble keeping his breakfast down.

“Other things?” Tash continued to advance. “But after yesterday ... oh damn, why are men so stupid?” She slipped an arm around his waist as he reached for another sack of feed and drew back when he winced. “Oh, did you hurt yourself?”

Jacob didn't give her an answer but somehow she must have understood. She spun him about, making him drop the sack. A dark cloud of loathing came across her face. Her eyes flashed and her lips drew back in a grimace. “That bastard. Blade had no right to ... if he thinks ... never mind, Jacob. I'll take care of him!” She spun on her heel and stalked off.

How had she known? Jacob hesitated for only a moment and then went after her. “No, Tash. I have to settle this myself.”

“Don't be ridiculous. You're no match for him. Blade could kill you without even breathing hard. No, Jacob. This is a personal matter between Blade and me. I'm the one who has to clear matters up, not you.”

Jacob watched her go with a sinking feeling in his heart. It wasn't right that she should fight his battles for him. But it didn't matter what she did, he knew he would still have to deal with Blade himself, one way or another.

* * * *

Arthur Thomas stated that he needed Jacob's help the next day and, when his father objected because of the work Jacob was to do, he offered Blade as replacement to help him load the hay in the loft. Since Blade was obviously stronger Jacob's father felt it a good exchange.

Jacob found that the magician had finally opened a door in the tower's side, a door that no one had suspected of being there. Jacob hesitated at the gaping black entrance, unsure of what he might find inside. From what Tash had explained he knew that the magician was only some sort of master mechanic and that the tower a mere machine. Yes, he knew that, but a lifetime of concern about the demon that dwelled within could not be put to rest so easily. Jacob hesitated. Hadn't the magician said they were going to loose a demon?

“Don't dawdle,” Arthur Thomas shouted from within. “I need your help with this.” Jacob took a deep breath and stepped inside.

What he found astounded him. There was no cavernous inside, no vast space such as one would find in a silo. Instead he found himself in a narrow, constricting hallway. On either side were walls covered with row upon row of lights and, beneath them, protrusions. Above some of these were small numbers. The rows were closely packed and extended from floor to as high as Jacob could reach.

Arthur Thomas was standing near a section covered with at least twenty rows of green lights. “Now Jacob, I want you to observe carefully. I'm going to set a pattern on this first panel and then repeat that specific sequence several times on other panels. You must tell me if I am about to make a mistake. Do you understand?”

Jacob wondered what the magician thought he could accomplish by doing this. He nodded to show the old man that he understood, although it seemed a rather trivial task, one that Arthur Thomas could have easily done for himself. It occurred to him that perhaps this make-work had little to do with him and more to do with punishing Blade. Yes, that must be it. This “job” was just an excuse to get him out of the way and to have Blade help with the backbreaking work in the hay loft.

Arthur Thomas pressed one of the protrusions. “Here we go, Jacob. This is the first group of settings. There are ten; 2.3, 2.2, 2.3, 1.05, 2.1, 3.2, 2.2, 2.2, 2.2, and 2.0. Do you have that?”

Jacob stumbled and tried to repeat the sequence without looking at the numbers. He got the first seven right, but missed one of the remaining. “Sorry, sir,” he said and vowed to pay closer attention.

Arthur Thomas pressed another button. Jacob watched in amazement as the numbers, which had appeared to be printed on the panel, changed. “The second set reads 3.3, 2.1, 2.2, 1.5, 3.0, 2.1, and zero. Got that?” Jacob repeated the sequence, this time without making a mistake.

“All right, here are the next settings,” the magician rattled off more figures as they appeared on the panel.

Jacob struggled to memorize them while holding the previous sets in memory.

As Arthur Thomas moved along Jacob repeated the entire sequence to himself over and over. “Now, what was that first set?” Jacob rattled off the first ten numbers without pause and watched as the magician made the row match those. The next two sequences were set in the same manner.

Five times Arthur Thomas asked Jacob for the sequence and five times Jacob replied flawlessly. At no time did the magician indicate that he had expected neither more nor less from his helper.

“Now, do you think you can do what I did on the rest of these?” The magician indicated the rest of the wall with a wave of his left hand. “I have more pressing tasks to perform up above while you are doing this. Can I trust you?”

The task didn't seem that difficult. The numbers seemed to change by a fraction each time one of the protrusions was pressed. “Yes, I think I can.”

“Excellent. Let's see you do one panel before I leave.”

Jacob's hand started to shake. The old magician was actually going to let him make changes to the machine. He didn't know what would happen as a result of these settings, nor did he particularly care. It was enough that he was being given the privilege of doing the work.

Arthur Thomas said nothing as Jacob went through the motions. “I think you've got it. Continue until you've set all of the power units.”

“Sir?” The words made little sense to him.

“Just keep doing it until you've set every one of the panels. After that come up and find me for your next job.”

“I will do my best, sir,” Jacob answered humbly, but the magician was already climbing the ladder at the end of the hall.

Jacob set to work. There were a lot of panels to be set.

By evening the ground was clear of snow for nearly a kilometer in every direction. Jacob noted that the hillside where he'd first noticed the melting snow cap was now completely bare. What is more, the hillside's grass seemed far greener. “Due to the heat, no doubt,” was Arthur Thomas' explanation. “I believe that is where the heat exchanger is buried.”

Which explained nothing. It was still magic as far as Jacob was concerned.

* * * *

“I'd like to see the town again,” Tash said as they snuggled in the warm hay above the horses' stalls. Their little nest was doubly a pleasure for Jacob since it was Blade's labor that had put the hay in the loft. “Maybe I can get something nice for your mother and sisters to repay their hospitality.”

“William Moore said you were to stay out of town. Besides, I'm sure Arthur Thomas and Blade would never let you go.”

Tash kissed him again. “What they don't know won't matter, dear. Besides, my part of the work is over.

Arthur Thomas can do the rest by himself. Come on, Jacob, the long ride to town would give us a chance to be really alone for a while.”

Jacob savored that idea. Their cozy nest in the loft hadn't been all that private. Twice they'd had to lie silent while his father retrieved some tools from the crib down below, and Arthur Thomas and Blade had more than once come through to gather tools. Privacy was in short supply around the farm.

“Mother probably has a list of things she needs. I'll volunteer to go to town for them.”

“I'll meet you below the hill.” With that Tash was off of him and down the ladder in a flash. By the time he'd gotten to his feet she was already out the door and racing across the field.

* * * *

“I'd like to go to town and see what the flood did,” Jacob announced as he came into the kitchen. “Can I get anyone anything while I'm there?”

“He's up to something,” Ev declared. “He usually hates going to town.”

“Hush,” his mother said. “I do have a few things we need, Jacob; flour, and some spices, a few pounds of wax, and sweetener.” She fumbled in the jar on top of the stove to extract some coins.

“Where is that magician you've been mooning over?” Ev continued. “We haven't seen either one of you since mid-day. Did she finally let you know what a pest you are and tell you to get away?”

“Tash wouldn't say that! She's too nice.” Jacob wondered why he was so transparent that just about everyone knew his feelings. Tash certainly had no problem in that regard.

Ev danced around the table. “Oh, Jacob's finally found someone more weird than himself. Is that it Jacob? Are you two going to run off you can hug and kiss in private?”

Which was exactly what he was planning to do, but he couldn't admit it. He decided that the best move would be to go on the offensive. “You mean like you and Eric Larson do whenever you have the chance?”

Ev flushed. “You, you....”

“I didn't know that you and the Larson boy were serious,” his mother said crisply. “How long has this been going on, Evangeline?”

“There's nothing between me and Eric Larson,” Ev responded hotly. “Don't listen to him. He's making it all up.”

“Then what about Lars Torfsen at the fair the other night, or Arlie Whitehurst at the harvest feast?” Jacob continued. “You do spread yourself around, don't you darling sister?”

Evangeline turned a bright crimson shade. “That's not true, either. Don't listen to him mother!”

“Hmm, I think it's time we had a long talk,” his mother pronounced slowly. Her usual smile had been replaced with a stern look. “Jacob, why don't you run along to town while Ev and I have a nice long chat. Yes, I think it is well past time we had a little woman-to-woman talk.”

Ev glared as Jacob snatched up the money and raced out of the door. He knew that Ev would figure a way to get back at him later, but for now he had escaped a possibly embarrassing admission.

Tash was waiting exactly where she'd said and snuggled into the warm furs on the sleigh beside him. Since Brandy knew the way Jacob let the reins hang limp while he paid more attention to Tash. And she to him.

The high water mark of the flood was most obvious on the houses nearest the river banks. From the mud stains near the roof line it looked as if William Moore's house had been completely submerged. All the doors and windows were opened wide to help dry the place out, despite the chill of the day. A pile of water-soaked rugs and assorted furnishings lay in a soggy heap just outside of the door.

The other riverside buildings were in much the same condition. Further away, up the bank, the flood's brown signature was below the roof line, but there was still damage to be seen. Luckily the buildings and shops around the square the had been spared, thanks in no small measure to Jacob's unintentional opening of the gates.

"I'll be as quick as I can," Tash said as she leaped from the sleigh and headed for the square. Jacob parked and began picking up the few staple items his mother had requested. The curt responses from the merchants and others were at odds with their normal behavior. It was as if they were still angry at him. Perhaps William Moore had not spoken for all when he'd expressed his gratitude.

Day was fading into twilight when he found Tash sitting on the low wall outside the butcher's shop. A small, silent crowd had gathered nearby. "I've gotten everything on the list. Are you ready to go?"

Tash came to her feet with a flowing movement so smooth that it seemed that she had no joints whatsoever. "I decided to wait for you." Although her words were light Jacob noticed the way her eyes darted nervously from side to side.

"Is something wrong?" he asked as they began to walk. The crowd followed them.

"They dislike me," Tash said quietly as she gripped his arm and held on. "No, it's more that they are fearful—wary of my presence and what I might do."

Jacob looked around. He recognized many of their faces. They were people he'd seen in school, at worship—tradesmen, shopkeepers, and schoolmates. It wasn't conceivable that they could be afraid of someone as lovely and nice as Tash.

"It's just your imagination," he said jokingly. "They're just upset because of the flood." At the same time he wondered at the undercurrent of animosity that filled the town. Perhaps there was something in what she said.

"I know you'd like to think so, Jacob, but that won't change things. Come on, let's finish and be on our way. This wasn't a good idea after all." She yanked him into a shop. "Here, let's get your mother some material for her sewing. Something nice to repay her for the pies."

He recognized the place. It was where his sisters seemed to spend so much time on market days. There were bolts of cloth arrayed on either side of the store's central aisle. Bins of small items were scattered about. He recognized cards of buttons and fasteners, but the remainder of the items were a mystery.

"These, I think, and some of those," Tash moved purposefully among the bins and pulled handfuls of this

and that together and dumped them on the counter. Then she went to the bolts and selected two with subtle flower prints. "I'll take them," she announced. Helga Lafstadder, the shopkeeper named a price that Jacob thought excessive, but Tash said nothing. She took out her purse and placed four shining coins on the countertop.

"I won't take your enchanted coins, imp" Helga announced coldly and made shooing motions at the coins. "No telling what might come of it."

"Are you afraid the coins will disappear as soon as we are gone?" Tash spit out. "Afraid that I'd cheat an honest woman of her earnings?"

Helga drew back as if slapped. "If you know so well what I'm thinking then why bother to ask?" she said angrily.

Tash leaned across the counter. "Were I as powerful as you imagine I'd not be needing coin at all, would I? No, Helga Lafstadder, these coins are pure gold and worth considerably more than what you've asked for these inadequate selections. Now, put my purchases into something we can carry so we can be gone."

Helga muttered something under her breath, but relented enough to pull a length of wrapping from under the counter and bind the items into a tight bundle.

Jacob lifted the two bolts while Tash took the bundle. "Good day to you, Helga Lafstadder" he said politely as they left. Helga couldn't respond. Her mouth was occupied with biting on Tash's coin to verify its value.

The crowd that had been following them had grown since they'd entered the store. It now consisted of some twenty or more people.

"There's one of them!" someone shouted and Lars Torfsen's father, who was standing nearest the door, yelled; "You flooded my barn and ruined my fields." His face was flushed and his breath smelled of too long at the brew kegs.

"Damned gicians wouldn't help us," one of his drinking mates slurred loudly.

"Washed out the bridge on the north side," another farmer whose name Jacob couldn't recall added. "Now I have to come the long way round now."

"Drowned my best sow, your flood did," someone standing in the back cried.

"Let's get the devil's spawn," a shrill voice shouted. "Let's get the bitch!"

Tash drew back as the rumbling voices grew louder and the crowd began to advance.

Jacob couldn't imagine what was making these people so upset. He took a step away, expecting Tash to follow, but she acted as if she were paralyzed. Her eyes darted from one to the next. Fear was written in her stance and on her face, plain for all to see. Jacob couldn't understand why she was reacting so strongly. They were only taunting her.

Then a stone flew across the empty space and struck Tash on the shoulder. "Get her, get her!" a gruff voice cried. Others quickly joined them until the cry was a roar. "Get the bitch!"

Tash still had not moved. "Come on, Tash. We've got to get out of here." Jacob grabbed her arm and yanked, but she continued to act as if she were stuck. He pulled again and managed to get her moving in the right direction, but too slowly.

Another second stone whizzed by Jacob's head and he thought he heard the dull thud of another hitting flesh. Tash staggered momentarily and then seemed to snap out of her trance.

She stopped, lifted her arms, and waved them about as if she were casting a spell. "Begone!" she shouted as she turned and pointed at the nearest group. "Begone or I'll call the demons of the nether worlds upon you!"

The people in the lead came to an abrupt stop. From the expressions on their faces Jacob thought they expected fire to sprout from the cobblestones or devils to suddenly appear before them. A few screamed in fright and pointed at the sky. There was a murmur of curses as those in the back stumbled into those who had stopped. In less than a minute the advancing crowd had dissolved into chaos.

"Now, run like hell," Tash said to Jacob as the crowd tried to sort itself out. She took off with the speed he had seen earlier. He was two steps behind her to begin with and fell further back with each succeeding step, although he was running as fast as he could.

Tash rounded the corner, climbed into the sleigh and took up the reins when he was only halfway there. Jacob heard footfalls close behind and tried to speed up but the bolts he was carrying were slowing him down. With no thought for his own safety he stopped, spun about and smashed the bolts of cloth into the faces of Peter Ulrich and Tony Scannish.

The two flipped backwards from the unexpected impact and tripped the gang behind them into a tangled pile. Jacob sprinted away, grinning in satisfaction. That would show them how he felt about people who threw rocks at Tash.

He tossed the bolts into the back of the sleigh and held on as they raced away. "Are you all right?" he asked when he regained his seat. "Did something hit you?"

Tash turned for only a moment so Jacob could see the angry red cut just below her eye. Her cheek was already starting to swell.

"Those bastards!" Jacob said. "I ought to..."

Tash silenced him. "There is nothing you should do, Jacob. They are only afraid of what is happening and fearful people often do things they later regret. The fault is mine for not leaving when I first learned of their fear. I should have known better than to stay."

Jacob protested. "How could you know what they intended to do? It isn't your fault the way they behaved."

Tash put a finger to his lips. "Not another word. But this is only the beginning, dear Jacob. I have a feeling there is worse to come."

"This is insane," he shouted over the rushing wind of their passage. "I can't believe the way they acted."

Tash pressed the horse to run even faster. "I don't think it was only my presence that made them so

fearful. It was something else that prompted them. Look there!”

Jacob looked forward, toward home, toward the tower. Against the low-lying clouds was an eerie greenish light that flickered and flashed.

“It has to be Arthur!” Tash yelled triumphantly. “He finally got the beacons working.” She seemed ecstatic over the horrible light.

Jacob didn't know what a beacon was, nor did he particularly care. The menacing light meant that his childhood nightmare had become reality—somehow the magicians had loosed the demons trapped in the tower! This was more than a machine could do, this was more than something dealing with simple skills. This was magic!

The villagers had tried to warn him. They had been right; the magicians had their own reasons, reasons that had nothing to do with creature comforts and farming. The light flickered and glowed, portending worse was to come.

“Faster,” he urged and leaned forward, as if by will power alone he could impel horse and sleigh to move even faster. He had to see if his family was in danger.

* * * *

Tash brought them to a stop in the farmyard and immediately leaped down to head toward the tower. Jacob went in the opposite direction, toward his family, who were standing at the door of their house, staring with horror at the glowing clouds.

The source of the greenish light wasn't the tower itself, but the pillars. Each was glowing and pulsating from dim to bright. The light made his past nightmares of demons building their strength and preparing to emerge seem real.

“What's happening?” he yelled at this father. It must be pretty serious, he thought, for his mother was clutching her arms protectively around both sisters. “What are they doing?”

“Arthur Thomas told us to get away,” his father answered. “He said we are all in terrible danger if we stay here.”

Pam cried, her face wet with tears, she was so frightened. “But you took the sleigh so we couldn't leave. Now the demons will get us for certain.”

“Come along, we've got to leave,” his mother said as she pushed Pam toward the sleigh.

Jacob grabbed Ev by the arm and pulled. She stumbled in her rush to climb aboard and Jacob didn't hesitate to give her rear a hard shove. She let out an indignant screech as she flew across the seat.

“Jacob, get in,” his father yelled as he tied Dan to the rear of the sleigh.

It didn't feel right to run away with the family when he was so responsible for all this. Maybe those panels he had done in the tower were a part of it. No, he couldn't leave, even if the old magician had warned them. Yes, he had a responsibility to see this through to the end, to try to stop the magicians from damaging or destroying the farm and the town.

Jacob hesitated, his feelings of loyalty and self-preservation were in conflict but, before he could decide,

a sleigh full of shouting townspeople drove into the yard and blocked the family's exit. William Moore was among them, as was the drunken Harold Torfsen.

“Where are those damned magicians?” William Moore demanded. “What are they doing?” He brandished a heavy staff that looked like an axe handle. With a start Jacob realized that each of the villagers were carrying something that could be used as a weapon. Tash had been right—worse had been yet to come.

“You've got to get away from here!” his father warned. “The magicians said it was too dangerous to remain here.”

William Moore shook his staff again. “Dangerous for those damned magicians, I'd say. We'll put a stop to their damned mischief once and for all.”

Jacob had never seen these people in such a foul mood. Jacob noticed the whiteness of their knuckles as they gripped their weapons. Even from afar he could see the fear in their eyes, see the hatred of anything that upset their daily routines, see their lack of understanding. If ever there was a time when he felt unlike them it was this moment. He was not one of them. He was afraid, but it made him want to understand, not destroy what he did not know.

One of the villagers shouted and Jacob turned to see Tash coming from the direction of the tower. Fear of what might happen ran through him. He doubted she could scare this hardened group of men the way she had spooked the crowd earlier.

Two of the men started to move toward her and the others quickly followed. They spread out into the same loose crescent line that they used to capture small game. Only this time it was Tash, not some startled hare, within a circle that could easily trap her.

He made up his mind and shouted as he raced away from the sleigh and toward Tash. He rammed William Moore in the square of his back with his shoulder and sent the headman tumbling into the man beside him, who jarred the next in line as Jacob dove through the gap.

“Run!” he gasped as he approached a startled Tash. “Get back to the tower.”

But Tash didn't run. She shuddered at the crowd, visibly afraid, yet she braced herself. “You are all in terrible danger,” she announced in level voice. “You must get away at once.”

“The only danger here from is you meddling magicians,” Moore growled. “Get them!”

As Tash had been speaking some of the men had worked themselves around to close the circle. Tash pressed against Jacob as they huddled together. He felt his stomach clench in fear as several of the men began to raise their implements above their heads.

Then Blade was there, glowering as he spun around. In a single smooth motion he withdrew his arm, his hidden hand, from the cloak. He was holding an odd sort of metal hatchet; truncated, with a heavy handle. It was hardly an imposing weapon against so many. Jacob wondered what he intended to do.

As if in answer, Blade raised the hatchet into the air. A clap of thunder roared as lightning leaped from the tool in Blade's hand.

Everyone stopped, astounded as Jacob that this magician should have such power in his grasp. But that

was only for a moment. "He can't stop us all!" William Moore shouted and swung his staff toward Tash's head. Blade was already turning his weapon toward the headman before William Moore's arm started to move.

Jacob didn't hesitate to think before he leaped and put himself between Tash and the angry headman. Just as Blade's weapon roared Jacob felt a sickening crack as William Moore's staff met his shoulder. Jacob felt his entire side explode in pain. He staggered for a few steps on weakening legs until they collapsed under him. Slowly, ever so slowly, the cold ground rose to press against his cheek.

As he fought to stay conscious he heard another roar from Blade's weapon and a hoarse scream. He tried to turn his head to see who it had been, but his muscles refused to obey. His father was struggling with the headman, rolling over and over on the ground.

The pain in his side grew unbearable, a hot scouring, searing rough-edged rasp of skin and flesh that went on and on. He tried to open his mouth to scream over the bedlam around him, but only a whimper emerged, a pitiful whimper. Gods, he thought, if only I could die and put an end to all this. But the pain went on and on.

"No, no. Get away you fools," he heard Arthur Thomas yell from a million miles away. He could barely make out the magician's cries over the commotion before everything went black.

There were flames and angry shouts when he awakened. Someone kicked him in the side. Rough hands began dragging him along the ground. He heard women's screams and the sound of flesh being struck again and again.

A new sound began to grow. It was a low roar, like an approaching thunderstorm, but continuous and steadily increasing.

"The tower!" someone yelled and he heard the crowd's roar move away.

"No, no, you fools," Arthur Thomas cried. The roaring was now almost unbearable it was so loud.

Jacob tried to make sense of what was happening. Near him a woman was sobbing endlessly, another's muffled screams were fading into the distance. There were flames reflecting off the barn's side and he could hear the crackling of a huge fire nearby.

"Kill the bastard," someone snarled and Jacob felt his head being lifted by the hair.

Then Blade's weapon roared. Three times it exploded and there were more screams, men's screams this time. He caught a flash of Tash and Arthur Thomas waving weapons as well. Someone turned him over and he saw that their house aflame. There was the smell of burning sulfur in the air and bodies lying all about. In the distance he could see flames erupting from the base of the tower.

"Those fools, they'll ruin everything."

"Can't we stop them?" he heard Tash beg. "There must be something we can do."

"One of the girls and the woman's dead," Blade said abruptly. "We'd better leave or we will join her. They won't be satisfied."

"Use the horse, Tash. We'll take the sleigh," Arthur Thomas shouted to make himself heard above the

rising roar of the approaching storm. No, that was no storm. The thunder was continuous, a roar that was steadily rising in power and intensity.

"I'm not leaving Jacob," she replied. "Give me a hand, Blade. Put him in the sleigh and ... oh, my God!"

Far above them the sky turned a pretty rose color, as if a new sun had formed. The light grew brighter and brighter until Jacob had to close his eyes against the glare. Seconds later there was a clap of thunder so loud, so intense that Jacob swore he could feel it hit his face. It made the earlier roaring seem a whisper in comparison.

"Damn, damn, damn, damn," Arthur Thomas kept repeating. It sounded as if he were crying as well as the light faded around them and the sound rolled away over the plains. Bright fireflies began to rain from the clouds. Beautiful, unseasonable fireflies of light drifting down.

The next hours were an agony of bumping and jostling, each movement sending waves of radiating pain from Jacob's shoulder. Consciousness came and went. He thought they had stopped, but then someone was carrying him, causing such pain that he passed out again.

The next thing he was aware of was someone stroking his head. Someone else was sitting on his legs as a pair of brawny hands were wrenching at his shoulder, sending further waves of intense agony through him.

He wished he could die.

* * * *

Jacob awoke to find an angel hovering over him, a beautiful angel whose russet hair framed a perfect, beautiful face. Why, he wondered, this angel looked so much like his Tash.

"...coming around, I think," the angel said to someone he could not see.

"About time. We can't stay here." That voice sounded like Blade's. "We need to get him on his feet so we can start moving again."

"He will rest as long as necessary," Arthur Thomas ordered quietly. "We cannot leave him here, not after what they did to his..."

"Be quiet! I think he's awake," Tash said. "Jacob? How do you feel? Are you in pain?"

Jacob tried to organize his thoughts. His side felt sore, but the intense pain had gone. "Weak," he whispered. "So damn weak." His lips felt parched and his tongue too large. There was a horrible taste in his mouth.

"That's from the painkillers. We set your shoulder, so don't try to move around, it'll be sore for a few weeks. We did some field surgery to remove the bullet. It didn't hit anything vital, thank heavens. You lost a bit of blood and that's why you feel so weak."

"Where's everyone?" he asked. He tried to make some sense of his recollections of the confusion as they tried to escape from the tower. "Did we all get safely away?"

Tash looked alarmed. She glanced at someone behind him and shook her head. "We can talk about that later, Jacob. Right now you need to get more rest for the journey." She pressed something against the

side of his neck.

Journey? What was she talking about? He hadn't planned on going anywhere. Before he could voice that thought sleep descended like a dark blanket. His dreams were of screams in the night and angry faces.

* * * *

The next few awakenings were a blur. He had a sense of movement, of a change of surroundings. Once he'd heard the sound of a nearby babbling brook, a sure sign of the spring melt. At that time Tash had spooned warm broth into his mouth and tended to the dressings at his side.

"Why did you have to shoot him," he overheard her asking during another awakening. "Is that how you deal with anyone you dislike?" He was clearly overhearing an argument in progress.

"I wasn't aiming at him. The fool kid jumped in my way," Blade snarled. "Why won't you believe me?"

"Maybe because of what you are," Tash said biting. "And the way you think. Jacob was just trying to protect, not attack me. I don't need your protection where Jacob is concerned, soldier."

The sound of the babbling brook was absent when he next awakened. He had a sense of mountains rearing around him in the darkness of a cloudy night. There was a campfire crackling nearby. He could make out shadowy figures gathered around it.

Arthur Thomas sounded weary. "We've got to find someplace to rest and figure out what we're going to do next. We lost so many of our supplies in the fire, including the radio. We have to find an active pillar and make contact with base."

"Why don't we just find a town and salvage whatever we can," Blade suggested.

"I don't want a repeat of our latest experience."

Tash exploded. "Is that what you call it—an experience?" Gods, it was a disaster—all those poor people.... It would have been better for everyone had we never come around."

"But we had no choice," Arthur Thomas said. "This tower presented the best possibility. We had to try."

"I know, but couldn't we have done it differently?" Tash pleaded. "There has to be a better way."

"Let me know when you think of it," Arthur Thomas said bitterly.

* * * *

Jacob woke to a hillside camp overlooking a small valley. On either side soared tall mountains still covered with snow. He was lying on a complicated arrangement of poles and blankets. He recognized the blankets as those that had been in the sleigh.

He heard voices behind him and Tash appeared with a steaming mug in her hands. "We stopped the meds so you'd be able to move around," she said pleasantly. "Eat this and then we'll see if you can stand."

Jacob was ravenous. He gulped the warm gruel down as if it were the most delicious food in the world.

"Take it easy. You'll get sick if you eat too quickly," Tash cautioned.

“Looks like he can start taking some of the load,” Blade said as he knelt beside Tash and casually put one arm across her back. “Probably been faking the past day or so.”

Tash shook off his arm. “I think I am the best judge of that, Blade. Trust me, he won't be ready to walk for another day at least.”

Blade stood. “Then I'm glad it's all downhill from here, but he'd better be ready by the time we get to the pass; that's as far as I'm taking him and I don't give a damn what Arthur Thomas says!”

A thousand questions swam in Jacob's head. Where were they and why had they come here? What had happened after he passed out? Where was his family? What was the meaning of the lights on the field, the roaring, the blazing sun—or had that been a dream?—the explosion, the dead bodies, and the fireflies? Just what had Arthur Thomas been trying to do?

But Tash avoided any direct answers. “You are one of us now, Jacob. You are under our protection?”

“But why? Why should I need your protection?” he asked, but met with only silence.

At least one question that had been in Jacob's mind was answered as soon as they broke camp. The pole arrangement allowed Blade to drag Jacob behind him as they descended the hillside. Jacob realized that he must have been doing this since they left home. No wonder he was so anxious for Jacob to be up and walking on his own.

It shamed Jacob that Blade should be doing this, no doubt at Arthur Thomas's insistence. Still, it did place him under some obligation to repay the dark man and that obligation was quite distasteful. He wanted to owe Blade nothing. He still had to settle matter between them, but only when he felt they were equals. His desire to repay the dark man in kind was tempered by the prudence of his youth and inexperience. His time would come, he was sure of it.

He struggled out of the blankets to test his strength whenever they stopped. His right side still felt stiff. Every time he tried to straighten a stitch of pain shot across his ribs, but he tried to never let it show.

“Take it easy. It'll take time to heal completely,” Tash whispered, as knowingly as ever. It was uncanny, the way she could see into his thoughts.

By the third day Jacob felt he could walk and managed it without assistance. “I will walk on my own in the morning,” he announced and bristled when he saw Blade smile.

“But you aren't ready to....” Tash began.

“Leave him be,” Arthur Thomas interrupted. “Jacob is the best judge of his own strength.” Turning to Jacob he said; “We will travel as slowly as we can. If you feel that you cannot keep up you must tell me at once and we will use the travois once more.”

Jacob swore that he would die before he let Blade carry him one step further. “I will not slow your progress, magician. But before I take another step would you please explain why we are doing this? Where are we going and what has happened to my family?” He had asked the same questions each day they stopped and had received no answer.

There was a moment of silence. Tash moved to Jacob's side and placed one hand on his shoulder. Blade

grunted and moved to the far side of the campfire as Arthur Thomas squatted before Jacob. He spoke quietly. "You have no family, boy. You must put that past behind you and continue with us. You cannot go back."

"But my father will need help with the spring planting, and there is so much to learn about the tower now that you've fixed it that..." His voice trailed off as he noted the sad expression on the old magician's face. Then he recalled the image of the burning tower he had seen and the flaming farmhouse.

"I'm afraid that the tower is no longer of any use to anyone. Nor could you return if it was. Listen Jacob, you were nearly killed and, despite our weapons, we barely got away alive ourselves. The mob—those ignorant settlers—was quite enraged."

"He wants to know about his family," Tash said firmly. Her hand rested gently on his arm. Jacob could feel her draw nearer, lending him warmth. "You can't put it off any longer. You have to tell him."

"We tried to...." Arthur Thomas began. "If we'd thought that..." When he paused the second time Jacob knew that the news would not be good.

Finally, Arthur Thomas found his voice. In a few terse sentences he described what the mob had done. As he spoke Jacob integrated the images that he'd believed were nightmares; the burning house, the screaming women; "The bodies?" he croaked.

"Some of your family, those we killed," the magician replied. "We had no time to bury anyone. It was too dangerous to remain, so we left at once. We had to bring you with us. Jacob, the mob would have killed you."

Jacob wondered why the news made no immediate impact on him. Instead, he felt numb. Suddenly he was without the father and mother he had so loved and he felt nothing. Suddenly he was without the older sister he thought he detested, and the little sister he loved. Suddenly he was alone as never before.

"We did find this," the magician extended a wad of fabric to Jacob. "I think you should have it."

Jacob took the soft fabric. It was Evangeline's scarf, her favorite scarf, the one she always wore when she was going to town. He lifted it to his face and breathed deeply, smelling Evangeline's sweet perfume. Deep in the night he recalled that scent and found the tears for her.

Then Tash was lying beside him, her arms embraced him, holding him close as he sobbed. "The pain will ease in time, Jacob. You want to learn too much to hold onto your past."

Jacob wondered how Tash always seemed to know his innermost thoughts, often before he realized them himself. What secret power did this lovely, desirable, woman hold and did she know how much he loved her? He glanced at Tash, so close and warm, and was about to voice that question when he saw her smile.

"It's a gift," she said simply. "And I feel the same way about you, dear Jacob." His remaining questions were buried in her lips. At that moment Jacob realized that he had won a contest he'd not completely understood until this moment. It had not been Blade who he had to defeat, it had been his own doubts about her.

Tash was absolutely right. He was eager to learn more of the magician's arts. Despite the pain of the moment he was where he had always longed to be. He was among the magicians.

Only, why did it have to come at such a price?

* * * *

In the morning, he helped strike the camp. The pass was just ahead and beyond that, the future. He had a long way to go if he was going to be a magician, but he knew that he would make it.

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