

NORTHSHORE-Awakeners 1

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There was no need for watchmen on the boats that plied the World River. Since everything moved at the same speed, pulled by the same invincible tides, there was little chance of collision; this no less on the barge Gift of Potipur than on any other boat. Thrasne, third assistant owner's-man, had appointed himself watchman nonetheless, borrowing the title from those who manned the gates between townships on North shore.

Northshore.

North shore with its Awakeners and frag powder merchants, its oracular Jarb Mendicants and blue-faced priests of Potipur, glittering with sacred mirrors. North shore, with its processions of black Melancholies, flailing away at the citizens with their fish skin whips and given good metal coin to do it. North shore, with its puncon orchards and frag groves and wide fields of white-podded pamet and blue-tasseled grain.

And Northshore's River' edge, where lean forms of stalking Laughers, tight-helmed in black, announce their approach with cries of scornful laughter, ha-ha, ha-ha, making the heretics run for cover. Echoing the Laughers, stilt-lizards hoot through their horny lips, scattering the song-fish from around their reed like legs only to snatch them up one by one to gulp them down headfirst. Ha-ha ha-ha.

Once in a while Thrasne would see the up-pointed finger of a Tower scratching at the sky, fliers gathered around it like flies around dead fish. Once in a greater while he would see the lonely knuckle of a Jarb House. And the River itself, some places smooth as a rain pond, other places full of rocks as a worker pit, everywhere dotted with blight-buoys and striped with jetties, as wide as half the world.

Township after township, town after town, with fences between to keep people from moving east and gates between to let people move west, the World River tugging the ships along on the endless tides, and all the panoply of life laid out for Thrasne's watching.

He knew watchmen were necessary on land to keep foolhardy youths from sneaking between townships in the forbidden direction or greedy caravaners from rushing too quickly westward, clogging the orderly flow of commerce. He knew that on a boat a watchman could only watch, but that was what Thrasne did best. He wasn't bad at handling sails or sculling oars. He could make the fragwood deck gleam as well as any boatman. He could give orders and see they were carried out, which is what gained him the third assistant's post. And he could stow a cargo so that what was wanted next was always on top. These were necessary and useful talents, but he felt his talent for watching was better than these. Certainly it was more developed.

He had created a little cubby in the fore wall of the owner-house, up top deck, where the ventilation shaft opened from the forward hold. Across this shaft he rigged a high grating of poles with a sack of loose pamet on top. When his round was done for the day he could sly up to top deck, wait until no one was looking, then hang himself by his fingertips from the owner-house roof with his toes on a hand wide railing and shinny around into the cubby. No windows there; no owner's wife looking for anyone not occupied so she could find something unnecessary for them to do; only the sun-warmed boards of the owner house wall vibrating to the ceaseless flow of the tides. Sometimes he'd stay until dark, and sometimes past that if there were things to see.

It was from the cubby he had first seen a flame-bird set fire to its nest, from the cubby he'd first seen a strange, rising from the depths like some great green balloon, looking at him out of huge, wondering eyes from its fringes as it spit its bones at him.

It was from the cubby he had first seen a whole ship and its crew caught by blight, drifting ever farther into the unknown southern currents with wooden men standing at the rail as though they'd been carved there.

It was from the cubby he had watched the golden ship of the Progression gliding by on its seven-year journey, the doll-like figure of the Protector of Man held high on the arms of the personal guards.

It was from the cubby he had watched the crowds on shore, thousands of shouting townspeople and file on file of mirror-

staffed Awakeners and gem-decked priests all shouting the Protector's name, "Obol, Obol, Obol."

It was from the cubby he had seen all there was to see for the four years he had been Blint's man, and it was from the cubby he now noticed the hard lines of jetties wavering over the River surface not far ahead, where no jetty was supposed to be.

According to the section chart-of-towns, there were no piers closer than Darkel-don, a good ten-day's tide yet, and just yesterday owner Blint had told them they could fish as they liked till then with no worries at all. Now, having seen what he'd seen, there was nothing to do but slither below and tell Blint of this, though it might put him to wondering how Thrasne had seen the piers. They wouldn't be visible from deck level for some time yet, and it wasn't Thrasne's shift to work the rudder deck at the high stern of the boat.

He reported the sighting in a quiet voice, hoping his very mildness and lack of excitement would throw Blint off the scent. Which it might well have done had not Blint's wife been standing near, overhearing him, going at once to peer over the rail.

"Jetties? There aren't any jetties! I can't see any jetties!"

"Well, boy?" demanded Blint.

"Yessir. Piers."

Blint's eyes crinkled at the comers. "He saw them from above, wife. I told him to be sure to check the owner-house roof was tight."

"Tight? Of course it's tight, Blint. It was rebuilt only a Conjunction ago. What do you mean, tight?"

Blint, who answered few of her questions, did not answer this one. "How close?" he murmured.

"Close enough, sir. We'd better get our nets out of the water or the fisherman caste of the place-assuming there is one, for why else have piers-they'll be heaving stones at us."

"We could move into deeper water."

"There was that bunch in Zebulee with the catapult."

"Ah. So there was. Well then, go tell the boys. Haul in and hide the evidence, tell them. No fishskins drying on the deck. No strange bones lying about. I'll leave it in your good hands."

"Any chance of trade, you think?"

"Well, we'll have to see, won't we." Owner Blint strolled away, no whit disturbed, leaving it in Thrasne's good hands. If Thrasne hadn't been available, he'd have left it in firstman Birk's good hands, or secondman Thon's. Thrasne scrambled into action. At least the boatmen wouldn't argue with him. The memory of that catapult was too recent.

When they were hard at work getting the nets in, they'd have to be stowed wet, which would stink up the net locker. Thrasne went to the chart room to take another look at the North shore section chart. They were passing Wilfor now. Nothing of interest listed on the section chart for Wilfor. Next place was Baris, and the section chart didn't say a word about Baris having jetties. Baris had pamet, art work, confections, puncon fruit when the weather was right and toys. The Baris Tower was listed as middling active, not fanatical, which meant the Awakeners weren't likely to search the Gift for any kind of contraband, books or such. And that's all Blint had written down six, seven years ago when he'd been by last. Thrasne made a mental note to hide his own books, if there were changes in one thing, there might be changes in others and to add a description of the piers as soon as he'd had a good look at them. Probably some fisherman moving west had come to Baris and decided piers would be a good idea. Probably sold the local Tower on the idea and got a worker crew to build them. In which case, Thrasne snorted, spitting in habitual disgust, it was sheer luck they were still standing.

He returned to the deck in time to help empty the nets. Not much in the way of fish and two or three hard, clattering things bumping on the deck with an unmistakable wooden sound.

"Blight-fish!" one of the boatmen cursed. "I swear by the carrion birds of Abricor, it's too much. All we get lately's the blight."

"Come on, Swin, it's not that bad. We haven't really seen any of it since Vouye. Be careful!" Thrasne pulled him back.

"You almost touched that one."

"It's hard. Probably blight's gone out of it. Almost."

" 'Almost' gave the boatman a wooden leg."

The men snorted. An old jest, but a true one. What the blight touched, it turned to wood, slowly or quickly, and if it touched the boatman's hand he would have the choice of cutting the hand off if he moved without hesitation or becoming a life-size carving of himself.

Some said once the blight hardened completely it lost its power of contagion, but Thrasne had seen a man lose a foot kicking something that seemed very hard indeed. "Just push it over the side, Swin. Don't stand there looking at it, or you'll forget what you're looking at and pick it up."

Swin grunted and pushed the fish overboard with a boathook. The few remaining fish were free of blight, thrashing around on the deck making high-pitched squeals from their air bladders. The men began clubbing and cleaning them, tossing the gutted fish down where other crewmen waited with the salt kegs. Thrasne turned to stowing the nets. Blight meant extra care there, too. They would have to be lowered into the net locker without touching them and sprayed with a mixture of sulphur and powdered frag leaf. Only when they had steeped in this mixture for a day or two could the men safely handle them again. Now they were plying (he long hooks in gingerly fashion, pushing the nets below, and Obers-rom was already mixing frag powder. A good man, Obers-rom. Never needed to be told anything twice.

Thrasne leaned over the rail to watch the blighted fish moving alongside, sinking very slowly as they went, still visible after long minutes had gone by. They floated right side up; they looked almost alive, only the lack of movement betraying that they were fish no more. Or perhaps fish of a different kind. Thrasne had seen a man touched by blight once. In fact, Thrasne had been the one to use the axe, and he still woke in the night sometimes sweating from the memory of it. The boatman had kept his chopped-off leg in a netting sack, sprayed down with blight powder. He carried it about with him to taverns, where he sold toppers a look at it in exchange for drinks, daring the foolhardy to touch it and see whether the blight had left it or not.

"Dangers in every caste and trade," said owner Blint from time to time. "None free of peril."

Thrasne supposed that was true. He went below to change his shirt and hide his books. Not that he had many, but those he had he wanted to keep. His book of fables about the South shore. His History of North shore in three volumes, Bine-tenths of it nonsense, Blint said, and all of it forbidden. Thrasne didn't care. It made a nice thing to do some evenings when the winds were warm, sit on the deck in the light of the owner-house windows and read about how humans first landed on North shore, down from the stars, and about their great wars with the Thraish, whoever they may have been. Winged creatures, by the sound of it in the stories, who could talk just like men. And all the men using metal tools and weapons, which was enough right there to show you why it was all false and unapproved. But who wanted to read approved books? Lives of the Great Awakeners. The biography of Thoulia. Poof. One might as well read the chart-of-towns; it was more interesting.

They'd be in Bans by noon, and owner Blint would likely seek trade. Most of the towns along this stretch were short of spices and salt. They'd want to give pamet in exchange, and the Gift couldn't take it. No room left in the holds. It would have to be something less bulky. Dried fruit, jam, jelly. Candies, maybe. The confectioners were supposed to be something special along here. Something about candies in one of their Festival myths. And toys. Little things for children. Mechanical ones that could be wound up. The toymakers on this stretch were notable. Not that Thrasne had been along this stretch before; he'd been only four years on the Gift of Potipur, starting when he was twelve as go-get-boy.

As he struggled with the buttons of his shirt, he examined the row of carvings set on his storage chest. There was a long, slender piece of clear fragwood he'd been saving, and he thought he'd make a fish of it. A surprised fish, with blight halfway up its tail. The carvings stared back at him from the chest top: merchants, children, the tall robed figure of an Awakener, even a worker, shapeless and hopeless in its canvas wrappings. The little figures seemed almost to breathe. One at the near end of the row looked at him in eternal supplication, and Thrasne took it into his hands with a little groan, warmth pouring into his belly.

"Suspirra," he whispered. It was his name for her, the otherwise nameless ideal, loveliest of all women, created out of his head and his aching loins. She lay on his pillow when he sought his solitary comforts. She watched him when he dressed and washed himself, always with the same expression of supplication and entreaty. "Love me," she begged silently. "Love me." And he did love her, in a lonely fever, almost forgetting sometimes that she was no longer than his forearm. He had carved her in one daylong frenzy of creation, the wood curling away from his blade as though it sought to reveal what lay

within it, the pale soft grain of the face, the darker grain of the long, smooth hair, the gown, clinging to her as though wet so he could see every line of her sweet breasts and belly, the curve of her thighs and the soft mound where they joined. Even her feet had sprung out of the wood magically, every toe perfect, the fines of the nails as clean as the line of her lips. "Suspirra," and he set her down, turning her slightly away from him.

"You should be artist caste," Blint had said when he first saw Thrasne's carvings. "Some of these towns give high status to artists."

Thrasne had shaken his head. "I'd rather see everything. Not just stick in one town. Maybe, someday, when I'm tired of the River."

Though he could not imagine being tired of the River. There was always something to see on the River. As there was right now the new piers fringing the edge of Baristown.

When he reached the deck he gave it a careful look over. No signs of nets or hooks. The net poles were put away. He could still smell the sulphur and frag, but the River breeze would carry it out river this time of day. He checked the hatch over the net locker to see it was tight. Funny the way shore bound fishermen resented any fishing done by the Riverboats. Even though the Riverboats caught different kinds of fish, to say nothing of the deep River strangeys, which probably weren't fish at all. Glizzee spice, now. Everyone wanted that, even fishermen. And Glizzee spice was nothing but ground strangey bone, though the boatmen didn't tell everyone that.

When he'd completed the round, he went back and climbed up to the rudder man. "What did Blint say?"

"Told me to pick the longest pier and see could I come around it."

"No side wharfs, hmm?"

"None we can see from here," Some of the towns had at the end of their piers sideways extensions that ran along the River flow rather than across it. A Riverboat could steer close, toss a line to be made fast, then let the tide turn the boat on the line to lay alongside. Coming around a long pier was harder work than that.

"Is Blint getting the sweeps set?"

"He got Birk out of his hammock. Said for you to stand by here where you could see everything." The man sniggered, not maliciously, and Thrasne grinned at him. Taken all in all, the boatmen rather liked having a carver aboard. There wasn't one of them he hadn't carved something for, as a pretty for themselves or a gift for someone they treasured. When a man only came to his home place every six to eight years, he wanted to have something special for his children, at least. Though it wasn't uncommon to find more children than reason suggested was appropriate. Many a man gone six years came back to find two- and three-year-olds, but such was the life of a boatman and accepted as such. The women couldn't be blamed, not with the procreation laws the way they were. And after all, if things like that mattered to a man, he wouldn't be River.

The pier was coming up on the right, a long one, not completed yet. The oarsmen had the sweeps set in the rope locks to turn the ship as soon as the pier was past. The tide wasn't strong just now, not with the moons all strung out like this, not like Conjunction, when no one in his right mind would try to tie up except at the Riverside itself.

"Hold fast," breathed Thrasne, locking the sculling oars out of the way of the rudder. "Hold fast."

"I see it," grumbled the steersman. "Been doing this for twenty years."

Thrasne ignored him. If Blint wanted him on the steer-house, it was to take charge of things.

"Hold fast," he muttered again. "Now! Hard over!" He bent his back to the rudder as the bite of the oars took hold, taking up the slack on the tackle until it was tied hard over and they could watch the sweating men at the sweeps. Blint himself was at the line cannon. In a moment it went off with a dull thwump of its huge wooden springs, and the line arched out over the pier, where half a dozen stand bouts made it fast.

"Sweeps up," cried Blint. "Stand by the winch!" The ship shuddered as it began to draw toward the pier, moving against the surging tide. Thrasne shook his head, remembering the time they had taken on a boatman from a place called Thou-ne. "Born in Potipur," he said he was. Sanctimonious half-wit. Insisted that no ship had the right to oppose the tide, and the only way to moor was at the end of a line along the bank. Fool had said winching was evil, anti-life, and against the will of Potipur. He lasted until the time he took an axe to the rope during a winching operation. Assuming he had been a good

swimmer and hadn't encountered the blight, he might still be alive. Since Blint had dropped him over the side in the far mid-River after dark, however, his survival was only conjectural.

There were no other boats at the Baristown piers. Despite this, there was a considerable gathering at the end of the jetty, engaged in some noisy set-to.

"What're they doing?" Thrasne asked.

"Couldn't say," offered Blint. "Have a look if you like. I'll need the walkway down anyhow for those fat bellies coming." He nodded toward the town. Several members of the merchant caste were bustling toward them, each trying to be first without being ostentatious about it. None of them quite broke into a run. Thrasne set the walkway, then strolled over it, hands in pockets, down to the end of the pier.

Most of the crowd were simple stand bouts, though there were a few fishermen and merchant apprentices who should have been elsewhere. There was one Laugher in his polished black helm, fiddling with the flasks at his belt, staring at each member of the crowd in turn, as though he would see through to the bones. Those at the end of the jetty, however, were Awakeners directing a worker crew in dragging the River.

2

Thrasne got a whiff of the workers and moved back a few steps. Using workers to labor in Potipur's behalf was a religious requirement in every town they traveled by, but Thrasne thought it a stinking one, literally and philosophically. The shambling figures were so damned inefficient. Everything had to be done six times over. It took a crew of Awakened workers four times over a field to plow it, and Thrasne had never seen a ditch dug by workers fit to run water through until some competent irrigation manager cleaned it out and trued the sides. Now they were heaving hooks at the ends of long lines, tossing them about a fourth of the distance Thrasne could have thrown them, dragging them back with slow tugs against the tide.

"What're they looking for?" he asked one of the stand-about.

"Some woman went in the River. Drowned herself."

"So? Why the dragging?"

"She did it to get out of bein' Sorted. So they say. I don't know. All I know is the Awakener's mad as a fisherman with a blight-fish on a new line."

The Awakener was indeed very angry. He could hear her clearly as she spat at a long-faced, miserable looking man before her. "Fulder Don! It was your duty to come to us if you thought she would do this!"

"I didn't think she would," the long-faced man said plaintively, his voice flat, almost without expression. "I thought it was just her talk. She talked about a lot of things she never did. I didn't think she'd ever leave the baby. She cared so for the baby." The little girl in his arms was crying. About three or four years old, Thrasne thought. Old enough to remember what was going on, without being old enough to understand it.

An old woman with a tight, lipless mouth stood beside the depressed-looking man. "Fulder Don," she said, "I've known since you married that silly fool she'd do something like this. I wouldn't have thought heresy, but who could put it past her? She hadn't an ounce of loyalty in her."

"Mama," begged the man placatingly. "Now, Mama ... "

"Don't 'Mama' me. You married beneath you and beneath artist's caste, and that's all there is to it. Take that idiot child and give her to Delia, will you. I can't stand the sight of her. It wasn't enough her mother had to do this dreadful thing, now you're saddled with the child for her whole life."

"Well, Mama, she's my child, too."

"I'm not even certain sure of that." The old woman stomped off down the pier, the cane in her hand slamming down hi a furious whop, whop, whap, which sent angry echoes booming under the pier over the lick and slap of the water.

The Awakener threw up her hands, twirled her staff, and began a slow, mind-curling chant. Thrasne shut it out, humming to himself. He couldn't stand Awakener chants. If it was to escape this, this chant-driven pretense of life, this shambling

excuse for existence, he did not blame the nameless woman who had drowned herself. The band of workers turned from the River to shamle back up the pier, following the glittering staff, eyeless, faceless, only their feet and hands indicating what lay beneath the loosely woven canvas sacks and hoods they wore. "Papa," the little girl was pleading. "Papa." The man paid her no attention, merely stood staring at the River as though he wanted nothing more than to be deep inside it himself. The passivity of that face moved Thrasne. His hands twitched, wanting to capture that face. This was a man who had given up. He would not do anything, not ever again. He would only float, pushed by the tide of others' lives, waiting his end under the canvas hood, deserving it. The child turned, caught by the watchfulness in Thrasne's face, stared at him, eyes wide and accepting with something of that same passivity. "Papa," she said again, hopelessly.

A woman came out of the crowd to take the child, a nothing much of a woman, small and plump, older than middle-aged. "There, there, my Pammy," she said. "There, there." The child sobbed once and laid her head on the woman's shoulder. That, too, Thrasne coveted, that line of child against the woman's body, limp and exhausted, giving up everything in the acceptance of this comfort.

Thrasne moved toward the man. What had the old woman called him? Fulder Don. "Fulder Don," he asked casually, as though he were only another stand about, "why did your wife go in the River? How do you know that she did?"

The man looked at his feet, mumbling. "A fisherman saw her. She was sick. She was afraid to die. Afraid to risk Sorting Out. My mother ... was always at her. Telling her how bad she was. How incapable. I guess she thought ... " His voice trailed away into nothing as he stared into the water, his long, mournful face intent upon another time.

"She was so beautiful," he whispered at last. "So very beautiful."

Something in the intonation made Thrasne look at him again. Yes. Under the shabby cloak the man wore the smock of the artist caste. An artist. Not a successful one, from the looks of it. For which Fulder Don's mama probably blamed the dead woman. Thrasne turned quickly to return to the Gift of Potipur, his hands itching for his carving knife. The man, the woman and child; if he was lucky, he could get both the carvings started before Blint found something else for him to do.

They spent three days in Baris. The merchants wanted spice, but they insisted on trading bulk pamet for it. Blint would take no more pamet. "Silly blight-heads," he complained as still another delegation left the boat unsatisfied. "Can't seem to understand every town in this section has more pamet than they can use. We'll have to go all the way to Vobil-dil-go before anyone will want pamet. I told them we'd take toys, or those dried puncon candies, or woven pamet cloth, provided it was something out of the ordinary. They'll come to it eventually. Just takes them two or three days to make up their minds."

On the third day they did make up their minds, and Blint did a brisk business. By dusk all the trading was done, and the crew of the Gift went into Baristown for some jollifications. Thrasne offered to guard the ship. He wanted to finish the carvings and brought them on deck to do so, working in the lantern light from the owner-house windows. He had caught Fulder Don to his own satisfaction, the sorrow, the loss. Now he was finishing the carving of the woman, Delia, and the child.

There were no sounds except the soft push -of the water along the sides, an occasional burst of laughter or song from the taverns. The soft bumping had gone on for some time before he even heard it.

Once alerted to the sound, it still took him a while to find it. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. At last he leaned over the side and heard it clearly. Something in the River, knocking against the side of the boat.

He lowered a lantern on a line to see only the oily shifting of the water. Then she came from under the wavelets to look up at him for an instant, turning in the ripples to glance sideways at him from half-closed eyes.

"Suspirra!" He set the lantern down, shaking, rubbing his eyes with his hands. The face was Suspirra's face. The bumping went on. He lowered the light again, and again she shifted to look upward at him, the water flowing across her face, the line in which she was tangled making a silver streak across her breast.

Sick cold in his belly, he could no more have left her there than he could have burned his own Suspirra for firewood. It took long moments to realize the bumping made a wooden clattering rather than the soft sound of flesh. He thought of a carving, first, and only then of the blight. This was the woman they had been dragging for. The woman who had been so beautiful, who was so beautiful. Blighted now. Wooden. And deadly. Still, he could not leave her there.

He brought up one of the small nets, safe enough after its frag powder soak. He rigged a line to the boom. Working silently, cursing the amount of time it took, he pushed the net under her with poles, and then heaved the boom all alone against her

weight, heavier than he'd thought, to lift her dripping body to the deck.

She turned in the lantern light, toward him and away in a silent dance, eyes half-open in invitation, lips curved as though about to speak. "So beautiful," he murmured, wanting to touch her, holding himself from doing so only with difficulty. "So beautiful."

A burst of laughter as some Riverfront tavern opened a door and spat revelers into the street. Blint would be bringing the crew back shortly. If Blint saw her, he would sell her to the family, or to the Awakeners, though what good she would be to either, Thrasne could not imagine. No. He wouldn't do that. She had fled from them, family and Awakeners both. The woman who had fled was gone. This was his own Suspirra now. He plotted furiously, discarding one notion after another.

Then he thought of the ventilation shaft beneath his own watching post. Up went the net once more as he guided it from the owner-house roof, down into the shaft, suspended there in its netting bag from the pole grating upon which he so often sat, where none could see it, wonder at it, touch it-save Thrasne himself.

When Blint and the crew returned, he was crouched beneath the owner-house window, finishing the carving of Delia and the child. That night, for the first time since he had made her, he did not even look at the small carving of Suspirra.

Night on the River in the township of Thou-ne. Lanterns gleaming along the River walk, on the quays and jetties, where the oily water throws back slippery reflections, fish belly lights, momentary glimmers. Rain misting the cobbles into fish scale paths, River sucking at the piers with fish mouth kisses, all watery and dim, silver and gray, evasive as dark bodies turning beneath dark water. Lantern man strolling along beside his wagon, wagon boy tugging, head down, sliding a little on the slick stones. Fish-oil cans in the wagon; fill the lanterns; trim the wicks; light the lanterns; then move on. Behind these two the lantern light lies in liquid puddles on the stones, pools of light, wetter than water as the crier follows after, "Dusk falls, night comes, let all abroad take themselves to home and hearth." The call so well known over lifetimes it comes out in drawn vowels, "Uhhhs aaaahs, aiiit uhnumms, aaaad ohhhhm aiiinli."

Peasimy Plot trots along the River path, behind the crier, stepping carefully into each puddle of light to splash it onto the path. Slap, slap, slap with the soft soles of his boots, slap, slap. Light has to be distributed. Nobody sees to it but Peasimy. What good are these puddles with all the dark in between? Have to splash the light around. He does not look behind him to see the pools of light still separate and rimmed with black. He has splashed them; now the walk is lighted.

Never mind what the eyes see. Never mind. It is what the soul sees that's important.

"Uhhhs aaaahs," the crier calls. "Aiiit uhmmms."

Night is already here. Potipur glares in the eastern sky, full and ominous, his face half-veiled in River mist. Viranel is half herself at the zenith, skittish behind clouds, as she becomes at these slender times; Abricor has whetted his scythe on the western horizon and goes now to harvest the crops of night. Peasimy stops in mid-splash to contemplate the scythe-moon. "Harvest," he calls in a whispery fish voice, full of bubbles and liquid gurgling. "Cut down the lies, Moon of Abricor. Foul weeds of untruth. Cut them down, down, down." Then back to the splashing once more. Pitty-pat, pittypat, slap slap slap.

Twelve years old, Peasimy is a neat one in his high-collared coat with the shiny buttons, his tight dark trousers fitting down into the soft boots, his perky little hat perched high on his tight, shiny hair. Daytimes he sleeps, like a strangey, lost in the depths of his sleep as in a cavern. Nighttimes he comes up for air and to look at the moon and splash lantern light. Peasimy knows Thou-ne would wither away if he didn't splash the light around. It doesn't matter no one else knows it. All night long he will continue this perambulation, spreading the light. Dawn will mean a bite of breakfast, then pulling the shades down, hiding in the dark. No one knows why, but he's been that way since childhood. No trouble to anyone. Just see him decent dressed and let him go. So says Peasimy's mama, the widow Plot. So says her kin and kith. Let him alone. He doesn't hurt anything. Poor little fellow. Lucky when he can remember his name.

Peasimy ... well, Peasimy remembers a lot of things. Peasimy remembers catching his mama putting Candy Seeds on his bed when it was supposed to be the Candy Tree growing there that did it. Peasimy remembers things Haranjus Pandel said in Temple. Peasimy remembers every lie ever told and some he only suspects. Peasimy can recognize true things when he sees them.

Lanterns, now, they are true things. Water is true, and the widow Plot. The lantern man is true, and the crier. Daylight is so true he needn't even stay awake to watch it. All light is true. Dark is a false thing, full of lies, making you think a thing is one way when it's actually another. That's why Peasimy splashes the light. Have to fight the dark. Can't just let it overcome.

There's an image Peasimy sees sometimes in the dusk, maybe in the dusk, maybe only in his head, he's not sure always where things are. But the image is there, somewhere, shining. A glowing thing. Looking at him. Looking at him and shining with its own light. Truth. Shining. He doesn't know what it is, but he expects to find it. Somewhere. Along this alley, perhaps, between splashes of his boots. Along that street.

And until then, he goes along.

"Aiiih uhhmmms," calls the crier.

"Night comes," whispers Peasimy. "Light comes."

3

It was six days before Thrasne was left alone and could look at the drowned woman again. Under a grove of enormous frag trees, tied up at the Riverside past Shabber, he was able to lift the net once more. He stood on the owner-house roof, staring at her in lantern light where she swayed in the net. She was dry now. Her hair had fluffed out like fine pamet fiber, a warm, lovely brown. Though he had thought her eyes open when he brought her aboard, they were closed now, the lashes lying softly upon her cheeks as she seemed to sleep. His eyes marked her, measured her, trembled over every part of her, fascinated and aroused. He had to hold his hands behind him to keep from touching her. At last he could stand it no longer. He went below and took a live fish from the cook's cage where it hung over the side. Carrying this squirming burden, he went back to her to thrust the wriggling thing against her, careful not to touch the part of it that touched her. He laid it on the roof, watching closely, and within moments the front part of it stopped thrashing and began to bump against the roof, moved by the tail, which was still alive. The blight lived in her still. He brought the sprayer up and covered her with a powdery, golden shower before lowering her into the shaft once more. The fish was still bumping, and he shoved it overside with a pole.

"Suspirra," he whispered down to her. "It's all right, Suspirra. A few more days' drying, the good powder will do its work, then you can come out of there ... " Except, he told himself, she could not. Where would he put her? How would he explain?

"Blint, sir, would you mind making me a small payment on my wages?"

"How small, Thrasne? And what do you suddenly find yourself so needy of? Isn't wife Blint seeing well enough to your food and clothing?"

"It isn't that, sir. I have a mind to make a large carving, and I'd like to purchase a block of wood from a frag merchant ... "

Which block of wood was not easily come by. Some were too crooked and others too straight. Some had harsh graining that would spoil the features, others were too dark. Thrasne found one eventually, at the bottom of the pile, and paid for it with good coin. He put it in one corner of his little room aboard the Gift, knives and chisels ostentatiously by. When he began to carve it, the wood opened up to reveal the Suspirra within. Still, it was a largish thing, life size, and it was longer than he liked before it resembled her, longer yet before it was her, line for line. Then was a long time between towns, during which he was never left alone, so that when he finally came to take the drowned woman from the net, replacing her with the carving-in case he might ever need to hide the real woman again-it seemed a season had gone by.

The drowned woman came gladly to his place, standing in one corner of it as though invited there for dalliance. She looked at him through barely opened eyes, lips not quite curved, as though she were thinking of smiling but had not yet accomplished it.

"Well," said Blint when he saw her first. "I still say you should be artist caste, Thrasne. Not that I'd like doing without you. Still, that's a beauty, that is. Pure fragwood, is it? Surely not the hair? That doesn't look carved?"

"Well, no sir," he lied without a change of expression. "That's a wig I bought in Tsillis. Somehow the carved hair didn't look ... well, it didn't look soft." Her hair had not looked soft, either, when he had raised her that last time, matted and filthy as it was from the frag leaf and sulphur. He had rinsed her time and again with buckets of clean water, brushed her hair, and run soap through it. Now it lay gleaming on her shoulders, not unlike the color of frag, yet more silken. The rest of her gleamed in nut-brown colors, also, with a hint of rose at nipples and lips.

"What do you call her?" asked Blint.

"Her name is Suspirra. It was the name of a girl I knew once back in Xoxxy-Do, where you found me."

"And where you'll be again in a year or so. What will she think of this, your having a life-size doll of her to keep you company?" Blint was roguish, twinkling.

"She wouldn't mind." Since Thrasne had invented such a girl on the spot, he was not concerned about what she might think. What Blint would think had concerned him, but evidently Blint thought nothing untoward. If a boatman wished to have a life-size carving of a beautiful woman in his cabin, well, so be it. It took all kinds, as Blint would say, to do all the things needing doing.

At first Thrasne merely looked at her in the lantern light before he slept or in the early morning before he rose. He touched her face sometimes, almost reverently. He did not presume to touch her breasts, though once he laid his cheek against them, almost sobbing as the promise of softness was betrayed. After a time he stopped touching her at all and began talking to her instead. At a short distance he could forget the blight, forget her petrification, believe that she was living flesh. He still called her Suspirra. He told her all the things he had never been able to tell anyone, not even Blint.

"Blint saved my life," Thrasne told her.

"I lived in Xoxxy-Do. Halfway round North shore from anywhere. A mountainous place, where the falls come over the cliffs into World River, and the ships have to tie up behind great shattered rocks along the sheer walls and the boatmen climb steep, twisty stairs to reach the towns above. My father was a builder there, a builder in stone. My mother was an artist-though there was not so much of the caste system there in Xoxxy-Do as I have seen elsewhere. It was she who taught me to carve-or let me learn it, I suppose. She gave me a knife when I was only five. She was a wonderful carver. When Father finished a place, it was she who ornamented it. They had a great success together. They were very happy. So was I." He was silent then, waiting for Suspirra to say something, to comment. He heard her saying, "I was not happy. I envy your happy family, Thrasne. My own was not like that."

"I saw your husband's mother," he replied. "My father's sister was like that. All pinch-lipped and hating. She could not bear it that they were happy. Could not bear it that they were in love. She had predicted doom on them, and the doom did not come. Not the kind she threatened." He fell silent again, this time out of pain. The memory still had this power to undo him, to turn his muscles to water, his bowels to aching void.

"Ah," said Suspirra. "Then we have much in common."

"They died. They had gone to the quarry together, and there was a great storm. The worker-built road was inadequate even in calm weather. In the storm it dissolved like sugar. They were found at the bottom of the gorge, crushed beneath the stone. My father's sister took me in."

"I know that kind of taking-in," said Suspirra.

"The first thing she said to me was that my father and mother were in the worker pits of Ghasstown to the east, being raised up by the Awakeners. I could not stop crying, but she went on saying it. She took my knife away, saying I might hurt myself. It was the knife Mother had given me. I stayed with her for almost a season, but then I lay awake one night planning to kill her."

"You had to get away," prompted Suspirra.

"I had to get away. Blint found me along the Riverside, half-starved, talking to a little carving of Mother I had made." It had been his first attempt at carving Suspirra, but he did not remember that.

"A kindly man, Blint."

"Blint is kindness itself." He stopped talking, appalled. She could not have spoken, and yet he had heard her speak. He left the little room to go out on deck and stride about, back and forth, hour on hour.

"What's troubling you, boy?"

"Do you ever find yourself talking to yourself, Blint?"

"All us boatpeople do, Thrasne. Never known one that didn't. Married Blint-wife just to have someone to talk to and found out it didn't work. Have to talk to yourself. How would you find out what you think about things otherwise?"

"Did you ever-did you ever pretend it was someone else answering you?"

"Always. Makes it more interesting that way."

So he came to accept it. Boatpeople came to the River because on that ever flowing current they could talk to themselves about North shore without that world forcing its own opinions on them. On the River one could repudiate the Awakeners, hate the workers-both for their hideous existence and for the shoddiness of the work they did-cogitate upon Potipur and Abricor and Viranel, question their very existence, perhaps, without being accused of heresy.

"Do you think Potipur is loving?" whispered Suspirra.

"I don't think Potipur is anything," he answered. "Except a moon which pulls the tide around. And a moon-faced god in the Temples with the priests all bowing and waving incense and sparking their staffs at the congregation every tenth day and twice at the end of the month." Ten days make a week, and when five weeks are gone, then you've a month with a holy day tacked on. Or so Thrasne's mother had always said.

"Then why?" Suspirra murmured. "Why, why, why? ... "

They had been on the River some forty days from Shabber when Blint complained that the pamet stacked in the forward hold smelled of mildew. "Must be something blocking the ventilation duct," he said with a sigh. "We'll see to it next mooring."

Thrasne was annoyed with himself. The wooden likeness of Suspirra was undoubtedly blocking the duct, and he should have seen to it long since. "Let me do it, Blint, I've a cubby up top where I sit and watch things. Perhaps I've let something fall into the duct."

"Have you now? Well then, you see to it. I'll leave it in your good hands."

He did it at night, with all the crew ashore, the fitful light of torches from the pier throwing orange stripes across the netted burden as it came out of the shaft. Once lowered on the roof, he stripped the net away to have a long look at it before giving it to the tide.

There was something wrong.

He had carved it to be like the blighted woman. Like her line for line, eye for eye, lip for lip. And this was not like. These eyes were half-shut, these lips not quite curved, as though about to smile, but the Suspirra in his cabin had wide-open eyes, her lips were compressed. Leaving the statue where it was, he went below to make sure. Her eyes met his as he entered the room, her lips set tight as though humming, as though admonishing, as though about to say something.

"I'm going mad," he whispered to himself, knowing he was not. "Suspirra, am I going mad?"

"The world is mad," she said. "You see what you see."

He put the carving into the tide, watching it until it vanished on the wavelets, casting a glance at the moons. Slack water would not come until early morning. It would travel far by then. He would never catch up with it again. Perhaps someone would fish it out along a pier and wonder at it.

Below in his room he began a small carving like the one just thrown away, line for line. When it was done, he did another of Suspirra as she was now. If the drowned woman was changing, he would make a record of those changes.

Over the next five years he carved forty little Suspirras. They were stowed under his bunk, numbered on their bases, and once in a very great while he would take them out and stand them in a long file before him, from first to last, the position of each slightly changed, the eyes and lips slightly opened or closed. Something about this silent throng oppressed him and bothered him at once, as though he should infer some meaning that evaded him. He still spoke to the drowned woman, and she still answered him, but this throng of small Suspirras seemed to shout at him in silence, a mute demand: "Pay attention." He looked and looked, not understanding.

"Are you alive?" he asked her.

"What is alive? Perhaps you stopped the blight before it was finished with me."

"Do you want me to put you back in the River?"

"It is cold in the River, and lonely. Perhaps you will let me stay a while."

So for five years he let her stay, carving each new expression as it showed itself, recording this strange slow life, if it was life, in every minuscule manifestation. Day succeeded day, river, pier, town, boatmen leaving and new ones coming aboard. Blint grew grayer and Blint-wife more loquacious. They had made almost a round since the drowned woman had come aboard. They had come to Xoxxy-Do to find Thrasne's aunt long dead, had passed it by, and were almost at Baristown once more.

"I wish you'd carve a baby for that woman," said Blint-wife in an unaccustomed tone. There was worry in it, and sorrow, and a kind of aching that Thrasne had never heard her use before. He was surprised.

"What woman?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

"That woman, those women, the little ones. All in a row, saying, 'My baby.' "

He went below to look, she behind him, peering over his shoulder at the array. "I came down to change your bed. I hadn't seen them all standing that way before. You see, look from the front to the back, that's what she's saying."

He was only puzzled. His artist's eye had missed it. Blint-wife left him, returning after a time with a box of children's toys from the hold.

"See here," she said, handing him one of the little books they had traded all along the River.

On each page a festival clown was drawn, each drawing slightly different. When one flipped it rapidly between thumb and fingers, the picture of the clown seemed to cavort and jump. Seeing his puzzlement, she went away.

That night he drew Suspirra's faces and arms on small squares of paper, binding them into a similar book. When he flipped the pages the hands and eyes moved, the mouth said, "My baby." Blint-wife, of course, had talked to Blint of the matter.

"Murga, that is, my wife, she lost the only baby we ever had," said Blint. "She used to sit before the mirror down there crying, saying it over and over, 'My baby, my baby.' It's no wonder she thought your carvings were saying the same."

The carvings weren't, but the drowned woman was. "My baby." The little girl at the end of the pier, the one saying so hopelessly over and over, "Papa. Papa."

"I'd like some time ashore in Baristown, sir," he said. "There's some private business I'd like to attend to."

He had no real idea how to find her. He had left Xoxxy-Do when he was twelve years old, not old enough to have perceived or understood the intricacies of town life. He had had no substantial contact with a town or village since. Still, intuition told him that there would be someone who made it his business to know things, all kinds of things. It did not take long to find him.

"Fulder Don?" the barber asked, waving his scissors in a vague gesture toward the center of town. "Oh, surely, I know Fulder Don. Him and the old lady, and isn't she a termagant. Makes his life a misery, she does. Oldest girl got married young just to get out of the house, and the story is that Pender, that's the middle one, can hardly wait for the same chance."

"There's a baby, isn't there?"

"Baby? There's been no wife there for six, seven years now. No. There was a baby when the wife killed herself, little girl, about four. But she's tennis, now. Half-grown. Lives with old Saint Delia the gardener on Outskirt Row."

"Saint Delia?"

The barber laughed, amused at himself. "Well, that's what they call her. Anybody needs something, anybody hungry or sick, they can go to old Delia and get taken care of. More of a saint than I ever thought Thoulia was, that's for sure." He laughed, somewhat uncomfortably, making the ware-eyes gesture to keep Laughters away.

Thrasne went to Outskirt Row to find Delia's house. It was the one with the greatest profusion of flowers, the most sweetly scented with herbs. He stood in a redolence of fragrance and color, peering over the low wall. The little girl was there, crouched over a book as though to protect it from thieves, twiddling one long lock of hair with her fingers, winding and unwinding. The book was licit from the looks of it. It had the Tower seal on the cover.

"Pamra," came a voice from inside. "Come have your supper."

The girl rose, half sighing, closing the book unwillingly. As she turned, she caught sight of Thrasne standing there and hesitated for a moment, puzzled, almost as though she might have remembered seeing him before. Then she shook her head

and went into the house, leaving him as shaken as he had been by the first sight of the drowned woman. For it was she again, line for line, in a smaller frame and compass, a younger face. There was the same passion, the same willful disbelief, the same stubborn intensity turned within. He knew, having seen her face, that she lived inside herself, seeing her own visions, making her own world, and not seeing half of what went on around her.

Seriously shaken, he made his way back to the Gift. What message could he give the drowned woman? How could he pierce the isolation of her blight to tell her her child was well? The child who was like her, line for line.

At last he printed a message large and put it upon the wall before the drowned woman's eyes. "PAMRA IS WELL. DELIA CARES FOR HER." He could think of nothing briefer, nothing more reassuring. He did not really know whether she would see it or not. Perhaps time was slower for her. Perhaps it would take her a year to see it. He was careful not to move her so that her view of it would be undisturbed.

They still talked.

"Blint is getting older," he confided to her. "He talks to me all the time about not being as young as he once was and needing someone to be a son to him."

"If he says that, he hopes you will be such a son."

"That's what I thought. Almost as though he needs reassuring about something. When he talks so, Blint-wife makes a kind of face, as though she had tasted something bitter."

"It is bitter for women not to have the fruit of their bodies when they are denied the world's fruits. Bitter to have her man seek for a son in his old age. Men, who harvest the world's fruits, care less for their own."

"It's true she gets little of the world's fruit," Thrasne agreed. "The River is a man's world."

The thought stayed with him as he moved among the boatmen in the following years, proving its truth to himself again and again. Those who had little enough of the world's fruits were most needy of their own. He thought often of the old woman, Fulder Don's mother. What had she had, after all, but Fulder Don himself? Had him, and had been disinclined to share him. Had she driven his first wife to her death, too? As she had his Suspirra? If she were dead, which he was not at all certain of.

Blint came to him one day with a bulky document, wrapped about with tape and sealed with wax. "My boy, I want you to keep this. I want you to swear oath to me you'll see I go into the River when my time comes and not into any town workers' pit." He looked deep into Thrasne's face, gray lines around his eyes, loose jowls betraying a loss of flesh. His hands trembled, too, and Thrasne was moved to such a sympathy of feeling, it was a time before he could bring himself to speak.

"You know I would do that without any oath, Blint. You have been a father to me. You may rely on me."

"Tie ballast to my bones, boy. Don't let the Awakeners get me into those damn pits. Put me deep as the strangeys swim."

"I'll do it, owner Blint. And where no blight is, either."

The man looked at him oddly then, and for a bit Thrasne thought he had given something away, but nothing more was said. Time went on. Blint seemed to recover some of his jovial ways. He put on a little weight. Thrasne sighed in relief. He was to open the document if anything happened, and he knew Blint-wife would be furious that Blint had not given it to her. Still, he owed much to Blint.

"Why didn't he give it to her?" he asked Suspirra.

"Because he knew he could rely on you to do what he wanted. He knew she might not. Often she does the opposite of what he says, you know, only to remind herself she is still a person. Otherwise, she forgets."

Thrasne knew it. He made a carving of it. A man, climbing, carrying a woman on his back, not looking at her. She, gazing at him, tripping him as he went. The faces were not anyone's faces. Still, Blint blinked when he saw it and looked at Thrasne with widened eyes.

Suspirra went on changing. Now that Thrasne had the hang of it, he simply drew a picture of her every twenty days or so, binding them together as he had previously. He thought she was beginning to say the same thing again. More than that, however, her body was changing shape. She, who had been slender as a frag sapling, yielding as a reed, seemed thicker, more stolid, as though she fattened upon the air of the little room, gained substance from their conversation.

They came one warm second summer to the Straits of Shfor. All the boatmen were on deck with the fending poles. They

had lashed great bundles of rope and sacks of pamet to the side of the boat to protect it against the fanglike stones of Shfor. One could not go through at slack water on the oars, for the way was too narrow. One wanted a low, easy tide and a slight wind to get through the straits, or one wanted a long voyage out into World River to go around. As they moved into the canyon, Thrasne looked up to see great birds gathered in hundreds along the rimstones.

"Owner Blint," he called, pointing up.

"Ah? Oh, this is a Talon, boy, full of fliers as a strangey is of bones. There's many of 'em up there, isn't there. Servants of Abricor. Takes a clear day to see 'em. Last time we were through was wrapped up in fog like a blanket, remember? Those peaks up there are all full of holes and caverns, so I've heard. And you never see any young ones at the Talons, so they say. Certain the big ones gather up there, though. Other things, too, from what I hear tell."

"What other things?" Thrasne drew nearer, drawn by something mysterious in his tone.

"There's Talkers and Writers up there."

"Now, owner Blint! Are you joshing me?"

"Well now ... " The old man squinted against the sun, moving along the side to assist a boatman who was thrusting against a toothy rock. When he came back panting, holding his chest, he sighed. "I'm trying to remember what it was I heard about that. My old owner told me. He was a flier watcher, he was, and he said there was two kinds of fliers."

"Sure." Thrasne laughed. "Big ones and little ones."

"No, no. Two kinds of big ones. He said the kind that nested up there on the Talons could talk. And write."

Thrasne could not help himself. He sniggered. "Like in die stories about when men came to North shore, owner Blint? Talking fliers?"

Blint shook his head reproachfully. "I didn't say I believed it, Thrasne. I just said that's what he told me. According to him, there's some people up there, too. They live there, to talk to the fliers."

"Where did he hear mat?"

"I don't know. He didn't say." Blint seemed vague, clutching his arm as though it hurt him, disinclined to discuss it further.

They came through the straits without incident and tied up at Shfortown. Blint started to move a bale of pamet, gave a startled exclamation, and fell down. He breathed hard for a moment, cast a frightened look at Thrasne, and lost consciousness.

"Plank aboard," called Thrasne in a calm voice.

"We just got here," grumbled a boatman.

Thrasne whispered to him imperatively, nodding at the pier where several Awakeners walked, and the man moved to pull the plank aboard. Two other boatmen carried Blint below as Blint-wife lamented. They moved quickly out onto the tide.

"Sorry, Thrasne," mumbled the boatman. "Wasn't thinking. You think he's took bad?"

"I don't know," Thrasne murmured. "Just I've been watching him. He keeps clutching his heart as though it hurts him ... "

Blint regained consciousness only for a few moments, learned they were well out in the River, gripped Thrasne's hand gratefully, and died. They put him into a small net with ballast stones and dropped him in the deepest part of the current while Blint-wife sobbed.

When she had had time to steady down, Thrasne went to the owner-house with Blint's document.

"Blint asked me to look after you," he said, seeing the fear leave her face a little as he said this. He and Suspirra had thought it out, this approach, after Suspirra told him Blint-wife was afraid.

"I agreed to do it, Blint-wife. He wanted me to take over as owner."

"You!" she screamed. "You, boy! You nothing boy we picked up from the rocks! Why not me, who was his wife these thirty years? Hah? Tell me that?"

He let her rage, saying nothing, until his silence weighted her down and she quieted, lips trembling.

"Because the men won't obey you, Blint-wife, and you'll not be able to find others who will. If you take the Gift, soon she'll

be against a rock in quick-River with none to fend her off. And if you sell her, you'll not get enough to keep you for your life. But if I'm owner, I promised Blint I'd set you safe ashore and bring payment to you each time the Gift comes round. Enough to live on and be well cared for. So, that's what Blint planned, and I promised. Unless you have some better plan." Which she didn't. The only thing she cried about then was the possibility of falling into the hands of the Awakeners, but Blint had thought even of that.

He had written: "There's secret groups in most towns call themselves River men, not boatmen, they've had nothing to do with the boats, who see that their people end in the River and not with the Awakeners. See Blint-wife is set near some such group, and gives them what gifts they require to see to her." So Blint had written. Boatmen wrote a good deal more than other folk, it being the kind of business it was. Thrasne wasn't the only one aboard with hidden books, either. Blint had some secreted in the owner-house, Awakeners or no Awakeners.

Thrasne, when he went looking, was surprised to find many groups such as Blint had described. They were secretive and careful, but open enough once they knew who he was and what his life had been. Boatmen in general were known to be rebels against the laws of the Awakeners, Thrasne no less than others. He set Blint-wife down in a pretty town called Zephyr, about midway between Shfortown and Bans, full of ponds where lily flowers grew, in a stout little house all her own near a quiet cluster of River men and women.

"You'll need to hold your tongue, Blint-wife," he said to her, carrying the last of her goods into the new place to the accompaniment of her incessant clacking. "Else you'll betray those who would want to help you."

She quieted, turning a weeping face on him at the last. "I know, Thrasne. Believe me, I hear myself and I know. It's only I was so lonely there on the River among all those men and not a woman, not a child to talk to. So lonely. I'd have come ashore long since had I not loved him so. Blint. Don't judge so harsh, Thrasne. There's more pain in us clacking old women than you'll ever know, most likely."

He went shamefaced to Suspirra with this.

"She talked just to hear a voice. A woman's voice," confirmed Suspirra.

Which didn't make Thrasne feel any better about it. Blint-wife had given him all Blint's books, and he was feeling he'd been ungrateful for all her care over the years. He wrote her a letter, saying so, which he had no means to deliver. It was not to his liking, so he wrote another. And as the days passed, he wrote still others, to Blint-wife, to Blint, to himself. In time, he began to keep them in a book, which he called, to himself and very secretly, "Thrasne's book." He was sure the things he wrote there would mean nothing to anyone but him.

From Shfor to Baris was only a few days' float, if one did it without stopping. Suspirra had asked once more, "My baby?" and it had been seven years since Thrasne had seen Pamra. So they came to Baris, and owner Thrasne went ashore, leaving the boat in the good hands of first man Birk. In the same shop he found a new barber, who might well have been the old barber for all the difference between them.

"Fulder Don's youngest daughter? Why, boatman, she surprised all her kin and became an Awakener. Been at the Tower four or five years now. Seems someone told me just the other day they'd seen her with an older one herding a bunch of workers out on the piers."

Sick at heart, Thrasne took himself off to the house he remembered from before.

"Pamra?" Delia asked, surprised. "Why, boatman, why would you come looking for Pamra?"

Thrasne mumbled something about having known her mother.

"Oh, sad, sad. Pamra's mama was the loveliest thing I've ever seen. Like a flower. Like a flame-bird, bright and graceful, and like a flame-bird gone too soon. Ah. Well, Pamra's an Awakener now. Did it out of rebellion, I think. To get even with her grandma and her half sisters. They were always at her. It was because she looked like her mother, don't you know?" She wiped the nose of the infant she was juggling and called a quick set of instructions to two toddlers who were picking herbs, explaining, "Their mama died, too, and they needed a place for a few days until their papa could make arrangements. Well. You didn't come to talk about my kiddies."

Which he hadn't. He left her with words of thanks, taking himself off to the vicinity of the Tower, far enough away not to be questioned by the Awakeners but close enough to see her if she came. When she did, he knew her at once.

"Pamra," he called, not certain it was allowed to speak to her, but needing to do something more than merely look and go away.

She turned to him, that expression he so well remembered intensified, if anything, into a stubborn, blind naiveté, a face that said, "I will do what I will do!"

"Do I know you?" she asked, a little haughtily, as all the Awakeners were.

"I knew your mother," he said.

"She went in the River." Her voice was forbidding. Cold. "She was a coward, a heretic."

"That's very harsh," he said, shocked at her tone.

"No more than she deserves. Did you have something to say to me?"

"Nothing," he said. What could he say to her? "Nothing." He turned away, confused, not liking her and yet not wanting to leave. "You look like her," he called over his shoulder. "Exactly like her. And she loved you." There, he thought. Let her make what she will of that.

He went back to the boat downcast and miserable to write a new sign for Suspirra. "PAMRA IS WELL." She was well. So beautiful it put his heart into his throat, half longing and half anger at her, at what she'd done. About sixteen or seventeen now, and the perfect copy of the drowned woman except that Pamra was slim where this woman had a rounded figure, gently swelling.

"How could she?" he whispered.

"She believes," Suspirra said. "Truly believes. Not in my love, for I abandoned her. Not in her father's love, for he left her, too, in his way. But in the love of Potipur, for she must believe in love-of some kind."

Sickened, Thrasne could not believe in the love of Potipur. It was with a kind of guilty relief he put Baristown behind him. Haranjus Pandel, Superior of the Tower of Thou-ne, saw fit to visit the home of the widow Plot. "There's this law, Widow Plot. You know it, and I know it." He said this in his usual manner, as one might who is dreadfully bored with the necessity but feels it wise to go through the motions.

Widow Plot, unawed, shook her head at him. "If you're talking of Peasimy, have a little sense, Superior."

"He's thirty years old."

"He's thirty in years. He's four or five in his head, and as far as his wee private parts go, he's not got enough to bring a blush to a maiden's cheek. I'll swear that part of him hasn't grown since he was born." She flushed a little saying it, but it had to be said. Gods, hadn't she said it to her friends, many a time, and hadn't they breamed it around? Sure Haranjus knew it, just as he knew every other blessed thing that went on in Thou-ne.

"Still, there's the law." It didn't come out with the force Pandel would have wished. He had suddenly remembered several other things about Peasimy that he had known at one time but had conveniently forgotten until that moment.

The widow Plot was no more awed by the law than she was by his presence. "The law says no celibacy, no boy-boying, that's what the law say, Haranjus Pandel. The law says there must be wedding and bedding and enough children born to keep our numbers strong. That's what the law says.

And Superior or no, don't come all over haughty with me, Haranjus. I knew your ma, and I've known about you since you were no bigger than Peasimy's cock. Peasimy's not celibate, no more than any infant is. And Peasimy's no boy lover, neither. Peasimy's an infant, a neuter, no more sex to him than to a blade of grass. So what's this about the law? You got some ugly, godforsaken maiden you've got to get matched up, is that it?"

Haranjus had the grace to blush. He had, as a matter of fact, the daughter of the Merchants' Guild Hetman to get mated, somehow. She with the face like a song fish and the body like a tub. No matter, face nor figure, so long as she was able to produce. With the constant drain on their numbers, producing was important. And rumor was that human numbers needed to be slightly increased for a ... well, for a reason. No way it could be done unless the birth rate went up.

Seeing him redden, she went on relentlessly, "You'd be laughed out of Thou-ne. And if word got back to the Chancery you was wasting your time on such silliness-and I'd see it got there, one way or another-they'd put an end to any hopes you

might have. Give it up, Haranjus. Find your ugly girl some other housemate, but give it up so far as Peasimy's concerned." He argued some, but it was only halfhearted, a kind of face saving before he went away with scant courtesies. It had been a silly idea. Everyone in Thou-ne knew Peasimy, and the idea of Peasimy with a wife would strike them all as a mighty funny thing. Compromising to the dignity of the Tower. Meeting the letter of the law, but contrary to its spirit. Besides, it wouldn't gain the favor of the Merchants' Hetman, either, if he got no grandkids as part of the deal. Widow Rot was right. Leave it alone.

Behind him in the little house, Widow Rot wiped one or two tears away. Hadn't she suffered enough? No hope for grand babes. No hope for someone to care for her in her old age. Just Peasimy, sweet as any toddler, and with no more sense. "There, there," she told herself, cheering a little. "Still, he's good as a pet any day."

In the bedroom, Peasimy sprawled in moist, infant sleep as he always did daytimes, unaware of the. Catastrophe that had narrowly missed him, dreaming of a time when all the darkness should be driven away and the light made whole. There were no words in these dreams, only visions in which winged figures moved through radiant space. Dreams, not unlike those dreamed by many, except that Peasimy remembered them whence woke. When he rose, walked, prowled through the dark, splashing light where he could, he always remembered them and longed to be deep in that dream again.

Days and nights go by. Moons swing up from the east in round, ripe glory and fade to mere slivers of rind on the western sky as time passes. Conjunctions come and go.

Comes a night. Dusk in Thou-ne, a misty dusk in which all is veiled, mystery made manifest, ghost faces in the wisps of fog that waft in from the River, ghost voices, too, which become, on long listening, the sounds of song-fish, wooden bells, the tinkle of glass chimes, the crier's call. Only the Tower has a brazen bell, metal being too scarce to waste on anything except coin and holy purposes, but it is silent tonight, its voice withheld. Tower bell only rings when something is wrong. There is seldom anything wrong in Thou-ne, edged as it is on the east with the scarps and valleys of the Talons. No workers come to Thou-ne from the east. Potipur knows what the Awakeners beyond the Talons do with their dead, though Peasimy supposes a workers' pit somewhere. Peasimy has it all figured out. Lies, all lies what they say. It was lies what they said about his father being Sorted Out. It was lies what the body fixer said about his arm, that time it broke. There hadn't been any Sorters, and the arm had hurt, terribly. Peasimy no longer listens to what they say. Only what they do is true, so he watches but does not hear. He has turned his ears off, long and long ago, to most words. Sounds, now, those he will condescend to hear, and tonight he listens from his post beside the warehouse wall. Chimes and wood bells and the crier's call.

4

Night along the River in Thou-ne. Mist, tonight, blowing in from the shipping surface, softly suffused globes of it gathered around each of the lanterns, holding the light in glowing spheres that hang along the jetties like a string of ghostly balloons. Song-fish making a chorus under the shore reeds, harummm, rumm, lummm, rumm. Three of them. One soprano-fish and two deep-voiced droners. Harumm, sloo, harumm.

Light cannot get far enough from the lanterns to make puddles on the cobbles. Lanterns are scarcely bright enough to see by. Jetties lying in shadow. He stands, Peasimy, head cocked, listening to the song-fish. Something there, disturbing them. Most nights they've finished up by now, danced on their tails, done all their calling and telling, but tonight there's something keeping them awake. So Peasimy listens, almost understanding what it is the song-fish sing, as much in tune with them as with the dark and the fog.

"Oh," he whispers to himself, "don't I hear you, don't I? Somethin' comin'. Somethin' wonderful comin'. Don't I know that? Haven't I been told? No need to keep sayin' it, over and over. No matter was it tomorrow or forever, I'd still be here, waitin' for it." He rocks to and fro on his heels, thinking they may stop now, now that he's told them, but the song-fish go on, harummm, harummm. No, whatever they're telling him, it's something different from the ordinary.

Peasimy tiptoes along to the Riverbank, out onto the jetty, down to the place the reed bed thins out and the fish sing, flings himself down with his head snaking out over the slosh and slurp of the black water.

Harumm, lummm, sloon, rumm. Fish playing with something, pushing it back and forth. They do that. Push an old barrel back and forth. Push a log, a stump. Chunk, chunk on the jetty, far down. Chunk, chunk, coming closer. And he can see it!

Even in the dark, down there under the water, glowing, shining, a greeny glow, like new leaves in the sun, like moon on grass, light!

He stares and stares as the fish bring her up, up to the surface, she glowing ever more brightly, until at last he looks directly into her face. All around her die fishes, singing, the glowing fishes spread either side of her like wings. Bump, bumping her against the stones, looking up at Peasimy as though to say, "Here she is!" He knows her at once, one of the creatures from his dreams, one of those who bring the light.

Oh, but she has changed since Thrasne carved her and put her into the River. All the features are the same, and the hard fragwood has not softened, but the little creatures of the depths have been at her, smoothing her all over with their phosphorescent slime so she gleams, shines, beams up from the waves like a beacon of greeny light, smiling, one hand held out as though for Peasimy to take it and welcome her ashore.

And Peasimy reaches down, stronger than he could possibly be, tugging and lifting, pulling like a boatman at the capstan, hauling with an excess of power he has never had and will never have again, until she stands there, dripping on the jetty, peering at the town of Thou-ne. Only then does he go screaming off after the crier and the watch, hallooing for the lantern man, for the people to come see, and such is his fervor and volume of voice it is not long before mere is a crowd gathered, full of muttering as the reed beds, staring at the woman from the River, who smiles back at them, shining, shining, shining in the dark.

"There," Peasimy cries, over and over, in a voice totally unlike his own. "There in the River. The Truth Bearer. The Light Bearer. She shines, oh, she shines!"

"What's he saying?"

"Says she's the Truth Bearer."

"What's that?"

"Somebody who brings the truth, I guess. Look at her. Ain't she lovely."

"What'd they say?"

"Said the lovely Truth Carrier was come, I think. That's her. Up there."

"What's a Truth Carrier?"

"Oh, that's religion, that is. Foretold to happen." This from one of the standabouts, a know-it-all who makes up half of what he says and switches the other half around to suit himself. No one believes a thing he says in daylight, but the dark and mist make him an anonymous voice, speaking with the authority of conviction. "Foretold to happen," he says again, pleased with the way this is received.

And the circumstances of it all, the mist, the dark, the voice saying things that seem authoritative, Peasimy's transfigured face, the beauty of the carved woman, all that reaches them so they go away from the place nodding their heads, believing she is whatever Peasimy calls her. Believing they had heard of the Truth Bearer all their lives, pleased and delighted, though mystified, that she has come.

The day after goes on with saying and saying until what is said by one is said by everyone and believed by everyone. Someone-years later the distinction is claimed by half the families in Thou-ne-someone says the glowing image belongs in the Temple. By evening she is there, in the Temple of the Moons, there at the top of the sanctuary steps in front of the carved visages of the gods, looking down at the people in kindness and wonder. By evening the ritual surrounding her has begun. From the balcony high above, a novice ladles water from buckets, an endless line of buckets carried from the River itself, and in this dank sprinkle the image of Suspirra stands, shining wetly and smiling, as though forever. Peasimy kneels at the altar rail, his face glowing like the moon.

Behind him in the sanctuary, Widow Plot stares at his back, not knowing whether she is thankful for this or not. Peasimy hasn't been up in the daytime for a dozen years or more, and this could mean he will start sleeping at night, like most people. Which means he'll be underfoot, during the day, most likely.

"Plot-wife," says a voice behind her in gloomy tones, and she turns to confront Haranjus Pandel.

"Superior," she says formally in her most discouraging tone. What is he going to make of this, now? Some new thing to

bother honest people with?

Instead he asks in gloomy tones, "What is all this? You can tell me, Widow Plot. Haven't I the right to know? All the responsibility and no one tells me? Did he carve the thing? Did he?"

She stares, laughs, stares again. He doesn't expect an answer. He doesn't even believe it himself. He sits there on the hard, uncomfortable bench, head propped on one hand, his long, lugubrious face attentive to the glowing woman behind the rail. Is he thinking, too, that it may really be a miracle? Behind the shining woman are the faces of Potipur, Abricor, and Viranel, so familiar the worshipers do not even see them. Now, for the first time, Widow Plot sees these carved faces of the gods contrasted with a human face, the shining woman's face, and knows them for what they are.

"Haranjus," she breathes in the grip of discovery. "Potipur's face! That's a flier's face!"

And he, casting his eyes upward, sees the faces of the gods for the first time. Really seeing. Peering down at him with a hooded-eyed cynicism, beaks gaped a little as though hungry. Fliers' faces. He has never questioned them before, never before even noticed the expressions they wear. How long, he wondered in sudden panic, how long had he been worshiping the fliers without even knowing it?

In the Awakeners' Tower in Bans, Pamra Don lay sleeping. The Candy Tree filled all the space above her, glitter and shimmer of leaf behind leaf, blossoms squirming open in a sensuous dance of hue and scent, explosions of amber and gold, bursts of gemmy reds, all rustling, flushing, burgeoning into every empty space, thrusting its light and color upon her, drawing her up into itself, weightlessly ... toward glory ...

Something rasped, scraped. A hard sound. Nothing alive in it. Metal on stone. The Candy Tree shivered. Pamra ignored the sound, hating it, clinging to the tree ...

"The new drainage ditches along the Tower wall," a voice in her mind said clearly. "A worker crew digging drainage ditches."

With that recognition the Candy Tree dream slipped away like smoke, and she woke thinking of Delia.

Tangled warmth of bedcovers; a ghostly reflection staring back at her from the glass across the cubicle. Last evening, the bleeding. This morning, heavy sleep and slow waking. A longing for comforting arms. That was why she was thinking of Delia today, when she had not thought of her for a season.

Groaning, Pamra rolled herself half upright, huddled at the edge of the bed, hugging herself as the weak tears runneled her face. Oh, it was hard enough to waken oneself after bleeding without thinking of Awakening the workers. She should have known better than to have angered Betchery with her comment about the woman's appetite. Betchery was well known as a glutton, but she hated being reminded of it. Bleeders had ways to retaliate; unconscionable, but predictable. She mouthed the furred, foggy taste of sick depression; only the result of weakness, true, but enough to make one doubt one's strength. For a moment, predictably, she regretted being an Awakener. Why keep on when it meant submitting to Betchery and all the other necessary unpleasantness? She responded to both regret and question as she always had. "Because of what my mother did." Muttering, the words coming out in a single connected string, as though they were all one word, an incantation uttered from habit.

It was years since she had actually heard herself saying those words. At one time they had stirred her anger, renewed her resolution. Now they were only part of the morning litany, the childhood humiliation buried beneath ten years of ritual and acceptance. She slumped away from the bed, aching, sagging, knowing her face must be pale as ice. What a lot to go through. And yet she was so close to senior grade. Senior grade. Senior retreat first, learning the mysteries that juniors were not privy to. Danger there, carefully avoided in thought. Not all those who went on senior retreat returned afterward. Skip over that. Senior retreat, then senior vows, then a luxurious room of her own on the upper floors. Meals cooked to order, not ladled out of the common pot. Respected by everyone, without exception. Even Papa wouldn't be able to think of her as a failure when she was senior grade.

She leaned against the window, letting the glass cool her skin, remembering Grandma Don's sarcastic voice: "Pamra's mother was a coward and a heretic. Pamra herself shows no sign of expiating that sin. She will never make an artist."

And her own words in response, unplanned, unintended, raggedly defiant in the subdued gathering. "I can be an Awakener. That's better than artist anytime."

Silence had opened to receive that statement, an embarrassed silence that grew into coolness, into distaste, into disaffection. There had been no way to back down, no way to change her mind. They had rejected her when the words were said; she could only go on after that.

Once in the Tower, she had not seen Prender or Musley or Papa or Grandma again. Someday she would see her half sisters and Papa, perhaps. After she was senior, not before. And not Grandma Don, of course. Grandma would have been taken to the Holy Sorters long ago, though Pamra doubted she had been Sorted Out.

Disgusted at the memory, she pushed herself away from the window. Nothing was real this morning. Propelling her weakness through the day would be like swimming through mirage. Stripping off her gown, she began the morning ritual which got her dressed, her hair braided in the distinctive Awakeners pattern. Robed and sandaled at last, she left the cubicle to pause at the top of the women's stairs for the Utterance.

"Rejoice! I go to Awaken those whose labors sustain us. Thanks be to the Tears of Viranel, to the Servants of Abricor, to the Promise of Potipur, and amen." Though her shaking hand upon the banister belied her voice, the statement was made firmly aloud, requiring response.

"Rejoice and amen!" chanted a voice from down the corridor, echoing and anonymous.

So released, she stumbled down to the women's refectory and a deserted table. The smell of the morning grain ration sickened her, but she held her breath and forced the porridge down. Her body would not make new blood if she didn't eat, and no amount of religious posturing would get her through the day unless she felt stronger.

Ilze's voice came from behind her, formally cool, yet with a slight tone of anger. "Pamra, you're white as pamet. Have you just been bled? Who did it?"

Pamra kept her face forward. While talking at morning meal was not forbidden, it was considered indicative of a lack of seriousness. Still, he was a senior and her mentor. He had a perfect right to come into women's quarters, a perfect right to question her. She whispered, "It was Betchery."

"Betchery indeed. I should have known without asking." He was lean and brown with a bony, handsome face and hungry eyes. Despite his evident concern, Pamra felt a sense of danger whenever he was near, as though she might burn if he focused on her more closely. She shifted uncomfortably beneath his unsmiling regard, keeping her eyes down where they belonged, uneasy under his stare.

"You're in no condition to be on labor roster. Take it easy today, and I'll see what I can do." He touched her, almost a caress, lingering longer than necessary. Beneath his hand, her skin quivered, not welcoming the touch, not daring to reject it. He turned, saying, "Well, enough of this rejoicing. I have yesterday's plowed fields to inspect."

"Rejoice!" Pamra responded formally. "The Awakening is at hand."

He left her with an amused smile, shaking his head very slightly. Ilze frequently seemed to find her amusing, and this slight, half-concealed mockery often puzzled her. This morning, however, she was too weary to be puzzled by anything.

In the open corridor between men's and women's quarters, she waited at the bleeders' hatch for someone to bring whatever supplements the Superior had ordered. Betchery brought them out, fat Betchery, sneering and popping candies into her mouth as Pamra tried to choke the pills down dry. It was Betchery's habit of gluttony that Pamra had commented on to Jelane. Unfortunately, Betchery had overheard the conversation.

"Rejoice, Awakener," said Betchery, handing over the two daily flasks of blood and Tears. "Lookin' a trifle pale, there."

"Rejoice and amen." Pamra would not give her the satisfaction of anything but ritual. Rejoice and amen, and amen to. You, Betchery, bitch. If you come dead under my hands, you'll not be Sorted. She went out into the morning, no longer trembling, merely angry-sad as bleeding usually made her. It brought a brooding melancholy that made the world seem colorless—a painting done in shades of brown and tan with none of the usual life and vitality.

The water in the trough on the high steps ruffled in the light wind of the year's second summer, warmer and less rainy than the autumn that had just passed. Thin, early-morning clouds streamed north in the onshore winds; later they would puff like pamet pods to hang their heavy veils over the fields. A flight of young flame-birds fled across the sky, their orangey feathers spark bright in the sun. Down in the Baristown plaza, a line of swaying Melancholies moved across the pave, chanting to awaken the people. Only they or the Awakeners would be up this early. The parkland that separated the Tower

from Outskirt Road at the edge of Baristown lay green in this early light, quiet, silvered with dew.

Beyond the park and the plaza, the avenue stretched south to the bank of the World River. There the tidal bulge pulsed westward as it followed the god-moons Viranel and Abricor, hanging like pale, round lanterns in the western sky. Potipur brooded beneath the horizon. Conjunction would come at midwinter this year, more than a season from now. Conjunction, when all the Servants of Abricor disappeared for a time and the workers were allowed to lie quiet.

Along the pulsing waters of the Riverside a worker crew was dumping loads of rock to extend one of the fishing jetties, the workers crawling like gray maggots on the clumsy structure. Beyond them on the brown-dun flow a boat passed, pushed onward by the tide, and the striding form of a Laugher moved on the River path at the same speed, as though boat and man were tied together. Pamra made the sign of Aversion, turning her eyes from the Laugher. Always better not to see them. Against a hillside to the west another worker crew was plowing, the shapeless forms oozing among the occasional copses of broad-leafed puncon trees left standing both for their shade and their fruit. Beside each crew an Awakener leaned on a tall mirrored staff, blood flasks hanging from the shoulder. Pamra was usually first to the day's labors. Seeing these others before her reaffirmed her weakness, her tardiness. She must move, get the day's work under way.

But first she could receive her own Payment, that moment of her day blessed by Potipur. No matter what has happened, the early morning rapture made it all worthwhile.

She took a deep breath and raised both arms in the ritual gesture toward the west, the direction of the World River, of the moons, of the sun, toward which all things moved. Her breathing slowed, her skin began to tingle. Eastward then, holding her hands before her face in the gesture of negation, the unworld direction, the way no one could go, from which all things came but into which nothing could return. She bowed north, to the forests that carpeted all the lands to the edge of the Great Steppes and beyond the steppes to the Chancery, where the Protector lived, mighty and omniscient, behind the Teeth of the North; bowed south to the River, World-Girdler.

Then she held her breath, waiting for it.

A welling joy that had no focus in this world, a transcendent glory in her flesh, a dizzying beat of her blood, a rush of pure pleasure throughout her body, a bath of ecstatic fire.

"It's the pills they give yon," Jelane had said to her. "It's the pills that give you that feeling." Jelane was a junior who had come into the Tower shortly after Pamra.

"No," Pamra had told her. "It couldn't be just pills. That wouldn't be fair."

"Well, it is, Pamra. By all the three gods, but you're dumb. Why do you think you get that rush every day right after they give you your supplements! It's kind of a little Payment, for being a good girl when they bleed you."

"No," Pamra had said, choking down her resentment and anger. Why should anyone listen to Jelane--Jelane, who spent every third day being restricted or getting two lashes for infractions? Jelane was a selfish, heretical little fool. If it was the pills, then how explain that the rapture came at other times, too? She said this, definitely, not expecting Jelane to believe it and not caring whether she did or not.

"Well, maybe you get it other times," Jeiane had sniffed. "None of the rest of us do."

How could one live in the Tower without the rapture? How could one do recruitment without the rapture? How could one get through the day? The rapture came from Potipur as Payment to His servants; nothing else made sense.

When the glory faded, she went to awaken the workers.

Of the twenty or so fresh bodies brought every week from Wilforn, the next town to the east, several still lay in the Baristown pit, their canvas wraps virtually unstained, the masking hoods whole and untattered. Only the swollen blue feet emerging from the wrap showed the first signs of corruption. These were the Wilforn dead who had not been Sorted Out, who had instead been left in the workers' pit to fulfill their obligation.

Pamra bowed her head and gave the invocation in a calm, beckoning voice, then raised the first hood just above the purple-lipped mouth to pour the mixed Tears and blood from her flask between the dead lips.

"Drink and rise," she intoned. "For work awaits you."

One never raised the hood high enough to see the faces-though every Awakener had probably done it once. Having done it

once, no one would do it again. A few years before, she might have waited to verify that each worker did indeed rise up. Now she merely dropped the hood and moved on. Other Awakeners would arrive soon, and she wanted as many of these fresh workers in her own crew as she could get. Too many times lately she had had to take shambling forms directly from the worker pits to the bone pits because some other Awakener hadn't bothered to put them where they belonged the night before. Of course it was unpleasant to get something barely able to hold itself together to walk the extra few hundred yards, and of course they had to be moved in a barrow sometimes, but that was part of the job. Though, thank Potipur, not a part she would need to do today.

"Thanks be to Viranel," she intoned, meditating upon the Tears that were mixed with the blood.

Long ago, said Scripture, Viranel had revealed the power of Her Tears, shed for the sins of mankind, to the Holy Sorter Thoulia, and in furtherance of that revelation all the Towers and Awakeners had come to be. In class, Pamra had been told that the fungus, brought into a spate of growth by fresh blood and sunlight, grew rapidly throughout the dead bodies, duplicating nerve and muscle cells with tissues of its own, copying and revivifying the structures that were there. Pamra thought there were other things the Tears did as well, but it was better not to ask questions. Undoubtedly she would be told whatever was important for her to know, in time.

"Anything you do badly reflects on me," Ilze had said to her that first day.

Pamra, half-terrified, had trembled. "Yes, Mentor," she had murmured.

"Anything you do badly, I have to answer to the Superior. You understand?"

She had bowed, hands folded, eyes down, only to start at the lash of something around her ankles, a stinging on her bare feet. She was staring down at a whip, coiled serpent like around her feet, and the shock brought her eyes up to confront the snakelike stare in Ilze's eyes, covetous and cold.

"And if I have to answer," He had whispered, "so will you."

Pamra had never forgotten. Ilze had never had to answer for anything she had done. She had kept the rules, not asked questions, done what she was told. As she was doing now.

"Drink and rise," she said again and again until she had the full hand of workers on their feet. Five was about all one could manage while plowing, though up to ten could be used in carrying stone. She twirled her staff as she led them northwest to the pamet fields, the mirrored facets throwing sparks of light before them. The harnesses and plow lay where the last crew had left them. Driven by the mirrored lights and her murmured chants of command, the workers shambled into the harness and began to plow, slowly, soundlessly, the blind hoods faced in the direction Pamra faced, seeing, if at all, through her eyes.

When evening came, she led them back, judging the distance carefully so that the power of the last blood she gave them would last just until the workers reached the pits. None of them were ready to be dropped into the bone pits, thank Potipur. A good fresh crew. She would rise early the next few days and attempt to keep them for herself. The thought frayed away, lost in weariness at the thought of any next few days, fatigue wrapping her with an aching sigh. She could not consider tomorrow. She could not even consider the night. Though she felt stronger than in the morning, the mindless evening hours in the Tower seemed more than she could bear.

She'd been neglecting Delia lately. It was a good time to visit her.

The gardens of Outskirt Row spilled over their walls, shedding perfume into the evening, fragrant with herbs and warm from the day's sun, as welcoming a place as it had always been. Delia's house was at the end of the row.

Despite the welcoming appearance of the place, Pamra delayed as she went down through the parklands, heavy with nostalgia, last night's dream and the morning's resentments all mixed together. Skittering sparks of light fled from her mirrored staff to scramble across the path and the stones. The lights attracted Delia's attention, and she came to the gate of her garden, waving her cane as though it were a wand held by some good witch to make a welcoming enchantment.

"Pamra! Something told me you would come, so I baked spice cakes ... "No reproach for all the days she had been forgotten. Reproach was not Delia's way, and Pamra warmed to Delia's way, as she always had.

"I haven't had a spice cake in ... oh, a thousand years." She could not help smiling. This was good Saint Delia, who always remembered things, all of them warm and happy, even when there were few enough of those to choose among. "Not since I

was a child. A long time ago, Delia."

"Not all that long. No. Scarcely yesterday. Only a conjunction of the moons or two, nothing to mention." Delia laughed, but the cough turned into a hacking convulsion that left her weak, wiping her eyes and shaking her head. "Oh, me, me. My days are surely few before I am carried to the west and put into the Sorters' hands. Tsk."

Pamra made a gesture, her revulsion scarcely concealed. "You mustn't say things like that."

"Oh, Pamra, child! All us ordinary people talk like that. You know it. Only you Awakeners never talk of going into the west. Do you worry so that we have no faith? That we will not be taken into Potipur's arms?"

"It isn't ... it isn't that, Delia. I have no doubt about your being Sorted Out and received by Potipur. Among us it's just accounted bad manners to talk of it with ... people close to us."

"But child, we're not among you Awakeners. There's just you and me, and haven't we always said honest things to one another?"

"Of course we have." Pamra took the old woman's hand in her own, feeling the fragile flesh give way between the slender bones. Delia's wrists were like a flame-bird's legs, like a reed stem. "And when all the family turned away from me because I decided to be an Awakener, only Delia stayed my friend."

She smiled into the old face, reaching out to touch the tiny, leaf-shaped blue birthmark on Delia's chin as she had when she was a little one. "Wiggle the leaf, Deely. Make it move!" She had been only two or three, but she could remember saying that.

"Well, I hope more than any friend, child. You were more like my own child, and you stayed my child, stubborn though you were. And angry, sometimes. I remember how excited you were about the Candy Tree. And how furious you got when Prender told you it didn't really exist. You were seven. Lots older than the others were when they found out. Ah, you flew at her with your little fists, hitting and screaming at her that she lied, she lied. You cried for hours."

Pamra protested, "But it was you told me about the Candy Tree, Delia. Of course I believed you. You made such a story of it. And sure enough, in the morning the seeds were always there. So good. I can taste them yet. And how hard it was to save even one as 'seed' for the next year's tree! I tried so hard to stay awake and see the tree grow, even though you said it wouldn't grow at all if I did. And then Prender ... well, I didn't like her much anyhow, and she was calling you a liar."

"Oh, child. Now, you know that isn't true. It wasn't a lie. It was just a kind of story. A pious myth. To make children behave well. And they get such fun out of it."

"Well, I got more fun out of the myth than I ever did eating the candy after I knew you had put it there. Especially since it was Prender who told me."

"Prender wasn't supposed to tell you. She was supposed to let you believe as long as you could. We always let the little ones believe as long as they can; they get such pleasure out of it. She probably wouldn't have told you if it hadn't been for jealousy in the family. You two didn't get along then and most likely never will. I've told Prender a hundred times, 'We eat the crops the workers grow! Why should we turn our backs on the Awakeners?' Ah, well, but you know your oldest sister."

"I know her well enough." Pamra was grimly certain about this. "The whole family. Rejecting me because of what I chose to do."

"Oh, child. They just doubt sometimes, that's all. Don't you ever doubt? Are you always sure Awakening is for the best?"

"Delia! What do you expect me to say? That's the kind of question Mother would have asked! And you know how everyone felt about that! Of course Awakening is for the best."

"I know you believe so, child. But lots of people don't, truly. It doesn't make them bad. Perhaps you know something they don't. It's better when all the people know, Pamra. It's better not to be alone." She sighed. "I wish you'd forgive your mama, Pammy. What she did wasn't so bad."

"It was bad enough! Deserting me and Papa that way!"

"She had her reasons, Pammy. She was pregnant, sick, frightened."

"That's no excuse! How could she give up an eternity of blessedness in Potipur's arms for no more reason than that!"

"Perhaps ... perhaps because she doubted she'd be Sorted Out, child. We all have our little sins."

"And Potipur is merciful," Pamra grated, teeth tight together. "Delia, stop this. I didn't come here to argue with you!" Remembering, suddenly, why it was she had not come more often. Delia always pressed her for forgiveness. And it always evoked this old guilt. This old pain.

"All right, all right, child. We won't fight over it. I wish you'd forgive her because you'd be happier so. But you won't. And that's that. It doesn't change I-love-you."

"No," she said, softening enough to put her arm around the old woman. "No, Delia. It doesn't change I-love-you."

They sat beneath the flowering puncon tree, the sky beginning to flush with sunset. "I'm glad you've come, Pamra. I prayed you would, because your old Delia wants your help to break a rule. Just a little bit."

Pamra's mouth twitched. Because she could not imagine Delia breaking any rule at all, it took a moment for the enormity of the woman's request to sink in. "You want to what?"

"I want to go back east, to the village I was born in, to see my sister. She's old. I want to see her."

For a moment she did not believe she had heard. Then she believed and was appalled at the fury of anger that took her. Anger. At Delia. She choked on it. "By the three, Delia! You want to get us both whipped? Or used? That's no small rule breaking. That's a major infraction-the major infraction. No one crosses town lines eastward. No one!"

"Oh, well, child, sometimes people do, you know. They just lie about it a lot. I heard that someone on the other side of Baristown went to Wilforn and stayed for the Conjunction festival and then came back, all in one piece and in his right mind."

"Don't tell me!" she demanded, feeling her face grow white and stiff. "Honestly, Delia. Of all the things I'm sworn to uphold, the direction of life is one of-is the most important."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? Because it's Potipur's commandment, that's why. The World River moves west, the moons move west, the sun moves west, we move-all west,

in the direction of life. To go east is antilife, against the Three. It's evil, in and of itself! Blasphemous! It's like those foul same-sex lovers who refuse to propagate in accordance with Potipur's will, like those rotten celibates the Laughters keep rooting out. If you want to visit your sister, you'll have to go west to Shabber, and keep on going until you come to it."

"But it's only to Wilforn," Delia whispered forlornly. "Not more than a day or so walk east from here, even for an old woman like me. If I go west, love, I won't live to get there. How long do they figure H takes to come all the way around? Twelve years if you walk, isn't it? Six or seven years on a Riverboat. Something like that? I don't have twelve years, Pammy. Not even six."

Pamra shook her head angrily. This wasn't fair. Not when she was so tired. Oh, Delia. What could she do? Travelers did go all the way around the world, traveling west, some on boats on the River tide. Some afoot. Pilgrims did it afoot, making Potipur's Round. They carried messages and told kin of kin, and walking it did take about twelve years, more or less, and Delia was right. She couldn't survive such a trip. She fought to be calm, forced herself into quiet.

"Now, let's talk it over. If it's so important you go back, how come you ever left there? You never told me you had a sister there."

"I came from there when I was about your age, following my curiosity. Oh, Pamra, truth to tell I was following a man. He wanted to see somewhere else. So we came here, and he wanted just to go on and on, but I didn't. I'd had enough of him by then, and your grandma gave me a job doing the garden in this place, and time went by. Your papa was only a child then, and he needed me.

"When he was grown, I could have gone on around west until I had come home again, but I delayed and dillied, and by the time I thought of it again, there was you. You, with your mama gone and that family of yours gnawing at you because you looked like her ... " She fell silent, stroking the little blue birthmark at her jawline. Then she shook herself and went on. "It's just that lately I've been thinking of my sister. Wanting to see her. Wanting to say, 'Well, Miri, how has it been with you?' She stood up, clapped her hands as she tried to smile.

"It's not important. Not at all. Not important enough to worry my girl. Now, have another cake. After all, I baked them for my own Pammy."

She did not speak of it again while Pamra sat in the garden in the glow of evening, smelling the kindly smells of the growing things, hearing the cries of the fishermen on their way home from the long jetties, sitting quiet as the sun fell lower to touch the horizon in blazes of crimson and orange and streaks of crushed berry color, bright and bruised at once. It should have been a time of contentment, of quiet, but too many memories had been jostled awake in Pamra. She kept the calm smile on her face, kept her voice low and peaceful not to distress old Delia, but it was a quiet surface over a turmoil of remembering.

Mama. Lovely as a dream and as fragile. Pretty as a soap bubble, and as useless. What did one remember about her? Softness and singing, sadness and tears, and at last-at last the unforgivable thing.

And Papa. Winning that second mention when he was young, very young, enough to set Grandma talking of his great future as though it were real. But there was no future. No other awards. No other mentions at all for Fulder Don. Not a second, not a fifth. And even that fact was blamed on Mama, somehow made out to be Mama's fault-in turn to become Pamra's fault, who so resembled lovely Mama.

And saintly Delia had been there through it all, the substitute mother, the kindly one, the only one who did not turn away when Pamra made her choice and went to the Awakeners' Tower. She squeezed Delia's hand now in remembrance of that. If it hadn't been for Delia ... Well, there must be a way to repay her now, a way to solve this problem.

"Delia, I'm not promising anything, but I'll ask around. Honestly I will. I'll have to sound out a few people, find out who to ask, but maybe there'll be a way we can send a message or something." She surprised in the old woman's face an expression of longing-no, more passionate than mere longing, a fanatic desire, an impassioned pleading with fear in it. "Delia, why does it matter so?"

The old woman sighed. "I wronged her, Pamra, My own sister. I wronged her with him, the one I followed away. He was hers, my sister's man, and he turned from her to me. He told me if he couldn't have me, he would not have her, he'd go to the west without either. And oh, I followed him, foolish as it was, and then did not care enough to follow him farther when he went on. I must ask her to forgive me. It must be done, Pamra child. It must be done. Otherwise ... I may die unforgiven, and it may be Potipur will not take me up. I'm so old, child. There isn't time to do anything but just go to her and ask ... "

The old woman sat there, head bowed, grieving over a wrong done forty or fifty years ago. Pamra shook her head. Even though it was dangerous for ordinary mortals to die unforgiven, it was silly for Delia to be upset like this.

"If you did a little wrong when you were young, you've made up for it a hundred times since. If there is any person within twelve days' travel who will be Sorted Out to receive Potipur's kiss, it will be you, Delia, so stop this grieving. I'll figure something out for you."

She felt better for having said it. It was all true. Delia was one of Potipur's own. If reaching Delia's sister was important to the old woman, Pamra would do what she could, and she told Delia so again, and yet again as she left after taking a last breath of the clean garden air.

5

The water in the ritual cleaning trough was chilled by evening, holding little of the day's warmth as she dipped her hands, sprinkled her face and feet. She leapt away from the trough as black wings swept by, buffeting onto the step where a great flier fixed her with a calculating eye, clacking its huge serrated beak softly together. She leaned against the wall to let her heart stop pounding. It was only one of the Servants of Abricor. They seldom landed on the Tower steps, 'though they clustered thickly around their aerie on the Tower top and in the bone pits, always silent, never making a sound' She dried her hands on the towel by the door, aware suddenly that door was open.

"Pamra." It was Ilze in the doorway. She realized he had been there, watching her. "Pamra? Come on, you'll miss your meal. Where've you been?"

"I'm sorry, Senior. I've been down in town. Visiting my old Delia. She's half-stuffed me on spice cakes. I'm not really hungry."

"Spice cakes don't build blood." He sounded irritated. "Come on. I've arranged something for you."

The hall was busy, echoing with feet and the clatter of plates. From the men's refectory there was a bass rumble of voices, a harsh shout of laughter, quickly repressed. The women's tables were half-empty, only a few tardy diners plying their spoons, breaking their bread. Ilze waited with her at the service hatch, then drew her away to an empty table. "I've got you on recruitment tomorrow."

"Senior! That's kind of you. I thought my turn on the roster wouldn't come up again for ages."

"It wouldn't have. But I told the Superior that no one was better at recruiting than you are, that you have a sincerity which is very effective." There was a moment's odd hesitation in his voice, but then he went on, "And I told her you'd been bled dry."

"You told the Superior!" Pamra was momentarily aghast. While some said the lady Kesseret was only human, and a kindly human at that, Pamra could only think of her as a moving presence beneath the shining crown and floating veils, a mystery and a glory. Despite her reputed more than hundred years, her unlined face and clear eyes implied she had already received the Payment. "Mentor, I heard someone say once that she's a Holy Sorter. I'm still petrified to go near her."

Ilze looked at her in that coldly amused way of his, head tilted to one side. "One needn't go that far," he said. "It's enough that she's Superior of this Tower. I told her, also, that if someone didn't do something about Betchery, she'd end up killing someone. The Superior agrees you need light duty, so you do your usual sincere job of recruitment for the next two days, and by then you'll be feeling better." Actually, it had been the Superior who'd suggested this, but Ilze did not say so. He preferred to let Pamra think he was responsible for the favor.

Pamra chewed thoughtfully, lulled by his informality into an almost social feeling. "I sort of like recruiting. It's a pain dealing with all the crazy stories they have about us, of course, but I guess I heard the same ones when I was that age."

"Better you than me, young one. I hate mixing with the damn other-castes. You'd think they'd been touched by Potipur not five minutes before, the way they look and act." His face was hostile, nostrils pinched.

Pamra shrugged. "Nobody could be any worse than my father's family was. I just ignore them."

"Well, you can't ignore them on recruitment duty. You're expected to be reasonably diplomatic, and that's what pisses me off most about it." He flushed, abruptly aware of his manner, not the appropriate one for a mentor to a junior, certainly.

"Why were you so late?" Now he was her mentor once more, demanding an accounting.

"I shouldn't have been. Except Delia was after me Senior Ilze. May I not be judged harshly if I ask a question which may be ... not in accord with doctrine?"

He gave her a dramatically astonished look, lifting one eyebrow. "A question, Pamra? From you? Are the final days upon us?"

She flushed. "I know I don't ask many. I wouldn't ask this one, either, except for old Delia. She came from the next town east, Wilfom, many years ago. She has a sister there, or thinks she does. She'd be a very old woman ... "

"And Delia wants to go east to see her sister?"

Pamra nodded, relieved not to have had to say it. "She says some do."

Ilze nodded. "It's quite true. If you asked an occasional question, you'd have known it. It's common talk."

"Where? How? There are guards! There's a fence!"

"Through the workers' pit at night. They go in there and sneak up the other side of the pit where there's no fence."

Pamra's face wrinkled in concentration. At the other side of the pit, marked by a burning lantern, was the Sorting place. Surely ... "But they might encounter the Sorters on the Sorting ground! That's sacrilege!"

He paused, eyebrows drawn together almost as though she had angered him. He seemed about to say something, and then changed his mind. "I've answered your question, Pamra."

"That's the only way?" She was disappointed. "Isn't there some way to send a message?"

"That's much easier. You go to the east gate and pay one of the gate guards on the Wilforn side of the fence to take the message into his town, and you tell him you'll pay him that much again to bring you an answer. That's not really licit, but

it's not heretical, either. It's quite common. Even if it's reported, it would only count a day's duty against you. The gate guards might abuse an old woman, but they will not trouble an Awakener. You can tell your old nursemaid that after recruitment tomorrow."

But she could not wait until then. She went early in the morning, moved by an urgency she did not try to identify, to explain how a message could be sent.

To which Delia nodded, frowning a little vacant frown, as though this was not what she had wanted at all, as though this new suggestion had come between her and the comfort of some long decided action with which she had reassured herself in time of pain.

"Just get the message written, Delia. Exactly what you want to say, just as you'd like to say it to your sister-Miri, wasn't it?- and I'll take it to the border either tonight or tomorrow. Tonight, if I can. Much better to do that than go sneaking off through the worker pits in the dead of night. That's not something I want you to do. I'll be back as soon as I can, and you have it ready." And she went off, late already, looking over her shoulder to catch that same expression of stubborn puzzlement, which she saw with a catch in her throat, wondering if she could not somehow have been more convincing and more hopeful.

But then it was all driven from her mind by the day's work, so different a day from the one before. As she went toward the plaza she passed the merchants' hall and the gardeners' mart and the guildhalls and artists' council houses, and from each of them representatives were coming out in the customary garb of their professions and guilds, all wandering in the same direction. They took no notice of her, or she of them, but each one of them had to give way when she came by, and she knew it ate into them like acid. "Scoff and sneer," she murmured to herself, "but stand aside when I come by, other-caste."

At the plaza each representative went off to his own booth, there to spend the day in earnest conversation with the casteless youths who were not yet fastened into any way of life. For her there would be the usual curiosity seekers and those who came on a dare. And among them might be the one or two she would recruit, though they had often not intended it when they came. It was true that Pamra could recruit better than any of the senior grade. Perhaps because she was not much older than the young people she talked to. Perhaps because she cared more about it. Though Ilze was a stickler for duty, sometimes he seemed almost to mock the Tower and the law. Almost as though it were no better than law mongering, or body fixing, or garbage shifting, some low-caste activity that no one would bother with if they could do something better. Occasionally Pamra wondered if any of the high-grade Awakeners took it seriously, though of course they must! The religious glory, the ecstasy, would only come if one were serious. How could they remain in the work otherwise?

And it was the ecstasy she talked about with the recruits. By midmorning she had collected a small group of two gigglers and one swaggering boy with a perpetual sneer. There was also a narrow cheated, fire-eyed youth who glared at her as though she guarded the gate to a treasure he sought. She could almost feel the spear of his glance skewering her, as though he feared she might oppose him rather than help him!

"Do you remember when you were children," she began, "at the time of Conjunction, at festival time, when the Candy Tree grew in your bedrooms at night?" She smiled at them, and they back, unable not to smile, even the gigglers and the swaggering one, though he covered the smile with a sneer pretending mockery. "When you awakened in the morning, the evidence of the tree was there, on your bedcovers, sweet and marvelous.

"Later, of course, you learned that it was your kin who put the candy there, and you believed the story of the Candy Tree must be false, a simple myth for little children. You did not realize that there was a greater truth that the Candy Tree did indeed grow on the night of festival, not in your bedroom alone, but over all the land of Bans, to drop its festival spirit into the hearts of everyone. If you looked into their faces, your mothers and fathers, you would have seen that festival spirit blooming." Her voice began to sing, she herself began to sway. Her exhilaration in what she said began to catch them, and herself. She felt the blood rising into her face and knew she was beautiful to them.

"There is indeed a Candy Tree., though it is a more complicated concept than children know. And just as the sweetness spread upon your bedcovers is the physical evidence of the spiritual tree, so the existence of the Awakeners is the Northshorely evidence of a greater mystery, the love of Potipur. It is true that we Awakeners raise up those who come to us from the east to provide a service they failed to provide in life. It is equally true that we carry the dead of Baristown to the place of Sorting, west of here. There the good and righteous, their faces shining with the radiance of a life well spent, are Sorted Out by the Holy Sorters to be dressed in silk and placed in the arms of Potipur. We know this. We can testify to it.

We are the evidence of it, the evidence of the love of Potipur, and Abricor, and Viranel.

"Because we know this wonderful thing of our own experience, we believe we are more likely to live in accordance with Potipur's will, more likely to be Sorted Out at the end." Pamra swept over this point quickly. She was sure. She wouldn't lie, not to recruits. It wouldn't be fair. But she didn't really know whether all Awakeners had the radiance in their faces. All Baris's dead were collected at the Tower for transport to the place of Sorting, and though Pamra had been on duty in the death room several times, there had never been the body of an Awakener there.

She took a deep breath and went on, "Other castes denigrate us, it is true, calling us names and making jokes about our caste. When I was a child I thought this was because of something atrocious or dirty about Awakeners. I came to know that it is simple fear. The other castes know they will come into our hands, and they are afraid. That is all." She looked firmly into the eyes of the gigglers, of the sneerer, and found there the fear she sought. "Just as you are fearful now. Perhaps you worry that the Awakeners somehow can decide whether one is Sorted Out or not. I tell you we cannot control it, but without us it would not happen. Your fear, however, is a key which may open the door of our Tower. If you fear us, join us and conquer your fear. Learn the truth of what we say." The rapture was seething within her now, as it did on the steps of the Tower at morning dedication, or sometimes during prayer, or when she had gone long without food, or during these sessions of preaching to the youth of Bans.

She felt herself smiling, felt the radiance of it, knew that her face was glowing as she did it. This was her heritage from pretty Mama, this smile, and her gift from Potipur. The gigglers had stopped their fidgeting, the sneerer his facial contortions. She might not have them as applicants, but they would not mock for a time. The other one, the pale-faced youth who had fastened himself upon her words as a baby upon the breast-him she had.

"Will you show me?" he begged. "Show me the Tower?"

She took his hand, letting the others go with an expression of tender regret. They would remember what she had said. "Remember the Tower with your gifts," she whispered to them as she turned away. They would make gifts in the future, certainly they would when they were old. None of her effort was wasted. She sighed, feeling the rapture fade. Until next time.

She took the youth to the Tower, as she had taken others. So precious they were. Young, full of idealism and wonder. She could not resist them, nor they her. From a great distance, the lookout had seen her coming, and when the door opened the Superior stood there in all her robes with the entourage around her. "Come," said Pamra, giving the youth her hand once more. "Come into the Tower." Then he was welcomed with wine and praise and flattery and a very late night, as she had been in her time.

She hadn't known what it really meant then, no more than he did now: the bloodletting, the endless hours in chapel without sleep during those first years, the constant repetition of litany. She had only seen the robes and the glittering staffs, the solemn figures at the forefront of any procession* only heard the whispers concerning the Payment of Life. The rest-the rest hadn't been mentioned. She had been only twelve when she'd said, "I can be an Awakener ... " Said it out of bravado and hurt and in ignorance, only to have the rapture become her reason for living.

She woke late. An officious senior caught her lingering at her ceremony upon the steps and sent her with two or three others onto the wastelands north of the Tower to gather Tears of Viranel. So, she had lost the second day's recruiting by her own inattention to duty. "My own sin," she'd told the Three in a whisper. "My own sin. Forgive."

The Tears were so small as to be almost invisible against the stones, transparent, drop-shaped, attached to the soil from which they grew by a glassy, hair like root. They grew thickly but in widely scattered patches, each patch marked by a tall, skull-topped pole. Impossible to transplant, fruiting only during second summer, Tears grew throughout the lands of Northshore, when and where they would, and the skull poles warned away the unwary. Of late, the patches of fungus had been even more scattered, more difficult to find, almost as though something had been rooting them out. This was an unholy thought, and Pamra made a religious gesture, ashamed of herself.

Gathering was hard, back-bending work that made bones and muscles ache. The Tears had to be scooped into baskets without touching them. The sun was hot, the dust sticky, provoking an unending damp itch that distracted and annoyed. Attention could not be allowed to waver. There were many cautionary stories about those who had touched the Tears accidentally, only to feel the tiny fungi passing through the skin in an instant of fatal error for which, there was no cure.

Those who touched the Tears were possessed at once by Viranel. Those possessed by Viranel Were living workers. Unlike the dead, they were able to speak, for a time. Like the newly dead, they knew what they were and felt the agony of possession.

It was only as she returned to the Tower, her basket full, that she remembered what she had promised Delia. The sun bulged upon the horizon like a single oozing drop before she came to the garden and the little house to find both empty.

The note was there on the table, half-written, scratched and erased, tried again and again. The words fumbled, crawled like crippled fliers on the page. "Miri, forgive ... " "I did not know ... " "Only now, in my age, Miri ... "

Pamra heard her own words in the silent room as though someone had spoken. "Much better than to go sneaking off through the worker pits in the dead of night," she had said. "Sneaking off through the worker pits ... " Cursing herself that she had not kept her word, that she had not even guarded her tongue.

So. Delia had gone. There was not even a chance to say good-bye. The house did not feel of parting. It welcomed, even now, even empty. In the kitchen the pots shone in the level rays of the sun. Pamra ran her hand over them, smooth and cool, as she had used to do when drying them for the old woman. Spice cakes filled a covered jar. Dried fruit rested upon the sill. High in the rafters bunches of herbs hung like autumn brought home, smelling of the fields. In a cupboard her own child's apron was folded away where she had left it the day they took her to the Tower. She felt it now, shaking out the sweet-smelling buds that lay in its folds. "Delia, ah, Delia. Why didn't you wait?" knowing as she whined into the silence that it was her own fault, her own. And at the end, as the sun darkened in startled ambers and bruised purple and the kitchen room settled into a quiet she remembered from childhood, all she could say was what Delia had said to her then, time after time: "Rejoice. May the Sorters protect you and bring you to Potipur's arms."

She skulked out late that night, a shadow in her robe, striding to the hill overlooking the pit where the little light burned to guide the Sorters, where all were forbidden to be after nightfall. She sat there, invisible. It was no good. Delia, if she had gone this way, had gone long since. It was too late to do anything about it. Against the stars she could see the wings of the great fliers, moving in and out of the bone pits, seeming to peer down into the worker pits. What was the sound she heard? A croaking murmur? As though someone had spoken? A chill went through her. If she sat here until the Holy Sorters came to bring those who had not been Sorted Out, they would turn her to stone for her presumption, and it would still be too late to do anything for Delia. Suddenly fearful for herself, she turned back, sneaking into the Tower as silently as she had left it.

Each evening thereafter she took herself to the Tower by way of Delia's house, hoping the old woman had returned. On the third day she found her half sister, Prender, sitting in the silent room, dusty now and beginning to smell of disuse and damp, weeping over the scribbled note. Pamra had not seen her for years. The face raised to her was familiar and strange at once, familiar in its outline, in the well known quirk of the lips, the expression she had so often interpreted as a sneer, but strange in its softness, in the lines above the eyes, around the mouth, lines of pain. "Gone," her sister said. "Pammy. She's gone."

"I know. She went east. Crossed the line. I was going to help her, but I was late ... " The words came out without planning, naturally, even kindly. They might have been children again, before any terrible things had been said or done to be forever remembered.

"Delia. Oh." Prender's weeping went on. "She was always there. When Grandma was having those rages of hers, when Papa shut himself up and wouldn't talk to anyone. I'd come here to Delia. It was Grandma's house, you know. She didn't like it, here so near the edge of town. She put Delia in it, just to keep it. It was all bare then. No garden. But Delia ... Delia ... "

Without knowing how she had come there, Pamra found herself at her sister's side, stroking her hand as she had not done since they were children. "I know."

"Delia said we treated you badly. We did, you know. It was Grandma. You looked too much like your mother, and she said we were Papa's girls, but you-you were your mama's girl. And then when your mama ... when she did it, Grandma was just hateful about it. I know you became an Awakener just to make it up. Just to prove you had faith, even if your mama ... I used to hate you, Pammy, for that. I don't anymore. You need to know that. Papa's gone. They're all gone but me. I don't want to be like Delia, unforgiven by my own kin. Forgive me, please. Please."

Musley gone? Papa gone? Not to see her reach senior grade? Not to know what she had become. She choked with surprised

tears. "I forgive you. Really. I do." Saying it, astonished to find that it was true.

And was even more astonished afterward to find that nothing had changed. There had been an hour or so when they had been friends, a transient solidarity of grief that gave way almost at once to old habits. For a few days Pamra went to the house in the evenings to hear if there were any news of Delia, but other people began to frequent the place now that Prender was there, and the stiff discomfort of these encounters drove Pamra away. Even Prender could not keep herself from suggesting that Pamra leave the Tower, give up her life, return to them in some more acceptable form and manner.

"There's no reason anymore, Pammy You could come live with me!"

As though Pamra's oath were nothing!

Pamra could preach the rapture to strangers, but she could not bring herself to discuss it with Prender, to defile it by letting Prender mock at it as she would, setting it to nothing. She nodded, said nothing, went away as soon as she could, and did not return.

Nothing had changed except that for a time the rapture failed her. It seemed to fail others, also, and there was much use of the whipping post in the courtyard. More than once she looked down to see Ilze plying the long whip on some crouched, tortured junior and gave thanks through dry lips that she found compliance easy. He had never whipped her, though she had never doubted he would if she did not keep her oath. If it were not for that, perhaps she could have heard Prender's words, but it was too late for such words now.

The weather grew windy and harsh. Summer robes were laid away and the winter ones taken from the chests. The moons were moving toward a winter Conjunction-there had not been a winter Conjunction for twenty-two years, not since the year she was born and the festival season began to fizz on the horizon of her time like something boiling in an adjacent room, a small excitement, a new possibility, the end of another holy year.

"You've been selected," Jelane announced at evening meal, grinning as the bearer of bad news. "Tomorrow you get to get the first load of wood for winter!"

"Oh, Jelane! No. Why me? I hate that trip. The forest is all dim and murky. It takes forever to get there with the wagon. The workers are no good with axes, half the time they cut themselves to pieces and the wagon comes back full of worker parts instead of wood ... "

Jelane made a moue. "Politics, junior Awakener. Some of us play and get out of things. Some of you don't play and so you get to go for wood."

It wasn't fair. Pamra conducted herself strictly by the rules, and the favors went to those who broke them. She shut her mouth in a grim line and said nothing. When Pamra became senior, she told herself, Jelane could expect an accounting.

The forest trip required an early start. It was scarce dawn yet, half-dark still, and the first worker lay under her hand, blood trickling between its lax lips before she saw the blue, leaf-shaped mark upon its jaw.

Her hand moved to raise the hood before she could stop herself.

In the instant she had known what would be there. Delia's eyes, full of knowledge and terrible awareness, staring into her own.

She dropped the hood to stand frozen in position, one hand still holding the dripping flask. A voice that she could not hear, could only feel, screamed inside her, "Strangers. You're supposed to be a stranger? Always strangers. No one we know. Not our family, our friends, our people. Others. Sinners. People from the east. People who are being punished for the sins and omissions of their lives ... Oh, shame! Shame Potipur that he did not take you. Shame Sorters that ... that ... that ... " But as her voice screamed mindlessly, her eyes saw the little lantern at the eastern lip of the pit and knew it for what it was, knew it for what it had always been-the light to guide the Awakeners from the town to the east to the place they might leave their dead.

There was no Holy Ground. There were no Holy Sorters.

If either of those things had existed, then Delia would not be here. Delia was here, therefore they did not exist.

"Delia!" Her throat bled at the rasping agony of her own cry. A great cloud of black wings rose from the bone pits to circle above her, looking down, aware of her.

"Delia," sobbing, knowing finally why it was the people scorned the Awakeners, lived by them and hated them. Before her the canvas-covered shape rose up to confront her. Despite the heavy veil, she knew that it saw her still. "A lie," she whispered, wanting that shape to know that she, Pamra, had been lied to no less than any; used and betrayed no less than they; knowing as she whispered that all the truth had been there for her to read, all the lies open, all her life long, as they had been open and easy to read for children when they woke to find candy on the bed. "A lie," she said once more, hopelessly, disbelieving it. Not even a pious myth. Merely a blasphemy.

She could not bear the blank canvas of the hood. She could not bear what lay behind it. She turned to flee, only to turn again. If she left, another Awakener would come to begin the long punishment, the seasons of unending labor while the flesh reawakened by the Tears of Viranel diminished slowly through an eternity of time and the rotting brain within the corrupted flesh counted each hour, each day, until time could be laid down forever in the bone pits to be eaten by the fliers. And then a calm came, a calm more terrible in its cold quiet than the frantic horror that had gone before. She went down into the pit and raised up all the workers who were there, a small pitful. Thirty-five or forty, perhaps. She led them away, chanting them along the road, her mirrored staff casting a glittering warning before her in the rays of cold sun. "Rejoice," she gargled. "Work awaits you." Her voice was a mockery. "Work awaits you,"

It was very early. No one saw her go. She led the workers away from the city, away from the Tower, north into the forested lands where they could not be seen, then farther still, farther than she had ever gone before among the endless trees of the roadless wilderness, using the blood and Tears for distance only, not for labor. She went in wild ways, guided only by the pale sun, leading a tangled, shambling line that stumbled in its witless wandering through the day, into the evening, into violet dusk. She found a chasm at last, a rocky place, deep and solidly ranked about with high-piled edges of balanced stone. The workers had begun to stumble, but she had driven them on with the last few drops in her flask and then by her voice alone, a harsh cawing, like one of the carrion fliers. She led them onto the sparse brush and hardstone of the chasm, and there she let them drop. There she let Delia fall as well.

When she raised the hood, Delia's eyelids lifted to give her one look of terrible intelligence before they closed once more. Pamra told herself it had been the final look, the last awareness.

"It's over," she whispered. "Over. Done. Soon the dark. Soon the silence. The forgiving silence. Soon the true peace, Delia. Delia. Forgive me."

Then dark surrounded them, the sound of night fliers, the rustle of small living things, the dim ghost light of Abricor, the silver radiance of Viranel, the red looming power of Potipur, gathered together to stare down at her as she stared up, daring them to strike at her. In their light she raised the hoods, leaving them up to see whether any still looked at her or whether they were only dead. She could not tell, for the moonlight shifted and threw strange shadows on the faces. From the top of the chasm wall she levered the loose rim rock until it tumbled in a thundering avalanche across them, a growl of stone that piled above the pathetic bodies and shook the silent fabric of the wilderness.

It ended in a shivering cascade of gravel, a roil of dust that hung for long moments in the still evening, moving as though it were sentient. She dropped onto the rim rock, choking on the dirty air.

Where had the stubborn naiveté come from that had kept her enthralled with myth long after those around her knew the truth? Where had her blindness come from? Had it been willful? A way of getting even with them all?

Slowly, so slowly that she did not know if she truly saw it or only imagined it, a line of fliers moved across the face of Potipur toward her, bent and moved as though a lip had moved upon that face, mouthing a word. Was it "Go"? Or perhaps "Good"? Or "God"? Fliers. Investigating the sound of the failing stone.

"A He," she said defiantly. It made no difference what the Servants of Abricor said. It was all a lie.

She broke her mirrored staff and threw the shattered pieces into the pit. Her hands went to her hair to remove the identifying braids. When it hung loose as any market woman's locks, she remembered she had never seen an Awakener die. Had never seen one dead. Perhaps there had been many come beneath her hands, their hair unbraided, hidden behind the canvas hoods.

After a time she climbed down from the high rim wall and began to walk through the dark trees into the west. She would pass through the workers' pit on the westward boundary and come to Shabber.

What would she do then? Tend garden, as Delia had done? Go westward farther still?

Or stay in one careful place, close to the River, so that in good time she could seek her own end in deep water as gentle, fearful Mother had done. Seek the long pier's end deep in the lonely night as Mother had done. As Mother had done, so that no amount of fishing could bring her forth again. No amount of dragging bring her to answer to Potipur for her sin in not trusting to the Holy Sorters to Son it all out.

Wise in her weakness; better able to face the truth than Pamra herself.

Behind her the dust settled. Hands moved feebly beneath the rocks. Through chinks in the stones, eyes stared upward at the red light of Potipur.

Out of the night the black wings settled upon the stones. Great fliers walked here and there, thrusting the rocks aside with monstrous beaks and talons.

"Rejoice," a croaking voice chuckled softly, almost inaudibly. "The Sorters are here."

Ilze had spent the day inspecting the plowing of pamet fields northwest of Baristown, a vast stretch of fertile soil that lay between two slightly raised banks, as though at some time a side channel of the World River had run there, depositing its sediment over centuries. The inspection was perfunctory, more a matter of ritual than actuality. Pamet did very well when scattered on unplowed ground. The uneven scoring of the soil by a crew of stumbling workers neither helped nor hindered the crop. Nonetheless, the workers had to be kept moving if the Tears were to permeate all the flesh, growing throughout it, reducing it in volume by at least half and making it suitable for the Servants of Abricor to eat. Worker flesh was all that they ate. Presumably Abricor had destined the fliers for the purpose of eating workers, or workers for the purpose of feeding fliers-though Ilze regarded this idea cynically. In his opinion, fliers were outrageously ugly, and they stank.

Also, junior Awakeners had to be kept busy. All juniors-like the populace at large-were supposed to believe that the labor provided by worker crews was necessary. They were supposed to believe it until officially told otherwise during senior retreat. Most of them did believe it, or pretended to. Therefore he stalked across the field, a solemn junior trailing behind as he commented aloud on rows that were uneven or corners that were scamped, twitching his whip suggestively from time to time to enjoy her shudder.

He lunched in Bans in a small cafe where he went from time to time and was a familiar-enough figure that the tables did not automatically empty as soon as he entered. Townsmen had a way of sniffing the air when Awakeners entered a shop or tavern, sniffing ostentatiously, then moving away, perhaps leaving the place. Ilze had known since childhood that Awakeners didn't smell. Still, the rudeness rankled, and he went to the town tavern from time to time to exercise his fury. They did not dare press too far, and Ilze was readier than most to make them pay for each jot of license. The Superior of the Tower occasionally ordered a conscription of townspeople. One or two, usually, for some mysterious purpose of her own. Next time Ilze was sent on that errand, he had certain individuals in mind.

A singer enlivened the hour at the cafe. Perched in a shadowy corner, the boy's voice crept over the conversation, into the pauses, into the hesitations.

"Devious as fire, Ubiquitous as care, Cruel as the flame-bird's byre and the waiting air, your love encompassed me And left me dying there."

Ilze smiled. It was a kind of love he recognized, his own particular kind. He knew the singer's voice very well but had no intention of recognizing him. That was over. Superficially enjoyable, slightly dangerous, and over.

"High as the flier soars, To Abricor's breast, from such height I fell onto my nest, to burn, to bum, to die, like all the rest."

Ilze snorted. Why was it they all thought reproaches gained anything? He fingered in his purse for the smallest coin possible, summoning a servitor. "Give this to the singer." He smiled. "Tell him his song is pretty, but boring."

He stayed to see the message delivered, delighting in the bonelike pallor that suffused the boy's face and the tears swimming in his eyes. Stupid. He would end as a living worker, a felonious boy-lover brought to justice. Ilze considered turning him in. No. Not yet. Perhaps later, when he needed amusement.

The boy picked at his instrument, sang again, sadly:

"When we are sunk so deep in madness' sleep who, who shall be our Awakeners? ... "

After lunch there was pretty little Seesa, the fish merchant's wife. The fish merchant had been one of those who moved

away in a tavern while making some ostentatious statement about the odor in the place. He and his wife had since learned how dangerous such an impudence could be. Now they took no license with Ilze whatsoever, though the lesson had taken them some time to learn an interesting time for Ilze. Seesa's submissiveness bored him now. Soon he would find another woman or another boy. What he needed he could not find among colleagues in the Tower—that is, not yet. When Pamra came to senior status, perhaps then. With her naiveté she would not know she was allowed to refuse him. Until she learned that, perhaps he could enjoy her. In anticipation of that day, he had never whipped her, though the thought of her body tied to the stake made him grunt explosively at odd times, his penis twitching in spasms almost like orgasm.

He returned to the Tower very late. There were no juniors at the trough, none who had been with the workers enough to need the cold ritual bath, and it was not required of seniors. He passed it by, humming, not dissatisfied with the day, a little puzzled at the unusual buzz of conversation in the junior dining hall, the air of mystery. The puzzlement gave way to amazement and then to baffled anger as he learned that Pamra seemed to be involved in some strange occurrence. Pamra! Obedient as any dog from the first day, with only that dazzling beauty to make him hold his hand! Never even whipped, and now this?

No one seemed to know what had happened. She had not returned from the forest, and the worker pit was empty. No one had known about the workers until late in the day. Each Awakener had assumed that other juniors, rising earlier, had taken what workers there were. There were shortages from time to time when the people of Wilforn obstinately refused to die. Or, as Pamra would have said, "when most of those who died were good ones who were Sorted Out." Ilze snorted, remembering, a slow, hot anger beginning to build in him. It was very late, unexplainably late, and she had not returned. No one had seen her.

By morning it was assumed Pamra and the missing workers were connected. There were only half a dozen new workers in the pit, scarcely enough to keep one Awakener busy. The work of the Tower would be disrupted for weeks. There was a feeling of unease in the place, a whispered buzz of conjecture and secretive hissing of words like heresy and conspiracy. The day wore slowly on, and the Superior did not put in an appearance.

Ilze received the message at the evening meal. It was delivered by the Superior's own servant, veiled, silent Threnot, she who spoke no word except what she was told to say by the Superior. "Now?" asked Ilze. Threnot gestured toward the stairs. He laid his napkin down and followed her, feeling a twitch of fear, an uncustomary emotion, one he did not like.

6

They stood outside the heavy door at the head of the stairs, waiting for a response to Threnot's tapping. Though he had spoken often with the Superior in her office on the ground floor of the Tower, Ilze had been summoned to the Superior's personal rooms only three times before. Once to receive senior status from her hands. Once to be commended for zeal in recruitment. Once to be assigned the supervision of a clutch of juniors, Pamra among them. He knew this summoning had to do with Pamra. It had to be. He wet dry lips and entered behind Threnot, eyes downcast in appropriate humility before the throne. The Superior wasn't alone, but he would not risk looking up to see who else was there.

"Hze."

He bowed deeply, waiting.

"One of your juniors has disappeared."

"So I heard this evening, Your Patience."

"The one in which you found such amusement."

"Amusement, Superior? I'm sorry, I—"

"At her naiveté." So I am told. You were most amused at Pamra, a true believer. Such is the gossip among the seniors. Never mind, I have been amused at naiveté in my time. I am told the old woman who reared her went east."

"I was not told so, Superior." The other figure in the room shifted impatiently from foot to foot. Ilze wished he could look up. There was a strong musty smell in the room, like a wet pillow. And something in the Superior's voice that rubbed upon his ears, knifelike.

"I was told so. Pamra had been unlike herself recently. She was seen making frequent trips to the house where the old

woman had lived. I sent Threnot to find out why. Threnot found a sister living there. Prender, her name was. She told my servant the old woman had gone east. Pamra, it seems, was deeply grieved."

"I didn't know." Ilze was puzzled. It would not have been his job to follow Pamra or inquire about her, unless the girl's work had suffered. Why this note of accusation in the Superior's voice?

"Since Pamra was naive enough to cause you amusement, Ilze, would it not have been prudent to watch her? Just in the event the old woman showed up in the pits?" There was a tone in the Superior's voice he did not recognize, one he had never heard in her before.

"It would have been, certainly, Superior. Had I known the old woman was gone ... "

"Perhaps if you had paid less attention to Pamra's body and more to her emotions, you would have known?" The Superior sighed, and Ilze dared look up, just for a moment. The other figure was a flier. A Servant of Abricor. He dropped his eyes, gulping. Here. In the Superior's own rooms. A Servant. Nausea roiled in him. He had not known this was possible.

"Have you heard of Rivermen, Dze?" For a moment he could not hear her voice, could not understand her words. Rivermen. What was she talking about? "Yes, of course, Superior. Those who bring cargoes on the boats ... " Suddenly he knew what it was in her voice that so cut at him. Fear. Nothing but fear.

"No. Rivermen have nothing to do with boats, Rivermen are members of an heretical sect who place their dead in the River. They do not trust in the Holy Sorters. A cult of apostates, Ilze. Had you heard that Pamra's mother was a Riverman?"

"I knew she was a madwoman, Your Patience. A sick woman. A heretic, if you like. I had never heard she was a member of any cult." He gulped, heard only the silence, went on. "The initiation master told me Pamra was deeply shamed by her mother's behavior. It was probably her mother's heresy which brought Pamra to the Tower in the first place. Her dedication had some redemptive quality to it. So he said."

"So I thought. So you thought ... perhaps. But now she is gone, with a pitful of workers. And the ... Talkers have sent for you, Ilze. And me. They have questions about our orthodoxy."

Talkers? In this context the word didn't make sense. He opened his mouth to ask to ask anything that would help him out of this confusion...

"I think you had best let me speak with him for a moment alone," she said to the Servant of Abricor, her voice wheedling and groveling. "He is totally ignorant of your existence. As naive, in his way, as Pamra was in hers." "And did you find this amusing?" croaked a strange voice, not a human voice, though using human words. "Was he amusing to you?"

"No. He knew as much as any senior. Seniors are not privy to the decisions of the Chancery, Uplifted One. May I appeal in the name of the Protector?"

"The Talons do not recognize the Protector."

"Surely you jest, Winged One." There was a note of desperation in her voice. "Your treaty is with the Protector, and through him with the Chancery and with the Towers. How can you have a treaty with an office you do not recognize?"

Ilze had heard the Superior's voice for years, leading the observances, reciting the litany, directing, assigning. He had never heard it as it sounded now, tight as a harp string, aching with strain, almost with panic.

"We do not recognize the Protector in this instance, human. Still, we do not desire further disruption of your duties. I will give you not long," the inhuman voice croaked again. "Other Talkers await you on the aerie. You will not attempt escape." There were sounds, wings, clacking of beak, a harsh scrape of talons upon the floor.

"Ilze?"

He breamed deeply, trying not to vomit. "Superior."

"You must help me in this, Ilze. I am depending upon your strong sense of self-preservation."

"What was it?" he grated, furious at himself for this loss of control.

"A Talker. A leader among the Servants of Abricor. One of their Superiors, I suppose you could say. Though this one seems rather higher in rank among its people than I consider myself among mine."

"Talking?"

"They talk, yes. Though not to us. Never to us. This is the first time I have heard one talk. I have been told that only a few of the Servants can talk. The ordinary fliers do not. Only these, these others. Or perhaps only these are allowed to talk. That also is possible."

"What does it want?"

"It expects to take us to one of the Talons. The closest one is east of here in a tall mountain range near the Straits of Shfor. The Talons are where their leaders live, as the Chancery is where our leaders live. They want to take us for questioning." Where I cannot go, she thought. Where I must not be taken. For they will certainly learn what I know, in time, and I know too much. "They want to take you, Ilze. And me, me as well. This is not the way it should be, Ilze. Listen now. In the northlands, the Protector t Ian dwells with his people, his retinue, the officers of the icery. You know of the Protector. You have seen him."

"During the Progressions. Of course. I saw the golden ship. Everyone does. The last Progression was years ago."

"So long ago that the next Progression is almost due. Once each eighteen years the Protector makes the trip, taking six or seven years to visit Northshore, allowing himself to be seen at every township. You have seen him!"

"I've seen him." He was sharply attentive. Why was she telling him this? "All citizens are required to observe the Progression."

"I remind you of that so you will remember it. The Protector exists. He lives in the northland. He heads the Chancery. He is my Superior, as I am yours. I work at his command." She reached for the man before her, reached into him. By all the gods, this unworthy tool must bend to her purpose—for all their sakes.

"I understand." He did not understand, though his hard, clever mind was beginning to chill, beginning to listen attentively. He had accepted that his life might depend upon that. She smiled at him approvingly.

"There is a treaty between the Protector and the Servants of Abricor. It is the treaty which prohibits the Servants from ... from troubling us. It prohibits our troubling them as well. If the Servants are troubled by men, the treaty requires them to report it to the Chancery. This Rivermen business, this heresy ... if there is something like that going on, they think we have something to do with it, we should be summoned by rite Chancery, not by the Servants themselves. Do you understand that?" She was begging him, and for the first time he came out of his own bewilderment to hear her. He thought she was frightened for herself, and this focused his attention.

"I ... yes. Yes. If this Servant is disturbed by something we've done, something it thinks we've done, it should have gone to the Chancery about it. And they would have questioned us."

"Yes. Exactly. And our one chance of coming out of this alive is to get to the Chancery. Not go with this one to the Talons. We go to the Talons and we're dead."

He did not ask her how she knew. It did not seem to matter. His heart was drumming, and he felt the blood rush to his fingers, making them tingle. "Can we escape from the Tower?"

"They will see us. They see well at night, and there are dozens of them."

There were dozens, of course. All around the Tower top, the bone pits, here and there in the forests. Ilze himself had counted up to twenty of them in the air over Baris at one time, as many over the neighboring towns. "Stay inside where they can't get at us? Send a messenger? Ask for help?"

"We could not live locked inside the Tower that long. The Chancery is half a year away, through the Teeth of the North by way of the Split River Pass. It is how the Protector comes down to make the Progression. By the Split River. We could walk there in a year or two if we stopped for nothing."

"And the Talons?"

"Not so far. East instead of north."

"How do they plan to get us there?"

"In a basket, the leader said. In a basket, carried by two or three of them. Through the air. For four or five days. He spoke of flying without stopping. He spoke of a 'tailwind.' I can guess what that is."

He had looked at the Talker only briefly, but it had not looked unlike the usual Servants. The long, almost human like king

legs with their feathered, two-taloned feet. The folded wings, tips almost dragging the floor, three-fingered hands at the wrist joint. The face, not long-beaked like the small fliers but flat-beaked; so that in profile it did not look unlike his own except for the absence of a nose. Ear tufts. Wide-set, round-orbed eyes surrounded by plumed circles. The chest, protruding at the center like the keel of a boat. And the neck. Not really long, but it would be stretched out in flight. He thought on that, anger moving him now, a well-known kind of anger. So, they would misuse and mock him, would they. They would break the rules of respect. Well then.

"When you were senior, lady, did you use the whip?" he asked, whispering. "And have you whips here still?"

When she nodded, he whispered again, and she sped to find the things he suggested. She knew then she had guessed aright in choosing the tool to save her life and in saving that to save more than that. She took a moment to speak to Threnot, dictating a message to be sent to Tharius Don, Propagator of the Faith, at the Chancery, in case they did not arrive there themselves.

"Enough," croaked a voice from behind her. "Enough time spent enlightening your lackeys. We will go now."

"Of course," said Lady Kesseret of the Tower of Bans, as though she were going for an afternoon walk into the parklands. "We will go now."

In a monstrous fanged circle halfway between the River and the pole, the Teeth of the North gaped at the swollen sun, their peaks thrust eight miles or more into the glittering sky. Here, driven deep into the frozen stone, were the only mines on this metal-poor planet, icy tunnels plunging into the heart of the towering range, warmed only by the feeble lamps of the slaves who dug the ore, the mines incessant in their demand for new flesh, for few men lived long in these frigid, airless holes.

The wall of the Teeth was riven in only one place. High against the southern light the jagged jaw of Split River Pass gaped at either side of the sky-filled notch, bared now and briefly, before the snows came again. There black rock tumbled from black rock down an ogre's stair to the loess of the slopes and taiga of the plain, with the river lunging over it in frantic starts and sorties, like a drunken man-at-arms waked suddenly from dreams of battle.

Within the lofty circle of the mountains stretched an enormous basin, taiga and grassy plains, dotted here and there with a few tens of migratory weehar and thrassil. When the teeth leaned toward the sun, the lands of the northern basin bloomed and burgeoned toward a hasty harvest. While the people along the River shivered in the chill rains that separated their first and second summers, above the Teeth the sun rolled up from the north around the circle of the sky like a swollen fruit upon the sides of a bowl, never setting, and the Chancery folk walked out of doors in their shirt-sleeves to smell the flowers while the woodsmen piled thick fortresses of firewood along the walls. Axes, axes on the height! Oh, yes, the summer sound in Chancery lands was the crack of the axe and the creak of wagon wheels behind the plodding feet of weehar oxen.

In the winter, when the Teeth turned from the sun after months of lengthening autumn dusk, the long night came down to drown Highstone Lees under a cold cataract of stars. Then the weehar and thrassil dug deep into ice caverns to sleep the three-month night away, and the residents of the Chancery retired to their tunnels and rooms burrowed into the rock below while they made other tunnels into the mighty walls-stacks of wood, carrying it inside load by load, leaving snow-covered, canvas-roofed tunnels behind, widening as the winter went on until the outside walls could be taken in to be burned in the half sun of early summer.

And it was summer yet, though there were few flowers left and evenings brought chill winds to curl at the corners of buildings and rattle the fastenings of windows. The broad leaves of the mime trees in the ceremonial plaza were beginning to roll into tight cylinders, fronds of papery green sheets becoming brushes of fine needles, black as jet. The fountain in the plaza still played, but plaintively, and North Split River rattled a shallow complaint upon its black stones beneath a hundred high-backed bridges. There would be little more melt from the heights to feed it and then no more at all until spring came again.

It was the time some people of the Chancery liked best, after summer's labor and before the cozy hibernation of the snow time. The High Lodge of the Jarb Mendicants preferred the season, the fading sun of autumn, the needling of leaves, the plaint of water. The Mendicants moved abroad to draw into their pores each scant ray of the slowing sun, drug pipes hanging cold in their lax hands, for a time unpossessed by oracular visions. And the Mendicants were not alone in their enjoyment. To the palace garden, tippy-toe with tiny mandarin steps, sweet as a leaping lamb upon the grass, came the Protector of Man, Lees Obol, in his padded robes, one Jondarite at either arm, half carried, half escorted in his gentle

perambulation of the cloisters. Such an old, old man, Lees Obol, beneficiary of the fliers' Payment for almost five hundred years, all the youthful passion spilled away over the centuries to leave this vague contentment in its stead. Not that all that youthful urgency leaked away unremembered and unremarked. At the center of him was an ache sometimes, a feeling of vacancy, as though an essential vessel had been drained, an important room left untenanted. This hollowness echoed occasionally, a dim seashell sound, the susurrus of his blood, perhaps; or a thudding like the boots of armed men come to rob a temple of all its valuables, only to find it empty and the worshipers gone.

So he quivered once in a while, shaking with a memory of passion, knowing he had cared once and unable to think of any reason he should not care now, but too frail to hold the notion for long. So he moved on the strong arms of his guards in the pale sun of polar summer, stopping to sniff at the brilliant northern blooms in the carefully tended gardens, easing through the muslin veils that clouded the doors, flung open now to the sweet airs and the sound of water, when it could be heard over the sound of chopping.

Still, at this noon hour the axes had fallen silent and the fountains could be enjoyed by the Protector of Man, held aloft and protected from harm, like a little doll, by the strong arms of his keepers. So he was held up during the last Progression; so he would be held during the next one if the Payment proved efficacious and he lived still longer. Though, said those who performed the functions of the Chancery, there was little enough left now to work with. An occasional spark was all, like the last glow of a fire banked against the morning and left too long without fuel. A fugitive gleam, without heat, consuming itself in die instant.

He stood on the gently curved span that crossed Split River, his old eyes seeking a gleam of golden fishes in the complaining flow. There was no peace in Split River. From the cold white heights it ran north into the Chancery lands, and from those same heights it ran south across the steppes of the Moor, and from there through Ovil-po township to the World River. Once each eighteen years a caravan carried the Protector through the pass and down the other side as far as Ovil-po, where the Progression ship was docked, its gold and gems wrapped against the harsh winds of early first summer. Six or seven years later, the Progression done, he returned to be met by the caravan and taken home to the Chancery, home to the warm familiarity of near five hundred years.

"Looky," said the Protector, staring up at the distant mountains in senescent surprise. "The pass is all melted black."

The uniformed Jondarites shared a conspiratorial glance and suggested it was time for his tea. His acquiescence was no less charming and inconsequential than his participation in the walk. One item of ritual more or less gracefully done. Let us move on, he seemed to say, to the next and then the next. The next being tea before the soft warmth of a porcelain stove. Cuddled deep in his curtained bed, Lees Obol nodded over his cup. His alcove was just off the main audience hall, its thick, squat walls dwarfed by the lofty barrel vaults above, its rock floor warmed and softened by carpets. Though it was too early for fires, the Protector of Man had a fire. The Jondarites were careful for his comfort, solicitous for his welfare. They would die for him without a moment's question, just as they cared for him day by day, hands busy in his service, knives ready at their belts, eyes watchful. Two of them stood guard outside the alcove now. Two more stoked the tiny stove and closed the curtains. The stove burned only a few pieces of charcoal at a time, but with the alcove curtains closed, it developed a cozy warmth. Stretching in the heat like an old, pained cat, Lees Obol puffed a little sigh and sipped, remembering a sense of sharp discomfort without being able to identify the memory at all. Outside the alcove the Jondarites heard the sigh and remembered it. General Jondrigar would demand an accounting of them. Each sigh, each word, each breath, had to be remembered.

High on a parapet of the household wing, Maintainer of the Household Shavian Bossit peered through a glass into the southern sky. Sun glow filled the wedge of sky that marked Split River Pass, and a flying speck showed black against this fruity shine; a Servant, maybe even a Talker, here inside the Teeth, where no flier of any kind had any business being. Shavian frowned, his mouth making a point-up triangle of concentration. Not merely a flier. More than one of them, he told himself as the speck wobbled toward the Chancery lands. Several. Two or three at least. Trouble of some kind coming, and Lees Obol vacant as ever while his people plotted, some against one another, some against the Protector himself. Bossit did not pretend to himself that he was not one of them, even while breathing a quick prayer that Gendra Mitiar and Tharius Don could set their growing enmity aside for a few hours or days, if real danger portended.

"Do you think it's Servants?" he asked the guard, one with younger eyes than his own.

"It looks like it through the glasses, Your Grace. Carrying something. It's a new one on me. I've never seen those fliers

carry anything."

"If you're in attendance when they land, Captain Veil that is, assuming it does land-remember not to say 'flier.' The correct title, if there's a Talker, is 'Uplifted One.' If there's no Talker with them, order the bowmen to kill them as soon as they land."

"I'll remember, sir." The captain flushed.

"In the meantime, perhaps you'll be good enough to find the Deputy Enforcer and suggest he join me here ... "He took the glasses back from the guardsman and peered into the wedge of sky once more. At least two Servants of Abricor, flying north of the Teeth in defiance of the treaty, carrying something. "Hurry, Captain," he suggested through clenched teeth.

Shavin Bossit was not the only one to have spotted the flier. From a window of his suite high in the library wing, Propagator of the Faith Tharius Don stared through a glass both newer and more powerful than the one used by the Maintainer. After much searching and many trials, he had had it secretly procured from the lens makers in Zebulee, an acquisition not to be displayed but to be kept wrapped in an old sheet in the bottom of his clothes chest. He had had his own watchers posted here and there throughout the Chancery. More than one rooftop at Highstone Lees carried his men, one of whom had called his attention to the approaching blot on the sky. When he identified the winged speck as probable Servants of Abricor, he buried the glass beneath his clothes once more and stood gnawing his lip, cold beads of sweat starting out on his forehead and in the edges of his beard. Servants. Possibly one or more Talkers. If a Talker, then certainly one concerned about heresy. It had been all the fliers had wanted to talk about at the recent convocation. Heresy. By the waters of surcease, he was not yet ready for this. Not ready at all. It was too soon. But if he avoided being part of whatever confrontation was about to take place, the others would interpret his absence not to his credit, though they might assign him varying motives depending on who was doing the assigning.

"So long as they do not know my true motives, it should not matter," he told himself. It was a kind of litany. There had been a time when Tharius Don had cared much for the opinions of others-even of others here in the Chancery. That time was long gone. Now he played the moralist, sometimes the fool, and told himself it did not matter. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he slipped out onto the stairs. Like it or not, he would have to be obtrusively present-a need with which the Maintainer of the Household might not be entirely sympathetic.

Gendra Mitiar was told about the approaching Talker by a servant sent by Shavian. "His Grace says to come to the small council room as soon as you can." The servant bowed.

Thin and dried, a woman of great age, her face long since settled into a vertical assemblage like eroded gully walls, her skin the same dun color as the winter fields, Gendra Mitiar stared at the messenger. When she spoke, it was to reveal vast yellow teeth jutting like monuments from her pale gums; flat, inexorable teeth that ground together from time to time, making the sound of millstones. Her voice was like herself, colorless and strong, betraying an unostentatious but terrible will.

"Tell His Grace I will be with him shortly," she said.

"And may Potipur help us," she added to herself, grinning in vicious humor. "For it is certain old Obol won't."

Shavian Bossit was irritated beyond measure. "I can understand your annoyance at being ... ah ... flown here against your will, Uplifted One. I can appreciate the discomfort of having a whip lashed about your throat in midair and being threatened with strangulation. However, I can also understand the panic felt by our Superior of Bans. Your action was in defiance of the treaty. You admit as much." He tapped his fingers impatiently, glaring at the Talker standing against the wall. The damn flier would not take tea, would not act like a rational creature, would not sit, though they could and often did. Shavian hated looking up at people, much less fliers, though his diminutive size let him do little else. He ran his fingers through jet-black hair, dyed each ten-day by his mute body servant, and frowned in exasperation. Where in the hell was Gendra!

"I have explained already," the Talker croaked from a throat not only unaccustomed to human talk but largely unfitted for it by the recent and lengthy half choking he had experienced at Ilze's hands. The flight had taken some days, and the whip had been around his throat for most of that time. "The treaty does not apply in this instance."

"You have said so." Shavian kept his voice carefully without emotion. "You have not said why."

"I am not required to do so. I demand you accept my word that such is the case."

Shavian pondered the possibility of simply sending this creature away. He would never have thought of insulting a Talker, any Talker, when he was younger and the promise of life offered by the Payment had seemed irresistible. Now he toyed with the idea. It was sad to think the wisdom and resolution of age might be only weariness and pain. Effort avoided became pain avoided, and ennui masqueraded as good sense. So he told himself, not speaking any of it aloud. When he spoke again, with every appearance of courtesy, it was to remark in an uninterested voice, "The treaty does not permit you to demand anything of the kind. I will listen to reasonable talk, flier. I will not listen to bombast, which is what you have given me thus far." To call a Talker "flier" was no less an insult than to turn one's back, which Shavian also contemplated doing.

The Talker's beak flushed red, a deep, winey color betokening fury. Shavian regarded this without apology or change of expression. The damn thing had very nearly forced his way into the Protector's bedroom. Potipur knows what old Obol would have made of that! Or what the Jondarites would have done! Killed the Talker, probably. Then they would have had to kill the others to keep the word from getting back to the Talons. Which might not have worked, for other Talkers or mere fliers might have seen these during their long flight toward the Chancery.

Well, it had been a disaster narrowly averted. Shavian had called on a hand of Jondarites to bring the Talker here, to the small council room. So far as the Lord Maintainer was concerned, Talker of the Sixth Degree Sliffisunda of the Talons had received as much courtesy as was due him.

This thought, or some similar sentiment, must have occurred to the angry Talker as well, for in a few moments the furious color faded. When the flier spoke again it was with grudging courtesy.

"We believe these two may be implicated in the Riverman heresy."

"Indeed? I find that hard to credit. In any case, this suspicion should have been reported at once to the Propagator of the Faith, and he would have sent for them to accuse and ascertain the truth."

"We did not wish you to send for them. We wanted to question them at the Talons." The words were clear enough, though it was hard to tell what the intonation was meant to convey.

"So you have said. Still, you have not said why."

"I will not say." Sliffisunda's beak flushed again, only slightly this time.

Oh, these Talkers didn't like subordination. High mucky-mucks, all of them, and proud! By Potipur, they're proud. A servant came forward with tea. Shavian took a cup, offering none to the flier. It had refused before; let the refusal stand. When the silence was broken by a rap on the door, he called, "Enter," knowing already who was there. The woman and the man who came in wore faces as carefully blank as his own; their bows toward Sliffisunda were sketchy, a bare politeness. The Talker stood against the wall, unmoving, looking them over with unblinking eyes.

"Uplifted One, these are staff members of the Chancery. At the most recent convocation you met the Dame Marshal of the Towers, Gendra Mitiar. The gentleman with the large knife is Bormas Tyle, Deputy Enforcer to Lord Don. Put the knife away, Bormas. The Talker is not threatening us. Yet."

He beckoned them to the table, offering cups only to them, interrupted in this calculated insult by another tap at the door and the entry of someone he had not sent for.

"Lord Maintainer," said Tharius Don with an ironic bow. "I saw my Deputy Enforcer waiting upon you and came to inquire if I might be of assistance."

Shavian Bossit poured another cup, seething inside. He had not wanted Tharius Don this morning. Lately he had not wanted Tharius Don at all. The man had a chilling way with him. Like the knife cut of cold conscience. "The Lord Propagator of the Faith, Tharius Don," he said, making introductions. "The Uplifted One, Talker of Sixth Degree Sliffisunda of the Talons. I have apologized to the Uplifted One for the absence of other members of the council." Of the seven, four were present. A quorum, he thought. Though he would have traded Tharius Don's presence in a moment for that of the Ambassador to the Thraish, Ezasper Jorn.

He turned back to the table, making a wry mouth at the Dame Marshal and commenting, sotto voce, "Ezasper Jorn should be conducting this little exercise as Ambassador to the Thraish, but both he and Koma Nepor are off somewhere. The Protector, of course, would be of no help." He shrugged, taking more tea for himself. "I know I am discourteous. This

Uplifted One has set my teeth on edge."

"I assume you have reason for discourtesy?" She turned toward the Talker, millstone jaws loud in the quiet room. Only the Talker heard it. The others were too long accustomed to the sound to be aware of it.

"Indeed," he murmured, loud enough for the other humans to hear. "This Talker and two of his subordinates, also Talkers, went to the Tower at Bans and abducted the Superior and one of her senior Awakeners. They went with him under threat of great harm to all those within the Tower. His reason for doing so is that he believes them to be part of the Riverman heresy."

"He need not have troubled," said Tharius Don, his gray brows pulling together over black, suddenly angry eyes, in a face become as suddenly and unnaturally pale. The pallor had struck him at the mention of the Superior of Baris, and it did not leave him now. The bones of his striking face stood out in relief as he sucked in his cheeks, biting back a set of too revealing words to replace them with, "We would have fetched them here had he but sent word."

"Ah, but it was not his intention to fetch them here at all. He sought to take them to the Talons."

"The Talons! Human prisoners?" Bormas Tyle slid the knife in and out of its sheath, cutting his words as he cut his hair, short and soft as velvet. The hair grew upon his forehead and down his neck onto the bulging muscles of shoulder and back, joining the velvet beard that half hid his mouth, making his head appear upholstered except for his cold serpent's eyes. "By what right? The treaty forbids this."

"Indeed." Shavian smiled his three-cornered smile at them all and then at the Talker once more. "So I have said. To which the Talker replies that the treaty does not apply in this case, though he will not say why."

There was a silence that began as mere hesitation, becoming tumescent with something more ominous than that, a brooding expectancy broken only by the hiss of the Deputy Enforcer's knife and the grinding of the Dame Marshal's teeth. These hostile sounds pervaded the room, sliding in it like serpents.

The silence was broken by Tharius Don. Such tension could breed nothing good, and in the absence of the Ambassador to the Thraish, someone had to take the responsibility of ending it. He moved with practiced ease, crossing the room and bowing the Talker to precede him into the corridor. "I am sure the Uplifted One would like to sit down. Perhaps he would honor us by joining his subordinates and having a cup of tea. I will prepare for him below, and we will beg his return when we have finished our discussion."

The Lord Maintainer sighed. For a moment there, he had felt something almost wonderful within, like lust, or youth, or rage. The possibility of hot conflict, maybe some blood spilled? His hands trembled. Whose blood? Most likely his own. "By all means, Tharius." He sighed. "By all means. Uplifted One? Will you go with the Lord Propagator? We will meet again a little later, when we have considered this matter."

It was quiet in the room after Tharius left. Gendra Mitiar cast questioning glances at Shavian Bossit from time to time, which he affected not to see. Gendra Mitiar had been uncollegial latterly. No, not only latterly, but for some time. Irascible. Given to ineffectual quarrels about trifles. She would not be content until her enmity for Tharius was out in the open, where she could gnaw on it publicly, something Bossit wasn't sure he wanted to see. At least, not yet. He sighed, and then sighed again, drifting toward the window, his inconspicuous form gliding like a shadow.

Suppose Lees Obol dies. Shavian considered this, not for the first time. Suppose Lees Obol dies of ostentatiously natural causes, and suppose, therefore, that General Jondrigar does not turn Highstone Lees into an abattoir seeking the cause of Obol's death. Suppose this not totally unlikely state of affairs. Who would be the next Protector?

7

Gendra is in line, but she is not popular among the members of the Chancery council who will elect the next Protector. There are factions there. The Mendicants have a faction for themselves. Meaning what? Potipur knows. Shavian has his own supporters, of course. And Ezasper Jorn would be supported by the Thraish, who have their own way of bringing influence to bear. Research Chief Koma Nepor has been in Jom's pocket since Jorn got him his first dose of elixir, so those two council members could be said to make up a faction. And there is a faction for Tharius Don among the lower ranks of the Towers. Perhaps a stronger one than is generally known. Which would explain Gendra's antagonism toward him, if an

explanation were needed.

Shavian ticked the connection into memory. He did not doubt Bormas Tyle had also a claue, ready to come forward. Bormas Tyle, however, could be managed, though he sometimes needed simple reasons to do what more complex motivations required, able to accept the former but being only confused by the latter.

So, of the six surviving council members, there would be at least four contenders. Only Jondrigar and Nepor would not seek the office of Protector for themselves. Four would, including Shavian himself. Enough, he thought, to make rampant confusion.

The door opened, closing behind Tharius Don with a final snick, like a scissors.

"Guarded?" Bormas Tyle asked, his knife sliding with creepy persistence in the sheath. "You have them well guarded?"

"Relax, Deputy. I've put them in the reception room at the, end of the corridor over the garden, the one with barred windows. You'll recall there's a grilled gate at the end of the corridor, and I've stationed six Jondarites mere, all growling at the insult almost offered to Lees Obd. Sufficient?"

"The damn things fly, is all," snarled Bormas. "You have to remember they fly."

"As we do remember," Shavian commented. "Well, you've all heard everything I've heard. If you'd care to offer advice." As when haven't you? He asked himself. All of you. Endlessly.

"How did the captives end up here?" Gendra, shaking her head and running one fingertip up and down a long wrinkle on her cheek. She did this sometimes for hours at a time, engraving her fingertip into her face as though to deepen the crevasses already there. Up, down, up, down.

"The senior Awakener-Ilze, his name is-brought a couple of whips with him, wrapped around his body under his clothes. Once in the air, he snapped them around two of the fliers' necks-evidently he has had considerable practice with the whips-and Lady Kesseret told the Talkers they had the choice of flying to the Chancery or of being strangled to death. Luckily, she knew the way up the Split River Pass, or they'd have died on the heights. Damn fliers can't get high enough to come over the Teeth. We may regret they came through." Bossit already regretted it, but it was not time to talk of that.

"And where is the lady Kesseret now?" asked Tharius in a carefully neutral voice. "And the Awakener?"

"I've got them both in the Accusers' House. It seemed prudent."

"Prudent!" He covered his terror with a pretended scorn. Kessie! In the Accusers' House!

"Until we know a bit more."

"Such as why they are suspected?"

"Among other things, yes," sighed the Maintainer. "I was much tempted to send this Talker packing. Something told me it would be a mistake to do it or not do it, either way." Shavian pondered this. Prudence had come with age and was as tasteless in his mouth as food had become. Lacking the spice of feeling.

"And the Talker won't say why the treaty does not apply."

"I think we can figure it out," Shavian murmured, moving across the room to the tea service, taking a cup with him to a comfortable chair, where he sat, face wreathed in fragrant steam, making owl eyes at them through the mists. "At the recent convocation with the Talkers, we learned they are barely reasonable upon the subject of the Riverman heresy."

"That's true," said Tharius Don carefully. "It was all they wanted to talk about. We traveled a great, uncomfortable distance to cross the pass to the place of meeting. There were matters of true import to discuss. This demand of theirs for a higher food quota in order to increase their numbers, for example. Gods, but that needed talking of. But no! All they wanted to do was huddle in dusty groups, ruffling their feathers-full of dander as they are to make me sneeze endlessly-and fulminate about the heresy." He fished a handkerchief out of his sleeve and erupted into it with a great play of gloomy recollection. Let them think him a fool. It was safer than the truth. Besides, the kerchief helped to hide his face.

"True." Gendra considered this. "It was the same with all of them. They spoke of nothing else, always watching out of the corners of their eyes, as though to catch us in some cover-up. The Riverman heresy, and was it connected to the homosexuals or the celibates? As though they had anything in common!"

"And we?" Shavian smiled a tiny, three-cornered smile, a mouse smile, wicked on that small face. "What did we do?"

"I told them it was all nonsense," said Tharius. "No more to it than the usual few Awakeners who can't get past their junior vows and a coven or two of recalcitrants who put their dead in the River out of misplaced sentimentalism. I told them in my opinion it was not a widespread heresy, and not a conspiracy of any magnitude. Probably not more than a dozen or two Rivermen per town, mostly individual families. I doubt there's a Riverman anywhere in the towns who even knows that Talkers exist, so it would be hard to imagine a conspiracy against them. And I told them the boy lovers were only aberrants! Genetic, if anything. Not a matter of politics or belief at all. And the same with the celibates. They want to believe all humans think of nothing but endless breeding, and it's hard to disabuse them of the notion. Though the gods know, Talkers ought to understand that if any creature can. They don't breed. They can't."

"And I told them the same thing," sneered Gendra, as though having agreed with him for any reason was of questionable taste.

Bossit bowed. "Your Graces were no doubt right to do so. However, if I were one given to paranoia, deeply suspicious that some human group was plotting my downfall, and if the Propagator of the Faith told me it was all nonsense and then the Dame Marshal of the Towers told me it was all nonsense-both of them telling me this as a mere aside, mind you, not with any appearance of grave consideration-might I not feel even more suspicious? Why would the leader of the humans be so offhand unless he wished to mislead me?"

"You mean the Talkers thought we were lying? That there is indeed some vast Riverman plot which we know about?" Tharius kept his voice calm, unmoved, feeling the sweat crawling on his forehead but trusting the shadows of the corner where he sat to hide him.

Trust Shavian, thought Bormas Tyle, drawing no attention to himself whatsoever. If there is one conspiratorial breath inhaled within ten thousand paces, trust Shavian to hear it and smell upon it what rotten fish the speaker ate for dinner. He sat quiet, watching the others think about this.

"It would fit," Gendra continued. "It would explain this particular action. They wanted to do some independent questioning." She raked both sides of her face simultaneously, fingers up and down the gullies, up and down. "And, of course, they could claim the treaty wouldn't apply if they really thought we were breaking it."

"There's something more here ... " Bormas Tyle turned to stare out the window. "Something going on."

"It may be wise to give them the Awakeners," Gendra said. "A quick way to show them we aren't lying."

Tharius turned pale, miming another sneeze to hide his pallor and his tight lips. Behind the linen veil he composed himself. "It would show them nothing of the kind. They will find whatever they believe is true. The Talkers are experts at torture. What do you think the lady Kesseret of the Tower at Baris will tell them under torture? That she knows nothing? Perhaps, for a time. At last, however, she will say whatever they most want to hear. 'Yes, there is a conspiracy. Yes, they are heretical. Yes, all the homosexuals and the celibates and the Mendicants are part of it. Yes, I was in on it, and so was my senior Awakener; in fact, so was the whole Tower and the entire Chancery, including the Dame Marshal of the Towers and the Protector himself!'"

Gendra blanched, compressing her lips. Obviously she had not thought deeply enough, but she resented Tharius Don's immediate apprehension in the matter. He was too often right. She longed for his pride to be riven, longed for his downfall. He, seemingly unaware, went on. "No, Dame Marshal. Allowing our people to be questioned at the Talons is the last thing we should allow, if for nothing but humanitarian concerns, much less for the sake of our own skins."

Gendra hated admitting he was right, but she was forced to agree. "Still, if we keep them here, the Talkers will believe their suspicions about us were true."

"It would be better not to upset them ... " Bormas frowned. The mutual benefits conveyed by the Treaty of Thoulia included provision of elixir for all high-ranking Chancery officials. His next scheduled Payment was to occur very soon. Not a good time to have the Talkers upset, angry, or suspicious.

"Then we must do something to make them believe their suspicions about us are false." Gendra moved to the table, stroking the polished wood as though it were some cowering animal she sought to tame. "Let us give them the Awakeners, but don't let them be taken away. Let the Talkers question them here. Under the eyes of my own Accusers."

Shavian agreed, turning his wicked three-cornered smile upon them. "Yes. Let the Dame Marshal supervise the questioning. The lady Kesseret will no doubt be willing to bear some discomfort for her faith." His glance at Tharius might have been only casual, though there were needles in it.

"Allow her to be questioned by Talkers? When we know she is innocent of any wrongdoing?" Tharius Don turned on them, hands knotted, lips tight. They moved away, annoyed at his challenge of conscience. Expedience often dictated, but Tharius Don would seldom let it dictate in comfort. "Let her be questioned under 'discomfort,' as you put it, Bossit, when we all know she is a faithful Superior, guilty of absolutely nothing? Shameful!"

"Come, come, Tharius. She may not be entirely innocent," Gendra challenged him, grinding her teeth like stones in an avalanche. "We are all guilty of something. Some minor thing. Sufficient to warrant some suffering, no doubt. It will not compromise her receiving further Payment, as she has been promised. In fact, we might make that day come sooner, as a reward." The younger one was when the elixir was first provided, the more powerful its effect, and to provide it earlier than promised could be a powerful inducement to many things. Enduring torture included.

There was another brooding silence. Tharius Don seemed about to object once more, but he contented himself with an internal monologue and an angry glare before subsiding into his chair, one foot tapping at the carpet, a muffled heartbeat of annoyance. At last Bossit asked, "Are we agreed? The Accusers and Ascertainers are your people, Dame Marshal. I trust you will not allow more harm than necessary to come to these Awakeners. They are, after all, our people." He used the royal possessive with heavy irony. Tharius gave him a hard, intent look, as though to see whether this was to be interpreted as a sensible instruction or as something with double meaning.

Gendra, who wanted no interference from Tharius Don, returned her agreement in like form. "No. Our people shall receive no more harm than is necessary, Lord Propagator. No more than is necessary."

Later that day, Tharius Don leaned in a window of his rooms. The Library Tower overlooked the Accusers' House. Somewhere behind one of those windows in that cold pile was the Superior of Bans Tower.

Tharius Don put his head in his hands, for the moment unconscious of those on distant Towers or roofs who might be watching.

"Kessie," he moaned in an agony of empathetic pain. "Oh, by the gods, Kessie. Kessie."

8

Thrasne had not wanted to think of Pamra again. He had put her out of his mind; he had refused to speak of her to Suspirra; he believed he could forget her in the years that followed his last departure from Baristown. But during those six years, the drowned woman had moved her lips once more to say, "My baby!" This time Thrasne had not needed to draw the sequence of facial expressions. He knew them as well as he knew his own. What should he have done? He asked himself in irritation. Should he have abducted Pamra there on the steps of the Tower? Should he have, dragged her away like some impetuous lover? What could he have done? After a time he stopped thinking about what he might have done and began thinking what he would have to do next time.

When he came to Bans for the fourth time, Thrasne was thirty-six, a stocky, thatch-haired man with a boatman's crinkles around his eyes from looking into the sun half of every day. He had stopped to give Blint-wife her first promised moneys, surprised to find her stout and healthy, happier looking than she had ever been aboard the Gift, eager to come aboard and hear all the news, bearing gifts of cakes and a keg of ale. She asked Thrasne, somewhat shyly, and with careful attention to who might be by to overhear what she said, if he had time to carve some gifts for her. "I'm being married again," she said. "To an old Riverman [this in a whisper] who lost his wife long ago. He has grandchildren. His daughter has gone to the River [whisper], and the children spend much time with me."

So he carved a jump-up-jakes and a dancing doll and a set of fancy building blocks, knowing as he did so that Blint would be glad of this marriage. Blint had loved her once, likely more as she was now than as she had become aboard me Gift.

And he left her to come to Baris at the beginning of the cold season, well before festival, with the tides pulsing ever higher. By this time there were many cross piers to tie to in Baris. There was a procession of Melancholies, dark faces fierce and demanding, waving their fish skin lashes in invitation to the watchers. Thrasne saw more than a few citizens taking a lash or ten in return for Sorter coin. When he found Ihe barber's place he remembered from before, Thrasne sat in the chair,

commenting on the scene.

"I don't know why they do it, barber. Let themselves be whipped in return for a worthless bit of glass!"

"Ah, well," the barber remarked, snipping around Thrasne's ear with close attention, the obsidian shears making a repeated snick, like the teeth of a stilt lizard, unpleasantly voracious. "It's harmless, I suppose. Who knows, maybe the Holy Sorters would Sort you Out if there were enough Sorter coins in your purse."

"Superstition," muttered Thrasne. "Even the Awakeners don't allow as how that's true." Then, seeing argument about to fall from the barber's lips, he changed the subject. "I wanted to ask you about the family of Fulder Don. Would you remember them?"

"All that family's gone, boatman. Pulder Don died a year or so after his mama. One of the older daughters died, too. The youngest girl, she that became an Awakener, she up and vanished not long ago. Quite a scandal!"

Thrasne was silent, shocked. Vanished? Pamra? "The old woman who cared for them? Oh, sure now, I heard something about that. Went east, I mink. Bad business, that was."

"Wasn't there another daughter?"

"Oh. Sure there was. Prender. She's staying at the house the old woman had. Now how did I forget Prender?"

Prender was stiff and cold, angry at being questioned. "She's gone, that's all I know. A servant came from the Tower. I couldn't see her face for the veils, but her voice was hard. Then a Laugher to question me about it, sent from somewhere else. He was stone in his face, and mean. His words were like threats. He said they'd find her no matter where she's gone. They don't know where she went, except she went early one morning. She was supposed to take workers to the forest for wood. Very early. All the workers were gone."

She started to shut the door against him, her face creased deep with all the bitterness of the years, opening it just far enough to spit a few more words at him through the crack. "He wanted to know what she had said to me about Delia. About Delia going east. As though she would have said anything to me. This is all her fault, Pamra's. She and her mother both. Neither of them could ever be sensible about anything."

"When did she disappear?"

"I said. Early in the morning."

"No. I mean when! How long ago?"

"Not long. Twenty, thirty days, perhaps."

As he turned to leave, she called after him, "She only did it to get even with us, you know. That's what I told him, that Laugher. She only did it to hurt us."

Thrasne didn't turn. He was too busy feeling ashamed of himself. He had blamed Pamra, blamed her, when all she had really done was flee from voices like the one behind him.

What would he tell Suspirra now?

He told her nothing. When he entered the owner-house, she was turned toward him. He saw her lips, her teeth, the lower teeth touching her upper lip. He copied it with his own, breathing out. "Ffff." He did not need to wait to know what she would say.

"Find her!"

"How can I find her, Suspirra? No one knows where she went."

"Find her!"

"She will have gone west, probably. Why? Why did she go at all?" And even as he asked the question, he knew the answer. He could see it as clearly as the pictures he had drawn of Suspirra. The barber had said Delia went east. He saw Delia leaving. She was old, too old. She died there, east of Baristown. He visualized her returning in the pit, Raima's arrival there, early in the morning. He assumed the Awakeners looked at faces: So, she would have seen the face, seen, known, and all at once known everything she had not wanted to know. That stubborn rebellion, that rigid naivet, breached, overcome. Suspirra had said, "She had to believe hi love of some kind."

And having seen, having known, where would she go? Not to the River, not at once. No. West. For a time.

He took the Gift west, stopping at every town, no matter how small. He searched everywhere, talking to Rivermen, patronizing barbers.

And he found her, as much because she had not had time to go far nor strength to go fast as for any other reason. She was serving drinks in a tavern, hair loose as any market-woman's, silent as a wraith with haunted eyes, and yet more beautiful in her fear than she had been in her complacency at the Tower. There were men drinking in the place only to look at her, but she was blind to all their looks.

"Do you want drink?" she asked, her haughtiness gone and only a haunted, terrible conviction of danger remaining.

"Pamra, I've been looking for you."

She started with fear, thinking he might be someone the Awakeners had sent after her, but he put a hand upon her arm as she trembled.

"It's all right. Your mother wants to see you."

"My mother is dead," she said, eyes wide with horror. "She's dead."

"Yes. But no. Will you come with me?"

"She went in the River. You're mad!"

"Say I am mad. But I will not harm you in my madness. I swear by all that is good and holy ... "

"Then you swear by nothing!" Her face was wild. She would have-run from him if she had had anywhere to go. She would have screamed, except to do so was to attract attention, and only in being quiet and unnoticed did she have any chance of life at all.

"I swear by the River, then, the River you have planned to go into, the River where your mother went. Come with me."

He coaxed her as he might have coaxed a frightened animal, until at last, terrified of him but more afraid of the looks being cast their way by those in the place, she consented to come with him to the place the Gift was moored. He led her along to the owner-house, letting her stand there in the door while he fumbled with the lantern, she ready to run, but too weary and beaten to do it.

The light shone down on Suspirra, facing the door, lips slightly open, though they had been closed when he'd left. And it was Suspirra's twin who stood in the doorway, eyes wide and lips open in surprise. They were alike, line for line. From the drowned woman came a sound, the only sound ever heard from her, almost a sigh, or perhaps a sigh of dissolution.

"Mother?" Pamra cried. "Mother!" She went to touch the still face, drawing back her hand in horror. "You lied. A carving."

"No," said Thrasne, heartbroken. "She is as I brought her from the River."

Pamra sobbed, laying her hand on the hard breast. Above that head the lips curved upward, moving visibly. The lips moved, seemed to utter a word. "Remember?" A question, perhaps. In that instant the smile vanished, smoothing like windswept sand, becoming a hinted curve, coherent only for the moment, cloud-edged, shining with light, as Pamra reached out to hold it.

"Mother?" she said.

The word released the last ties that held the figure whole. Suspirra went, all at once, the golden cloud falling in the instant into a hillock of powdery dust, leaving behind a transparent golden pillar in the beam of light as though something incredibly tenuous maintained its structure still, after all that was dross had fallen away. Something solid fell as well, resting upon the dust like a little moon, softly glowing. Pamra knelt to pick k up; Thrasne was too late to stop her as he muttered, "Blight!"

Undeterred, she knelt there, stroking the thing, round and heavy as a melon. "Was that what made her like that, the blight?"

He nodded, watching her hands. The globe seemed to breathe between them. "Out of her womb," Pamra whispered. "She was pregnant when she died. I was too young to know at the time, but Grandma saw that I heard the story often as I grew up. Mother almost died when she had me, and the midwives told her she would die next time. She was afraid. Afraid of the Awakeners. Of us ... "

"You are not an Awakener now."

She turned her haunted eyes upon him. "Once past the junior vows, an Awakener is an Awakener forever. They will remind me of that when they send a Laugher with the flask of Tears for me. I have been lucky to escape them this far."

"What would they do to you?"

"They will feed me Tears of Viranel. I will remember who I am, but I will have no will of my own. I will exist for long years until I truly die and can be eaten by the Servants of Abricor. Perhaps, since I will not be dead and stinking, the senior Awakeners may use me for a while. Jelane says they do that. I saw a woman like that in the Tower once. They have almost caught me twice already. I cannot sleep, cannot live, for fear of them. They will find me. I have nowhere to go"

"You have somewhere to go." He took the strange Toundness from her hands, turning it in his own. It shifted as though something within it moved, turning in slow sleep. "What shall we do with this?"

"It lives," she breathed. "See, that place on the side seems to swell, like a pamet pod opening."

A thin, light-colored line upon the roundness widened, stretching as they watched. He set it upon his bed, and they leaned over it, not daring to breathe too loudly. The line strained, shifted, strained, opening wider over a lighter lining, which began to tear with a thin ripping sound like rotted canvas.

From inside came the sound of shallow breathing, slow as the tide.

Pamra reached out to tear the shell open gently with her hands.

A child lay within. Tiny. Perfect. Brown as Suspirra had been, yet moving. Breathing. Opening its night-black eyes to look up at them as though it saw them entirely and comprehended them utterly, moving its lips as though to speak.

They said nothing. It was a wonder too great for speech. They could have made exclamations of disbelief, but in the quiet of the room it would have seemed blasphemy to speak at all. When those eyes closed at last and the baby half turned as though into sleep, they took the shell away. It was connected to the child by an umbilicus, a dried, brittle cord that shivered to fragments when they moved her. A girl child. Pamra reached a tentative, fearful finger to touch that flesh, warm and soft as her own. Silently, she wrapped the child in one of Thrasne's towels and laid her in the basket he used for his mending while Thrasne stared and stared, lost in the wonder of it.

"Now you must come with me," he said. "To care for her."

"Who ... what is she? How can I care for something like that? Surely this is no human child."

Thrasne took her by the shoulders, shook her gently. Though the child was a wonder and a miracle, had not Suspirra been both a wonder and a miracle? "A strange child, yes, but I believe she is your sister. Born of the same parents." He did not say what other strange parents might have been involved in that birth. The strangeys of the depths? The blight?

"Where will we go?"

"For a time, we will simply go on," he said firmly. "They will not look for you on the River." He would make this so if it were not so already. Perhaps it would not be safe enough forever; perhaps some other provision would have to be made. For the time being, it was enough that Suspirra-who had been in turn a dream, a small carving, a drowned woman, an almost carving once more-was with him now, alive.

9

The Accusatory of the Chancery at Highstone Lees was a cold stone building, built high along one side of the ceremonial courtyard, where dark-needled trees made a solemn shade around a jetting fountain. The room in which Ilze found himself confined was no less chill. He could walk around and around in it to warm himself. He could stare out the high, shuttered windows at the mountains along the horizon, which seemed to nibble at the sun as it moved along them. After a very long time of alternate walking and staring, Ilze realized that the sun would get no higher than the low northern sky where it swung in a long arc from east to west barely above the peaks. When darkness came, he huddled on the narrow bed, beneath the two blankets.

There was nothing else to do: walk, stare, or huddle on the bed, staying as warm as possible. There was food in the room and two buckets, one of water, one for his waste. The sun went once around the mountains before anyone came near him.

Then there was only a silent guard with more food and a lackey to deliver two clean buckets, one full and one empty, and take away two dirty buckets, one full and one empty. Ilze had a vision of himself spending years in this cold room, moving water from one bucket to the other by way of his guts, moving solids from the plate to the bucket, consuming, being consumed. Somewhere nearby was another such room, he imagined, with the lady Kesseret in it. He had been separated from her almost immediately, but he thought he would be released as soon as she had had time to tell their story.

He slept for a time, woke again, looked out the window to see the sun rolling upon the mountains, the day not quite half-gone. He stared, walked, huddled, began inventing pictures from the crevices and holes in the walls. There were a line of rounded depressions that looked like fish. He half slept, the fish emerging from the wall to swim about him, slowly, like blight-fish. He woke. The shadows had moved. Now the same depressions were eyes, watching him.

Another day passed before the door opened again to admit two tall Servants of Abricor. Talkers. They had come, they said, to accuse him. They were accompanied by a silent human in a dark robe and half veil. Ilze was angered by this, horrified by them.

"What am I accused of?" he demanded. "Tell me! What do you think I've done? I knew nothing about Pamra's disappearance until after it happened. I know nothing about it now."

"Tell us about Rivermen," they demanded. They were taller than other Servants he had seen, cleaner, their feathers gleaming with blue highlights. One of them might have been the one who had been in the Superior's room. Perhaps not. He could not tell. The fingers at the last joint of their wings were hard and clever. When he didn't answer quickly, they pinched him. Their beaks were soft, almost like lips, and though the words they spoke were more croaked than enunciated, he learned to understand them very quickly. "Tell of Rivermen," they repeated.

"I know what the Superior told me. They are a heretical cult who put their dead in the River."

"Tell us something more."

"I don't know anything more."

"Do you think they infiltrate the Towers? Put their own people in as Awakeners?"

"I have no idea. It seems unlikely."

"Do you think Pamra was a spy? For the Rivermen?"

"She was only twelve when she came to us. Would a spy be that young?"

"For a person, she was very pretty, wasn't she? Did you like her a great deal? Did you lust for her?"

"Seniors are not allowed that sort of contact with juniors. Yes, she was remarkable looking. Everyone thought so."

"Did you lust for her?"

"Not really, no. There are always plenty of women in the town."

"Did she confide in you?"

"No. She did ask me about sending a message east for her old nursemaid."

"Did you tell her to do that?"

"I told her it wasn't particularly in accord with doctrine, but it wasn't actually heretical. I told her how to do it."

"When did she tell you her old nursemaid had gone east?"

"She never did," he said in a fury.

They went on asking these same questions for hours. From behind the veil a grinding sound emanated from time to time, as though the veiled person were chewing stones. That person said nothing. Tomorrow they returned to ask the same questions again. These returned, or others who looked exactly like these. Until his anger got the better of him.

"Where is my Superior? Ask the lady Kesseret!" It was obvious, even to him, that they had already asked the lady much. Where else would they have gotten the information they needed to question him? "She knows I'm telling the truth. What do you want from me?"

When they left him alone at the end of the day, he was too tired to move, too angry to care. He lay on the bed, the blankets

drawn carelessly over him, letting the night come. There were bruises all over his body where they had mishandled him. He had stopped eating. The food tasted foul. The water tasted foul, too, but he was always thirsty.

"Why did you choose Pamra to be your junior?"

"It doesn't work that way. I didn't choose her. She was assigned to me."

"Who assigned her?"

"My Superior. But even she didn't pick Pamra. Pamra was just one of the handful who came in about the same time. As soon as the initiation master was through with them, I was in line to get that clutch. And the next senior got the next clutch. A clutch is five, it didn't mean anything. Whichever of us was next senior got the next bunch that came in."

"Did she confide in you?"

"No. She didn't confide in me."

"Did you lust after her?"

He hadn't, really, not in any way that was culpable. "No," he said. "I didn't lust after her."

"Tell us about discipline. It is said you never whipped Pamra."

"I never whipped any of them unless they deserved it. Of the five of them assigned to me, I only whipped three."

"Why did you whip them?"

"Because they were lazy."

"Was Pamra never lazy?"

"No. Pamra was a zealot. She was never lazy. She believed. She believed everything."

"Didn't such excess of belief seem at all suspicious to you?"

"Why would it? That's how I believed when I was seven or eight years old. It seemed childlike. Endearing. I thought it was funny."

They went away again. He pushed a shutter aside and leaned in a window, exhausted. His room was on a corner, with two windows. On this side the flat, bleak moorlands stretched to the foot of the jagged mountains, the sun rolling like a red ball on their tips. He could not see the moons.

For a moment the world whirled, shook, and there was a great darkness behind his eyes. He could not see the moons. After a time he figured it out. The moons circled this globe at its center line, above the World River. He could have seen them, low on the horizon, except for the mountains. The Teeth had bitten off the moons. Not seeing them was like an accusation. But an accusation of what? "I really haven't done anything," he snarled furiously into the dark. A dark anger welled up from within him, and he tried to wrap himself in it. Sleep would not come. He rose to run around and around the small room until he was panting, gasping, his heart thundering away inside him as though it would burst. His hands knotted, unknotted. He would kill the fliers. Strangle them. If he ever got out of this place, he would kill them. One at a time, lingeringly. Wherever he found them. At last, worn out, he fell once again into that sleep from which they always woke him.

"Where did Pamra take the workers?"

"I don't know that she took them anywhere. If she took them anywhere, some of you must have seen her. How could she take a whole pitful anywhere without the Servants seeing it? I didn't see her. I don't know."

One of the Talkers looked at the other, almost disconcerted, he thought. Had he told them something they didn't know? Suggested something? They gave him no time to think about it. "Did you ever discuss the workers with her?"

"Discuss? No. Except in class. I had her for a class in hermeneutics. Scripture. The Scripture talks about workers."

"Did she doubt the Scripture?"

"Pamra? I told you Pamra never doubted anything."

"Did you lust after her?"

Perhaps he had. Perhaps he had. "Yes," he said. "Sometimes. But I didn't do anything about it."

They went away, leaving him, returned again, went away. After an endless time they seemed to tire of it.

"Tomorrow," they said to him. "Tomorrow you will go to the Ascertainers."

He didn't know what that meant; he didn't care. It would be different from this, something to look forward to. Perhaps they would give him an opportunity to kill some of them. He went to sleep, dreaming of them tied to the stake and he with the whip in his hand.

10

Pamra, at first fearful and hostile in equal measure, became gradually accustomed to being aboard the Gift. Thrasne had given her a room in the owner-house with a comfortable bunk, a basket for the child, Lila, and a chest full of simple clothing such as the boatmen wore. He taught her to braid her hair in River fashion, high in the back, with bead-decorated locks around the face. He named her Suspirra, as he had named her mother before her and his lady of dreams before that. Relieved of the constant bleeding of the Tower, which kept the juniors both slender as saplings and free of any trace of sexual feeling, she put on a little flesh. Though she looked unlike the woman he had found in the tavern and much unlike the Awakener he had seen outside the Tower, she looked more like his Suspirra than ever, and with this Thrasne was content.

Had to be content. Though he wooed her with his eyes and his gifts and his constant, calm solicitude, she showed no sign of perceiving what was in his mind. He kissed her cheek, and she accepted it as a child might a kiss from an uncle, not unwillingly, but as though it did not matter. Nothing moved her. Nothing stirred her. At certain times, when she was drowsy, perhaps, she would answer his questions about life in the Tower, though never at length or in any great detail. From these infrequent comments he formed a picture of her existence there and on the basis of that troublesome image forgave her much. She could not feel attraction toward him, he told himself. She did not know what it was. She was like a child, innocent of sexual feeling. She was sometimes angry, but it seemed an anger unformed and unfocused, and if she had any feelings toward Thrasne at all, she did not recognize what they were.

Still, she began to keep house for him, at first absentmindedly, and then with a small show of concern for his comfort. She learned to cook in the same way, at first from hunger, and then with a kind of dim pleasure, remembering the aromas of comfort found in Delia's house without having to remember Delia herself. She could not remember Delia. Would not. The fall of rock in the lonely place was shut away inside her. The faceless regard of the canvas hood was shut away. Herself as Awakener with the flasks at her belt was shut away. There, inside, where love might have lived, was a stone house into which all such things were put. There was no room for love. The house was so large it took up most of the room there was. It had to hold too much.

Thrasne, looking deep into her eyes, knew it was there, for he could see the shape and shadow of it and the feral glow of eyes that peered out of its windows now and again. A ghost house. Tenanted by her mother and by Delia and who knew how many more. He hoped the hard prison space inside her might grow smaller in time. He had time.

She never went ashore. He showed her his watching place in the high cubby by the owner house, and she sat there for hours watching the Riverbanks flow by. Long months went by. He brought the shore to her, little gifts, bits of foliage and flower, fruit and confections. And toys. And carvings he made for her, which said all the things his mouth left unsaid. And she did not much notice.

Meantime the child of the drowned woman grew like a little tree, slowly yet observably, and moved like a reed blown gently by the wind. They had tried feeding her everything, softly stewed grain, vegetables, bits of fish. She took only the brackish River water and sunlight. On days of cloud, she lay quiet in her basket, scarcely moving. On sunny days she learned gradually to crawl about the deck with the deliberation of a tortoise and the curiosity of any infant confronted with a new world to experience.

She seemed to love best to be held on Suspirra's--Pamra's--lap facing the sun, being shown things--a fish, a bit of rope, a frond of flowers from a tree they floated under when early first summer came. The boatmen stopped to talk with her, never touching her, regarding her half with affection, half with superstitious awe. So far as they knew, Suspirra had brought the child with her when she came, her arrival as mysterious as anything else about the matter. The carved woman in the owner-

house was gone. A live woman who looked like the carved woman was there, except that the live woman had a child that could have been carved. Except that it lived, of course. A wonder. A living wonder.

Thrasne and Suspirra had agreed to name the child Lila. It had been Thrasne's mother's name. He liked the sound of it. The crewmen accepted this as well but did not use the name. Instead, they were inclined to hint to Thrasne that they suspected a story that might be told, at which he shrugged and smiled, unresentful. Suspirra made the matter no less complicated when she referred to Lila as her sister.

"They'll talk ashore, you know, Thrasne," said Obers-rom. "Seems to me you aren't sayin' much about this and would rather the matter was kept quiet. But they will talk, Thrasne. You know that. Best you give them something to say, or they'll say something you won't like."

Thrasne thought on this. It was true. The men would talk ashore, and the more mystery they made, the more likelihood of curiosity seekers trying to sneak aboard to catch a glimpse.

Something close to the truth would be best. "Tell them the baby's mother was pregnant. She drowned in the River and was blighted. So the baby was born different from you and me. She has a different sense of time, that's all. Perhaps all creatures which are blighted have that sense of time. Maybe blighted fishes live their whole lives out but do it a lot slower than we do. Now, my old friend Suspirra--her I had the statue of until she herself came aboard Suspirra calls the Baby her sister because the drowned woman was her ... her friend, and she cares for her friend's child as she would for a baby sister. It wouldn't be fitting for her to call Lila her own child, her being an unmarried woman. And Suspirra came to stay with us because the Awakeners wouldn't leave the child alone, not if they knew. You know that. She had to come to the River to be safe. That's all there is to it."

This won their sympathy and went a way to shutting their mouths. Boatmen were accustomed to avoiding Awakener attention and keeping shut about River business. It began to seem to all of them that Lila and Suspirra were River business right enough.

Obers-rom gave it considerable thought. Next time he stopped to speak to Lila he stroked her face, at which she made an indeterminate sound of pleasure, almost a word. "She's not so different, really," he said to Pamra. "She just moves real slow, that's all. Real slow. I'll call her slow-baby." He turned away, smiling, the smile vanishing as he thought of the watchful, perceptive expression in the child's eyes. "Not so different," he repeated to himself, "except for that." He still determined to call her slow-baby.

Which, thereafter, Lila heard more often than she heard her name.

11

Where the great log came from, Thrasne could not say. It had the look of something prehistoric about it, like some ancient monster heaving up from the depths to wreak havoc upon the works of man. As it did. The Gift of Potipur ran upon the log--or the log came up beneath her--with such force as to stave a man-sized hole in her bow planks, through which the water alternately poured and gurgled as the Gift rocked from the shock. There were several hours of panicky struggle, after which the Gift gurgled rather less, though still dangerously, and the most threatening part of the damage had been controlled for the moment.

"What will you do now?" asked Pamra. She had stayed out of the way during the worst of it, trying not to show how frightened she was, clinging to Lila as though to some raft on which she might have expected to float to safety. Later, when they had patched the hole, she had gone below to see the black water oozing around the patch and had realized it could be only temporary. "You'll have to fix it ashore, won't you?"

Thrasne nodded, still numb. It was the first real injury the Gift had received, and he felt it himself, looking at his ribs from time to time as though expecting to see great bruises and rents there, surprised to find himself whole. "It'll take a while. That third rib back is sprung all out of line. All the planks are loose along there. They're not leaking now, but they will be. Next town's hopeless, no piers, no shipwrights. Next one on down's some better, but I'll have to do most of it myself, most likely."

"How long?"

"A long time. Thirty, forty days, at least. Probably more. They won't have the planking we need. It's almost impossible they'd have seasoned wood available. Chances are if they have any, it'll be green. Or, more likely, still standing. Over a month." A month was fifty-one days. "Sixty days, maybe. Seventy." Still in shock, he wasn't thinking of her at all. Then he turned to see her look of fear and apprehension, understanding it in the instant. "That'd be too long for you to be in one place, wouldn't it? Dangerous for you. Those hunting you would likely find you. I should have thought of that right off."

"I can stay here in the owner-house." She tried to smile. "If the men won't talk about it."

They would talk, of course. No way he could prevent it. "You can't stay cooped up that long. You'd turn all pale, like a mushroom." He tried a not-very-successful smile. "No. We'll think of something else."

When he came back to the owner-house some hours later, he brought the local chart-of-towns with him, laying it on the table under the lantern where she could see it. "I've found something," a tired smile telling her it was the only thing he'd been able to find. "I'd forgotten all about it. Strinder's Isle."

He pointed to the chart, the ragged edge of the River at one side, with its endless list of places, products, local idiosyncrasies, religious taboos. There to the south, a good day's sail out into the World River, lay a long, wide, inky interruption among the careful notes and the River flow. The eastern end of it was behind them, two towns back. The western end was three towns yet ahead. "The only people there are the Strinders," he said. "And only a few of them left. No guards. No gates. They have a pier here, a little east of Chantry. Chantry's where we'll have to get the boat fixed."

"An island? I never heard of an island in the River." "There's many of them. Most of the ones close to shore are so small they're only rocks on the charts, dots, places to steer clear of. But Strinder's Isle, well, it's a good way out. Out of sight of the shore. Blint used to call there every time he came around. Used to bring in flour and cloth and sweetening. Take out dye shells. The thing is, we can run down along the island, drop you off, then pick you up again at the western end after the ship is fixed. All we'll need is some kind of signal so you can come down to the west end of the island when it's time. That way we'll be with the current, taking you in and getting you off."

He misinterpreted her doubtful look. "It's safe enough, Pamra. We've got time to drop you off. The Gift isn't going to sink under us."

"No, no, no," she said, hating herself for seeming to question his provision for her when that very provision might delay and endanger him. "It just seemed-is it an empty island? I mean, are there still any people there?"

Now he was doubtful himself. "There used to be. Right along here. A bunch of little houses, some of them scattered back in the trees. Of course, the island mostly belongs to the Treeci. They're a little like the fliers."

"Servants of Abricor!"

"Not carrion eaters. No. Not the Servants of Abricor. A different kind of creature. I've never seen them anywhere but there, on the island. Bigger legs than the Servants. They have beautiful plumage, but they don't fly. Flat kind of beaks on them, almost like lips only harder, not those hard, hooked beaks the Servants have. From a distance, they look almost human. I've only seen them at a distance, of course, but the Strinders got on well with them." He ran a hand across his face, as though trying to wipe away the tiredness. "If there's any way to let you stay there, Pam, it's best. Truly. Even if you had to stay alone in one of the old houses. The people looking for you won't find you there, I can guarantee. And we can make it safe and reasonably comfortable for you, even if you have to stay alone."

It sounded like abandonment, and he knew it. She could not help but know it, and it made a slow, burning anger in her that there could not be some other way. There was no other way. The alternatives were worse. The Awakeners would send Laughers after her, they weren't going to stop looking for her, and even death alone on an island would be far preferable to their finding her. She shook herself, made herself sound cheerful about it.

"I'll go there, Thrasne. Even if there's no one there. I'll take Lila, she'll be company for me. However long it takes, I'll wait for your signal."

When they came to the island, however, she was less sure.

There were little houses along the shore, most tumbled into piles of gray fragments, log and plank silvered by the sun and the River wind. At last they saw a vague line of smoke ascending, and this led them to a rickety pier and a ramshackle dwelling showing light among the trees.

The woman who answered their calls had aged like the house. She was rust and dust held together by a net of wrinkles with gray hair wisping around her like smoke. "Strinder? Me? Well, of course I'm Strinder, and damn near the last. Did you say you were old Blint's boy? I seem to remember he had a boy. Think of that, and come in."

There were two others on the island, as old as she; an old curmudgeon named Stodder and her own cousin, Bethne. "Joy," she said to Pamra with a keen glance from under bushy brows. "That's my name. You wouldn't think it, would you? Not exactly a joyful object, am I? Often wished I'd had a name that aged better. Sophronia. Eugenia. Something with some dignity to it."

She looked them over, Pamra and the slow baby. She did not remark then or ever upon the baby's strangeness and Pamra came to believe for a time it was because human babies were so far in her past she had forgotten what the usual ones were like. Lila might have fitted her memories of babyhood as well as any other.

When Thrasne left her, it was with a goodly supply of food and with a large supply of wood cut for the old woman's fires. Though it was warmer on the island than on the shore, the evenings would still be cold for the next three months. Thirty days was the minimum time the repairs would take, but it could be three times that. After thirty days she was to watch the northern shore each evening, a little before dusk, to see three pillars of smoke. When she saw them, she was to make the two or three day hike along the flat shore to the western end of the island and camp there until he came for her. "If it takes us longer than that, we may be delayed by the Conjunction tides," he told her. "So don't be impatient. You can get down to the west end all right?"

"Oh, yes, yes," said the old woman. "She can get there easy enough. There's no more wilderness on Strinder's Island. No more wildness at all. Except for ... well, except for what there is, of course." If this had been meant to convey something, it failed. Pamra was too agitated at being left behind to pay much attention.

The Gift pulled away from the isle, Thrasne turning from the high rudder deck to wave to her. When sight of him had faded into the River haze, down and cross stream toward the distant shore, she turned back to the house, the old woman meeting her halfway there.

"Oh, girl, I saw he left you puncon jam. Couldn't help but see it. I haven't had puncon jam since my youngest daughter was born, she that's gone now and left only the memory. Would it be ugly of me to beg puncon jam on our fry cakes tonight? I do have a light hand with fry cakes." For a time it was as though Joy had returned, so young she sounded, and Pamra was ashamed not to greet this enthusiasm with more spirit of her own. Though she kept counseling herself to be calm, not to consider herself injured, still she felt bereft, grieved, and abandoned, senseless though that was. She found herself blaming Thrasne, senseless though that was as well, ashamed of it and yet unable to stop. Still, faced with the old woman's delight in having company, she assented to the scheme of puncon jam, assented to having Stodder and Bethne as guests. These three were the entire remnant of the Strinders. There had been some younger who had gone away on the River, there had been many younger and older who had died. And now these three remained, not one among them who had ever seen the northern shore or an Awakener or a Servant of Abricor. They knew only the island and the waters around it and the Treeci, who shared both with them.

It was some time before she met the Treeci. First there were days of walking here and there, weeding a bit of garden, checking the nets to see if anything worth eating had been caught, raking shellfish from the River to dry upon the shore, carrying the dried shells to the pier, where great, wobbly baskets bulged with this reeking harvest awaiting the next Riverboat.

"Not many stop here," creaked old Stodder. "Let's see, there's River Queen, and Moormap's Fish (Moormap died, but his daughter's husband kept the Fish), and the Gift, o' course, and the Startled Wind ... " He went on with his enumeration, Riverboats afloat, Riverboats long gone.

After their supper they sat on the rickety porch beneath the trees to watch the moons assemble before the old man and the other old woman stumped off to their own falling-down houses in the woods. Pamra stood looking after them, wondering why they did not live together. It would mean only one house to heat, less wood to cut. Far off in the trees came a plangent, bell-tolling sound, and she remembered the creatures Thrasne had mentioned.

"Treeci?" she asked old Joy.

"Treeci," whispered Joy, face in the lamplight alive with old memories, eyes gentle as doves. "Treeci. Honoring the

moons."

They went next day to rake shells, Pamra, Lila, and Joy. Three Treeci came through the trees, calling in bell-like voices, then in human sounds. "Joy! We greet!"

The old woman waved. "Binna! Werf! Come meet a visitor from over the River. Her name is Pamra. And the baby, Lila." The Treeci bowed, acknowledging the introduction, while Pamra stared.

They were as tall as she, standing upright on legs not unlike her own, with feathered buttocks that curved as hers did into a narrow waist. The long, two-toed feet might have been human feet stuffed into feathery socks except for the knifelike talons. Above the waist the likeness to humans was less. The arms, ending in three-fingered hands, were fully feathered with long, wing like primaries; their breasts were keeled; their large-eyed faces were full of candid intelligence. "Pamra," they said, bowing again.

She bowed in return to Binna, to Werf, then turned to bow to the third member of the group, feeling Joy's hand tugging at her as she did so. She looked down to see the old woman shaking her head, embarrassed, whispering, "No, don't bow. That's a male. You don't bow to them."

"Why?" It was startled out of her, not really a question. "Shhh. Later."

"Are you having a pleasant visit?" Binna asked her, taking no notice of this gaffe. The words were clearly articulated, slightly accented but in a pleasant way. Though the lower part of each Treeci face was visored by their shallow beaks, those beaks were soft and flexible, protruding little, moving almost as lips did.

"Yes, thank you." They talked of the weather for a few moments, of the tides. The third, unnamed Treeci wandered to the shore and stood there, watching the water.

"I came to tell you, Joy," said Werf, "there's a new bed of inedible shellies just below the big rocks, beyond the frag grove. Good dye shells! They're small now, but by Conjunction after this one, they should be good size for your gathering."

"That's kind of you," she responded warmly. "Will you return with us and take tea?"

They demurred, demurred again, then accepted. It had the pace and quiet predetermination of a ritual. At the house they were joined on the porch by Bethne to drink tea out of fragile old cups as they recited memories of former times, so many memories it was obvious they were more than acquaintances. Joy had brought six cups. Without saying anything to anyone, Werf filled the extra cup and carried it to the rock,

where the third Treeci perched in lonely silence. The two conversed in low tones. Werf returned. No one seemed to notice. Before leaving, Werf retrieved the cup and set it upon the table with the others.

"We rejoice in your friendship," they called as they were leaving. "May your lives extend."

Joy gathered up the cups. "If you could get me a pail of water, child, I'd get these washed."

"In a minute. First, tell me about the-the male. Why don't we talk to him? ... "

"It isn't done." The old woman laid a trembling hand on Pamra's own. "Werf is Neff's mother. She talks to him, you see. And his own sisters do, of course. But no one else. It just isn't done."

"Cruel," Pamra said, remembering herself as a child. "It's cruel to treat people like that."

"Ah, but child, they aren't people, don't you see."

"They're people, Joy. You wouldn't sit here drinking tea with them unless they were." She said this as she would have done to Delia, mistaking Joy. For Delia, perhaps, without realizing it.

"In that sense, yes, they're people and my dearest friends, but you know what I meant." She turned away toward her wash basin, holding out the empty pail. "They aren't human people."

Pamra forced her feelings off her face. She was living in the old woman's house, a good old woman, not unlike-not unlike another good old woman whom she had failed in a time of trouble. Let her not trouble this one more. As a guest, she had no right.

But she felt a sympathetic rebellion for the lonely Treeci, even as she admitted to herself the loneliness might be more in her than in Neff. The rebellion in her was the same it had been when she was eleven or twelve, the same that had led her to

say, "I can be an Awakener." She did not think of this, but only of the sad Treeci. His separation spoke to her.

Among the Treeci, it seemed, hospitality must be returned. Two days later Joy dressed herself with unaccustomed attention digging through dusty boxes in search of old finery. She found a glittery scarf for Pamra, a shiny bit of ribbon for Lila's blanket, and they set out along the shore.

"I suppose eventually you'll tell me where we're going?"

"Well, Werf and Binna will expect us. Among the Treeci it's considered nice to drop by in a couple days so's they can show hospitality. They call it returning the opportunity. Very set on it, they are."

"Why all this sparkle?"

"Do them honor. You wouldn't have noticed, not being island reared, but they were got up fine for us the other day. Talons painted; feathers around the eyes dyed. They were making an opportunity to honor us-so they call it. Curious, I expect. About you and the baby. Not been a human baby on Strinder's for thirty years."

Pamra found herself lost in wonder at this, not so much at the fact of it-another race of creatures upon the world with its own habits and customs, speaking not only its own language but a human language as well, curious about human babies-no, not so much at the fact as at her ignorance of it. How could she have grown to be adult without having heard of them? Why had no one spoken of them? And if no one had spoken of the Treeci, how may other wonders in the world might there be, unspoken of?

Joy had something to say upon that subject. "My brother used to say all the Northshore people were so stuffed full of Awakener shit they hadn't room for anything else. Is it true they forbid books there?"

It was true. Or true enough. There had been books in the Tower. Homiletics. Hermeneutics. Scripture. Difficult books breathing an atmosphere of dusty mystery, unenlightening. There had been no others. Without books, without travel, Pamra could explain her own ignorance. She could not really forgive it.

The Treeci lived in houses, better kept and better made than those of the human occupants of the island, and there was a teahouse set in a grove where water bubbled tranquil music into a stone basin. Young Treeci, half the size of the adults, gathered on the meadow in murmuring groups. Tea was served in ceremonial fashion. Pamra watched the others to see what was proper, getting through the formal bits with some degree of grace. When everyone had a cup, when every cup had been tasted and approved, when the nuts and cakes had been passed around and those had been complimented, then the group could sit back and indulge themselves in conversation. Joy had been right. It was curiosity. All the questions they had been too polite to ask on Strinder territory they felt empowered to ask on their own.

"Is the child yours?"

"Is it a customary child?"

"We thought it was not a customary child. We believe she is t'lick tlassca." After some discussion, this term was translated as "wonder."

"Yes," Pamra agreed with a rare smile. "She is a wonder."

"Would Pamra stay long?"

By this time Lila lay on Werf's lap, patting her feathery bosom with long, stretched gestures, murmuring her own legato music. Werf dripped tea into her mouth, and the baby smiled, an endless smile, like dawn.

"Why had she come?"

Without thinking to censor what she said, Pamra told them why she had come. Not all, merely some. Awakeners were part of the reason, and the Servants of Abricor. There was a sad murmuring, a shaking of feathered heads.

"They were kin to us one time, those fliers of the Northshore. Those you call Servants of Abricor. We remember that time in our histories. There was a time when honor could have been retained. Our tribe, the Treed, chose the way of honor. They, those who remained, chose otherwise. There are certain words in our language which go back to that time which those on the Northshore no longer know. Words like 'decency.' And 'dignity.' It makes us sad what they have become." Werf shook her feathered head in sadness, widening the plumy circles around her eyes.

Binna changed the subject, and Pamra kept quiet, abashed at the sadness she had caused.

"We thought you might like to see some of our dancing," said Binna, nodding at a young Treeci, who went racing away with this message. In moments there were sounds of a drum and a rhythmic tinkling.

From the teahouse the Treeci watched indulgently, even proudly. On the lawn the young Treeci sat, whispering, a few going so far as to point with wingtips, as though accidentally. Looking at these youths, Pamra could not tell whether they were male or female; they had no distinguishing colors, they were merely young. Perhaps there was a stage in development in which it did not matter, for all the young ones murmured together, moved about in giggling groups, walked with entwined fingers and heads tilted toward one another.

The dancers, however, were all male. Pamra could feel it. They twirled and postured, stamped, wings wide with each feather displayed, chest feathers fluffed, those around the eyes widened into flashing circles. Their flat beaks had been rouged, their talons painted. Beside her Werf sat smiling, wing fingers tapping in time to the drums, eyes moist. Pamra followed the direction of her eyes. Werf's son, Neff, among the dancers, magnificent in his grace and strength, the dance itself stimulating, breathtaking. Without thinking, Pamra started to say something about this, some small, complimentary remark, only to feel Joy's fingers biting into her arm. Confused, she confronted the old woman's forbidding eyes with wide, excited eyes of her own. This, too, was not to be spoken of. Pamra pulled her arm away. She wanted to say something, do something. Her face was flushed, red; she could feel the heat in it, in her arms trembling with the music.

Binna had been watching her. Now she said something loudly, a cutting metal sound, and the dance ended in a ragged cacophony of drum and bell. There was conversation then", apologies, a rapid murmur of polite talk covering the sudden end of the entertainment. Pamra did not understand it.

Then they were on their way home. "Binna apologized," said Joy. There was sorrow in her voice, as though she had been given news of a grave illness or death.

"For what? I don't understand."

"For the dancing. They had not realized you would be--moved by it."

"It was exciting! That's wrong?" Pamra wanted to laugh. "Isn't that the object of it all?"

"No. Never. That would be unseemly." This, too, was forbidden ground. Joy would not talk of it further.

Her reticence broke the fragile confidence that had been building between them. Now Pamra could not feel comfortable. Each remark had to be weighed for acceptability. There were too many areas of taboo. She began to take long walks, carrying the slow baby in her shawl, far down the shore toward the west, far into the forest toward the south, roaming the rolling island woods to pass the time and leave the old woman alone. Joy did not object. She seemed to have withdrawn from Pamra as though Pamra had been culpable of some social error that only time would dilute. Her feelings did not seem to convey disapproval so much as sorrow. It was easier for them both when they were apart.

Once or twice she encountered Binna or Werf on her solitary walks. She transgressed politeness to ask them a few things about old times and the Servants of Abricor. They were not reluctant to talk, merely distressed by it, their pain so palpable that she gave it up. What she had learned from them was already a lumpish knot in her throat, confirming her knowledge that in the Tower she had been used and lied to.

Pamra found a favorite place along the shore, high among a cluster of lichened stones. It was almost a little room, sheltered from the sky, with a tiny moss yard and minuscule pool of rainwater. Here Lila could lie for long hours on the moss, singing her drawn-out notes of gladness. Pamra merely sat, hypnotized by the sound and the River flow.

It was there that Neff came.

She arrived at her sitting place one afternoon to find a spray of flowers laid upon the moss, a delicate crimson bouquet tied with a knot of violet grass, the whole displayed as in a picture. Someone.

From the top of the rock she searched the area. He was sitting on the River shore, face turned from her as though to make it easy for her not to see him. She did see him, and the frustration that had simmered in her for days brought a flush to her cheeks. She would not take part in this silly custom of silence when he had been so thoughtful. She waved, beckoned, called, "Come up!"

He came leaping up the rocks in one flowing motion of power, posed upon the ridge in a posture so unconsciously graceful that she drew breath, belly clenching and loosing like a knot untied. "Artist's blood," they might have called such a feeling

on the Northshore. "Artist's eyes," Thrasne would have said. She was not thinking of Thrasne; she was breathing deeply, almost unaware of her own body.

She motioned to the rock across from her, a flat place with a convenient arm and back for leaning, her own favorite seat. He sat there, looking at her from enormous eyes. "You're Neff," she said. "Aren't you." He would not speak, she thought, unless she spoke to him first. "Yes," he said in his bell voice. "Neff!" "Your mother has been very kind to me. Won't you tell me something about that dance you did the other day? It was very beautiful."

"Just the dance." He turned away in shyness, looking at her from one eye only. "The dance we do."

"I see." She was at a loss. "We have no dances like that on the Northshore. At least none I have seen."

"Tell me of the Northshore," he begged, the words tumbling over one another in their eagerness. "Tell me of the Northshore. There! Over there!"

Poor thing, she thought with immediate sympathy. He's an explorer at heart. She told him about the Northshore. Wary of those subjects that caused discomfort, she did not speak of the Awakeners or the Servants of Abricor, but of more usual things. Festivals. The Candy Tree. Planting pamet and gathering the ripe pods. Fruit harvest in the puncon groves. As she spoke, she realized how little she actually knew of the life of the people. All her memories were of childhood, before entering the Tower. She could not share with him any memories after that.

"The one who brought you, will he come back for you?"

"Yes. He'll be back. When the boat is fixed."

"Would you-would he let me see the boat?"

"Haven't you seen boats before? Haven't you seen them when they come to pick up the dye shells?"

"I mean, would he let me go on it? See it? See the inside of it?"

"I'm sure he would." If those biddies will let you, she thought. "Would that be all right with the ... others?"

He shook his head, the edges of his beak flushing as though rouged. "Mother wouldn't let me."

"We'll have to arrange it without her knowing, then." There it was, out in the open. Rebellion.

He seemed frightened by this; frightened and stimulated at the same time. He stood, posing, stamped, extended his wings, looked at her flirtatiously out of one eye. Then she blushed, and he turned away, as suddenly shy. "That would be wonderful. Please. Do that." He jittered from foot to foot, finally murmuring, "I have to go now." He sped away down the rocks.

"Neff," she called, unable to let him go. "Thank you for the flowers."

"We give them like that," he called. "We Treeci. To our sisters."

So then, she thought, half in amusement. I'm one of his family. So much for the old woman's distinctions. If he thought of Pamra as a sister, then it would be all right to talk to him. They did talk to their sisters.

That night she got out the puncon jam. Jam seemed to loosen Joy's old tongue. Forbidden subject or not, Pamra wanted to learn about the Treeci.

"The young ones," she said casually, "all appear to be about the same age. I didn't see any babies."

"No, there won't be any babies for almost a year. They only breed one year in ten. My brother used to say it had something to do with keeping the population in balance. They don't have any more than the island can keep. Sensible of them, he used to say."

"I didn't see any males among the children."

"You probably did. Far as the Treeci are concerned, children are just children. Can't tell male from female till they get to be about fifteen."

"So the one that came here, with his mother, he was over fifteen?"

"Nineteen," said Joy, burrowing into the jam pot. "Nineteen last Conjunction."

"You know that? So exactly?"

"Well, of course. I know all Werf's children, have for years. She used to bring Neff and his sisters here from the time they were just hatchlings. I used to feed them nut cookies and play hide and go find with them in the woods."

"But now you don't talk to Neff? After being his friend when he was a child?" She could not keep the outrage from her voice.

The old woman pushed her chair back from the table, stood to confront her accusing look. "Girl, you're my guest and I'll give you guest rights, but don't lay your voice on me for things you don't understand. I never said I couldn't talk to Neff, being almost his mother and him as dear to me as my own ever were, I said you couldn't. I said to you before, they're not people. Not human people. You've got to give them their own way!"

There were tears in the old woman's eyes, and it was that which softened Pamra. If she was already grieved over whatever it was, there was no point in adding to her grief. So Pamra bowed her head in submission, making her apologies, promising not to bring up the matter again. It did not change her mind. Cruelty was cruelty. If Neff got pleasure out of making her an honorary sister, why, then she would be his honorary sister.

At the end of thirty days, she began to make regular trips at dusk each day, looking for Thrasne's signal fires. More and more often during these excursions, Neff appeared, though he never did when one of the old people accompanied her. At other times during the day she would find flowers strewn in her path, a necklace of bright petals strung on grass, bouquets of herbs smelling of damp woods or sunny meadows. She began to look forward to the evening walks, began to slip away early without inviting Joy or Bethne or Stodder to come along.

"Your man, he'll be back for you," said Joy.

"I know he will. He said it might take a long time."

"Thought you might be worried. You're spending so much time alone." This with a sidelong, questioning look.

For several nights thereafter she invited the oldsters to come with her, paying particular attention to being chatty with them. Thereafter she included one or more of them every few days, merely to allay their concern, she told herself. No point in distressing them.

"Tell me about the baby," said Neff. He would hold Lila for hours, fascinated by her leisurely, graceful movements. Pamra saw him trying to mimic them in dance, long, stretched extensions of wing and leg as though he would reach himself through into Lila's timeless world and make himself a place there. Often he danced for Pamra, without music, humming to himself in a strangely moving, unmelodic way.

"What is that music?" she asked at last.

"Just ... just music. The music," he said, flushing. He had done that more in recent days, the red moving in from the edges of his beak toward the center. The feathers on his chest were turning crimson as well, and the wide, plummy ones around his eyes. When he looked at her like that, she wanted to hold him, tell him everything was fine. It made her ache for him.

"Tell me of this man who hunts you!" he asked.

"How did you know about that?"

"I heard Mother talking. They think the Awakeners are very cruel to raise up the dead, who should lie asleep. Also our kin, the Servants. They think them stupid, vicious, and cruel, also."

Not more cruel than they, she thought, stroking the line of his jaw, the feathers of his chest. She could tell he liked having her do that, liked having her near him.

"I suppose every group of people has its own cruelties," she said, wondering if he would say anything about his own treatment at the hands of his people. Remembering her own rebellion as a child, she could not accept his passivity. Perhaps it lay in the fact that all males were treated much alike; perhaps that made it seem less cruel. "Don't your friends miss you when you're off here with me?"

"They are mostly alone. Besides"-he flushed-"I am a Talker. They aren't Talkers. Males aren't much. Only one in each thousand males is a Talker, they say." "You mean other males don't talk? Never did?" "They talk like everyone when they are children. When they grow up, though, talking goes. Except once in a while, one like me. It makes it harder."

She could not bear the thought. The safest one to ask seemed to be old Stodder. "Is it true the male Treeci can't talk?" "Oh,

they can talk. They just don't much." "What do you mean, they don't much?" "They just lose interest, that's all. I suppose they figure why talk if you don't have to?" This seemed to her to be Stodder's own philosophy. She seldom heard him speak unless asked a direct question.

Upon examination, his comment made some sense. During visits to the Treeci village, Pamra noticed how cosseted the males really were. Why would they talk when every need was met before they had a chance to utter it? Each one had a circle of children seeing to his grooming, his food, his drink. Every male had a mother, sisters.

Though she went to the watching place each evening, there were still no signal fires. Stodder counted the days until Conjunction and remarked that the Gift of Potipur would likely not come until after the flood tides. "Thrasne's a good boatman. He won't risk the Gift."

"Do you really think he won't come until after the flood tides, Stodder?"

"Ah, girl, he could still get here. Don't leave off looking for the fires. Just don't be disappointed."

Was she disappointed? Did she care if Thrasne came soon or late? What were they to one another, after all? She frowned at this new consideration. It was an uncomfortable thought because she should have been able to answer it and could not. She didn't know. "Does he love me?" She whispered the question, looking for the answer in Lila's eyes, which lightened almost imperceptibly into a smile. "Does Thrasne love me?" Suddenly she thought of things he had done, gifts he had given. Was that why?

What did the question mean? If he did or not, what difference did it make?

She wrapped herself warmly in a heavy shawl and went to the rocks with Bethne, seeing nothing on the Northshore, hearing nothing but the usual shush of wind and River sounds. They turned to walk back along the ridge in the dusk, the light of Potipur casting a ruddy glow along the slopes, making black pits of shadow. In a clearing at the foot of the hill, there were two Treeci dancing, male and female. "Beautiful," whispered Pamra. "Look, Bethne. Look how beautiful."

The male Treeci called plaintively into the dusk; the female responded, the two voices like a duet, sweeter than one could bear.

"What are they saying?" Pamra stopped, straining to hear, until Bethne tugged her along.

"Come along. It isn't polite to listen in. What he's singing is 'Tell me of my children ... ' It's a song the young males sing. So she sings to him of his children, how strong and graceful they will be."

"Tell me of my children," Pamra mused. Sentimental, that. Unlike Neff. He was all "tell me," but about a hundred other things.

"Tell me about the South shore."

"Neff, no one knows anything about the South shore. Maybe people went there once, but no one does now. Thrasne says the World River is twenty-four hundred miles wide, and no one goes farther out than Strinder's Isle. All the measurements are in the old chart-of-towns. That amazes me, but it's true."

"Are there Treeci there?" "For all I know there could be." "I could get there, in a boat. With a sail." "Why would you want to do that?" "I just thought of it, that's all." He rose, jittering, unable to keep still, pulled her up to dance with him. This was new, their dancing together. When they were exhausted by it, they lay curled in the moss bed side-by-side, she stroking his feathered chest, dreamy and quiet.

"You are my sister," he said. "Aren't you. It's all right for me to be here. You really are my sister."

"Of course," she choked. "Of course I am."

The next evening Pamra and Joy found the approach to her lookout place ankle deep in water. "Conjunction," said Joy, measuring the water with her eyes. "Moons are pulling that water right up here, aren't they. Well, if Thrasne doesn't get back for you in the next few days, he won't come until low-water-after-the-moons. There's no place to tie up for long at the west end. He'll have better sense than to try."

Pamra tried to feel disappointment. The feeling would not come. She was not concerned. Not upset. All it meant was she would have more time with Neff. More time to dance, to sing, to lie together in the dusk watching the moons move among the stars. He had become so beautiful in recent days. Because of their friendship, she told herself. Because he had someone

to talk to.

"Only ten days or so to Conjunction," said Joy, saddened by some recollection, some nostalgic connection that Pamra could not follow. "Think I'll go over to the village tomorrow to visit ... Werf. Few days she'll be too busy."

"I'll go with you."

"No. No, just a friendly visit between Werf and me, I think. Two old friends. You can visit later. After Conjunction. There'll be plenty of time. Thrasne's not going to get here before."

The drums began to sound nightly, throbbing like hearts, like bruises, like the pulse in wounds, painfully immediate. Joy stood at the window, listening, tears standing in her eyes. "Memories," she said abashedly, wiping the tears away. "So many memories."

Of her childhood, Pamra thought. Of her young womanhood, of her children. Sad to be old and almost alone with only these other-people for company; sad to think of their children as one's own because one has none of one's own.

Still the drums. Pamra put Lila in a shawl and started to go visiting.

"No," said Joy. "You wouldn't be welcome."

"I thought I'd just watch the dancing."

Joy didn't speak.

"It's their religious time," said Bethne. "Their farewell time."

"The old year?" Pamra asked, unwillingly taking off her shawl, remembering the celebrations of her childhood when they said farewell to the old year and welcome to the new.

"Something like that," said Bethne.

Neff came earlier each day. He was thinner, fined down to pure muscle and bone, light as reeds in the wind. "All the dancing," he explained. "I haven't been hungry."

She tested this, bringing cakes, bringing tea in a bottle. He drank the tea thirstily but gagged at the cakes. "Too much dancing."

She worried about him as he lay in her arms, eyes shut in sleep. And yet he didn't look at all unhealthy but vital and alive, his beak bright red along the edges, the feathers on his neck and chest turning a brilliant crimson. He had never asked so many questions, had so many things he wanted her to tell him. He seemed to want to be with her so much it was an agony to leave him and return to the house.

"We must have festival," exclaimed Joy. "We must have a celebration of our own! I haven't made a festival dinner for twenty years. With Pamra and Lila here, we must! With wine! We'll open up the big front room we used to use!"

Pamra found herself drawn in, involved, sent scurrying here and there for everything imaginable, pulled in to help with long, detailed recipes. There was something a little frantic in the way Joy set herself to this task, as though she wanted terribly to remember, or to forget. Or perhaps it was only to make a festival for Lila. Festivals were for children, after all. The Candy Tree. That was for children.

On conjugation evening, Pamra went to the lookout rocks, watching for Neff, seeing no sign of him. Well, she told herself, he couldn't come. Not until after Conjunction. With the water this high, it was sure that Thrasne wasn't going to be signaling, either. Still, she climbed the rocks one more time.

There were flowers on the stone. She went on to the mossy place, holding her breath, to find him there, already there, moving like a windblown cloud in a tiny circle. "Pamra," he sang to her in a voice unlike his own. His eyes were so bright she thought he might be drugged. "Pamra, tell me about the River."

He wouldn't wait for her to tell him anything, wouldn't let her sit down. "Tell me about the Towers. Tell me about fishing." He wanted to know everything, couldn't sit still to listen to anything. "I have to go back."

"Come again tomorrow, Neff. I'll wait for you tomorrow."

"Come again tomorrow," he cried. "Oh, Pamra, tell me of my children ... "

Her mouth fell open in surprise, but he did not wait to be told. He fled, leaving the smell of himself behind, a rich fragrance that made her breathe as though she had been running. When she returned to the house, her trousers were wet between her legs. She washed herself at the spring, hanging the clothes out to dry, drying herself in the wind. Her nipples were hard, like little stones. She had never felt them like that, so painful. She put her hands over them, trying to soften them, but it only made them worse. She should have been cold in the wintery wind, but she was warm, fiery, alive with the dance. It was the drums, she knew, the hectic batter of the drums, like her own heartbeat gone mad.

The oldsters made their festival dinner, scattered the seeds of the Candy Tree upon Lila's cot, sang festival songs in quavering old voices, unsure of the words. There was wine, more of it than was good for any of them, Pamra felt, repeatedly emptying her own glass out the window, only to have it refilled solicitously by Joy. Then it was over. They had exhausted themselves as if purposely, worn themselves fine and dry so they could only fall into their beds.

"You'll sleep, won't you?" asked Joy, nodding with weariness, half-drunk. "You will sleep."

Pamra yawned. Of course. Even without the wine, she would sleep.

In the deep dark she woke, sitting straight up in the bed, hearing Lila stir beside her, where she, too, had heard the sound. Pamra had not heard it before but knew in the instant what it was. Neff's voice calling in the night, bell-like, insistent, reverberating with an inexpressible vitality. "Come. Come. I'm waiting for you." Farther off were other such sounds, other such calls. Come, come. She heard only Neff, disregarding the others as so much noise.

She threw a cape over her nightdress, sandals on her feet, went out into the night, three moons from the top of the sky casting diffused shadows under every tree. "Come," he called. "Come." The voice came from the woods, from the meadows deep in the woods. She began to run, wondering what wonderful thing he had found to be calling so, her breath eager in her throat and her skin burning. She had never run so before, never so long and tirelessly, never run before without pain or effort.

Trunks of trees going by, dark and light, masses of moon and shade, splashing of stream shallows, silver fountains beneath her feet, meadow grass dotted with pale faces of winter-blooming flowers. "Come." A hillside of moss velvet. "Come."

Far to her left another voice called, and across the valley before her a figure ran toward that voice, wings extended as though to fly, feet seeming scarcely to move as they skimmed the grass. Two met; two danced. There were angels alive in the night. Treeci.

"Come!" He danced upon the hilltop, posed in glory, silver and black in the light of the moons, head back, caroling, bell sound on the hill, voice of joy. "Come!"

She ran toward him, panting now a little, wondering what marvelous festival this was, what occasion called the Treeci out into the night, remembering only then that it was Conjunction. Of course. A second celebration.

He turned, seeing her, eyes wide in their circles of feathers, wider yet as he realized who it was ascending the hill. "No," he cried, a wounded sound. "No. No."

What did he mean? She paused, puzzled at this denial, stopping short when he threatened her with widespread wings. She could see him clearly now, feathers on his abdomen spread wide to disclose a pulsing, swollen organ on the bare skin, black in the night, oozing silver. "No," he begged.

She went toward him, her thighs sliding slickly, wetly on one another. "Neff? It's Pamra. Neff?"

An agonized cry from him as he clasped her, his body beating against her, one thrust, two and three, breaking away only to close again, then away, this time really away to flee down the hillside faster than she could pursue him, no longer calling, now only crying, more like a child than an adult. She stared after him stupidly, brushing at the front of her cape, where the copious jet of sticky fluid clung, slowly, very slowly flushing as she realized what had happened, what she had been too preoccupied with her own feelings to see.

"Mating," she whispered to herself, aghast. "It's their mating time. Oh, by Potipur, but I've shamed him and myself." Sudden tears burned hotter than her skin, and all at once she felt the cold.

She trudged homeward, a longer way than she could have imagined, trying various apologies in her head, how she would say it, how she would rectify the situation. Her cape stank of his juices, a smell as wild as the woods themselves. She would have to wash it. When she returned to the house, however, she could only fall into bed, leaving the cape where she

dropped it beside the door.

She was wakened by Joy shaking her, shaking her, screaming at her. "What have you done, damn you, Pamra, what have you done?"

She sat up stupidly, drawing the blanket over her breasts as though against attack. "What ... what do you mean?"

"Did you go out? Last night? You didn't go out. Not with all the wine I gave you. You couldn't have. No. You couldn't have done that to him. He was my son, like my own son."

"I woke up." Pamra cowered, trying to explain, still half-asleep. "I intruded. But I didn't hurt him. I'm sorry. How in hell did you find out, anyhow?"

"I smelled it. Smelled it. On your cape. That smell. Oh, stupid, stupid, selfish, unhearing, unheeding stupid girl." She was weeping too hard to talk, weeping herself away, out of the room, leaving Pamra to stare foolishly at the door. In the cot beside the bed, Lila made a sound of pain, a creaking agony. Pamra pressed her hands over her ears, willing not to hear it.

It was Bethne who came to her about noon. "Joy asked me, to have you pack up your things. Food in the cart. Stodder'll help you take it down shore to the west end. Joy'd rather you weren't here. Makes it too hard for her."

"Bethne, I told her I was sorry. I didn't mean to intrude. Where is Joy? Why doesn't she tell me herself?"

"Look, girl, I'd have just thrown you out. I might have killed you. Didn't she tell you not to talk to that Neff? I know she did. I heard her say so."

"He thought of me as his sister. He said so. They can talk to their sisters."

"Sure they talk to their sisters. That's so their sisters recognize their voices and have the common decency to stay away from them on the night. You didn't have the decency to listen to Joy, and you didn't have the decency to stay away from him, either. Now he's gone, wasted, all for nothing."

"Gone? Away?"

"Gone. Dead. Lying on the funeral woodpile down there in the village, all dressed in his pretty feathers, all spent. All the pretty males. Dancing, dancing, all danced out, mated out. I've thought about it sometimes, how it would be. Knowing it would all go so fast, all in a few years, a few days. Losing friends, losing words, becoming what they are at the end. No wonder they comfort themselves by asking their sisters to tell them of their children. Remember! I told you about that. 'Tell me of my children!' Did Neff ever say that to you? Probably not. He was a Talker, poor little tyke. Talkers shouldn't have to go through it. They want to know so bad. He wanted to know so much ...

"No one to tell him of his children, now no children. Him gone. His seed gone. His line gone."

The old woman was crying. "He was like a son to Joy. Like her own son."

"I'll go there. I'll explain."

"Oh, stupid girl, stay away from them. They're singing now. They'll sing each name, and some young Treeci girl will stand up and sing that she carries the children of that one. They'll sing Neff's name, and there'll be no one, no one at all, but that's better than having it be you, you stupid human, trying to explain!"

Bethne cried herself away. Pamra crouched on the floor, unable to move, to think. Dead. Unable to move. Dead. The smell of him was still in her nostrils, the sight of him dancing.

Tell him of his children.

12

Apprentice Melancholic Medoor Babji accepted a fat copper coin from her weeping victim, gave the paunchy snop a dozen halfhearted strokes of her fish skin whip, then put a glass Sorter coin into the sweating merchant's palm.

"May the Sorters accept the pain you have already borne as payment for your sins," she singsonged in formula, slipping the merchant's warm metal into her own jingling purse. Medoor's purse was almost as stout as the merchant, full of the coin paid for whipping Northshoremens across a hundred towns this season before ending here in Chantry.

"Amen," said the merchant, wiping his eyes. Though why he should weep, Medoor could not say. Medoor had not struck him hard enough to get through the lard to anything essential, a fact brought forcibly to Medoor's attention by her Leader, Taj Noteen, who came up behind her and cuffed her across the back of her head.

"The man paid you, Babji! Put some muscle into it! What's all this patty-pat, as if you were playing with a baby?"

"He was such an old fart," Medoor responded, knowing it was the wrong thing to say.

"So much more in need of Sorter compassion!" The leader leered at her, daring her to say anything more, an invitation Medoor sensibly refused. She knew as well as Noteen did that Sorters, Sorter compassion, and Sorter coin were all equally mythological, but it was Melancholic policy to appear to believe in the myth, at least when moving among the shore-fish-so-called because the townees schooled at the edge of the River, waiting to be caught, just as song-fish did in the waters along the shore.

"The shore-fish believe, they pay because they believe," Noteen was fond of saying. "Who are you to question their belief?"

Which was another way of telling Medoor not to bite the hand that offered her hard metal coin. Coin that would buy food, wine, woven pamet cloth. Coin to send to the Noor kindred on the steppes-some for the near-kin of each Melancholic; some for the coffers of the Queen. Thinking of Queen Fibji, Medoor made a reverent gesture and saw the leader's glance change to one of understanding approval. He thought he understood how she felt, but he did not, not at all. Medoor Babji had more reason than most to care about Queen Fibji. It was Queen Fibji's need for coin that made any of them willing to serve a term as Melancholies, despite the precarious life of the Noor steppe dwellers and the relative luxury the Melancholies knew. But Medoor's feelings for the Queen were of a different kind and intensity. And private, she reminded herself. Very private.

"I don't know why the Queen needs all that coin," Riv Lymeen had said once during a fireside argument with Medoor. "I've been at Queen Fibji's encampment, and even her big audience tent isn't that wonderful. My uncle Jiraz has one almost that big."

The leader had intervened in that argument, too, saving Lymeen from a pounding. "None of your business why she needs it, Lymeen. It's for some great plan of her own, for all us Noor; for us here on Northshore getting coin out of shore-fish pockets and for them on the steppes, fighting off the Jondarites. She's planning for all of us, woman, so we don't question what she needs it for. She needs it, and that's enough."

These reflections fled as the leader raised his signal bells and struck them with a flexible hammer, blindingly fast, the shrill tunes cutting through all the babble of the marketplace. "Assembly," succeeded rapidly by "Stores," "Wagoneers," and then "Return to camp."

Medoor had been on stores detail for one Viranel, with some days of the duty yet to run. She coiled her fish skin whip into its case, slinging it over her shoulder as she looked around for the others. Riv Lymeen, very white teeth in an almost black face and a voice like a whip stroke; Fez Dooraz, plump and wobbly with sad brown eyes; and old white-headed Zyneem Porabji, who could add up in his head faster than the merchants could on their beads. The three of them were already together at the head of Market Street, waiting for her.

"Come on, Babji," Lymeen called, her fuzzy head wagging disapproval and her lips curled to show her fangs. "Step it up, Medoor. All the camp will go hungry waiting on you."

Which was unfair, for Lymeen often scamped her whips late in the afternoon. "Match coin!" Medoor growled at her, pleased to see the other turn away without accepting the challenge. Whatever Riv might say about Medoor being distractible and absentminded, she couldn't say Medoor was lazy-something Riv Lymeen had often heard said of herself. The amount of coin each Melancholic gained was an accurate measure of the amount of effort each Melancholic expended. "Match coin" was a way of ending argument on the matter.

"Leader says to see can we get song-fish," remarked old Porabji. "Fillets or whole. Some to eat tonight and some to dry and smoke for the trip. I'll see to that. You, Babji, go along to the wine merchants. Lymeen, you to Grain Alley, and Dooraz will see to the greens. If there's fresh puncon fruit, call me. They'll want the price of a copper bracelet for it, but maybe I can talk them down. Remember, we're buying for tonight plus two days. We're westering tomorrow. Three or four more towns, Taj Noteen says, and then back to the steppes.

Three or four more towns. Then the long walk northward, through the dry, white-podded pamel fields on the arid heights and the wet grainfields along the little streams, blue with tasseled bloom. Many days with no markets, no one allowed to sell them food, and fliers hanging high, black dots on the pale sky, to see they ate nothing from the fields. Many days living on what they pulled in the carts. Then the line of watchtowers, marking the edge of Northshore, and beyond that the steppes. There would be roasted jarb root. Medoor would never understand why anyone would dry jarb root skins and smoke them as the Mendicants did-visions or no visions-when one could bury them in the coals in their skins and eat them, sweet and satisfying as nothing else edible could ever be. And there would be stewed grains from the traveler fields, small grain patches that were harvested, weeded, fertilized, and replanted by any Noor who traveled by. Every Noor carried seed grain in a pouch, and every Noor learned to control his or her bladder, too, so as not to waste fertilizer on empty sand.

Medoor longed for the steppes, that great sea of grass dotted with the gray-green rosettes of jarb plants and interrupted by occasional thorn trees with their tart, crimson fruit. The rivers of the steppes were full of silvery cheevle tiny toothsome fish, perfectly safe to eat and equally full of shiggles plump, ground-running birds that could not be eaten at all unless one cooked them with grain but when cooked with grain tasted of heaven. Medoor told herself she would trade all the wines and sweetmeats of Northshore for the food of the steppes.

She hurried toward the wine merchants' stalls, as though by speeding this part of their necessary preparation she could speed their departure. She was heartily sick of Northshore; tired of the babble and bellow of its people, the muddy taste of its food, and the stink of its workers, glad as she had never been glad before of her dark skin, which prevented the Tears of Viranel from invading her body, dead or alive. Tears wouldn't work on black folk. Something about the light not getting through. It didn't matter why they wouldn't work. The fact was enough to be thankful for.

"Thanks be to the Jabr dur Noor," she murmured to herself in the ritual prayer of the Noors. "Thanks be that I am black." Thus assured of the attention of the All-Seeing, she lifted a merchant's purse as he pressed through the market throng, slipping it into her trouser leg. At the wine merchant's she bargained well. Between what she bought out of the merchant's purse and what she slipped into her wide pockets without paying for, the price would be acceptable, even to Porabji. There was fresh puncon for sale, but Medoor did not bother running to the old man with word of it. When they returned to camp, she simply emptied her capacious trouser legs, placing russet fruit after russet fruit onto the meal wagon tailgate, grinning as she did so until Porabji, who had begun by scowling at her, had to grin in return.

"You'll be caught one of these days, girl," he said, shaking his head. "You'll be caught and brought up before the Tower charged with theft."

"What'll they do, let the fliers eat me?" She grinned. Criminals were dosed with Tears and given to the fliers for food, at least white ones were, or so it was rumored.

Porabji shook his head. "They'll burn you, girl. That's what they do to us Noors. If the fliers can't eat someone, they'll bum him and scatter his ashes on the River."

Medoor sobered somewhat, if only for a time. She had witnessed a burning once. It was not an end that appealed to her. She promised herself for the hundredth time to be more careful. Still, stealing was the one thing she did really well, and it was hard to give up one's only talent. She went toward the campfire in a mood of mixed self-congratulation and caution. One more night among the stinking heathen of this town, then three towns more, then home, to the tents of ... well. Home. That was enough.

When the Moor had been fed, Medoor was free to amuse herself until roll call. There was never any question where she would go or what she would do with her free time. She had had only one passion since she had first seen the River. Boats. Boats spoke to Medoor. Their planks oozed with mysterious travel, far destinations. Their crews had been all-the-way-around. They had seen everything, been everywhere. Sometimes the owners would let her come aboard. More than once she'd gone aboard at some lecher's invitation and had to show her knife and whip to get off again, but no owner was going to bring the curse of the Melancholies down 'on himself. He might hint a little, or make an outright proposition, but he wouldn't try rape. At least, Medoor thought with some satisfaction, none had yet. It had been the danger her mother had most feared for a Moor daughter, here among the heathen. Medoor had had to promise utmost prudence before she had obtained permission to join the Melancholies.

For some days now, there had been one particular boat at the Chantry docks that interested Medoor, and it was certain the troubled man who was owner of the Gift of Potipur wouldn't bother her. Though he seemed to like to talk to her, he hadn't

once looked at her with that particular expression men sometimes got. It was almost as though he didn't know she was a woman at all, and this was part of the fascination. Most boatmen were garrulous sorts, full of tales and exaggerations, but the crew of the Gift was of a different kind. Quiet. Almost secretive. Not fearful, she thought, but with a kind of separation about them, as though they knew something the rest of the world didn't. Thrasne himself had a habit of standing on the deck, staring southward over the River at one particular spot, as though there should be something there he could see.

"Thrasne owner," she called, making her way up the plank.

"Medoor Babji," came the call in return. He was below, where she often found him, supervising the repair of the ship's planks stove in by some great floating tree on the wide River. She poked her head down, attracted by the strange' smell from below. Most of the crew was there, caulking the new planks with frag sap. The hot pungency of the caulk took her breath away, and she wondered how they could bear to work in the close heat of the hold. She went back to the deck, pausing for a time to admire the great winged figure that poised at the bow of the vessel, a giant flame-bird, perhaps, or a winged angel. Tired of this, she leaned against the rail, watching the water. There, after a time, Thrasne joined her.

"Another day or two," he said, wiping his hands on a scrap of waste. "We'll be done with it."

"How can you breathe down there?"

"Oh, after an hour or two, you get drunk with it. When everyone starts giggling and stumbling, then's time to call a halt for the day. They'll be coming up soon." He nodded at her, a friendly expression. "Medoor Babji," he mused. "What does your name mean? It must mean something."

"It does mean something," she retorted. "As much as yours does."

"Thrasne?" He thought about this for a moment. "It was my grandfather's name. It was the name of the place he came from, inland, where they had a farm. So, what does your name mean?"

"The Moor have a secret language of naming. We usually don't share our secret names with Northshoremens."

"Oh."

He said it flatly, accepting rejection, and she immediately sought to make amends.

"I just meant it wasn't customary. All our names are two words, and the two words put together have another meaning. Like in our home tribe, there's a man named Jikool Pesit. Jikool means 'stones,' and Pesit means 'nighttime,' 'dark.' Stones in the dark are something you fall over, so that name would mean 'Stumbler' in Northshore language."

He turned an interested face, so she went on. "I have a good friend whose name is Temin Suteed. Temin means 'a key,' and Suteed is 'golden'-ah, like sunlight. If you lock up gold with a key, that means 'treasure,' so that's her name. Treasure ...

"My grandfather's name was M'noor Jeroomly. M'noor is from the same word as our tribal name. Noor. Noor means 'a speaking people.' And m'noor means 'spoken.' Jeroomly means 'promising,' so the two together mean 'oath,' and that was his name."

"How about Taj Noteen?" asked Thrasne, who had met the troupe leader.

She laughed. "In Northshore he would be called Strutter."

Thrasne shook his head, not understanding.

"It comes from the words for cock and feather, that is, plume, and the plumed birds always strut, you know."

"But you won't tell me what your name means?"

She flushed. "Perhaps someday." Actually, Medoor Babji still had her baby name, and it meant something like "dearest little one." She did not want Thrasne to know that. Yet.

He let it go, staring out across the River, upon his face that expression of concern and yearning that had so interested Medoor.

"What's out there?" she asked, taking the plunge. "You're always looking out there."

"There!" He was startled, stuttered a reply. "Oh, someone-someone from the crew, is all. Someone we had to leave on an island when we came in for repairs. We're to pick ... her up when we're solid again, and it's been longer than we planned. We thought it would be before festival."

"Oh." She didn't comment further. With some men she might have teased, but not with Thrasne. Whatever bothered him, it was no light thing. And whoever he had left behind, it had been no common crew member. "Well, we may see you down River, then. Our leader says we'll visit three more towns before turning north."

"Possibly." He wasn't interested. She could tell. His lack of interest was irritating enough to gamble on. "Thrasne?"

"Hmm?"

"Who is she, really?"

His silence made her think she had overstepped, but after a time he turned toward her, not looking at her, heaving one hip onto the rail so he could sit half facing her.

"Did you ever dream of anyone, Medoor Babji?"

She had climbed onto the rail and teetered there now, trying to make sense of his question. "Of anyone? I guess so. Mostly people I know, I suppose."

"Did you ever dream of someone you didn't know? Over and over again?"

She shook her head. This conversation was not going as she had thought it might. Nonetheless, it was interesting. "No, Thrasne owner. I never have."

"I used to. When I was only a boy. A woman. Always the same woman. I called her Suspirra. A dream woman. The most beautiful woman in the world. I made a little carving of her. I still have it." He was silent again, then, and she thought he had talked all he would. Just as she was about to get down from the rail and bid him a polite farewell, he began again.

"When I was near grown, I found a woman's body in the River. It had been blighted. You know what that is?"

She nodded. She had never seen it, but she had a general idea.

"It was the woman I'd dreamed of. Line for line. Every feature. Face. Eyes. Feet. Everything. I brought her out of the River and kept her, Medoor Babji. Kept her for many years. And then one day I met the daughter of that woman. Found her, I guess you'd say. Truly, her daughter. The daughter she had borne long ago, before she had drowned. And the daughter was alive and the same, line for line. And she came onto the Gift of Potipur. It was before Conjunction, winter, when I found her. And that was more than a year, now."

"And it was that woman you had to leave on the island?"

"That woman, yes."

"Why? Is someone after her?"

He looked her in the eyes for the first time. "Can I trust you not to go talking about this business, Babji? It could be my life. And hers."

"Laughs?" She held, her breath. This was the stuff of nightmare and romance. Laughs and dream women.

Seeing his discomfort, she changed the subject. "It's nice you found your dream woman, Thrasne. Things like that don't often happen."

"I don't know what's happened," he said in a kind of quiet sadness. "Her body lives on the Gift. But her spirit-it isn't here yet, Babji. So, I'm patient about it."

He went on then, for some time, talking. He told her everything he knew of Pamra Don, everything he had ever thought, even some of the things he had hoped, though he did not realize that. Far off along the shore she heard the sound of "Moor count" shrilling over the water.

"I must go, Thrasne owner," she whispered, interrupting him. "My leader will whip me with my own whip if I am not in place very soon." Though he would not if he knew who she was, she thought. Still, it was important he not know.

"Ah," he said, his unfocused gaze coming to rest on her and gradually clearing to reveal the girl perched there before him, dark smooth skin gleaming like the surface of the River. Her hair fell in a heavy fringe all the way to her knees, twisty strands of fifty or so hairs, each of which hung together, never tangling, like lengths of shiny black twine beneath a beaded headband, all gold and blue in the evening light. The scales of her fish skin vest gleamed also, laced tight over the long, full-

sleeved shirt she wore tucked into pamet trousers died blue with mulluk shell. Her dark hand rested upon the rail, inches from his own, and he took it, turned it over to examine the pink brown of her palm, scarred and calloused from the whip. Her eyes were dark, and her pink lips parted in complaint.

"Come now, owner. I must go."

"Go, Babji. I didn't mean to keep you. It's just I had not really seen you until now."

She ran down the plank and along the shore, wondering at the expression on his face. A kindly, surprised alertness, like a child finding something interesting and unexpected. Well. What to make of that. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Still, she was not sorry to hear him calling after her.

"Return again, Babji. Talk has done me good. Perhaps your people would like a ride to the next towns west?"

13

When the Gift of Potipur left the Chantry docks, Babji's troop of Melancholies was aboard, paying nothing for the transport and living on their own provisions. Thrasne had come to trust them, and, wisely, had seen their presence as a kind of camouflage. The Gift put on sail and headed out into the River, cutting across the tidal current toward the west end of Strinder's Isle, hidden in the southern mists.

Two days later, decks crowded with the curious Noor, Thrasne lowered a boat with two men to row ashore at the west end of the island, shot them a line, and tied fast to a great tree that leaned above the flood. It was twenty-two days after Conjunction.

Pamra had been camped on the tiny beach for most of that time. She came aboard with Lila, hardly noticing the dark faces of the crowded passengers, not seeing at all the concern on Thrasne's face. Her eyes were deep set in a haggard face, and her hair was tangled as though she had not combed it in days. She was no less beautiful than ever, but it was a terrible, anguished beauty.

"Are you all right?" he begged, appalled. "You look as though you'd been ill."

"I should have seen there were no older males," she told him earnestly. "I should have seen how worn away he was."

"Pamra?"

"I was so sure it was cruel. So sure. Sometimes things are I cruel and can be changed. Sometimes we only make them worse. Sentimentalizing. Pretending. So tied up in my own ideas, I couldn't see what was in front of me."

"Pamra! Who are you talking about?"

She shook her head, handed Lila to him, made her way on board to her old refuge in the owner-house, glancing over her shoulder as she went, scarcely noticing the curious group of Melancholies at the rail, the young girl who was pressing close to her with open curiosity on her face. Passengers. Well, sometimes the Riverboats did carry deck passengers.

She did not really need to look behind her to know that Neff still followed her, as he had since the night after the fires. The smoke had risen in the village, and he had come. Stodder hadn't seen him. Pamra had. He had been with her since, face alight with curiosity and wonder, flowers in his hand, a recusant ghost.

And he was not alone. The pillar of golden dust beside him was her mother. And the accusative formless shadow was Delia. Three.

"Pamra, love. Are you all right?" Thrasne asked, following her into the house.

She let him hold her, even held him in return, aware at some subconscious level of the need in him, perceiving feeling in him she had never recognized, not even in herself until it was over, depending upon his kindness not to bother her with whatever it was.

"I'll be all right, Thrasne. I'll be all right." She stepped away from him, shutting him out. She had to be all right. There was something Neff wanted her to do, something she owed him. Him and her mother, and Delia. When she was very quiet, she could hear their voices.

The Ascertainers maintained a domiciliary compound with dining hall, exercise yard, and dormitory, some above the ground, some below for winter occupancy. All was gray, splintery, very old. They kept it neat but could not keep it clean. The dust was too ancient, too deep in the cracks. When Ilze was given a broom to sweep it away, he knew he swept only the top layer of something that had been there for longer than he could imagine. Lifetimes. Some of the boards in the walls were newer than others. Some of the beams a lighter color. He saw it being replaced, piece by piece, over the centuries, never changing, always renewed. Why had they needed a place like this that long ago? Why did they need it now?

His Superior was in the compound, as well as some dozens of others, all with the same dazed look of incomprehension that Ilze knew he wore. There was no prohibition against talking together, but they seemed reluctant to do it, as though someone might be listening. As though anything said by anyone might lead to more questions. Even conjecture seemed dangerous. Only with his own Superior did he whisper his questions, await her answers.

"I don't understand," he said, gritting his teeth, trying to reach her with his voice as he had been unable to reach the fliers. "I thought if we got to the Chancery, we were safe! I haven't seen any humans at all except the guards and someone in a veil and some half-wit carrying buckets. Why were those foul poultry allowed to misuse me so? I don't understand any of this. Help me understand it."

"Shh, shh. Ilze. Be thankful you are alive. I am thankful I am alive. You were not the only one mistreated, so hush. Think. You will need to think."

"Think of what? I've done nothing but think since I've been here, and I've been here forever. I need some answers." "I meant for you to think strategically. Listen to me. We came here, to the Chancery. We demanded to see the Protector. Instead, we were sent to the Accusatory and sometime later were there questioned by the Servants of Abricor. But there were human Accusers watching, Ilze. Behind the veil you may be sure was a human Accuser." Her mouth twisted bitterly at these words, as though she needed to spit. "And the Servants of Abricor didn't take us away. We stayed here."

Her hand on his arm stopped his quick, angry words. "We stayed here, Ilze. And we're alive." He was forced to consider the implications of this. "You think ... you think it was some kind of agreement?"

"I listen in my mind, Ilze, for hints of conspiracy or ignorance or trouble. What words were said here? I can imagine what the Talker said, the one who came for us, the one you forced to bring us here. He demanded that you and I be bound securely and given to them. And then Lees Obol, the Protector of Man, would have said, 'No, no, my friends, my treaty mates, but these are humans. Humans are not sent to the Talons. Humans must be examined here. By us.' And then the Talkers would have blustered and demanded. What would they have said?"

Ilze thought about this, frowning, realizing he knew quite well what the Talkers would have said. "They would have said they did not trust the humans. They must question us, they would have said, because they did not trust the humans. Perhaps that is not what they said, but that is what they meant."

"Such was my own thought. A certain lack of trust. So, the Protector, for some reason-which I will learn if Potipur grants me time-allows us to be questioned by the Talkers. But not taken away. And not seriously injured. I will not even have scars." Think about that, she urged him silently, wanting him to realize that both of them had been equally mistreated. Both of us, Ilze. When you leave here, you must remember they tortured both of us.

Ilze, who believed he carried scars he would never lose, did not reply to this. "And now?"

"And now something else. Some further part of the game. These fliers ... oh, but they are concerned with Rivermen. Endlessly they asked me about the Rivermen. They asked you as well, I suppose. Always about the Rivermen." About which we know nothing, she urged him silently. Nothing at all. Either of us.

"They did. But I know nothing about the Rivermen! I'm not one!"

"But they must find out, Ilze. If they cannot find one who knows, then they must ask those who do not. They must find out."

He ignored the illogic of this, still trying to comprehend. "I didn't know the Servants could talk. I didn't know they had ... had a society of their own."

She became very dignified, almost prim. "Just as there are secrets seniors do not share with juniors or novices, so there are

secrets Superiors do not share with seniors. You would have learned all about the Talkers in time, if you had earned advancement. As you would have done." Oh, yes, she told herself. He would have done. And pity the Tower he would have headed in his time.

"These others, the Talkers ... ?"

"There are not many of them. They come from the flier caste, from the Servants of Abricor. They do not seem to run in particular lines of descent, so I am told. They are hatched infrequently, once in a thousand hatchings. It is what our scholars call a sex-linked characteristic. All Talkers are males. When the ordinary flier males breed, they die. The Talkers are identified while still young; they are fed a special diet to prevent both breeding and death."

"A special diet?" He thought about this before answering. "When we're through with the workers, we drop them in the bone pits and the Servants of Abricor eat them. We all know that. No one cares. What do the Talkers eat?"

"Our flesh is poisonous to the flier people, Ilze. In time you would have studied our history, how we came to this world to find the Servants already here; how they grew monstrously in number until the world could not feed them, until the herds of thrassil and weehar were gone; how they hunted us, only to find us poisonous. You would have read of Thoulia, one of their Talkers. Thoulia the Marvelous. It was Thoulia, who showed them how to soften our flesh with the Tears of Viranel, and it was then the wars began in earnest between our two races. We killed them by the hundreds, Ilze, and they killed us, until there were few of them left and not many more of us. Until the treaty was made at last which allowed them to take our dead ...

"Our dead are what they eat. Do you see why they fear the Rivermen so?"

He did not see. He could not see because of his anger. He did not realize she had not answered his question.

She went on, voice calm, willing him to listen and understand. "If the cult of the Rivermen were to prevail, the fliers would die. All the Talkers. All the Servants. They would starve. There would be nothing for them to eat."

Gradually he perceived the implications of this, implications so enormous he could not face them. All the philosophy, the theology, all his studies oh, one knew there were evasions, one knew there were euphemisms employed, but still. Basically, one believed. Every senior Awakener knew that all the dead go into the worker pits except the Awakeners themselves. Even knowing this, still, still one believed. One understood the need for a pious mythology to keep the ordinary people quiet, but that did not nullify the essential truth. Senior Awakeners knew that truth. They had been accepted as the elect of Potipur. Common people, common people had to be led, instructed, used, then purified through that final agony. It was not Holy Sorters who put the sainted dead in Potipur's arms, it was the Servants of Abricor who carried their souls to Potipur. The common folk could not expect a fleshy resurrection, but that did not affect the spiritual one. But for Awakeners—for Awakeners it was a real immortality. In the body. It was the Servants of Abricor who carried the bodies of dead Awakeners directly to ...

The thought stopped, blocked, destroyed by what she had been saying. Obviously this was not true. Obviously.

"What happens to us, to the Awakeners?" he snarled at her, his fingers digging deeply into her arm. "If the Servants don't carry our bodies directly to Potipur, what really happens to us?" He hated himself for asking the question, sure she was laughing at him as he had always laughed at Pamra.

"If we are not clever and if our colleagues detest us sufficiently to take vengeance, we go into the pits with common folk," she said haughtily, ignoring his grasp. "With our hair rebraided to make us look like merchants or carpenters. In this way the myth is kept alive that no dead Awakener is ever seen in a worker pit.

"If we are more clever, or less disliked, we are burned to ashes at one of the crematories of the order. There is one here, at Highstone Lees. And if we are very clever, if we do our jobs well and cause no trouble to the Chancery or the Talkers, we are given the Sacred Payment. We are given what the treaty requires we be given, the elixir. If we receive that gift, we live a long, long time. Hundreds and hundreds of years. So be clever, Dze. Let go of me."

He let go of her, let go of her entirely, left her, did not try to speak with her after that. He had seen angry laughter in her face, bitter amusement. It was not unlike the amusement he had hidden so often from Pamra. The lady Kesseret thought him funny. Because he had believed. He burned with savage, humiliated shame at this. Because he had believed!

When the day came, he went before the Ascertainers, a kind of court with several humans sitting on high chairs to hear

what was said. These, he was told, were members of the Court of Appeals of the Towers. Judges, he thought. His Superior, the lady Kesseret, was there. She appeared little worse for her experience, though Ilze knew he looked like shit. Bruised, uncombed. They had not let him put his hair in braids, and it hung about his face like tangled rope. The Talkers were there, both the ones who questioned him and others he had not seen before. Old ones. With silvered feathers.

It was one of these who asked for the Accusation.

"Ilze, senior of the Tower of Baristown, is accused of heresy; of conspiracy to aid and comfort the Rivermen; of sheltering a Riverman spy in the Tower. He is accused of erroneous beliefs. He was led astray by lust. It may be he is essentially orthodox." The humans on the bench accused him. He did not believe it.

He was given no chance to answer these charges. The silver-feathered ones merely nodded as they turned to the human people on the high chairs, and one of these said clearly, not looking at either Ilze or the lady Kesseret as he spoke, "We will allow the Uplifted Ones to be present as Ilze is examined by the Ascertainers."

The Talkers left. Ilze stood in the room alone with Lady Kesseret, he in the cage they had put him in, she behind the railing that separated him from the others.

"Poor Ilze," she said. "If you can withstand it, they will let you atone." There was a strangeness in her voice that he could not identify. Only her words were sympathetic.

She went away then, saying nothing more. In the days of pain that followed, he remembered her words.

They threatened him repeatedly with the Tears of Viranel. He defied them. "Give them to me. I don't care anymore. I might as well be dead." They did things to him, things he had in the past done to others to shame and humiliate them. Ilze, however, felt no shame, only a slow, burning fury. He knew too well their purposes, but he learned his resolution and understanding could be weakened by pain. When they hurt his body, it insisted upon healing itself so they could hurt it again. When he tried to starve himself out of fury at them and to deprive them of their obvious pleasure in his pain, they fed him by force. They would not let him kill himself. And through it all the veiled watcher stood, listening, peering, silent except for the sound of millstones.

And yet, even throughout it all, he knew they were not hurting him as much as they could. It was as though they did not really want to break him. As though they were playing with him. Waiting.

Finally he demanded they give him the Tears of Viranel in order to prove he was telling the truth.

The Talker was amused.

"Accused, if these Ascertainers gave you the Tears, all you would tell them would be the truth. Then we would eat you. A temporary pleasure which would not advance our cause."

"Oh, by the lost love of Potipur, isn't the truth what you want! Isn't that what you've been putting me through this pain for, to get the truth!"

"Oh, no, accused. If we wanted only the truth, we would have given you the Tears long since."

The winter wore on. He was moved to a cell below. Gradually, through the pain and his own anger, he realized what they wanted. Something to confirm their suspicion. Something to save them embarrassment before the Chancery officials. Something to justify their opinions. Not merely whatever it was Ilze did or did not know, but something more. Not the truth that he had, but some future verity, something they could build upon to make themselves secure. It came to him slowly, through the agony of their knives and pinchers. It came to him slowly, and clever as he was in the ways of submission, he did not realize they had led him there.

"If you will let me find Pamra," he said at last, believing he had thought of it himself, "I will find what it is you need to know. Just let me find her."

"Well," mused the Ascertainer who twisted the iron, "it would serve her right. To have repaid your concern in this fashion was an abomination. To have treated you so when you had been so kind to her. This accusation came about through her, Ilze. Your pain is due to her, Ilze. If it weren't for Pamra ... " Against the wall the veiled watcher made the sound of grinding.

"Let me find her," he begged.

After that there was a long quiet time when the pain passed and was more or less forgotten. "Your heresy came about through her," they told him, both the human Ascertainers and the Talkers who watched. "We're sorry for your suffering, but it was all her doing." It was a revelation that he knew to be absolutely true. He had almost compromised his own future. Because of her. Because of Pamra. If they had not been so understanding, he would have been condemned, because of Pamra.

"Are you feeling well, Ilze?" It was the lady Kesseret once more, rather gaunt and wan looking, as though she had been many nights without sleep. She wore a robe he had never seen before, one that covered her hands and feet. When she moved, she winced. "Are you recovered?"

"Quite recovered, thank you." It was early spring. He had recovered. Obviously, the lady Kesseret had not.

"The Ascertainers met this morning. I was in attendance. They have ascertained that you were not entirely guiltless, but misled. Tricked. You have been offered an opportunity to atone through special duty. As a Laugher, I understand, for Gendra Mitiar, Dame Marshal of the Towers."

"I know," he said, his anger hot at her tone. It would be more than atonement.

"I am told they plan a reward for you when your mission is done. A Tower of your own. An initial offer of the Payment." Her voice was without emotion or encouragement, uninvolved in this, as though it had happened quite separate from her life and without any connection to it.

He bowed, silent. Hatred moved him, not ambition. When he felt his wounds, hatred moved him.

"The Payment comes from the Talkers, and they must approve its recipients. That they have done so speaks well of your future expectations, Ilze."

Hot curiosity still burned in him. "Tell me again about the Talkers. Who are they?"

"They are the leaders of those who lived here before we came."

"What was it they ate before we came?"

"Beasts, so they say. I've told you."

"Tell me again."

"They ate hoovar and thrassil and weehar, animals with hot juicy bodies. They ate them all. All but a very few who survived here behind the Teeth of the North. The Protector has small herds of thrassil and weehar here in the Chancery lands. A few hundred animals. The hoovar are extinct." She rose, moved about the room, stiffly, uncomfortably. Again, Ilze wondered what they had done to her. "When all the beasts were gone, they had no choice but to eat us-us or fish."

"Why not fish, then?"

"Because, so they say, fish eaters lose the power of flight and thereby blaspheme the will of Potipur, who made them fliers. Some essential ingredient is missing in fish. Eating fish changes them in other ways, too-makes their females more intelligent, for example. The female fliers are as you have seen them. Dirty, quarrelsome. I am told they, too, can talk but do so very little. Eating fish makes them less aggressive, as well. There is a tribe of fish eaters somewhere, so they say, a tribe called the Treeci. In their language, 'treeci' means 'offal.' Talkers speak of fish eaters as we do of heretics." She winced, sat down, cradled her hands as though they pained her.

"No, given a choice of eating fish or dying, they might well eat fish. However, they prefer to eat us. And the Talkers eat us alive, Ilze. Not dead. There are not many Talkers. Two or three living humans taken from each town each month are enough to feed them. You will learn how to do it when you are Superior of a Tower. It will be your task to recruit citizens for this purpose. The Talkers do not eat the dead. The fliers would not eat the dead if they had anything to eat."

"So they might feast on me, or on you!"

"The Servants have nothing else to eat," she said simply, as though his statement were irrelevant. "They are the Servants of Abricor. We worship Abricor. We worship Potipur, and Potipur promised them plenty." These are truths, her voice said. Truths beyond question. "Do you think you will be able to find her? Pamra?"

Was this another test? He stared through her, not seeing her. Who was she, really? Another like himself or one of them? A betrayer? Or a betrayed? Had she, too, really been tortured? If she had, he knew with sudden certainty, they would have

told her the suffering was Ilze's fault, and she would have had no choice but to use him as he would use Pamra in turn. What was she up to now? "I will find her," he said.

"Find her. That's good. Bring her back to the Tower."

"I will give her Tears."

"No, Ilze. You will not. That is an order. Not at first. She can only tell us the truth if you give her Tears. We must have more than truth. The Talkers need more than that."

He knew that already. The Talkers needed far more than truth. He had learned there were occasions the truth did not serve, when only the presumptive lie would serve at all. He had not yet learned what they needed to know, but he would. He was resolved upon that.

They set him down in the glowing springtime upon the River shore far west of Baris. His scalp had been shaved clean and covered with a curious dark helmet, close as a second skull. None of the scars they had put upon him showed. He turned his face to the west and began the hunt. Pamra. Rivermen. Along the river in both directions others like him moved; others with similar scars. Everyone called them Laughers because of their scornful cries, ha-ha, ha-ha. Even the Rivermen they sought called them that. And they never really laughed.

15

On an evening not long after the Gift had been repaired, Pamra stood on the quiet deck watching Thrasne lay out the boom lines while the ship rocked gently along a pier at Sabin bar. The Melancholies had gone ashore, even Medoor Babji, who these days seemed reluctant to leave the Gift. The sun lay low along the River, making a dazzle that beat against their eyes. Neff stood in the dazzle, and her mother stood there as well, bathing in that effulgence as though to draw nourishment from it. Delia was lost in it, a black shadow obscured by brilliance, so that she, Pamra, could not distinguish one from the other but merely stood at the edge of a glowingly inhabited cloud. All was very still. Sometimes at this hour an expectant hush would fall upon the Riverside, upon the waters themselves, calming and stilling them, making the song-fish hum in voices one could scarcely hear, so soft they were. So it was tonight.

And so it was that Ilze appeared at the edge of her vision like a striding monster, all in black, the black soaking up the glow as though to empty it, to absorb it all, and it flowing toward him as water flows toward a drain, whirling down into blackness. "Ilze!" she breathed, quiet, her stomach telling her the truth of this more than her eyes. There was a striding figure there on the River path, but she did not truly perceive it. Her belly saw it before her brain knew who it was. Then it shivered her, all at once, like a tree cut but not yet fallen, and she collapsed across the rail. "Ilze," she breathed in a tone of mixed relief and horror. "He is a Laugher. Come for me." It was relief he had not seen her yet, horror to know he was seeking her, a verification of everything she had known all along. He bore a flask at his waist, and she knew what it contained. Tears, and a little water to keep them fresh. They would last like that for years, remaining potent to the end, her destiny there swinging at his hip, a threat more monstrous in that she had almost escaped it.

"Lie down," Thrasne whispered to her, pushing her below the line of the rail. She seemed hypnotized by that distant figure, leaning out across the rail as though asking to be noticed. He thrust her down into the piled nets with one hand, then set his foot upon her, holding her there as he tied off the lines to the boom, his stance betraying nothing except attention to the task at hand.

Across the stretch of water the striding figure stopped as though it had heard its name. Sound carried over the River. Perhaps her voice had been loud enough for the Laugher to hear, for he stared out over the long pier to the place the Gift rocked slowly on the tide, holding his right hand to shield his eyes from the brilliant glow in which the Gift was bathed. Thrasne watched him covertly, memorizing the face, the form, the strange helmet he wore. Thrasne had seen such helmets before. This hunter was not a new thing but an old one, at least as old as Blint's youth, for Blint had told him of these men-always men, the Laughers. Beneath the contorted helmet the face was narrow, full of an unconscious ferocity, a violence barely withheld. It was a cruel face in repose, one that could lighten into sudden, dangerous charm when it was expedient to do so. Thrasne looked at his own hands, square upon the ropes, thinking of men he had known with faces like that. Often they died of violence. One time his own hands had pushed the knife home. Sometimes the knives were held by women. Such men were always feared. And hated. Had they not been Laughers, still they would have been hated.

When he looked up again, the Laughter was gone, perhaps into the town.

"You can get up now," he told her. "The hunter has gone." "It was Ilze. Come after me."

Thrasne decided upon calm acceptance of this. There would be no point in lies between them. "Pamra, you knew that someone would come after you. It is time to talk of that now. Make plans. Decide how we will avoid them."

The moment stretched between them. For a moment he thought she would answer him, for she was looking at him as though she actually saw him. Ilze had made her aware of her surroundings, of him no less than of all other things. He waited, breathless, hoping she would speak.

She, however, turned toward the sun glow again. From that glow came a voice, Neff's voice, speaking for her ears only, soft as the feathers of his breast had been. "Cruel, Pamra. Cruel to so raise up the dead, who should lie at peace."

"Remember," instructed her mother, also silently. "Remember."

And from the wrapped darkness that was Delia came a sigh.

"Cruel," Pamra said. "Cruel!" A flame-bird called as though in answer to this.

"Yes," said Thrasne, thinking she meant the man she had just seen. "Very cruel. But we can deal with that."

"It has to be stopped."

He nodded. He had already decided to stop Ilze himself, in the only way possible, but Pamra took his agreement for more than he had intended. Her eyes clouded with mystery once more; her spirit disappeared along some road he could not follow.

"We must go to the Protector of Man. He must be told. He must be told to stop it."

Her face was utterly calm. Behind her in the golden light Neff's voice seemed to breathe an assent.

And her mother's voice. "Remember!"

And for the first and only time, Delia's voice, breathing from the effulgent silence. "It is better when all the people know, Pamra. It is better not to be alone."

Pamra turned to Thrasne, smiling. He had not seen her like this before, though the novices of Baris Tower would have recognized her radiant face, her eyes lighted as though from within by rapture. Her arms went out, out, as though she would encompass the world. "We will go, yes," she breathed to him. "But we must take the people with us, all of them, to the Protector of Man."

And he, lost in her eyes from which the dark shadows had suddenly gone, stared at her in terror, seeing her flee away from him down a long corridor toward a blinding glow into which he could not see and would not dare to go.

From the shore, Medoor Babji saw them there, saw their faces, both, seemed to see an effulgency of wings hovering at Pamra's side, put her hands to her eyes and drew them away again to see only the sun glow and two people silhouetted against it.

Soon the Melancholies would be leaving the Gift to begin the trip to the steppes. It had been disturbing to travel aboard the Gift, disturbing and strange. Now she found herself glad that they would be leaving in a short time. She could not bear the expression on Thrasne's face.

16

The lady Kesseret, Superior of the Baris Tower, former prisoner in the Accusatory of Highland Lees, now convalescent, her injuries received under the question slowly healing, leaned in the window of the library wing looking out upon an evening of early summer. Beneath the window on a narrow ledge was a flame-bird's nest, a tidily woven basket of straw and wild-pamet fiber, holding three spherical golden eggs. An additional pile of pamet fiber lay to one side, weighted down by several small stones. In a flash of orange and gold, the flame-bird itself came swooping down the wall to perch on the ledge and move restively between this pile of tinder and the nest, fluttering its wings as though in indecision whether to stay or go.

The window was in the lady's bedroom, hers at least by guest right. She had occupied this room since the laggard sun had

broken winter's hold upon Highland Lees and let them all come up from the caverns. Cozy though the caverns had been, she preferred this room, windowed to the air. Through the open door she could hear Tharius Don's flat-harp virtuoso, Martien, as he flicked his hammers over throbbing strings. Behind her on the porcelain stove a kettle sang an antiphon to itself. She was warm, well wrapped in a thick robe and in Tharius Don's arms, for the moment forgetful of her pain.

"You comfort me," she said drowsily. "I am wondering why."

"Because we remember really comforting each other," he said. "When it was more than this." For a moment there was something virile and intemperate in his voice, as though for that instant his passion had been more than merely memory. His arms tightened about her, strong arms still, capable of stirring her own recollection so that her mind lusted briefly over old visions while her body laid aside, like some discarded garment.

"It isn't fair," she complained. "Why can we still feel pain so very well when all the other feelings are gone?"

"All the other feelings aren't gone," he said patiently, knowing she knew, knowing she needed to hear him say it. "Only lust. And lust is gone because the Payment is a Talker gift." He did not need to explain that. They both understood it. The Talkers died if they bred. Therefore they did not breed or value breeding. They did not lust. They had no experience of passion. Though they perceived it intellectually, their bodies rejected it, and the elixir made of their blood rejected it as well. "We could have refused the elixir, Kessie."

Refused it. She thought of having refused it, of having grown old with Tharius Don. There were old lovers in Baristown whom she had watched over the years. She had seen them, too, aged past passion, walking hand in hand in the market square. She imagined them snuggled side by side in their beds, complaining to one another like old barnyard fowl, full of clucks and chirrs, grinding the day's events in their leathery gizzards to make each one reasonable and useful to them. "My, my," they would say. "Did you see? Did you ever? What's the world coming to?"

How was it different for them, those old people? Remembering the loves and lusts of youth? Little different, perhaps, except that their twilight was brief, the memories strong enough to last that little time between age and the end, their flavor and fragrance scarcely dimmed by the years, death coming at last while the perfume lingered, making their old lives redolent of youth. They breathed the scents of childhood, a potpourri of their green years. But for Kesseret? And Tharius? What remained? "Dust," she whimpered. "All our love, dust." "Not while I hold you," he told her urgently. "Not while I grieve for your pain."

The memory of pain made her fleetingly angry. "Pain and anger," she said. "Those we keep."

"And curiosity. And laughter. And determination. So you see, it isn't all hopeless."

"It seems so sometimes," she said, remembering the pincers at her fingers, the wedges driven beneath her toenails. "Ah, gods, Tharius, but it seems so."

He buried his face in her hair so she would not see his tears, thinking to himself. "Pity. We haven't lost pity. Which is why we go on plotting, always plotting. Oh, gods, when will the plots be thick enough to clot into action!"

She moved in his arms, as though aware of her pain. "You shouldn't be here," she said.

"Because of Martief? He wouldn't say a word to anyone."

"No, not because of your musician friend, love. Because you shouldn't be here. You shouldn't be showing any interest in me at all. Someone may be watching the corridor to this suite, to see if you come and go-or come and stay."

"You are thinking in township terms, Kessie. Those of us here at the Chancery no longer have the habit of thinking in terms of sexual misconduct. We are beyond scandal."

She hid her face in his shoulder, very white at his words. "I know. Stupid of me."

"Yes, my dear. Stupid of you."

"Do you ever ... are you ever sorry?"

"Sorry to have outlived my passions? Yes. Sorry to have time, still, to do what we are trying to do? No."

She shuddered, trembling at his words, fearful of what they were trying to do. In the past, the cause had seemed the only righteous way to live, and it had not brought her pain. Now it had brought her more than she was ready to bear. "Still, love, they may wonder at your interest in me. What am I, after all? Superior of a Tower. There are thousands of those."

"I made my interest very clear," he said, folding her more closely in the robe. "I said before the questioning started that it was shameful treatment of a loyal member of the service. I've said it in the interim, several times, and I've capped it by demanding they recognize your courage by providing you with care and attention until you can be restored to duty."

"Which I could have been yesterday, or last week."

"Not true, Kessie. You may have come here the direct route, by flying. The road back is not so easy."

"Easy! By the true God, Tharius, I hope you didn't think that was easy!"

"You lived through it," he said, caressing her. "That's the important thing. You lived."

"I lived because I dragged the most ambitious and viciously self-serving Awakener in my Tower into my problem and linked his future to mine. He's one I should have rid the Tower of early on. I didn't. I saved him, for just such a need. As a stratagem it worked, but I'm not proud of it, Tharius." She trembled again, and the slow tears gathered at the curve of her eyes. She blinked, driving them back, willing that he would not see her so weakened. "Now he is loose out there, a Laugher. And I am among those who sent him."

"You lived," he said again. "That's all that matters."

She had begun to feel real pain again, but it was too soon to take more of the waters of surcease that Tharius had provided. "Tell me," she whispered in an attempt to distract herself from her pain. "Tell me how far we have come?"

He looked around carefully, being sure they were not watched or overheard, a movement made habitual through a hundred years of conspiratorial conversations. "The cause has members in over five thousand Towers," he murmured at last, like a litany, well learned, often rehearsed. "One-fifth of all Towers. Over half of them include the Superiors of those Towers. We have strong lay groups in ninety percent of all the towns. Over half the signal routes are ours, at least on some shifts. I am now informed within a day or two of things happening anywhere on Northshore."

She concentrated, remembering conversations held long ago. "The cause is about where we planned it would be, then. Somehow I had thought it lagged."

"No. It has not lagged. The suspicions of Mitiar and Bqssit were planned for. The only thing we had not foreseen was this untimely suspicion on the part of the fliers. Now there must be some kind of diversion, something to draw them away. At the moment, they are too much focused upon the Chancery."

"What are you planning?"

"I've sent an actor friend to the tents of the Noor, to visit Queen Fibji."

"Oh, Tharius, haven't those poor devils suffered enough?" Her own pain was forgotten for the moment in the pain she felt for the Noor, constant victims of the Jondarites. "Can't we leave them out of it?"

He shook his head sadly. "It will mean nothing worse for them than they already suffer, Kessie. I've sent someone to talk of South shore, that's all. I've had him say nothing which wasn't in the palace library. There's every possibility South shore really exists, just as I've had it described to her. If I know Queen Fibji, she'll send an expedition within the year. General Jondrigar would try to stop them, of course, if he heard of it. He would not let all those possible slaves go. He enjoys his expeditions among the Noor too much to let them escape. We must make sure he does not hear of it. The fliers will be much confused if they hear of it. So, we must make sure they do."

"And it will turn eyes away from us. When do you think, Tharius? Soon?"

"I think soon. If nothing else happens to upset our plans. If no other junior Awakener goes off with a pitful of workers. If no eager Riverman starts the uprising ahead of time. If there is no spontaneous religious uprising of one kind or another." He brooded over this while Kessie moved restlessly in his arms.

So much to keep track of; so much to control. Many years ago there had been two factions within their movement. One for immediate war; one for the hope of peace.

The war faction had plotted to kill the fliers, all of them. They had planned to pick a time when the Talkers would be out of the Talons and simply murder them all.

Tharius had been a leader of the peace party. He recalled impassioned speeches he had made, phrases he had used. "We

would be forever guilty of the murder of an intelligent species." He believed it. Much though he detested the fliers, including the Talkers, still he believed it. Moral men did not do such things. Not to another species with intelligence, with speech, with a culture of its own.

Some years of covert exploration into the actual attitudes of Talkers had followed. He laughed bitterly sometimes when he recalled that time. His thesis had been so simple. What the fliers were doing was immoral, unethical. They were eating intelligent beings. They were raising the dead, who were possibly aware of that fact. If they ate fish, they could continue to live, but in a moral way. Wouldn't that be preferable? Wouldn't it be a better arrangement? He had asked this of Talker after Talker during convocations. "Wouldn't it be better?"

To which they had cawed hideous laughter or turned to deposit blobs of shit at his toes, showing what they thought of the idea. Eventually he had been forced to understand. Morality was not an absolute. Theirs was not his. His was not shared even by all humans, much less by this nonhuman species.

He had quit trying to sell the idea after a time. He had been warned it wouldn't work, and it was becoming difficult to disguise his stubborn efforts as anything but what they were. He had called it research, but research was not Tharius's affair, after all. Council member Koma Nepor was Chief of Research. Questioning the fliers was not Tharius's responsibility, either. Ezasper Jorn was Ambassador to the Thraish. When it became evident Tharius's efforts were drawing unpleasant attention from both the Talons and the Chancery, what had been confidential attempts at negotiation became deeply covert. There were to be no more attempts at persuasive conversion of fliers. Which left, he was convinced at last, only conversion by necessity. If there were no bodies to eat, then the fliers would eat fish or nothing.

And in that belief, the cause had been born. From that statement all else had followed. Agents moving among the towns, increasing the fisheries against the day when fliers would need fish to eat. Superiors of Towers sending worker crews to build more jetties. Rivermen holding themselves ready for the day when every worker pit would be emptied in the deep of the night. Even now agents moved across Northshore seeking patches of Tears to spray with fungicide, reducing the number of locations where they were found. When the day came, there would be no human bodies available, at least none treated with Tears. And when the morning of the revolution came, fliers would eat fish or die.

His arms tightened around his burden once more. The fliers would eat fish or die. And the humans in the Chancery? Those in the Towers? Well, they would eat fish or whatever else they liked, but in a little time they would die as well. When the cause struck, there would be no more elixir to keep their superannuated bodies alive. On some days, Tharius actually looked forward to that time. It was not so much that he tired of life as that he tired of the lives of others. His mouth quirked, thinking of this. Oh, to see the end of Gendra Mitiar!

"Why are you smiling?" asked the lady Kesseret, amused at his expression despite herself.

"Because what we are doing is right," he said. "Because it is right."

The flame-bird left its nest to swing out across the courtyard, the vivid circle of its flight seeming to linger on the air. Then it returned to the ledge and began to dance, wings out, legs lifted alternately as it hopped to and fro on the narrow stone, bowing, stretching, stopping occasionally to shift the little stones, sharp-edged with red in the ruddy evening light, as though bloodstained.

"Do you think it will light the nest soon?" She could ask this without crying, distracting herself.

"Probably."

"I always feel so sorry for them."

"Shh. Kessie. Don't waste your time feeling sorry for them. If you must feel sorry, feel sorry for yourself, or for me, come to that."

The flame-bird danced gravely to a music and song it alone could hear, forward on one leg, then back, on the other leg forward, then back, bowing with wings wide, pointing its beak upward as though invoking some far-off presence. In the adjoining room, Martien seemed to sense the rhythm of its lonely ballet, for the music began to accompany the performance.

"I wonder what the bird thinks."

"I'm afraid we'll never know."

Whirling rapidly, the feathered dancer picked up a stone and held it firmly in its beak to strike it against the ledge with a tiny battering sound. Sparks flew, dwindled, died. It struck again, and again.

"Oh, Tharius. Can't you stop it?"

"I could. But then the young ones wouldn't hatch, Kessie. The eggs won't break without it."

"I know." She turned her face into the hollow of his throat, not wanting to see.

A spark caught the tinder. The flame-bird picked up a beakful of burning tinder and laid it upon the nest, fanning it with her wings. Smoke rose in a white coil. The sticks and straw of the nest began to burn with tiny, almost invisible flames.

"Did it catch?" A muffled question from her hidden mouth.

"Yes. It caught."

The flame-bird began to roll one of the golden eggs about on the burning nest, charring the surface of the shell, seeming not to notice its own feathers were on fire, the flesh of its legs crisping, its bill beginning to blister.

The first egg cracked wide in the heat, the tiny nestling within it pushing out a questing beak, then thrusting the shell fragment aside with strong, infant wings as it flew upward in a wild flutter of damp feathers amid the smoke. The mother turned to the second egg, then the third. Only when this last nestling flew did the flame-bird raise itself into the air, singing, alive amidst its flaming plumage, spiraling as though in a frantic attempt to escape its own immolation. "Oh," cried Kessie. "I hate hearing them sing like that."

"Shh. They say it sings in ecstasy, Kessie." Above them in the sky, the singing faded into a whisper of sound, the wings stopped beating. A black speck planed away, trailing a line of misty smoke beyond the walls of the palace.

"I don't believe that," she wept, raising her stained face to look at the fading trail of smoke. "I think it sings in agony. It would scream if it could." She trembled, suddenly aware of her own pain, wanting not to think of that, wanting to forget, to think of anything else instead.

"Pamra used to use the flame-bird as a parable in recruitment homilies," she chattered, letting the first thing that came to mind flow from her mouth like water. "She tried to liken the Awakeners to the mother flame-bird, sacrificing itself for its children. It wasn't a successful parable at all. Too painful. The last year or so she'd been using one about the Candy Tree which worked better. She was a marvelous recruiter."

His mouth turned down, reminded now of the cause of all their recent pain. "Where is she, do you think?"

"Oh, Tharius, I hope she got away. I hope she's safe somewhere, if anywhere can be called safe. Perhaps there was enough time before Ilze got onto her trail for her to find safety."

"Or the River."

"I think not, somehow. There was a toughness about her. A kind of impenetrable naivete but tough, nonetheless."

"The last of the Dons," said Tharius. "My great-great grandchild. I had such hopes for her, somehow. I thought she might be another you, another Kesseret ... "

"I know. I know you wondered about her, cared for her. That's why I kept close track of her. Though not close enough, it seems. She came very close to ruining everything."

"How could you keep track of her at all without attracting notice? Superiors don't normally interest themselves in novices or junior Awakeners. Not as I remember."

"Oh, my dear. You of all people to ask such a question, when you taught me every subterfuge I know. I kept track of her through my servant, Threnot. Threnot always goes veiled, and she goes everywhere. And sometimes it was Threnot herself, and sometimes it was me, listening to a recruitment parable or watching someone at the worker pits. I spent a lot of time watching Pamra."

He shook his head, drawing her closer. "Risky, love. But kind of you in this case. Great-great-granddaughter Pamra. Well. I hate her causing you this agony, but it wasn't the child's fault. Perhaps we can locate her, provide some kind of assistance. It would be sensible to do that. I don't want the Laugher to get her. I don't want the fliers to get her. Not alone that she's kin; more important, it would set them off again. When I heard it was she who had started all this, I thought how ironic it was-

my own great-great-grandchild, without knowing it, coming close to betraying us. I'd like to help her, since she's the last. Not that the intervening generations were much to brag about."

She ticked them off on her bandaged fingers. "Your son, Birald. Your granddaughter, Nathile bit of a fishwife, that one, so I've heard. Pamra talked to Jelane about her unpleasant grandma. And then your great-grandson, Fulder Don ... "

"Useless. Like a piece of fungus. AH sweaty and damp. Not much of an artist, either, I'm afraid."

"And finally your great-great-granddaughter, Pamra Don. Something about that one, Tharius, love. Something more to her than to the others. A kind of shining, sometimes."

"Awakener, heretic, and now fugitive," he said bleakly. "The best of the lot, and what an end to come to."

She squeezed his hand. "Old Birald wasn't that bad, actually."

"You knew him?" He was astonished at this.

"I knew everyone in Baristown. I knew Birald before I came to the Tower. I was twenty then. He was a couple of years younger than I, a stiff, fussy youth, always looking over his shoulder. He ended as a crotchety old man who carved leaves and flowers on door lintels, holding on to the artist's caste by his fingernails. Oh, God, Tharius, but speaking of fingernails, my hands hurt ... "

He reached for the carafe on the table and poured a glass of its waters for her. "Kessie. Oh, Kessie, you did get the drugs I sent? You did get them in time."

"You know I did." She drank what he had given her, thankfully. "I've told you over and over. It was all that kept me going. Knowing I wouldn't actually feel the pain, not in my body, at least. Knowing you were here, doing whatever you could to get me out of that ... that nightmare."

"I couldn't do anything! I saw Shavian Bossit throwing suspicious glances my way when Gendra spoke of putting you and the Awakener to the question. He knows I came from Baristown, and he knows I've spoken out against this inquisition atmosphere the fliers want to force us into. Trust Shavian to put egg and fire together and hatch a plot." "You think he suspects?"

"Suspects? Of course he suspects. Everyone! Of everything! Suspicion is his standard mode of operation. He maintains the household by suspicion." Tharius gritted his teeth. "I mean, do you think he suspects us? Do you think he is convinced there really is ... a heresy? From his point of view, I suppose that's what it would be."

"No. Not yet. The thing that's occupying his mind just now is another matter. There's supposed to have been a miracle in Thou-ne. Some idiot fished an image out of the World River, and the people demanded it be taken into the Temple. They're almost worshiping it, calling it the 'Bearer of Truth.' It shines, so they say. There are people traveling from six towns east just to visit the Temple, even though they know they can't come home again."

"The Bearer of Truth?" Kesseret frowned. "An image? I hadn't heard about that. Do you think it's connected in any way?" "Shavian may. He has a habit of connecting everything.

And it may be more man habit. During the last convocation, he spent an unwarranted amount of time with the Talkers. It was almost as though he were trying to usurp Ezasper Jorn's prerogative as Ambassador. He's ambitious, is Bossit."

There was a sound from the next room, a hesitation in the music, then the dissonant fall of a hammer. In the silence they could hear a monotonous thrumming. Martien thrust one hand into the room, knocking on the open door.

"Tharius. Someone's coming down the private corridor. It sounds like the old weehar. Mitiar."

"Damn," Tharius said, unwinding himself from the lady Kesseret. "That's Gendra's majordomo with that damn drone. Quick, Kessie. Get yourself into bed."

"I really should sit up--"

"Quickly. Don't argue. Back to your hammers, Martien." Quickly he closed the window, pulled the chair into the center of the room, and seated himself in it, reaching a long arm toward the bookshelves. "Something dull, Kessie? An eschatological essay, perhaps?" He leafed through the volume and began to read, his voice dry and instructional.

The thrumming came closer, a low moaning, "Whoom, whoom." The sound ceased outside the door to the suite. In the

outer room Martien's music was interrupted once again, this time by a crash as the door opened and a loud voice cried, "Dame Marshal of the Towers, Gendra Mitiar."

"She didn't even knock," Kesseret hissed between her teeth. "Your private corridor, and she didn't knock!"

"Shh, Kessie. Remember who she is." He smiled quickly as he leaned back in his chair and called through the open door, "Ah, Gendra! I see you do not need to be invited to come in. Have you come to tender apologies to the lady Kesseret?"

There was a bark of humorless laughter from the outer room. "I'm sure all my subordinates understand necessity." She came into the doorway, showing a voracious arc of yellow teeth. "We must all make sacrifices. And it is. Necessary to apologize for necessity. Isn't that so, lady?"

"I'm sure it is, Your Reverence." Kessie lay pale upon the pillows, not needing to play a part. At the sound of Mitiar's voice her hands and feet burned agonizingly, and she found herself remembering the flame-bird as unexpected tears flowed unheeded down her face, sudden and unstoppable as the spring spate.

"Gendra, if you will?" Tharius was on his feet, escorting the woman out, pulling the door almost shut behind them. Kesseret heard him in the outer room. "Have you no sensitivity at all? By Potipur's teeth, woman. At least let her recover!"

"I was told she was little injured," the Dame Marshal snarled, aggrieved. "The Ascertainers said she seemed to feel little pain. Had it not been for the infections, she would have been long since healed."

"Let them do to your hands and feet what they did to hers, Gendra, then tell me if you consider yourself little injured. Let your hands and feet swell to twice their size in the winter caverns, let you bum with fever! Would you have been happier if your blasted Ascertainers had broken her? Made her whimper for mercy? Made her confess to something she hadn't done in front of a roomful of fliers? Would that have satisfied you, made you sympathetic?"

"Why should I be sympathetic? It was she who housed the conspirator."

"Oh, pfah, Gendra. Conspirator! Don't talk nonsense. Only the Talkers profess to believe that, and even they doubt it. You owe the lady Kesseret your thanks. Don't you understand she protected us all by her demeanor? If it weren't for the lady Kesseret's courage, the entire Chancery might be under siege by some thousands of paranoid Talkers. By all three gods and their perverted offspring, Dame Marshal, but you've more gall than good sense." He heard himself raging and didn't care. Let her make what she would of it.

Stiffly, she answered. "I would not have come if I had thought she would not welcome."

"She may understand the necessity of what you did to her, but for the love of Potipur, don't expect her to welcome your visits now."

This was a word too much. Gendra snarled, "She'd better welcome them if she intends to go back to the Baris Tower as Superior under my orders."

He did not relent. "Of course she goes back to the Baris Tower. And you'll let her alone until then and not harass her after she's returned. I swear to you, Gendra, you've laid an obligation for vengeance on me already. Don't make it worse."

"Why you, Tharius? Hmmm? What is she to you?" It was both a sneer and a threat.

"An old friend and my cousin-oh, yes, Gendra, my cousin. Though we must perforce set aside family relationships when we receive the Payment, those of us who have family members also receiving the Payment are blessed with kin who remember us as we were. My cousin, I say it again. Also a loyal member of the service. That's what she is to me and should have been to you, if you'd forget your damned Tower discipline for a moment and think of people ... "

Their voices dwindled away down the corridor. Into the silence behind them the sound of the flat-harp flowed; water music, a few tones repeated over and over in differing orders. Rippling. Lulling. Martien was covering the anger with calm, washing the pain away.

Tharius shouldn't have spoken so. He shouldn't have angered Gendra. He shouldn't ever do anything to make her angrier or more suspicious. And yet Kesseret warmed at his words, at his defense of her. For a little time she forgot the conspiracy to which her life had been given and let the waters of surcease wash around her.

After a time, the lady slept.

Six stone courtyards separated the library wing from the Bureau of the Towers, each succeeding each through long, echoing corridors lit by occasional oculars that spilt dim puddles of watery light onto the clattering stone. Jorum Byne, majordomo to the Dame Marshal, led the procession, the long neck of the single-stringed viol held against one shoulder as he plied the bow with his right hand, whoom, whoom, whoom. Two functionaries followed after, laden with documents and dispatch boxes. Then came Gendra herself, her teeth grinding endlessly in time with the viol, and last her personal servant, Jhilt, in a shackle, shackle of chains and rustle of stiff fabrics. Jhilt was a Noor slave from the lands north of Vobil-dil-go. There was no reason for her to wear chains. Though her personal duties in providing various kinds of pleasure for the Dame Marshal were not pleasant for her-were, indeed, often quite painful-escape from behind the Teeth was impossible. Still, she wore chains. Gendra Mitiar liked the sound of them, finding them even more pleasing in that there was no reason for them at all.

Except for the palace itself, the Bureau of the Towers loomed higher than any building in the Chancery, its vast hexagonal bulk heaving skyward in stark, unornamented walls of black brick, windowless as cliffs. Behind those walls in .serried ranks were four divisions, each with six departments; each department with ten sections, each section with a Supervisor; each Supervisor responsible for ten Towers and thus ten townships. Each Supervisor had a deputy and an assistant. Each of these had a clerk, perhaps more than one. Some Towers, after all, were much larger than others, and the supervision of them was therefore more complex.

Deep in the bowels of the bureau lay the labyrinthine vaults of Central Files, their complexities guarded and their secrets plumbed only through the let and allowance of the Librarian, Glamdrul Feynt, who did not, as might be naively supposed, have any responsibilities at all for the library wing of the palace. There had not been any books or records worthy of attention in the library wing for generations. What was there could be cared for, if at all, by Tharius Don, cared for by Tharius Don simply because it did not matter. Such was Feynt's opinion. He had not seen the books in the library wing. He did not need to do so. He had seen what was in the files, and everything of importance was there.

So now, Gendra Mitiar, passing by the great corridor that led to her offices and reception rooms, her dining halls and solaria, elected to descend the curving stone staircase that led to the vaults below. The railing of this stair was carved in the likeness of fliers slaughtering weehar, thrassil, and an unlikely animal that was the artist's dutiful though uninspired conception of the legendary hoovar. None of the party except Jhilt-who shuddered to see the ravenous talons so bloodily employed, reminded thereby of certain habits of the Dame Marshal's-paid any attention to the railing. Gendra did not see it. She had stopped seeing it several hundred years before.

The whoom, whoom, whoom of the viol announced her coming. Far down an empty corridor that dwindled to tidiness at the limit of its seemingly endless perspective came a faint echo a door slamming, perhaps, or a heavy book dropping onto stone. At this, Gendra halted, snarling at Jorum Byne to stop the noise. Jhilt, too, was silenced with a gesture, and the five waited, heads cocked, listening for any defect in the dusty silence.

"'Roo, 'roo, 'roo," came the call, softened by distance into a whisper. "Haroo. Your Reverence. Dame Marshal. Haroo?"

"Tosh," growled the Dame Marshal. "Jorum, go find him. Bring him here. And don't lose sound of him. He's half-deaf and likely to go limping off in six other directions." Pleased with her own wit, she chuckled, grinding her teeth together as she found a bench along the wall to sit upon, not bothering to dust it, though it was deep with the even gray coating that covered every surface in the files. The bench was in a niche carved with commemorative bas reliefs, fliers and humans locked in combat, fliers and humans solemnly making treaty. Dust softened the carving, obscuring the details. No one had looked at it for generations.

"Glamdrul Feynt is too old for this job," Gendra assured her clerks and bearers, going so far as to glance at Jhilt as though the information were so general it might be shared even with so insignificant a person as she. "Too old, and too deaf, and too crippled. Trouble is, hah, what you might suppose, eh? Trouble is no one else can find anything! We give him apprentices, one after the other, boys and boys, and what happens? They vanish. Lost. So he says. Lost in the files, he says. Can you imagine. Hah!""It is said," ventured Jhilt in a whisper, "that a monster dwells below the tunnels here, coming out at night to feed upon those in the Chancery."

Gendra found this amusing. "A monster, hah? Some toothy critter left over from ages past, no doubt? A hoovar bull,

mebee? Got frozen in a glacier until we built Chancery atop him, hah?" She roared with laughter, stopping suddenly to listen to the clatter of approaching footsteps, one firm, one halting.

Glamdrul Feynt was a young man by Chancery standards, only slightly half past a hundred, but he seemed to hover on the edge of dissolution, his aging unstemmed by the Payment. It had been given him tardily and with deep frustration by certain underlings of the Dame Marshal who devoutly wished him dead but were unable to replace him. It amused Glamdrul Feynt, therefore, to act even older and feebler than he was while still conveying omniscience on any matter relating to the files. Bent and gray, shedding scraps of paper from every pocket as he came, he approached the Dame Marshal with dragging footsteps and failing breath, leaning heavily upon his cane, meantime whispering his compliments in a gasp that bid fair to presage extinction at any moment.

"Oh, sit down, sit down," she snarled at him. "Jorum, make him sit down. Now get off down the corridor, all of you. I've private business to discuss." She watched them malevolently as they retreated out of earshot, then leaned close to Feynt's side and said in a low voice, "I need you to do some research for me, Glamdrul Feynt. And if you do it well, I'll see you get a dose of the Payment that'll do you some good."

"Ah, Your Reverence. But I'm too old, I'm afraid. Too late. Much too late, so they say. On my last legs, I'm afraid." He fished in a pocket for a wad of paper fragments, drew them forth, and peered at them with ostentatious nearsightedness.

"Nonsense. Play those games with those who believe them, Feynt. Now listen to me.

"There's a thing going on. The Talkers call it the Riverman heresy. What it is, it's people putting their dead in the River instead of giving them to the Awakeners. Now, it's no new thing. Seems to me I've heard of it off and on in passing for a few hundred years. There's been a flare-up of it in Bans. Maybe other places, too. There's a new thing in Thou-ne. Some fisherman pulled a statue out of the River. Now it's set up in the Temple, right under Potipur himself. Rumbings. That's what I hear. What I want to know is, where did this heresy start? And when. When is important, too. And could the two things be connected?"

"I can look, Your Reverence. I don't recall the heresy, offhand. Don't recall anything about Rivermen. But I can look ... "

"Go back two or three hundred years and look in the records of Bans. Find out who was Superior of the Tower then. Find out what was going on. Hah? You understand?"

He did not answer, merely wheezed asthmatically and bowed, as though in despair.

For her part, she took no notice of his pose but shouted for her entourage and went back the way she had come. Something within her quickened, hard on the trail of a connection she merely suspected. Tharius Don. The lady Kesseret. Hah. Both from Baris. And she seemed to recall something about Baris as a center of rebellion, long ago.

Behind her on the bench the old man peered after her with rheumy eyes, his hands busy with the scraps of paper he had drawn from a pocket, sorting them, smoothing them, folding them twice and thrusting them into the pocket once more.

"Oh, yes," he muttered to her retreating back. "I'll bet you would like to know where it started, old bird." He sat there, perfectly still, until he was alone in the files once more. Then he rose and moved swiftly down the corridor, shedding scraps from every pocket as he went.

A door halfway down the long corridor opened as he approached, and a figure came halfway into the hall, beckoning imperiously.

"Well, what did the old fish want?" The question came from a mouth thin-lipped as a trap and was punctuated by the snap of fingers as long and twisted as tree roots. Ezasper Jorn was a man of immense strength and enormous patience, though this latter characteristic was not now in evidence. "Come up with it, Feynt! What did old Mitiar want?"

Behind the Ambassador the shadowy figure of Research Chief Koma Nepor stared at the file master. "Yes, yes, Feynt. What did she want?"

Glamdrul Feynt entered the room, casting a curious glance at the boyish figures that lay here and there in its corners and along its walls. These were his apprentices. They were also the materials Nepor had used in his research on the effects of Tears and blight and half a dozen other substances found here and there on Northshore. "Any luck?" he asked, purposely not responding to their questions. "Did you have any luck with that last one?"

"It talked," whispered Nepor, his pallid little face with its pink rosebud mouth peering nearsightedly at one of the forms. "It

talked for quite a while, didn't it, Ezasper? I was quite hopeful there for a time."

Ezasper Jorn refused to be sidetracked by these considerations. He gripped the file master in one huge hand and shook him gently to and fro, as a song-fish might shake a tasty mulluk. "Out with it, Feynt. What did the old fish want?"

And Glamdrul Feynt, chuckling from time to time, explained what it was that much concerned the Dame Marshal of the Towers. After which came a long and thoughtful silence.

18

Mumros Shenaz rolled out of his blankets well before dawn, awakened by the peeping of the ground birds, a repetitive, percipient cry that seemed as full of meaning as it was without purpose. There was no mating, no nest building, no food searching going on. No defense of territories. Only this high, continuous complaint of bird voice, as though only by this sound could the dawn be guided to the eastern horizon and only by these cries driven to mount the sky.

Such thoughts amused Mumros. He sat often by himself, thinking such things, and was called the Lonely Man because of the habit. He did not mind. Since all who were his had died, he was indeed a lonely man, spending his life seeing the joys of others and remembering his own that were past. One such was to be remembered this dawn time. He stretched, bent from side to side, working the kinks out of his back and legs. All around him lay the lightweight pamet tents of the Noor. Last night's campfires were hidden beneath lumps of half-dried bog-bottom. Smoke leaked upward in thin, coiling bands. He stretched again and bent to pick up the pottery flask of sammath wine laid by for his father's ghost. His father's mud grave was nearby, only over the hill, and Mumros walked away from the camp toward it, the walk turning into the distance-eating trot of the Noor as his sleep-tightened muscles loosened with the exercise. At the top of the hill he looked back, hearing someone in the camp call, a long-drawn cry to the new day. There was movement there. Flames. Someone had risen as early as he and built up the fire with dried chunks of bog-bottom cut by some other traveling Noors, days or even months ago. Such was the life of wanderers. Planting grain to be eaten by others, harvesting grain others had planted. Cutting bog-bottom for another's fire, burning bog-bottom some other Noor had cut. "Of such small duties is the solidarity of the Noor built," he remarked to himself, remembering something similar his father had once said. "Of our concern for those who travel after us comes our unity as a people."

He trotted down the hill, head swinging to and fro in its search for the mud grave. His tribe had not been this way in several years. He could have forgotten where it was-no. No. He had not forgotten. It stood in a slight declivity, the sculptured face looking toward him. Rain, though infrequent, did come upon the steppes from time to time. It had washed the mud face, leaving it bland, almost featureless. In a way that was a good sign, for when the mud grave fell to dust, the spirit would move on. Some were ready to go on in only a year or two. Others so longed for their lives and kin that they stayed in the mud graves for many years, even a lifetime. This grave was neither very old nor very young.

"Father ... " He bowed, pouring the sammath wine onto the thirsty clay that covered the bones. "I have brought you drink. And news. The tribe has been chosen by Queen Fibji to take part in her great plan. We go now to her tents, all of us. Your friend Mejordu is still well, though he tires sometimes after a long day, and he asks to be remembered to you." He had several anecdotes about Mejordu to share, for the man had always been clownish and amusing. After this he was still for a moment, trying to recall the last bit of news. Oh, yes. "Your grandson Taj Noteen has led a group of Melancholies south to net shore-fish for the Queen."

He fell silent then, thinking he had heard cries from the camp. Well. Whether or not, it was time to be getting back.

"I take my leave, Father. I will visit you when we next come by this way." He bowed again and turned back toward the camp, not trotting now but running, for he did hear cries, screams.

Before reaching the crest of the hill, he dropped to his belly and writhed upward to peer over it.

Glittering figures moved among the tents of the Noor. Jondarites! Shiny fish skin helms plumed with flame-bird feathers sparkled over the huddled people of Mumros's tribe. He wriggled forward, serpent like in the sparse grass, down the hill into a slanting gully. Over the cries of his people he heard the voice of the Jondarite captain.

"Women and children here. Men over there. All boys over ten with the men. Boys under ten with the women, Speed it up there, move! Move!"

Mumros risked raising his head. The men were herded together at one side of the camp. The women were all in the center, near the fires, surrounded by the Jondarite soldiers. Suddenly, without a word of command, the soldiers began slaughtering the women and children. All at once. Quickly. Like fishermen clubbing fish, they struck them down. Like stilt-lizard beaks, swords dipped in and out, emerged dripping, plunged in again.

The men of the tribe tried to break loose, but they had been tied. Over his own howling blood, Mumros heard their voices, crying names: "Onji, beloved!" "Creedi, Bowro, children-ah!" "Girir, oh, Girir!"

Then the voice of the captain once more.

"You men are to be taken as slaves to the mines. You will be roped together and marched there. Before we go, you are to look at the bodies, closely. Make sure all are dead. We have had men try to escape in the past to get back to their families. We want you to be very sure you have no families to come back to."

Mumros dropped his head into the grass. He could not move. There was bile in his mouth, an agony in his head. He wanted to kill but had nothing to kill with. He was one and they were many. He could go to them, but what good would it do? They would only take him with the others.

So he lay, not moving, while the chain of roped captives was led away into the distance. When they had gone, he went into the camp. The captain had been right. None of those who had been taken away had anyone left to return to.

He lit three fires, spread them with damp bog-bottom, tended them while the smoke rose in pillars in the still air. By noon the first helper arrived. By nightfall there were several more. After several days there were many, and where the camp had been now stood the mud graves of the women, those of the children clustered at their knees.

"Come," said one of the helpers to Mumros. "There is nothing more you can do here. Join us."

"I know I can do nothing here," said Mumros. "But I will not come with you. I must go and tell of this thing to Queen Fibji." And he turned his face from the cluster of graves to begin the long march.

19

In Thou-ne, Haranjus Pandel had been expecting a visitor for over two years, since the day he had sent a signal to the Chancery announcing the finding of an image in the River and the elevation of that image in the Temple. As a matter of policy, the existence of the signal towers-or, rather, of their purpose, since the existence could not be concealed-was kept from the general populace. No one except Haranjus Pandel knew of the message he had sent or that it was possible to send a message at all. Thus, no one knew the eventual visitor had come in response to that message. The whole township saw the boat, of course, and the Chancery man getting off it, but it was all very casual.

Bostle Kerf was his full name, a Section Chief in the Bureau of Towers, sent south in all haste through the pass, thence quickly west, and then south again to arrive after a year's travel in Thou-ne after a short detour to Zendigt, two towns east. His arrival from the east would evoke less concern, he had been told, than if he had appeared suddenly, coming down from the north like a migrating Noor. It was necessary to come to Thou-ne, it was not necessary to cause more talk than had already occurred. Gendra Mitiar had been clear about that. Once safely ensconced in the Tower, Kerf had a long, troubled conversation with Haranjus Pandel.

"How did you allow this to happen, Pandel? Her Reverence is in a fury over it, I'll tell you. Bad enough to have no workers in Thou-ne, without having a miracle here as well."

The Superior nodded, sweating a little. He had never aspired to the Payment. Indeed, he had never aspired to be Supervisor of a Tower, but then, no one with aspirations would have taken the job in Thou-ne. The mountains to the east prevented any traffic from the next township that way. This meant there was^ little enough need for Awakeners in Thou-ne, and little enough to do for the few there were. The Tower was small, cramped, and needed only one recruit every decade or so. Since there were no workers, there was no fieldwork, road or jetty building. All the Tower really had to see to was the transport of Thune's dead to the worker pit in Alter, next town west, and since Thou-ne itself was small, there was little work in that. Haranjus had been content to be what he was, letting happen what happened, and in general the people of Thou-ne had approved his stewardship. Now he sweated more than a little, wondering if he was to be blamed for what had happened despite his innocence.

"I wouldn't call it a miracle," he said now, not wanting to contradict the Section Chief but unwilling to be blamed for more than was just. "It's only some image from old times, floated up on the River, that's all."

"It shines, man. I went to the Temple. I saw it for myself. It's all wet, and it shines."

"Well, there's that, yes. But dead fish often do that, and muliuk shells."

"She shines and smiles," Kerf went on, not listening. "And holds out her hand. More attractive than the moon faces, I'll tell you."

"Oh, well, now, Your Honor, but nobody's suggested the thing's a god! No. I wouldn't have tolerated that for a minute. No. No heresy here. All they've said is the thing is an image of ... well, of the Bearer of Truth."

"And what's that? Not a goddess? You're sure?"

"Well, nobody's said it's a goddess. I shouldn't think anyone believes so unless they've said ... "

"If they haven't so far, depend on it they will soon."

"Well, if they do, I'll just have to pick up a few, that's all. Pass around a few Tears. Settle things down."

"Why haven't you settled things down already?"

Haranjus shrugged, a bit uncomfortably. Why hadn't he? "Well, because if I did, you know, they'd think there was something in it. Something important. Something the Tower needed to defend against. If I let it be, it's a wonder for a few years, and it brings some curious travelers to spend their money here in Thou-ne--which won't hurt, Your Honor. Potipur knows we're poor enough. And it will blow over. When it does, let enough time pass for them all to forget it, then take the thing and burn it, shine or no shine."

Bostle Kerf was no fool. He liked having his own way but wouldn't push it to the point of causing trouble. Here, he felt, the local man had the right of it. Don't fuss it. Don't make a racket. Let it die, as it would, of its own accord, without drawing more attention to it.

"How long since it was found?"

"Two and a half years. Maybe closer to three. I signaled the Chancery the very night of the day it happened."

As he had, sweating away at the handles of the signal light, clickety-clacking the coded message across all those miles to the nearest signal tower, first time he'd ever done it; first time he'd ever had anything to report. And it had taken over a year for the Chancery to decide it wanted to investigate, so why all this uproar now? Well, thought Kerf, Haranjus was probably right. Let it alone. For now.

He snarled a little, letting the local man know he was being watched. No harm in that. Keep him on his toes. When it was dark, they went to the signal room, polished the mirror and lighted the lantern while Kerf worked the shutters. He did it a good deal faster than Haranjus had done, but then, he'd had more practice. "Reported image of local interest only," he signaled. "Thou-ne Tower recommends allowing interest to die of its own accord. Kerf in agreement. Returning to the Chancery."

All that travel for nothing, Kerf thought. Not even any good food in Thou-ne. And certainly none in the lands of the steppe people, going back. Noor bread always tasted of ashes, and no one but a steppey could pretend to enjoy roasted roots. Besides, Noor hated Chancery men. Only his escort of heavily armed Jondarites guaranteed passage and food at all. Though they hadn't seen many steppeys, come to that. Fewer than he'd thought they would. Perhaps they were traveling, east or west of the route Kerf had taken.

He shrugged, setting those thoughts aside as he bullied Haranjus a bit more before leaving. It had taken him a year and a half to get to Thou-ne. It would take that long at least going back. In his eagerness to leave, he did not ask the local man if devotion to the image had increased or decreased since shortly after it was found. Haranjus had very carefully not mentioned that subject. Bostle Kerf was able, therefore, to leave Thou-ne in good conscience.

Three days after Bostle Kerf left Thou-ne, the Gift of Potipur arrived there with a boatload of Melancholies who intended to disembark in Thou-ne and begin the trek north to their home country. Pamra was also on the ship. She came ashore in Thou-ne. By that time, however, it was too late to summon the Chancery man back again.

The Queen of the Noor sat upon her carved throne, legs neatly aligned in their tall fish skin boots, eyes forward, feathered scepter in hand, dying a little more as each delegation from an outlying tribe made its appeals, thankful for the protocol that insisted upon an expressionless face. As a young Queen she had rebelled against the requirement; as an old one she realized its necessity. Had it not been for protocol she would have wept, screamed, howled in frustration, anger, and pity.

Now the last of the delegations was on his knees before her. One lonely man.

"They came on us before dawn, Highness," said the lonely man in an emotionless voice. "Most of the camp was still asleep when I left. When I heard the cries, I came back. They rounded up the women and children, even the babies, and killed them while the men were forced to watch. After the killing, they let the men see the bodies just to be sure all the women and children were dead." He went on in that same dead voice, describing the scene, the cries. "The Jondarite captain told them they had no families to return to," the man said at last, falling silent. He knelt before her, eyes on the floor, as though he expected nothing from her at all, as though he expected nothing from anyone.

Fibji had bitten her tongue in the need not to speak. Streng had spoken for her, as he usually did, knowing what was in her heart.

"How did you escape?"

"I had gone out before dawn to visit the mud grave of my father, to leave offerings to his spirit. I was returning when the Jondarites came. I hid, watching from the hill. I should have been taken with the others, but I could have changed nothing, and someone needed to tell you, Highness."

Fibji had recently spent some time at the Chancery, going there under a banner of truce, appealing to the Protector of Man, attempting to get something from the Council of Seven, a treaty, an understanding, anything that would stop the taking of slaves and the mindless killing. She had not even seen the Protector. The council had refused to consider her request. She had failed in every effort, all the time afire to get home. Now she regretted being here. At the Chancery there might be something more she could do; there was nothing here. She could do nothing here except listen to the endless tales of slaughter and rapine, endless pleas for action against the Jondarite tax collectors and slavers and murderers, pleas that received a sympathetic hearing and no action at all. "Because they have me," she told herself. "That damned general has us all, like birds caught in a net." General Jondrigar would not mind if all the Noor were dead. He welcomed those times when the young men of the Noor rebelled against her to wage war against him, for then he could kill them more quickly. He welcomed uprisings, for then he could mount a major assault. Their only hope lay in not provoking him to a major effort, not until the plan could be put into effect. Then ... well, then they would either live or die, but they would not go on as victims.

If the young men would hold their peace. If they could move onward with the plan. If she could have seen the Protector.

Oh, surely, surely Lees Obol would have listened. Surely the Protector of Man would not consider the Noor unworthy of his protection. Were Noor not men? But she had not seen the Protector. Only Maintainer of the Household Shavian Bossit, who had put her through half a dozen inconclusive and frustrating sessions.

"Have you seen Jondarites take your people slaves?" he had asked half a hundred times. "Have you seen it?"

No, she had not seen it. Had not seen the slavers come, had not seen the tax collectors come, had not seen the murderers come, had only heard about it afterward, from the survivors, when there were any. "Take me to your metal mines, Lord Maintainer. Let me identify the slaves there. They are my people."

"Tsk. Your Highness is misinformed. We have no slaves in our mines. Only bondsmen from Northshore. Ami _s for those who took your people, how do you know they were Jondarites? Rebel townsmen, perhaps, in Jondarite dress? I'm sure that's who it was. Apply to the Supervisor of the Tower of whatever town they are from, Queen Fibji."

As well apply to the moons, she thought viciously. There were no rebel townsmen, only Jondarites, Jondarites who kept the depredations remote from the Queen's tents and thus could not be directly accused by the Queen.

"We will accept without question anything Your Highness has seen personally," said Bossit, smiling, always smiling, dripping politeness and courtesy as a rotten fruit drips juice. "In accordance with the treaty the Chancery has always had with the Moor," he said, showing his tiny teeth, a curve of threatening ivory, like a knife.

In accordance with the treaty! A treaty, made generations before, in an untrusting age when the Noor King had feared anyone speaking in his name and would speak only for himself. Used against them now to prevent her speaking. If she camped north of Thou-ne, the Jondarites struck above Vobil-dil-go. If she went to the lands above Vobil-dil-go, the Jondarites would take captives above Shfor. Wherever the Noor moved upon the open steppes, the Jondarites could find them. There was no stone, no tree, to hide behind. There were no chasms, no caves. There was only the steppe, open to the sky, and the tethered balloons of the Jondarite spies, who would see their quarry from miles away. And she, Fibji, would see the pain of the wounded and the mud graves of the dead-assuming there had been anyone left to bury the dead but she would not see Jondarites. She knew that someone reported on her movements. Perhaps those winged demons, seeing where she went and being sure the Jondarites knew it.

So, now, she heard the man from the slaughtered tribe. He was alone. Without near-kin. Well, that, at least, she could pretend to remedy. She gestured, a tiny movement, at once interpreted, as she called out a few words in the secret naming language of the Moor.

"Mumros, Her Highness takes you into her tribe, into her family. She calls you Kalja Benoor. Adopted Near-kin."

The man who had brought the news leaned upon his hands and wept. It was not for joy. He knew as well as she the adoption was only a gesture. Near-kin could not be so easily replaced, nor grief so easily stayed. Still, when he left the tent it was with a steadier gait than that with which he had entered.

"Your Highness?" A murmured voice at her ear.

"Yes, Streng, what is it?" Of all her men he was her favorite: strong, not at all servile, yet attentive to her dignity, virile, father of two of her children.

"The delegation from the boatmen."

"Haven't there been enough delegations for one day?" There was despair in her whispered voice. He heard it. Among all her people he was the only one she let hear it.

"They have Glizzee spice, Your Highness." His eyes were down, his posture dignified. If they were alone, he would call her Fibby. They had been children together. And lovers later. And lovers still.

"And we have no spice, is that it? And our people have few enough pleasures, they should not have to do without this one. And the boatmen won't deal without seeing me?"

"Your Highness sees the invisible and hears the inaudible." He gave her a secret glance, one she knew as well as she knew the feel of her own skin.

"My Highness is dying of the agony of my people, Streng. Of inanition and frustration. Of the duplicity of the Chancery and an unapproachable creature that calls itself the Protector of Man. Put them off."

"Ma'am, one of them is the man called Fatterday. He claims to have seen South shore."

Fatterday! Was Fatterday a real person, then? Not a mere story hero, favorite protagonist of the Jarb Mendicants' tales? Was he here, now? Bringing word of a larger world out there than this circumscribed one, squeezed between the Teeth of the North and all the little, biddable towns of Northshore, and chewed to death by Jondarites? Fatterday, who had perhaps seen what Fibji had only dared hope for, a homeland beyond the reach of the general's troops? She gasped, holding Streng with the fire of her eyes. "Do you think he tells the truth?"

"Who could know, ma'am? However, I knew you would want to see him."

"In the small tent, then. I've a cramp in my butt from sitting on this damn thing, and I must be able to question him."

Streng affected not to have heard her, his face impassive as he turned to bellow at the courtiers and warriors hanging about. "You have Her Highness's leave to go. The boatmen may await her pleasure outside."

They left quickly. Protocol prevented her rising until they were gone, and they knew her displeasure at being kept waiting. When the heavy tent flaps dropped behind them, she stood up, rubbing her rump, kicking off the jeweled boots and harness, handing over the holy scepter to be put in its case. Streng was ready with a soft robe and shoes of quilted pamet embroidered with flowers. Against the white fiber her skin glowed dark, like oiled fragwood, and when she pulled off the high, feathered crown, her hair tumbled across the fabric like a thousand twining little vines, twisty and moving as though

each lock had its own life. Her hawk-nosed face relaxed somewhat from its audience expression, the lines around her mouth and eyes smoothing out, dropping decades from her appearance. I'm an old woman, she thought to herself, knowing she wasn't, yet, but needing to get used to the idea. Too old for all this sitting. The small tent adjacent was her own living space, the piled carpets dotted with soft pillows and small tables. "Let them come in here," she said, taking one of the huge pillows for her own. "Have someone bring us some wine. I ache all over."

They came in, three of them, one lean, two stocky, brown men all, though none so dark as she. Their darkness was merely of the sun, while hers was of an ancient race, so it was said among the Northlings.

"Your Highness." Three voices, all of them muffled from being spoken into the carpet, three backs bent impossibly to prevent their eyes meeting hers.

"Oh, stand up," she said impatiently. "I have to have all that out there where people are watching, but I haven't time for it here. Which one of you is Fatterday?"

He stood forward, the leanest one of the bunch, burned almost as dark as she by the sun and with deep white lines radiating from his eyes where the sun had not reached down into squint lines, smiling irrepressibly. "Your Highness. I'm Fatterday."

"And you've truly seen South shore?"

He bowed again, nodding assent, not speaking.

"Well, tell me! What is it like? Are there people there? Are there fliers?"

"Your Highness, we were cast ashore on a rocky coast among high mountains. From the top of a mountain I saw an endless plain under the sun." His eyes were alight, his fingers twitching as they described the outlines and dimensions of the lands, the rivers. "I saw no fliers, no people. After many days, we managed to repair the boat enough to sail northward once more. Only we three survived to bring you the tale."

"A great land." She regarded him thoughtfully, wondering if he told the truth. "For the taking, boatman?"

"From all I could see, free for the taking, Your Highness. If one could come to it. I saw no fliers."

And that was it, of course. No fliers. No Jondarites. She lusted for it. The dream required lands. Lands for the people of the north, free from fliers, free from attacks by the Jondarite tax collectors, free from the constant pressures of the Chancery. Lands to hold without taxation. And lands with beasts. In her mind she saw wagons pulled as they were in the Chancery lands, by beasts instead of by her people. Oh, with beasts one could move, move, out of reach of pursuing armies. Oh, why not have lands, Northlings? Why not have beasts?

"How did you come there?"

"We were prospecting among the islands for Glizzee, Your Highness. We followed a great school of strangeys. Came a strong, wild current in World River, and we were driven south. Came storm and great wind driving us, days and days, until we lost track of them. Many died. Most. Only seven of us came to that shore, and only we three returned." He did not say how they had lived or what they had eaten. They could not have eaten the local animals and survived, not without human grains to go with them. They could have eaten fish. It was better, perhaps, not to know how they had survived.

"So, how would we come there, if we chose to go?"

"If you chose to go, Highness, you should go well provisioned. It is a long voyage. Still, I would not hesitate to make it again. There are wonders there."

She waved him away. That was the question, wasn't it? How could one get better provisioned with the Chancery taking all but a bare sufficiency. They were lucky if the scavengers from the Chancery left them grain enough for the cold season and a spare bit more should the warm come late. When that was all they were allowed to assemble, how could they put together a store for a long voyage? And how put together the boats, come to that? Fibji's people numbered some hundreds of thousands, not many compared to the population of Northshore, but a great horde when one considered the size of most boats. Fifty at a time, perhaps. Hundreds of thousands of Noor, and only fifty at a time. If they took one boat from every town ...

She shook herself, shedding the vision of lands beyond the River. Fatterday was still standing there, as though he had not seen her excuse him. The man was still to be dealt with.

"You came north across the World River to Thou-ne?"

"We did, ma'am. With Glizzee spice as the whole of our property, all that was left us after the storm save the shell of . our boat."

"And you brought it here because the price is better so far from the World River?"

"As Your Highness says." He grinned knowingly.

"And it would help you, now, if we bought your spice from you?"

He bowed, unspeaking. It was probably the only thing that would help him, she thought. He had likely been impoverished by his adventure. He must have had everything he owned lost on the voyage. She beckoned to Streng, signaling him to send for the coffer keeper. They had little enough in stores of food or obvious possessions, the Moor, but the Melancholies did keep the Queen's coffers filled. So let Fatterday be paid, and let him think it was for the spice. Actually, the payment was for the news he brought her. News she could use.

When the boatmen were gone, she summoned her near-kin, not forgetting the lonely survivor most recently adopted. They drank sammath wine as they talked of South shore, of the goddess, of themselves and the Jondarites.

"But what of the plan?" they asked, uncomfortable at the thought of giving up the thing they had been working on for so very long.

"We are not yet changing the plan," she replied, "It was too long in the making to change it unless for something far better. So far, we have only the word of an explorer. He could be lying. He could be mistaken. No, we are not yet talking of changing the plan. But let us investigate the dream. If South shore is within reach ... "

She did not need to complete the thought. The old plan had been fifty years in the making, thirty in implementation. Here and there across the steppes were great complexes of tunnels dug secretly by the Noor. There beneath the steppes were towns, cities. There beneath the scattered grainfields were dormitories and meeting halls and storehouses now beginning to hold some grain and roots hidden from the tax collectors. Timbers supported the corridors beneath the earth, timbers bought from the Queen's coffers, moved at night, hidden by day. Clever mechanisms brought air into the depths, mechanisms paid for from the Queen's funds. Melancholies went south into the cities and returned with goods and coin, and both went into the underground cities Queen Fibji was building. Fifty thousand of the Queen's people dwelt beneath the moors already, and more were descending every day. In twenty years more, or thirty, all would have made themselves a redoubt within the earth. Then, the scouts would watch for Jondarite balloons, would signal the approach of armies, but those armies would find no one on the open steppes, no one to enslave, no one to tax. Or if they did, they would fight tunnel by tunnel, room by room, against strong defenses.

And across the breadth of the steppes hundreds of thousands of mud graves stood mute evidence of the soil dug out in the dark hours. If any had had sense to see it. How could so sparse a people have had so many dead? But the Jondarites had not asked that question.

"And yet," she whispered to herself, "and yet, in that thirty years or fifty years, how many more will really die?" The young men grew belligerent in the underground places. If they could not fight the Jondarites, they fought one another. Queen Fibji had made a rule that boys could dwell below only until they had fathered two children; then they must return to the nomad tribes above. Which made it more peaceful below but left the children without fathers to learn from. She sighed. Thinking again of Fatterday, she wondered how many of her people might be saved if there were truly a South shore and she could find some way to come to it.

Now her near-kin were saying the same things over and over, worrying the subject to rags. Her mind wandered, remembering.

On one particular day long ago she had walked with her father across a stretch of the arid lands, away from the tribe, free for the moment from servitors or petitioners. He had

taken her on these walks sometimes, talking and talking, as though to gift her with the essence of his thought to store for some future time. She was his only child.

"The young always want to go to war," he had said. "And the old are too often eager to send them. The young revel in thoughts of battle. They think blood is wine, that it can be spilt without consequence and a new vintage bought for

tomorrow's feast. And the old are sometimes willing to have young men gone, to have their exasperating numbers thinned to a biddable fraction, for they, the young men, are the source of dissent and confusion. It is among them that revolution breeds, often to no point. But what good are dead warriors, Fibji?"

He stopped, as though taken by a sudden memory. "Long ago, when I was only a youth and my father was yet King, I came upon a Jarb Mendicant sitting on a stone here on the steppe, wreathed in the smoke of his pipe. I was joyful and sanguine then. I said to him, 'Mendicant, give me a prognostication for our people.' He looked at me through the smoke, as they do, and said at last, 'I see peace and prosperity for the Noor, Prince, but only when the ruler of the Moor can answer the question, "Of what good are dead warriors?" He brooded again. "I have never answered the question, Fibji. See the mud graves of the dead as we pass. Is our way not marked with the bones of our people? And what good do the dead do themselves or us?"

He had intended it as a rhetorical question, but it had caught Fibji's attention. What good indeed? The mud tombs were scattered everywhere on the endless plains, thinly in most places, thickly around much used campsites. Inside them the bones of the dead, rolled in their robes, sat inside thick mud shells sculptured into the shapes of them as they had been in life. Children played among the clayed-over bones, thinking nothing of it. Death had no reality to children. Fibji herself had played among the tombs, knowing what they were well enough. They had no more reality for her than for other children.

Until that moment. Her father stood at her left hand, staring off across the steppe where the sparse grass moved in a small wind, the half-dried blades making a gentle susurrus, barely audible. To her right was a cluster of mud graves, three almost alike, as though of one family, two men and a woman, their faces staring toward her from the clay. She fancied they would speak in a moment, greeting the King, and in that instant her mind saw into the clay to the place the bones rested and beyond the bones to the people who had once lived. It happened all at once, like a vision. Almost she could have called the names of those who rested in the shells, gone now. They stared out at her with eager eyes, those young men, eyes anxious for battle, hungry for death. And in that instant she knew mortality, all at once, entirely. Even she, Fibji, would stop! She, Fibji, would cease to be!

"Of what good are dead warriors?" her father had repeated, and she had screamed, cowering against him in a sudden spasm of fear so palpable it was like a presence, as though death itself had touched her.

"Fibji?" he had said, looking her full in the face with total understanding. "Daughter?" And then he had held her tightly, waiting for the fear to pass. "I know," he said. "I know."

She had been about seven when she'd realized death. When she had taken up the scepter, she had tried to explain why they must not wage war. And yet there were always the young men who rebelled against her. Young bloods, always, in love with their concept of justice, eager to prove themselves, making it easier for the Jondarites, plunging into battle with a scream of defiance and naked chests.

Now she was fifty-five with perhaps a decade or two left before understanding became reality. For the Chancery there was the elixir and an almost immortality. For the people of Northshore, the Promise of Potipur. For the steppe dwellers, the Moor, nothing. Seven tens of years and then the mud grave and the cold wind. Now, though she was closer to that end she had perceived when she was seven, she did not fear it as much for herself as she had feared it then. She feared it more, however, for her people and knew what her father had tried to tell her.

"Think well," she said now, speaking earnestly to the near-kin, an interruption of their wrangles. "I remember the words of my father. We walked upon the steppe, and he told me the Noor would not have peace until they could answer the question, 'Of what good are dead warriors?' Think well, kinfolk. Let us consider the possibility of South shore. But whatever we do, let us save every Noor we can in the doing of it."

Then she turned away from them, went into the small tent where she slept, where Strengé waited for her now. "Old friend," she said, "when Medoor Babji, our daughter, begged to be allowed to accompany a troop of Melancholies to the cities of the River, we thought it well she should see the world in which the Noor must live."

He nodded. "Those she is with do not know who she is or what she is to be."

"True, but she carries sufficient proof to command them to her service. Here, in her tent, is a cage of seeker birds kept by her servants. Send the birds south. Tell our daughter what we have heard of South shore."

It was a daughter, not a son, selected to be Queen Fibji's heir. Her sons were too brave, too puissant, too eager for war.

They disbelieved in death. "Tell our daughter," she said once again, "what we have heard of South shore."

21

Shavian Bossit drank wine with General of the Armed Might of the Chancery Jondrigar and described the futile embassy of Queen Fibji.

"Honest as the day," he sneered, reaching down with his toe to tap the floor in emphasis. All the general's chairs were too large for Bossit, but he forced himself to sit in them, forced himself to fill whatever chair he sat in, whatever room he occupied, whatever role he chose for himself. "The Queen will not lie, General. She has not seen Jondarites herself, and she will not say she has."

"The woman's a fool."

Shavian twitched his shoulders in a quick shrug. "Perhaps. A very tortured fool, General. I would not take her honesty as her only foolishness. She may be foolish enough to attack you."

The general snorted. "Don't be stupid, Bossit. So long as she does not see what we do, she remains comfortable. She will not disrupt herself over deaths she does not see." He considered death in the abstract. To him the victims of his raids were not men, not women or children, not babes as he had once been a babe. They were simply steppe dwellers, Moor, tribesmen, proper targets for a military exercise. How else should troops be sharpened against the inevitable time of need, against the time when someone or something might threaten the Protector of Man? He used the steppe dwellers in various ways, sometimes working parties of young males up into a killing rage, then quelling them in a well-planned exercise; sometimes surprising whole tribes and taking the males captive-for the iron mines or the copper mines or to be given to the woodcutters as slaves-sometimes merely slaughtering them because Jondarites must become accustomed to killing.

"You may underestimate her," nagged Bossit, staring at the other man with frank curiosity. The general wore his helm liner, its flaps covering his head and neck. Beneath it his face was gray as lava and pitted as dust after a spring shower. No disease had caused this skin coloration or texture. Jondrigar had been born with it, born with the gray, pitted skin and the wild, iron-gray hair-now kept shaved-the massive shoulders, the long arms that let his standing figure touch his knees without stooping. He was a hideous man. He had been as hideous a child. His mother, so Bossit had been told, had screamed at the sight of him and shortly thereafter had died. Bossit, though more or less accustomed to Jondrigar's appearance, sometimes amused himself imagining what had gone through her head, that faceless woman who had given him birth. Had she thought, perhaps, of Jondrigar's father? Whoever that might have been? Had she thought of her sins, wondering whether this monstrous baby was some old sin made manifest? What had she thought? Or had she thought at all?

Bossit had had Jondrigar's antecedents looked into, insofar as that was possible. Jondrigar had been reared by his mother's sister, Firrabel. Firrabel was as resolute and dutiful as her sister had been flighty and hysterical. It was Firrabel who had taken the ugly infant, reared him, fed him, and schooled him, teaching him more of letters than nine-tenths of Northshore thought necessary; it was Firrabel at last who had sent him to the Chancery to be of service, claiming the Chancery had picked him for that service when he was still a baby, as, in a sense, perhaps it had.

If that is what had happened, it had occurred during a royal Progression. The shore had been lined with people, the goldenship of the Protector moving slowly along the Riverbank with the Protector held high above the crowd in the arms of his servitors, leaning down now and then to toss a glittering token to one of the common people.

And Firrabel, taken up with the drama of it all, had held Jondrigar high above her head, waving him like a banner, him ugly as a mud grave, all wide-eyed, reaching out with his little gray paws, grab, grab at anything. The hands caught the robes of the Protector, and the Protector had laughed and turned to someone else with a remark.

Someone had given the baby a token. "By the moons, look at the face on him," someone had said. "Send him to the Chancery when he grows, mother," someone else had said to Firrabel. "We have need of those who can frighten demons just looking at them." Had it been the Protector who had called out, saying these things? Or someone in his entourage? Who knew? Firrabel didn't remember, then. , He was a child who had had to fight for his life, many times. He learned to fight very well and to despise weakness, in himself, in others. Then, when he was a strapping youth of such horrible mien and reputation that people hastily hid when they saw him coming, Firrabel had given him the token and sent him north. "Go

to the Chancery," she had said. "Ask for the Protector and remind him that he chose you out of thousands to serve him."

By this time, she had convinced herself the Protector had said it all. Actually, it had been Bossit himself who had said most of it, and it was Bossit who remembered the whole thing when Jondrigar came to the Chancery at last. The guards had laughed in his face when he'd passed into Chancery lands. They had laughed, but they had passed the word. Bossit had seen monstrousness in the child, he saw the promise of that monstrousness fulfilled in the man. Bossit had given him a spear to see what he could do with it, and he could do a good deal. Jondrigar had become a guardsman, and then the leader of a company, and then head of a battalion. And by the time the old general had died, all the

guards in the Chancery were Jondarites, and no one suggested any other candidate to lead the Chancery army.

Jondrigar the gray, the scaly, the pitted, wild-haired, long-armed monster. Jondrigar the untouchable. Jondrigar, who cared for only two people in all the world: Firrabel, who had raised him and cared for him; and Lees Obol, Protector of Man, who had picked him-so he thought-out of all the world. He had never loved a woman, never cared for a child. To Firrabel he sent money and gifts and infrequent letters. To Lees Obol he gave all his devotion and his life. And to Bossit, who furnished the general with tempting morsels from time to time, the monster served as a constant amusement, a source of daily wonder.

As for the general's own feelings, he did not think he had underestimated Queen Fibji. The northlands might rise under one of the male advisers to the scepter, perhaps, but not under the Queen. She was a pacifist. She would not fight. Her young men would fight, but she would not. From what he knew of women-that is, of his dutiful aunt and some even more dutiful whores-Jondrigar believed that women put comfort above all other considerations. Fibji was a woman, and she was comfortable as she was. He, Jondrigar, would allow her just enough comfort to keep her quiescent by exercising his troops at some distance from the Queen's tents. When Noor were to be murdered, maimed, or otherwise brutalized, he would do it out of Fibji's sight or hearing. Though she might learn of it later, it would be after the blood had dried and most of the grieving done. None knew better than Jondrigar how difficult it was to work up an outrage over something that had happened a long time before. So wherever Fibji went, the balloon scouts came to tell him, and he sent the troops elsewhere. A kind of game, really, but effective. The ceaseless depredations of the Jondarites kept the steppe dwellers' population in check and prevented them from assembling the stores they needed to wage outright war: the confiscated grains and roots filled vast storehouses behind the Teeth, enough to keep the Chancery for a generation if it were ever needful. General Jondrigar was well satisfied with Queen Fibji. If General Jondrigar was grateful for anything, he was grateful for comfortable, dutiful, compliant women.

In a hidden room off a remote corridor of the palace, Ezasper Jorn, Ambassador to the Thraish, built up the small fire in his porcelain stove and invited his guest to bring a chair closer to the warmth.

"Glad the winter's well over," he said, holding his hands to the stove. "One can find out absolutely nothing in the winter." His mighty form was close-wrapped in a heavy cloak, his pendulous ears half-covered by a floppy cap. Still he shivered, holding his huge hands almost upon the surface of the stove. Ezasper Jorn was never warm. Even at the height of polar summer, he shivered. In winter, he was almost immobile. He had fulfilled the duties of his office for many years, mostly by virtue of saying almost nothing to the Thraish and agreeing with everything they said to him. Since no action was ever taken on any recommendation made by Ezasper Jorn-indeed, he seldom made any at all-it did not matter. The position of Ambassador was filled harmlessly, and all at the Chancery were satisfied by that.

"We have to find out somehow," said Koma Nepor, purse-lipped. Chief of Research was a position lacking clear duties but implying vast and often unnamable expectations. Koma brought to the role an instinctive appreciation of mystery coupled with an inquisitive, persistent mind. The mystery over which he now troubled himself was the reported disappearance of animals from the Chancery herds of weehar and thrassil. It could have happened late last fall, perhaps.

Not during the winter, when the creatures were dug deep into the ice. Perhaps early this spring, when the first thaws came and the grass turned green on Chancery lands.

The surviving herds had been kept small at the command of Shavian Bossit, Lord Maintainer of the Household. Generations ago he had perceived the dangerous temptation large herds of weehar and thrassil might present to wandering fliers, assuming any such abrogated the treaty and flew north of the Teeth. It would have been wise, he had felt then as now, to kill the remaining beasts, leaving no cause for temptation at all.

However, the Protector of Man enjoyed red meat from time to time, and General Jondrigar, who regarded each least notion of the Protector as though it were an order given under penalty of death, had seen to it that the herds remained. The Protector received his roasts and chops at intervals, carefully augmented by certain grains and herbs. Men who ate the native animals had learned to serve them thus or risk a bewildering loss of intelligence. On Northshore the relationship between what eats and what is eaten was closer than on many worlds--or so the histories implied. There were those foods, for example, that allowed the fliers to retain their wings while others would have confined them to a life on the ground. There were foods that allowed those in the Chancery to live long, long lives, and others that would have condemned them to an early and brief idiocy. So it was that the fliers ate what they ate in order to maintain their wings, and the Chancery officials, when dining upon roast thrassil, consumed it with leguminous garnish. Which they would not do soon again if too many animals were missing.

"Bormas Tyle has investigated the report and is sure some of the animals are gone," said Ezasper. "He's told Tharius Don about it, you may be sure of that. Bormas may go his own way most of the time, but he is not derelict in his deputized duties. And Bossit won't drop the matter, you may be sure." His flaccid arms were held toward the welcome warmth of the stove, his pouchy face reddened by the heat. "Just gone."

"How would he know? We don't keep them on inventory, for the gods' sake. They wander. They get killed. Some of them die."

"Bormas says the two herds were small, almost household herds, kept close to the Chancery. The herdsmen had counted the young last fall, marking some to be set aside for the table of the Protector. When they went to do the butchering last week, there were only a few of the younger animals left. Up to a dozen of them gone, says Bormas."

Ezasper frowned. "Almost enough to make one remember those old legends about the monster in the main files. The one who eats all the apprentices."

Nepor giggled, appreciating this reference to the legend of the monster. "Most likely fliers," he said. "That's really what everyone is worried about. That Talker was here, before winter set in. First time ever, him and his friends. And he wasn't blind. He saw the thrassil, the weehar."

"Bormas wanted those herds killed off, long since."

"Bormas was right to urge it." Koma Nepor mused, "The general should have listened to him. Well, if the fliers have taken the animals, they haven't taken them to a Talons. Nothing for grass eaters in those rocky places. No. They'll have them on pasture somewhere. Most likely on the steppes, or in the badlands. Whichever, they'll have to be found." He scratched himself reflectively, thinking. "Bormas says we must send Jondarites. I told him no, it would be better to get the Noor to find them. Bormas asked why the Noor would bother, considering what use had been made of them in the past. To which question, of course, one cannot give convincing answer. Still, I think no Jondarites. Too much room there for conflict of an undesirable kind. Perhaps we had better consult with Tharius Don?" He left it as a question. Both of them knew what such consultation would mean--an hour's lecture on the morality of the situation. Still, better Tharius Don than Mitiar, who disliked unpleasant news and retaliated against those who brought it. Better than Bossit, who would definitely seek a scapegoat to take responsibility for the disappearance.

They postponed the decision in desultory chat, "And what of your researches?" Ezasper asked. "What new and remarkable things have you found?"

Nepor giggled again. "I've been experimenting with blight, Joro my boy. There are, ah ... interesting applications. Applications I do not intend to reveal to General Jondrigar. Oh, by the moons, none of us would be safe if he knew them."

Ezasper turned his wide face toward the other, held up a cautioning fist. "Careful, Koma. If you have found something like that, be very careful speaking of it. To anyone at all."

The other shifted uncomfortably. He never knew exactly what Ezasper meant. Perhaps he meant not to speak of it at all; perhaps he meant to speak to no one except Ezasper himself. Sometimes Nepor felt he did not understand what was going on. Experimental situations were very different from people. In experiment, one could control what happened--or, if not what happened, the conditions under which it happened. Results could be duplicated time after time. With people, very little was controllable. They acted quite unpredictably. It seemed wisest to let the subject go, for now. Still, it was quite remarkable what a sprayer full of blight could do to a living person.

23

The lady Kesseret prepared to depart from Highstone Lees. On the morning she would go to the top of Split River Pass and down the other side, carried in a palanquin by Noor slaves while she meditated upon the evil of their slavery. Slavery, like Awakening, would vanish on the day. Until then, she could not appear to disapprove of it without coming under suspicion. More suspicion, she told herself, sure that she was already suspected of much.

"Have you any word?" she asked Tharius Don.

"The man who played the role of Fatterday did his job well. Queen Fibji will send an expedition to the South shore."

"When? How soon?"

"Probably not until late summer. Still, that is only a little time. When she does so, we will see that the fliers hear of it. It will give them something to think about besides Rivermen. Also, I've sent an envoy to ask her to search for the missing beasts. The envoy will plant the idea that such beasts should be taken on any voyage, in case there are none beyond the River. They will steal the beasts-if they find them. And this, too, will draw the fliers' attention."

She was not sure this feint would have its desired purpose. The fliers were subtle, more subtle, she thought, than Tharius realized. "When the time comes, Tharius, do you really think the fliers will capitulate? Do you really think they will give up their wings? Become like the Treeci? Legendary Treeci, I should say. We don't even know if they really exist."

"There are books in the palace library that say they do, Kessie. Old books, which have stood on those shelves for hundreds of years, talk about the Treeci islands. Books no one looks at but me. Luckily, Glamdrul Feynt cares for nothing but his files. Strictly speaking, the books should be his responsibility, yet I thank whatever gods may be that they are where I can read them. And yes, to answer your question, I think the Thraish will capitulate. Rather than see us die or themselves. Once they have experienced the other kind of life, I think they will prefer it."

"You're so sure." She shook her head at him, smiling wanly. He had always been sure, very sure. Perhaps it had been that quality in him that she had loved. So nice to be sure, without doubts.

"They've seen us, Kessie. We don't fly. And yet we have a civilization better than the one the Thraish have. They borrow our craftsmen, they borrow our writing. They take from us constantly. They can't be unaware of the difference. It's only custom that keeps them to the treaty. A hard custom, and one tightly held, but when it comes right down to it, I think they'll be relieved. By all accounts, humans and the Treeci live very well together."

"So you've said, Tharius. I wish I were as sure as you are." She choked, oppressed by this act of leaving him. In a moment her voice came back and she went on, "Sometimes I lie awake in Baris Tower at night. Everything is very quiet. Far off in the town the crier sings out, and his voice comes gently. There is wind, perhaps. I lie there, almost at peace, my mind drifting quietly."

"Oh, Tharius, there is a peaceful place inside the head where one may wander. Like fields, new mown, green and moist and fragrant. One wanders inside oneself, at peace, unconscious of being oneself. Then, suddenly, out of nothing, a hard, hurtful thing intrudes and one cries out."

"I know." He smoothed her hair from her forehead. "I forget, too, sometimes. I drift, dream. But I always remember again."

"There is such peace in that forgetting! But yes, one remembers again, and the future looms up like a rocky cliff, creased with bruising edges and sharp corners, a thing which cannot be drifted over but must be climbed, hard stone by hard stone." She fell silent for a time, lines starting from her eyes and lips, her face for that moment incredibly ancient.

"When I remember, I start to think of the morning of the rebellion, of the day itself. Our people will have been to the pits in the night and every worker pit will be empty. All the bodies will be in the River. Weighted down. We will have killed every patch of Tears we have been able to find. The fliers will have nothing to eat ... "

Tharius Don took up the account. "In every town the crier will call watch against fliers who may come seeking living meat. There will be Tears in the Towers, and these must be sought out and destroyed by fire, by our friends within the Towers. By those outside the Towers, if necessary."

"I think of Towers burning," she said.

"But not Bans Tower," he said. "In Bans Tower the Superior will tell her Awakeners of a new revelation."

"Yes," she agreed sadly. "A new revelation, to be preached by the Awakeners to the fliers. A revelation from Potipur which demands that they give up their wings ... When I look at someone like Sliffisunda, though, I'm not sure he will ever accept it. There's a kind of hatred in him. For us. For all our kind."

"Tradition. Custom. That's all. The attitude they've adopted. It doesn't mean that's the only attitude they can adopt."

"Does the Ambassador to the Thraish agree with you on that point?"

"I don't discuss anything with Jorn. He returned from his journey some time ago, but all I've said to him thus far is 'Good evening.' Ezasper cares for nothing except that the stove be well alight and he not expected to go out on cold days. Don't seek confirmation from those like Jorn, Kessie. Don't doubt our cause. Have faith. When the time comes to choose between wings or life, the Thraish will choose life and life with us as ... well, if not as brothers, at least as kin."

"And we, Tharius? When will the day come?"

"Soon. There are only a few more pieces to be set into place. A few more patches of Tears to kill. A few more Towers to recruit. A few more groups to get organized for the night of the strike. Not many. Have patience."

She, who had had patience for some hundred years, snorted at this, and he joined her in wry laughter.

"Have you any word of Pamra?"

"No signals. If Hze had found her, we would know."

"Let us hope we hear nothing." She stretched, moved her fingers and toes to be sure they had healed. "Let us pray we hear nothing."

He nodded. Time pressed, now. Secrecy had to be maintained. They needed some minor distractions to keep the Talkers busy. They needed absolute quiet from those involved in the conspiracy. They needed no more upsets such as the one provided by Pamra Don. Not too much to keep track of, really. He kissed her on the forehead, a valedictory. They might never see one another again.

"If I am killed while you still live, Kessie, find Pamra then. Tell her I cared about her."

She shook her head; a tear gathered that hung, unshed, like a gem upon her lashes. "Better I don't see her again, love. Better for all of us. Let us pray she has gone to ground and is well hidden. Pray we do not hear of her again."

24

High in the Talons above the Straits of Shfor in the aerie of Sliffisunda--the Uplifted One, by the grace of Potipur articulate, a Talker of the Sixth Degree--met with his students, newly located Talkers, still awed by their selection. The aerie, once a graceless, chilly cave, full of wind and the stench of guano, had been reshaped by the hands of human slaves. There was a privy slot in the outer wall, set in a niche covered with a heavy curtain. There was a low, broad perch, on which Sliffisunda stood to receive visitors. There were carvings on the walls, and a meat trough with an ornamental post and chains to hold the meat down until it died. Though heavily dosed with Tears, the living human bodies tended to thrash about unpleasantly while they were being eaten. Sliffisunda sometimes believed that despite the stench of carrion, he might have preferred to eat as the ordinary fliers did, in the bone pits.

The students before him, three of them, were eggings who hardly knew the meaning of the Covenant. They did not understand humiliation. It was Sliffisunda's job to teach them, to let them know how far the Thraish had fallen from their onetime communion with the gods, and by imparting that knowledge to cleave these youngsters to the doctrine of rage that governed the Talons.

"Perch," he directed them, waiting impatiently while they settled before him, wings outspread, heads carried well back on their flexible necks, foot talons stretching beyond their knees as they crouched, knees on feet, in the posture of subordination.

"I want you to imagine you are a flier," he said at last, when they were well settled. "Just a flier, a female. Not a Talker at all. I want you to imagine it is long ago, more than a thousand years." There was a snigger at this. There was always a

snigger at this, but Sliffisunda waited without outward show of impatience for his own heavy regard to make their eggishness manifest. Soon they felt his disapproval and became uncomfortable, shifting from foot to foot, staring at him from lowered eyes.

Sliffisunda's voice became a monotone, a rhythmic chant. "It is spring. You have slept the winter away in the caves low in the mountains of the north. Now the time of warmth has come, and you emerge from your cave to the time of rejoicing. Your name is Shishus, flier of the Thraish ... "

His voice was hypnotic. They would imagine, combining what they knew in their blood with what they had learned and what he would tell them in his chanting. They would fall into a trance, and in the trance they would dream that last awakening of ancient times.

In the trance it seemed that the season of warmth had come upon the northern plains. The cold rains were over. On the endless prairies the tall grass moved like water, silver blue like the River the grass moved, breaking around the herd of weehar as the River broke on the rocks of Shfor, near the Talons. The herd whuffled nervously as Shishus's shadow fell across them, she crying, "Rejoice! Warmth is come!"

The weehar rejoiced in their own way, heads down, legs trembling. Each thing rejoiced in its own way. Even trees, doubtless. With warmth came the end of hibernation, the season of rejoicing, the season of Potipur's Promise to the Thraish.

Shishus whispered the name of her people. "Thraish." The word was a rejoicing in itself. After the lonely time of cold, she longed for Thraish, for huntmates. First the rejoicing. Then the obligatory trip to the Talons for the dancing as the moons gathered. Then mating. Then nesting, the joy of nestlings. "Thraish," she whispered, turning on her strong wings above the prairie.

Though perhaps the Talkers would suggest again that the dancing not take place. As they had at the last Conjunction. Last warm season there had been rebellious muttering against the Talkers, and Shishus had been a leader in that rebellion. In old times Talkers had been wise, settling disputes over nesting sites or huntmates. Last season-no, the season before that and before that as well-they had not been helpful. Not orthodox. Of late the Talkers seemed to doubt Potipur's Promise, the promise of ten thousand years. "Do my will and ye shall have plenty."

Thinking of it made Shishus angry. Among the free fliers there was talk of overthrowing the Talkers. Shishus had told them it was foolish talk. It was not necessary to overthrow the Talkers. They could simply be ignored!

Potipur's Promise was holy. Long, long ago the Thraish had been hungry. All the hoovar had been eaten and were gone. Then came the Talker Shinnisush, bringing Potipur's Promise to the people. "Follow me and ye shall have plenty!" And after the promise there had been great explosions in the northlands, mountains jutting fire, and endless herds of thrassil came, driven out of the north by the fire, driven from behind the great mountains. The Thraish had rejoiced in plenty once more.

But in time the thrassil also were gone, eaten. Then the world had shaken again, and the weehar had come, down in great herds to the silver-blue plains that lay between the Riverlands and the northern mountains.

Great herds.

Shishus planed in a wide gyre, peering down. One herd only. Small. Perhaps she should wait to find a larger herd. No. Cold season had been long, and soon huntmates would arrive. She threw back her head and cried loud into the sky, "Invitation! Join! Rejoice! Summer beasts are here."

Below, Shishus's shadow fell across beasts, and they began to gallop, a frenzied flight, knowing time to rejoice was near. Far on the western horizon two winged specks moved toward Shishus, crying as they came, "Rejoice, rejoice." Her huntmates: Slililan, Shusisanda.

They met in midair, wingtips caressing, beaks touching the tender sweet places behind ears, glorying in touch, in flight. Then they cried together, fell together, talons extended, crying the great invitation to the weehar. "Rejoice! Rejoice!"

The weehar rejoiced, galloping, snorting, leaping in a wild dance upon the grass, evading, skipping, falling at last beneath the clutching talons, beneath the spearing beaks. Blood ran hot into Shishus's beak.

In Sliffisunda's aerie the young shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, beaks agape. They tasted the hot blood of the

weehar, heard the cries of the huntmates. Sliffisunda chanted to them, telling them what to feel, what to experience. In the trance they heard Sliffisunda's voice:

"Rejoice! Rejoice!"

Away upon the prairie the few remaining weehar stopped running, stood trembling, the few young in the center of the group. This was how weehar prayed to Potipur. This is how the herd beasts rejoiced. Shishus stood upon one of the beasts she had killed, gorged now, beak dripping, and called to her huntmates to see the beasts rejoicing.

"Not rejoicing," snapped Slililan. Slililan did not always sound like free flier. Sometimes she sounded almost like Talker. "No rejoicing, Shishus, silly flier. Weehar scared. Only scared. Herd too small."

"Rejoice in own way," Shishus screamed. Slililan was spoiling their first feast. "Slililan makes unorthodox talk. Doubts Potipur."

Slililan flew at Shishus then, battle ready. Only Shusi-sanda's bulk thrust between had stopped them as they stood with wings cocked high in threat, spear-beaked and blood-eyed. "Huntmates," Shusisanda whispered. "Time to rejoice."

What had made them grow so angry? There had never been anger among free fliers before. They had fought only the mock battles of conjugation, vying for the dancing males.

They had not fought one another. Was it something in the look of the plains? In the trembling silence of the few weehar?

"Find bigger herd," Shishus demanded, lifting away from the many bodies that littered the ground. Perhaps they should not have killed so many. They could have killed only three, one for each of them, though they could have eaten only a tiny fraction even of that. Already grouped in -a wide circle around the corpses were the silly fliers, those with no speech, waiting for their own time to rejoice. Shishus and her huntmates winged toward the Talons, uneasy as distances drifted by, uneasier yet when they came within sight of the peaks.

There the hunters of Thraish, free fliers, gathered in their hundreds of thousands, thick as grass, their clattering so loud it reached the huntmates when they were still far away.

They had flown half around the world, had arrived at the Talons, but there had been no bigger herd of weehar.

There had been no herds at all.

They arrived to sounds of the summoning rattle, propelled to and fro on its flexible sapling base by young fliers, telling Talkers to come out of their rocky towers. Speaker's rock was empty. No Talkers sat upon it. Rattle went on as sound of Thraish grew louder, more agitated.

Then silence, for Talker came out, old Talker, blue with age, eyes deep-pouched, beak silver and ragged-edged. He came from a dark hole in rock, perched on doorstep, peered nearsightedly at great throng there, said in a dry, uninterested voice, "Rejoice, people of Thraish."

There was only muttering from free fliers. Shishus, alone among throng, called response. "Rejoice!"

All eyes came to Shishus, fastening upon her. Muttering grew louder. Talker fixed his old eyes upon her, called to her.

"You found weehar then, flight leader?"

Shishus could not reply. This was not the way ceremony went: Talker asked again, and yet again, before Shishus could think to say, "Huntmates have rejoiced."

"How many weehar did you find?"

Shishus conferred with Shusisanda. How many had there been? Five claws? About that. Fifty.

"And when you had rejoiced, how many left?"

Three claws, perhaps. Or less.

Silence then upon Talons. A long, uneasy silence, unbroken except by rustling of thousands shifting from foot to foot in an agony of apprehension. "Promise of Potipur," one called from midst of free fliers, whining. "Promise of Potipur."

"Ah, well," cried old Talker. "If Potipur has promised, then free fliers of Thraish have nothing to worry about."

Muttering began again, angrily this time. Potipur had promised plenty, but there was no plenty. So. So. There must be fault

somewhere. Evil. Sin. Talkers, most likely. Their fault. Their sin. Doubting.

The old Talker might have read their minds. "Who told you free fliers last warm season not to eat weehar?"

Muttering. It was true. Talkers had told them that. Talkers had said weehar were too few. Free fliers had told Talkers something different instead. Free fliers had told Talkers to keep quiet. Had told them, "Promise of Potipur."

"Last warm season, who told males not to dance? Who told free fliers not to breed last Conjunction? Who told the fliers to break their eggs?"

The Talkers had told them. Talkers said to eat fish. Foul fish that softened beaks, made feathers fall, which made free fliers unable to fly at all. Talkers said not to nest. Not do Conjunction. But flight leaders had cawed laughter. Promise of Potipur. Shishus had cawed laughter with all free fliers. Do will of Potipur! Breed. Grow more numerous. Have plenty!

"Who told fliers to eat, breed?" Old Talker had a voice like rocks rubbing together in flood. "Flight leaders said eat, breed. Flight leaders, like Shishus there. She called shame on Talkers. Told you Potipur would provide plenty. So. Ask flight leaders where is rejoicing Potipur will provide."

The Talker had gone then, quickly, down inside the stone, where it would be safe against Thraish, for Thraish were very angry at Talkers.

At first.

Anger was there. But Talkers were not there. Free fliers could not attack them. Could not spear beak, wing buffet. Talkers were different. Males who would not dance. Males who changed, instead. Knew more. Used more words. Had different thoughts. Lived down in stone, somewhere deep where Thraish could not get to them.

So, wrath turned against others.

Against flight leaders.

Against Shishus, flying, flying, hiding among stones, in grass, walking along streams to hide, not flying, huntmates lost, pecked to death, only Shishus living, eating stilt lizards, eating worms, living, while all around Thraish died by thousands, thousands. Starving.

In the towns along the River lived the two-legged outlanders, humans. Despicable no fliers. Good smelling. Pull of hot blood. Weak. Slow. Some fliers hunted this meat. Some fliers ate this meat, died. Screaming, insides burning, they died. Human meat was poison to the Thraish.

Some ate fish. Feathers dropped out for a time. Bones changed. Couldn't fly. Treed, meaning "crawler." Fish eaters. Filth. Betrayers of Potipur.

Some, like Shishus, ate lizards, worms, bodies of dead fliers. Only those few like Shishus lived, eating dead fliers, smaller birds, not eating the poisonous humans, not eating fish as the foul Treeci did, who forsook Potipur's Promise, giving up their power of flight. It was a test, a test. Potipur testing. Soon would come Potipur's Promise.

Of the Talkers, only a few lived. Of the fliers, only a few, like Shishus, survived.

In the aerie, the eggings woke from their trance, gagging, no longer full of giggles.

"Attend," said Sliffisunda. "Some survived. Shishus, whose story you have heard, survived. And many of us, the Talkers, survived. It was one of our number, Thoulia, who learned that the flesh of the humans could be softened by Tears of Viranel and then safely eaten by us. We took them, the soft, weak humans, took them to eat. "We chose not to eat fish, not to become flightless, not to betray the Promise of Potipur.

"But the humans fought us. Many of them died. Many of us died. Thoulia said to us, "They will never let you take them without fighting. And if you kill them all as you did the weehar, what will you eat? And if they kill us all, who will keep Potipur's name alive?"

"We chose rather to arrange matters in order to assure ourselves a sufficiency of human flesh.

"We made treaty with humans. We offered some few of them the elixir of the Talkers in return for the flesh of other humans. Dead flesh for the fliers, who are many. Live flesh for us Talkers, who are few. We gave some few of them the elixir if they would worship our gods. We offered some of them long, long life if they would become Awakeners, build the

Towers, let the Thraish feast in their bone pits and live upon those Towers. One Tower at first, then two. Then four. Then many. Few free fliers at first, then more. Not many, about eighty thousand. Living on Towers of life. Towers."

The young ones shifted on the floor. They had not yet had time to take in what they had learned. They looked at him with baffled eyes, one, bolder than the rest, whispering, "But we despise the Towers?"

Sliffisunda nodded his approval. This one would go far.

"Yes, eggings," he said in a grating whisper, lifting his tail to deposit a symbolic dropping on the subject under discussion. "Never forget it. We despise the Treeci, our own kind, who betrayed the Promise of Potipur and gave up their wings. We despise those who are consumed by us, made into shit by us. We despise those among them who will sell their kindred for a few years of stinking human life.

"Yes, eggings. We despise the Towers, and the Chancery. We despise all humans in the world of the Thraish. We allow mankind to live only that we may live winged as Potipur commands. If we could not live as our god commands, we would die. And every human would die with us, for we despise them all."

When the eggings had gone, he left the wide perch to go to one of the openings in the stone. The humans called them windows and put glass or oiled paper over them. The Thraish called them spy holes and hid them behind hangings or piers of rock. This one looked toward the north.

The north! Behind the great mountains. Sliffisunda had seen thrassil there, and weehar. Though he had not yet been hatched when the great beasts were last seen, he knew them when he saw them, as he knew his own wing feathers. He already knew the taste and smell of them. And he knew filthy humans had them and would never give them to the Thraish voluntarily.

Which did not matter. Now that the Thraish knew they were there, it would not take long to get them. A few strong fliers had already been instructed to go through the pass in the deep night, find young ones, carry them out. Indeed, the task might already have been accomplished.

A dozen young ones would grow up, become a herd. A herd would become a great, great number in time. And when there were enough of them ...

"Now, eggings," he imagined himself saying at some not-too-distant time. "Now, eggings, every human shall die, because Potipur our god commands that we kill them all."

25

Once Pamra had heard the voices clearly, her doubts and fears left her. Rapture and joy had returned. The rapture that had abandoned her at the worker pit when she had found Delia; the rapture that she had thought forever gone; the joy she had felt in Neff's company; the joy she had thought eternally lost; now they had returned, both, so that she walked encircled by peace and sureness, unable to remember a time when she might have doubted. Thrasne watched her and hated what he saw. Before Strinder's Isle she had begun to talk with him, begun to care about the Gift, begun to take part in the daily life of the River. He had begun to plan for their future together. He knew of a carpenter in Darkel-don who would rebuild the owner-house into a fit place for Pamra, Pamra and their children. He thought of a weaver he had met in one of the little towns past Shfor. From her he would buy covers for the beds and hangings, for the colors she used were the colors of sunset and dawn, warm as light itself. He would buy gowns for Pamra herself, gowns of that long fiber pamet grown only in the bottom lands near Zephyr, soft as down. She would respond to these gifts with affection and approval. They would plan together for their future. It was all there, in his mind, how each thing would happen in its time.

Now she had left him, gone elsewhere, become as remote as the girl he remembered outside the Tower in Bans, tolerating his presence, perhaps. Perhaps not noticing he was there. She spoke to him of voices, gently, as though to a child, as though he should be able to hear what she heard. She nodded, smiled, as though in conversation. Sometimes she sat upon the deck of the Gift with Lila on her lap, pointing to something Thrasne could not see, but which he suspected Lila did see. At least the child's eyes followed Pamra's eyes, followed and fixed in a kind of concentration that was not childlike.

Seeing Pamra like this, he began to be afraid she would leave him, though for the time being she seemed willing to stay on the River. He saw her sometimes murmuring to herself, as though rehearsing words she would say, but when they stopped

at Trens and Villian-gar, or any of a dozen other small townships, she made no move to go ashore.

Once, she had shared in his life, at least a little. She had chatted with him of the sights along the shore, sometimes gone to the market with him in the towns where they stopped. She had cooked for him, appearing to enjoy it. He had told himself it was only a matter of time, of patience-both of which he had in seemingly unlimited quantity.

Now, since Strinder's Isle, all his plans seemed moved into some future so remote he was not sure there was enough time after all. For the first time he thought of himself growing old, still without her. Old, still alone. No children to roll about the owner-house floor and learn to be boatmen in their turn. No woman to share the everlasting voyage, no Suspirra. What right had she to destroy his hopes? When he had watched over her, sought her out, saved her?

He found himself growing angry at her. What right had she to change in this way! And for what? Some Treeci who had died. Some dream she had had. When compared with his hopes, what was that? Nothing!

Nothing, he assured himself, going to the room he had given her and entering it without asking her leave. He took hold of her before she quite knew he was there, his arms tight around her, his lips on hers, forcing her lips apart, tasting her mouth, pressing her beneath him onto the bed. And she did not move, did not seem to breathe. When he drew back to look into her face, it was like looking into the face of an image he might have carved from pale wood, then smoothed until its reality was blurred into mere shape. So she was mere shape, eyes wide and unseeing, not Suspirra, not Pamra even, not anything.

"Pamra!" He shook her, slapped her. She fell against the bed, slumped, limp.

Slowly her eyes focused, saw him. "But you must help me, Thrasne. Don't you see? You were meant to help me. That's why you came for me. Mother sent you, don't you see? To help me?" Her eyes filled with hurt tears, and his heart churned within him, creating a vertigo, a sick dizziness. "Help me, Thrasne."

Her face cleared then. The tears dried. The rapture came into her eyes once more, and she nodded, hearing something he could not hear.

He stood up unsteadily and left her, feeling a deeper loneliness than he had felt since long, long ago in Xoxy-Do.

Medoor Babji saw him leave the cabin, saw the unsteady walk, the drunken demeanor. He leaned over the rail as though he might be sick or readying himself to leap into the water, and she moved up beside him to lay a hard, small hand upon his back.

"Thrasne owner," she said, risking everything for his pain. "It doesn't take a Jarb Mendicant to tell us the woman is mad." Jarb Mendicants had a reputation, not often undeserved, for treating mental troubles of one kind or another, and it was in the Jarb Houses that the truly mad found refuge.

For a time he seemed not to have heard her. "Mad?" he asked at last, as though he did not know the meaning of the word.

"Mad, Thrasne. Though she has not tasted jarb to see visions, still she has visions of her own. She is not your Suspirra because the Suspirra you dreamed of was not mad and this woman is. Your Suspirra is an ideal, Thrasne owner. Not a real creature of this world. This woman, Pamra, she is only a semblance of your ideal, and she is real. Of this world. Therefore, imperfect."

"No, not of this world," he disagreed simply. "But I love her with all my heart."

She shook her head, tears forming at the corners of her eyes. She, Babji, hardened by the marketplaces of a half hundred towns, to cry so for his man. She shook her head angrily, letting the tears fly away. "Then love her if you must, Thrasne. But you must look somewhere else for the things you dream of." She left him and went to her bedding where it lay upon the deck. Long into the night she lay there, alternately angry and sorrowful, picturing herself and Thrasne, together, without realizing she was doing it. He was not Moor. Given only that, he was not her equal, for the Noor were what they were only to others of their kind. To mate with one outside the Noor was to diminish oneself. She had no right to consider him at all, but consider him she did. Finally, just before dawn, she said to herself in an ironic voice, "Well, love him if you must, Babji; but look elsewhere for the things you dream of."

The morning brought them to a mountainous region, a place of towering peaks and precipitous cliffs; a Talons. Upon the stony peaks they could see the clustered forms of fliers, and high above were their spread wings, floating in great circles. Thrasne kept the Gift well offshore, away from the cliffs and the treacherous currents that swirled around the tumbled stone at their feet. Pamra stood at the rail, peering forward, shifting from foot to foot, speaking aloud, as though to a company of

friends, pointing to the fliers far above in increasing agitation. Thrasne watched her, telling himself he did not care what she was doing. He had not spoken to her since the night before except in passing, as he might speak to any member of the crew. Now she acted as though she had been told to go or do something she was uncertain of, for she asked something again and again, almost plaintively. Whatever answer she received was eventually enough, for when night came she went to her bed with a calm face. They would come into Thou-ne on the morning tide. When they tied up at the jetty and edged out the plank, he was not really surprised to see her leaving the boat. He wrestled with himself for a moment, deciding not to follow her, then deciding that he must. He had promised to keep her safe. He had made no conditions then; it would not be fair or proper to set conditions now. Still, he was hard put to it to follow her as she went through the town, one foot in front of the other, as sure as the wind. She had a cloak drawn over her head, but when she reached the public square she drew it back, hair floating wildly free as the drowned Suspirra's had used to do. She mounted to the steps of the public fountain and turned, arm outstretched, face glowing like a little moon. "People," she cried in a voice like a flute, softly insinuating. "Is it not better when the people know?" Those in the marketplace turned to see her, astonished, drawing close and staring as she stood there, gathering them in with her hands. And from some little fellow at the edge of the square came a scream, almost hysterical, a treble cry as from a child but with the force of a trumpet blown, announcing war. "She has come, in flesh, the Bearer of Truth!" It was Peasimy Plot, alert to the coming of light as he had always been, always remembering the dark, the lies.

(Peasimy, remembering following the Awakeners when they took his father to the next town east and then just threw him in the worker pits in the dark, as though they didn't care; Peasimy remembering when the body fixer told him it wouldn't hurt, what they were going to do to him that time he broke his arm, and it did hurt, a lot; Peasimy remembering the shining face from beneath the water, and it was this face.) "She has come," he cried again, like a call to battle. A shout went up then. It was half surprise, half recognition, from a hundred throats. Thrasne had lingered at the edge of the square and was suddenly at the back of a crowd, all watching her. Pamra's eyes opened very wide, as though to take this in. Then she nodded, answering their shout as a sigh went through those gathered by.

"I have come," she agreed, beckoning to the thin, hectic-looking young fellow who had called out. "I have come bringing the truth. You have been expecting me, and I have come."

Thrasne turned back to the docks, sick at heart.

He went to a tavern, where he drank among a crowd of doubters and nay sayers, then returned to the Gift. Medoor Babji stood on the deck, reading something while stroking the feathers of a large, dun-colored bird. When she saw him coming, she tossed the bird into the air, then put the missive in her pocket as she came toward him. She was the only one there. She had stayed behind when her fellows had left the boat to buy stores for their journey. Perhaps she had known he would return.

"Medoor Babji," he croaked. "You were right. She is mad. Mad or possessed. Or something else I have never heard of. What shall I do?"

His agony was manifest. She held out her arms, and he fell into them as into a well. She held him, kissing his sun-browned face where the hair grew back, tasting the sweat of his forehead along with his tears. What could he do?

"I have kept her hidden, but she is in the square now, where anyone can see her. The Laughters will find her! Or the fliers. I think she will preach revolt against the fliers." So much he had inferred from her soliloquies over the past days.

"If she is surrounded by people?" Medoor asked abstractedly. She was still thinking of the message the bird had brought, a letter from her mother, Queen Fibji. A letter commanding her to a great exploration, a voyage. How could she think of something else just now? Yet she did, seeing in the agonized face before her all agonized faces, Noor and shore-fish alike. "How can the Laughters take her if she is surrounded by a multitude?"

"If the Laughters cannot take her, they will send Jondarites. Jondarites to put down a rebellion." Thrasne had seen this happen once or twice in the past. He was sure of it, hopelessly sure.

Jondarites.

Holding him in her arms, close against her girl's breasts, Medoor felt the chill of the word. Jondarites. Now, now she began to realize what was really happening here. It was not a matter merely of a madwoman and a man. There was more to it than that.

Jondarites.

Jondarites and the Moor.

Queen Fibji, far to the north, bearing greater burdens than anyone should have to bear. The endless depredations of the Jondarites. The great plan. And now this word of an even greater possibility, which the seeker bird had brought. If the Jondarites were sent in great numbers to Northshore, to put down a rebellion, there would be fewer to prey upon the Moor. And if there were fewer depredations among the Noor, then the Noor might better do what was best for them.

"Come," she whispered at last. "Let us go see what Pamra is really doing."

Pamra had gone to the Temple, together with half the town. Thrasne and Medoor Babji pushed their way into a corner of the crowded sanctuary, where they could kneel with the others before the image of the glowing woman. At first Thrasne did not recognize his carving of Suspirra, for it shone with a light he had never seen. Only when Pamra stood before it and claimed it as a precursor, divinely meant, sent to announce her coming, did he become truly aware of what it was. He wanted to laugh. He would have laughed except for the ominous stillness in the place. Precursor? Yes, but from his knife and a lump of frag wood, nothing more than that.

Afterward he scarcely remembered what she had said. There had been something in it of love and something of righteousness. She had spoken of being misled. Of a conspiracy to keep the Protector of Man unmindful of the evil that flew upon the winds of the world. She spoke of the worker pits and of the great lie of Sorting Out. She told them truth, that the true Sorting took place in another realm, beyond the world, and what happened in this world was a blasphemy. She called the fliers Servants, not of Abricor, but of their own pride. She said all that, over and over, in different words, making them laugh and weep and cry out. Someone called to her, asking how she knew these things, and she said her voices had told her to stand before them and tell the truth, at which many had shouted out they would follow her in the telling.

"Crusade," she cried. "Let all who can, join me in crusade. We will carry the word of this injustice around the world. And when we go to free the Protector of Man from those who hold him in ignorance, we will be many, a multitude, a great tide to sweep away the evil of the world." Lila lay in her arms as she said this, looking out at the crowd with great, wide eyes, reaching out her baby arms toward them all.

The strange little man who had first hailed her called out again, "The Mother of Truth," and others echoed these words. His face and theirs were shining with devotion.

Thrasne thrilled to her voice, as did everyone within sound of it. He could not stop himself. His flesh responded even when he told himself it was all foolishness. There were others there, Awakeners among them. They, too, looking at her with an expression of alert surprise and wonderment, nodding their heads as though she had been Viranel herself.

Not Viranel. No. Viranel's face carved on the wall behind Pamra was only an image, crude and somehow horribly inhuman. One could not worship a god that was a stranger. Not Viranel. Something finer than that. Holier than that.

And even then, he wanted her still. The impossibility of that wanting struck him like a blow, and he leaned forward on his knees and wept as Medoor Babji regarded him thoughtfully, fingering in her deep pocket the message she had received.

And Peasimy crouched at Pamra's feet as she went on teaching, lit from within as though by flame. He crouched there, cheeks red with the fire of her talk, eyes burning also, all of him lit up as if from within by that hot, plasmic vapor, as though he were liquid, without form except as her words gave him form and meaning, shaped by her with that shape crystallizing in every instant to something more refined, simpler, with keener edges and corners to it. "Light comes," he murmured to himself, a litany, an obligatto to her speech. "Light comes, light comes."

But then, his eyes lighting upon the tall, dark-cloaked Jondantes, who made a shadowy enclosure about the sanctuary, unable in their uncommanded state either to attend to what Pamra was saying or prevent her from speaking, held in abeyance as the dammed River holds itself, full of force and power that-is for the moment unused, not out of conviction but out of simple inability to act-seeing these, their high-plumed helmets nodding as they craned their necks to observe all who came into that throng, Peasimy spoke again.

"But first, night comes. Night comes."

The story of Pamra Don, Thrasne, and Medoor Babji is concluded in South shore: The Awakeners, Volume II.

***SIGNIFICANT INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE**

Binna: One of the Treeci on Strinder's Isle. Blint: Owner of the Riverboat the Gift of Potipur.

Bormas Tyle Chancery official, Deputy Enforcer to Tharius Don, conspirator with Shavian Bossit.

Delia: Nanny to Pamra Don, called Saint Delia by the townsfolk of Baris.

Drowned Woman, the: The drowned wife of Fulder Don, taken from the River in a blighted state and kept by Thrasne.

Ezasper Jorn: Ambassador to the Thraish; member of the Council of Seven in the Chancery. Conspirator with Koma Nepor.

Fibji: Queen of the Noor.

Fulder Don: A man of the artist caste in the town of Baris. Father of Pamra Don.

Gendra Mitiar: Dame Marshal of the Towers, member of the Council of Seven in the Chancery. Conspirator with Ezasper Jorn.

Glamdrul Feynt: Master of the files in the Bureau of Towers, Chancery. Conspirator with Shavian Bossit.

Haranjus Pandel: Superior of the Tower in Thou-ne.

Ilze: Senior Awakener in the Tower of Baris, mentor to Pamra Don. Becomes a Laugher.

Jhilt: Noor slave of Gendra Mitiar.

Jondrigar: General Jondrigar, member of the Council of Seven in the Chancery; leader of the armies of the Protector.

Joy: Surviving resident of Strinder's Isle.

Kesseret: "Kessie," "the lady Kesseret," Superior of the Tower in Baris.

Koma Nepor: Director of Research, member of the Council of Seven in the Chancery.

Lees Obol: Protector of Man, member of the Council of Seven in the Chancery.

Lila: The slow-baby. Born from the drowned woman.

Martien: Musician, close friend, and follower of Tharius Don.

Medoor Babji: Daughter of Queen Fibji; chosen heir of the throne of the Noor.

Murga: Wife of owner Blint. Called Blint-wife. Neff: A young male Treeci living on Strinder's Isle.

Obers-roirt Thrasne's trusted assistant, first owner's man after Thrasne takes over the Gift of Potipur.

Pamra Don: Awakener in the Tower of Baris, who leaves the tower to begin the great crusade.

Peasimy Plot: Resident of Thou-ne, childlike adult son of the widow Plot. Follower of Pamra Don.

Prender: Half sister to Pamra Don.

Shavian Bossit: Maintainer of the Household; member of the Council of Seven in the Chancery.

Shishus: A semi mythical typical flier of the past, used as an eidolon for young Talkers.

Sliffisunda: A Talker of the Sixth (highest) Degree among the Thraish.

Stodder: Resident of Strinder's Isle. Strange: Favorite consort of Queen Fibji.

Suspirra: The idealized woman of Thrasne's dreams. A carved image of that woman.

Taj Noteen: Leader of a group of Melancholies to which Medoor Babji belongs.

Tharius Don: Propagator of the Faith; member of the Council of Seven in the Chancery. Ancestor of Pamra Don. Leader of the cause.

Thoulia: Semi mythical "Sorter," the Talker who first discovered the efficacy of the Tears of Viranel.

Thrasne: Third assistant owner's man aboard the Riverboat the Gift of Potipur. An orphan, adopted by the owner, Blint.

Later, owner of the Gift.

Threnot: Servant to Kesseret.

Werf: One of the Treeci on Strinder's Isle.

***GROUPS, PLACES, AND THINGS**

Abricor: Male, second god in the Thraish trinity. Also the second largest moon.

Awakeners, the: Religious order living in the Towers who oversee disposal of the dead.

Bails: Township. Home place of Pamra Don, Tharius Don, and the lady Kesseret.

Blight, the; A fungus living in the World River that seems to turn living flesh to wood.

Boatmen: Those who make their living on the boats that travel westward on the World River. Merchants. Not to be confused with Rivermen, q.v.

Chancery, the. The administrative center of Northshore, including the officers, buildings, and bureaucracy, located at Highstone Lees, behind the Teeth of the North.

Direction of Life, the: Movement to the west, as the sun, tides, and moons move. Movement to the east is considered antilife and forbidden.

Flame-bird: A species of Northshore bird that sets its nest afire in order to hatch its eggs.

Fliers, the: Ordinary-nontalker-members of the Thraish.

Gift of Potipur, the: Riverboat belonging first to Blint, then to Thrasne.

Glizzee; Glizzee spice: A euphoric substance of pleasant flavor, provided by strangeys, sold in the markets as a food additive.

Highstone Lees: The name given to the Protector's palace, as well as the Chancery offices and residence grounds in the lands behind the Teeth.

Holy Sorters: Those human or superhuman creatures who sort the dead into categories of worthy or unworthy.

Jarb Houses: Places of residence set up by the order of Mendicants for the treatment and housing of madmen.

Jarb Mendicants: Madmen enabled to see the truth by smoking jarb root; visionaries; oracles.

Jarb Root: A food root often eaten by the Noor whose toasted peel contains an anti-illusory drug.

Jondarites: The military personnel under the command of General Jondrigar.

Laughers: Pursuivants and inquisitors sent from the Chancery to find heretics in Northshore.

Melancholies: Wandering pseudo religious bands of the Noor who collect coin for the Queen of the Noor in the cities of Northshore. Noor. The: The black people of the northern moors, from whom the Melancholies come.

Northshore That area of land immediately to the north of the World River which is occupied with separated townships.

Pamet A fiber crop in which arm long pods open to reveal sheaves of white strands used in making cloth.

Potipur: Chief god in the Thraish trinity. Also the largest moon.

Priests of Potipur: Awakeners assigned to Temple duty, distinguished by blue-painted faces and mirror-decked garb.

Puncon: A spicy fruit, most often used in jam and confections. The bloom of the puncon tree.

Rivermen: A heretical group who put their dead in the River.

Servants of Abricor: Another name for the fliers who frequent the bone pits.

Song-Fish: A shallow-water fish that grows to great size and which sings in the evenings and early mornings, the pitch and tempo dependent upon the size of the fish (smaller fish having higher, more frequent tonal eruptions).

Sorting Out: Theologically, that process by which the dead are sorted into categories of worthy and unworthy.

South shore: The land to the south of the World River, considered almost mythical.

Split River; Split River Pass: A river originating in a mountain lake in the Teeth of the North, running both north and south from that point. The pass cut by that river. The shortest route from the Chancery to Northshore, ending in the town of Vobil-dil-go.

Stilt-lizard: A lizard with very long rear legs that stalks the shallow waters of the River or swamps, snapping up small fish or aquatic bugs.

Strangeys, the: Creatures of vast size and unknown habits living in the World River.

Strinder's Isle: An island not far from Northshore that is occupied by a tribe of Treeci and a few surviving members of the Strinder family.

Talkers, the: Infrequently hatched members of the Thraish who have the talent of articulate speech over and above that found in ordinary Thraish.

Tears of Viranel: A fungus that reanimates recently dead bodies or takes over live ones, changing the composition of the flesh.

Teeth of the North: The mountain range separating Chancery lands from the moors of the Noor and Northshore.

Thou-ne: Township. Birthplace of Peasimy Plot. Site of the origin of the crusade.

Thraish. the: Race of large, carnivorous fliers in the world north of the World River. A flier can lift a small person easily. Two or more of them can carry a large adult human. While light-boned, their talons and beaks are formidable weapons.

Towers, the: One in each township, residences of the Awakeners.

Towns, the Areas along Northshore, each approximately thirty miles wide, largely agricultural, usually centered on a village or urban area, extending northward into unsettled or Noor country. Typical towns are Thou-ne, Baris, Cheeping Wells, Xoxy-Do, and so forth. There are 2,400 towns on Northshore.

Treeci: A race of ground-dwelling Thraish whose wings have atrophied because of their diet.

Viranel: Third, female, deity in the Thraish trinity. Also the third moon.

Vobil-dil-go: Township. Some distance west of Thou-ne. Historically called the site of the embarkation of the Noor.

Xoxy-DO: Township. Birthplace of Thrasne.