

Drinker of Souls

Drinker of Souls Trilogy, Book 1

Jo Clayton

1986

“I am the Drinker of Souls ...

and these are the mountain’s children, born of fire and stone.

“Feel fortunate, O man, that I am not thirsty now. Feel fortunate, my enemy, that the mountain’s children are not hungry. Were it otherwise, you would die the death of deaths.

“All I desire is to pass in peace through this miser-able land. Let me be, warrior, and I’ll let you be. You and your kind. Anger me, and you will never see another day ...

Jo Clayton has written:

The Diadem Series

Diadem From The Stars

Lamarchos

Irsud

Maeve

Star Hunters

The Nowhere Hunt

Ghosthunt

The Snares Of Ibex

Quester’s Endgame

Duel Of Sorcery

Moongather

Moonscatter

Changer’s Moon

and

A Bait Of Dreams

Drinker Of Souls

1. A Thief and His Sister

AITUATEA SHIFTED the bend in his legs to ease his aching hip, careful as he moved to keep the bales piled under him from squeaking, the bales of raw unwashed fleeces that were a stench in his nostrils but sheltered him from noses and teeth of the patrollers’ rathounds. He raised his head a little and stared at the curls of mist drifting across the calm black water of the bay. A wandering breeze licked at his face, tugged at his slicked-back hair, carried past his ears just enough sound to underline the silence and peace of the night. “This is a bust,” he whispered to the one who stood at his shoulder. “She won’t come.”

“The man on the mountain said ...” His sister’s voice was the crackling of ice crystals shattering. “Look there.” She pointed past the huddling godons beyond the wharves, their rambling forms lit from behind by torches burning before the all-night winestalls, the joyhouses, the cookshops of the water quarter. The Wounded Moon was rising at last, a broken round of curdled milk behind the spiky roof of the Temple. She swung round an arm colorless and transparent as glass, outlined with shimmers like

crystal against black velvet and pointed across the harbor. "And there," she said. She was all over crystal, even the rags she wore. "Out beyond the Woda-an. A blind ship from Phras, dropping anchor."

He looked instead at the Woda livingboats shrouded in the thickening mist, their humped roofs like beetle shells catching bits of moonlight. A blind ship. The Woda-an hated them, those blind ships. There were torches flaring up here and there among the boats as the Woda-an grew aware of the visitor, clanking raffles starting up, growing louder, fading, sounding and fading in another place and another as they invoked the protection of the Godalau and her companion gods against the evil breathed out by the black ship that had no eyes to let her see her way across the seas. He sneered at them with Hina scorn for the superstitions of other races. *They'll be thick as fishlice at the Temple tomorrow. Where's that curst patrol? I want to get out of this. She won't come, not this late.* He propped his chin on his fists and watched the ship. He drowsed, the Wounded Moon creeping higher and higher behind him. The guard patrol was late. Hanging round the winestalls. Let them stay there. "Let's get out of this," he whispered. "That ship's settled for the night. Won't no one be coming ashore." He twisted his head around so he could see his sister. She took her stubbornness into the water with her, he thought. She stood at his left shoulder as she'd stood since the night she came swimming through water and air and terror to find him while her body rocked at the bottom of the bay. The black glitters that were her eyes stayed fixed on the Phras ship as if she hadn't heard him. "The man on the mountain said she'd come," she said.

"Doubletongue old fox."

She turned on him, stamping her crystal foot down beside his shoulder, her crystal hair flying out from her head. "Be quiet, fool. He could curse you out of your body and where'd I be then?"

Aituatea rubbed oily fleeces between his palms, shiv-ered at the memories her words invoked. Old man kneel-ing in his garden on the mountain, digging in the dirt. Clean old man with a skimpy white beard and wisps of white hair over his ears, tending rows of beans and cab-bages. Old man in a sacking robe and no shoes, not even straw sandals, and eyes that saw into the soul. Aituatea, jerked his shoulders, trying to shake off a growing fear, went quiet as he heard the faint grate of bale shifting against bale. He stared unhappily at the blind ship; whis-pering to himself, "It'll be over soon, has to be over soon." Trying to convince himself that was true, that he'd be through dealing with things that horrified him. The Kadda witch dead and Hotea at rest, which she would be now but for that bloodsucker, and me rid of her scolding and complaining and always being there, no way to get free of those curst eyes. He wanted to climb down from the bales and get off Selt for the next dozen years but he couldn't do that. If he did that, he'd *never* get rid of Hotea, she'd be with him the rest of his life and after. He suppressed a groan.

Out on the water the torches scattered about the Woda-an watercity were burning low and the rattles had gone quiet. Behind him on Selt Island's single mountain where the Temple was, rocket after rocket arced into the darkness, hissing and spitting and exploding to drive off the enemies of the Godalau and her companion gods.

Part of a counting rhyme for a fete's fireworks:

Blue glow for the Godalau
Sea's Lady, sky's Queen
Red shine for the Gadajine
Storm dragons spitting fire
Yellow flash for Jah'takash
Lady ladling out surprise
Green sheen for Isayana
Birthing mistress, seed and child
Purple spray for Geidranay
Gentle giant grooming stone
Moonwhite light for Tungjii-Luck
Male and female in one form

Luck, he thought. My luck's gone sour these past six months. Aituatea repeated to himself (with some pleasure) *fool, fool, fool woman. She never thinks before she does something. Going to the Temple the day after year-turn when she knew Temueng pressgangs would be swarming over the place, sucking up Hina girls for the new year's bondmaids. She should've thought first, she should've thought*

WHAT HAPPENED, he said, where you been all this time?

Thanks a bunch for worrying about me, she said. He heard her *as a* cricket chirp in his head, an itch behind his ears. I was working the Temple court, she said, reproach in her glittering glass eyes. You were off somewhere, brother, Joyhouse or gambling with those worthless hangabouts you call your friends, and the money was gone when I looked in the housepot and there wasn't a smell of food or tea in the place. What'd you want me to do, starve? It being the day after year-turn, I knew every Hina with spare coin and unwed daughters would be burning incense by the fistfuls. I spotted a wool merchant with a fat purse dangling from his belt and started edging up to him. I get so busy checking out running room and easing through his herd of daughters, I forget to look out for pressgangs. Hadn't been for those giggling geese I might've heard them and took off. I don't hear them and they get us all.

They take us, me and the wool merchant's daughters, across the causeway, me hoping to be put in some little havalar's House where I can get away easy and take a thing or two with me for my trouble, but I see we are heading all the way up the high hill to the Tekora's Palace. I am cursing you, brother, and thinking when I get home, I am going to peel your skin off a strip at a time.

She was much calmer at this point in the story, drifting about the room, touching familiar things with urgent strokes of her immaterial fingers as if she sought reassurance from them. She hovered a moment over the teapot, smiling as she absorbed its fragrance.

I know I can get loose again easy enough, but the Tekora's a mean bastard with girls that run away. You wouldn't know that, would you, brother? Only women you bother about are those no-good whores in the joyhouses.

Aituatea scowled; dying hadn't changed his sister's hab-its in the least as far as he could see. Shut up about that, he said. Get on with what happened.

Branded on the face, brother, branded runaway and thief, who'd let me get close enough to lift a thing? So when the Temueng Housemaster puts me to work in the Tekora's nursery, I am ready to act humble before those Temueng bitches when I'd rather slit their skinny throats! She grimaced in disgust. You know what they do to me? Hauling slops, picking up after those Temueng nits, not lifting a finger to help themselves, running my feet to the bone fetching things they could just as easily get for themselves.

Her chirp sounded bitter and full of rage; she was madder than he'd ever seen her, even when he turned fourteen and ran off with the housemoney to buy time with a joygirl, what was her name? He shook his head, couldn't remember her name or what she looked like.

After a month of that, Hotea said, I am about ready to skip out even if it means I have to get off Utar-Selt, live low the rest of the year. You could take care of yourself, brother dear, though I did mean to warn you they might connect you with me if your luck went sour as mine. The nursery garden has a high wall, but there are plenty of trees backed up against that wall. On its other side is the guard walkway and a pretty steep cliff, but I am not fussing about that, I can climb as good as you, brother, and swim better, and the causeway's near. I am thinking about going over the wall that night, or the one after, depending, when fat old Tungjii, heesh jabs me in the ass again. The Tekora's youngest daughter disappears.

Hotea beat her fist several times on Aituatea's shoulder, making him wince at the stinging touches. He jerked away, then clutched at his head as the sudden movement woke his hangover and started the demon in his skull pounding a maul against his temples.

Hotea laughed, the scorn in the soundless whisper rais-ing the hairs along his spine. Fool, she said, you'll kill yourself, you go on like this. You need a wife, that's what, a good woman who'll keep you in order better than I could, give you sons. You don't want our line to die with you, do you, brother?

She shook herself, her form shivering into fragments and coming together again.

Listen, she said, you got to do something about that witch, as long as she lives I won't rest.

She wrung her hands together, darted in agitation about the room, gradually grew calmer as the grandmother ghost patted her arm, ragged lips moving in words that were only bursts of unintelligible noise. She drifted back to hover in front of Aituatea.

The Tekora's youngest daughter, she said, three years old and just walking, a noxious little nit who should've been drowned at birth. On the eve of the new moon they turn the place upside down, double the work on us. I don't think much about it except that I'd strangle her myself if I come across her, she is wrecking my plans because she took off. Three days later they find her face-down in the nursery fountain, shriveled and bloodless like a bug sucked dry. Not drowned but dead for sure. 'F I was scared of leaving before, well! Tekora would tear Silili brick from plank looking for me, or that's what I'm think-ing then. The other maids are as jittery as me. We are Hina in the house of the Temueng, that makes us guilty even if we do nothing, and the other bondmaids are too stupid and cowed to say boo to a butterfly. Housemaster beats us, but his heart isn't much in it. And things go on much the same as before. On the eve of the next new moon another daughter goes and I am there to see it.

They order us bondmaids to sleep in the nursery to make sure the daughters don't just wander off. This night is my turn. A bondmaid brings me a cup of tea. I sniff at it when she goes out. Herb tea. Anise and something else, can't quite place it. I take the cup to the garden door and look at it but can't see anything wrong. I sniff at it again and I start getting a touch dizzy. I throw the tea out the door and carry the cup back and put it by my pallet so it looks like I drank it. I stretch out. I'm scared to sleep but I do, up before dawn running like a slave for those bitches, I'm tired to the bone. Something wakes me. I don't move but open my eyes a slit and keep breathing steady. A minute after that I see the Tekamin standing in the door-way, the Tekora's new wife she is, he set her over the others and they are mad as fire about it, but what can they do? Hei-ya brother, I have to listen to a lot of bitching when I am fetching for the other wives, they don't get a sniff of him after he brings that woman back with him from Andurya Durat. No one knows where she comes from, who her family is or her clan, even the wives are scared to ask. And there she is in that doorway, slim and dark and lovely and scaring the stiffening out of me.

She comes gliding in, touches the second youngest daughter on her face and the daughter climbs out of the bed and follows her and I know what she is then, she's a Kadda witch, a bloodsucker.

I lay shivering on my pallet wishing I'd drunk the drugged tea, my head going round and round as I try to figure out what to do. I think of skipping out before morning and trusting I can keep hid. But I think too of the Kadda wife. I don't want her sniffing after me; I have a feeling she can smell me out no matter where I hide. Well, brother, I raise a fuss in the morning, what else can I do? And you better believe I don't say one thing about the Tekamin. The other daughters howl and scream and stamp their skinny feet and the old wives they go round pulling bondmaid's hair and, throwing fits. When the Housemaster beats me again, it is just for the look of the thing, and for himself, I suppose. He is scared himself and happy to have my back to take it out on.

I keep my head down the next month, you can believe that. I try a couple times to sneak out of the handmaid's dorm, but the damn girls aren't sleeping sound enough and keep waking up when I move. Anyway I'm not trying too hard, not yet. The Kadda wife isn't bothering me—except sometimes she looks at me—like she is wondering if I was really asleep that other time. I'm thinking maybe I can last out the year and get away clean and all the fetching and carrying and cleaning up don't bother me near so much. Then the Wounded Moon starts dribbling away faster and faster till it is the eve of the new moon again and curiosity is eating at me till I can't stand it. You told me more than once, brother, my nose would be the death of me.

Hotea giggled and the other ghosts laughed with her, a silent cacophany of titters, giggles and guffaws. Aituatea sat slumped in his chair, waiting morosely for them to stop. He wasn't amused by a situation that meant either he had to go after a bloodsucking witch or face having an overbearing older sister at his elbow for the rest of his life.

Another girl is sleeping in the nursery this night, the Gndalau be praised for that, but I decide to sneak in there and watch what happens. I tell myself the more I know, the easier I can get away without the witch catching me. Well, it's an argument.

Like it happens sometimes when old Tungjii gets to-gether with Jah'takash and they wait for you to put your foot in soft shit up to your ears, everything is easy for me that night. The other bondmaids go to sleep early. Snor-ing. I've half a mind to join them, but I don't. I make myself get out of bed. Moving about helps some, clears the fog out of my head. I sneak down to the nursery, jumping at every shadow and there are lots of those, the wind has got in the halls and is bumping the lamps about, but that is just the sort of thing you expect in big houses at night, so instead of scaring me more, it almost makes me feel like I'm at home, prowling a house with Eldest Uncle.

In the nursery the nits are sleeping heavy. The bond-maid is stretched on a pallet, snoring. She doesn't so much as twitch when I step over her and duck under the bed of one of the dead daughters. It is close to the door into the garden and I figure if anything goes wrong I can get out that way. The door is open a crack, wedged, to let the air in and clear out the strong smell of anise. I lie there chewing my lip, thinking things will happen soon.

Sounds of wind and fountain whoop through the room; I almost can't hear the bondmaid snoring. There is a lot of dust under the bed; no one checks there and we don't do more than we have to, but I am sorry about that now because some of that dust gets into my nose, makes it itch like I don't know. After a while I start getting pains jumping from my neck to between my shoulders. I stand it some minutes more, then I have to stretch and wiggle if I want to be able to walk without falling on my face. I am just about ready to crawl back to my bed, muttering curses on Tungjii and Jah'takash, when I hear a kind of humming. I stop moving, hoping the wind noise had covered the sounds I was making. I can't tell you what the humming was like, I've never heard anything like it. My eyelids keep flopping down; I am fighting suddenly to k6ep awake; then more dust gets in my nose; I almost sneeze, but don't. One good thing, the itch releases me from the witch's spell. I ease myself toward the end of the bed and crick my neck around so I can see the door. I am hidden by the knotted fringe on the edge of the coverlet and feel pretty safe. The Kadda wife is standing in the door.

The humming stops.

The Tekora moves out of the shadows to stand beside his wife. I stop breathing. He looks hungry. I feel like throwing up.

The Kadda wife looks around the room. I get the feeling she can see me. I close my eyes and pretend I'm a frog hopped in from the garden. Even with my eyes closed I can feel her looking at me; I'm sure she's going to call me out from under the bed; I'm thinking it's time to scoot out the door and over the wall. But nothing happens and I can't resist sneaking another look.

The Kadda wife smiles up at the Tekora and takes her hand off his ann. It's like she's taken the bridle off him. He walks to his daughter's bed. He looks down at the little girl, then over his shoulder at the witch. She nods. He bends over and whispers something I couldn't make out that hurts my ears anyway. The girl gets up, follows him out of the room. His own daughter!

Hotea's voice failed as indignation shook her. Her form wavered and threatened to tatter, but she steadied her-self, closed her hand tight about her brother's arm. He winced but didn't pull away this time.

The witch looks around the room one more time then leaves too. I stay where I am, flat out under the bed. I am thinking hard, you better believe. No wonder the Tekora is neglecting his other wives. I see he is looking younger. His skin is softer and moister, he is plumper, moving more like a young man. I see that's how she is buying him, then I think, he's running out of daughters, he's going to start on the bondmaids too soon for me. And I think, what odds the Kadda wife doesn't make me the first one to go? None of us Hinas are going to finish out this bond year. I wait under the bed for a long time, afraid she's going to come back and sniff me out, but nothing happens. I creep out from under the bed when I hear the first sleepy twitters of the warblers in the willows outside the door, a warning that dawn is close. If I have to spend the rest of my life exiled, I am going down that cliff. Now.

No more this and that and the other. Out. Away. Far away as I can get, fast as I can get there. The last daughter is still sleeping, so is the bondmaid, but she is going to wake soon and start screeching the minute she sees the third daughter is gone. I kick the wedge away and whip out the door into the garden.

The Kadda wife is waiting in the garden for me. I get maybe two steps before she grabs me. I try to jerk loose, but her cold hands are hard and strong as iron chains, and they drain my strength away

somehow. It is as if she sucks it out of me. I am scared witless. I think she is going to drink me dry right there. She doesn't, she pushes me back into the nursery and across it into the hallway. I go without making a sound, I can't make a sound though I try screaming; something is pulling strings on my legs as if I were a puppet in a holy play. No, an unholy play.

She takes me high up in the palace to a small room under the roof, shoves me inside and a minute later there is this pain in the back of my head.

When I wake, it's dark again—or still dark, I don't know which. I am hanging on an iron frame like a bed stripped and set on end, my wrists and ankles are tied to the corner with ropes. There is a gag in my mouth, probably because of the open window high in the wall on my right, and a strong smell of anise, I am getting very tired of anise. The mix smells stale, as if it had been floating round the room a long time and that scares me all over again, more than if it'd been fresh. They hadn't eaten the daughter yet; looks like I'm going to take her place this month. My wrists and ankles are burning, my mouth is like leather, my head feels like someone kicked it.

After a short panic, I start fiddling with the ropes and go a little crazy with relief when I find I know more about knots than whoever tied me. I get myself loose and start looking for some way out.

There is no latch on the inside of the door, just a hole for a latchstring or maybe a pin key. Nothing in the room I can use on it. I push the frame over to the window and climb up to look out, I climb carefully, the frame creaking as if it will collapse if I breathe too hard. I get halfway out the window and look down. There is nothing much between me and the water except a lot of straight up-and-down cliff and the surf is white wrinkles about black rocks. Way way down. The wind is blowing against my face, cold and damp, but it feels good.

Fingers touch my ankle. I know it's her. I kick free before she can drain away my strength again. Somehow I keep myself from falling as I wiggle out the window, so scared all I know is that I have to get away fast. I hear cursing behind me and the squeal of metal as the frame collapses under her. I stand in the window and look down at the waves crashing against the rocks. No joy there. I look up. The endhorns of the eaves are close, but not close enough so I can reach them. Behind me I hear curses and other noises as she drags something to the window. She's coming for me. I take a chance and jump. My hands slap around a horn and I am hanging free. I start pulling myself up. Fingers close about my ankles. I kick hard, harder, but can't get loose. My hands slip.

So here I am. And here I stay till the Kadda witch is dead, down in the water with me, dead, you hear me, brother, you hear?

[AITUATEA WINCED](#) as he felt a nip in his left shoulder.

"Look." Her crystal arm sketched in touches of moon-light. Hotea jabbed her finger at the Phras ship.

The ship's dark bulk was suddenly alive with lanterns shining red and gold behind horn sides, dozens of them lighting up the deck and the swirl of dark forms moving over it. He could hear snatches of speech too broken for understanding, the blast of a horn as one of the figures leaned over the rail to call a water taxi from the Woda-an. The hornblower had to repeat the signal several times before the slide of a red lantern marked the passage of a taxi from the watercity to the blind ship.

A slim, energetic figure swung over the rail and went down the netting with skill and grace. Aituatea swallowed the sourness in his throat. A woman. By outline alone, even at this distance, a woman. The Drinker of Souls. He cursed under his breath. The weight of centuries of cus-tom, of his sister's shame and fury, of his own battered self-respect, all this pressed down on him, shoving him toward the thing that twisted his gut. He pressed his hand over his mouth, stifling an exclamation as two more forms balanced a moment on the rail then followed the woman down, small forms, children or dwarves or something. The old man on the mountain hadn't said anything about companions. He glanced up at Hotea. She was staring hun-grily at the woman, bent forward a little, her hands closed into fists, her form shivering with a terrible urgency. The strength of that need he hadn't understood before, despite all those scolds, all those bitter accusations of cowardice and shame repeated so often he ceased to listen; he squirmed uncomfortably on the fleece.

The taxi came swiftly toward the wharf, the stern sweep worked by a young Woda girl, the lantern on the bow waking coppery highlights on sweaty skin the color of burnt honey. Her short black hair held off her face by a strip of red cloth knotted about her temples, she swayed back and forth in a kind of dance with the massive oar, her muscles flowing smoothly, her face blank and blandly animal, as if she lived for that moment wholly in the body. Aituatea stared at her, his tongue moving along dry lips, a tension in his groin reminding him how long it'd been since he'd had a woman. A stinking Woda bitch. He ground his teeth together and went on watching her. Frog ugly. In his Hina eyes she was a dirty beast, beastly with her strong coarse features, her broad shoulders, her short crooked legs—but she roused him until he was close to groaning. Six months since he'd been to a joyhouse, he'd tried it once after his sister fell in the bay but he couldn't do anything there. Hotea's ghost followed him everywhere as if a string tied her to his left shoulder; he tried to drive her off for a little bit, but she wouldn't go; he thought maybe he could ignore her long enough to get his relief, but when he was with the girl he could feel Hotea's eyes on him, those damn judging angry eyes, and he shriveled to nothing and had to pay the woman double so she wouldn't spread talk about him.

The taxi bumped against the wharf. The strange woman laughed at something one of the children said, a rippling happy sound that jarred against his expectations. Drinker of Souls conjured dour and deflating images. The children's giggles echoed hers, then she was up the ladder and swinging onto the wharf. The children followed. In the moonlight they looked like twins, pale little creatures dancing about the woman, flinging rapid bursts of their liquid speech at her, receiving her terse replies with more laughter. After a last exchange that left the woman grinning, the twins capered away, disappearing into the maze of boxes and bales piled temporarily on the wharf, waiting for the Godalau fete to pass before they were tucked away into the godons. Aituatea heard the children chattering together, then the high rapid voices faded off down a grimy alley. The woman turned to look across the water at the Phras ship where the lanterns were going out as it settled back to sleep, then she gazed along the curve of Selt toward the many-terraced mountain of Utar. He saw her follow the line of torches burning along the causeway, the lampions that marked the course of the looping road-way, her head tilting slowly until she went quiet, stood with a finger stroking slowly and repeated alongside her mouth, contemplating the topmost torches, those that burned on the gate towers of the Tekora's Palace.

She had long straight hair that gleamed in the strength-ening moonlight like brushed pewter, the front parts trimmed to a point, the back clasped loosely at the nape of her neck. She was taller than most Hina, wider in the shoulders and hips though otherwise slim and supple. Her skin was very pale; in the moonlight it looked like porcelain. She wore loose trousers of some dark color stuffed into short black boots, a white, full-sleeved shirt with a wide collar that lay open about her neck. Over this was a sleeveless leather coat; when a gust of wind flipped it back for a moment, he raised his brows, seeing two throwing knives sheathed inside. She wasn't Phras or any of the many other sorts of foreigners that passed through the port of Silili, but he wasn't too surprised at that, seeing what she was.

Behind him he heard the stomp and clatter of the godon guards and the whining of their rathounds. He took a chance and watched the woman to see what she would do.

Poking long spears into crevices to drive out drunks or sleepers, sounding their clappers to scare away ghosts and demons, whooping to keep up their courage, the godon guards came winding along the wharves.

The woman stirred slightly. Touch-me-not spun out from her like strands of mist, real mist spun up out of the water until she was a vertical dimness in a cocoon of white. Aituatea watched, uneasily fascinated, until the guards got close, then dropped his face into the fleece and waited.

As soon as the patrol had clattered past, he looked up again.

The cocoon out by the water unraveled with a speed that startled Aituatea, then his stomach was knotting on itself as she came sauntering toward him, as unstoppable and self-contained as the wind. What's she doing here? Why'd she come to Silili? He hadn't thought about it before, but now he saw her ... What's waiting for her here? Old man, you didn't tell us nothing except she was the one who could face the witch. What else didn't you tell us? What else do you know? Crazy old fox, said nothing worth salt.

* * *

THE OLD MAN settled onto his haunches, his dirt-crusted hands dropping onto his thighs. Eyes the color of rotted leaves touched on Aituatea, shifted to Hotea and ended looking past them both at the woolly clouds sliding across the early morning sky.

Hotea drove her elbow into Aituatea's ribs. He lurched forward a step, bowed and held out the lacquer box filled with the rarest tea he could steal.

Ah, the old man said; he got stiffly to his feet, took the box from Aituatea. Come, he said. He led them into the single room of his small dwelling. It was painfully clean and quite bare except for a roll of rough bedding in one corner and a crude table with a chair facing the door and a bench cobbled from pine limbs opposite. He went to some shelves, mere boards resting on wooden pegs driven into the wall, set the box beside a jumble of scrolls and a brush pot, shuffled back to the chair. Sit, he said.

Aituatea glanced over his shoulder. Morning light cool as water, filled with dancing motes, poured through the door and flooded across the table, picking up every wrinkle, wart, and hair on the old man's still face. Thought he *was* uneasy with emptiness at his back, Aituatea slid onto the bench and sat plucking nervously at the cloth folds over the knee of his short leg. He wanted to shut the door but he was afraid to touch anything in the but and afraid too of shutting himself in with the old man. He twitched but didn't look around when he felt the cold bite of Hotea's hand on his shoulder. His eyes flicked to the serene face across from him, flicked away, came slowly back. The old man looked harmless and not too bright but there were many stories about him and brash youths who thought they could force his secrets from him. Some said it was always the same old man, Temueng to the Temuengs and Hina to the Hinas, or whatever he chose to be.

The but was filled with a faded tang of cedar and herbs; the breeze wandering in from outside brought with it the sharp aromas of pine and mountain oak, the dark damp smells of the earth, the lighter brighter scents of stone dust and wild orchids. It was warm and peaceful there, the tranquility underlined by the whisper of the breeze, the intermittent humming of unseen insects. In spite of himself, Aituatea began to relax. Hotea pinched him. Stub-bornly he said nothing. This visit was her idea, something she came up with when she couldn't drive him into action with bitter words or shame. If she wanted help from the old man, let her do the talking.

The sunlight sparked off her outflung arm. I'm drowned by a Kadda witch, she burst out. Her voice made no impression on the drowsing sounds of the small room, but the old man looked at her, hearing her. I want her dead, she cried, in the water with me. Dead.

The old man blinked, pale brown eyes opening and closing with slow deliberation. With his shaggy brown robe, the tufts of white hair over his ears, his round face and slow-blinking eyes, he looked to Aituatea rather like a large horned owl. The tip of a pale pinkish-brown tongue brushed across his colorless lips. All things die in their time, he said.

Hotea made a small spitting sound. Aituatea looked at his hands, feeling a mean satisfaction. This wasn't what she'd come to hear, platitudes she could read in any book of aphorisms. Not that woman, she said, her voice crack-ling with impatience. Not while there's young blood to feed her.

Even her, he said.

I want her dead, old man, she said. I want to see her dead. Hotea's hands fluttered with small, quickly aborted movements as if she sought to uncover with them some argument to persuade him to interfere against his inclination. Look, she said, Temueng children have died. Do you think Hina won't pay for those deaths? Ten for one they will. We're guilty, old man, whether we do anything or not. They can do no wrong, they're the conquerors, aren't they? Besides, leave the witch alone, how long before she eats everyone on Utar-Selt? Hotea went still a moment, then her voice was a thread of no-sound softer than usual in Aituatea's head. Teach us, old man, she said, teach us how we can front and kill a Kadda witch.

The old man stared at her a dozen heartbeats, then turned those pitiless eyes on Aituatea. They swelled larger and larger until they were all he could see. He began to feel like weeping softly and sadly as they searched his soul, as they spaded up fear and waste and the little niggling meannesses he'd done to his friends and to his sister, and all the ugly things he'd buried deep and refused to remember. As he

stared into the old man's eyes, he was finally forced to see that he would never do anything about the Kadda witch without someone to take the brunt of the witch's attack, that he would keep putting it off and putting it off, growing more wretched as the years passed, as Hotea grew more caustic.

The old man leaned back, his worn face filled with pain as if he had absorbed from Aituatea all that self-disgust and fear. He slumped, his body shrinking in on itself, his eyes glazing over. Kadda witch, he murmured, blood drinker, knows no will but her own, evil, recognizing no right beyond her own needs. I see ... there's a counter ... I see ... He flinched, drew further into himself. Powerful, he said, another power comes ... an ancient enemy His eyes moved in a slow sweeping arc, but he was seeing nothing in the hut. Aituatea felt his stom-ach knot.

One comes, the old man said, husky voice reduced to a whisper. A woman ... something between her and the witch ... like the witch ... no, not the same ... drinker of life, not blood ... not evil, not good Drinker of Souls, she comes the eve of the Godalau fete. Set her on the track, let her sniff out the witch, buy her with Das'n vuor, and point her at the witch. She comes with the rising of the Wounded Moon, will leave before the rising of the sun. The Drinker of Souls, come back to Silili after years and years ... a hundred years ... ah! her pur-poses mesh with yours, angry ghost. He muttered some more, but the words were unintelligible, intermixed with sudden chuckles. It was as if he had to wind back down into his customary taciturnity and something amusing he saw was retarding this return.

Aituatea sat frozen, sick. Three months' respite, then he had to face the witch or face himself. He glared at the old man, silently cursing him for setting the limit so close.

The old man lifted his head, looked irritably at him. That's it, he seemed to say, you got what you came for, now get out of here!

Shadow spread out from him, dark and terrible, killing the light, the warmth. Aituatea scrambled back, knocking over the bench; the smell of cedar choking him, he ran from the hut.

ANOTHER NIP in his shoulder. Hotea getting impatient. "Go after her. Stop her," she shrieked. "Don't lose her, fool. You won't find her again, you know it. And we've only got till sunup."

Muttering under his breath Aituatea swung down from the bales and limped after the woman. His hip hurt but he was used to that and almost forgot the pain as he hurried past the godons and stepped into the Street of the Watermen. She was making no effort to hurry—it was almost as if she wanted to be followed, had set herself out as bait, trolling for anything stupid or hungry enough to bite. He kept back as far as he could without losing sight of her. The peculiar lurch of his walk was too eye-catching, even in the leaping uncertain light from the torches burn-ing in front of businesses still open, casting shadows that lurched and twisted as awkwardly as he did. She circled without fuss about the knots of gambling watermen and porters crouched over piles of bronzes and coppers, toss-ing the bones into lines chalked on the flagging. She slowed now and then, head cocked to listen to flute and cittern music coming in melancholy brightness from the joyhouses, ignored insults flung down at her from idling women hanging out second-story windows, walked more briskly past shops shuttered for the night—a herbalist, a shaman's den, a fishmonger, a geengrocer, a diviner, and others much like these. Some cookshops were closed for the night, others were still open with men standing about dipping noodles and pickled beans and pickled cabbage from clay bowls or crunching down fried pilchards. He watched her careless stroll and felt confirmed in his idea she was bait in her own trap. Maybe she's hungry, he told himself and shivered at the thought. He dropped back farther, his feet dragging. For no reason he wondered suddenly where the children were. Now and then it seemed to him he heard them calling to each other or to the woman, but he was never sure and she never responded to the calls.

"Where's she going?" he muttered and got Hotea's el-bow in his ribs for an answer. That she was heading the way he wanted her to go, uphill and vaguely north, made him nervous; it was just too convenient; as Hotea said, it happens sometimes that everything goes easy for a while but old Tungjii's getting together with Jah'takash and they're waiting for you to put your foot in it. But he kept limping after her, eaten by curiosity and buoyed up by nervous excitement.

She sauntered past a lighted cookshop. The owner-cook was leaning on the counter, pots steaming behind him, tossing the bones with a single customer. The two men stopped what they were doing to

stare after her, then went back to their game, talking in low tones, discussing the woman probably. A shadow drifted from behind the cookshop a moment later. A clumsy shift and Aituatea saw a part of the shadow's face, the hulk of his body, then the follower was in the dark again. Djarko. He snorted with disgust. Took the bait like a baby. He limped after them, careful not to be seen. Djarko's equally cretinous cousin Djamboa had to be somewhere about, they hunted as a team. He spotted the second shadow and smiled grimly. Better them than me. The Godalau grant they satisfy her so she'll be ready to listen before she jumps me.

The woman turned into one of the small side lanes that wound through close-packed tenements of the poorer players, artisans and laborers. Djarko and Djamboa turned after her, almost running in their eagerness. Aituatea followed more warily, trying to ignore the nips in his shoulder as Hotea urged him to catch up and defend the woman from those louts. Defend her? Godalau defend me. He slowed his uneven gait until he was slipping through shadow near as much a ghost as his sister was, avoiding the refuse piles and their uncertain footing, gliding over sleepers huddling against walls for the meager shelter they offered from the creeping fog. He edged up to blind turns, listening for several heartbeats before he moved around them. Apart from the sodden sleepers the lane stayed empty and quiet. Inside those tall narrow houses leaning against each other so they wouldn't fall down, Hina had been asleep for hours. Most of those living here would have to rise with the sun to get in half a day's work before they left for the feteday, the players and nightpeople were gone for now, though they'd be coming home at dawn to catch a few hours' sleep before working the streets to ease coppers from the purses of the swarming revelers.

Hotea pinched his shoulder. "Look," she said. "There."

"Huh?"

"On the ground there." Hotea pointed at a filthy alley between two of the tenements. Aituatea squinted but saw nothing; choking over the lump rising in his throat, he crept into the alley.

He kicked against something. A body. He dropped to one knee and twisted the head around so he could see the face. Djarko. He pressed his fingers against the meaty neck under the angle of the jaw. Very dead. A little farther up the alley he could see another long lump of refuse. He didn't bother checking, only one thing it could be. Both dead. So fast. Not a squeak out of them. Big men. Stupid but strong. Dangerous. Not even a groan. He got creakily to his feet and shuffled back from the body, step by step, lurch and swing, soles grating against the hard-packed dirt. Hotea touched his arm. He exploded out a curse, swung round and would have fled but for the dark figure standing in his way.

"Why follow me?" She had a deep voice for a woman, danger in it he could hear as surely as he heard the pounding of his heart.

He swallowed. His mouth was too dry for speech. Hotea jiggled at his shoulder, almost breaking up in her impatience. She dug her fingers into him, spat a gust of words at him so fast it hurt his head. He jerked away from her and flattened himself on the rutted dirt in front of the woman's boots.

She made a soft irritated sound. "Stand up, Hina, I won't talk to the back of your head." The sharpness in her voice warned him her patience had narrow limits.

He scrambled to his feet. "Drinker of Souls," he said. "Will you listen to me?"

She shook her hair out of her face, that silver-gray hair that caught the moonlight in slanting shimmers as she moved her head. "Brann," she said. "Not that other. I don't like it. It isn't true anyway."

Aituatea glanced over his shoulder at the blob of dead flesh, turned back to the woman, saying nothing, letting the act speak for him.

She shrugged. "I didn't tell them to come after me."

"Fish to bait," he said and was surprised at his daring.

"I'm not responsible for all the stupidity in the world." She rubbed a finger past the corner of her mouth, frowning a little as she looked from him to Hotea standing a step behind him. "You were on the wharf watching me."

"You saw me?"

"Not me." She snapped her fingers.

A soft whirr overhead, then two large horned owls swooped past him, low enough he could smell the

fog-dampness on their feathers. They beat up again to perch on the eaves of a house across the street, blinking yellow eyes fixed on him. He knew, then, what had happened to the children. He straightened out of his defensive crouch, keeping his eyes on the woman's face so he wouldn't have to look at the owls. "The man on the mountain said you would come ashore tonight."

"Ah. Then he's still there?"

"Someone is."

"You want something."

"Yes. I want you to do something for Hotea and me. I've got something the old man says you want; I'll give it to you if you'll do a thing for us."

"What thing?"

Aituatea fidgeted, slanting a quick glance at the owls. One of them hooted softly at him. "Not here. Not safe." He dropped onto a knee, bowed his head. "Honor my home, saōri Brann. There will be tea once the water boils."

"Tea?" A raised brow, a warm chuckle. "Well, if there's tea. I've an hour or so to kill." She smoothed her hand over her hair. "And who's waiting for me in your home?"

"A few ghosts, that's all. Do you mind?"

"Ghosts I don't mind."

He nodded and started back down the lane,, walking slowly and trying to minimize his lurch, the woman walk-ing easily beside him. "They're family in a way," he said. She made him nervous and he spoke to fill the silence. The owls whirred past, gliding low then circling up until they were lost in the fog.

"Family?"

"All my blood kin except Hotea died in the plague. Ten years ago." He turned into a side street heading more directly north. "They're company, those ghosts, though they're not actual kin. They go when their time's up, but there are always more drowned and killed and suicided to take their places."

"They won't like me." A corner of her mouth twisted up. "The dead never do."

"They're ready for you. I told them I was going to bring you if I could."

"Old man been busy about my business?"

"Hotea and me, we went to see him about our problem."

"This mysterious problem. Mmmh, I thought no one would be left to remember me."

"We asked him for help."

"And I'm it?"

"That's what he said."

They walked in silence past the crumbling houses, Hotea drifting beside him. The tenements degenerated into crowded hovels built of whatever debris their dwellers could find or steal. In the distance a baby wailed, two men were shouting, their words hushed and unintelligible, a woman shrieked once and no more, but the street they were on was sodden with silence. "There's a story about where we're going," Aituatea said. "A score of years ago there was this silk merchant. Djallasoa. He built himself a godon up ahead not far from the Woda-an Well. He sold Eternity Robes. Know what those are? No? Well, you find yourself some young girls without a blemish on their bod-ies to weave the silk, then get enough strong and healthy pregnant women to embroider the robes so the force of the new life will be transferred to them. A thousand gold pieces is cheap for the simplest. Hundred-year robes, that's what old Djasoa's robes were called. Even the Temueng Emperor bought from him. Talk was you never even caught a cold wearing one of his robes." The fog wrapped the three of them in a dreamlike world where the ragged huts on either side of the lane faded in and out with the shifting of the mist. "Djallasoa's eldest son was a bit of a fool, so the story goes, kicked a Woda Shaman or something like that. Old Dja tried to smooth things over. Didn't work. The Woda Shaman came ashore, built a fire in front of the godon and slit the throats of Dja's wife and seven children, then his own. After that there were nine angry ghosts infesting the place. No Hina priest of any sort could drive them off, not even those belonging to the Judges of the dead. The gods refused to get involved" The lane ended. He circled a thornbush and began pick-ing his way through the scrub along an unmarked path so familiar he paid little attention to where he was putting his feet. "And the other Woda Shamans sat out there on the water enjoying the fuss

and refusing to interfere. All the Eternity Robes Djallasoa had stowed in that godon, no one would chance buying them, not with a woda curse on them.”

The wasteland they were passing through was a mixture of thornbush, bamboo, scattered willow thickets and a few stunted oaks. With the fog obscuring detail an arm’s length away, the silence broken only by the drip of condensation from limbs and leaves, the crackling of dead branches and weeds underfoot, it was like walking through one of the Elder Laksodea’s spiky ink paintings come alive in a dream. Aituatea had a fondness for Laksodea and had several of his paintings, souvenirs of successful nights.

“Why are you telling me all this?”

He turned to stare at her, startled by the acerbity of her words.

“Have we much farther to go? I have better things to do with this night than spend it wandering through drip and scrub.”

He pointed at the thinning growth ahead. “To where this stops, then a bit farther.” He rubbed at the side of his neck. “Your pardon, saõr, and your patience, if you will, but no one knows where Hotea and I live. It’s safer that way. And I merely thought to help pass the time with the story. If you don’t want to hear more”

“Oh, finish it and let’s get on.”

He bowed, started walking again. “Guards wouldn’t stay around the godon at night. The silks inside were safe enough, not even Eldest Uncle wanted to face those ghosts and he was the wildest thief in Silili. Finally old Djasoa and the rest of the clan fetched a gaggle of exorcists and deader priests waving incense sticks, hammering gongs, popping crackers, making so much noise and stink they drowned out the ghosts for long enough to haul out the silk. The Eternity Robes they burned in a great fire by the Woda Well, the rest they took away to sell to foreigners who’d haul them out of Tigarezun, the farther the better. And the godon was left to rot. Old Djasoa wanted to burn it, but the other merchants raised a howl, it was an extra dry summer and they were afraid the fire’d get away from him, so he didn’t burn it. So there it sat empty till the plague. You know about the plague?”

“You said ten years ago?” She shook her head, pushed aside a branch about to slap her in the face. “I was half a world away.”

He stepped onto the crescent of land picked clean of vegetation. “We turn east here. It was bad. The plague, I mean. The Temuengs ran like rats, but they made sure no Hina got off Utar-Selt. Ships out in the bay rammed anyone who tried to leave and they put up barricades on the causeway.” He pointed out a low broad mass, its details lost in the darkness and the fog. “The Woda Well. This is Woda land. No one else comes here now. When there was sickness in a house, the authorities burned it. Temuengs sent orders in and Hina ass-lickers did the work. So when our family started getting sick and oldest grandmother died and Hotea knew it wouldn’t be long before someone came with fire, she sneaked me out and brought me to that old godon, figuring the ghosts wouldn’t get sick, being already dead, and would keep snoops away. They were getting ragged, those Woda ghosts, already been around longer than most earth souls, it’d been what? ten years, more, but they made life hard for a few nights. We couldn’t sleep for the howling, the blasts of fear, the cold winds that blew out of nowhere, the stinks, the pinches and tickles, but nothing they could do was worse than what was happening outside. We’re almost there, you can just about see the godon now. Hotea had to go out and leave me alone a lot so she could scare up food and clothes for us. With nothing to do, shut up in that place, I started playing with the child ghosts even if they were Woda-an and after a while we made our peace with the adults, and by the time the Woda-an ghosts wore out, others moved in with us. No one likes ghosts hanging around, it’s a scandal and a disgrace. If they can afford it, they have the exorcists in to chase the ghost away, a loose ghost about the house makes gossip like you wouldn’t believe. So there are usually a lot of homeless ghosts drifting about. They hear about us and come to live in the godon.” He heard a scrabbling behind him, swung around. Two mastiffs came trotting from the fog and stopped in front of him, mouths open in twin fierce grins, eerie crystal eyes laughing at him. With a shudder he couldn’t quite suppress, he forced himself to turn his back on them and start walking toward the small door in the back wall, but he couldn’t forget they were there; he could hear the pad-scrape of their paws, imagined a rhythmic panting,

convinced himself he could feel the heat of their breath on the backs of his legs.

He shoved the door open and went inside. There was a narrow space between the guardwall and the godon itself, space filled with clutter slowly rotting back into the earth, bits of bone, boxes, rope, paper, silk scraps, fish bones, scraps of canvas, old leaves. The godon itself was a hollow square with red brick walls and a roof of glazed black tiles shiny with wet. Drops of condensation dripped from fungus-blackened endhorns, plopped desultorily into the decay below. Aituatea dealt with the puzzle lock on a small side door, held it open for Brann and the mastiffs, followed them inside.

At the end of a cold musty passage, moonlight was a pearly flood lighting the open court beyond, playing on mist that had crept inside or been sucked in by the breath-ing of the old godon. Brann stood silhouetted against it a moment as Aituatea pulled the door shut and barred it, but was gone by the time he turned around. When he reached the end of the passage, he saw her standing in the center of the court looking up, the moonlight dropping like watered milk on her pale porcelain face. The ghosts were diving down at her, bits and fragments of mist them-selves, flicking through her and dashing away. She stood quite still, letting this happen as if it were a ritual that bored her but one she was willing to endure for the calm she expected afterward. The mastiffs were chasing each other and any rats they could scare up in and out of the swirls of fog, in and out of the dank caverns of the ground floor bins. They came and sniffed at his knees, then flipped around and went to circle Brann.

“Second floor to your left,” Aituatea said and started for the stairs. The mastiffs trotted past him and went thump-ing up the stairs, dog mastiff, bitch mastiff paw matching paw on the soggy slippery wood.

Aituatea went a short way along the second floor gallery, unbarred a door and swung it open. The room inside was dark, warm, odorous—cedar and sandalwood, lacquer and spices, smoldering peat and hot metal from the covered brazier. He bowed, spread his arms. “Enter my miserable rooms, saõri Brann.” He swung around and went into the dark, turning back the shutters on the window opening on the court, lighting the lamps scattered about on wall and table. He dipped water from the covered crock, set the kettle on the coals, blew them alive, came back to his guest.

Brann was settled in a low armchair, one leg tucked up under her, the other stretched out before her, her hands resting on her thighs. Her hair was darker in the rosy lamplight, more gray than silver, her eyes were a clear light green like willow leaves in early spring. The mastiffs were children again, sitting crosslegged at her feet, staring with the owl-eyed directness of real children. They had ash-blond hair, one a shade darker than the other, bowl-bobbed, fine, very straight. As he’d thought before, they looked like twins, so asexual in these forms that it dis-turbed him to remember one of the mastiffs had definitely been a bitch.

“My companions,” she said. “Jaril.” She leaned forward and touched the head on her right. “Yaril.” She stroked her hand lightly over the paler head on her left. “This is a nice little nest. T’kk, friend Hina, it’s more than enough to hang you.” Her eyes moved over the scrolls on the walls, the jewel rugs on the floor, the other fine things visible in the lampglow.

“I’ll be dead anyway if the Temuengs get this far.”

She tapped fingers on her thigh. “It’s rather crowded in here.” He dropped into the chair by the brazier and sat watching her. She saw them all, that was obvious. Moonfisher drifting in rags near the ceiling, used to be a power-ful fishcaller, brought in heavy boatloads until a storm caught him and drowned him in sight of land. Eldest Grandmother crouching by the door, a tattered patchy ghost, she’d fade out soon, poisoned by a daughter-in-law who was tired of being run off her feet. Elder brother sitting in front of the window, strangled by a Sister of the Cord when he blundered into a forbidden ritual. Little brother, drowned, hovering behind the chair, peeking out at the shape-changers. The headless woman no one knew about, the gambler, the dancers, the several whores, the little sister, even the crabby old Temueng who sat in gloomy silence in the corner. Though Eldest Grandmother started muttering angrily beside the door, glaring at Brann, who ignored her after a flicker of, a smile in her direction, the others came drifting around her, circling gradually nearer. One by one they darted to her, stroked her, tasting her through their fingers. As if the taste pleased them, they quieted, grew content, the frazzled edges smoothed away.

Aituatea checked the pot but the water wasn’t close to boiling, then he sat staring down at his hands,

reluctant, now the time was on him, to speak the words that would commit him to the attack on the Kadda witch. The ghosts gathered around him, his family, patting him, murmuring to him, giving what strength and support they could. Why not get it over with. "I don't know why you came to Sill."

"No." She smiled, drew her thumb along her lower lip. "You don't."

"Well, it doesn't matter. There's a Kadda witch in the Tekora's Palace. His wife."

"Then the man's a fool."

"I won't argue with that. Anyway, she's the one respon-sible for Hotea's drowning. We want you to help us get rid of her."

"The Tekora's Palace." She laughed, a warm savoring sound. And he remembered the way she looked at the gate torches. He got to his feet and crossed to the back of the long room, going behind the screen that shut off the corner where his bed was. The dark red lacquer box sat where he'd left it among the hills and hollows of the crumpled quilts. He looked at the unmade bed and won-dered if he'd ever get back, bit his lip, lifted the box and carried it to Brann. He set it on the low table by the arm of her chair, then backed away. He glanced at the brazier but saw no steam and resettled himself in his chair. "The old man said that would buy you."

She lifted the box, set it on her legs. After eyeing it warily a moment, she lifted the lid. Her indrawn breath was a small whispery sound. "Das'n vuor." She lifted the black pot from its nest of fine white silk and ran her fingers over it. A strange tense look on her face, she turned it over and passed her fingers across the bottom. "His mark," she whispered. "The last firing." She, set the pot back and lifted one of the cups, sat cradling it in both hands. "That you found this one ... *this* one! I remember .. Slya bless, oh I remember I held this cup in my hand after my father took it from the kiln. I went up Tincreal with my father, we carried the last cups to their firing; we stayed there all day and all night and the next day till just after noonsong. The first three he took from the kiln he broke, they weren't good enough, this was the fourth, he set it in my hand and I knew what perfection was, for the first time I knew what perfection was" She shook her head as if to clear away fumes of memory.

"Old man said it would buy you." He repeated those words, knowing he was being crude, perhaps angering her, but he was shocked at seeing her unravel. He wanted her to be powerful, unshaken by anything, as she was when he first saw her. Otherwise how could she stand against the witch?

"Old man, he's right, damn his twisty soul." She eased the cup into its nest and folded the lid shut. "You've bought me, Hina. I'll fight the witch for the pot and for more reasons than you'll ever know. Mmm, tell you one thing. Would have done it without the pot." She grinned at him, her hand protectively on the lid. "Don't try to take it hack, I'll bite. Seriously, I'm a sentimental bitch when I let myself be, Hina, and I've been watching you and your sister. You could have worked yourself free of her easily enough, a little thought and gathering the coin for an exorcism, who would ever know? My companions tell me you didn't even think of exorcism. I like that. Well, that's enough, what are you planning?"

"Can you climb?" Hotea pinched him. "So we hear from you again," he grumbled. With a spitting crackle of indig-nation she pointed at the steam shooting from under the kettle's lid.

"I was born on the side of a mountain that makes the hills round here look like gnat bites," Brann said and laughed.

"Good." He chose a teapot he thought of as his garden pot, the one with bamboo and orchids delicately painted round the five flat sides. As he rinsed the pot, he glanced at her. Her head was against the back of the chair, her eyes half closed, her hands relaxed on the chair arms. He measured out two scoops of black tea, added hot water, took the pot to the narrow table by the screen, set out the shallow dishes for the ghosts.

"Why are you doing that?" Her voice came to him, lazy, relaxed. When he looked at her, she seemed half asleep.

"For the family," he said. A wave of his hand took in the hovering ghosts clustering over the bowls lapping up the fragrance. He came back to the table, filled two cups, frowned at the children. "Do they want tea?"

She shook her head. "No." She took the cup he handed her, sniffed at the coiling steam. "Mmmm." Green eyes laughing at him, she said, "Steal only the best."

“Right.” He dropped into his chair, gulped a mouthful of the tea. “Old man said you and the witch are ancient enemies.”

“Oh?” Her eyes narrowed. “Do you know her name?”

“No.”

“Yes.” Hotea darted forward. “Yes. The other wives, they cursed her by name and worse. It’s an odd name, can’t tell clan or family from it. Ludila Dondi.”

“Ah. The Dondi.”

“You do know her.”

“We met. Briefly. A long time ago. Not love at first sight.” She rolled the five-sided cup between her palms. “She was just a fingerling then, but nasty.” She emptied the cup, set it carefully on the table. “Talk, young Hina. I’m due back on the ship by dawn and I’ve other games to play.” She set the box on the table, leaned forward, her eyes bright with curiosity and anticipation. “I’m listening.”

THE WILLOWS tilted out over the water, their withes dissolving into mist. The boat was a miniature of the flat-bottomed water taxis with barely room for two and a ghost but the children had shifted form again and gone whiffing away as owls. Brann seated herself in the bow, settled the box at her feet on dry floorboards. Aituatea fumbled at the sodden rope, finally working the knot loose; his hands were shaking, but excitement outweighed his fear. With Hotea floating at his side, he shoved the boat into deeper water and swung in. A few minutes later he was propelling them through mist with nothing visible around them but the grayed-down wavelets of dark water kissing the boat’s sides.

After half an hour’s hard rowing, he’d rounded Utar’s snout and was struggling south along the cliffs, the rougher chop on the weather side of the small island making the going hard. The fog was patchy, shredding in the night wind. Finally, Hotea pinched his arm and pointed. “There,” she said. “The nursery garden is up there.”

“Bout time.” With Brann fending the bow off the rocks, he eased the boat through the tumbled black boulders to the beach.

While Brann held the boat, he tied the painter to a knob on one of the larger rocks, then pulled a heavy cover over it, canvas painted with rough splotches of gray and black that would mask the boat shape from anyone chancing to look down. As he waded beside Brann to the tiny beach, the owls swooped down, hooted, a note of urgency in their cries, and swept up again. A moment later, voices, the stomp of feet, the sounds of a body of armed men moving came dropping down the cliff. Brann dodged into a hollow that hid her from above. Aituatea joined her there, all too aware of the heat of her body through the thin silk of her shirt, the strong life in her more frightening than arousing.

“How long before they come round again?” she whispered.

“When Hotea was in the Palace, the round took about an hour, no reason to change that. Plenty of time to get up the cliff.”

The cliff was deeply weathered, but most of the hand and footholds were treacherous, the stone apt to crumble. In spite of that, Aituatea went up with reckless speed, showing off his skill. He wasn’t a cripple on a cliff. He reached the top ahead of Brann, stood wiping the muck off his hands and examining the garden wall as she pulled herself onto the guard track.

The wall was twice his height, the stones polished and set in what had once been a seamless whole, but a century of salt wind and salt damp had eaten away at the cracks, opening small crevices for the fingers and toes of a clever climber. He kicked off his sandals, shoved them in a pocket of his jacket, looked at Brann, then started up. As soon as he reached the broad top, he crawled along it until he was masked from the nursery door and windows by the bushy foliage.

Brann came up with more difficulty, needing a hand to help her over; again he felt the burning as his hand closed about hers. She smiled at his uneasiness, then sat on the wall and pulled on her boots.

The owls circled overhead, dipped into the garden, flowing into mastiff form as they touched ground. The dogs trotted briskly about nosing into shadow until they were satisfied the garden was empty, then they came silently back and waited for Brann to come down, which she did, slithering down the foliage with ease and grace. Aituatea climbed down as well, dropped the last bit to land harder than he’d

expected, limped toward the doors, Hotea a wisp fluttering beside him. Though she was silent now, he could feel her agitation. This was where the witch had caught her. "Sister," he whispered, "scout for us."

Hotea slipped through the wall, emerged a few minutes later. "Empty," she cried. "No children, no wives, no bondmaids. All gone. Not one left." Her crystal form trembled. "The bottom of the bay must be solid with bones."

"Just as well." He took a long slim knife from a sheath inside his jacket, slid it through the space between the doors, wiggled it until he felt it slip the latch loose and the door swing inward. Brann touched his arm, a jolt like a shock-eel. Swallowing a yelp, he looked around.

"Let Yaril and Jaril run ahead."

He nodded. The mastiffs brushed past him and trotted inside, their nails making busy clicks on the polished wood floor. Brann glanced about the garden, moved inside, silent as the ghost she followed. Aituatea pulled the door shut behind him and limped after them.

The air in the maze of corridors was stale and stinking, a soup of rottenness, thick with the anise Hotea had learned to hate mingled with other spices. Those corridors crawled with shadow and dust rolls that tumbled along the grass mats, driven by vagrant drafts that were the only things wandering the palace. Most of the rooms were empty; there were a few sleepers, some court parasites, men and women drugged by ambition and stronger opiates, refusing to know what was happening about them. Aituatea moved through this death-in-life, his fear and reluctance banished by the demands of the moment; there was no turning back and a kind of peace in that.

Up one flight of stairs to the public rooms. The eerie emptiness was the same, the same death smell, the same staleness in air that was paradoxically never still. They went swiftly through this silence to the stairs leading up to the rooms the Tekora kept for himself.

The mastiffs sat on their haunches beside Brann, stubby tails thumping against the mat. Hotea flitted back to them. "Guards, she said. "Standing on either side of the Tekora's sleeproom door."

Brann touched the corner of her mouth. "They alert?"

"Not very," Hotea said, "but awake."

"Mm. Means he's inside. But is the witch with him?"

"I'll see." Before Brann or Aituatea could stop her, Hotea flitted back up the stairs.

"Tkk, young Hina. Pray the Dondi is sleeping or not there, otherwise your sister could bring the roof down on us."

"She won't think before she does."

"And you think too much, eh?"

Aituatea ignored that as he gazed up the stairs, anxious about Hotea.

Seconds later she was back, a streak of subdued light plunging down the slant, a waterfall of woman ghost, halting before them in a swirl of crystal fragments that rapidly reassembled themselves into Hotea-shape. "They're in bed, both of them. Asleep, I think, I only poked my head in for a second. They ate someone tonight, the smell of it is sickening thick in there."

"Asleep. Good. Let them stay that way." She led them around beneath the stairs so the sound of their whispers would not carry to the guards. She settled herself with her back to the wall, waited until Aituatea was down beside her, squatting, fingers rubbing at his sore hip, preferring the pain to the thoughts in his head; it was almost a sufficient distraction. "Bit of luck," Brann murmured, "find-ing them asleep and sated." A quick wry smile. "Not so good for whoever they ate, but we can't change that. I am very glad indeed that the Dondi's asleep. Even so, be warned, she limits me. I don't want to stir up resonances that would wake her too soon." When Aituatea indicated he didn't understand, she sighed but didn't try to explain. "First thing is taking out the guards." She flipped back the edge of her leather vest, showed him the twin blades sheathed inside. "I can pick them off, but I can't be sure of silencing them, takes time to bleed to death. Any ideas?"

Aituatea nodded, reached inside his jacket, felt a mo-moment among the pockets sewn into the lining, took out a section of nested bamboo tubes. "Carry this for tight holes. Haven't had to use the darts yet, but I can hit a hand at twenty paces. Sister, where are they? what armor?"

Hotea knelt beside him. "About a dozen paces from the landing, my paces, not yours," She held out

her arms, wrists pressed together, hands spread at an angle. "That's the shooting angle you'll have from the nearest shelter. They're not looking toward the stairway, didn't the whole time I was watching them, though that wasn't very long." She shifted restlessly. "It's a tight shot, brother, even you'll have trouble. They're trussed in studded leather and iron straps and wearing helmets." She framed her face with her hands, her brow and chin covered. "That's all you got."

"Hands?"

"I forgot. Gloves."

"Tungji's tits, they don't make it easy." He pulled the tubes out until he had a pipe about a foot long. He looked over his shoulder at the dogs; they were on their feet, crystal eyes bright and interested, tongues lolling. He breathed a curse, brought out a small lacquer box, held it in the hand that held the pipe. "Them. If I miss, can they take out the guards?"

Without answering, Brann pushed onto her feet and went around to the foot of the stairs. The mastiffs sniffed at Aituatea's legs as he stood beside her, then went pad-ding up the stairs as quiet as cats slow and flowing so their nails wouldn't click on the wood. Near the bend in the flight they misted out of shape and reformed into long brindle snakes that flowed silent and nearly invisible up to the landing.

Aituatea followed them up the steps, narrowing himself to the need of the moment. On the top step he knelt and eased around the corner, concealed in the shadow not lit by the lamp suspended above the sundoor, picking out gleams in the many layered black lacquer and the gilt sun-shape inlaid in both halves of the double door. He popped one of his poison thorns in the pipe, careful not to touch the gummy tip, got a second dart from the box and set it on the floor by his knee. Ache in his hip forgotten, chill in his belly forgotten, he focused on the expanse of cheek and sent the dart winging with a hard puff. As soon as it was on its way, he reloaded the pipe and sent the second at the other guard.

One then the other slapped at his face, eyes popping, gave a small strangled gasp and started to crumple. Aituatea was on his feet and running as soon as he saw the first man waver, knowing he wouldn't get there in time to catch both.

The shape changers flowed up from the floor by the guards' feet, children again, caught the collapsing men and eased them down quietly. Aituatea touched his brow and lips in a gesture of congratulation. They grinned and bobbed their pale shining heads.

He stepped over a recumbent guard and eyed the double door, brushed his hand along the center line, felt the door yield a little to the pressure. "Sister," he breathed, "what sort of latch?"

Hotea oozed partway through the door, then pulled back out. "Turnbolt. You'll have to cut the tongue."

He scowled at the gilt sun. "And hope the noise doesn't wake them. Some hope."

Brann touched his shoulder. He jumped. "I wish you wouldn't do that."

She ignored that as foolishness. "Be ready," she whispered. "Yaril will throw the bolt for us, but her presence in the room will wake the witch."

The fairer child changed into mist and flowed under the door. A second later he heard a muted *tunk* as the bolt tongue withdrew, then a wild, piercing yell.

Brann leaped at the door, hit the crack with the heel of one hand, slamming the doors open. She charged in to stand in front of Yaril who crouched on the rug, eyes steady on the witch.

Ludila Dondi arose from the bed, her face ugly with rage, her naked body yellowed ivory in the dim light, like a tiger in her ferocity and the vigorous agility of her leap. When she saw Brann, she checked her lunge along the bed, so suddenly she was thrown off balance. "You." She slid off the bed and came toward Brann, feral yellow eyes fixed on her, ignoring the others.

Jaril took Yaril's hands. After a brief, silent consultation they rose as spheres of amber fire, lighting the room with a fierce gold glow.

The Tekora kicked loose from the quilts and rolled off the bed, standing naked as the witch but not so readily awake and alert. Aituatea watched him with a burning in his belly. No old man any longer, the Temueng was firm, fit, supple, a man in his prime, a vigor bought with the blood of his own children, a hideous vigor that had cost Hotea her life.

The Tekora eyed the two women, reached up and with a soft metallic sibilation drew from its sheath

the long sword hanging above the head of the bed. He swung it twice about his head, limbering his arm. A glance at Aituatea, a head shake dismissing the Hina as negligible. He started for the woman.

The Dondi and Brann were moving in an irregular double spiral, gradually working closer to each other, each focused so intently on the other no one else existed for them.

Hotea fluttered about them, turning in wider loops, silent but radiating fury.

The fire spheres vibrated more rapidly, then one of them darted straight at the Tekora's face. He lifted his free hand to brush it aside, yelled as his flesh began to blister, swung round and swiped at the sphere with the sword, slicing through it but doing no damage. It settled to the floor in front of him, a mastiff as soon as it touched down. The dog came at the man, growling deep in her throat. Bitch mastiff. Yaril. Aituatea snapped the knife from the sheath up his sleeve, sent it wheeling at the Tekora.

It sliced into the large artery in his neck. There should have been an explosion of blood and a dead man falling.

Should have been. The Tekora plucked the knife out easily and flung it away. The wound in his neck closed over. He lifted the sword and started for Aituatea.

Aituatea looked rapidly around, caught up a small stool and hurled it at the Temueng, it caught his elbow, his fingers opened involuntarily and the sword went flying to land in the tumbled covers on the bed. The Yaril mastiff went for his throat but he got his arm up in time and the curving yellow teeth closed on that instead of his neck; Yaril began gnawing at the arm, kicking at his gut with her powerful hind legs.

Aituatea backed off. Ludila Dondi was chanting as she circled, a drone of ancient words with a compelling complex rhythm. When the doors flew open and he saw her coming up out of the bed, he thought she was completely naked, but now he saw the mirrors on the silver chain about her neck, the tinier mirrors dangling from her ear-lobes, others set in wristlets on each arm. She moved her body, her arms, her head in counterpoint to the rhythm of the words, dancing the glitters in a web about herself, trying to weave a web about Brann.

Brann stalked her, avoiding the wild yellow eyes, avoid-ing the mirror lights, gradually tightening the spiral.

Firesphere Jaril darted at the Dondi, shattering the rhythm of her lights and each time he dived, Brann got a little closer.

The Tekora flung off the mastiff, his torn flesh closing. He threw himself at the bed, came curling up with the sword, rolled onto his feet again. With a grunting roar he charged at Brann.

The mastiff Yaril was suddenly a long snake that whipped itself up and around the Tekora's legs, wrenching him off his feet, dissolving before he could cut at it with the sword he still held.

Firesphere Jaril came an instant too close to the witch, touching one of the mirrors; the sphere tumbled through the air, melting through a dozen shapes before it was a boy curled in fetal position on the rug. His fall distracted the Dondi for a second only, but it was enough. Brann's hands slapped about the Dondi's ribs; she hugged the smaller woman tight against her, caught her mouth, held her mouth to mouth, muffling the witch's shriek of rage and despair.

As Yaril melted, Aituatea was on the Tekora, the foot of his good leg jammed between arm and shoulder, hands in a nerve hold on the Temueng's wrist. The Tekora writhed and struggled but couldn't break the hold. Aituatea dug his knuckles in. The Tekora's fingers opened. Aituatea caught the sword as it fell, leaped back, took the Temueng's head off as he surged up, the sword answering his will like an extension of his arm. He swung it up, whirled it about, grinning, suppressing an urge to whoop; but all too fast his elation chilled. The Tekora's headless body stirred, hands groping as it got clumsily to its knees. Something bumped against his foot. The Tekora's head, mouth working, teeth gnashing as it tried to sink them in his flesh. He kicked the head away, wanting to vomit. A hand brushed against him, tried to grab hold of him. He sliced through the body's knees, kicked the severed legs in separate directions. The body fell, lay still a moment, then the stumps began moving. They found no purchase on the silken rug until the torso raised itself onto its elbows and pulled itself toward him. He cut off the arms at the elbow, groaned as the hands started creeping toward him. He kicked them away but they started crawling for him again.

The kiss went on and on, the witch withering in Brann's arms—but withering slowly, too slowly,

there was too much life in her. Yaril landed beside Jaril, changed. She reached toward the boy, fire snapped between them, then Jaril was up looking around. A look, a nod, then they joined hands and two firespheres darted into the air. They threw themselves at the Soul-Drinker, merged with her until her flesh shimmered with golden fire and the three of them finished drawing the life out of the Dondi.

Brann dropped the woman's husk, the fire flowed out of her and divided into two children, sated and a bit sleepy. She stared down at the thing crumpled at her feet and shuddered.

Aituatea kicked away a creeping hand, walked over and stared down at what was left of the Kadda witch. An ancient mummy, leathery skin tight over dry bones. "Never seen anyone deader."

Hotea came from the shadows. "Put her in the water; she has to go in the water." She rushed to the nearest window and tried to pull the drapes aside, but her hands passed through the soft dark velvet. She shrieked with frustration and darted back at them. "In the water," she cried, enraged.

Brann nodded. "This one's too strong to be careless of, let the water rot her and the tides carry her bones away. Open the window for me, or would you rather carry that?" She waved a hand at the husk.

"Gahh, no." He stepped over a wriggling leg, a crawling hand, circled the silently mouthing head, pulled the drapes aside and opened the shutters.

Wind boomed into the room, cold and full of sea-tang, blowing out the lamp, stirring the silken quilts, almost snatching the shutters from him. It caught at the shorter hair by Brann's ears, teased it out from her face, bits of blue-white fire crackling off the ends. She wrinkled her nose, brushed impatiently at her hair, her hand lost among the snapping lights. "Hold your head on," she muttered at Hotea who was chattering again and jiggling about her. She lifted the husk, grunting with the effort, carried it to the window and eased it through. Hotea at his shoulder, Aituatea stood beside her and watched the husk plummeting toward wind-whipped water as Hotea had half a year ago, watched it sink.

Hotea gave a little sigh of satisfaction, tapped her brother on the cheek. "A wife," she said. "Mind me now, get you a wife, brother." Another sigh and she was gone.

Aituatea rubbed at his shoulder. Rid of her. He stared out the window seeing nothing. He'd cursed her silently and aloud since she'd come back dead. And he'd cursed her alive and resented her. She'd taught him most of what he knew, stung him into forgetting his short leg, scolded him, comforted him, kept him going when times were bad. Always there. And now he was rid of her. Alone.

"Hina." He heard the word but it didn't seem important. "Hina!" Sharper voice, a demand for his attention.

"What?" He turned his head, searching vaguely for the speaker.

"That sword. The one you've got the death grip on. May I see it?"

He looked down. He was leaning on the long sword, the point sunk into the rug, into the floor beneath. He had to tug it free before he could lift it. He gazed at it, remembering the aliveness of it in his hands, shook his head, not understanding much of anything at that moment, and offered it to her.

She looked down at her hands. They glowed softly in the room's shadowy twilight. "No. Better not. Lay it on the bed for me." She hesitated a moment. "Hina, let me touch you."

"Why?" Apprehensive, still holding the sword, he backed away from her.

"Slya's breath, man, you think I want more of this in me? Got too much now. Listen, you're tired, sore, we've still got to get out of this and down the cliff. I can give as well as take. You'll feel like you've been chewing awsegatsa weed for a few hours, that's all. All you have to do is take my hand." She held out a hand, palm up, waited.

He looked at her; she seemed impatient. His hip was a gnawing pain, he'd used himself hard this night, his shoulders and arms ached, he had toothmarks on one foot and cold knots in his stomach. "The weed, huh?"

"With no hangover."

"I could use a look at Jah'takash's better side." He tossed the sword on the bed, closed his hand about hers.

A feeling like warm water flowing into his body, gentle, soothing, heating away his aches and pains, washing away his weariness. Only a breath or two, then she was pulling free. He didn't want to let go, but was afraid to cling to her. He opened his eyes. "I owe the Lady of Surprises a fistful of incense." He

looked from the sword—a long glimmer on the silk of the quilt—to the sheath on the wall above the bed. “That’s what you came to Silili for, isn’t it.” He climbed on the bed, pulled the sheath down and slid the sword into it, jumped back onto the floor.

“Right. The Serpent’s Tooth, Sulinjoa’s last sword, the one he forged for what’s-his-name, your last Hina king. It always cuts the hand that owns it, so the story goes. His wife, she was supposed to be a demon of some sort, she cursed the sword when he quenched it the last time in the blood of their youngest son.” She took the sword from him, no hesitation now, pulled it from the sheath, clucked at the bloodstains along the blade, used the edge of the drape to wipe it clean, moving the velvet cloth gently over it, then held the blade up to the moonlight, clucked again at the marks the blood had left. “Have to work on this once I’m back on the ship.” She slid the blade with slow care into the sheath. “Your king took off Sulinjoa’s head with it so he’d never make a finer sword for someone else. The Temueng who made himself emperor, he used it on the king and gave it away to a supporter he didn’t much like.” She chuckled. “That one didn’t last long either.”

“Who’d want it with that history?” Aituatea eyed the sword with revulsion, then remembered how it’d felt in his hand. He shook his head.

“The man who’s going to pay me five thousand gold for it.” She looked down, grimaced and kicked away the hand that had brushed against her foot. “No friend of mine which is just as well, looks like the curse is still going strong.”

Aituatea grunted and went hunting for his knife, unwilling to leave any piece of himself in this place. When bright light suddenly bloomed about him, he glanced up. A firesphere floated above him. “Thanks.” he muttered. He found the knife leaning against the side of a cabinet, wiped it on the rug and tucked it away. The light vanished.

Brann was leaning out the window when he straight-ened. She drew back inside. “Dawn’s close. We better get out of here.”

Giggles flitted by Aituatea. From a shimmering point above the bed, finger-long gold bars, silver bars, rings and bracelets cascaded in a heap on the silk.

“Yours,” Brann said. “Courtesy of Yaril and Jaril. They thought you ought to have some compensation for your latest loss.”

An owl was suddenly in the room, hovering over the bed, a plump leather sack clutched in its talons. Its hoots like eldrich laughter, it sailed through the window and disappeared into the night. A second owl with a second pouch appeared, flew after the first.

Aituatea passed a hand across his face, disconcerted. In the events of the past moments, he’d forgotten the sense of dislocation that had chilled him when Hotea vanished. Now he resented both things, being reminded of that loss and having his feelings read so easily. But this was no time for indulging in resentments or grief. He shucked a case off one of the pillows, raked the gold and gems into it, tied the ends in a loop he could thrust his arm through, leaving both hands free. “Back the way we came?”

“Unless you know how to get past the causeway guards.” she tucked the sword under her arm and started for the door. “You can take me out to the ship if you will. She’s due to lift anchor with the dawn.”

THE FOG WAS blowing out to sea, the wind changing from salt to green, the smell of day and land and coming storm on it. As Aituatea worked the boat toward the willow grove, he saw the sky flush faintly red behind the Temple roof. More than one kind of storm coming, he thought. When someone steals himself to look into that room and finds the Tekora in still wiggling pieces. Hei-yo, Godalau grant they blame the Kadda wife for it since she won’t be around. No way to tie me to it, not now, not with Hotea all the way gone. He tied the boat up, splashed through the shallow water to the shore. In the distance he could hear drums and rattles, the Woda-an celebrating the departure of the blind ship. Drinker of Souls, you’re not a bad sort, but I hope I never see you again. Tungjii bless you, though. Never thought I’d miss Hotea like this. Aching with loneliness, he pushed through the dangling withes and trudged up the slope toward the abandoned godon.

IN THE WARM and scented room, he sat with the bra-zier providing the only light, a bowl of wine in

one hand, a stone jar of wine on the table beside his feet. He'd put his dirty bare feet on the table deliberately, meaning to pro-voke Eldest Grandmother into scolding him. The sounds she made in his head were no longer words but they were comfortably familiar. He sipped at the wine, thinking about Brann, wondering who the fool was who sent her after that cursed sword. He thought about Hotea. She's right, I should find me a wife. Someone who could stand to live here, definitely someone who knows how to keep her mouth shut. He stretched out in the chair until he was almost lying flat, crossed his ankles and balanced the wine bowl on his stomach. Not till the storm's blown out. Both storms. He took a mouthful of wine, let it trickle its warmth down his throat, smiled sleepily at the ghosts that were gathering about him. He thought he could see some new faces among them but was too lazy to ask. It's over, he thought. Really over. Me. Aituatea. I killed the Temueng Tekora. Sort of killed him. He grinned.

"Let me go off a little while and look what happens. Drunk. Disgustingly drunk."

He jerked up, spilling the wine, looked wildly about. "Hotea?"

Her crystal form was hovering over the brazier, picking up red light from the coals. "You got another sister I don't know about?"

"I thought you were gone to rest."

"Not a chance, brother, not till I get you safely wed to the right woman." She gathered in several female ghosts and led them to surround him. "Listen, Kellavoe's youn-gest. Word is her hands are almost as good as mine, can strip the eyelashes off a dozing dragon. Living with her uncle these days since the Temuengs hanged her father and you know old Kezolavoe, meaner than a boar in rut, but she doesn't complain. Good girl. Loyal to her kin. Be doing the child a favor, getting her away from him"

"Ohh-eh, slow down, I'll take a look at the girl, but after the storm, if you don't mind, sister." He got to his feet, went to set out the dishes for the ghosts. "Why don't we all celebrate? Sniff some wine and help me tell the tale of the raid on the Tekora's palace." He began filling the dishes with wine, feeling his body and spirit relax into a familiar irritated contentment. Plenty of time, good friends and a growing family. He looked about, counted shapes and set out another of the shallow bowls. Definitely new faces in the mix, some Hina, some Temueng and a Woda-an. He stepped back, lifted his bowl. "To family ties," he said. "Old and new."

The ghosts sighed, bathed in the wine's fragrance and exuded a contentment to match his own.

2. Brann's Quest—The Flight from Arth Siva

BRANN SITS AWAKE. Bleeding into memory, all the sounds about her, water sounds, muted shouts from deck and masts, ship sounds, board and rope talking to the dawn, wind sounds, *sighs* and long wails. She sits at a small table, dawn's light creeping in, painting images across her body. The mix of sound and smell reinforces the quiet melancholy that awakened her and drew her out of bed and to the chair, her hair falling about her face, the das'n vuor pot held between her hands. Black deeps on a base as thin and singing as fine porcelain, the true das'n vuor from the fireheart of Tinreal.

She breathed on the pot, rubbed at the surface with a soft rag. Whoever had you took good care of you. Well why not? You're a treasure, my pot, ancient though you are. Almost as old as me. A hundred years, more. Doesn't feel like it's been that long. The years have flown, oh how they've disappeared. She put the rag down and held the pot tilted so she could look down into the black of it, seeing images, the faces of father, brothers, sisters, cou-sins, uncles, aunts, of her mother suckling long dead Ruan; saw herself, a thin energetic girl with mouse-colored braids leaking wisps of fine hair. A long time ago. So long she had trouble remembering that Brann. She drew a finger across the black mirror, leaving a faint film of oil behind. Is the road to Arth Slya open again? Are the Croaldhine holding the tri-year fair in Grannsha? I'd like to see it again. Jupelang—I think he's the one—said you can't step in the same river twice. Even so, I'd like to see the valley again no matter the changes or the hurt. No place for me there, but I'd like to walk the slopes of Tinreal again and remember that young Brann.

She smiled with quiet pleasure at Chandro shipmaster when he rolled over half-awake. More memory. Sammang, my old friend, you gave me a weakness for sailing men I've never regretted. Blinking, Chandro laced his fingers behind his head and grinned at her, his teeth gleaming through a tangle

of black, the elaborate corkscrews he twisted into his beard at every portcall raveled into a wild bramble bush. He yawned, savoring these last few min-utes in the warm sheets smelling of both of them, a musky heated odor that mixed with memory to make a powerful aphrodisiac. She started to put the pot down and go to him, but the mate chose that moment to thump on the door.

Chuckling, Chandro rolled out of bed, stood stretching and groaning with pleasure as he worked sleep out of his big supple body. He patted at his beard, looked at her with sly amusement. "Save it for later, Bramble love, won't hurt for keeping."

She snorted, picked up the rag to clean her fingerprints off the pot.

When he was dressed, his beard combed, he came over to her and looked down at the gathered blackness in her hands. "Das'n vuor. I could get you a thousand gold for that." She snorted again and he laughed. "I know, you wouldn't part with it for ten thousand." He brushed her hair aside, kissed the nape of her neck and went out, whistling a saucy tune that brought a reluctant fond grin to her lips.

Quietly content, she burnished the pot.

In the black mirror her woman's face framed in white silk hair blurs, elongates into a skinny coltish girl with untidy mouse-colored braids and grubby hands that look too big for her arms. She sits in a grassy glade among tall cedars, a sketch pad on her knee, jotting down impres-sions of a herd of small furry coynos playing in the grass ...

ON THE DAY of Arth Sly's destruction, Tincreal burped.

Brann leaned over and flattened both hands on the grass beside her, feeling the rhythmic jolts of the hard red dirt, relishing the wildness of the mountain. She tossed her drawing pad aside, gabbed for a low-hanging limbtip and pulled herself to her feet, her eyes opening wide as she felt the uneasy trembling of the tree. Around her the cedars were groaning and shuddering as the earth contin-ued to shift beneath them, and birds spiraling into air stiller for once than the earth, a mounting, thickening cloud, red, black, blue, mottled browns, flashes of white, chevinks and dippers, moonfishers, redbirds and mojays, corvins, tarhees, streaks and sparrins, spiraling up and up, filling the air with their fear. She gripped the cedar twigs and needles, starting to be afraid herself as the groaning shift of the earth went on and on, shivering. After an eternity it seemed, the mountain grew quiet again, the rockfalls stopped, the shudderings calmed, and Slya went back to her restless sleep.

She opened her hand, looked at the sharp-smelling sticky resin smeared across her palm and fingers, gri-maced, ran across the grass to the creekbank and her sunning rock, a flat boulder jutting into the water. She stood in the middle of it watching the otters peel out of their shaking pile and begin grooming their ruffled fur, watching the birds settle back into the treetops leaving the sky empty except for a few fleecy clouds about the broad snow-covered peak of Tincreal. This was the first time she'd been alone on the mountain during one of the quakes that were coming with increasing frequency these warm spring days. A warning of bother to come, the Yongala said, pack what you'll need if we have to run from her wrath; and Eldest Uncle Eornis told stories of his great-grandfather's time when Slya woke before. With an un-easy giggle, she clapped her hands, began the Yongala's dance on the rock, singing the sleep song to the mountain and the mountain's heart, Arth Sly, Sly's Ground, to Slya who protected, who warmed the springs and kept the Valley comfortable in winter, to Slya who made fire for her father's kilns, to Slya the Sleeping Lady, powerful protector and dangerous companion. "Slya wakes," she sang

....

Slya wakes
Mountain quakes
Air thickens
Stone quickens
Ash breath
Bringing death
Sly, sleep sleep, Sly
Yongala dances dreams for you Sly turns

Stone burns
Red rivers riot around us
Day drops dark around us Beasts fly
Men fear
Forests fry
Sleep, Slya Slya, sleep
Yongala dances dreams for you

At once exhilarated and afraid, singing to celebrate and to propitiate, Brann danced her own fears away, then went hunting soapweed to wash the blackened cedar resin off her hands.

* * *

GO BACK, start again at the day's beginning, the last morning Arth Slya was whole.

On that last morning that seemed much like any other morning, Brann came into the kitchen after breakfast and her morning chores were done. Ginky-next-to-baby stood on a stool by the washtub, soapweed lather bubbling up around his arms, scrubbing at pots and plates. He looked round, snapped a glob of lather at her. "You," he said. "Hunk"

"It's your turn, mouse, I did 'em yestereve." She wiped the lather off her arm, went over to ruffle his short brown curls, giggled as he shuddered all over and whinnied like a little pony, then went to the food locker. "Shara."

"Mmm?" Her younger sister sat at the breakfast table tending a smallish plant, nipping off bits of it, stirring the dirt about its roots. She was only nine but her Choice was clear to her and everyone else; she was already, though unofficially, apprenticed to Uncle Sabah the fanner and spent most of her days with him now, working in the fields, silent, sunburned and utterly content. She set the pot down, looked around, her green eyes half hidden by heavy lids that made her look sleepy when she was most alert. "What?"

"Did Mama order more, bread from Uncle Djimis? No?" She held up the hard end of an old loaf. "Well, this is all we got left. And I'm taking it." She put the bread in her satchel; it was stale but Uncle Djimis's bread had a good-ness that stayed with it to the last crumb. She added a chunk of cheese and two apples, slipped the satchel's straps over her shoulder and danced out, her long braids bouncing on her shoulders. "Be good, younguns," she warbled and kicked the door shut on their indignant re-plies, went running through the quiet house to the back porch where her mother sat in her webbing hammock swinging gently back and forth as she nursed baby Ruan, humming a tuneless, wordless song.

"I'm off," Brann told her mother. "Anything special you want?"

Accyra reached out and closed a hand about Brann's fingers, squeezed them gently. "Take care, Bramble-all-thorns, the Mountain's uncertain these days." She closed her eyes, keeping hold of Brann's hand, hummed some more, smiled and looked up. "Coynos, as many different views as you have time for, some of your other four-foots, I'm thinking of a tapestry celebrating the Mountain." She lifted a brow. "And be back to help with supper."

Brann nodded, then clicked her tongue. "I forgot. I was going to tell Shara to order some more bread, I've got the last in here." She patted the satchel. "Shall I stop in at Uncle Djimis's on my way out?"

Her mother lifted heavy eyelids and sighed. "Ill never remember it without Cairn here to remind me. What do we need?"

"Well, a couple loaves of regular bread. And some honey-nut rolls for breakfast tomorrow? HmMMM? Please?"

Her mother chuckled. "All right, a dozen honey-nut rolls; tell Shara to fetch them before you leave."

"Thanks, Mum." She started toward the door.

"Be just a little careful, whirlwind, don't let the Moun-tain fall on you."

"Won't." She dashed back through the house, stuck her head into the kitchen, "Shara, Mama says you should fetch the bread and stuff," went charging on through the house singing, "Won't, won't, won't let the Mountain fall on me, won't won't won't," but went more sedately down the white sand road,

waving to uncles and aunts and cousins by courtesy and blood who passed her walking along to the workshops that lined the river.

Uncle Migel was at his forge, a pile of work already finished; it was his day to turn out all the finicky little bits the Valley needed: nails and rivets, arrow points, fish-hooks, scissor blades, screws and bolts and suchlike. His apprentices were scurrying about like ants out of a spilled nest, the two elder journeymen wreathed in clouds of steam. "Eh-Bramble," he boomed, "bring your old uncle a drink."

She tossed her braids impatiently at the delay, but Valley rules definitely dictated courtesy to adults. She lifted the lid off the coolcrook her father's apprentice Immer had made and brought Migel a dripping dipperful.

He gulped down most of it and emptied the rest over his thinning black hair. "Made your Choice, yet, Bram? Time's getting short"

She nodded.

He pulled a braid, grinned at her. "Not talking, eh?" He laughed when she looked stubborn, his breathy all-over laughter, then sobered. "On the mountain, are you? Good. Venstrey there—" he jerked his head at one of the journeymen—The wants a sleeping otter for the hilt of a knife he's working on, stretched out straight, mind you, one curled up nose to tail would make an odd sort of hilt."

She nodded, hung the dipper he gave her by the thong in its tail and went on down the road.

AS SHE CAME ka-lumping down uncle Djimis's steps, her mother's apprentice Marran rounded a corner of the house with a pair of hot sweet rolls. "Eh-Bram, catch." He looped one of them at her.

She stretched up to catch the roll—and nearly fell off the bottom step, keeping her face out of the dust with a flurry of arms and legs, a clownjig that didn't improve her temper. "Marran, you idiot, you make me break my neck and I'll haunt you the rest of your days."

He gave her his slow, sweet smile, but said nothing. He seldom had much to say, but few Valley folk, male or female, young or old, could resist that smile. This was his third year in Arth Slya and he was settling in nicely; her mother said he was going to be the best weaver and tapestry maker Arth Slya had seen in an age of ages. If her mother did decide to make a Mountain tapestry using

Brann's sketches, it'd be Marran who drew the cartoon and did much of the work. He'd turned fifteen only a month ago and was young for it, but her mother was planning to make him journeyman on the Centenary Cele-bration for Eldest Uncle Eornis. Brann's Choice Day. Her eleventh birthday. Going to be a busy day.

She kicked some sand, sneaked a glance at Marran, who grinned when he caught her at it, then went stalking away down the road, stuffing the roll into her satchel, hmphing and grumping, half-annoyed and half-delighted at the at-tentions he kept pushing on her. Her mother and some of the aunts were beginning to plan things, she caught them time after time looking at her and Marran with heavy significance that made her want to bite.

She climbed to her father's workshop and looked inside. Cousin Immer was in one of the rooms fussing over de-signs for a set of plates one of the uncles wanted for his daughter's marriage chest. Problem was the uncle and the daughter had very different notions of what each wanted and Immer, who was inherently kind, was struggling to design something both would agree on. He was a fusser and sometimes snappish but Brann was very fond of him; even when he was impossibly busy he always found time and patience for a pesty little girl. She went to stand at his elbow, watching him patiently flowing color into outlines. He was putting the same design through various color combinations to show the embattled pair. She patted his arm. "Slya bless, maybe this will work."

He sighed. "If it doesn't, I surrender, Bramble. The Yongala can arbitrate for I don't think either will settle for less."

She patted his arm again and went to putter about the workshop, cleaning tools, straightening the storage niches, sweeping up the small accumulation of dust and the large accumulation of cobwebs, enjoying herself, no one to fuss at her for getting in the way, no impatient older brother chasing her out. As she maneuvered the pile of debris toward the door, the floor trembled and sent dust jiggling—only a tiny twitch of the mountain, soon over. "Sleep, Slya, Slya sleep," she sang as she pushed the pile of dust

and scraps together again, swept it out the door.

Enjoying the bright crisp morning she stood in the doorway, looking up through the green lace of birch leaves to a sky clear as the water in the creek singing past the workshop. She breathed the cool air, shook the broom and leaned it against the wall, fetched her satchel and went climbing up the creek, hopping from rock to rock, heading for her favorite sunning place where the boulder pushed the creek aside. She could lie there, her head hanging over the edge, and watch the bright fish dart about. Or sit watching her four-foots coming down to drink. When she was sitting still as the stone beneath her even the fawns came down with their mothers and played on the grassy banks.

On the morning of Arth Slya's destruction, she sat on the stone and watched bright blue moonfishers darting about in a screaming fight, two after the flapping fish in the talons of a third. It seemed to Brann they always found more delight in stealing from each other than in catching fish for themselves, though to have those thieving fights, some moonfisher had to abandon principle and snag his own fish.

When the fight was over and the triumphant moonfisher flew off with his prize, she dipped up water and splashed it over her face; the sun was starting to get a bit too hot. She moved into the glade where the shadows were cool and the air tangy with cedar, took out her sketch book and waited for the family of coynos that usually showed up about this time.

ON ARTH SLYA'S last day, the mountain twitched and growled and sent rocks sliding and Brann grew afraid, calming her fear with the ritual dance, the sleep song, then went to wash the blackened cedar resin off her hands.

Once her hands were clean, she wandered about the slopes of Tinreal, too restless to sketch. She missed her father. She loved her mother and knew she was loved in return, but her mother wasn't company in the same way, she was mostly absorbed by her work and the new baby, Ruan firehair who slept in a basket beside the loom, listening to the hiss and thump as Brann had listened when she was a baskling, breathing in time to the sounds of the weaving, lulled to sleep by this constant comforting song. Brann was jealous of Ruan and hated the feeling, knew fairly well what the rest of her life was going to be and rebelled against accepting that, needed time for her-self, knew the folk were letting her have it and was furious at their complacent understanding. In the Valley everyone knew everyone else's business, knew what each would do in just about every circumstance before even he or she knew. Her eleventh birthday was a month and a half away, the Time of Choosing. It fell on the same day as Eldest. Uncle's, his hundredth, and there was going to be a grand celebration and she would share it and at the end of it she would announce her choice for her lifework. And just about nobody would be surprised.

Life in Arai Slya was pleasant, even joyful when you felt like fitting in, but when you didn't, it was like a pair of new boots, blistering you as it forced you into shape. Her father and her two older brothers had left with the packtrain going to Grannsha for the tri-year Fair. She'd wanted to go with them, but her mother was stuck here with a baby too young to travel and Brann couldn't go if her mother didn't. She thought it was stupid that she couldn't go, but no one else saw things her way. Not that she made a great fuss about it, for this was the last summer she could spend free, the last summer before she was officially apprenticed with all the work that meant, the last summer she could ramble about the Mountain, watching animals and all the other life there, sketching in the book Uncle Gemar the papermaker had sewn together for her, with the ink and the brush Aunt Seansi, Arth Slya's poet and journal keeper, had taught her how to use and make.

From her sketches her mother had woven for her a knee-length tunic with frogs and dragonflies in a lively frieze about the hem, dark greens, browns and reds on a pale gray-green ground. As time passed others found worth in her drawings. Sjiall the painter and screenmaker saw her plant and insect studies and went into the mountains himself searching for more such. Her father and Immer let her design some of their embellished ware. Uncle Migel seized on several drawings of otters and wolves and graved them into his swords and knives and sent her back to the slopes with specific commissions. Uncle Inar the glassmaker and Idadro the etcher and inlayer added her notes to their traditional forms. She could choose for any of them; they told her so. Thinking about their praise made her flutter with pleasure.

Though she was irritated and sometimes unhappy about the life laid out for her in the Valley, she

found the outside world frightening. What little she knew about it, from candidates who made their way to the Valley, re-pelled her. Very few girls came, and those that did had stories to put a shudder in back and belly. She watched the boys shivering at a scold, or turning sullen with shak-ing but suppressed violence, watched the way they guarded their possessions and thoughts, their despair if they weren't taken as apprentices. Even those candidates accepted took several years to open out and be more or less like every-one else. Another thing—since the last Fair the trickle of younglings into the mountains had dried up entirely. The Valley folk came back from that Fair with rumors of trou-ble and reports of a general uneasiness on the Plains. Legates from the mainland were in Grannsha making de-mands the Kumaliyn could not possibly satisfy, so the stories went. Still, no one expected trouble to come to Arth Slya, they were too isolated and hard to get to; there was no road most of the way, only a rugged winding track that no one in his right mind would try to march an army along.

She wandered back to her boulder, sat eating one of her apples and watching the antics of otters who'd made a mudslide for themselves and were racing about, sliding, splashing, uttering the stuttering barks of their secret laughter. Her hand dropped in her lap as the otters abruptly broke of their play and darted into the trees.

Two shines like smears of gold painted on the air flick-ered about the treetops, then came jagg-ing down the stream, switching places over and over, dropping close to the water, darting up again. She stared at them, fascinated by their flutter and their glitter and their eerie song, a high swooping sound alternately fast and slow, sometimes un-bearably sweet. She sat on her heels, smiling at them, bits of sun come to earth.

They jerked to a halt as if they'd somehow seen her, swooped at her, swinging closer and closer in tightening circles, then darted at her, plunged through her again and again. She gave a tiny startled cry, collapsed on the warm stone.

SHE WOKE as suddenly as she went down, a few heart-beats later.

Two children sat on the creekbank watching her from shimmering crystal eyes, pale little creatures with ash-blond hair, bowl-bobbed, silky, very straight, one head a shade darker than the other. They were so alike she didn't know how she knew the darker one was a boy and the other a girl. They wore shirts and pants like hers and apart from those eerie inhuman eyes were much like any of the children running about the Valley below. The girl smiled gravely at her. "I'm Yaril. That's Jaril. You're Brann."

Brann pushed up until she was sitting on her heels again. "I didn't tell you my name."

Yaril nodded, but didn't answer the implied question. Jaril wasn't listening. He was looking at everything with an intensity that made Brann think he'd never seen any-thing like blue sky and wind blowing cedars about and butterflies flitting over the stream and dragonflies zipping back and forth, otters crouching across the creek, black eyes bright and curious, fish coming up to feed, breaking the water in small plopping circles.

"Where'd you come from? Who're your folks?"

Yaril glanced at Jaril, rubbed at her small straight nose. "We are the Mountain's children."

"Huh?"

"Born of fire and stone." Yaril said, sounding awed, portentous.

Brann eyed her skeptically. "Don't be silly."

"It's true. Sort of." Yaril stared intently at Brann.

Little fingers began tickling the inside of Brann's head; she scowled, brushed at her face. "Don't DO that." She pushed onto her feet, jumped onto the grass and began circling around them.

"Don't be afraid, Brann." Yaril got hastily to her feet, held out her small hands. "Please don't be afiaid. We won't hurt you. Jaril, tell her."

Brann kept backing away until she reached the trees, then she wheeled and fled into shadow. Behind her she heard the high sweet singing of the sunglows, a moment later bits of yellow light were dancing through the trees ahead of her. The patches of light touched down to the red soil, changed,—and Yaril stood with Jaril waiting for her. She turned aside and ran on, blind with terror. The shiv-ering song came after her, the shimmers swept through her, caressing her, stroking her inside and out, gentling her, trying

to drive the fright from her. She collapsed in the dirt, dirt in her mouth and nose and eyes, the last thing she remembered, the taste of the mountain in her mouth.

SHE WOKE with her head in Jaril's lap, Yaril kneeling beside her, stroking her forehead. She tried to jerk away, but the boy's arms were too strong even if she couldn't quite believe in the reality of those arms. She lay stiff as a board waiting for them to do with her whatever they'd planned.

"Hush," Yaril said. "Hush, Bramble-all-thorns, don't be afraid of us. We need you, but we can't help that. We won't hurt you. Please believe me."

Jaril patted her shoulder. "We need you, we won't hurt you," he said, his voice a twin of his sister's, a shade deeper than hers as his hair was a shade darker. He grunted as the mountain rumbled and shifted beneath them, the third quake that day. "You ought to warn your folk, Bramble-all-thorns; this hill's getting ready to blow mmmmh, in your terms, Sly's going to wake soon with a bellyache and spew her breakfast over everything around."

Brann wiggled loose, got shakily to her feet. She looked for the sun, but it was too low in the west to show over the trees. "Sheee, it's late. Mama will snatch me bald." She started downhill. Over her shoulder, Valley courtesy de-manding it, she said, "Come on. It's almost supper. You can eat with us. Mama won't mind."

The children caught up with her as she reached the stream and started down along it. "About that supper," Yaril said. "We don't eat your kind of food. Maybe I should explain ..." She broke off and looked at her brother. "Not time yet? I don't agree. You know why. Oh all right, I suppose it is a big gulp to swallow all at once." Yaril blinked as she met Brann's eyes and realized she was listening with—considerable interest. "Pardon us," she said, "we forget our manners, we'll join you gladly, if not for supper. And warn your people about the mountain."

"You keep fussing about that. Sly's waked other times, we know her moods, we've lived with her a thousand years and more." She began hurrying through the length-ening shadows, taking care where she put her feet, jump-ing from rock to rock, flitting across grassy flats, sliding on slippery brown needles, keeping her balance by clutching at trees she scooted past, landing with running steps on the path that led from the high kilns down to the workshop.

When she reached the workshop, she ran up the steps, pushed the door open. "Immer, supptime."

No answer. Puzzled, she went inside, ran through the rooms. No one there. That was funny. She clattered down to the children, beginning to worry. Immer always worked until the light quit. Always.

The way to the Valley was broad and beaten down from here on, passing out of the trees at Lookwide Point then through a double switchback to end at the landing on the River. A cold knot in her stomach, Brann hurried along the road, but slowed as she came out of the trees, walked to the edge and looked down into the Valley. She could see most of it spread out before her, the River running down the middle, the scattered houses and workshops, the fields with crops, cows, sheep or horses in them, even the broad patch of bluish stone that was the Dance Ground with the Galarad Oak growing on the western side, the one Brann thought must be the biggest and oldest tree in all the world. There should have been children, playing on the white sand road and in between the houses. There should have been workers coming in from the fields, oth-ers standing by the workshops. There should have been old folk sitting on benches by the river to catch the last of the day's heat, the first of the evening's cool, chatting and telling stories, hands busy at small tasks. But there was none of that.

Soldiers were herding her folk onto the Dance Ground, where the Valley daughters were due to meet with the Yongala to dance the Mountain back to sleep. Brann ground her teeth together to stop her jaw from trembling, but the shake had gone deep into the bone. She closed her eyes. She couldn't bear to see more. That's why Sly's restless, there's no one to dance her pains away, she thought and felt a kind of relief. Easier to think of Sly than Dance her pains away and ease her back to sleep. Yes.

yes. That's it. Sly dreamed this and sent her children. She turned her head, opening her eyes when she was looking away from the Valley, gazed at Yaril and jaril. They *are* the Mountain's children. Sly sent them. She clenched her hands into fists, the shaking wouldn't stop, jerked her head around to look into the Valley again. Can't see ... got to get closer. Away from the road. Harrag's Leap. Yes. That's it.

Where the mountains squeezed the Valley wasp-waisted, not far from the Dance Ground, was a vertical wall of granite Arth Slya folk called Harrag's Leap after the smith who went crazy one day a few hundred years ago, swore he could fly and jumped off the cliff to prove it, Brann plunged back into the trees, running as fast as she could without falling. It wouldn't be so good to break a leg up here; who'd ever come looking for her? Finally, breathing in great sucking gasps, she flung herself down on the flat top of the cliff and looked over the rim.

She was close enough to make out the faces of those crowding onto the Dance Ground, close enough to hear what was being said, but outside of a few orders from the soldiers, no one was saying much. They looked as bewildered as she felt. Why was this happening? Who would gain anything from bothering Arth Slya? Her mother was there, holding Ruan, looking angry and afraid. "Mama," Brann breathed. Suddenly she wanted to be with her mother, she couldn't bear being up here watching, she wanted to be down there with her uncles and cousins and aunts, kin by kind if not blood. Sobbing, she started to get up, but two pairs of hands held her where she was.

"You can't do her any good if you get caught." One of the children was speaking, she couldn't tell which. "Think, Bramble, your mother's probably rejoicing because you're out here on the mountain, at least she knows you're safe. Look, Bramlet, look close. Where are the children? Do you see Gingy or Shara? Do you see anyone your age or younger except for little Ruan in your mother's arms?"

She shuddered, went limp. They let her go and she scanned the crowd below. Gunna, Barr, Amyra, Caith, a dozen other younglings, but they were all fifteen or more, past their Choice. Nobody younger. Except Ruan. And even as she watched, one of the tall black-haired invaders shoved his way to her mother, took Ruan from her, kicked her feet from under her when she fought to get her baby back, elbowed and slammed his way out of the crowd, drawing blood with the clawed back of his gauntlet.

And as she watched, Yaryl and Jaril crowding close to her, holding her, the soldier carried Ruan to the Galarad Oak and he took her by the heels, and dashed her against the broad trunk, held her up, shook her, slammed her once again against the tree, harder, then tossed her on a heap of something Brann had missed before, the bodies of the Valley's children.

She trembled. She couldn't make a sound, she couldn't cry, couldn't anything, couldn't even feel anger. She was numb. She kept looking for faces she knew. The old were gone like the children. The young and strong, they were all there, some with bandages on arms and legs, men and women alike, one or two sitting, heads on knees. None of the old ones. Yongala Cerdan wasn't there. Ancient Uncle Gemar who made her sketchbooks *wasn't* there. Eornis who shared her birthday, he wasn't going to see his hundred after all. Lathan, Sindary, Fearlian, Frin, Tishish, Millo and on and on, a long litany of grief, a naming of the dead. She didn't understand_ Why? What could they gain? Why? She watched soldiers going in and out of the houses, driving out anyone trying to hide, plundering the houses and workshops, destroying far more than they carried away. Why? What kind of men were these who could do such things? She watched a knot of them kicking and beating Uncle Cynoc who was Speaker this year, yelling to him about gold, where was Arth Slya's gold. He tried to tell them they had it all, the bits Inar and Idadro and Migel had for inlaywork and decoration. They didn't listen. When they got tired of beating him, one of the soldiers stuck a sword in him and left him bleeding, dying. She watched another knot of soldiers pulling some of the women, her mother among them, from the Dance Ground. The children tried to get her away, but she clutched at the rock and wouldn't move, watched the things the invaders were doing to her mother and the others. She whimpered but wouldn't look away from the devastation below, watched the deaths and worse, some of the acts so arbitrary and meaningless that they seemed unreal, so unreal she almost expected the bodies to stir and walk away when the play was over as they did in the magic battles at the equinoxes, battles that ended with all-night dances and cauldrons of mulled cider and a feast the next day. But these dead stayed dead, bloody dolls with all the life pressed out of them.

Night settled over the valley, obscuring much of what was still happening down there, doing nothing to block the sounds that came up the cliff to Brann. She listened, shuddering, as she'd watched, shuddering. Again the children tried to get her away from the cliff edge, but she wouldn't move, and they couldn't move her. All night she lay there listening even when there was no more to listen to, only a heavy silence.

Under her numbness resolve grew in her. There had to be a reason for what was happening. In her memory, a gilded, winged helmet, a blood-red cloak, a glittering figure moving through the drabber browns and blacks of the rest. He it was who by a nod had given consent to the use of her mother and the other women, who had supervised the looting of the houses and shops, who had stood by while her folk were roped together in groups of eight, then herded into the meeting hall to spend the night how they could. He knows, she thought, I have to make him tell me, somehow I have to make him tell me.

As the night dragged on Yaril then Jaril went some-where, came back after a short stretch of time. Brann was dully aware of those departures, but had no energy even to wonder where they went. She huddled where she was and waited—for what, she had no idea, she wasn't thinking or feeling, just existing as a stone exists. She got very cold when the dew came down, but even that couldn't penetrate the numbness that held her where she was.

The night grayed, reddened. Some of the soldiers went into the meeting hall, brought out two ropes of women, her mother among them. Brann strained to see through the dawn haze. Her mother's shirt and trousers were torn, tied about her anyhow. She moved stiffly, there were bruises on her face and arms, her face was frozen, but Brann could see the rage in her. She'd only seen her mother angry once, when a new apprentice who hadn't learned Valley ways yet jumped Brann's oldest brother Cathor over some silly thing, but that was nothing to the fury in her now. Once they were cut loose the women were put to fixing food for the soldiers and later for the captives.

The morning brightened slowly. The smells of the food reached Brann and her stomach cramped. Yaril went off a few breaths and came back with food they'd stolen for her. For some minutes she stared at the bread and cheese, the jug of buttermilk. Hungry as she was, it felt horrible to be eating with the things that kept replaying in her head, things she knew she'd never forget no matter how long she lived.

Yaril patted her shoulder. "Eat," she said. "You need your strength, little Bramlet. Wouldn't you like to get your mother and the others free of those murderers? How can you do that if you're fainting on your feet? You're a practical person, Bramble-all-thorns. There's nothing wrong with eating to keep up your strength."

Brann looked from one pale pointed face to the other. You think I really could get them looser

Yaril nodded. She fidgeted a moment, seemed to blur around the edges, but her nod was brisk and positive. "With our help. Well show you how."

Brann took a deep breath and picked up the jug. At first it was hard to swallow and her stomach threatened more than once to rebel, but the more she got down, the better she felt.

As she finished the hasty meal the movements below began to acquire shape and order, the soldiers lining up the roped-together villagers, getting pack mules and ponies loaded and roped together. Yaril whispered to Brann, "You want to make them pay. You can. Let them go ahead. It's five days out of the mountains. We'll help you get ready. Let them go thinking they won. Listen to us, we'll tell you how you can make them pay for what they've done." Soft nuzzling whispers as Brann watched the soldiers take brands from the fires and toss them into the houses along the white sand road, as she watched them march away, the roped slaves forced to march with them, the laden packers ambling along behind.

Brann huddled where she was, breathing hard, almost hyperventilating, while the leader mounted his horse and started off at an easy walk, and the soldier-pacemaker's voice boomed through the crisp morning, all sounds magnified, the flames crackling, the scuffing thud of marching feet, the jangle clink of the soldier's gear, the rattle of the small cadence drum that took over for the pacemaker's voice. She wrapped her arms about her legs and sat listening until the sounds muted and were finally lost in the noises of river and wind. Then she lifted her head. "How?"

Yaril and Jaril gazed at each other for a long breath. Finally Yaril nodded and turned to Brann. "There's a lot for you to forgive. We said we wouldn't hurt you, Bramble, but ... well, you'll have to decide how much harm we did out of ignorance and need." She coughed and her edges shimmered as they had before. Brann clenched her hands until her ragged nails bit into her palms, bit her lip to keep from crying out at this dallying, in no mood to sympathize with Yaril's embarrassment. "We changed you,"

Yaril went on, keeping to her deliberate pace though she had to see Brands impatience. "We had to,

we don't say it was right or a good thing to do, but we thought it was the only thing to do. You were the first thinking being we saw in this reality. We didn't mean to come here. We were borne into your reality—your world—by accident through fire. I know, I'm not making sense, just listen, there's no hurry, we'll catch up with them easily enough. Listen, Brann, you have to understand or you can't .. you can't deal with what we made you. And we can't change that now. We're melded, Brann, a whole now, three making one. We came through the heart of fire changed, Brann. Among our own kind we're children too, unfinished, malleable. Think how you'd feel, Brann, if you woke one morning without a mouth and could only suck up food and water through your nose, and your hands were gone. How would you feel with hunger cramping your stomach and food all around you that you couldn't touch? How would you feel knowing you would fade and die because you couldn't eat? And then if something in-side you, something you knew to trust, said, 'that person will feed you, but only if you change her in such and such a way,' what would you do?" Yaril shimmered again, her crystal eyes glowing in the morning light, pleading for understanding.

Brann moved her lips. No sound came at first, finally she said, "You're demons?"

"No. No. Just another kind of people. Think of us as what we said, the Mountain's children. Truly we were born through her. Where we ... oh, call it began, where we began we ate things like sunlight, umm, and the fires at the heart of things. We can't do that anymore."

Brann pressed her hand against her stomach, licked her lips, swallowed. "You ... you're going to eat me?"

"No, no! You didn't listen. You have to know this. Maybe it'd be better to show you." Once again she ex-changed a long glance with her brother, once again she nodded, turned to Brann. "Wait here, Bramble. When we drive a beast from the trees, take it between your hands and drink."

Brann shuddered. "Its blood?"

"No. Its life. Just will to take." Yaril got to her feet. "You'll know what I mean when you touch the beast, it's coded into you now." She flowed into the form of a large boarhound and trotted into the trees, Jaril shifting also and trotting after her.

Brann sat, feeling cold and horrified at the thought of what she was going to have to do. She heard the hounds haying somewhere in the distance, then coming closer and closer, then they were on the stone driving a large young coyno toward her. In a blind panic it ran at her and if she hadn't caught it, would have run off the lip of the cliff Without thinking, acting from new instinct, she moved faster than she thought she could, trapped the lean vigor-ous body between her hands and did what Yaril told her, *willed to take*.

A wire of warmth slid into her, heating her middle in a way she found deeply disturbing though she couldn't have put into words why it was so. In seconds the coyno drooped empty between her hands. She looked at it, wanted to be sick, sent it wheeling over the edge of the cliff. Then she remembered the soldier tossing Ruan on the hill of dead children and was sorry. She put her hands over her face, but found no tears. The male boarhound picked his way over the rough stone and pushed his cold nose against her arm. By habit she stroked her hand along the brindle silk of his back, scratched absently behind his soft floppy ears. "That's the way it's giing to be?" The hound whined. Brann scrubbed her fist across her eyes. "I'm all right, don't worry. Worry? I s'pose you do or you wouldn't explain, you'd just make me do things. What now? Was that enough or will you need more? Go ahead. I'm going to think about it like cleaning chickens for supper. Go chase some more beasts here, I'll sing the Blessing while you're gone." She looked over her shoulder at the cliff edge and swallowed, tightened her hand into a fist again. "Slya says all life is sacred, all death must be celebrated and mourned." She spoke gravely, feeling the weight of custom falling on her thin shoulders. Jaril rubbed his head against her arm and trotted off after his sister.

A DAY AND A NIGHT and a day passed, Brann and the children learning the rules of their new unity. A day, a night and a day, gathering the lives of small beasts and large, joining hands to share that feeding. Brann shunting aside grief, rage, impatience, fear—except in dreamtime when memory turned to nightmare. The children scaveng-ing for gear and food, tending the stock when Brann remembered the

need. "The cows will dry up," she said. "Can't you do something?"

"Bramlet," they said, "We're only two. At least the beasts will be alive." A day and a night and a day drifted past, and then another night. When the sun rose clear of the horizon, she started after her folk.

BRANN RODE a wild black werehorse down the mountain, black mane stinging her face, brother and sister melded into one, carrying her and the gear they'd salvaged from the gutted houses. Down the mountainside, going like the wind, Brann as wild and exhilarated as the *great* beast under her. Down the mountainside through the bright cool morning, lovely lustrous morning though Arth Slya was dead and lost. Day ought to weep, sun ought to lurk behind a thick weight of cloud, trees ought to droop and sigh, river to gloom and gray, but it was not so. And no more than day and mountain and sky could she mourn. She thrilled at the driving power of the great muscles between her legs, muscles fed as she was with the lives of wolves and coyons. She laughed aloud and laughed again when the werehorse bugled its delight.

Late that afternoon they came to the first of many cataracts. The werehorse stopped beside a storm-felled ash slowly rotting back into the earth, collapsed into brindle boarhounds after Brann swung groaning down, sore muscles protesting, chafed thighs burning. The hounds walked out of saddle and gear and trotted away. Brann stretched and groaned some more, then went through the gear, found the hatchet and went about collecting downwood for a fire, wobbling on legs that felt like wet noodles, splaying her knees to keep her thighs apart. When she had the fire going and the kettle dangling from an improvised tripod, she stripped off her clothing and found an eddy by the ash tree's roots where she wouldn't be swept away. She sat on a water-polished root, dabbling her feet in the river, watching the roughened redness inside her thighs fade to pink, the pink to the matte white of healthy skin. She'd burned her finger getting the kettle to hang properly from the tripod. The burn blister had dried and, as she watched, the dry skin cracked and peeled away leaving no sign at all of the burn. Some change, she thought. She slipped off the root, dunked herself all the way under, crawled out of the water, stretched her dripping body along the hard white wood of the ash tree's trunk, the sun warm and welcome on her back and legs, dozing there until a hiss from the fire told her the tea water was boiling. She pulled her clothes back on, feeling a mild curiosity about when the children would return, a curiosity that faded as she made the tea.

She sat with the hot drinking bowl hugged between her hands, her face bent to the fragrant steam rising from the tea. Her father's work, that bowl, with the goodness her father put in everything he made. She sipped at the tea, listening to the cries of the hunting hounds, wishing her father were there sitting beside her on the ash trunk. Sipped again, trying to wash away the lump in her throat, dismissing the horrors, thinking instead of the good times. When her father took his impling to his workshop with its smells of dry clay and wet clay, of powders and glaze mixes, cedar cabinets and oak tables, the whirring of wheels, thuds of the kicks that kept the wheels going, Immer's humming, another apprentice's sweet whistling, jokes tossed about, laughter, shouts—sounds and smells set as deeply into her as the thumps and clacking of her mother's loom, her mother's tuneless burring songs. Good times. When she shared her birthdays with ancient Uncle Eornis and he fed her cake and cider and told her the exciting scary stories she loved. Tough old man, should have lasted a dozen more years. Everyone in the Valley was making something special for him, she'd done an ink drawing of moonfishers in a scream fight. Her father spent two years on his gift. A das'n vuor pot and a hundred das'n vuor drinking bowls, one for each year of the old man's life. He broke pot after pot until he was satisfied, broke bowl after bowl. Most of them looked fine to Brann, but he pointed out their imperfections, made her see them as he did, feel them, patient with her until she finally understood what he was talking about. And when he took the last bowls from the firing, he broke three, but wiped the fourth carefully and set it in her hands. She looked deep and deep into the black luster that seemed to drink the light, rejoicing in the shape that had the rightness of the Galarad Oak, or the Yongala dancing when Slya filled her, a rightness that whispered deep within. As if a light was kindled inside her, she knew why her father could judge so quickly and surely the worth of his work. Shine and whisper filling her, she felt as if she should hook her toes under something or she might just float away. Her Choice was made. More than anything in all the world, she wanted one day to

make a thing as right as the bowl cradled in her hands. She gave it back to her father and sighed. He put it carefully into its nest of silk, then caught her up, lifted her high, swung round and round and round with her, laugh-ing and proud, his spirits suddenly released as his labor was finished at last, astonished and enraptured by what his hands had made, rejoicing at her Choice. He might never do anything quite as splendid again and it was somehow fitting that his daughter marked it with the gift of her life, yet more fitting that his greatest work was born of love and celebration and not done for gold.

She refilled the bowl and gulped at the tea, burning her tongue with it, squeezing her eyes shut to hold back tears, "He can't have it, I won't let him, can't have them," remembering with helpless fury soldiers carrying things from her home, the chest with the das'n vuor pot, the chest with the hundred bowls, the Temueng pimush in the gilded helmet hovering over them with a hungry look, putting his hands on them, claiming them. "No!"

The hounds' bellowing grew louder, closer. Brann put the bowl down, stood crouched, waiting.

A yowling, spitting black beast ran from the trees, swerved when he saw her, a malouch with claws that could strip the flesh from a tough old boar. He yowled again and switched ends, but the hound bitch was too fast for him, dodging the claw strike with a speed that blurred her shape into a brindle streak. She tore at his hind leg, sprang away again. As soon as Yaril distracted him, Brann leaped, slapped a hand against the side of his head. The malouch writhed around, his claws raking her arm, then he froze as she started the pull, a black statue of hate unable to move, unable to make a sound. Ignoring the blood and pain from her torn arm, Brann set her other hand on him. His life flooded into her, hot and raw, terrible and terrifying, waking in her that queasy pleasure that she hated but was starting to need. At last the malouch was a scrap of fur and flesh melting from between her hands.

Children again, Jaril and Yaril took Brann's hands and the fire passed from her. She began to feel clean again though some of it remained with her; the malouch had clung to life with a fury that saddened and sickened her and she wanted to rid herself of everything she'd taken from him; she tried to hold onto the children, tried to force all of that stolen life out of her, but they melted and flowed through her fingers and flitted away to shimmer over the scatter of gear, then they merged and the werehorse was snorting and stamping impatiently, the children eager to be on their way.

She drew her fingers down the torn arm. The wounds were already closed, ragged pink furrows visible through the rents in her sleeve. With the knife from her belt sheath she cut away the bloody rags. She tossed the sleeve into the fire, thought a minute, cut the other sleeve to match. She knelt beside the river and washed away the dried blood. By the time she was finished the furrows had filled in, even the pink flush was gone. She looked at the arm a moment, then bent again, scooped up water, splashed it over her face, drank a little. The children melted apart and moved beside her, throwing questions, demands, pleas at her, as she walked about the glade, kicking leaves over the body of the malouch, smoothing out the rips in the sod he made with his claws, repacking the saddlebags with slow meticulous care, dismantling the tripod, dousing the fire, burying the blackened bits of wood. She said nothing to them, refused stubbornly to acknowledge their presence, walked heavily to the riverbank and sang the mourning song for the malouch and for the wood she burned, sang the praises of the living river, the living forest. A week ago she would have done all this—restored the land, sung the praises—because she'd done similar things a hundred times before, because she rested comfortably in the support of ancient custom. This time it was a way to shout at the murdering invaders that nothing was changed, that Arth Slya still lived as long as one of Slya's children lived and followed Slya's way.

When she turned away from the river, the werehorse was waiting beside the fallen ashtree. She saddled him, tossed the bulging bags in place, tied on the spade and hatchet, then stepped onto the ash and pulled herself onto his back. He trotted to the track, did a few caracoles to loosen up then started racing down the mountain once again, crystal eyes having no trouble with the thickening shadow. Down and down

Until she saw a body flung beside the track, a boy huddled round a gaping wound in his chest. She screamed the horse to a halt, flung herself down and ran back. Kneeling beside the boy, she pressed him over. "Marran," she whispered. She brushed dirt and leaves from his face. His eyes were open, dull, shrunken. She tried to shut them, but her hands fumbled uselessly. Behind her the horse stomped

impatiently, then whickered and nudged her with his nose. “Stop it,” she said. “Don’t bother me.”

She gave up trying to straighten Marran, sat on her heels and looked about, her tongue caught between her teeth.

Yaril came round her, squatted beside Man-an’s body. He put his hand on the boy’s face, drew it back. “Dead over a day, Brann. Nothing you can do.”

Brann blinked slowly, brushed a hand across her face. “It’s Marran,” she said. She got to her feet. “Help me fetch wood.” With clumsy hands she untied the hatchet from the fallen saddle and started away. “We’ve got to burn him free.” She cast about for dry downwood. Yaril and Janl ran beside her, trying to talk to her. “We’re getting close to the Temuengs; it’s dark, they’ll see any fire big enough to burn a body; he’s dead, how much can it matter when you put him on a pyre? Free your people and let them take care of him, Brann, Bramlet, Bramble-all-thorns, it won’t take that long, if we go on now, you can have them free by dawn, back here before dusk, come on, Brann”

Brann shook her head, her mouth set in a stubborn line. She wasn’t going to be stymied from doing what she clung to as right; if she let one thing go, the rest might slip away from her little by little. Bewildered and uncertain, alone with nothing but memory to guide her, all she could do was hold by what she did know. That this was Marran. That she owed him his fire. She trembled, her knees threatening to give way, caught hold of the branch waving in her face. Wood. Yes. She pulled the limb taut and lifted the hatchet.

One of the children made an irritated humming sound, then they were both in front of her, holding her by the arms, taking the hatchet from her. She tried to pull away but their hands were locked to her as if their flesh was melded to hers. Their fire came into her; it pinned her in place as if her feet had grown roots. She cried out, tried again to wrench free; they held her; the fire held her. Frightened and frantic, she writhed against that double grip until Yaril’s words finally seeped through her panic.

“Wait, wait, listen to us, Bramlet, listen, we can help you, listen, we’ll help, we understand, listen”

She grew quiet, breathing heavily. The grip on her arms relaxed; movement restored to her, she licked dry lips. “Listen?”

“Let us make fire for you.”

“Wha ..”

“Go back, sit by the boy and wait. We’ll make a hotter, cleaner fire for your friend, Bramble, he’ll burn in moun-tain heart. Wouldn’t you rather that, than green and smoky wood?”

She looked from one small pale face to the other; the drive went out of her, she turned and fumbled her way back to Marran’s body, stood looking down at him a mo-ment. “Mama” She backed away to give the fire room and sat in the middle of the trampled track, her arms crossed tight across her narrow chest.

Yaril and Jaril came from the shadows and took up places facing each other across the body, with formal movements like the paces of a dance, dissolved into light shimmers that bobbed up and down like bubbles on a string. Brann heard the swooping sweet song again, Jaril’s deeper notes dominating, looked at Marran half in shadow, half in moonlight, looked away pushing her grief back, shutting it away inside her as she’d done with the rest of her anger and pain, not noticing how frequently she was doing this or realizing how much trouble she was piling up for herself when the rush of events was over and there was nothing more to distract her from all that she had lost or from the cold shock of what her future held for her. The shimmers vibrated faster and faster, waves of color—blue and green and crimson—passing across them top to bot-tom, faster faster faster, the song rising to a high piercing scream. They darted away from each other, whipped around and came rushing back, slamming together into a blinding explosion. Blue fire roared up in a gather of crackling tongues. Hanging first in midair, the fire lowered until it touched, then ate down into Marran, racing up and down his contorted body, consuming flesh and bone until there was only ash.

The blue flame paled, broke in half, the halves tumbled apart, and the children lay on the leaves, pale and weary.

Yaril sat up. “We have to hunt before we can go on.” Jaril rolled up, nodded, flowed immediately into the hound form and trotted away, Yaril following after, most of the spring gone out of her legs. The

burning had cost them.

Brann watched them go, sat where she was for a few breaths longer, then she got to her feet, stretched and began to sing the mourning song for Marran.

ABOUT AN HOUR before dawn, the werehorse slowed to a walk, hooves flowing into clawed pads as each one left the ground. It ghosted on, step by slow step, through the starlit quiet until the sound of a man's voice raised in idle complaint came drifting up the track. Brann swung down, pulled the saddlebags off and carried them to a tangleroot, stowed them in the trunk hollow, struggling to make no sounds. She came back, eased the buckles loose and slid the saddle off, teeth tight together, moving as smoothly as she could so nothing would rattle or clink. By the time she reached the huge tree, Jaril was there to help her lower the saddle.

They crept around the perimeter of the camp clearing until they found a pepperbush growing crookedly out from the roots of a sweetsap where a thin screen of toothy leaves let them see without being seen.

The captives slept in the center of the cleared ground, the ropes knotted about their necks tied to stakes pounded into the hard soil. Perhaps on the first two nights some had lain awake, too stunned by grief and fear to sleep, but this night they all slept, heavily, noisily, with groans and farts and snores and sobs and the shapeless mutters that sleepers make when they're speaking into dream.

Two men slouched heavily about the edge of the camp clearing, passing each other at roughly fifteen-minute intervals, occasionally moving among the ropes of captives, prodding those who groaned and snored too loudly. The rest of the soldiers were rolled in their blankets in two rows on the river side, the pimush slightly apart from his men.

Yaril eeled up to Brann's shoulder, breathed, "Jaril's started for the far side. I'll tell you when he's ready. All you have to do is get close to that sentry, touch him before he can yell. Then we can take the rest."

Brann started sweating. Abruptly deserted by rage and grief, no longer comfortably numb, she had to face the reality of those men whose life forces she was going to suck away. For all her eleven years her parents had taught her reverence for life. Slya's strictures demanded aware-ness of responsibility for all life stopped; she remembered how desperately the malouch had clung to life and how easily she'd stripped that life away and how nauseated she felt about it later. But there was no going back.

Yaril wriggled close, warm and alive in her eerie way. "Look at his face, that sentry coming toward you," she breathed.

When the guard came out of shadow, she saw the face of the man who'd taken Ruan by her heels and swung her twice against the Oak, thrown her away like a weed onto a compost heap.

"Be ready," Yaril said, her words a thread of sound by Brann's ear. "When this one has his back turned Jaril will bite the other."

The sentry walked past her. "Go." Urged on by the whispered word, Brann raced after the sentry, slapped her hand against the bare flesh of his arm before he had a chance to cry out, landed her other hand, began drawing the life from him, the fire hammering into her differing in quality and force from that she'd taken from the smaller, less deadly beasts. This was a predator among predators, a killer horn as much as bred, only slightly tamed by the discipline of the Temueng army. She read that in the flash as his life-force roared into her. A second later he fell dead. Breathing hard, struggling to quell heinausea, Brann looked for the other sentry. He was down also, silently dead. In their serpent forms the children distilled from their substance a venom that killed between one breath and the next, a minuscule drop in poison sacs yet enough for the death of a dozen men.

"It's time," Yaril whispered. "Don't think, Bramlet, just do. It's the only way to keep your people safe. These murderers have earned death, more than you know." She touched Brann's arm, then ran ahead of her to the lines of sleeping soldiers. A shimmer of pale light and she was a serpent crawling in the dust, in the dim starlight, dust-colored and nearly invisible except when her viper's head rose above a sleeping man and darted down.

Brann nerved herself and followed. Man to man she went, setting her hands on those the children had

not touched, taking their life into her, a burning unending river flooding her. She drank and drank until there were no more lives to take, trying as she stooped and touched to ignore the pleasure currents curling turgidly through her. It didn't seem right. Her vengeance should be pure, untainted by anything but righteous wrath.

The children rose from serpent form and came to her, their hands melting into hers as they took and took from her until she could think coherently again and move without feeling bloated and unwieldy. She turned to look at the dead. Two rows of them, fifty men falling to snake and whatever it was she was now, with hardly a sound and no struggle at all, they might have been sleeping still. Silent herself she went to stand beside the Temueng pimush, the leader of these invaders, the one who'd given the orders for all they'd done—calmly asleep, untroubled by dreams or remorse. You know why, she thought, but how do I ask you, what do I ask you? He made a small spluttering sound, moved his hands. She jumped back into shadow, but he didn't wake. Jaril tugged at her arm. She leaned down. "What?" she whispered.

"Take from him but not all, enough only to sap his will so we can move him away from them." He nodded at the sleeping captives.

Brann looked down and was surprised to see her hands glowing in the hushed darkness before the dawn, rather like the round porcelain lamps her father made for nightlights. She knelt beside the pimush and took his head between her hands. He started to wake but faded into a daze as she pressed the slow drain. "Enough," Jaril said, touched her hand. She sighed and sat back on her heels. "What now?"

"Into the trees. He'll walk if we prod him."

With the children's help she led the pimush a short distance from the camp clearing and propped him against the high roots of an old oak. "That's done. Where from here?"

"Give him back."

"Huh?"

"You want him able to talk, don't you? Reverse the flow. All you have to do is touch and will, Bramble, it's as easy as breathing."

"Which I think you don't do."

Jaril grinned at her. "Not like you, anyway."

She rubbed a grubby forefinger by the corner of her mouth. The Temueng was tall, head and shoulders higher than most Arth Slya men, the flesh hard and tight on his bones. She shivered. "He looks like he could snap me in two without half trying. Shouldn't we tie him or something?"

"No." Jaril changed, flowed upon the Temueng's chest, coil by coil, his broad triangular viper's head raised and swaying, poison fangs displayed and ready. Jaril moved around until she was kneeling by the Temueng's right arm, drawing over her the feral look of a hungry weasel. It sat comfortably on her delicate child's face, made her more terrifying than a raging male three times her size. Brann looked from child to serpent, wiped her hand across her face, scraping away a new film of sweat. "Why don't I feel safer?" she whispered, then giggled nervously.

The dawn breeze was beginning to stir, rustling among the leaves, here and there a bird's sleepy twitter broke the hush. Jaril clicked her teeth. "Brann, you waiting for it to rain or something?"

Kneeling beside the Temueng, Brann put her hand on his brow and found that Jaril was right, it was easy; the fire crackling under her skin went out through her finger-tips into him. His pale face darkened, flushing with renewed vigor. She jumped hastily to her feet and moved back a few paces.

He opened his eyes. The flush receded leaving him pale as he saw the serpent head rising over his; he stiffened and stopped breathing.

"Man." Jaril said.

"What?" His narrow dark eyes flicked about, going to the viper swaying gently but without that extra tension that meant readiness to strike, to the feral child showing her pointed teeth, to Brann filled with moonfire. He didn't move; he was afraid, but mastering his fear, calculating, seeking a way to slide out of this peril.

"We are Drinker of Souls and the Mountain's Children," Jaril cooed at him. She caught hold of his hand, the strength in her dainty fingers as frightening as the rest of her. She folded the hand into a fist and wrapped her hands about it, gazing at him with an impersonal hungry interest. "You killed our mortal

cousins and took others away. You bloodied and befouled our mother. Why?" Her high light voice was calm, conversational. "Answer me, man." She tightened her hands about his fist, watched him struggle to keep still, sweat popping thick on his long narrow face. "Why?" She eased her grip. "Why?"

"It was something to do," he said when he could speak again. "To pass the time."

Yaril gestured at the viper and it changed to a giant worm with daintily feathered wings little larger than a man's hand flirting on either side of an angular dragon's head. Forked tongue flicking, a whiffing and fluttering of the opalescent feathers, the great worm grew heavier and heavier on the Temueng's chest, the coils spilling off him onto the roots of the oak. As the pimush stared, mouth clamped shut but eyes wide with the fear he couldn't deny, smoking oily liquid ran down one of the dragon's dagger fangs, gathered at the tip, then dripped off onto his chest. The venom burned through his shirt and into his flesh. His body jerked and spasmed as much as it could, one hand held prisoned by Yaril in a grip he had no chance of breaking, legs and lower body pinned by the punishing weight of the worm.

Yaril passed her hand across the bubbling liquid, drew it into herself. The pain subsided, the man lay still again. "Why?" she said. "We sent the tribute to Grannsha every year without fail, the compact between Arth Slya and the Kumaliyn has never been broken though a thousand years have passed since it was made. Why did you come to Arth Slya?"

He licked his lips, gave a sudden wild shout.

"Your men are dead." Yaril patted his hand. "Only their ghosts to answer you. Call again if you want. Call all you want. Only the captives can hear you and they're staked to the ground. Why have you destroyed Arth Slya?" She tightened her grip on his fist again, watched him struggling to hold back groans and fight off the feeling of helplessness the worm's weight and her unlikely strength were waking in him. She eased the pressure a little. "Speak true and you will die quickly and easily. Lie or refuse to speak, then my brother's venom will consume you bit by bit and the Souldrinker will see you stay awake for all of it."

His dark eyes darted about, he was fighting a last battle with himself, desiring defiance but too intelligent to waste his strength hiding things that had to be common knowledge in the villages below. With a visible effort he re-laxed. "All dead?"

"All. Slya watches over her children."

"Easy they said. Round up the young and strong, no kids or dodderers" The breath hissed through his stiff lips. "Nothing about no arsehole god getting her eggs in a twist. Your Kumaliyn's skipped. Abanaskranjinga Emperor of the Tern uengs rules here now."

"So. Why come like wolves? There were no soldiers in Arth Slya."

"Why ask me? I do what I'm ordered. Good boy, pat 'im on his fuckin head."

"Why come like wolves?"

He sneered. "Old Krajink's not about to let a little bunch of mud dawbers nest free, thinkin they can make it without him. Maybe other folk they get the idea they got rights. Mudfeet, mudheads stompin up trouble, just get chopped, but Krajink he's got to pay us to do the choppin and he parts with silver bits like grasslion from his meat. Cheaper to stomp first. Don't mess up trade or plantin and harvestin. Cheap way to get valuable slaves. Trust of Krajink to see that. He figures your Arth Slya artisans might as well be making their junk for him where he can keep an eye on them. Figures maybe he can make Durat a rep as big as your dawbers got."

Brann took a step toward him. "Slaves," she spat. "Half my folk dead so that ... that ... he can prance around claiming their work!"

He raised his thin arched brows, the sound of his voice insensibly seducing him into speaking further, turning this interrogation into something like a conversation. "So what's new about that, bint? In old lardarse's head we're all his slaves. We hop when he pulls our strings. Don't hop, get the chop. Why not? Do the same, us, to folk beneath us."

Brann stared at him, not comprehending much of what he was saying. It was a world totally other than the one she'd grown up in. All she got from the speech was the ultimate responsibility of the Temueng emperor for the destruction of Arth Slya. "The Fair," she said. "What happened to the Arth Slya folk at the Fair?"

“On their way, hint. On ship to Andurya Durat.”

Brann put her hands behind her back, clenched them into her fists, struggled to keep her voice steady. “Were any of them killed?”

“And get chopped for wasting prime meat? Uh-uh.” Brann closed her eyes. Her father and her brothers were alive. Captives, but alive.

“Bramble!” Yaril’s voice.

Jolted out of her daze, Brann came round the Temueng’s feet and stopped beside her. “What?”

“That all you wanted to know?”

—Yes ... um ... yes.”

“Well?” Yaril gestured impatiently.

Brann rubbed her hands down the sides of her bloodied shirt, blood from her wounded arm, long dried. It was different somehow, looking into his eyes, listening to him talk, seeing his fear, seeing him as a person, knowing him. With all the harm he’d done her, she shrank from taking him; the revulsion she felt was almost more than she could overcome. She reached heavily toward him, saw the leap of fear in his eyes, saw it dulling to resignation. Her hand fell. “I can’t,” she wailed. “I ...” An immense hot fury took hold of her, drowned her will, worked her arms, set her hands on his brow and mouth and drew his life in a rushing roar out of him.

Then he was dead and that *thing* went wheeling away. It wasn’t the children; as wobbly as her thinking was, she was able to understand that. Cautiously Yaril came closer, reached out. A spark snapped between them, then the strong small hands were closed on her arm, and Yaril was pressing against her, warm and alive, murmuring comfort to her. Another spark snapping, and Jaril was smoothing his hands along her shoulders, gently massaging her neck and shoulder muscles. They worked the shock out of her, gave her the support she needed until she was able to stand.

Yaril stood beside her, holding her hand. “What was THAT?”

Brann moved her shoulders, flexed her fingers, the children’s hands comfortably human around them, even a little sweaty. “Don’t know. I think ... I *think* it was Slya filling me.”

“Oh.” There was complete silence from both children for a few breaths, then calm and deliberately prosaic words from Yaril. “We better go turn your folks loose.”

As they walked through the trees, Jaril looked up at her. “What do we do after this, Bramble? Go back to the Valley with your folk?”

Brann stopped. “I thought ... before I knew about Da ... do you think we could get him loose too?” Jaril grinned. “Why not.”

Brann stopped in the shadows of some stunted alder bushes, an unseen hand restraining her, a wall of air keeping her back from her mother and the rest of Slya’s folk out in the clearing. No words, no warning, nothing tangible, but she was being told Arth Slya was no longer for her. She dropped to her knees, then swung her legs around so she was sitting with her hands clasped in her lap, looking into the camp clearing through a thin fan of finger-sized shoots and a lacy scatter of leaves. The children exchanged puzzled glances, squatted beside her without speaking.

UNCLE MIGEL was on his knees beside a stake, looking about. He scrubbed his hand across his mouth, fumbled on the ground by his knees, came up with a dirt clod, snapped it at a soldier lying rolled in his blanket. He grunted as the clod hit, splattering over the man and the ground around him. “Not sleeping,” he said. He put two fingers in his mouth, produced an ear-piercing whistle, waited. “Unh, looks to me like they’re all dead.”

“How?” Her mother’s voice.

“All?” Aunt Seansi kneeling beside her mother. “I’d say so, Mig, that whistle of yours is most likely waking folks in G rann sha. “

Wrapping thick-fingered hands about the stake, Migel rocked it back and forth, and with an exploding grunt, pulled it from the ground. He got to his feet, his ropemates coming up eagerly with him, all eight of them moving out and around the shakes to the line of bodies. Migel kicked a soldier out of his blanket, got his belt knife and cut himself loose. He sliced the loop of rope from his neck, then tossed the

knife with casual skill so it stuck in the ground in front of Brann's mother, who grabbed it with a heart-felt "Slya!" and began slicing her rope loose from the stake. When she was free, she passed the knife to Seansi and marched over to the pile of wood the soldiers had cut the night before, hauled sticks from it to an open space where she used the sparker she found on a soldier to get a fire started.

Brann watched the swirl of activity and noise in the clearing, warm with pride in the resilience of her people. Harrowed by the shock and violence of the invasion, bereft of hope, marched off to a fate not one of them could imagine, waking to find silent death come among them with no idea of how or when it struck, whether it would come on them later, not a one of them sat about glooming or complaining but each as soon as he or she was freed from the rope saw something to be done and did it. Time for fear and mourning later. Now was time for food in the belly and scalding hot tea to get the blood moving. Now was the time to get the mules and ponies out of their rope corral, now was the time for caching the loot from the Valley where they could find it later. In a hectic half hour the camp clearing was picked clean except for the bodies of the soldiers (the body of the pimush was added to the pile when they found it; they passed close by Brann and the children, but whatever kept her from entering the clearing kept them from—seeing her). Then they were mounting the mules and ponies and riding away, those that had no mounts trotting beside the others. After a short but heated argument, they left the pimush's horse and gear behind. Her mother wouldn't have the beast along, uncle Migel wanted to take it. Inar and Seansi and a dozen others talked him out of that, the beast was a high-bred racer too obviously not Valley-bred. Migel kept sputtering that anyone getting close enough to the Valley to spot the horse would be too damn close anyway. But the others countered that it only took one snooping out-sider to get an eyeful of racer and report his presence to the Temuengs. If he wanted such a beast, then he should buy one the next Fair on. As they left the clearing, the Mountain chose to rumble a few breaths and go quiet, almost as if Slya were laughing—the soldiers dead, the people returning to rebuild their homes, and Brann aimed like an arrow at the Temueng Emperor.

As the morning brightened and grew-warmer with the rising of the sun, Brann sat staring at the empty clearing, not seeing it. She wasn't tired, wasn't sleepy, only empty.

"Bramble." Yaril's voice demanded her attention. She looked around, eyes unfocused. "Here." Yaril put a hot mug in her hand. "Drink this." When Brann sat without moving, staring at the mug, the changechild made a small spitting sound like an angry cat, wrapped her hands round Brann's and lifted the cup to Brann's lips.

The scalding liquid burned her mouth but Brann kept drinking. When the mug *was* empty, Yaril took it away and came back with more tea and a sandwich of stale bread and thick chunks of cheese, scolded her into eating them. Food in the belly woke her will, gave her the energy she'd not had; the emptiness she'd been suffering was of the body as well as of the spirit; she realized that when Jaril brought the pimush's horse to her, the beast wearing her saddle and the pimush's bridle, the rest of her gear in place with some additions. He was a fine lovely beast—no wonder Uncle Migel had coveted him—prancing, nostrils flaring but tamed by the touch of Jaril's hand when Brann was ready to mount.

"Up you go," Jaril said. He caught her about the legs and tossed her onto the snorting beast, his strength once again surprising her; having seen him as a frail child or an insubstantial shimmering hanging in midair, she could not help letting her eyes fool her into underestimating him. She settled into the saddle, began settling the horse, stroking him, comforting him, teaching him that she wasn't about to allow any nonsense from him.

Then she was riding away down the mountain, holding the horse to a steady canter when he wanted to run. Brindle boarhounds trotted beside her, or disappeared into the trees on scouting runs. The track continued to follow the river, clinging to the sides of ravines where she drowned in the boom of cataracts, departing grudgingly from the cliffs where the river fell in rainbowed mists. Down and down without stopping, eating in the saddle, drinking from the pimush's waterskin, ignoring the continued chafing of her thighs, the cramps in fingers, arms, legs, down and down until the pimush's horse was leaden with fatigue, until they were out of the mountains and in gently rolling foothills.

When the Wounded Moon was an hour off the horizon, she curled up in a hollow padded with grass and went to sleep, leaving the horse and her safety to the children. She slept heavily and if she dreamed,

she remembered nothing of it later.

SHE WOKE with the sun beating into her eyes, sweat greasing a body drastically changed, woke to the pinching irritation of clothing that was much too small for her.

She sat up, groaned. Hastily she ripped off what was left of her trousers, most of the seams having given way as she slept, breathed a sigh of relief, tore off the remains of her shirt, bundled the rags and wiped at sweat that was vis-cous and high-smelling. Her hair was stiff with dirt and dried sweat. When she tried combing her fingers through it, it came out in handfuls. She rubbed at her head with the wadded-up shirt; all the hair came out, mouse-brown tresses dead and dark, falling to the grass around her. She kept scrubbing until her head was bare, polished bare. Throwing the shirt aside, she ran her hands over the body the night had given her, the full soft breasts, the narrow waist, the broader hips, the pubic hair glinting like coiled silver wire in the sunlight. She wanted to cry, to howl, lost and confused.

A hand on her shoulder. She jerked convulsively, cried out in a voice she didn't recognize, flung herself away—then saw it was Yaril. Yaril holding neatly folded clothing. "Jaril's fixing breakfast next hollow over. You better get dressed. Here."

Brann shook out the shirt, looked from it to Yaril. "Where ..."

"Brought it with us. Just in case."

Brann looked at the shirt she still held out and snorted. "Just in case I grew a couple feet taller and a dozen years older?" She bit on her lip, uncomfortable with the deeper richer voice that came out of her, a woman's voice—not the one she knew as hers.

"Just in case you couldn't go back to Arth Slya. Just in case you needed to free your father and the others as well *as the* ones the soldiers had taken. Seemed obvious to Jaril and me that the Temuengs would round up the Fair people before coming after the villagers."

"You didn't say anything about that."

"You had enough on your mind."

"You did this to me. Why?"

"A child of eleven. A girl child," Yaril said. "Think, Brann. Don't just stand there glupping like a fish. Put that shirt on. Who'd let such a child travel unmolested? Chances are the first man or woman who needed a laborer would grab you and put you to work for your keep. Who'd bother listening to a child? And that's far from the worst that could happen. So we used all that life you drank and grew you older. You haven't lost anything, Bramble-all-thorns, we've stabilized you at this age. You won't change again unless you wish it."

Her head feeling as hard as seasoned oak, Brann stared at her. "What ...?" She pulled the shirt on, began button-ing it, having to pull it tight across her newly acquired breasts. "Stabilized?"

"You know what the word means, Put these on, they belonged to Mareddi who's about your size so they should fit."

Brann stepped into the trousers, drew them up, began pulling the laces tight. "But I don't know what it means when you use it about me."

"Means you'll stay the age you are until you want to change it."

"You can do that?"

"Well, we have, haven't we? Like we told you before, Bramble, we're a meld, the three of us. You're stuck with more limits than we have, but we can shift your shape about some. Not a lot and it takes a lot of energy, but, well, you see. Here. Boots. Mareddi's too. Might be a touch roomy."

"Weird." She ran her hand over her head. "Am I going to stay egg-bald? I'd rather not." She pulled on the boots, stomped her feet down in them.

Yaril giggled. "I could say wait and see. Well, no, Bramble. New hair's already starting to come in."

"I'm hungry." She looked at the blanket she'd slept in, nudged it with her toe. "What a stink, I need a bath." Shrugging, she started toward the smell of roasting coyno.

ON HER SECOND day out of the mountains she came to a small village where Jaril bought her a long scarf to cover the stubble on her head, also more bread and cheese, some bacon and the handful of tea

the woman could spare. Brann hadn't thought about the need for money before and was startled when he came up with a handful of coppers and bronze bits, though she had wit enough to keep her mouth shut while there were strangers about to hear her. Later, when she was riding down a rutted road between two badly tended boundary hedges, she called the hound back and pulled Jaril up before her. "Where'd you get the coin?" She smiled ruefully, shook her head. "I forgot we couldn't travel down here without it."

"Soldiers' purses, pimush's gear. They won't be needing it anymore, and we will." He leaned back against her, awakening a strong maternal urge in her, something that surprised her because she'd never before felt anything of the sort.

"Another thing you didn't bother telling me about."

"You were too busy glooming to listen."

"Hunh."

He tilted his head back, looked up at her with a smile too much like Marran's for her comfort, then he slid away from her, hitting the ground on four hound's feet, trotting ahead to rejoin Yaril,

* * *

AS THE DAYS passed, she rode through village after village clustered about manorhouses with their keeps tenanted by Temueng soldiers. The fear and anger was thick as the dust cast up by plows and plodding oxen, the villages quiet and hushed, the children invisible except for the ones working with their parents in the fields—a kind of desolation without destruction that reawakened anger in her, a fury against the Temuengs whose touch seemed as deadly as the change-serpents' poison. She even found herself blaming the lack of rain on them, though the dry days and nights let her sleep outside, which was necessary because of the presence of the Temuengs in the villages and the sullen, mistrustful Plainfolk.

Toward evening on the seventh day after she left the mountains, she reached the wide highroad from Grannsha to Tavisteen and turned south along it, dismounted and walked beside a horse stumbling with weariness, the hounds trotting in wide arcs before her, noses and ears searching for danger. Now and then one of them would run back to her and pace alongside her for a while, looking repeatedly up at her, remnants of the day's light glinting in the crystal of their strange eyes. The sky was heavily overcast, thick boiling gray clouds threatening rain with every breath. The river swept away from the road and hack in broad tranquil meanders, the color sucked from the water by the lowering skies, the sound muted by the ponderous force and depth of the flow.

She was about to resign herself to a wet cold night when she came on a large rambling structure built be-tween the highroad and a returning sweep of the river, an Inn with a pair of torches out front, torches that had burnt low because it was long after sundown. The hounds came back, altering into Yaril and Jaril by the time they reached her. "What do you think?" she said. "Should we stop there?" She drew the flat of her hand down her front, sighed. "I'd really like a hot bath."

Yaril scratched at her nose, considered the Inn. "Why not, Bramble. It looks like it gets a lot of traffic. The folk there won't be surprised by strangers."

"You're the moneykeeper, J'ri, can we afford their prices?"

He looked thoughtful, then mischievous. "Why not. 'S not our coin, we can always steal more." He dug into the saddlebags, handed the purse to Yaril and took the reins from Brann. "You two go on inside, let Yaril do the talking and you stand about looking portentous, Bramble." He giggled and dodged away from the sweep of her hand.

get Coier bedded down, he won't mind a dry stall and some corn for dinner, oh no he won't."

The door opened at Brann's touch and she went in, looking about as impassively as she could. Beside her, Yaril was gawking at the place with far less restraint, her child's form licensing freer expression of her interest. A long narrow entranceway with open arches on each side led to a broad stairway at the far end, a horseshoe-shaped counter by the foot of the stairs. Yaril ran ahead of Brann to the counter, beat a few times on the small gong set by the wall, then engaged in an energetic sotto-voce debate with the sleepy but professionally genial man who emerged from the door behind the counter. Brann watched from the corner of her eye, trying to show she knew what she was about, ignoring the men who came to the arch-door of the taproom and stared at her with predatory speculation. She grew

increasingly nervous as Yaril prolonged that debate. If she'd been here with her mother and father, as she could've been, she'd have been excited and absorbed by the newness of it all, protected by the arms of custom and love; now she was merely frightened, asea in a place whose rules of conduct she didn't know. She reached up, touched the scarf still wound about her head. Already she had about an inch of new hair, silvery white and softly curling like downfeathers on a duck. It itched, needed washing as much as the rest of her. Seemed weeks since she'd had a bath. She gazed down at thin wrists that looked as if a breath would snap them, at long strong hands tanned dark that were dark also with the grime water alone wouldn't get off. Soap and a hot bath. She sighed with anticipated pleasure.

Yaril came trotting back. "I thought you'd like to eat first while he's getting the water heated for your bath." She led Brann into the taproom and settled her at a table in the far corner. Jaril came in, looked through the arch, began helping Yaril fetch food and eating things, acting as beginning apprentices were expected to act, serving their masters' wants and needs. The clink of the coin the children had taken from the soldiers had bought her a measure of welcome, the children's act brought her a grudging respect as one who might have a dangerous amount of power however odd she looked. Even that oddness had its good points, setting her apart from the general run of women on their own.

As soon as she was settled behind the table with the wall at her back, she felt better, as if she'd acquired a space all her own. And when the children brought cold roast chicken, heated rolls with cheese melted into them and a pitcher of hot spiced wine, she began to eat with the appetite engendered by her long ride. The children knelt beside her, hidden from the rest of the room. When most of the wine was a warm mass in her stomach and the first edge of her hunger had been blunted, she looked down at Jaril. "Coier all right?"

He nodded. "Good stable. Clean, fresh straw in the stalls, no mold on the oats."

"Good." She put down the wine bowl. "What about you two, do you need to eat?"

He shook his head, the fine hair flying into a halo about his pointed face. "After that last meal? No. We shouldn't need more until the Wounded Moon is full again."

"Oh."

She finished the rest of the food and sat holding the drinking bowl cradled in her hands. Her body ached. She still wasn't quite used to the altered distribution of meat on her bones, though as time wore on new habits were beginning to form. That was a help, but she was more and more worried about her ability to make her way in this other world; she was woefully, dangerously ignorant about things these people didn't waste two thoughts on. The money Jaril carried, for example. The only coin she'd ever held was the bronze bit Marran called his luck piece. The children seemed to know what they were doing, their experience at traveling seemed to be much greater than hers, but she felt uneasy about leaving everything to them. Arth Slya encouraged its young ones to develop self-reliance within the community. They had to know their capacities, their desires and gifts, in order to make a proper Choice, whether that choice be centered in the Valley or else-where; that knowledge and contentment therein was even more important to the well-being of the Valley than the proper choice of a lifemate. Even after Choice, if the passage of time found the young man or woman restless and unsatisfied, they were encouraged to seek what they needed elsewhere; apprenticeships were arranged in Grannsha, usually at Fairtime, in Tavisteen, or some-where on the Plains, the young folk leaving to be dancers, players of all sorts, merchants, soldiers, sailors. She had cousins all over Croaldhu, probably scattered about the whole world, but they all had help getting to know how to act, they had people around them to encourage and support them. Such practices had kept Arth Slya thriving for more than a thousand years. A thousand years. Impossible that in so short a time *as a day* such a way of life had almost ceased to exist.

She sipped at lukewarm wine and noticed for the first time the singular hush in the taproom. At first she thought she'd caused it, then she saw the three men at the bar, their backs against the slab, tankards still full in their hands. They were Temuengs with pale northern skins the color of rich cream, straight black hair pulled back and tied at the napes of their necks, high prominent cheekbones, long narrow eyes as black as the shirts and trousers they wore. They had a hard, brushed neatness, no dust on them, no sweat, not a hair out of place, faces clean-shaven, nails burnished on hands that looked as if they'd never done anything Brann could think of as work, a disturbing neatness that spoke of coldness and control,

that frightened her as it was meant to do. Yaril sensed her unease, dissolved into the light shimmer, crept around the edges of the room, then darted through the men and away before they could do more than blink, flicked back along the wall and solidified into Yaril standing at her shoulder. "Watch out for them," the girl whispered. "They have leave to do anything they want to anyone, they're the enforcers of an imperial Censor." Yaril patted her arm. "But you just remember who you are now, Drinker of Souls."

Brann shivered. "I don't like ..." she started in a fierce whisper. A pressure on her arm stopped her. She looked up. A fourth man had come from somewhere and was standing across the table from her. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

"I don't recall requesting company," she said. Jaril was on his feet now, standing at her other shoulder; she lost much of her fear; with the children backing her, this Temueng was nothing. She leaned back in her chair and examined him with hatred and contempt.

He ran his eyes over her. "What are you supposed to be?"

"Drinker of Souls." The phrase Yaril had used came out easily enough. She looked at his frozen face and laughed.

"Who are you?" He spoke with a deadly patience.

She giggled nervously, though he and his armstrongs were not very funny. She giggled again and the Temueng grabbed her arm, his fingers digging into her flesh. He tried to twist the arm, to retaliate for her laughter—somewhat to her own surprise—she resisted him with ease and sat smiling at him as he strained for breath, getting red in the face, his menacing calm shattered. But he wasn't stupid and knew the rules of intimidation well enough. If a tactic fails, you quit it before that failure can make you ridiculous, and slide into something more effective. He'd made a mistake, challenging her with unfriendly witnesses present. He loosed her arm, sat back, turned his head partway around but didn't bother looking at the men he spoke to. "Clear them out," he said,

She watched the enforcers clear the room and follow the Plainsfolk out, stationing themselves in the broad arch-way, their backs to the taproom. She frowned at the Temueng, knowing she would kill him if she had to. Her gentle rearing and Slya's strictures of respect seemed a handicap down here, but she wouldn't abandon either unless she was forced to. She had horror enough for nightmares the rest of her life.

He jabbed a forefinger at the children. "You two," he said. "Out."

"No," Brann said.

Yaril's nostrils flared. "Huh," she said.

"Yours are they, ketcha?"

"We are the Mountain's children," Yaril said, "born of fire and stone."

He looked from one to the other, turned his head again. "Temudung, come here."

One of the three standing in the doorway swung round and came across to the Censor. "Salim?"

He pointed at Yaril. "The girl. Stretch her out on the bar. Then we'll see if the mountain has answers."

"Censor," Brann said softly, though with anger. "Take my warning. Don't touch the children. They aren't what they seem."

Yaril snorted. "Let the fool find out the hard way, mistress."

The enforcer ignored that exchange and came round the table, hand ready to close on Yaril's arm and snatch her away from Brann's side.

Then it wasn't a delicate small girl the Temueng was reaching for, but a weasel-like beast the size of a large dog that was leaping for his throat, tearing it and leaping away, powerful hind legs driving into his chest, missing much of the geyser of blood hissing out at him. Brann grimaced with distaste and dabbed at the bloodspots on her Ece and shirt with the napkin the host had provided with her meal.

By the time the Temueng slumped to the floor, the weasel had shrunk smaller, a darkly compact threat crouched on the table in front of Brann, long red tongue licking at the bloodspots on its fur.

"I think you'd better not move," Brann said quietly.

The Censor sat rigidly erect, a greenish tinge to his skin, staring not at Brann or the beast, but at the serpent swaying beside her. The two enforcers in the arch wheeled when they heard the abruptly silenced

shriek from their companion, took a step into the room, stopped in their tracks when the serpent hissed, the weasel-beast gave a warning yowl.

The taproom filled with those tiny sounds that make up a silence, the ones never heard in the middle of ordinary bustle and noise, the creak of wood, the hiss of the dying fire, the hoarse breathing of the men, the grinding of the sensor's teeth, the buzzing of a lissfly without sense enough to shun the place.

"Censor," she said. She'd done some rapid thinking, lipped into the fund of stories she'd heard from ancient Uncle Eornis, tales of heros, monsters and mischief-makers. "I am Drinker of Souls," she said, infusing the words with all the heavy meaning she could. "Feel fortunate, O man, that I am not thirsty now. Feel fortunate, man, that the Mountain's children are not hungry. Were it otherwise, you would die the death of deaths." She felt a little silly, though he seemed to take her seriously enough. "All I desire is to pass in peace through this miserable land. Let me be, Temueng, and I'll let you be. You and your kind." She let the silence expand until even the slightest sound was painful. Then she said, "I have a weakness, Censor. Anger, Censor. You will be tempted to make the locals pay for your shame. But if you do that, I'll be very very angry, Censor. I'll find you, Censor, believe me, Censor."

She stopped talking and grinned at him, beginning to enjoy herself. But enough was enough so she stood, pushing her chair back with her legs. "I'm going to my room now, Censor. I'm tired and I plan to sleep soundly and well, but the Mountain's children never sleep, so you'd be well advised to let me be. Say what you want to the folk here, I won't contradict you, you need lose no touch of honor, Censor."

She felt his eyes on her as she left the room. Yaril flitted up the steps before her and Jaril came behind—guarding her, though she was too self-absorbed to realize that until triumph burnt out and she was walking tiredly down the lamplit hall to the room she'd hired for the night.

A cheerfully crackling fire on the hearth, a large tub of hot water set comfortably close to the heat, copper cans of extra hot water to add later. Soft fluffed towels on the rush seat of a high-backed straight chair, a bowl of per-fumed soap beside them. She crossed the room letting the children shut the door, touched the thin-walled porcelain of the soap bowl, picked it up, ran her fingers over the bottom. Immer's mark. It was born from her father's kilns. The simple lovely bowl made her feel like weeping. Her father was a gentle man who disliked loud voices, would simply walk away if someone got too aggressive. He saved his anger for cheats and liars and slipshod work and for that last he was unforgiving. He would not live long as a slave, there wasn't the right kind of bend in him. She sighed and stripped, putting aside that worry, there being little she could do about it right then.

With a breath of pleasure she eased into the hot water and began to wash away the grime of her long hard ride, the pleasure of the bath making up for those many hard-ships she'd had to endure, even for the contretemps in the taproom and whatever came of it. She wrinkled her nose at the filthy shirt and trousers thrown in a pile beside the chair, disgusted by the thought she'd have to get back in them come the morning. No mother or cousin or anyone to do for her. When she was done she stood up, dripping, the scent from the soap around her like a cloud. She snapped open one of the towels—it was almost big as a blanket—and began rubbing herself dry, a little timid about touching herself, embarrassed by the soft full breasts, the bush of pubic hair. She put a foot on the side of the tub, dried it, stepped onto the hearth tiles, dried her other foot, dropped the damp towel beside her discarded clothes and wrapped the dry one about her.

Yaril and Jaril were sitting on the bed watching her, but in the days since the Valley she'd gotten used to their being always around. She rubbed at her head with a corner of the towel, combed her hand through short damp hair, sighed with relief as it curled about her fingers. Being bald was almost as embarrassing as the jiggle of her breasts.

She looked at the bed, but she wasn't sleepy. Tired, yes. Exhausted, uncertain, weepy, yes; but the bed meant nightmares when her mind was so roiled up. She walked to the window. It was still not raining and very dark, the Wounded Moon not up yet and anyway it was shrunk to a broken crescent. She leaned on the broad sill, gazing to the west where the mountains were; wondering, what her folk were doing now, how they were faring, if they'd gone back and collected the loot yet. She continued to gaze into the cloudy darkness, willing herself to see her mountain, her Tinreal.

And—for a moment—believed it was her will that touched the peaks with light. Then the sill rocked

under her el-bows, the floor rocked under her feet and the faint red glow illuminating the peaks rose to a reddish boil bursting into the sky. Some minutes later a blast came like a blow against her ears; it settled into a low grinding grumble that finally died into a tension-filled silence. The red glare subsided to a low-lying seethe sandwiched between clouds and earth. Standing with her face pressed against the iron lace, her mouth gaping open in a scream that wouldn't come, she was a hollovircast figurine, empty, no anger, not even any surprise. As if she'd expected it. And of course she had, they all had, the signs had been amply there, the children had warned the blow was coming soon. "No," she said, saying no to the sudden thought that the Mountain had destroyed the little the Temuengs had left of Arth Slya. Guilt seized her. If she'd left the soldiers alone, alive, if she'd let them take her folk away, her mother'd be alive now, they all would.

A tugging at her arm. She looked down. Jaril. "They could be safe, Bramble. If the Mountain blew away from the Valley. And it isn't your fault. Like you told me once, your folk know the moods of the Mountain. I could fly there and see, be back by morning. If you want. Do you?"

Brann barely whispered, "Yes. Please." She turned back to the window, her eyes fixed on the soft red glow, a bit of hope mixing with her despair. Behind her she heard the door open, click shut. Then small hands caught hold of her arm. Yaril led her to the bed, tucked her in. Lying on her stomach, her face to the wall, she let herself relax as Yaril murmured soft cooing sounds at her and smoothed those small strong hands across her shoulders, down along her arms, over and over. Her shaking stopped. All at once she was desperately tired. She slept.

A WEIGHT WAS on her, she couldn't breathe, a hand was clamped over her mouth, a knee butting between her legs. Fear and horror and revulsion welled up in her; she began to struggle, not knowing what was happening, trying to free her mouth, trying to buck the weight off her, but he was strong and heavy and he'd got himself set before she was awake enough to fight him. He was hard and thick, pushing into her, he was grunting like an animal, hurting her, it was a dry burning as if he invaded her with a reamer, rasping at her, all she could think of was getting it out.

Seconds passed, a few heartbeats, and she came out of her panic, lay still for one breath, another, then she moved her head so suddenly and so strongly he wasn't ready for it. She didn't quite free her mouth but she got flesh between her teeth and bit hard. He cursed and slapped her, then fumbled for her mouth again. She wriggled desperately under him, got her hands free, slapped them against the sides of his head, shoved it up off her, started the draw. He had a moment before the paralysis took hold but he couldn't dislodge her.

When he was drained, she rolled him off her and got shakily to her feet, lit the lamp from the dying fire, threw on a few more sticks of wood. Toe in his ribs, she nudged him over. The Censor. She'd humiliated him; this was how he got even. Got dead. She looked away. No anger or fear left, all she felt was dirtied. Filthy. She looked down at herself and was startled by a drop of blood falling by her foot. Her thighs were smeared with blood. Another drop fell. Hastily she stepped into the tub, scooped up a dollop of fresh soap and began washing herself, gently at first then scrubbing the washcloth harder and harder over her whole bod' as if she could scrub the memory of the dead man off her skin.

By the time she finished, the bleeding had stopped. She padded to the bed, wrapped herself in a blanket and sat crosslegged in the middle of the stained sheets, staring at the door.

About an hour later Yaril came back with a bundle of clothing. Brann blinked at them, understanding then where Yaril had gone. The changechild had seen the way she looked at the stinking shirt and trousers. Once she was safely asleep, Yaril went out and stole clean things for her.

"You didn't lock the door," Brann said, her voice a hoarse whisper.

Yaril looked at the dead man, shook her head, held up the clumsy key. "I did."

Brann opened her mouth to say something, forgot it, began to cry, the gasping body-shaking sobs of a hurt child.

Yaril dropped the clothing and ran to her, sat on the bed beside her, murmured soft cooing words to her, pat-ted her, soothed her, comforting her as a mother would a frightened child, gentling her into a deep healing sleep with the song of her voice, spinning sleep with that soft compelling voice.

WHEN SHE WOKE, the sound of rain filled the room.

While she slept, her body had healed itself; the bruises and strains were gone and the burning hurt between her thighs. She sat up. The body was gone. She got quickly out of bed and started pulling on the clean clothes Yaril had brought her.

A knock on the door as she was tucking in her shirt tail. "Come."

Jaril came in looking a little wan. "I was right," he said, not waiting for her questions. "Mountain blew east not north. The river has changed course some, got more cata-racts, the track out is chewed up so badly that if you didn't know where Arth Slya was already you'd never find it. Dance floor is cracked, part of it tilted. Some of the workshops slid into the river. Your folk are out clearing up, a few bumps and bruises but I didn't see anyone seriously hurt. Your mother's fine. Her looms didn't get burnt, the fire in your house went out, the quake didn't mess them up either, so she's been busy. She thinks you're dead, killed by Temuengs. Folk don't know what to do about your father and the others. If they haven't re-turned before shelters are cobbled together, some of your cousins are going to slip down and see what happened to them."

"Sheee, they shouldn't"

"Be all right if they keep their heads down; they've been warned."

Brann brushed her hand back over her hair, rubbed at her eyes. "Thanks, Fri. That helps a lot. You look worn down." Her mouth curled into a wry smile. "I picked up a life last night. Come and take."

Jaril hesitated. "You all right?"

"Not so upset as I was. A little wiser about the way things are." She held out her hands. As he took them, she said, "By the way, what did you and Yaril do with the body? And where is she?"

"Watching the enforcers, they're asleep and she wants them to stay that way until after we're gone. We dumped it in the river. With a little luck it'll be out to sea before it's spotted." He took his hands away, giggled. "He'll get to Tavisteen before us. I better see how they're treating Coier, get him saddled. You feel like eating?"

"What's one more dead man?"

After he left she wandered about the room, picking up her scattered possessions, folding everything neatly, pack-ing with the careful finickiness of the most precise of her aunts. When she was finished, she sat on the bed, gather-ing courage to leave the room. After a few ragged breaths, she bounced to her feet, draped the saddlebags over her arm, sucked in a deep breath. Go slow, she thought, act like you don't give spit what anyone thinks. She touched the door's latch and went weak in the knees. Not ready to go out. Not yet. She passed her hand over her hair, realized she'd forgotten to wind the scarf about her head, saw the creased length of material hanging over the back of the chair. She crossed to the wavery mirror. A curling mass of soft white hair all over her head, long enough now that its weight made the curls larger, looser. Strange but rather nice, suiting the shape of her . face. She thought about not wearing the scarf, it'd feel good to let the wind blow through her hair, but short as it was, the color it wasn't, it'd cause too much comment when she was riding the highroad. She wound the strip of cloth about her head, tied it so the ends fell behind one ear. Odd, that paring down of her head to its basic contours made her eyes look huge and gemlike, her mouth softer. She looked at herself another heartbeat or two, then strode to the door, jerked it open and stepped into the empty corridor. The other travelers staying the night had already de-parted or were still sleeping. It was early.

She walked slowly down the rush matting toward the stairs at the end of the corridor, her stride growing firmer, steadier. At the landing she touched the scarf to see if it was still in place, a concession to uncertainty, then started down.

A younger version of last night's host, so exact a copy he had to be the owner's son, looked up as she stopped by the counter. "You wish, athin?"

"I'd like, athno, something to eat."

"Certainly, athin. It is a bit early," he went on as he flipped the hinged section of counter top and came out to escort her to the table she'd chosen the night before. "It'll take a breath or two to prepare, but 'tis just as well to be early this day, the diligence from Tavisteen is due to stop here soon for the

fastbreaking and we'll be busier than broody hens and wishing for more hands, trying to feed them and the escort too." She said nothing, but he must have read something in her silence because he came around and stood beside her. "Traveling was near impossible till the Temuengs started sending patrols with the packtrains and the diligences. Now, we have eggs fried or poached, fresh baked rolls, sausages, they're the family's special blend and many the praises we've got for them, though it's me who says it. Or a nice steak? Or we've some young rockquail, or some fish my middle son caught from the river this morning. For drinking, there's ale, cider, tea or something called kaffeh a trader left with us a month ago. Some seem to like it, though I must say I think it's an acquired taste." He turned his head to listen to the rain coming steadily down outside. "The highroad will be awash if this keeps up, athin; for your comfort you might con-sider staying until the storm blows out."

Having waited for him to finish, she did not bother to answer his discreet attempt to wring another day's coin out of her, but simply ordered a hot ample breakfast with a pot of tea to wash it down. His amiable chatter had put her at ease and now she was merely hungry.

The children came in before she was done with the meal, soaked and waiflike one moment, dry the next. Silent and undisturbed by the stares of the fastbreakers in the slowly filling room, they threaded through the tables and came to stand beside her. Brann scowled at the stare-eyes and they looked hastily away, wary of her. Rumors, she thought, worse than midges for getting about. She sipped at the hot tea, saying nothing until she'd emptied the cup. She set it down with a small definite click, turned to Jaril. "Have you paid for our room and meals?"

"No mistress, nor for the stable and worn." His back to the rest of the room, Jaril grinned and winked at her.

"See to it then; I shall be annoyed if you allow yourself to be treated like a country fool."

Jaril winked again, went trotting off to pay the rate Yaril had won by bargaining with the host. Brann relaxed a bit more, squeezed a last half cup from the pot and sat sip-ping at it, looking about the room. A number of new faces, probably they'd been in bed when she reached the Inn last night, up now to get their morning's meal before the inundation from the diligence and the Temueng patrol. An odd mix. Alike in their wariness, not alike in other ways. A merchant with a duplicate-in-little of his opulent dress, bland ungiving face and tight little hands seated beside him, a son most likely learning the business. Several scarred, harsh-featured men in worn leathers with more cutlery hitched to their bodies than she'd seen outside of Migel's smithy. They reminded her immediately of the Temueng invaders, different racial types, but a sameness to them that overrode the minor differences of build or skin color. Half a dozen older men seated about, mostly with their hacks to the walls, their clothing and demeanor giving little clue as to who they were or why they were on the move, the only thing she could be sure of was that they weren't Temuengs.

Jaril looked in through the archway, nodded. Keeping her face expressionless, Brann slid from her chair and walked without haste between the tables, feeling eyes on her all the way. In the foyer she lifted a hand to the young host, pushed through the main door and stopped under the bit of roof that kept the rain off her head. It was coming down harder than she'd expected, in gray sheets that hid everything more than a body-length away. Coier stood saddled and ready, hitched to a ring in one of the several wayposts before the Inn, sidling and unhappy, not liking the rain very much. She felt for him, reluctant herself to leave the shelter of the roof, but there was no help for it, she had to be long gone when Yaril's sleep spinning wore off and the enforcers woke to find the Censor vanished. She stomped through the wet and pulled herself into the saddle, sitting with a squishy splat, took the reins when Jaril handed them up to her, looked at him with envy. His clothing wasn't clothing at all, but a part of his substance and when he chose, it shed the wet better than any duck's back. She sighed. "The trouble you two get me into." With a gentle kick she started Coier toward the highroad, keeping him at a walk. "No doubt they all think I'm a horrible monster, riding while I make you children run in the mud." She bent down, called to Yaril, "How long's the spinning going to last without you there to freshen it?"

Yaril turned her face up. The rain slid away without wetting her. She held up her hands and Brann swung her onto the saddle in front of her. "Till the diligence gets there probably. I'd say the noise of it is enough to wake them."

“What’ll they do?”

“Considering what happened in the taproom, raise one holy stink and get half the Temueng army looking for us.”

“Sheee, Yaro, we can’t handle that.”

“Can’t fight something, then run like sheol and hope you lose it.” Yaril patted her arm. “Just have to be smarter than they are, that’s all.”

“Not so great a start, was it.”

AN HOUR LATER the diligence came out of the rain at her. She heard it before she saw it, its creaks, rattles, cadenced sloppy thuds, windy snorts, a snatch or two of voices, mostly bits of curses; she nudged Coier off the road, pushing up tight against the hedgerow trying to ignore the clawing thorns. The rain was coming down harder than ever and from the sound of the thing whoever was driving it expected the world to get out of his way. The large mild heads of Takhill Drays came out of the rain, their black manes plastered down over the white stripes that ran ear to nose, the leather blinder on the offside lead gleaming like the glaze of das’n vuor. Their brown hides dripped water and looked almost as black as the harness. The feathers on their massive shapely hocks were smoothed down with rain and mud but their sturdy legs lifted and fell with the regularity of a pendulum, tick-tock, tick-took. Two first, then two more, then the two wheelers, larger than the others. A fine hitch. The driver hunched over the reins, cowl pulled so far forward she couldn’t see his face, only the large gnarled hands so deftly holding the black leather straps. He was silent, his silence making a space about him that the second man on the perch made no attempt to breach. He was a Temueng with a short bow held across his knees that he was trying to protect with his cloak, a quiver full of arrows clipped to the inside of one leg. He was cursing steadily, stopping only to wipe at his face. He saw her, looked indifferently away. She watched him with a surge of hatred that twisted her stomach into knots.

The diligence was a long boxy vehicle creaking along on three pairs of oversize wheels that cast up broad sheets of brown water. Oiled silk curtains were drawn tight against the rain but there was some sort of lamp burning inside, probably more than one, because she saw the shadows of the passengers moving across the silk. Six high narrow windows filled with profiles and the rounds of swaying heads. She watched them and wondered what was so important it took those people out into weather like this. The last window slid past, then she saw the piles of luggage strapped behind. And felt again that helplessness that had engulfed her as she walked into the Inn, an ignorance of life down here so complete that moving into it was like stepping off Tinreal onto a low-hanging cloud.

Four Temuengs rode guard far enough behind the dili-gence to escape the mud and gravel the broad iron-tired wheels kicked up. They rode swathed in heavy cloaks, lances couched, bows covered, but she had little doubt they’d be a nasty surprise to anyone thinking of attacking the diligence. The leader turned his head and stared at her as he rode past. She saw a flash of gilt, of paler silver. An empush, commanding four.

Then he was past. Then they were all past. She let out a breath. Her middle hurt as if she’d been stooping and straightening for hours. She wiped at her face, kneed Coier into a walk, guiding him back onto the road, the two hounds pacing silently one on each side of her.

A few breaths later she heard the sound of a horse coming rapidly up behind her, then the Temueng empush rode around her, turning his mount to block the road. She pulled up, a flutter in her stomach, a knot of fear and rage closing her throat. She couldn’t speak, sat staring at him grimly, silently. Her eyes blurred and after a moment she knew she was crying; she didn’t try to hide her tears, only hoped the rain beating on her face would camouflage them.

“Who are you?” he shouted at her, his voice harsh, impatient. “What are you doing on this road? Where are you going?”

She stared at him, managed, “A traveler, headed for the nearest port so I can get out of this soggy backwater.” She was surprised by the crisp bite of the words, no sign of what she was feeling in them, as if someone else were speaking for her. Her fear and anger lessened, the tears stopped, she sat silent waiting for his response.

“Your credeen.” He rode closer, held out his hand. “What?”

“Your permit to travel, athin.” The honorific was an insult. He drew his sword, holding it lightly in his right hand. “The sigiled tag.”

—“Ah.” She thought furiously. Seemed the Temuengs were trying to control travel and tighten their grip on Croaldhu; nothing of this had been in place three years ago at the last Fair; the Kumaliyn didn’t bother with such nonsense. She dredged up the worst words she could think of, cursing the Temueng’s officiousness, the need to poke his nose in other people’s business. All he had to do was ride on and let her be. But he was waiting for some sort of answer and from the look of him, wasn’t inclined to accept excuses or pleas of ignorance. She glanced quickly at Jaril and Yaril. The werehounds had moved quietly out from her until almost obliterated by the rain. She risked a look over her shoulder; the other soldiers and the dili-gence were out of sight and hearing. Lifting a hand slowly so he could see it was empty, she moved it in a broad arc from Yaril to Jaril. “They are all the permits I need, Temueng.”

And Yaril was a fireball rushing at his head, and Jaril was fire about his sword. With a scream of pain, he dropped the blade. Hastily Brann said, “Just chase this one off, I’ve had enough lives.”

The fires seemed to shrug, then nipped and sizzled about the flanks of the already nervous horse, driving it into a frantic, bucking run after the diligence, the shaken empush struggling to keep from being thrown into the mud. One of the fires flowed into a large hawk and came flying back. It swooped to the sword’s hilt, caught it up and vanished into the rain with it. A second later it was back, settling to the ground beside Coier, Yaril again as soon as the talons touched mud. Brann lifted her Onto the saddle in front of her. “I gave that fool his sword,” Yaril said. “Better if he doesn’t have to explain how he lost it.” She leaned back against Brann, smiled as the other fire re-turned and was a hound again standing beside the horse. “We got trouble enough once he connects up with those enforcers.”

Brann nudged Coier into an easy canter. “I’m still glad he’s alive. We got trouble anyway, what’s one more stink-ing Temueng?” She stroked Yaril’s moonpale hair. “An-other hour, ...” She sighed. “Stinking rain. Wasn’t for that, one of you could fly watch. I don’t know what to do ... I don’t know”

BRANN RODE ON into the rain, that dreary steady downpour that falls straight from clouds to earth and stays and stays until you forget what the sun feels like. Jaril laughed at the idea that anything so simple and natural as rain could keep him from flying and was following about an hour’s ride behind, a dark gray mistrane dipping in and out of clouds. Yaril was a hound again, running easily beside the horse. Rested and well-fed, Coier had to be held to a steady lope; he wanted to run and Brann shared the urge, but she didn’t dare let him loose.

An hour passed, then another. The children could com-municate over any distance bounded by the horizon, why this limitation they either couldn’t or wouldn’t explain, and Jaril would give them an hour’s warning of pursuit, a chance to discover a hide that would fool the followers.

Another hour. Brann rode on between half-seen hedge-rows beaten into a semblance of neatness by the down-pour, washed to a dark shiny green that glowed through the grays of rain and mud.

Some fifteen minutes into the fourth hour the hound was suddenly Yaril trotting by her knee, screaming up at her over the hiss and splat of the rain, “Riders coming up. Fast. Temuengs. Three from the diligence, one of the enforcers. Half dozen besides. New faces. Most likely occupation troops.” She dashed ahead of the horse, was a hawk running, then powering into the rain, gone to look for a break in the hedges.

Brann was frantic. Ten men, men warned about her. Half a score of men who could stand at a distance putting arrows in her, pincushion Brann, not something pleasant to contemplate. Adept as her body was at healing itself, she had a strong suspicion there had to be a limit—at which point she would be very dead. The hedges on both sides of the road were high, wild and flourishing, taller than she was atop Coier and likely as thick as they were tall. Even if she could somehow push through, those murderous hounds on her trail would spot the signs she’d have to leave and be through after her and she’d have gained nothing, would have lost if some of them had been living long enough hereabouts to know something of the land. Even a year’s patrolling would have taught them how they could drive her into a corner.

Yaril came winging back, touched down, *changed* to childshape. Brann pulled her up before her once again, so they could talk without having to shout. “Nothing,” the changechild said, “No turn-offs far as I dared fly. But there’s a weak spot in the hedge about twenty minutes on, a place where one of the bushes died.”

Brann started to protest, but Yaril shook her head. “It’s all there is, Bramble. Well contrive something. Now move.” She slid of *changing in* midair and went soaring away on hawk wings. Brann urged Coier into a gallop and followed her, feeling a surging exhilaration at the power under her. The hedge on the left grew wilder and even the meager signs of tending evident before vanished completely, straggly canes encroaching on the paving.

Yaril stood in the road, waving at a thin spot where the canes had withered away and the few leaves clinging to branchstubs were wrinkled and yellow. Without hesitation, Brann turned Coier off the road and drove him toward the brittle barrier with voice, heels and slapping hands. Head twisted back, snorting protest, he barreled through into a long-neglected field that was grown to a fine thick crop of weeds in the center of which stood a shapeless structure with much of its thatching gone, its stone walls tumbled down, the stones charred black in spite of the rain and the many that had gone before. She rode Coier into the meager shelter through a door where half the frame still stood, the other half lay in splinters among the charred stones and twisted weeds. The roof that remained was sodden and leaking but it kept out the worst of the wet. She dismounted with a sigh of relief and trembling legs, glad to be out of that depressing incessant beat-beat on her body and head. She closed her eyes and leaned against the endwall, dripping onto the bird dung, weeds, old feathers, bits of thatching that lay in a thick layer over the beaten-earth floor. But she couldn’t stay there. She looped the reins about the remnant of the door frame, then ran back to Yaril.

The changechild was dabbling in the mud, resetting the clods that Coier’s hooves had thrown up, helping the rain wash away the deep indentations his iron shoes had cut into the mud. The hole in the hedge looked wide as a barn door; Brann tried to drag a few canes from the live bushes across the gap but that didn’t seem to do anything but make the opening more obvious. Yaril straightened, the mud sloughing off her, leaving her dry and clean. She saw what Brann was doing, giggled. “Don’t be silly, Bramble.” The pet name seemed to amuse her more and she laughed until she seemed about to cry, then pulled herself together. “Go on,” she said, “get into shelter. Jaril’s coming, be here soon to keep watch when I can’t.”

“Can’t?”

“Watch, then scoot.” Yaril giggled again then stepped next to the twisty trunk of the bush and *changed*. With startling suddenness she was a part of the hedge, as green and vigorous, wild and thorny as the bushes on either side of her.

Shaking her head at her lack of thought, Brann trudged to the burned-out structure, barn or house or storage crib, whatever it was.

She stripped off her sodden clothing, rubbed herself down with one of her blankets, stripped the saddle and bridle off Coier and rubbed him down until she was sweating with the effort, doled out a double handful of cracked corn onto his saddle pad. She tied on his tether and left him to his treat, then got out her old filthy shirt and trousers, slipped into them. At least they were dry. She wrinkled her nose at the smells coming from the dark heavy cloth, but soon grew used to them again. She folded the damp blanket into a cushion, sat down with her back against the rough wall and was beginning to feel almost comfortable when Jaril walked in.—“They’re almost here,” he said. “You’ll hear them soon.” He squatted beside her. “Far as I could see, they didn’t investigate any of the turn-offs, they’re coming straight ahead, pushing their horses hard, on the chance they can overtake you.”

“What happens when they wear out their mounts and still haven’t come on us?”

“Raise the countryside I expect. Listen.”

Through rain that at last was beginning to slacken she heard the pounding of hooves on the worn stone paving of the highroad. Coier lifted his head and moved restlessly. She got to her feet and stood beside him, a hand on his nose to silence him if he decided to challenge the beasts on the far side of the hedge. She listened with her whole body as they went clattering pounding splashing past without

slackening pace, the noises fading swiftly into the south.

She let out the breath she was holding. Jaril squeezed her fingers gently.—I'm off, Bramble. Better I keep an eye on them awhile more.” He looked around.—I think you could chance a fire, Yaril'll get you the makings, dry them off. You might as well eat something now, it could get harder later.” Then he was a mistcrane stalking out the door. Brann followed him, stood watching his stilting run and soar, beautifully awkward on the ground, beauty itself in the air. She stood wiping the damp off her face, sud-denly and simply happy to be alive, delighted with the water running from her hair, the breath in her lungs lifting and dropping her ribs. She stood there long enough to see Yaril dissolve out of the hedge and come walking through the wet weeds, a slight lovely sprite, a part of her now, her family. She smiled and waited for Yaril to reach her.

BRANN WOKE FROM a long nap to find the afternoon turned bright as the clouds broke and moved off. Yaril was sitting in silence, staring into the heart of a little fire, her face enigmatic, her narrow shoulders rounded, the crystal eyes drinking in and reflecting the flames. Brann felt an im-mense sadness, a yearning that made her want to cry; it wasn't her own grief but waves of feeling pouring out of Yaril. For the first time she saw that they'd lost as much as she had, drawn from their homeland and people as she was driven from hers. And there was very little chance they'd ever return to either homes or people; they were changed as she was changed, exiled into a world where there was no one to share their deepest joys and sorrows. Brann licked her lips, wanted to say something, wanted to say she understood, but before she could find the words, Yaril turned, grinned, jumped to her feet, tacitly rejecting any intrusion into her feelings. “Jaril's on his way back.

Rain's over, we'll ride tonight and if we can, lay up tomorrow.”

Brann yawned. “What's he say?”

“Temuengs went on till the rain stopped, but they finally had to admit they'd missed you. There was a bit of frothing at the mouth and toing and fming—” Yaril giggled—“then the enforcer rode on for Tavisteen, your favorite empush started back, he's sending the Temuengs one at a time down side roads to stir up the local occupation forces and looking careful at the hedges as he goes past. Time I got back to being a plant. It's boring but not quite so bad as being a rock.” With another giggle she got to her feet and ran out.

Brann followed her to the opening, watched her dart through the weeds to the hedgerow, merge with the green. Shaking her head, she turned away to fix herself a bit of supper while she waited for Jaril to arrive.

THE MISTCRANE FLEW ahead of them, searching out clear ways, leading them along twisty back roads that were little more than cowpaths. Moving mostly at night, duck-ing and dodging, watching Temuengs and their minions spilled like disturbed lice across the land, nosing down the smallest ways, Missing her sometimes by a hair, a breath, Brann wormed slowly south and west, heading for Travisteen though that grew more and more difficult as the hunt thickened about her. The children stole food for her, corn for Coier to keep his strength up because there was never enough rest and graze for him. She grew lean and lined, fatigue and hunger twin companions that never left her, sleep continually interrupted, meals snatched on the—run. Five days, seven, ten, sometimes forced into evasions so tortuous she came close to running in circles. Yet always she managed to win a little farther south. Twice Temuengs blundered across her, but with the children's help she killed them and drank their lives, passing some of that energy on to Coier, restoring the strength that the hard running was leaching from him.

The broad fertile plain at Croaldhu's heart dipped lower and lower until sedges and waterweeds began to replace the cultivated fields and the grassy pastures, until pools of water gathered in the hollows and stood in still decay, scummy and green with mud and algae. The fringes of the Marish, a large spread of swampland and grassy fens like a scraggly beard on Croaldhu's chin, a bar on her path, a trap for her if she wasn't careful; should the Temuengs get close enough they could pin her against impassible water or bottomless muck. The mistcrane flew back and forth along the edge of the Marish, trying to work out a way through it, a straggling line from one dot-sized mud island to the next, wading through the pools

and streams to test depth and bottom, keeping as close to the Highroad as he could so he wouldn't get them lost in the tangle of the wetlands, even after the road turned to a causeway built on broad low stone arches a man's height above the water, an additional danger because Temuengs riding along the causeway could see uncomfortably far into that tangle. He led Brann and Coier along his chosen route, one that managed to keep a thin screen of cypress, flerpine and root-rotted finnsion between her and that road. The Wounded Moon was fattening toward full and the children's crystal eyes saw as well by night as by day, so they moved all night, slowly, with much difficulty, struggling with impossible footing, slipping and sliding, half the time with Brann dismounted and walking beside Coier, stroking him, comforting him, bleeding energy into him, helping him endure, stumbling on until they reached a mud island high enough to get them out of the water and away from the leeches and chiggers that made life a torment to the two fleshborn though they avoided the changechildren.

Gray. Even during daylight everything was gray. Gray skies, gray water, gray mud dried on sedges and trees, on low hanging branches, gray fungus, gray insects, gray everything. The stench of damp closed around her, of rotting everything, flesh, fish, vegetation. Three gray nights she rode, three gray days she rested on mounds of mud and rotting reeds, where she fed Coier from the too rapidly diminishing supply of corn, rubbed him down, touching to death the leeches on his legs, draining their small bits of life, feeding it back into him; once the leeches were drained they were easy enough to brush off, falling like withered lengths of gutta-percha. By accident she discovered another attribute of her changed body as she fed that life into the weary trembling beast; her hand was close to one of the oozing leech-bites and she saw the bite seal over and heal with the feed.

By the end of the fourth night, she was ready to chance the causeway rather than continue this draining slog. As dawn spread a pale uncertain light over the water, Jaril led her deeper into the Marsh to an eye-shaped island considerably larger than the others with a small clump of vigorous, sharp-scented flerpines at one end, a dry graveled mound at the center with some straggly clumps of grass, a bit of stream running by it with water that looked clear and dean and tempting. She resisted temptation and began going over Coier, her probing deadly touch killing gnats and borers, chiggers and bloodworms and the ever-present leeches, feeding the weary beast those bits of life. It was a handy thing, that deadly touch of hers, and she was learning from far too much practice how to use it. By now she could kill a mite on a mosquito's back and leave the mosquito unharmed. After spreading a double handful of corn on his saddlepad, she plunged into a stream and used a twist of grass to scrub the sweat and muck off her body and hair. While she washed, Yaril thrust a hand into the pile of wood Jaril collected and flew back to the island, got a fire going and set a pot on to heat water for tea, then took Brann's clothing to the stream and began scrubbing the shirts and trousers with sand from the mound. When Brann was clean inside and out, when the water was boiled and the tea made, when Yaril had hung the sopping shirts and trousers on ragged branches of the pines, Brann sat naked on a bit of grass, cool and comfortable for the first time in days, watching Coier standing in the water drinking, sipping at her own drinking bowl, the tea made from the scrapings of her supply but the more appreciated for that. She set the bowl on her knee, sighed. "I don't care how many Temuengs are shuttling along the causeway, come the night, I'm getting Coier and me out of this."

Jaril looked at Yaril, nodded. "Traffic's been light the last few nights, and ..." he hesitated, "we've used more energy than I expected. Yaril and me, we're getting hungry."

"Think I'd like being the hunter for a change. Instead of the hunted." She gulped at the tea, holding it in her mouth, letting the hot liquid slide down her throat to warm her all over. "Coier's sick or something, the water's got him, or those bites. He needs graze and rest, more than anything, rest. Me too. Maybe we could find a place to lay up once we're past this mess." She looked over her shoulder at the hazy sun rising above the pines. "Could one of you do something about drying my clothes? I don't feel right lying down with nothing on. Anything could happen to make us light out with no time to stop for dressing."

"Right." While Jaril doused the fire, Yaril *changed*, went shimmering through Brann's wet clothing, drying a set of shirt and trousers for her. When she thought they were ready, she brought them to Brann. "Get some sleep," she said. "We'll watch."

BRANN WOKE tangled in tough netting made from cords twisted out of reed fiber and impregnated with fish stink. She woke to the whisper of a drum, to the suddenly silenced scream from Coier as his throat was cut. She woke to see little gray men swarming over the island, little gray men with coarse yellow cloth wound in little shrouds about their groins, little gray men with rough dry skin, a dusty gray mottled in darker streaks and splotches like the skin of lizards she'd watched sunning on her sunning rock, little gray men butchering Coier, cutting his flesh from his big white bones. She wept from weakness and sorrow and fury, wept for the beast as she hadn't wept for her murdered sister, her murdered people, wept and for a while thought of nothing else. Then she remembered the children.

She could move her head a little, a very little. It was late, the shadows were long across the water. No sign of the children anywhere. Another gray man sat beside a small crackling fire, net cording woven about him and knotted in intricate patterns she guessed were intended to describe his power and importance; a fringe of knotted cords dangled from a thick rope looped loosely about a small hard potbelly. In an oddly beautiful, long-fingered reptilian hand he held a strange and frightening drum, a snake's patterned skin stretched over the skull of a huge serpent with a high-domed braincase and eyeholes facing forward. Smiling, he drew from the taut skin a soft insistent rustle barely louder than the whisper of the wind through the reeds, a sound that jarred her when she thought about it but nonetheless crept inside her until it commanded the beat of her heart, the in-out of her breathing. She jerked her body loose from the spell and shivered with fear. Magic. He looked at her and she shivered again. He sat before that tiny hot fire of twigs and grass, his eyes fixed on her with a hungry satisfaction that chilled her to the bone. She thought about the children and was furious at them for deserting her until the drummer reached out and ran a hand over two large stones beside his bony knee, gray-webbed crystals each large as a man's head, crystals gathering the fire into them, little broken fires repeated endlessly within. His hand moving possessively over them, he grinned at her, baring the hard ridge of black gum that took the place of teeth in these folk, enjoying her helpless rage until a commotion at the other end of the island caught his gaze.

She strained to see, froze as a Temueng walked into her arc of vision, leading his mount and a pack pony with a large canvas-wrapped load. Gray men crowded around him, hissing or whistling, snapping fingers, stamping their broad clawed feet, jostling him, giving off clouds of a hate and fury barely held in check. His nostrils flaring with disgust, he looked over their heads and kept walking until he stood stiffly across the fire from the magic man, not-looking at Brann with such intensity she knew at once the Marishmen had sold her. She lay very still, grinding her teeth, with a rage greater than the gray men's.

"You sent saying you had the witch." The Temueng's voice was deep and booming, deliberately so, Brann thought, meant to overpower the twitter and squeak of the gray men. "I brought the payment you required."

The drummer convulsed with silent laughter, drew whispery laughs from his drum. "Yellow man, scourge a thee dryfoots." He laughed some more. "Sit, scourge."

Gray men trotted busily about building up the small fire into a snapping, crackly, pine-smelling blaze. The magic man played with his drum, its faint sounds merging with the noise of the fire. The Temueng sat in firmly dignified silence, waiting for all this mummery to be done, looking occasionally around to Brann. She glared hate at him, and lay simmering when he looked away, taking what satisfaction she could in his rapidly cracking patience.

The drum sound grew abruptly louder, added a click-click-clack as the drummer tapped the nails of two fingers against the bone of the skull. "I, Ganumomo speak," the drummer chanted, garbling the Plainspeak so badly she could barely understand what he was saying. "Hah! I, Ganumomo daah beah mos' strong dreamer in ahhh Mawiwamo." Continuing to scratch at the drumhead with two fingers of the hand that held the skull, he scooped up one of the crystals, held it at arm's length above his head.

"Ganumomo naah fear fahfihmo, see see." He set the crystal down, pursed his rubbery lips, added a whispery whistle to the whispery rattle of the drum, snapped off the whistle. "Cha-ba-ma-we naah sah strong. Magah da Cha-ba-ma-we naah hotha Ganumomo. Hah!" Dropping into a conversational tone, he said, "You, dryfoot, you bring aulmeamomo?"

With a grunt of assent, the Temueng got to his feet and went to the pack pony. He unroped the

canvas, took a pouch from among the other items piled onto the packsad-dle, brought it back to the fire. He dropped it beside the drummer, returned to his seat across the fire from the gray man. "Bringer of dreams," he said. "More will be sent when we have the witch, like you say, what is it? the chabummy. I brought other things. Axe heads, spear points, fishhooks, knives. An earnest of final payment. Give me the witch."

"Fish that swim too straight he go net. Otha thing in the trading. I Ganumomo daah beah wanting no dryfoots come in Mawiwamo. I Ganumomo daah beah wanting ..."

Brann stopped listening as the bargaining went on, fo-cusing all her attention and will on the children. It was no use, she got no response at all no matter how hard she concentrated. She moved about the little she could, but her arms were pinned tight against her sides, her legs were bound so tightly she couldn't even bend her knees; the more she struggled, the more inextricably she was tangled in the cords. Anger rumbled in her like the fireheart of Tincreal, anger that was partly her own and partly that wildness that took hold of her and killed the Temueng pimush. She was terrified when that happened, some-where deep within her there was terror now, but it was overlaid by that melded fury. She began to sing, very softly, tinder her breath, the possession song that Called the Sleeping Lady into the Yongala and readied her for the great Dances.

Dance, Slya Slya, dance
I am the Path, so walk me
Dance the sky the earth the all
Dance the round of being's thrall
Dance, Slya Slya, dance
Emanation, puissance
I am the cauldron, empty me
Dance dissolution, turbulence
End of all tranquility
Dance, Slya Slya, dance
I am the Womb, come fill me
Germination, generation
Dance hard death's fecundity
Dance the is and what will be
Dance the empty and the full
Dance the round of being's thrall.

Though she sang so very softly and the magic man was deep in bargaining, he sensed immediately what was build-ing in and around her; he broke off, came round the fire and kicked her in the ribs, the head. But he was too late. Slya took her as she groaned, Slya called the drummer's fire to her and it burned the nets to ash and nothing and it leaped from her to the magic man and he was a torch and it leaped from her to the Temueng and he was a torch, and it leaped from gray man to gray man until the island was a planting of torches, frozen gray men burning, Temueng burning, grass and trees burning, pouch of dream dust burning. In an absent, blocked-off way she saw the packs and gear burned off the horse and pony without singing a hair on them, though they ran in panic into the water and away.

Finally the fire dimmed in her, a last tongue licked out, caressed the crystals. Yaril and Jaril woke out of stone, sat up blinking.

Then Slya was gone, the island bare and barren, the trees reduced to blackened stakes, the ashes of the burned blowing into drifts, and she was burdened with a fatigue so great she sank naked on charred sand and slept.

THREE DAYS LATER she was Temueng in form and face, wearing stolen Temueng gear, riding on an elderly but shapely werehorse, one good enough for Temueng pride but not enough to tempt Temueng greed, her al-tered shape grace of the children's manipulations and the lives of half a dozen Temueng

harriers they ambushed along the causeway. The sun was setting in a shimmering clear sky and she was riding across the river on a stone bridge a quarter of a mile long, turning onto a road paved with massive blocks of the same stone, the city a dark mass against the flaming sky. Tavisteen. Gateway to the Narrow Sea.

3. Brann's Quest—Across the Narrow Sea With Sammanq Schimti

BASTARD RUMORS SPREAD faster than trouble through Tavisteen; no one claimed them, everyone heard them. Agitation on the Plain

Temuengs dead or vanished (silent celebrations in Tavisteen hearts). Temuengs thrashing uselessly about, interrupting spring planting, rousting honest (and other-wise) folk from their homes, stopping trader packtrains to question the men and rummage through their goods. Temuengs closing down the port more tightly than before (suppressed fury in every Tavisteen and an increase in smuggling, Tavisteeners being contrary folk, the moment the Temueng Tekora governing the city promulgated a rule, there'd be cadres of Tavisteeners working to find ways to round it, but they were wily and practical enough to pretend docility); since the Temuengs moved in and took over, any trader caught in port went through long and subtle negotiations and paid large bribes if he wanted to sail out again (another cause for fury, it was ruining trade). And this aggravation doubled because they were chasing some crazy woman who kept slipping like mist between their fingers (in spite of the trouble she brought on them, Tavisteeners cheered her in the secret rooms of mind and heart—and hoped she'd go somewhere else).

Agitation in the Marish

Marishmen went gliding like gray shadows from the fens to attack Temuengs and Plainsfolk alike, turning the causeway into a deathtrap for all but the largest parties, and these lost men continually to poison darts flying with-out warning from the Marish. No one dared go into the wetlands to drive off the ambushers; traffic along the road sank to a trickle then dried up completely.

Agitation in Tavisteen .. .

Bodies without wounds lying in the darkest parts of dark alleys, floating in the bay. Temuengs and Tavisteeners alike. The locals were small loss to the city since all of them without exception were cast-offs without family to acknowledge them, given to rape and general thuggery. The other Tavisteeners grumbled at the cost of exorcising all those stray ghosts, but didn't bother themselves with listening to the complaints of the ghosts or hunting for the ghost-maker (for the most part, this was another case of silently applauding one they saw as something of a hero in spite of the trouble she was causing them).

The Temuengs were not nearly so philosophical about the mysterious force stalking and killing them. Temueng enforcers began snap searches, surrounding a section of the city or the wharves, turning everyone into the street, checking their credeens, searching houses and warehouses, ripping furniture,, boxes and bales apart, kicking walls in, even turning out ship holds, beating Tavisteeners and foreign sailors with angry impartiality, hauling chosen mem-bers of both sorts off to the muccaits for questioning. Sometimes they made several of these searches in a single day, sometimes they let several days pass with none, some-times they struck in the middle of the night.

They found smugglers' caches, forbidden drugs and weap-ons, illegal stills, prisoners escaped from any of a dozen muccaits, and other things of some interest to the Tekora. They did not find the woman.

* * *

SAMMANG SHIPMASTER sat hunched over a tankard of watery beer, scowling at the battered table top, his dark strong-featured face the image of his island's war god; squat and powerful was that god, a figure carved from sorrel soapstone and polished to a satin shine, meant to inspire awe and terror in the beholder. The rest of the tavern's patrons, not at all a gentle lot, sat at the far side of the room and left him to his brooding. Now and then he tugged at an elongated earlobe; the heavy gold pendant that usually hung there he'd sold that morning to pay docking fees; the little left had to keep him and his men for a while longer. Soon though, he'd have to break from the mooring and try to run past the ships and the guard tower at the narrow mouth of the harbor, not something he contemplated with any pleasure. Trebuchets hurling hundred-pound stones, springals with javelins that could pierce the thickest of ship

timbers, fireboats anchored beyond to take care of what was left of any ship sneaking out, skryers to spot anyone trying to run under the cover of magic. Temuengs were thorough, Buatorrang curse their greedy bellies. He had a cargo of Arth Slya wares smuggled down from the Fair by an enterprising Tavisteener under the noses of the Tern uengs who'd grabbed everything they could, with some hides and fleeces from the Plains, noth-ing that would spoil or lose its worth—if he could get the Girl out of this wretched port. He growled deep in his throat, his broad square hand tightening on the tankard until the metal squealed protest.

“Sammang Schimli? The Shipmaster?”

He looked up, the lines deepening between his thick black brows, the corners of his mouth dipping deeper into the creases slanting from flared nostrils. He ran his eyes slowly over the woman standing on the far side of the table. “Shove off, whore, I’m not looking for company.” He shut his eyes and prepared to ignore her.

The woman pulled out a chair, sat across from him.

“Nor I, Shipmaster. Only passage out of Tavisteen to Utar-Selt. And I’m not a whore.”

Eyes still closed, thumbs moving up and down the sides of the tankard, he said, “I’m going nowhere soon, woman.”

“I know.” His eyes snapped open and he stared at her. “If you’ll tell me just what you need to shake yourself loose,” she went on, “and we can agree on terms, I’ll see what I can do about financing your clearance.”

He looked her over. No. Not a whore. Not reacting to him right for that. She was interested, but in an oddly childlike and at the same time cerebral way. None of the body signs of sexual awareness. Under the mask of calm, a nervous uncertainty. He clicked tongue against teeth, wid-ened his eyes as he realized who she must be.

She had large green eyes in a face more interesting than pretty, rather gaunt right now as if she’d been hungry for a long time. A full mouth held tightly in check. Skin like alabaster in moonlight. The hands on the table were long, narrow, strong; hands not accustomed to idleness. Shoul-der, length soft silver hair catching shimmers from the tavern’s lamps whenever she moved her head. Wholly out of place here. He had a sudden suspicion she’d look out of place an’where he could think of. By Preemalau’s nimble tail, how she ran loose in this part of the city was a thing to intrigue a man. He drew his tongue along his bottom lip, tapped his thumbs on the table. Maybe she could break the Girl loose, maybe she’d put his head in a Temueng strangler’s noose. A gamble, but what wasn’t? “Why not,” he said.

“We can’t talk here.”

He thought about the rumors, the dead on the plain, the dead in the city, the dead floating in the bay, then he drained the tankard, set it down with a loud click that made her hands twitch. “I have a room upstairs.”

She smiled suddenly, a mischievous gamin’s grin that changed her face utterly. “Be careful, Shipmaster. You don’t want to make me angry.”

He stood. “Your choice.” Leaving her to follow if she would, not so sure anymore he didn’t want female com-pany, he went up the several flights of stairs, hearing now and then her quiet steps behind him. He was rooming on the fifth floor, up under the roof, not so much for the cheaper price as for the breezes that swept through the unglazed windows. He unlocked his door, shoved it open, walked in and stopped.

Two children sat cross-legged on his bed, moonlight glimmering on pale hair, glowing in crystal eyes.

The woman brushed past him, settled herself in the rickety chair by one window. “My companions,” she said. “Close the door.” When he hesitated, she giggled. “Afraid of a woman and a pair of kids?”

He looked at the key in his hand, shrugged. “Might be the smartest thing I’ve done in months.” He pulled the door shut, latching its bar and went to perch on the sill of the nearest window.

“Yaril,” the woman said, “any snoops about?”

“No, Brann.” The fairest of the two children grinned at her. “But Jaril did drop a rock on Hermly the nose.”

“Nearby?”

The child with the shade darker hair wagged a hand. “So-so. Got him a couple streets back, fossicking about, trying to figure out what happened to you. No one else interested in you, well, except for the usual reasons.”

“Hah, brat, talk about what you know. Still, mmh, I think you better go prowl about outside, see we aren’t interfered with.” She turned to Sammamang. “Let him out, will you please?”

“What could the kid do?”

“More than you want to know, Shipmaster.”

He shrugged. “Come on, kid.”

When the latch was again secure, he stumped to the window, hitched a hip on the sill, angled so he could look out over the roofs toward the estuary and at the same time see the woman and the remaining child. “Why me?” he said. “Why not a Temueng ship? They’re going in and out all the time. Cheaper too, because I’m going to cost you ... Brann, is it? Right. I’m going to cost you a lot. Maybe more than I’m worth. You who I think you are, you’ve already fooled Temuengs high and wide, seems to me you could go on fooling them just as easy. Not that I’m usually this candid with paying customers, you understand, but I want to know just what I’m getting into.”

“Candid?”

He raised both brows, said nothing.

“You know quite well what you’re getting into, Ship-master.”

The child—he was growing more certain it was a girl—slid off the bed and walked with eerie silence across the usually noisy floorboards, touched a pale finger to the wick of the stubby candle sitting on the unsteady table that was the room’s only other piece of furniture. The wick caught fire, spread a warm yellow glow over Brann and Sammamang, touched the hills and hollows of the lumpy bed. She went back to where she’d been and sat gazing intently at him for a long uneasy moment, sharp images of the candle flame dancing upside down in her strange eyes.—Tell him,” she said. “He’s hooked, he might as well know the whole, maybe he could come up with better ideas than we can; he knows this city and the Temuengs. You can trust him with just about anything he isn’t trying to sell you.”

He scowled at the girl, snorted at her impudent grin, turned to the woman. “Have you heard of Arth Slya?” she said. Her voice broke on the last words; she cleared her throat, waited for his answer.

“Who hasn’t?”

“It was my home.”

“Was?” He leaned forward, suddenly very interested: if Arth Slya was gone, the Slya wares hidden in his hold had suddenly jumped in value, jumped a lot.

“Temuengs came, a pimush and fifty men. Tried to take my people away, killed” Once again her voice broke; hastily she turned her head away until she had control again. In a muffled voice she said, “Killed the littlest and the oldest, marched the others off ... off for slaves ... on the emperor’s orders ... the pimush told me ... slaves for the emperor He called him old lardarse ... the pimush did ... he’s dead ... his men, dead .. I killed ... the children and I killed them my folk are home again, the ones left ... trying to put things ... things together again.” Her shoulders heaved, she breathed quickly for a space, then lifted her head and spoke more crisply, her mask back in place. “Slya woke and Tinreal breathed fire, scrambled the land so Arth Slya is shut away. As long as the Temuengs hold Croaldhu I doubt you’ll hear much of Arth Slya.”

He tugged at his earlobe, narrowed his eyes. “You’re going after the emperor?”

“No. Well, not exactly. This is the year of the Grannsha Fair.”

“I know, Slya-born, I came for it and caught my tail in this rat-trap.”

“There were Slya folk at the fair. The pimush told me they were taken to Andurya Durat where they were going to be installed in a special compound the Emperor old lardarse” She laughed; it was not a comfortable sound. “He built for them. Slaves, Shipmaster. My father and two of my brothers, my kin and kind. I will not leave them slaves.” She spoke with a stony determination that made him happy he was neither Temueng nor slaver. He nod-ded, approving her sentiment, it was what he’d have done in similar circumstances, which Buatorrang and the Preemalau grant would never happen; he wasn’t so sure he wanted to involve himself and the Girl in this, but it might be worth the gamble; where she was now,

she was like to rot before he could pry her loose. There was a lot the woman wasn't telling him, but he didn't think this was quite the moment to bring that up. "My greatest difficulty," she said, "is I haven't been out of Arth Slya before and know very little about the world down here."

"You're not doing so bad, Saiir." He smiled. "And you knew enough to come here instead of Grannsha."

"Ignorance is not the same as stupidity, shipmaster."

"And you want to go to Utar-Selt. Slipping in the back door."

"I have to be careful, I'm all there is."

"It's not very likely you can do anything but get yourself killed."

She shook her head, looked stubborn. "I've taught

Temuengs here they aren't masters of the world,"

"You have that. How do you keep from being caught?"

"Can't be two women on this island look like you." I know a trick or two. How much will this cost?"

He rubbed a hand across his chin. "Fifty gold for passage, you and the children. In advance."

"Done." The urchin grin again; it charmed him but not enough for him to reduce the price though he was rather disappointed that she hadn't bothered to haggle. "It'll take a few days to steal that much."

He raised his brows.

"Temueng strongboxes," she said defiantly. "They owe me, more than they could ever pay though I beggared the lot of them. And don't worry, Shipmaster, I won't get caught or tangle you in Temueng nets. Now, the rest of it. What papers do you need? What signatures, what seals, who do you have to bribe, how much gold will it take and how soon do you need it?"

FOUR DAYS LATER. Tavisteen gone quiet. No more dead.

No alarms out for an impudent thief, though he listened for them and had his crew listening when they weren't getting the *Girl* ready to sail.

The room up under the roof. Late afternoon light stream-ing in, heavy with dust motes, a salt breeze blowing hot and hard through the windows, tugging at the papers Brann dropped on the table.

"Look them over, Shipmaster. I think they're right, but you'll know better than I if they'll pass."

THAT HE COULD read a number of scripts was one of the several reasons the children had for choosing him; they'd walked his mind in dream, learning the language of his islands, learning much of what he knew about the ports he visited and more about his character. He was a man of strong loyalties who kept his crew together, cared for them, gave them money to live on though that meant his limited resources vanished more quickly, a man whose love for his ship was as fierce as her love for her folk and fire-hearted Tincreal, a man of many gifts who could read water, air, sky and landshapes as if they were words scribed in a book, hard when he needed to be hard, with a center of tenderness he let very few see, a brown, square man with a large-featured square face. Sitting by the win-dow with the sun giving a sweat sheen to his tight-gained skin, he was a creature of living stone, a sea-god carved from red-brown jasper with eyes of polished topaz. He affected her in ways she didn't understand, did things to that adult body she'd so suddenly acquired that she didn't want to understand; this terrified her, even sickened her because she could not forget no matter how she tried the Temueng Censor grunting on top of her, reaming into her; she dreamed that time again and again, the children hav-ing to wake her because her cries might betray that night's hiding place. She watched the man and wanted him to touch her, her breasts felt sore and tight, there was a burning sweetness between her thighs. She forced her mind away from her intrusive body and tried to concen-trate on the papers and what the man would say of them.

SA MANG FELT HER restlessness, looked up. "Where are the children?"

"Around. Never mind them. How soon can we leave?"

He shook his head. "You are an innocent. Wait a min-ute." He began going through the papers again, holding them up to the light, wondering by what magic she'd come up with them. Not a flaw in them, at least none he could find. When he *was* finished, he squared the pile, flattened a hand on it. "How much

noise did you make getting these?"

"None. The Temuengs who signed and stamped them were, well, call it sleepwalking. They won't remember anything of what happened."

"Handy little trick. Mmmh." He tapped his forefinger on the pile of paper. "Can't go anywhere without these, but it's only a start, O disturber of Temueng peace and mine; even with gold to ease their suspicions, well have to be careful to touch the right men and move fast before the wrong men start talking to each other."

"How much gold?" Without waiting for an answer, she leaned out the window, brought back a heavy bag, which she set on the table in front of him. Before he could say anything, she had twisted away. She brought in a second bag, dumped it, and was out again, pulling in a third. With quick nervous movements, she went away from him to sit on the bed; today she seemed very aware of him *as a man*. Her response woke his own, he eyed her with inter-est, wondering what bedding a witch would be like. She looked hastily away. Skittish creature. Well, Sammo, that's for later.

He unwound the wire from the neck of the first bag, began setting out the coins, brows raising as he broached the other bags and the piles multiplied, ten each, in rows of ten, ten rows of ten, a thousand gold, a full thousand heavy hexagonals, soft enough to mark with his thumbnail. Even without weighing and trying them, he was sure they weren't mixed with base metal, something you had to watch for here in Tavisteen the tricky. When he finished he sat frowning at the mellow gold glimmer. And I thought to discourage her by asking a ridiculous price for her passage. He looked up. "This much high assay gold will be missed."

She shook her head. "Not soon; these are from the Tekora's private stash, dust and cobwebs over the lockboxes."

With a laugh and a shake of his head he began putting the coins back in the sacks. "You wouldn't consider sign-ing on with me as bursar? I do like the idea of paying off the Tekora's men with the Tekora's gold." He set two of the sacks on the paper pile, held out the third. "Here. You hang onto this, you might need it."

She shook her head. "No. I don't want it. When can we leave?"

He dropped the sack on the table, frowned. "Tide's right round mid-morning tomorrow, but I'd rather put off leaving another day, have to provision the *Girl*, top off the water barrels. Don't want to look hurried either, set noses twitching." He drummed, his fingers on the table top, lips moving as he conned the tides. "Why not midday three days on?"

She blooded a moment, nodded.

"Can you and the children get on board without anyone seeing you?" When she laughed at that, he went on, "A Temueng pilot will be coming along. He's to get us past the forts and fireships, good enough, but he'll stick his nose into every corner before he lets us leave. Can you handle that?"

"I think so. You can really be ready to sail that quickly?"

"I could sail yesterday." His voice was angry, violent. "If it weren't for those lapalaulau-cursed sharks."

She slid off the bed, started for the door, turned back. "I forgot to ask. How long from here to Utar-Selt?"

"Say we get good winds and we aren't jumped, ten, twelve days. The *Girl's* a clever flyer."

"That long"

"You want a shorter route, it's only five days to the mouth of the Garrunt, but don't ask me to take the *Girl* anywhere near the Fens."

"Which I understand are a maze of mud and stink and hostile swampfolk. No thanks. The Marish was bad enough. Seems to me the long way round is the shortest route, all things considered."

He got up and walked over to her, touched the side of her face, dropped his hand on her shoulder. "Need you go right now?"

She stopped breathing, green eyes suddenly frightened; she moved away, would not look at him.

"I only ask," he said mildly. He didn't try to move closer.

She let out a long shaky breath. "How old do you think I am, Sammang Schimli?"

He raised a brow. "Shall I flatter or speak the truth?"

"Truth."

"Mmm, mid-twenties, maybe a bit more." He crossed his arms over his chest. "A lovely age, Brann, old enough to have salt in the mix, young enough to enjoy the game."

She set her shoulders against the door, her agitation visibly increasing. It puzzled him, disturbed him, made him wonder if she was whole in the head. If not, what a waste.

"I wouldn't ... wouldn't know." She flattened her hands against the door, then burst out, "I'm eleven, I know what I look like, I know it's hard to believe, but inside here, I'm *eleven* years old. The children changed me, grew me older, I went to sleep a girl and woke a woman. Like this." She swept a hand along her body, dared to look at him a moment. "How could a child do what I have to do?"

"Eleven?" He frowned at her, uncertain.

She nodded, shyly, abruptly. "You ... you do disturb me, Shipmaster" She rushed on, "But I'm not ready for what you offer."

Abruptly he believed her, saw the child there, mar-veled that he hadn't understood it before. When her urchin's grin flashed out, when she relaxed and let her mask drop, she was little sister, mischievous child—if he didn't look at her body. He backed off. Nice child, good child, bright and warm and loving. He discovered that he liked her a lot and wanted to help her all he could. "Too bad," he said. "But we're still friends?"

She blushed, nodded. "If it were otherwise" She fumbled the door open and ran out.

He followed her, watched her slow as she went down the stairs until she was the cool witch he'd first seen. Shaking his head, he shut the door, went back to the table to tuck the papers in a leather pouch. The children. Spooky little bits. Those eyes. Preemalau's bouncing tits. Changed her. He shivered at the thought, momentarily chilled in spite of the heat. Eleven. What a thing to do to her. To me. He slid a hand down one of the bags of gold, the corners of the hexagonal pieces hard against his palm, then stripped its tie off and began stowing the coins about his person. The other two bags he shoved in the pouch on top of the papers. No more Arth Slya wares. For a good while, anyway. And I'm the only one in Tavisteen who knows that. He chuckled, patted the bulging pouch, began humming a lively tune. Too soon to be passing out bribes, might as well nose out some more of the Slya wares; she'd passed the gold on, didn't care what he did with it as long as he got her out. When she's a few years older, what a woman she'll be. Taking on the whole damn Tenueng empire. And getting away with it, yes, he'd wager even the *Girl* she got away with it. Should've had Hairy Jimm hanging around below. This much gold was honey to the tongue for the thugs hanging about. He bent, transferred the boot knife to his sleeve. Still humming, he left the room, locked the door behind him, went lightly down the stairs, the song's traditional refrain ousted from his head by a more seductive one, the siren song of the trader's game where profit was more the measure of skill than anything important in itself. No more Slya ware, his mind sang to him, no more no more, and when the word gets out, when that word gets out, the price goes up up up You're a lucky man, Sammang Schimli, though you'd have traded places with a legless octopus a week ago. Slya ware, Slya ware, rare it is and growing rarer, no one knows gonna be no more

THE TEMUENG ENFORCERS went like locusts through his goods, but the smuggled treasures were deep in the bundles of hides and fleeces. His crew went after the lapalaulau castrate and put things together again, stowing the bales and casks properly so the *Girl* was ready to go. When the sun was directly overhead and the lice were off the ship, when the *Girl* was tugging at her mooring, eager as Sammang was to be gone, he stood at her rail, wind whipping his hair into his eyes and mouth as he waited for the pilot. He watched the skinny Tern ueng (his pockets heavy with Brann's gently thieved gold) leave the sour-faced harbor master, clamber into a dinghy, sit stiff and somber while the master's men rowed him out to the *Girl*. Sammang wondered briefly where Brann and the children were, then walked forward to help the pilot over the rail.

He showed the Temueng about the ship, fuming as the man poked and pried into her cracks and crannies, even into the crew's quarters, opening their seabags, sticking his long crooked nose where it had no business being. The crew resented it furiously, but were too happy to be getting back to sea to

show their anger. They watched with sly amusement as the Temueng (they named him in whispers *Slimeslug*) went picking through Sammang's quarters with the same prissy thoroughness; they passed the open door again and again, savoring Sammang's disgust. He held his tongue with difficulty, beckoned Hairy Jimm in to take a chair on deck for the pilot. And he lingered a moment after the pilot followed Jimm out to grin at a large sea chest the Temueng hadn't seemed to notice and salute.

* * *

AS SOON AS HE could, he left the pilot sitting with his signal flags across his knees, lowering the level in a sack of red darra wine. Brann was sitting on his bed, flanked by the not-children. There was a shimmer about her, a snap-ping energy. "We've pulled the hook, the pilot's getting drunk on deck; we're just about loose, young Brann, but hold your breath until we're past the fireships." He dropped his eyes to the full breasts swaying with the movement of the ship beneath the heavy white silk of her shirt, sighed as he saw the nipples harden.

She smiled. "Eleven," she said. "Though I'm getting older by the minute."

"Yeah. Aren't we all?"

The blond boy had his head in her lap, the girl was curled up tight against her, both were deeply, limply asleep. With their eyes closed, they seemed more like real children. "They've been working hard the past few nights," she said. "They're worn out."

Worn out. That too was something he'd just as soon not have explained. "Not much point in hiding down here once we put the pilot off. You can trust my men, they're a good bunch." He frowned. "No ... no, you wait here until I have a talk with them which I will do once we pour that gilded gelding into his dinghy. You get seasick?"

"I don't know. I've never been on a boat before."

"Buatorrang's fist, woman. Ship. Not boat, ship." He fished under the bed, found a canvas bucket. "Spew in this if the need takes you." He looked at the sleeping children. "Them too." He started out the door, turned. "I won't leave you shut up longer'n I have to. Um, my crew, they're not delicate flowers, don't mind the way they talk."

"Stop fussing, Shipmaster. I have got a little sense, or haven't you noticed?"

Feeling better about everything Sammang went back on deck and stood by the rail watching Hairy Jimm maneuver the Girl among the ships crowding the estuary. The pilot *was* paying little attention to what *was* happening about him. His title had a Temueng twist to it; he wasn't there to guide them through the harbor's natural snags but to ease them past the far more deadly man-made obstacles. The day was brilliant with a brisk headwind, and tide and river current together were enough to carry the Girl bare-poled out to the stone pincers at the mouth of the bay. Stays singing about him, the salt smell growing stronger than the stench of estuary mud and city sewage, the shimmering blue water blown into sharp ridges, white foam dancing along them, Sammang relished everything about the day, the colors and sounds, the mix of smells, the exploding array of possibilities ahead of him.

The pilot shoved onto his feet as the ship came up to the two great towers looming over the narrow mouth of the estuary, settled himself and began whipping his signal flags about. When specks of bright color bloomed and swung atop the South tower, he made a last pass, then rolled up his flags, sheathed them, and dumped himself back in the chair, ignoring the crew who took every chance they found to walk up, stare at him and stroll away again. Hairy Jimm kept a minatory eye on them and the heckling didn't go beyond staring; he'd made it quite clear early on that anyone who laid a hand on the pilot would go over-board there and then. More than one of the crew had deep grudges against the Temuengs and the parade could have disintegrated into a shivaree with a dead Temueng at the end of it. When they began crowding too close and staying too long, Sammang nudged Hairy Jimma and the big brown bear lumbered forward and stopped the parade.

The ship slid without incident between the towers, began to lose way as the channel widened abruptly and the flow spread out. Hairy Jimm sent Tik-rat and Turrope to raise the jib and ordered the ship into a tack so the wind wouldn't push them into the Teeth of the Gate. The Girl was a two-masted merchariter with standing lugsails, a configuration that could have been clumsy and often was, but she was Sammang's dream and he'd watched her rise from bare bones under the hands of his great uncle

Kenyara; more than that, he'd built with his own hands model after model, had sat with Kenyara and argued and trimmed the models and made her come to life as much by will as by the work of his hands and the gold he brought back to the Pandaysarradup, the wood he'd searched out and brought back, the fittings he'd gathered from most of the ports he touched in his travels; the eyes on her bow he'd carved and painted himself. She could sail closer to the wind than most her size, could squat down and ride storm waves as well as any petrel. She was an extension of himself and he loved her far more than he would ever love man or woman, loved her with a passion and a delight that would have embarrassed him into stammering if he had to talk about it. Seeing her dulled and dying and quiet at the mooring had been the worst of many bad times during the months of stagnation in Tavisteen. Now he felt her come to life under his feet and hands; he stood smoothing his hand along her rail in a contented secret caress. Young Brann, I owe you. Whatever you want, you and your He cleared his throat with a sound half a laugh, half a groan. The children scared him and he had no hesitation admitting that to himself. Brann was pleasanter to the mind—child, woman, fighter, with a passion, caring; stub-bornness that reminded him very much of a younger Sammang. He thought fondly of a few of his own child-hood exploits, as he watched the fireships swinging at anchor, the last line to pass, then they were free. He took a deep breath. The air filled the lungs better out here. He looked at the slouched Temueng half asleep and reeking of the wine they'd fed him. Or it would soon as they got that off the *Girl's* deck.

They put the pilot and his minions overside in the trailing dinghy, set and trimmed the sails and left the fireboats in their wake. Sammang stood sniffing at the wind, gave a short shout of freedom and celebration, grinned as he caught the cheerfully obscene salutes from Dereech and his shadow Aksi.

He moved to the wheel, cuped his hands about his mouth, bellowed, "Tik-rat, Turrope, Aski, Leymas, Dereech, Gaoez, Staro, Rudar, Zaj, gather round."

When they were around him, squatting on the gently heaving deck, Sammang clasped his hands behind his head, grinned at them, still riding high with the effects of breaking the *Girl* loose and incidentally sneaking past the Temueng clutches the woman they were turning the is-land upside down to find. "We got a passenger," he said. He stretched, straining his muscles till his joints popped. "The woman the Temuengs were hunting. One who kicked those sharks where it hurt. We don't mind that, do we." He grinned into their grins, grimaced as the wind blew hair into his teeth. Rotting in Tavisteen, he'd let his hair grow long, too despondent to get it cut. "We owe her," he said. "Still be watching moss grow up the walls without her help. Witch," he said. "Nice kid but no man's meat. Not mine, not yours. Ever see what happens if a Silili priest holds onto a rocket too long after its lit? Uh-huh. So keep your hands to yourselves. This old fart talking to you, he wouldn't like to see what comes down if one of you got her into a snit."

"Hanh." Hairy Jimm rubbed a meaty hand across his beard. "I heerd a thing or two about that nakki that makes me leery of her. What keeps her hands off us?"

"Relax, Jimm. She's a good kid. Treat her like a little sister." He thought a minute. "Not so little." He looked round at the crew. "That's it."

They went off to busy themselves with the endless tasks that kept a ship healthy, but Hairy Jimm fidgeted where he was. "Turrope's boor was telling him the Fen pirates are taking everything that moves, be you Temu be you Panay, whatever. How you want to handle that?"

"A good wind and no proa's going to catch the *Girl*."

"Turrope's hoor has got a busy ear, she say the Djelaan have found them a weatherman."

Sammang laughed. "If he sticks his head up, I'll sic the witch on him." He sobered. "She's paying us for a quick passage, Jimm. Cutting south would add at least five days. Give your tootom a thump for me and whistle us a steady blow." He rubbed thumb and forefinger over the finger-pieces of the heavy gold pendant in his left ear, the first thing he'd ransomed with Brann's gold, tracking down the buyer and leaning on him till he sold. "I'll talk to her, see what she says." He watched Jimm walk away, watched him try the tension of backstays, eye the sails for weak spots, look for any problems he'd missed in port, things that would only show when she was moving. With a nod to Uasuf, silent at the wheel, Sammang went to stand in the bow, hands clasped behind him, staring out across the empty blue. Empty now, but how long would it stay that way? For a few breaths he stopped worrying and simply relished the way the

Girl was taking the waves and the wind; she was a trier, his sweet *Girl*, even with her hull fouled with weed and barnacles, she danced over the waves. Preemalau be gentle and send no storms, she had to be careened and cleaned, gone over for dry rot and wood worm, every bit of cordage checked and replaced if necessary. He knew as well as Hairy Jimm how fragile she was right now. He unclasped his hands, touched her stays, feeling the hum in them, touched her wood feeling the life in it, loving her for her beauty and her gallant heart, afraid for her, cursing the Djelaan pirates, cursing all weather-men, cursing the Temuengs who were too busy with con-quest to keep their own coasts clean. He watched the dolphins dance in the bow waves a while longer then went below to see how Brann was faring and talk to her about Jimm's disclosures.

"How soon until we're in Djelaan waters?" she said.

"Four days," he said.

"Too far," she said, "Wear the children out for what could be nothing."

"You don't far-see?" he said.

"The Temuengs call me witch," she said, "their mis-take. Don't you make the same one. I have certain abili-ties, but they're useful only in touching-distance."

"Then we should turn south in two days, go wide around the Djelaan corals," he said.

"How many days would that add?"

"Four, probably five."

"Too long," she said. "I'd be a shade by then and the children would be hungry."

"Then we sail on luck and hope," he said, "and fight if we have to."

"There's nothing else?"

"No."

THE NEXT TWO DAYS passed bright and clear, with spanking winds that propelled the ship across the glittering blue as if she were greased. Sammang watched Brann move about the ship, taking pains to keep out of the way of anyone who was working. She respected skill and found the sailors fascinating. Both things showed. The crew saw both, were flattered and fascinated in their turn and the children helped with that by staying below where their strangeness wouldn't keep reminding the men of corpses in dark alleys and corpses floating in the bay. Young Tik-rat was wary of her for an hour or two, but he succumbed to her charm after she'd followed him about awhile as he played his pipe to help the work go easier; he spent the hour after that teaching her worksongs. Leymas was the next she won. He taught her a handful of knots then set her to making grommets; she was neat-fingered and used to work-ing with her hands and delighted when he praised her efforts. Sammang continued to watch when he had a mo-moment free, amused by her ease with them as if they were older brothers or male cousins, as if she willed them to forget her ripe body, damping ruthlessly any hint of sexu-ality. One by one his crew fell to her charm and began treating her as a small sister they were rather fond of, fonder as the second day faded into the third. By then he couldn't move about the deck without finding her huddled with one of the men, her strong clever hands weaving knots, her head cocked to one side, listening with skepti-cal delight to the extravagant tale he was spinning for her. Even Hairy Jimm told her lies and let her take the wheel so she could feel the life of the ship while he showed her how to read the Black Lady, the swinging lodestone nee-dle, and put that together with the smell of the wind and the look of the sea to keep the ship rushing along the proper course.

She had relaxed abruptly and utterly all her own wari-ness and pretenses and was the child of the gentle place where she'd been reared. He saw in her the naive and trusting boy he'd been when he found his island growing too small for him and he'd smuggled himself on board one of the trading ships that stopped at Perando in the Pandaysarradup. He'd been confident in his abilities and eager to see the great world beyond, never hurt deliber-ately and with malice, trust never betrayed, friendly *as a puppy*. It took a lot of trampling and treachery to knock most of that out of him. He saw the same kind of trust in her and he sighed for the pain coming to her, but knew he couldn't shield her from that pain—and if he could he wouldn't. To survive, she had to learn. Even the Temuengs hadn't taught her to be afraid of others;

here, surrounded by people who were not threatening, who responded to her friendliness with good will and friendliness of their own, she'd let her guard down. Not a good habit to get into. Still he couldn't condemn it totally as foolishness, it had done her good with the men. And, he had to admit to himself, with him.

The fifth day slid easily into the sixth; no Djelaan yet, but the rising of the sun showed him clouds blowing about a low dark smear north and west of the Girl. The south-ernmost of a spray of uninhabited coral atolls, most of them with little soil and no water, good only to shelter pirate proas while the Djelaan waited to ambush ships that ventured past. He scowled at it. Was it empty of life except for birds and a few small rodents or were a dozen proas pulled up on one of its crumbly beaches with a weatherman set to cast his spells?

Brann came to the bow and stood beside him. "Is that Selt?"

"No."

"Thought it was a bit soon. Djelaanr

"If they're coming, that's where they'll come from." She chewed her lip a moment. "I can't judge distances at sea"

"Well come even with the island about mid-afternoon, be about a half-day's sail south of it."

"And you'd like to know if you can relax or should get ready to fight?"

"Right."

"And the trip is a little more than half over?"

"Wind keeps up and pirates keep away, we should be in Silili say about sundown five days on."

"Mmm. Children lying dormant, they haven't used as much energy as they'd ordinarily do." She looked around at the crew, then straightened her shoulders, stiffened her spine. "Jaril will fly over the islands and Yaril will tell us what he sees. You'd better warn Nam and the others; it's sort of startling the first time you see one of the children changing."

Sammang wasn't sure what was going to happen but suspected it would be spectacular and remind him and his crew forcibly she wasn't little sister to all the world. He patted her hand. "They won't faint, Bramble."

She looked up at him, startled, then half-smiled and shook her head. "Well ... I'd better fetch them up." She left him and moved with brisk assurance along the deck.

He went back to stand by Hairy Jimm who had taken the wheel awhile because he was nearly as fond of the *Girl* as Sammang and loved the feel of her under his hands. "Our witch is getting set to scare the shit out of us."

"Hanh." Jimm took a hand off the wheel, scratched at his beard. "Hey, she *our* witch, Sammo. Ehh Stubb," he boomed. "On your feet."

The dozing helmsman started, came to his feet, looked dazedly about. "Huh?" Then he came awake a bit more and strolled yawning over to them.

"Grab hold." As soon as Staro the Stub had the wheel, Jimm moved away. "Our witch gon be showing her stuff and I want a close eye on it."

By the time Brann came up on deck with Yaril and Jaril, the news had spread through the crew. Even those sup-posed to be sleeping settled themselves inconspicuously about the deck doing small bits of busywork. Sammang looked around, amused. The way Hairy Jimm said *our witch*, with the air of a new father contemplating his offspring, made him want to laugh until he realized he felt much the same way.

She came up to Sammang and Hairy Jim. "What's the most common large bird that flies out this far?" "Albatross. Why?"

She turned to the boy. "You know that one?"

Jaril grinned at her and suddenly the grin was gone, the boy was gone, there was a shimmer of gold and a large white bird with black wingtips was pulling powerfully at the air and rising in a tight spiral above the ship; a heart-beat later it was speeding toward the island.

YARIL SRRS WITH her back against the mast, her eyes shut, her high young voice sounding over the wind and water sounds, the creaking of mast and timber.

First island. Nothing from high up, going closer, some birds objecting, no beaches, no sort of anchorage. Going on to the next.

Silence. The listeners wait without fuss, quietly working, not talking.

Second island. More trees. Don't see any sign of surface water. Definitely deserted, quiet enough to hear a rat scratch.

Silence. Sammang gazes at Brann wondering what she is thinking.

Third island. This one's the lucky dip. A dozen proas drawn up by a stream cutting through a bit of beach, apparently water's the main attraction. Maybe a hun-dred Djelaan, war party, clubs, spears, throwing sticks, long knives, war axes. A clutch of them cheering on a tattooed man who's throwing a fit. Ah, the fit's over. Look at them scoot. Anyone want to wager the tat-toed gent wasn't telling them about this fine fat ship passing by? Get a move on, folks, you got trouble rolling at you.

THEY RACED WEST and south, carrying as much sail as the rigging would stand, the *Girl* groaning and shuddering, fighting the drag of the weed on her hull. In spite of that she sang splendidly through the water. She popped rig-ging and staggered now and then, but the crew replaced and improvised and held her together as much by will as skill. Sammang was all over the deck, adding his strength where it was needed, eyes busy searching for breaks. He heard laughter and saw Brann beside him, her gyeen eyes snapping with sheer delight in the excitement swirling about her. For a breath or two he gwzed at her and was very nearly the boy who'd run to the wider world confi-dently expecting marvels. Then he went back to nursing his *Girl*.

The wind dropped between one breath and the next. The *Girl* shivered and lost way, the drag of the weed braking her with shocking suddenness. Sammang cursed, stood looking helplessly about. The crew exchanged glances, dropped where they were to squat waiting, hands busy splicing line, one man whittling a new block to replace one that had split.

Brann touched Sammang's arm. "Jaril says the proas are about an hour behind us."

"How many?"

"Twelve. Traveling in two groups, the tattooed man—that has to be the weatherman, Jaril thinks so and I agree—he's hanging behind with a couple boats to guard him. The other nine are riding a mage wind at us, really flying, Jaril says."

"How many men in each boat?"

"Nine or ten."

"Eighty maybe ninety, not counting the bodyguards." He scowled at the limp sails. "A wind, even a breath"

"Jaril's thought of that. He's been trying to get at the weatherman but he keeps bouncing off some kind of ward, whether he comes at the proa out of the sky or under water. Only thing he can think of is a pod of mid-sized whales he spotted a little way back. When he broke off talking, he was going to find them. He plans to drive them at the proas. Spell or no spell, a half dozen irritated whales are going to swamp that boat. He figures a weath-erman will drown *as fast as any* other breather. And once *he's* gone, you should have your wind. Thing is, though, he doesn't know quite how long it's going to take, so you should be ready for a fight."

Sammang nodded, touched her arm. "Our witch," he said, felt rather than heard a murmur of agreement from the crew. "You'll fight with us?"

"In my way." She grimaced, looked around at the circle of grave faces, raised her voice so all could hear. "Listen, brothers, when it starts, don't touch me. I am Drinker of Souls and deadlier than a viper, I don't want accidents, I prefer to choose where I drink."

Sammang nodded, said nothing.

Yaril tugged at his sleeve. "What do you want me to be, Sammang shipmaster? Serpent? wildcat? falcon? dragon? It'd have to be a small dragon."

Sammang blinked at the not-child. "Falcon sounds good. You wouldn't get in our way, and you could go for their eyes."

She considered a moment, nodded. "Be even better if I make some poison glands for the talons, then all I have to do is scratch them."

Sammang blinked some more. "Be careful whom you scratch," he said after he got his voice back.

"Don't worry, I've done this before." She stretched, yawned, went to curl up by the mast; a moment later she seemed sound asleep.

He turned to Brann, raised a brow.

"Don't ask me," she said.—Before they came here, probably; that's something I haven't seen."

SAMMANG WENT BELOW and dug out his war ax, a steel version of the stone weapon he'd learned to swing as a boy in the godwar dances, his father's passed on to him, an ax that hadn't been used in a real war since his great-grandfather carried it against Setigo, the next island over. After he'd shipped out a few years, he got very drunk and nostalgic and spent most of his remaining coin hiring a smith to make a copy of the bloody old ax, describing it to him as a curving elongated meat cleaver, point heavy with a short handle carved to fit his grip.

Zaj and Gaoez, the bowmen of the crew, climbed on the cabin's roof and sat waiting, arrow bundles between their knees; Hairy Jimm was swinging his warclub to get the feel of it, a long-handled lump of ironwood too heavy to float; other crew members were using hones on cutlasses or spearpoints, razor discs or stars, whipping staffs about, making sure clothing and bodies were loose enough to fight effectively. Djelaan never took prisoners; either they were driven off or everyone on the ship died. The *Girl* wallowed in the dead calm. Close by, several fish leaped and fell back, the sounds they made unnaturally loud in that unnatural silence. Yaril woke, fidgeted beside Brann. "I'm going up," she said suddenly. She dissolved into a gold shimmer then was a large Redmask falcon climbing in a widening spiral until she was a dark dot high overhead circling round and round in an effortless glide. Brann stood still, looking frightened and uncertain.

The hour crept past, men occupied with small chores fidgeting with their weapons.

The Redmask left her circling and came swooping down, screaming a warning, found a perch on the foresail yard.

Silence a few breaths, the sea empty, then the Djelaan came out of nowhere, yelling, heating on flat drums, proas racing toward the *Girl*, their triangular sails bulging with the magewind, a wind that did not touch the *Girl*'s sag-ging canvas.

Zaj and Gaoez jumped up and began shooting, almost emptying the first proa before the mage wind began taking their shafts and brushing them aside. They shot more slowly after that, compensating for the twist of the wind, managed to pick off another half-dozen before the Djelaan bobtail spears came hissing at them, propelled with mur-derous force by the throwing sticks. They hopped about, dodging the spears and getting off an ineffective shaft or two until Hairy Jimm began batting spears aside with his warclub. The rest of the crew darted about, catching up those that tumbled to the deck and hurling them back at the proas, doing little damage but slowing the advance somewhat.

Then grapnels were sinking into the wood of the rail, the Djelaan attacking from both sides. Sammang and oth-ers raced along the rails, slashing the ropes until there were too many of them and they had to fight men instead of rope. Yaril screamed, powered up from the yard and dived at the proas, not a falcon anymore but a small sun searing through the sails. The weatherman was holding the air motionless, trapping the *Girl* but protecting her too; in seconds she was swaying untouched in a ring of flames as the proa sails burned and began to char the masts and rigging. With shouts of alarm half of the attack-ers turned back and began to fight the fires that threat-ened to leave them without a means of retreat.

The rest swarmed over the rails and the *Girl*'s men were fighting for their lives, cutlass ax and halberd, warclub staff and all the rest, flailing, stabbing, slashing, a ring of men tight about the foremast holding off the hordes that tried to roll over them. Yaril flew at Djelaan backs, stoop-ing and slashing, her

razor talons moistened with the poison she and her brother could produce when inspired to do so, keeping the Djelaan off Brann as she walked through them, reaching and touching, reaching and touch-ing, each touch draining and dropping a man. A spear went into her side; she faltered a moment, pulled it out with a gasp of pain, sweat popping out on her face, a trickle of blood, then the wound closed over and she walked on.

At first the attackers didn't realize what was happening, then they began struggling to avoid those pale deadly hands—They retreated before her, throwing other attack-ers into confusion. The *Girl's men* shouted when they saw this and fought with renewed hope.

A powerful gust of wind whooshed along the deck, filling the drooping sails. Another deadly Redmask came darting out of the east where the weatherman's proas had been and swooped at the Djelaan, clawing at eyes and hands, slashing flesh, the poison on his talons killing quickly, painfully. Twisting and turning with demonic agility he wove unharmed among the weapons of the pirates with a formidable ease that drew moans of fear from them. Retreating from the falcons, retreating from Brann who burned now with a shimmering fire, the Djelaan broke. Dropping their weapons, scrambling down the grapnel lines, leaping into the sea and swimming for their fire-stripped proas, the men in the boats dragging the swim-mers over the sides, the Djelaan fled that demon-haunted ship.

Sammang dropped his war ax and leaped to the wheel, turning the *Girl* so she was cutting across the rising swells, not lying helpless between them. Hairy jimm roared the men capable of moving into trimming the sails and getting the ship into order so she wouldn't be broken by the coming storm. Brann and the children staggered along the deck, heaving Djelaan dead and wounded overboard. When that was finished, Brann stood a moment staring at her glowing hands, the wind whipping her white hair about, plastering her shirt against her burning body. With a sigh she went searching for crew dead and wounded. Zaj was dead, a small brown islander much like the men who'd killed him. She and the children carried him to the side wall of the cabin and lashed him there to wait for what rites Sammang and the others would want for him. She hurried back to kneel beside Dereech who had a flap of scalp hanging down over his face, deep cuts in his legs and shoulder. He stared up at her with his one clear eye, horror in his face as she reached for him, tried to crawl away from her but was too weak. When she flattened her hand on him, he froze, a moan dying in his throat.

From his place at the wheel, Sammang watched her and wondered what she intended, wondered if he should drive her off Dereech. What she'd done to the Djelaan she'd done to save her life and theirs, but the glimpses he'd caught of her work worried him. He liked and trusted the child in her, but didn't know what to do about the witch. In the end, he did nothing.

She bent lower, smoothed her hand up along Dereech's face, pressing the flap into place, her hands blurring in a moonglow mist. The bleeding stopped, the flap stayed put as if the mist had soldered it down. She pressed the other wounds shut, smoothed her hands over them, the glow shuddering about her flesh and his. The children stood behind her, their hands welded to her body until she sat back on her heels, finished with the healing.

Tik-rat had a spear through a lung. She burnt the spear, out of him, bone point and broken haft, close the wound and held her hands over it, a wound that was almost always fatal. Smiling Tik-rat was the ship's bard, story teller and singer, the pet of the crew. Now all saw her clean and close his wound, saw the boy's chest begin to rise and fall steadily and smoothly. *Our witch, she's our witch.* A whisper passing round. Our child-woman witch, Sammang murmured to himself. The children with her, she moved on to Rudar, then Uasuf, left them sleeping, their wounds closed, cleaned, healed.

She went briskly over to Hairy Jimm, who jumped when she touched him, looked uneasy and dubious as she began moving her hands over his meaty body, touching, pressing, the mist moving with her. After a minute of this, though, he grinned and stood holding his arms out from his body as if for a tailor taking measurements. When she finished, he patted her on the head. "Any time, our witch."

She went on, the children following close behind. Tun-ope, Leymas, Gaoez. Healing the smallest cuts, the scrapes and bruises, even a blood-blister on Turrope's little finger. Then she came toward Sammang.

She looked very tired, haunted by all the dying, her face pale in spite of the eerie glow that shone out

through her skin. "Your turn, Sammo. Give over the wheel a minute; you might find this a bit distracting."

Hairy Jimm boomed laughter, shouldered Sammang away from the wheel. "Distractin's not the word, no not the word."

She touched the cut in Sammang's side. He felt a jolt, then a tingle, then coolness, a new vigor coursing into him. Her strong nervous hands moved along his body and all the hurts and scrapes of the fight were wiped away. And he understood the look on Jimm's face. He was tumescent before she was half done, ready to take on a harem and a half when she stepped away from him.

She smiled uncertainly at him, met his eyes briefly, blushed, turned hastily away to the hatch.

A bit of hard work and some douches of icy sea water from the building waves cooled him down. He glanced at the sun and was startled to see how little it had moved. Less than an hour since the fighting started. He shook his head, feeling a touch of wonder at how much had hap-pened in that pinch of time. Two dead. But because of the child-woman and the not-children the wounded lived and were well, neither maimed nor disfigured. He lifted his head and laughed. "Our witch," he shouted, laughed again at the cheers from the three now awake. He began a rumbling song, Hairy Jimm took it up, all of them roared it into the wind as they settled the *Girl* for the blow coming.

SOMETIME AFTER MIDNIGHT Sammang stumped wearily into his cabin. A nightlamp was hanging from a hook by his hammock. Brann was curled in the bed, half-covered by a blanket, her flesh faintly glowing in the darkness. Her eyes were closed and for some time he thought she was asleep; he pulled off his shirt, started to unlace his trou-sers, thought about the sleeping witch, and decided he could stand the damp if he kept himself warm. Eleven, eleven, eleven, he told himself; his mind believed it but his body didn't. He started to swing up into the hammock, couldn't resist another look at Brann. She was curled on her right side now watching him. Her face was pale and drawn, huge eyes, dark-ringed, asking him ... He turned his back on her, climbed into the hammock, flipped the blanket over him and settled himself to sleep.

Much later he woke, knowing something had roused him from sleep, not knowing what it was. He listened to the ship, nothing there. Slowly he became aware of a sound almost too soft to hear, faint rhythmic creaking, soft soft rustles.

Brann lay curled up, her back to him; the children were somewhere else, doing whatever shapechangers did at night. She was sobbing and the shudders that convulsed her body were shaking the bed. He scowled at her, hesi-tated, tipped out of the hammock and padded the few steps to the bed. He touched her shoulder. "Bramble?"

She buried her face in the pillow. The shaking went on; she was gasping and struggling to stop crying, unable to stop the shudders coursing through her body.

He caught her shoulder, pulled her over, examined her face. She was crying with the ugly all-out grief of a wounded child. He straightened, looked helplessly around, cursed the children for leaving her in this state. Finally he gath-ered her up, holding her tightly against him, patting her, smoothing his hand over her hair and down her back, over and over, murmuring he didn't know what to her; her shudders and wrenching sobs died gradually away.

For a while she was just a child he was comforting. Insensibly that changed, pats changed to caresses. He forgot the child in the woman's body—until he suddenly realized what he was doing. He pulled away from her. "You'll be all right now," he said when he could get the words out. He started to get up but her hands closed about his arm, pulled him down beside her.

"Don't go," she whispered. "Please."

"Brann" He touched her face, drew his hands down over her shoulder and onto her breast. Her eyes widened, her tongue moved along her lips. She sighed and her breast shifted under his hand, the nipple hard as he was. He pulled his hand away.

"No," she breathed.

"Got to," he said; he tore at the lacing on his trousers, breaking the thongs in his urgency.

She was warm and wet and ready for him, closing tightly about him, passive at first, then doing what her body taught her. When it was finished and he lay beside her, his breathing quieting, she snuggled

against him, sighed, a sound of deep contentment, and went to sleep.

HE WOKE WITH a numb arm and white curls tickling his chin, sunlight pouring through the slats of the airvent, lay a moment listening to the sounds of the ship. The wind had slackened to a brisk quartering breeze that drove the Girl steadily along without straining her.

Brann's breath was a spot of warm dampness on his shoulder. She was deeply, bonelessly asleep, not even murmuring as he eased from under her and slid off the bed. He picked up a fresh pair of trousers and laced them on, pulled on a sleeveless shirt bleached by sun and salt water to a dirty gray. He ran his fingers through his hair and swore to have Staro take a knife to it before the day was out.

He looked at Brann. She lay on her stomach, one arm outflung, the other bent so her fist was pressed against her mouth. A child, damn her. A moment before he'd been looking forward to breakfast, now his appetite was gone. He left the cabin, his bare feet soundless on the planks, taking care to make no noise when, he shut the door. He didn't want to wake her. If she slept most of the day away, he'd be quite happy. He had a lot of thinking to do.

Hairy Jimm had the wheel. He was squinting at the sky ahead, humming a three-note song into his beard. He grinned at Sammang, jerked a massive thumb at the sky. "Takes a bit of getting used to, it does, but they're handy little buggers. Y' know, Sammo, you ought to keep hold of them all, say you can."

Sammang looked up. Two large white birds circled la-zily above the ship, effortlessly keeping even with her.

"They been up there most all the night, friendly of them, they say they give us a shout down here if somethin starts coming at us."

* * *

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON Brann came on deck. Standing in the bow, Sammang heard her shouted exchanges with the crew, heard her silences. She drifted about for some time, circling gradually closer to him, but he gave no sign he knew she was there. When she put her hand on his arm, he flinched and all but jerked his arm away.

"You're really upset." She seemed amazed.

"Yes," he said, angrily, almost violently.

"I told you I was getting older. I was eleven in Tavisteen, but things have happened since, pushing me older. Might be fifteen, sixteen seventeen now." She drew her forefin-ger along the hard muscle of his arm. "You helped, Sammo, you taught me a lot before you ever touched me."

"Don't do that." He pulled his arm away, stared at the water ahead of the ship without seeing it. "Why?"

"I don't know. Lot of reasons. Comfort. I needed to touch someone just for me, not to heal them or kill them. She gave a tiny shrug. "Curiosity."

"You weren't virgin." His own resentful confusion in-creased his fury.

"A Temueng censor raped me. He's dead." She ran her hand slowly down his arm; he felt her enjoying the feel of him and ground his teeth together. "You would be too," she said, "if I'd wished it."

A chill ran through him, fear. He forced himself to look at her. There was sadness in her face as if she knew how her words had affected him, had extinguished desire. *She said it deliberately*, he thought, *out of pity for me*. He took a step away, almost hating her. Then child and woman both looked at him out of those wide green eyes and anger drained from him.

Forgetting him, she leaned precariously out to look down at the water slicing out from the bow. "The sea looks different." she said. "How come?"

"How different?"

"Color maybe, the way it moves. I don't know. It's just different."

Watching her, he again saw himself as a boy, ship's lad trying to answer the same question. He leaned over the rail beside her and began teaching her as he was taught.

THE NEXT DAY was bright and clear, but the wind grew erratic, now and then quitting altogether,

leaving the *Girl* wallowing, her sails slatting, the crew run off their feet. And the weathermaker's ghost tangled itself in the rigging, gibbering at them, which didn't improve either skill or morale. Tik-rat who was ship's exorciser as well as bard had dealt with the rest of the ghosts but the weatherman was stubborn and filled with spite, determined to make the lives of his slayers as miserable as he could manage. He was ragged and growing more so, but grimly hanging on ignoring Tik-rat's chants and sacred dances, the erod-ing of the incense the boy waved at him, the curses of Sammang and the rest of the crew. Yaril and Jaril watched the process with fascination until it began wearing on the nerves of their friends, then they joined to drive the ghost from the shrouds and banged through him until he was scattered wisps of smoke that dissipated with the rising wind.

ON THE TWELFTH day after leaving Tavisteen the *Panday Girl* dropped anchor in the crowded bay at the island port Silili.

4. Brann's Quest—Silili to Andurya Durat with Taguiloa the Dancing Man

HOLDING LIT CANDLES in both hands, Taguiloa made the last run, whirling over and over, coming up with the candles still burning, arms lifted high over his head, feet stamping out an intricate patterdance over the cork mat-ting spread on the flags of the summer court. He finished the dance before the painted coffin, made the required deep obeisance, blew out the candles, bowed to the finger-snapping crowd and stalked into the darkness with stiff-legged dignity, leaving Yarm to pass through the ghost-witnesses and collect what coins they felt like giving. Should be a goodish haul. Most of the witnesses were rich old merchants, more than half-drunk, delighted to have their minds taken off the death of one of their num-ber, even if the dead was only an old cousin of the master of this house. They were reminded too vividly of their own decaying bodies and how short the count of their remaining years could be. He didn't like performing at ghost watches either but the money was good, the fee guaranteed, with whatever he could wring from the watchers added on top of that.

He stopped by the food table, dipped a drinking bowl into the hot mulled wine and stepped back into the shad-ows to watch the dancers who followed him move onto the matting, their long sleeves fluttering, their gauze draper-ies hiding little of the lithe bodies beneath. Tari called Blackthorn and her dancers. Csermanoa wasn't stinting his uncle. Taga smiled. Wasn't for love, all this, Csoa the Sharp was underlining his position among the Hina mer-chant class; from the number of men sitting out there and the smiles painted onto their faces, he was nailing down his status with the same force he used to drive bargains.

Tari's flute player was a marvel, the sounds he got out of that pipe, and matched—the mood of the dance and the subtle rhythms of Tari's body. Taga sipped at the wine, frowning thoughtfully at the way the music enhanced the appeal of the dancers. Though tradition decreed that flute music be reserved for female dancers, for the past year he'd been working with Tari's Ladjinatuai, developing a mixture of tumbling and dance that used the flowing line of the flute music, but he hadn't tried it in public yet. It was a daring move and required the right audience, prob-ably one with a strong leavening of Temuengs. Much as he despised them, they weren't so rigidly set on maintaining things the way they were. When he ventured to combine juggling and tumbling into a single presentation, he had Gerontai his master to support and defend him, but he remembered all too well how difficult it had been to win acceptance before the Tekora chanced to see him and approve. Taguiloa spent a good few days despising himself for being grateful for this recognition until his mentor--almost-father chided him out of it. We're despised anyway by those who pay us for our skills, Gerontai said, don't let them tell you how to see yourself. Look at the lap-dogs licking Temueng ass and running after you now that the Tekora says you're remarkable. What does it matter that it takes a Temueng to see what you are? You know yourself, soul-son, you know you're better than I ever was or could be. Your integrity lies in your art, not in what Hina say of you. The new things he wanted to do, though, would need a lot more than the Tekora's approval. He was growing more and more impatient to get started but could only see one way to manage. Gather a troupe together and travel to Andurya Durat with a chance at performing before the

emperor—which would give him the right to display the imperial sigil when he was working. That plan would cost an impossible sum in bribes and fees, to say nothing of general expenses. He'd need a patron and a lot of luck to have half a chance of pulling it off.

He watched and listened a while longer, brooding over all the barriers he could see no way of surmounting, then set the bowl down and went into the sidecourt where Csermanoa had put up a paper pavilion for the players, a place to keep them away from his guests. He found Yarm in a corner with one of Tari's maids, glanced at her to see if she was being coerced in any way, nodded to her and strolled into the alcove that served as washroom and dressingroom. After stripping the paint from his hands and face, he climbed out of his tumbling silks and pulled on a long dark robe, thrust his feet into the aged sandals he brought along when the performance would be long, com-plex and tiring. Knotting a narrow black sash about his waist, he walked back into the main room, stood looking around. Chinkoury the m'darjin magician and his boys in a small knot by the door, elongated blue-black figures, even the boys a head taller than Taguiloa. To one side and a little behind them a clutch of Felhiddin knife dancers, bending, stretching, testing gear, inspecting each other, chattering in their rapid guttural tongue, little brown men covered in intricate blue tattoos. He didn't recognize them, must be new to Silili. Trust Csermanoa to get hold of something no one else had seen. Curled up in the far corner, snatching what sleep they could, six young women, more joyhouse girls than dancers, a step above ordinary joygirls, but far below the rank of courtesan, though most of them had hopes. The last to perform—in both their functions—they were expected to return to their house with more than their appearance fee, with longer-term attachments if they could manage it.

He nodded to Chinkoury and passed out of the pavilion. He stood in shadow watching the dancers, silently applauding Tad for the gift she was wasting on those drunken coin-suckers. He watched the merchants for a moment with a contempt he usually had to hide; some were drink-ing and eating, a few frankly asleep, others wandering about, some watching the dancers, some with their heads together, a heavily conspiratorial air about them that sug-gested they either plotted new coups or told each other tales of coups past to magnify their shrewdness. Maybe one or two watched Blackthorn dancing with a pinch of appreciation and understanding of what they were seeing, the magic she was making there on the cork mats before the painted coffin. Taguiloa drew his sleeve across his face, amused and angry. I ought to know, he thought, by now I ought to know what to expect. He put anger away and watched Blackthorn end her dance, bow first to the coffin, her sleeves fluttering dangerously near the hordes of candles burning about the elaborate box, then to the audience, who woke enough to provide the expected ap-prise, she was after all Blackthorn, the most celebrated dancer in three generations. As her maids came giggling into the audience, rattling their collecting bowls, dodging gropes, shaking heads at gross remarks but careful to smile and say nothing, Blackthorn sailed majestically into the darkness, her dancers drifting after her, the flute player weaving a slow simple tune that trailed into silence a moment after the last of the girls vanished.

In the hush before Chinkoury was due to appear, Taguiloa heard a faint commotion from the direction of the main gate and succumbed to the curiosity that was his chief vice. He glanced quickly about, but the noisy clash of cymbals, the sprays of colored smoke and the looming of the apprentices as they ushered their master onto the cork, all this had trapped the attention of most of the guests and servants; those still involved in conversations wouldn't notice if old Csagalgaso climbed out of his coffin and jiggled on the lid. He slipped away and eeled into a dark corner of the public court, hidden behind a potted blackthorn that Tad had given to Csermanoa when he was one of her favored few, before she inherited her house and income from another of her lovers.

Old Grum stopped talking and slammed the hatch shut, swung the bar and opened the wicket to let in the folk he'd been arguing with.

A man and a woman. Not Hina. Two children, very fair. Not Hina.

"You wait," Grum said, "You wait here." He jerked a third time at the bell rope then stumped off to his hutch and vanished inside.

A broad man muscled like a hero, Panday by the look of him, not much taller than Taguiloa but wide enough to ' make two of him. Dark brown skin shining in the torch-light, yellow eyes, hawk's eyes.

Taguiloa grinned. Fitting, with a beak like that. Wide, rather thick-lipped mouth, good for grins or sneers. Raggedly cut black hair. Barbaric ear ornament the length of a man's finger, a series of animal faces linked together. A shipmaster from his dress.

The woman, tall and full of nervous energy. Attractive face for one not Hina, rather wide in the mouth with elegant cheekbones and an arrogant nose; eyebrows like swallow's wings over large lustrous eyes. Green, he thought, though it was hard to be sure in the torchlight. A band of silk wound about her head, hiding her hair. White blouse with long loose sleeves, wide leather belt that laced in front, long loose black trousers stuffed carelessly in the tops of black boots. She wore no ornaments of any kind, had no visible weapons, but he smelled the danger that hovered round her like a powerful perfume.

Dombro the Steward came into the court, hastened to the visitors. "Sam mang Shipmaster, you are early this year."

"And late this night, for which I beg your master's pardon, but it is important I speak with him."

"So the Sao Csermanoa understood. He asks if you would wait in the spring garden pavilion, Shipmaster. He cannot leave his guests quite yet."

Taguiloa scowled at the Steward. Stiff-rumped worm. Players had to put up with a lot of sniping from him; he looked like he wanted to try his insolence on the Shipmaster but didn't quite dare. Obviously the Panday was important to Csermanoa. He watched the Shipmaster nod and follow the Steward, waited a while then slipped after him. He'd met many foreigners in this house. Csermanoa's interests ranged widely; while it wasn't according to Temueng law for a Hina to own shipping, he was a very silent partner to more than one Shipmaster, and Taga's snooping had brought him the startling discovery that this highly respectable merchant was also a fence of considerable proportions; there was not a whisper of that in the market places around Silili and Taguiloa would have been mocked as moon-dreaming if he'd told anyone, but he was a miser with the secrets he nosed out, calling them up and fondling them when sleep eluded him.

He ghosted through the dark paths, his senses alert; if this was something to do with the subterranean aspects of Csermanoa's business, the merchant would be quick and drastic in the methods he used to keep his secrets to himself *I should forget this and get back to the Watch*, he told himself. He kept following them.

The Steward unlocked and opened a gate in a wall, and left it open after ushering the Panday and his companions through. Taguiloa crept up to the gate after a few ragged breaths, still half-convinced he should get out of there.

A few scrapes of feet against gravel, no talking. Dombro wouldn't waste his breath on foreigners. Taga watched a moment more, then floated through, his feet as soundless as he could make them. He whipped into shrubbery on the far side of the gate, wishing he wore clothing more suitable for night-prowling. A moment later the Steward came back, a sour sneer on his face. He passed through the gate, slammed it shut and locked it. Trusting soul. Seshtrango send him boils on his butt.

The pavilion was a free-standing six-sided structure large enough to contain more than one room. He circled round it till he found one window whose oiled paper was an arch of yellow light. He slid into the shaggy yews planted close to the wall, dropped into a crouch as a voice sounded above him, startling him with its nearness and clarity. At first he didn't catch what was being said, then realized the woman was speaking Panay. Growing up wild in this poly-glot port city had given him the rudiments of many tongues and he'd polished them as he grew older, because he admired his master's command of many languages and because it was a necessity for satisfying his thirst for secrets.

"You're fussing about nothing, Sammo." Her voice was husky but musical, deep enough to pass for a man's. "I did all right in Tavisteen."

"Hunh." An angry rasping sound rather like a lion's cough. "You're a baby, Bramble-all-thorns. Tavisteeners may think they're the slipp'riest things under the Langareri bowl, but Silili Hina make them look like children who aren't very bright. Hina say they're the oldest folk and maybe it's so; trying to get through their customs is like threading a maze without a pattern. And since the Temuengs took over here nothing they say or do means exactly what it seems to. It's called survival, Bramble, Hina are very good at surviving."

“So am I, friend.”

Another impatient sound from the Panday. Footsteps going away from the window, coming back, going away again. Pacing, Taguiloa thought, a baby? that woman? Wicker creaking, the whisper of silk. The woman sitting down. After a while the man joined her. “Csermanoa financed a good part of the *Girl*,” he said, “I’m clear of debt to him, the *Girl’s all mine*. It’s the other way now, he owes me. He’ll take care of you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Baby, baby, you haven’t the least idea what the real world’s like.”

A chuckle, warm and affectionate. “Hahl Maybe I didn’t last month, but I’ve learned a few things since.”

“You’ve learned to tease, that’s for sure.”

“Who says I’m teasing?”

“Let it go, Brann. You know how I feel. Smooth your feathers and take any help that’s going. Think of your father and your brothers. If you’re killed before you get to them, what good is all you’ve done so far?”

“You throw my own arguments at me. How can I fight that?” Silence for a while. “I’ll take a lot of killing.”

“Lapalaulau swamp me, I wish you were a few years older.” There was an odd, strained note in the man’s voice.

Taguiloa scowled. There was too much he didn’t know. He couldn’t catch the nuances, the feelings between the words. Crouched outside in the darkness, he could hear the strong currents of affection passing between them, such shared understanding they didn’t have to say any of those things he wanted to know. He flushed with envy. Not even Tani Blackthorn was that close. Gerontai had loved him but he was an old man when he took an angry street boy into his home and he was a man of solitude and distances. Taga’s parents, his brothers and sisters, he lost them in a shipwreck when he was five; he clung to a bit of debris and was pulled out of the sea by a fisherman, brought back to live with an overworked cousin who had eight children of her own and neither missed nor mourned him when he ran away.

“What are you going to do?” The woman’s voice. “Unload my official cargo for what I can get. See if I can get hold of more Slya ware, maybe pick up other cargo.

Go home awhile. Careen my ship. I didn’t use half your gold in Tavisteen. You sure you don’t want it back?”

“Very sure. What I need, the children will provide.”

“Yeah.” Sound of wicker shifting, scrape of boots on the tile floor. “What about your father, will he work for the emperor?”

“How can he without Tinreal’s fire? He’s spent a life-time putting her heart into his work; what he does is more than just shaping the bowls and things. Old Lardarse ...” She giggled. “Like that name? A Temueng pimush should know the worth of his emperor Where was I? Ah. I suppose he can have my folk beaten into making some-thing, but it won’t be Slya ware. What a fool he is. If he’d left us alone, he’d have had the pick of what we made. Now that the mountain has taken her own back, he’ll have nothing. “

Arth Slya gone, Taga thought. He closed his eyes and cursed the Temuengs, cursed the woman, cursed himself for somehow believing there’d always be a place free from the compromises he’d made all his life, a place where artist and artisan explored their various crafts without having to pander to blind and stupid men whose only virtue was the gold in their pockets. If he understood what she was saying, Arth Slya was either dead or maimed beyond recovery.

The Panday cleared his throat. “Come home with me, Bramble. Wait till I get my ship clean of weed and rot. Well take you up the Palachunt to Durat, sooner and safer than the land route, wait for you, take you and your folk away once you break them free.”

Silence again. More creaks from the wicker as she shifted about, more wool moving against silk. “I’m sorry you wouldn’t love me again, Sammo. I wanted you to, you know that.”

“Bramble, how could I? Tugging a child. I’d kill another man for doing that.”

“I should have kept my mouth shut that time in Tavisteen, just said no and left it at that.”

“I wish you had.”

“I’m growing older fast.”

“Give me a couple more years, Bramble, then maybe I’ll believe it.”

“Slya! you’re stubborn.”

“We’re a pair.”

“You’re right. I’m going to stick to my first plan, Sammo. I know how you feel about the Girl and I can read a map. A dozen places on that river where the Temuengs could drop rocks or fire on you and would if they thought they had a reason. You’d all be killed and if you weren’t, you’d lose the *Girl*. I won’t have that, Sammo. I won’t.”

The shadows around Taguiloa suddenly vanished and hot golden light flickered about him. He bit back a yell and jumped to his feet, meaning to get out of there as fast as he could, hoping he wasn’t already identified. His feet wouldn’t move. He tried to turn his head. It wouldn’t move. Not his head. Not a hand. Not a finger.

He stood frozen and afraid. As abruptly as it came, the light was gone, taking with it the greater part of his fear. Whatever else had happened, he wasn’t discovered. In-side the pavilion the man and woman were still talking; there were no shouts of discovery outside it. Something very strange had happened. If he fled without careful thought, likely he’d run into trouble rather than away from it. He glanced around, saw only darkness and yews, dropped to the ground and began listening again to what was happening inside.

“I don’t want to let you go.” The Panday was walking about, his words loud then muffled.

“I don’t want to go.” Creak of wicker as she moved restlessly on the divan. “If it weren’t my father, my broth-ers, my kin, if it weren’t for Slya filling me, driving me, if ...

Ill Stupid word. I can’t change what is, Sammo.”

“You don’t even know if they’re alive now, you don’t know what will happen to them before you can get to Durat.”

“No.” A long silence filled with the small sounds of movement. “If they aren’t alive,” the woman said sud-denly, fury, frustration, fear sharp in her voice. “If they aren’t alive, I will drink the life from Abanaskranjinga and spit it to the winds.”

“Preemalau’s bouncy tits, Brann, don’t say that, don’t even think it.”

“I won’t say it again, but I will do it. That’s another reason I don’t want you and the others anywhere about.”

“I believe you, don’t say more, what if someone is listening.” Sound of door opening, feet crossing the tiles, voice louder, window shutters slamming open. Taguiloa shrank farther into shadow, but the Panday saw nothing but the darkness of the yews and the moonlit grass beyond. He dragged the shutters to and went to stand behind the woman, so close to the window Taga could hear him breathing. “Where’s the boy?”

“Keeping watch.”

“Ah.” Feet on tiles, wicker protesting loudly as a heavy weight dropped onto the silk cushions. The Panday sitting beside the woman. “I could leave Jimm to take care of the Girl and go north with you.”

“Don’t be silly, Sammo. I’d have to spend more time worrying about you than getting on with the business. The children will take care of me. There’s no way the Temuengs can harm them. Strike at them and they fade and are something else, somewhere else.”

“Not you.”

“While they live, I live.”

He grunted, then laughed. “Don’t think I want to go deeper into that.”

Laughter from the woman. A long comfortable silence. Taguiloa felt the amity and warmth moving between them, filling the silence, was angry and sad at once that such a communion was beyond him. Even as he felt this, the woman repelled him and the things they said frightened him. He thought of leaving, decided he’d wait for Cser-manoa and see what happened then.

As if it took a cue from him, a child's voice broke the silence. "Jaril says Csermanoa's coming."

Taga listened, heard nothing for a few breaths, then the crunch of feet on the gravel path, then Csoa's voice ordering the guards to take up their posts. Taga smiled to himself. Csoa the Sharp making sure they weren't close enough to hear what was said in the pavilion, yet where they could come running if he needed them fast. Heavy footsteps as he came on alone, protesting planks as he climbed the stairs to the pavilion's door, faint squeal of hinges.

"Well, Sammang?"

"Precariously, Saiim." He spoke Hina with very little accent.

"Ah." Creak of wicker as the rotund little merchant settled himself across the room from the man and woman. "Didn't expect you till the end of summer."

The Panday chuckled. "The gods dispose, Sadm." A short silence. "This isn't business. I'm calling in a couple favors. Business we'll discuss tomorrow." Another short silence. "Sorry about your uncle."

"An old man full of years." Wariness in the merchant's voice. Taguiloa grinned into the darkness, seeing the film sliding over Csoa's eyes, the stiff smile stretched his lips. For him, favors meant coin and he never parted with coin until he got as much as he could for it.

"My friend needs a place to stay hid and needs tutoring in Hina and Temueng ways."

"She speak Hina?"

The woman broke in with a rapid question to the Ship-master, wanting to know what was being said. She listened and told him she'd be speaking Hina the next day, the children would give it to her.

"She will," the Panday said, finality in his voice.

Loud creaks from across the room, the wicker complaining as Csoa's shifting weight stressed it. Taguiloa imagined the fat man leaning forward to stare at the woman, his narrow black eyes sliding over her as if she were a sack of rice he thought of buying. "Stay hid?"

"That's the other favor. Don't ask."

"Ah." The wicker creaked again, Csermanoa settling back. "Dombro won't gossip, he knows better. Grum wouldn't talk to his mother if he had one. Who else saw her?"

• "My crew, but they won't talk, not about her. We came the back ways, no one credible saw her."

"You had that hair covered? Good. Old woman's hair with a young woman's face catches the eye. Can she read and write? Her own gabble, I mean. Yes? Good. She's got the idea. Shouldn't be too hard to give her a fair sense of Hina script if she's willing to work at it." Silence. Taguiloa imagined the merchant running shuttered eyes over the woman again. "Is she prepared to earn her keep?" An angry exclamation from the Shipmaster. "Not while she's here," Csermanoa added hastily. "I ask so I'll knovi, what to teach her."

Switching into rapid Panay, almost too rapid for Taguiloa to follow, the man reported to the woman what he and Csermanoa had been saying.

"Samna, I'm not going to be earning my way, you know that. He's fishing, it's nonsense. I'll survive," she added grimly. "Leave how I do it to me."

Taga smiled. As I thought, he told himself. A tough one Csoa can go milk a rock and get more than she'll give him.

"You don't want the imperial guard waiting for you." Sammang speaking angrily. Careless, Taguiloa thought. I'm sure Csoa knows some Panay, and the word *imperial* is a bad slip, has to tell him more than they want him to know.

"Who knows to wait?"

"You think the Temuengs in ... where you come from don't send messages every day to Durat?"

"So?"

"They're not stupid. By now they know you've escaped them, and they'll have an idea where you're going. They will be waiting for you. You've got to be sly and cunning, you've got to know the ground."

"All right, all right, I hear you. I admit you're right. Get on with the bargaining. I'm sleepy."

Be careful, Taguiloa thought, Csoa may owe you favors, but you're not Hina, remember that and beware, how he treats the woman depends on how much he still needs you. Don't let him know the Temuengs will hunt her down and stomp everyone connected with her. He made a note to himself to stay

as far away from her as he could manage.

Switching to high Hina, the Shipmaster said, “Sao Csermanoa, will you provide shelter and tutoring for the freewoman and her child companions?”

Taguiloa wished he could see the merchant’s face. That was a most formal request, phrased in the elegant high Hina more suitable for use with one from the few Old Families left after the Temueng clearances in the bloody aftermath of their invasion. He nodded with appreciation. A touch. A real touch. Shrewd though he was, Csermanoa would bite.

In the same high tongue, with the same formality, Csermano answered the Shipmaster. “I say to you, O Sammang Schimli, shelter will be provided and tutoring for the freewoman and her child companions.” Slipping into less formal language, he went on, “You said companions. I only see one child. Silent little thing.”

“Her twin watches outside.”

“A bit young.”

“But very competent.”

Competent? Taguiloa thought. *Haven’t found me ...* he jumped and almost betrayed himself as a small hand touched his arm, a soft laugh sounded in his ear. He looked down, saw the boy’s face as a pale oval in the shadow, then it dissolved into the golden light that had touched him not so long ago, then the light was gone; there was a faint rustle to his left as if something small was pattering away. No wonder the woman wasn’t worried. Witch with demon familiars. He shivered and renewed his vow to keep away from her, shivered again when he realized the boy would tell her about him as soon as Csermanoa left. He fidgeted. He wanted to get out of there now, he knew enough to play with, but he couldn’t chance the guards. They’d be just bored enough to catch the slightest sound and mean enough to enjoy stomping him.

“Favor for favor,” the merchant said.

“Name it and I’ll think about it.”

—Tomorrow, Shipmaster.” Wicker creaked. “You said business tomorrow.”

“Sen, would you promise blind?” Sounds of the Panday shifting his feet, softer noises of the woman standing beside him. “Thanks for listening. I’ll make other arrangements.”

“Sit, sit.” Csermanoa spoke hastily, a querulous note in his voice. “There’s no question of swearing blind. Certainly not. We’ll talk about that tomorrow.” Grunts, more creaking, a few thuds. Csermanoa standing. “The woman may stay, of course she may, servants will be provided, food, the tutoring you ask. All I ask is discretion.” Heavy steps on the tiles, crossing to the door. “Come to the ghostwatch, Shipmaster, before you leave.” Sound of door opening, closing. Heavy feet stomping down the steps. Csoa calling to his guards, walking off with them.

Taguiloa stayed where he was until he heard the gate clunk shut. He straightened, turned to follow Csoa out. Then he heard the Panday and the witch start talking, hesitated, squatted once more, cursing his stupidity but unable to break away.

“Our witch.” Caressing sound in the man’s voice. “You’re set. He won’t bother you. Maybe ask questions. Mmmh. Certainly questions. You’re all right as long as you’re suspicious, Bramble, but soon as you relax, you talk too much. You talked too much to me.”

“What harm would you do me?”

“Bed you, child.”

“I keep telling you ...” She sighed impatiently. “It wasn’t a child’s body you loved. I don’t know what I am any more, only that I’m not Arth Slya’s Brann waiting for her eleventh birthday so she could make her Choice. Sammo, I was going to be a potter like my father. He made a teapot and drinking bowls for an old man’s birth-day. Uncle Eornis. My birthday was his too, he was going to make a hundred this year ... the oldest among us ...

Her voice broke. After a moment she cleared her throat and went on. “That he was killed two weeks before his hundred ... funny, that seems worse ...” She seemed to be speaking to herself. Taguiloa was caught up in them, his imagination responding to the emotion in the soft voice, emotion that was all the more powerful because of the quiet restraint that kept the words so slow and easy. “I saw a Ternueng

take my baby sister by the heels and dash her brains out against the Oak, I saw them fire my home and walk away with my mother, my uncles, aunts and cousins, I didn't cry, Sammo, all that time I didn't cry. And now I weep for an old man at the end of his life. Look at me, isn't it funny?"

"Brann"

"Don't worry about me, Sammo, I'm not falling apart. Like aunt Frin always said, complaining is good for the soul. A purgation of sorts."

Silence. The man began walking about, stopping and walking, stopping and walking, no regular rhythm to his pacing. Pulled two ways, Taguiloa thought, wants to stay, wants to go.

"Three months," the Panday said, his voice stone hard with determination. "Enough time for you to learn how to go on and work out a way into Audurya Durat, then make your way there. In three months I'll be tied up at the wharves of Durat waiting for you."

"No!"

"You can't stop me."

"The Girl. What if something happens to her?"

"Thought about that. Plenty of inlets near the mouth of the Palachunt. Jimm can wait there with the *Girl*; your gold will buy a ship I don't have to care about, all it needs is a bottom sound enough to get us back down the river. And the children flying guard." He chuckled. "Now argue with that, Bramble-all-thorns."

"Dear friend, what about the crew? Who're you going to take with you into that rattrap? Tik-rat? Staro the stub?"

"Better to ask who I can persuade to stay behind and if I'm going to have to part Jimm's hair with his war club to make him wait with the *Girl*." He cleared his throat. "You're part of the crew now, Bramble. You're our witch."

Soft gasping, snuffling sounds. The witch weeping. Taguiloa scowled into the darkness, his pulses shouting danger at him, danger to stay so close to a woman who could spin such webs. He started to creep out of the shadows, froze as he heard the door slam, feet running down the steps. Then the Shipmaster slowed to a deliber-ate walk. The gate creaked open, bumped shut. Taguiloa stood, still in half-shadow, and worked the cramps out of his body. Behind him he heard the soft murmur of voices—the children and the woman. He closed his ears to them, started cautiously for the gate, staying in the shadow of the plantings, moving with the silent hunting glide that had served him so well other times.

A faint giggle by his side. He looked down. The blond boy, trotting beside him. Taga ignored him and went ghosting on until he reached the wall.

The boy caught hold of his arm. "Wait," he breathed. A slight tug, then a large horned owl was powering up from him. It sailed over the wall, circled twice and came slanting back. Feathers soft as milkweed fluff brushed at his arm, then the boy was standing beside him. "No one out there, not even a servant."

"Why?"

"It's late. Only a couple hours till dawn."

—"You know what I mean."

The boy grinned at him, danced back a few steps, turned and ran into the darkness. Taguiloa stared after him then turned to the gate. With a silent prayer to Tungjii, he lifted the latch and walked through.

THE KULA PRIEST came from the house and paced round and round the pyre with its festoons of silk flowers and painted paper chains and the paper wealth soaked in sweet oils to make a perfumed and painted fire. He waved his incense sticks and the sickly sweet perfume drifted on the breeze to Taguiloa. If funerals had not provided a steady income and a place to show his work, he'd have missed them all; the smell of the roasting meat, the sight of the earthsoul and skysoul oozing out of the coffin sur-rounded by that smell which the incense never quite covered twisted his stomach and made the inside of his bones itch.

The fire was crackling briskly as the Kula finished the final tensing round. He stepped back and

chanted, bind-ing the sparks into a web of light so there was no danger of the House or the Watchers catching fire.

Taguiloa sensed a presence and looked down. The blond boy was standing beside him, watching the show with amused interest. There was a companionable feel to the situation that made him want to relax and grin at the boy, ruffle his hair the way he hated to have done to him when he was a boy. He'd stopped being afraid of this maybe-demon, this changechild; he smiled at the boy and went back to watching the fire burn.

The shimmer that was the skysoul wriggled free and darted skyward like a meteor shooting up instead of down. The earth soul, a bent little man looking much as old uncle had looked in life, hovered near the pyre as if it didn't have the strength to leave the meat that had housed it. After a while, though, it seemed to shrug its meager shoulders and begin a heavy drift upwards riding the streamers of smoke. The death was clean, the old man had nothing to complain of, there was no violence against the meat to hold the earthsoul down, a clear testament to the way Csermanoa performed his family duties.

As the fire began to die down, the party grew livelier. The servants came bustling about, replacing the plun-dered food trays, setting out new basins of steaming spiced wine, drawing the lamps down and replacing the candles in them; the joygirls were circling through the guests, teasing and laughing, cajoling sweets from the men, whis-pering in their ears. It was clearly time for the players to leave. He looked down. The child was gone. He watched a moment more, then edged around the walls of the summer court and went into the paper pavilion. Yarm had the gear packed and was curled up, dozing, beside it. He shook the boy awake, caught up his own pack and left Csermanoa's compound by the servant's entrance, the sleepy doorkeeper coming awake enough to hold out his hand for a tip. Feeling generous, ignoring Yarm's scowl, Taguiloa dropped a dozen coppers in the palm; the broad beaming grin he got in return seemed worth the price.

As they wound through the irregular narrow streets, Yarm kept looking back, something Taguiloa didn't notice until they were about halfway to the players' quarter and the house and garden he'd inherited from Gerontai. He endured Yarm's fidgeting for a while, then looked back himself, half-suspecting what he'd see.

The small blond boy was strolling casually along behind them, making no effort to conceal himself. He stopped when he saw them watching him, waved a hand and sauntered into an alley between two tenements. Taguiloa tapped Yarm on the shoulder. "Forget it," he said. "That's nothing to trouble us."

"Who's he? What's he want?" Petulance and jealousy in the boy's voice.

Taguiloa frowned at him, started walking again without answering him. Yarm had a limber body, a quick mind when he wanted to use it, a good ear for rhythm; he also had a difficult nature he made no attempt to change. He was intensely, almost irrationally possessive. Taguiloa's continued aloofness still intimidated him a little, but the effect of it was wearing off. He had to go. There were complications to getting rid of him, notably his cousin the thug-master Fist, but he had to go.

An owl dipped low overhead, hooted softly and went slanting up, riding the onshore wind freshening about them in the thickening dark just before dawn. Taguiloa shivered, then laughed at himself. The boy was teasing him, that was all. And following him home. He glanced up at the owl, walked on. Nothing he could do about it. Besides, a hundred people knew where he lived, that was not one of his secrets.

THE DAYS SLID one into the next until a week was gone. The boy appeared now and again when Taguiloa *was* performing, watching him with such genial interest that he found himself relaxing and accepting his presence with equanimity and curiosity. He didn't try to talk to the boy, only nodded to him and smiled now and then.

Yarm began making jealous scenes about the boy, barely confining them to the walls of the house, making life there such a misery that Taguiloa began staying away as much as he could, even neglecting practice, something he'd never done before. He was coldly furious at Yarm, but he needed him for performances already booked, a wedding, two funerals, a guild dinner, and the first-pressing festival. And there was always Fist who started dropping in on Taguiloa now and then, mentioning casually how delighted the family was that Yarm had found such a considerate master. It was enough to make a man

stomp into the Temple and kick old Tungjii on hisser fat butt.

TAGUILOA THREW the sticks and they landed eskimemelo, the wave of change, a sign of the third triad, a good high point. He smiled with satisfaction. Maybe a sign that his luck was changing. Djeracim the pharmacist grunted, gathered the sticks and threw them, snarled with disgust and emptied his winebowl. Neko-karan. Only one step from nothing, the maelstrom. Grunting with the ef-fort. Lagermukaea the Fat scooped up the sticks, held them a moment lost in his huge hand. "That kid of yours, Tap, he's whispering nasty things about you in Pupa's ear. Muck-worm don't waste any time running to the Temueng Nose to dump his dirt. You ought to pop the kid in a sack and drop him in the bay." He opened his hand, looked surprised to see the thin brown stalks on his broad palm. Clicking tongue against teeth, he cast them, hummed a snatch of a dirge as they split into two signs. Rebh-sembulan, the honeybee, and mina-tuatuan, the reviving rain. He grunted. Even added, they didn't count enough to beat the eski-memelo. He grinned a moment later, began flipping the coppers one by one to Taguiloa who caught them and tossed them up again, keeping more and more in the air until he finally missed one and dropped the bunch. Laughing, he opened his pouch and dropped the coins inside along with Dji's, leaving out enough to buy another jug of wine. "That I would," he said. "Tie him in a sack. If someone would sack Fist and feed him to a shark." He pushed the coins into a squat triangle. "Let me know if someone none of us likes is looking for an appren-tice, maybe I can push Yarm off on him. Or her." He curled his tongue and whistled up another jug.

TACUILOA SAT on the pier in a heavy fog, listening to the sound of the buoys clanging, to the distant shouts from the Woda Living boats, to the thousand other noises of the early morning. He'd always liked foggy days, enjoyed the times when he was immersed in the sounds of life, yet wholly alone in the small white room the fog built around him.

The blond boy came into that room and sat beside him, his short legs dangling over the pier's edge. Water con-densed on his skin and in his hair, ran down his nose and wet the collar of his jacket.

"Why are you following me about?" Taguiloa spoke lazily, not overly interested in the answer.

"Curiosity."

"About why I was outside the pavilion listening?"

"That? Oh no. I already know what you were doing there and why. I wanted to know more about you."

"Why?"

"My companion needs to reach Andurya Durat. I thought you might be the right one to take her."

"Me? Nol" After a moment's silence, he said, "She's a witch. Worse, she's a foreigner. Worse than that, she's going hunting for Temuengs."

"So? You like Temuengs?"

"Hahl I like living."

"What about gold?"

"Not enough to die for it."

"You want to go to Durat and play for the emperor. Brann could provide the gold."

"My master reached his eighties by being a prudent man."

"He took a chance on a boy who tried to rob him, took him in, taught him, made him his heir. Was he wrong?"

"Stay out of my head." There was no force to his voice, he was too accustomed to the boy now, he couldn't work up any fear of the changechild, no matter how strange he acted. "Look, Jaril, I'm not saying I don't understand her feelings, if my folks were slaves Understand me, it's the rest of my life you're talking about."

"Brann knows that. All she wants is a quiet way into the city so she can get there without the guard waiting for her. If she didn't care who knew she was coming she could hire a barge and a team of Dapples and float in comfort up the canal."

"A foreigner?"

“She could buy a Temueng to take her. Enough gold buys anything.”

“Csermanoa’s gold?”

“Certainly not, we’re not going to make trouble for our Sammang and his men; think rather of the Tekora’s vaults. Who can stop Yaril and me from getting in where we want?”

“Why me?”

Jaril snickered, slanted a crystal glance at him. “You presented yourself.” Darkened by the fog his eyes glis-tened with good humor. “And who would look for ven-geance riding in a player’s wagon?”

“Your companion offers to pay the bribes and the outfitting?”

“And expenses along the way. What you make, that’s yours to share out with the others in the troupe.”

“She is generous.”

“How easy to be generous with Temueng gold.”

“Given the Temuengs don’t know.”

“Who would think of serpents with pockets in their hide?”

Taga chuckled. “Not me, friend.”

“You won’t take Yarm?”

“One more funeral and I’m done with him.”

“He’s got a cousin with a nasty temper.”

“He has a lot of cousins, most of them with nasty tempers.”

“Only one of them about to lesson you with padded clubs that won’t break the skin, only bones.”

“Tungjii’s gut! I suppose you were a fly on the wall.”

“Be one monstrous fly, but you’ve got the idea.”

“Why tell me?”

“We like you. Offer. Whether or not you accept my companion’s gold, Yaril and I, we’ll keep an eye on Fist and warn you when he’s set to act.”

“Accept. Seshtrango send him hives and flatulence and inflict Yarm on him the rest of his life.”

Jaril giggled, then dug in the pocket of his jacket and dropped a handful of gold beside Taguiloa. “Brann wants to move out of Csermanoa’s house. He’s hanging around a bit too much, asking questions she doesn’t want to answer, and the maids spy on her. Makes her nervous. Could you find her a place to stay?” He stacked the coins into a neat pile. “That should be enough. Someplace she can stay quiet and safe?”

“There’s no place safe from gossip.”

“Even if she seems Hina? At least outside the house?”

“She can do that?”

“We can do that.”

“Mmm. I can think of a couple places might do. Give me two days, meet me at my house.”

“I hear.” The boy got to his feet with the sinuous supple grace of a cat, vanished into the fog with a wave of a hand.

Taguiloa sat staring at the black water rocking under his feet, wondering what he’d got himself into.

HE FOLLOWED THE MUSIC and laughter through the pleasure garden to the beach house built out over the water—water-dark stones and wind-sculpted cedars, clipped and trained seagrape vines. Salt flowers in reds and or-anges and a scattered shouting pink. A willow or two to add a note of elegance. A bright cool morning with the sun just hot enough to fall pleasantly on the skin. Flute song winding through the wash of the sea, the spicy whisper of the cedars, the rustle of the willows. Ladji, he thought, then lifted his head and stopped as another instrument began to play, a jubilant, very clear, rather metallic flurry of notes dancing around the thread of the flute song.

He walked into the house.

Tari Blackthorn was reclining on a low divan amid piles of pillows watching two girls dancing. A small ancient man with a few wisps of hair on mottled skin stretched tight over his skull knelt at the edge of the straw matting and danced fingers like spider legs over the holes of his flute. Beside him a small

dark-haired woman sat on a broad orange cushion, an instrument like a distorted and en-larged gittern on her lap. Her hair *was* dressed in innu-merable small braids, some of them stiffened into graceful loops about her head. Elaborate gold earrings, wide hoops with filigreed discs hanging from them. Large blue eyes, the blue so dark it was almost black. Small pointed face, dark olive skin. A nose that had a tendency to hook. A wide mobile mouth, smiling now as she watched the girls dance. Short stubby fingers moved with swift sureness over the strings, the ivory plectrum gleaming against her dark skin.

Tari looked up as he came in, smiled and nodded at a pile of cushions near her feet. He dropped on them, leaned against the divan and watched the girls. They were very young, ten or eleven, sold by their parents into the night world when they were old enough so their adult features could be guessed at. He'd escaped being im-pressed into the world of the joyhouses by craftiness learned in a hard school, by the nimble body, coordination and speed Tungjii had gifted him with, and by a lot of luck. He watched the dancers with a cool judicial eye, his tastes running to older women. The plumper one wasn't going to make a dancer, she was a juicy creature with a bold eye; she had the proper moves, but there was no life to her dancing, none of the edge and fire Tail Blackthorn got into her dances. The other girl was thin and under-developed, coltish and a bit clumsy but there was a hint that she might have some of the gift that made Blackthorn the premier dancer of Silili before she was nineteen and kept her there for the next fifteen years.

Taga twisted his head around and saw her watching him. A slow smile touched the corners of her mouth. She seldom let her face move in any way that would encourage wrinkles, part of the discipline she enforced over nearly every aspect of her life. He was a part of that tiny area where she let herself feel and possibly be hurt, that little area of danger that gave her the magic she put into her dancing. Her smile was at most a slight lifting of her face, a gleam in her eyes, but he'd warmed to it since he'd celebrated his seventeenth birthday in her bed. Eight years ago. She was at her zenith now while he was still rising. She'd stay where she was for a few years and manage a graceful glide into her retirement unless she made enemies. Here too she walked the ragged and crum-bly edge between acceptance and obloquy, walked it with calculation and care, knowing a misstep could destroy her. Like every player she had only her wits, her skill, and the tenuous protection of custom and reputation to restrain the merchants and the officials who ran Silili (always sub-ject to the whims of the Temuengs) and ordered the lives of all who lived there.

Tali touched the ceramic chimes. The double clink was not loud, but it cut through the music. The dancers stopped and bowed, then stood waiting for her to speak, the plump one a little nervous but enough in command of herself to slide her eyes at Taguiloa, the thin one seeing no one and nothing but Blackthorn. Tari lifted a hand. "You saw, what do you say?"

"The hungry one."

Tail nodded. "When you have that hunger, its easy to see it in others. If I were five years younger, I might want to kick her feet from under her." She turned to the two girls. "Deniza," she told the thin one, "see my bataj about buying you out. Rasbai, your gifts lie elsewhere, I am not the proper teacher for you. May I suggest ... mmm ... Atalai?" She dismissed them firmly, ignoring both Rasbai's scowl and Deniza's sudden glow. "Your student has shut his mouth. What'd you do to that little snake?"

He watched the two girls walk out with their silent chaperone and said nothing until they had time to get beyond hearing, then turned to stare coolly at the foreign woman. "Me?" he said, "I did nothing."

Her eyes opened a bit wider, the toes of her right foot nudged at the nape of his neck, tickled through the hair by his right ear. "This is Blackthorn, little love. Maybe you forget?" She dug at him with the nail of her big toe. "Harm? Would I ask in front of her if I didn't trust her? Fishbrain."

He swung round, caught hold of her ankle, danced his fingers along the henna'd sole of her foot. "Even a fishbrain knows Blackthorn." He let her pull her ankle free. "It's the truth. I did him nothing. He's happy contemplating my future broken bones."

"What?"

"Fist and a handful of his thugs are getting set to thump me some."

"You're very cheerful considering."

"Considering I've got some protection Fist and Yarm don't know about. I'm shucking Yarm the end

of the week, going on tour soon as I can get it together. I've got a patron of sorts, who's financing me and providing that protection I mentioned."

"You're finally going to do it? The dances?"

"Uh-huh. I need a flute player." He scowled at the mat. "Funeral tomorrow. The last appearance I've got for a while. Yarm's out the next day. I'm not looking forward to that."

"I told you he was a bad idea.

"That you did, but I had no ears then."

"And nothing between them either."

He caught hold of a toe, pinched it lightly. "Flute player."

A sharp intake of breath, a moment's silence. Tari lay back with her eyes shut. He frowned at her but before he could say anything, she spoke. "Ladji."

The ancient flute player got easily to his feet, came across the open airy room and dropped to his knees near the head of the divan. "Sew," he said tranquilly. He held his flute lightly across his thighs.

"You have a student, your sister's grandson I think it is. You know him, you know Taga. What do you think?" She opened her eyes. "It's a gamble, and the hillwolves are getting bold." She glanced at Taguiloa, lifted the corner of her mouth a fraction. "Rumor is once the Jamara lords and the jamaraks are left behind, it's a dance with death." Delicate lift of a delicate brow, slow and smooth, a question to Taguiloa. "You're not given to taking those kinds of chances, little love."

"It's the hillwolves that better watch themselves." He hesitated, wondering exactly what he wanted to say, how much he wanted to tell. This was Blackthorn who read him better than he did himself "My patron is a friendly witch with demon familiars." He turned so he was facing the foreign woman. "That is not for repeating."

She nodded, but said nothing.

The old man spoke. "Taga, when would you like to talk with Linjijan? And where?"

Blackthorn's toe nudged at Taguiloa's head again. "Will here do?"

"Since you offer." He rubbed his head gently against her foot. "This afternoon? I've got to start shaking the mix."

"Ladji"

The old man looked past her at the wall. "Linjijan went out with his brothers this morning. After fish. He'll be returning with the sun. But he'll need sleep." He turned muddy amber eyes on Blackthorn and smiled, the wrinkles lifting and spreading. "And you, saOr, prefer the afternoon."

"True, my eldest love." She made the deep gurgle that was her sort of laugh. "raga. Dance for me, you. I've earned some entertaining, don't you think?"

He turned his head and kissed the smooth instep, then jumped to his feet. He kicked off his sandals and walked barefoot onto the woven straw mat, rubbed his hands down his sides, lifted a brow to Ladjinatuai, then began snapping his fingers, hunting for the rhythm that felt right for the mood he was in and the way his body felt. He looked over his shoulder at the foreign woman. "Play for me," he said. "With Ladji, if you will."

Ladjinatuai lifted his flute and began improvising music to the changing rhythms of Taga's fingers.

A few beats later, a soft laugh, and the lively metallic complex tones of stringed instrument came in, picking up the beat, playing fantasies around it, making a sound he'd never heard before.

He let the music work in him a while longer.

When he was ready, he began the first tumbling run, moving faster and faster, gathering the energy of the music into his blood and bone, ending the run with a double flip, landing, reversing direction without losing the impulse driving him, dropping, curling onto his shoulders, slowly unfolding his body until he was a spear pointed at the roof, breaking suddenly, the music breaking with him, a long swoop of the flute, a glittering cascade from the strings, his body flexed, rose and fell, wheeled and caracoled, improvised around the traditions of the female dancers, the male mimes and tumblers; he felt every move, all the pain and effort, yet at the same time he was flying, riding the sound.

Until a tiny shake, a hairline miscalculation, and he lost it, the music went on but his improvisation faltered. With a gasping laugh he sank onto his knees, then sat back on his heels, hands on thighs,

breathing hard, sweat pouring down his face, into his eyes and mouth. He heard Black-thorn's gurgling laughter, the patter of her hands, but only at a distance; more important to him this moment was the music that wove on and on, the foreign woman and the old flute player working out their own magic until they achieved resolution and silence.

He swung on his knees to face the woman. "Who are you?"

"My name is Harra Hazhani."

"From the west?"

"A long way from, dancer."

"Why?"

"Chance, curiosity, who knows. I came with my father."

"Your father?"

"Dead." She plucked a discord from the strings. "An aneurism neither of us knew he had."

"Your people?"

"You wouldn't know them." She shrugged. "What does it matter?" Then, producing a soft buzzing sound from the instrument by pulling her hand gently along the strings, she stared past him. "I'm a long way from my mountains, dancer. The wind blew me here and dropped me. The day will come when I catch another and blow on. Rukka-nag. My people. You see, it means nothing to you and why should it?" She had a strong accent that was not unpleasant, especially in her honey-spice voice. As she spoke she made almost a song of the words, using the pads of her fingers to coax a muted music from the strings. Abruptly she lifted her hands from the instrument and laughed. "More prosaically, Sad Taguiloa, when my father dropped dead, Saiiri Blackthorn took pity on me and gave me houseroom until I could find the kind of work I was willing to do." She took up the plectrum and plucked a questioning tune. "And have I, O man who makes music with his body? Have I?"

"Do you dance?"

"The dances of my people. And never so well as Black-thorn does hers."

"Show me." He moved off the mat to make way for her, seating himself once again at Tafi's feet.

Han-a Hazhani looked at him gravely, considering him, then she set her instrument aside and got gracefully to her feet. She wore black leather boots with high heels; a long skirt with a lot of material in it that swung about her ankles, a bright blue with crudely colorful embroidery in a band a handspan above the hem; a long-sleeved loose white blouse and a short tight vest laced up the front that seemed designed to emphasize high full breasts and a tiny waist. The blouse was gathered at wrists and neck by drawstrings tied in neat bows. She reached into a pocket in the skirt and pulled out a number of thin gold hoops, slid them over her hands so they clashed on her wrists when she lifted her arms over her head and began clap-ping out a strongly accented rhythm. Still clapping she began to whistle, a sound with a driving energy as crude to his ears as the colors and patterns in the embroidery on her clothing was to his eyes. She whistled just long enough for Ladjinatuai to pick up the tune, though the mode of her music was not that of his flute.

Her head went back; her arms curved so her hands were almost touching, then quivered so the gold hoops clashed slightly off the beat, then she was whirling round and round, her feet moving through an intricate series of steps. She danced pride and passion and joy—at least that was what he read into what he saw—then went suddenly still, a foot pointed, a leg a little forward, a straight slant visible through the drape of her skirt, her head thrown back, her arms up as if she would embrace the moon.

She broke position, grinned at him and went back to her cushion, dropped with energetic grace beside her instrument.

"What do you call that?" He pointed to the instrument. "Daroud. A sort of distant cousin to a lute."

"You dance well enough."

"Thanks."

"You play a lot better."

"I know."

"Modest too."

"Like you."

“What would you do if a man started fondling you?”

“Depends. Official, patron or some lout in an Inn where we happened to be staying?”

“Start with the lout.”

She tilted her head, scowled, put her hands on her hips, “Back off, lout.” One hand shifted position so quickly it seemed to flicker. A short thin blade grew suddenly from her fingers; she held the hand close to her body and waited. “And if he didn’t, he’d lose maybe some fingers, certainly some blood.” She tossed the bright sliver of steel into the air, caught it and flipped it at the wall. It thudded home a hair from a small waterstain on the wood. She frowned, got up and retrieved the knife. “Kesker would pull my hair for botching a throw like that.”

“Kesker?”

“My father’s bodyguard until he got killed.”

“Protecting your father?”

“No. Bloodfeud. We passed too close to his homeland.”

“You’ve had a varied life.”

“Very.”

“That takes care of the lout. If you run into trouble for it, I’ll back you, but try saying no first, will you?”

“Sure. Why not.”

“Say a Jamar Lord has an itch for foreign bodies in his bed.”

She grinned. “And I say, it’s all right with me, honored Sabin, but I’ve got the pox so maybe you’d rather not.”

“You don’t look it.”

“That’s us foreign bints, can’t tell about us.”

“And if he says he doesn’t believe you?”

“Then I do this.” She began to whistle an odd little droning tune. He watched her a moment until she blurred and a total lassitude took hold of him. She stopped whistling and clapped her hands, the sharp sound jolting him awake. “Men are very suggestible in that state,” she said calmly. “I’d tell him he wasn’t at all interested in me and he should forget the whole thing including the whistling. My father was a mage. I was his best and most constant student.”

He looked at her and began laughing so hard he fell over on the floor. When he recovered a little, he sat up, wiped at his eyes, caught Tari’s astonished stare and al-most began again. He sucked in a long breath, exploded it out. “If you want to come along, you’re welcome, Harra Hazhani.” He cleared his throat. “Though you might want to wait until you meet my patron before you make up your mind.” He narrowed his eyes, examined her face, her hands, wondering how old she was.

“Twenty-three.”

“You answer questions not asked?”

“Why waste time? You wanted to know.”

“Keep out of my head, woman.”

“No need to get in it. Your face told me; men are much alike, you know, at least on things like that.”

“Uh-huh, you and the witch should have some interest-ing conversations.”

“You make me curious. Who is she?”

“A foreigner like you.”

“Should I know her?”

“I doubt it.”

Tari Blackthorn stirred on the divan, nudged at him with her foot. “Go home, Taga. Now that you steal my treasure from me. Go home, summerfly and soothe the wasp in your nest.” She made a soft snorting sound. “Don’t come back, O ungrateful one, without a thank-gift to make up for taking all my afternoon. The second hour after midday and not a breath before.” She gurgled. “Or I’ll have my dancers fickle you into a mass of quivering jelly.”

He trapped the prodding foot, woke laughter in her with knowing fingers, kissed the instep, then jumped to his feet and started for the door.

Before he reached it, she called out, "Bring your witch with you and let us see this wonder of wonders."

He waved a non-committal hand and plunged out the door before she could call him back, strode off along the winding path, whistling an approximation of Harra's dance tune, content with things as they were (except for Yarm and Yarm would cease to be a problem very soon); old Tungjii was sitting on his shoulder, he could almost feel his presence there. "So I light a batch of incense for you, O patron of my line, O bestower of joy and sorrow."

The doorguard let him out the gate and he strolled along the sun-dappled lane beneath the willows and the tall, rare mottled bamboo. A few wisps of fog were flowing in off the sea and the air had a nip to it that pleased him. The night would be foggy and jaril was sure to come to him. Brann's house was ready with a discreet maid waiting to see if she pleased the new mistress. He sauntered through the Players' Quarter, wound deeper into Silili, heading up the mountain to the Temple, his mood mellowing until he was afloat on contentment and all men were brothers and all beasts had souls.

He drifted through the godons, the throng of traders from a thousand lands east and west. M'darjin, black men, ebony stick figures, heads shaven and enclosed in beaten bronze rings, bronze rings about their wrists and ankles, narrow bodies clad in voluminous robes, patterned in lines and blocks of black and white and sudden patches of pure color, blue, green, red, a vibrant purple. They brought ivory and scented woods and metal work of all kinds.

Western men and women—Phras, Suadi, Gallinasi, Eirsan, dozens of other sorts of men he couldn't name, pinkish skin, hair shading from almost white to the darkest of blacks, eyes blue, brown, green, yellow, mongrel hordes they were, none as pure as Hina. They came with clocks and other mechanical devices, saddles and fine leatherwork, books, wines, fine spices. The women especially were spice hunters adept at worming into the odd places where you found the rarest of the spices. Gem traders, art dealers, dream sellers. Anything that men or women would buy.

Harpish clad in leather top to toe in spite of the warmth of Silili's climate, faces shrouded in black leather cowls with only the eyes cut out, always in groups of three, never alone, dealers in mage's wares and witch's stock, mystical books, rumor and small gods.

Vioshyn in layer upon layer of violently clashing patterned cloth, selling sea-ivory and mountain furs, carved chests and exotic powders, also most of the more common drugs.

Felhiddin, small, thin, a walnut brown, clad mostly in the blue tattoos that covered every inch of visible skin, skimpy loincloths and sandals, men and women alike, though any stranger who mistook the meaning of the bare breasts got the metal claws the women wore in the meat of the offending hand and threatening growls from any other Felhiddin nearby as they swirled about *him* like a dog pack set to attack. Trading in exotic nuts and herbs, scaled hides of strange beasts, furs in fine bright colors, metallic reds and greens, a hundred shades of blue, bowls and other objects carved from jewelwoods with great simplicity but exquisite shape.

Henermen trading nothing but their services and their herds of strong ugly Begryers, hauling whatever their hirers desired inland along the land route to the west.

Mercenary fighters of all races and both sexes.

Street magicians, dancers, acrobats, musicians, beggars. Woda watermen and porters, squat, broad, bowed legs, calling their services in loud singsong voices.

Priests. Servants to many gods and demons. Mostly Hina, native to the ground, born on Selt to die on Selt, born in the uplands that had once been Hina-ruled but now lay in the tight fists of Damara lords, here now as pilgrims to the great Temple on Selt's central mountain or teaching in the priest schools attached to the Temple.

Mages, small men and large, small women and large, all races all shapes, some pausing awhile in Silili during their enigmatic wanderings, some there for the day, changing ships, touching foot to ground only to leave it again, some there to study in the Temple schools, some just nosing through the teeming market.

Fog *was* edging up from the water and the streets were beginning to empty, the foreigners flowing out of them into the joyhouses or the Inns of the Strangers' Quarter according to the hungers that most clamored to be satisfied.

Taguiloa waved to those who leaned from joyhouse win-dows calling his name, shrugged off invitations. He was popular among the women of the night because of his stamina and his delight in them and their bodies. It was his intention to appear as one who walked lightly and with laughter through the world; his fears and blue spells he kept strictly to himself. He was a good fella, a pleasant considerate lover, a gambler who lost and won with cheer-ful equanimity, a friend who didn't vanish when trouble came down, so there were many men and women to wave and call his name, and few knew it was as much calcula-tion as nature, as hard-won as Blackthorn's beauty, a prod-uct of much pain and rage and thought. When Gerontai died, he wept and shuddered in Blackthorn's arms and she shut herself away with him a day and a night, though this meant she had to deny her current patron and had to coax him into complaisance with a masterly performance of illness. A sickness in which she seemed frail and suffering, but ten times as lovely and desirable as before, perhaps because of her momentary unattainability. From where he was concealed Taguiloa watched with amazement and ap-preciation, seeing how she took what would have destroyed a lesser woman and made it work to her advantage. He left her and shut himself in his master's house, his now, shut himself away from everyone and thought long and hard about how his life should go, coming from that wres-ting match with a sketch of the man he wanted to be, eighteen and determined to climb as high in his way as Blackthorn had in hers.

He ran up the steps of the Temple Way, reached the Temple Plaza, turned and looked out across the city and the bay.

The shops were being shuttered, the paper windows of the living quarters above them glowed a dark amber just visible as night drifted down on Selt. Torches and lamps flared in the Night Quarter, the noises of the night came to him, tinkle of strings, soar of flutes, laughs, shouts, a fragment of a song. The Strangers Quarter was quieter, the only lights the torches that glimmered before the Inns and taverns and noodle shops. The docks were dark and deserted except for the guard bands with their polelamps and rattles. Out on the water the Woda-an were lighting up lanterns and cook fires, too far away for him to hear more than a few mushy sounds, the blat of a horn, a wild raucous shout or two. He could see dark shapes passing the lanterns, merging and parting, some moving fast, jag-gedly, some slowly, sinuously, a shadow play of dark and light that fascinated him for a while, wisps of images for another dance fluttering unformed in his head. The ghosts of the drowned and murdered came oozing from the water and the ground, blown by the wind like scraps of smoke. Ignoring the Temuengs, *it's a good place to be*, he thought, *and I am a man with the luck god riding my shoulder. Time to pay my debt, eh Tungjii?*

He went into the Temple, moved past the Godalau and her companion gods and stopped before one of the small-est figures, the little luck whose belly was shiny from the hundreds, no, thousands of hands that had rubbed it, a mostly naked little man/woman with fat big-nippled breasts and a short thick penis, left eye winking in a merry face. Taguiloa bowed, patted the round little belly, dropped coins in the offering bowl and lit a handful of incense sticks. Feeling more than a little drunk from contemplat-ing the possibilities in his future, he poked the sticks in the sandbowl, squatted and watched the sweet smoke swirl up about the god. After a moment he laughed, jumped to his feet, did a wheeling run, a double somer-sault, flipped into a handstand then over onto his feet, then he was running from the Temple, laughter still bub-ling in his blood, the luck god still riding his shoulder, giggling into his ear.

Jaril materialized from the fog, walked down the Temple Way stairs beside him, saying nothing, just there. Taguiloa nodded to him and continued his careful march down-ward; the steps were slick with condensation and worn by generations of feet. To break a leg here would be thumb-ing his nose at the god on his shoulder and an invitation to a cascade of evil luck. When he reached the bottom, he smiled down at his small silent companion. "Ladji and Blackthorn offer Linjijan, Ladji's grand-nephew as our flute player. Blackthorn wants to meet Brann." He hesi-tated, lifted a hand, let it fall. "I told them a little about her and you. They won't say anything, Jaril. Oh yes, there's a foreign woman too, a musician and the daughter of a mage. She's joining the troupe. I think. Tomorrow, two hours after midday. Would your companion be willing to come? I've found a house. A few steps from mine, a maid there for Brann if she wants to keep her. The girl will be discreet. We can get your companion moved in tomorrow morning if she decides to take the house. You want to see it? Come along then."

BRANN CAME THROUGH the wall-gate, not at all the woman he'd seen that morning. Obviously she'd decided not to show forth as Hina, wisely so, he thought. The Shipmaster was right, Hina ways weren't easily acquired. Her hair was hanging loose, not curling but undulating gracefully out from her face, black as night, cloud soft. She wore a cap of linked gold coins with strings of coins hanging beside her face, a long loose robe of black silk embroidered with birds and beasts from Hina tales. Her skin was darkened to an olive flushed pink on the cheeks, her mouth a warm rose, her green eyes wide and gemlike, her face as devoid of expression as the godmasks in the Temple. A brindle hunting bitch pranced beside her, prickears twitching, crystal eyes filled with a dancing light that said Yaril was enjoying herself.

For a moment Taguiloa felt uneasy before this trio, though he was used to ghosts fluttering about and gods roaming the world. Now and then someone would see the Godalau swimming through the waters of the outer bay, her long fingers like rays from the moon combing the waves, her fish tail like limber jade flipping through air and water, churning both. Or Geidranay big as a mountain squatting on a mountainside tending the trees. He'd seen a dragon break a long drought, undulating laughter it was, flashes of reds and golds as the sun glittered off its scales, a memory of beauty so great the ragged boy digging for clams forgot to breathe. The little gods, Sessa who found lost things, Sulit the god of secrets, Pindatung the god of thieves and pickpockets, all the rest of them, they scam-pered like cheerful mice from person to person, coming unasked, leaving without warning, a capricious, treacher-ous and highly courted clutch of godlings. You could make bargains with them and if you were clever enough even profit from them. If you weren't clever enough and brought disaster on yourself and your folk, well that was your fault; if you got greedy and overstepped or fearful and failed to keep your wits honed you might find yourself reduced to night-soil collector or beggar with juicy sores to exploit.

Taguiloa walked in silence with the woman, boy and bitch; contemplating his choices. When Tungjii gave, you used the luck or lost it and more. The time he was still fussing about being obligated to a Temueng, Gerontai impressed that on him and to underline the lesson told him Raskatak's story.

Raskatak was a fisherman with a small boat and misera-ble luck who brought in just enough fish to keep him from abandoning the craft and seeking some other kind of work. One bright day he was out in his boat alone on a becalmed sea, his lines overboard while he patched his sail. It had nearly split up the middle in the sudden squall that sepa-rated him from the other boats and left him wallowing between swells that rapidly flattened out as the wind stopped dead and the sun rose higher and higher until it was beating remorselessly on the ocean. There was nothing touching his lines, they hung loose over the side, even the boat sounds had died away until the noise the awl made punching through the canvas seemed as loud as a large fish breaking water, though none did for miles about.

Overhead, sundragon burned and undulated, white and gold, great mother-of-pearl eyes tuning and turning. And on his forward shoulders Tungjii rode, hisser plump but-tocks accommodated in a hollow the dragon made for himmer. Waving a fan gently before hisser face, heesh looked down at the wretched little boat and grinned sud-denly, broadly, reached into the glitter about the dragon, twisted hisser dainty hand in a complicated round, opened hisser fist and let a scatter of gold coins drop into the boat, watching with casual interest to see if they would hit the fisherman on his head and kill him, miss the boat *al-together* and be lost in the sea, or land beside the man *in a* clinking shining pile. Tungjii had no leaning toward any of those outcomes, heesh was merely watching to see how chance would work out.

The coins came clunking down, heavy rounds that landed in a little pile beside Raskatak's bare feet, one of them bouncing off his big toe, crushing the bone. He gaped at the coins, his big bony hands stilled on the rotten canvas. After a minute he put the canvas aside and scowled at his reddened toe. He lifted his foot and put it heavily on his knee. He touched the toe with clumsy fingers, grunted at the pain. Still ignoring the gold, he searched around in his sea chest, drew out a flat piece of bone, broke off a bit of it, bound it to his toe with a bit of rag, then a twist of line.

He put his foot down with the same heavy care. Only then did he pick up one of the coins and look it over, test it with his teeth. He sat staring at it as if he didn't under-stand what it was. Moving with the same stolid delibera-tion he picked up each of the coins, tested each of them the same way and put it away in his sea chest. When he finished that he looked up, searching the sky for the origin of the shower of gold. What he saw was the glitter and burn of the noon sun. He hawked and spat over the side, went

back to sewing up the sail. Gold or no gold, he wasn't going to get home without a working sail.

He finished the seam and raised the sail, but the wind was still absent. The canvas hung limp, not even slapping against the mast. He sat waiting, his eyes half shut, dream-ing of what he was going to do with the gold.

As if to prove that miracles never occur singly, a school of fish struck the hooks on his lines and he spent the next two hours hauling them in, dropping the lines back until his boat was alive with flopping glistening silversides and the moment the school passed on, a fresh breeze sprang up and set the wretched little boat racing for Selt. For the first time ever he came in early and alone and got pre-mium prices on his fine fat fish. He went back to the tiny hovel he'd built of ancient sails and bits of driftwood on a handful of land he rented from a distant cousin. He counted the coins over and over, even when it was only by feel after his fish oil lamp sputtered dry. And he counted the silver and copper coins the day's catch had brought, ten times the sum he usually made. Fearing that the gold might disappear as strangely as it had come, fearing too that the thieves that lived around him might smell it out and steal it from him, forgetting no thief of reasonable intelligence would come poking through his bits and pieces, he buried the gold under the agglomeration of sticks and rope he used for a bed, then spent a good part of the night nursing a jug of cheap wine and trying to ignore the pain in his toe while he dreamed of great feasts and high-class dancing girls and fine silk robes and his cousins bowing respectfully before him and seeking his advice and beg-ging favors of him which he granted or refused with gra-cious nobility.

In the morning he washed his toe, bound some cobwebs and chicken dung about it and tied on another rag. With-out much thought, acting from old habit, he rose with the dawn, got dressed, went limping down to the water and went out again in his boat. Again he had great luck. As if his hooks were magnets, he called the fish to them. Again he filled the boat so soon he was the first back and got the best price.

It being the way of the stupid, he sw himself as clever, he saw what was happening as an outcome of his superior worth. Though he was no less a silent man he began holding himself with great pride (not noticing that chil-dren followed behind him, mocking him). The gold coins staved where they were, buried beneath his bed. He dreamed the same dreams night after night, but in the morning he left the dreams behind and went out on his boat as he had since he was old enough to hold a line. He sat alone in the boat whispering to himself, saying: if I spend gold, they'll want to know where it comes from, they'll send thieves to steal it from me, they'll send men to kill me. So the gold stayed under his bed, the dreams stayed in his head. His foot got worse, the toe swelling and turning black. His catch went back to what it was before, a whole day's work hardly enough to pay his land, huy his meals and a jug of cheap wine to kill the pain in his foot.

On the sixth day a squall caught his boat before he got more than a few lengths from the shore, reducing the wretched thing to a hodgepodge of shattered planks and timbers. It took him all day to gather the bits and pieces, then he went looking for driftwood so he could cobble the boat back together; he had more than enough gold for a dozen such boats, but the thought of spending it never entered his head. He worked on the boat all day, then went home to eat and dream some more. In the morning he couldn't get out of bed, his whole foot was black, his leg swollen, his body damp with fever.

By the end of the week he was dead.

This is the lesson, Cerontai told Taguiloa: Use your luck or it rots like Raskatak's toe.

LINJIJAN WAS a smiling amiable boy, nineteen or twenty, skinny, hands chapped and callused from the labor on a fishing boat, keeping in spite of that the tender agility of his great-uncle's hands. Taguiloa met his mild uncurious gaze and groaned within. The boy seemed as incapable of keeping himself as a day-old baby. Then he saw the way Blackthorn, Brann and Harra were smiling at him, the half-exasperated, half-adoring smile of a mother for a mis-chievous but well-loved child—and changed his mind. Linjijan was one of the fortunate of the earth. As long as he had his music, he'd be content and whatever he needed to survive and play that music would come unmasked into his hands. Women and men alike would care for him, protect him, love him even when they were furious at him. Taga sighed but promised old Tungjii more incense and a free performance on the Luckday festival. He lis-tened to

Linjijan play and sighed again, moved quietly to stand beside the old piper. "Thanks," he said dryly.

The old man stretched his mouth in a tight-lipped smile, savoring the ambiguity in the word. He snapped his fin-gers. Linjijan stopped playing and came to squat beside him. "You want to go with him?" Ladji nodded at Taguiloa.

Linjijan nodded. He hadn't said a word so far, even to his great-uncle, greeting him with a smile and a nod.

"That's it then. Come." The old man retreated to the far side of the room and sat with his back against a wall, Linjijan beside him.

Tari stirred on her divan, her eyes fixed on Brann. She'd focused on the woman's face the moment Taguiloa brought her in, had been glancing repeatedly at her as Taguiloa dealt with Linjijan; now she gave over any pre-tense of interest in the others. "Saiir Brann," she said. "Taga tells me you will be reading past and future for the countryfolk. He tells me you're a witch, really a witch. Read for me." She looked blindly about. "What do you need, gada sticks? fire and shell? crystal? a bowl of water? Tell me what you need and I'll have it brought."

Brann came across the room to kneel beside the divan, the brindle bitch moving beside her with silent feral grace. "If you will give me your hand, said Blackthorn." Tad extended her hand. Brann cradled it on hers. "Yaril," she said, "Let's make it real this time."

The bitch shimmered into a gold glow which rose and hovered a moment over Blackthorn then sank into her. Taguiloa remembered it with a shiver at the base of his spine and wondered briefly if he should interfere. He glanced at Brann's intent face and held his tongue. The glimmer emerged from Tari and coalesced into a small blonde girl. She stood beside Brann, murmured in her ear for several minutes, then she retreated to the end of the divan and sank out of sight.

Brann shivered, her composure broke suddenly, briefly. Pain and fear and pity and anger flowed in waves across her face. She sat very still, as if frozen for a moment, then the mask was back; she opened her eyes, drew a forefinger across Tan's palm.

"Not even the gods know for certain what the morrow brings," she said quietly. "Their guesses might be better than a mortal's but that's only because they've had a longer time to watch the cycling of the seasons and the foolishness of man. When I read the fates of men and women, I will give them what pleases them and phrase it vaguely enough that whatever happens they can twist the words to fit as they will. They want to be fooled and will do the greater part of the work for me." Her voice flowed on, gentle and soothing. "Yongala laughing told me folk hold fast to their dreams even when their reason tells them they are fools. Tari Blackthorn, dancer on fire, do you desire that sort of reading or the truth of what you fear?"

Tad trembled, closed her eyes. "What do you know?"

"Shall I speak of it here?"

"These are my friends. I wouldn't ask if I didn't expect a real answer.

Brann looked at the hand she still held, set it on the black velvet cover. Watching her closely, his curiosity a hunger in him, Taguiloa saw her gather herself; a cold knot in his stomach, he waited for her answer. "This is what I know," she said, her voice held level with visible difficulty. "Some days every step is agony and effort. Your ankles and knees swell and throb sometimes beyond bear-ing. When you are in the dance you forget that pain but are nearly crippled by it once the dance is over. You fear the end of your ability to dance. Six months ago you sought solace from pain in poppymilk, now you find your-self slaved to it and view that slavery with horror but cannot escape it." She turned away from Tali's drawn face, looked over her shoulder at Taguiloa. In spite of her efforts her own face quivered; she closed her eyes, tried to calm herself and when she spoke her voice was flat and dead. "Saõm, I will not do this for you in the villages, it would call too much attention to me. And I don't think I ..." She faced round again, moved on her knees to the foot of the divan. "Yaril, Jaril, come to me, I need you."

The blond boy came from the shadows, put his hand on her left shoulder; the hand melted through the black silk and into the flesh beneath. The blond girl came from behind the divan and stood at her right shoulder, the hand melting through the black silk of the robe and sinking into the flesh beneath. Brann reached out and brushed aside the many layers of fragile silk and took Blackthorn's ankle in her hand.

Taguiloa saw then what he'd overlooked before. The ankle was swollen a little, thickened, stiff. Tari watched with fear and anguish as Brann brushed her fingers across the swelling. "It is only beginning," she said, cleared her throat, took a breath, then went on. "Were it to proceed, you would be unable to walk five years from now." She smiled a wide urchin's grin full of joy and mischief. "Slya be blessed, O dancer, it will not proceed." She closed her eyes and held the ankle cradled between her hands.

Tari's eyes flew open wider. "Heat," she whispered.

Brann said nothing, did not seem to hear. After a mo-moment she lowered that foot to the velvet and lifted the other.

Taguiloa watched, amazed, his anxiety and the sharp fear aroused by the witch's words dissipating as the wom-an's long strong hands moved from ankles to knees, not bothering to push aside the layered silk robe, from knees to hips, then wrists, elbows, shoulders. Humming softly, Brann moved her hands from the top of Tari's head down along her body to the henna'd soles of her lovely feet, the children moving with her, bonded to her, flesh to flesh. Then she sat back on her heels and sighed.

The children moved away from her, their small fine hands sliding from flesh and silk. Yaril shimmered a mo-moment and was again a brindle bitch lying beside her. Jaril went to squat beside Taguiloa.

Tari's face flushed then paled. She sat up, moved one foot then the other, moved her wrists, bent one leg at the knee, straightened it, bent the other leg, straightened it. Her hands were shaking. Her breath came sharp and fast. She opened her mouth, shut it, couldn't speak, closed her eyes, pressed her hands against her ribs, sucked in a long breath, let it out. "And the poppymilk?"

"You're free of that too."

"There's not gold enough in the world ..."

Brann shrugged. "Oh well, gold." She got to her feet, stretched, yawned. "This isn't what I'm going to feed the farmers, no and no, tell them what they want to hear and make them shiver just enough." She grinned. "And scare the bones out of any hillwolves stupid enough to attack."

Taguiloa looked around. Harra was gazing at Brann with an expression of lively interest, her full lips pursed for a whistle, but not whistling. Ladji was sliding his ancient flute between thumb and forefinger, smiling at nothing much, his body gone rubbery with his private relief. He was apparently the only one who'd known of Tari's grow-ing pain. Linjjan was gazing dreamily at nothing, his fingers moving on his thighs as if he practiced modes of fingering for music he heard inside his head.

Jaril touched Taguiloa's ann. He looked down. "What is it?"

"You wanted a boy to play the drums."

"You volunteering?"

Jaril shook his head. "Too boring. But I found a boy. He doesn't have to be Hina?"

Taguiloa looked around the room. Mage's daughter from so far west he'd never heard of her people. Linjjan, comfortably Hina. Brann the changeling witch, once of Arth Slya now of nowhere. Yaril and Jaril, who knew what they were? "One more foreigner, who'd notice." He laughed. "How long will it take to get him here ... ?" He turned to Tari, spread his hands. "Sorry, I shouldn't be so free with your house."

Tari Blackthorn waved a slim hand. "I won't say I owe you, but you may bring all the world in here and I won't complain."

"He's waiting outside." Jaril darted for the door.

Taguiloa strolled across to the divan, knelt beside Tari, took her hand in his. "There *was* a time when I thought I was running this thing." He lifted her hand, touched his lips to the wrist, cradled the hand against his cheek. "You didn't tell me."

"I wasn't telling myself." She eased her hand free. "Taga my tinti," her voice was a whisper that reached only him, "don't you see how odd it is, all this? This collection of mage-touched strangers? Why are they being pulled together? And who is doing it?" She bent a finger, touched the knuckle to his chin. "She worries me, your patron, I don't understand her. I shouldn't say it after what she did for me, but be careful of her, summerfly. Why is she doing this?"

"She has her reasons."

"And you know them. Why am I even more worried for you? No, don't fidget so, little love. I won't

ask more questions.” She ran her forefinger around the curve of his ear and down his neck. “Your drummer comes, Taga.” Laughter shook in her voice.

Taguiloa swung round. A m’darjin boy stood uncertainly in the doorway clutching drums half as big as he was, ten, maybe twelve, blue-black skin, hair a skim of springs coiled close to his skull, huge brown eyes. His hands and feet were borrowed from a bigger body, his arms thin as twigs with bumpy knobs where the joints were.

“His name is Negomas,” Jaril said. “His father was a m’raj shaman and he did something, Negomas doesn’t know what but it was bad and it killed him and the rest of the m’darjin won’t have anything to do with Negomas now, it’s like he caught something from his father and could infect them with it, but that’s not true, I checked him out and you know I’m good at that.” He tugged the boy forward.

Negomas grinned nervously. His body was taut, quiver-ing with eagerness and hope.

“Your drums?” Taguiloa said.

“My drums.” He grinned wider and mischief bright-ened the huge brown eyes. “I grow into them.” He wag-gled one of his large bony hands. “With a bit of time,” he finished, winced as Jaril kicked him in the ankle. “Saōm,” he added politely.

“Play them for me. Something I can move to.” He stepped out of his sandals, moved to the center of the mat and stood waiting, shaking himself, a long ripple from ankles to head, wrists to shoulders. He smiled toward the boy, then unfocused his eyes and concentrated on listen-ing with ears and body both.

He heard a blurred shiver of sound, then some tentative staccato taps that had unusual overtones, a sonority similar to the deeper notes of Harra’s daroud. The drums began speaking with more authority. He kept up his loosening moves, listening until the sound slid under his skin and throbbed in his blood; he flexed his arms, twisted his body from side to side, then let the music lift him into a handless backflip that developed into a series of bending stretching kinetic movements, alternating high and low; he reveled in the drumsong beating in blood, bone and muscle, was unsurprised when two flutes joined in, sing-ing in none of the usual modes, producing a strong harsh music, then the daroud came in, picking up its own ver-sion of the melodic line, adding a greater tension to the blend by tugging at the beat of the drums. The dance went on and on until Taguiloa collapsed to the mat, sweat-ing and laughing, exhausted but flying high, his panting laughter mingling with the applause and laughter from Tari and Brann, whoops from Jaril and the sweating m’darjin boy. Then silence, filled with the sound of Taguiloa’s breathing.

He fell back till he lay flat on the straw. His hands burned, his bones ached and he’d collected bruises and sore muscles from moving in ways he hadn’t tried before. He turned his head, lifted a heavy hand to push sweat-sticky hair off his face. “You’ll do, Negomas.” He yawned, swallowed. “Anyone I need to talk to about you?”

The boy shook his head, moved his fingers on the drumheads.

Taguiloa looked at Jaril, raised his brows.

Jaril shook his head.

Taguiloa pushed up until he was sitting with his arms draped over his knees. “You understand you won’t be my student but only part of the troupe?” When the boy nod-ded, he went on, “I’m sorry but that’s the way the world says things have to be; I need a Hina boy. If ever I can find the right one. Jaril, fetch whatever the boy’s got, move him into my house and make sure Yarm doesn’t try anything.”

Jaril snorted, looked pointedly at Brann.

Brann sighed. “Taguiloa is master of this motley group, my friend. We don’t argue with the boss, at least not in public even if he’s being more than usually foolish.” She chuckled, then sobered. “You know what Yarm is like. For the good of our purpose, get Negomas settled, then take him out for something to eat.” She smiled. “I know you could fry Taga’s liver if you chose, he knows it by now or he’s a lot stupider than he looks, we all know it. And we know you’re going to do nothing of the kind.”

Jaril walked over to Negomas, jerked his head at the door, then strolled out with an air of going where he chose at the speed he chose to go. Negomas picked up his drums, winked over his shoulder at Taguiloa, then fol-lowed the blond boy out.

Brann got to her feet, stood looking around. “I’m glad it’s you who’s got to pull this mix of geniuses together.” She nodded to Blackthorn, smiled a general farewell and swept out the door.

YARM LOOKED UP as Taguiloa stepped through the door. “Where you been? And what’s that dirty m’darjin doing here?”

“None of your business. And speaking of dirty, this house is a garbage dump.”

“If you want neat, hire a girl. You can afford it,” Yarm said sullenly. “I’m not your servant.”

“You’re not my wife either, which is just as well because you’d be fit only for drowning if you were a woman. Not a servant? Boils on your ass, you’re what I say you are. As of now, that’s nothing. Get.” He jerked a thumb at the door.

“Now?” Yarm’s voice cracked with surprise and rage. “You’re putting that foreigner in my place?”

“Get out. Now. Tomorrow morning you can collect your gear, but I’ve had all I’m going to take from you.”

“Fist will”

“Out.” He leaped at the boy, caught the collar of his shirt, half shoved, half lifted him across the room and out of the house, set his foot on the boy’s backside and sent him in a stumbling sprawl down the leaf-littered path.

Yarm lay dazed for a moment or so, then scrambled to his feet and came screaming at Taguiloa. Who slapped his face vigorously several times, swept his feet from under him with a leg scythe, caught an arm in a punish hold and ran him down the path and out into the street. He stood watching as Yarm slunk off, even his back full of threat though he didn’t dare turn and voice his thoughts.

“He still doesn’t quite believe you’re serious.”

Taguiloa looked down. Jaril stood beside him, his blond hair shining in the sunlight.

“I’m like to have company tonight.”

“Uh-huh. We’ll be there too. Yaril’s been getting bored, she says I have all the fun.”

TAGUILOA STOOD in the center of the bedroom and looked about him. He’d finished packing up Yarm’s things and a ratty lot they were, the boy had no pride. Black-thorn was right, he thought, as she always is. Yarm had a beautiful slim body, limber as a sea snake’s, and the face of a young immortal which the women in the audiences sighed over. He also had a good sense of timing, he learned quickly everything Taguiloa taught him, but he was spoiled, lazy, whining, dishonest about small things and large unless he thought he would be caught, jealous of Taguiloa’s time and attention to a degree that had soon become unbearable. Not a sexual jealousy, that would have been far easier to handle, but something else Taga couldn’t understand or explain.

He put the packets outside with a feeling of relief. This house used to be the place where he rested, practiced, meditated. It was filled with memories of his loved teacher, memories of peace and contentment after the turmoil in the streets. Gerontai had taught him much besides tum-bling and juggling. He’d been hoping for much the same relationship with Yarm but was quickly disillusioned. He’d let Yarm move in with him, not seeing the speculative gleam in Yarm’s black eyes. A measuring cold calculation powered by malice and spite and a like for hurting. A passionate need to hold and own. Fire and ice and neither of them comfortable to live with. Taguiloa stood in his doorway rubbing his back across the edge of the jamb, feeling relaxed and clean for the first time in the three years Yarm had lived here.

The Wounded Moon was a ragged crescent rising in the east, its lowest horn just touching the Temple roof. I’m not going to wait here staring at the wall like a fool. Negomas was spending the night with Brann: no need to worry about him. “Jaril,” Taga yelled.

An owl circled above, hooted what sounded like laugh-ter, came swooping down, landing beside Taguiloa as the blond boy. A moment later a nighthawk screeched, came slipping down and landed as the silverbright small girl. “What’s the fuss?” Her voice was water clear, melodious.

Taguiloa bowed. “Welcome, damasaõr.”

“Hm. Well?”

Feeling as if he faced the ghost of his great-aunt who was mamasaõr to the whole family and by repute tougher than a Temueng pimush, Taguiloa cleared his throat. “I was going to visit some friends, thought your brother might like to come along.”

She snorted (though Jaril had informed Taguiloa that his kind didn't actually breathe and therefore couldn't play the flute). "And let Fist burn you out?"

Taguiloa laughed before he thought, then expected her to scold him for disrespect, but she seemed unperturbed, just stood waiting for him to explain himself. "Fist has better sense," he said. "Even on a foggy night, start a fire here and half of Silili would go. Bad enough to have Hina on his tail when some ghost or other named him as the fire-starter, something that big would bring in Temueng enforcers and maybe even an Imperial Censor. He'd be skinned alive and hung to rot. His family too and everyone who helped him and their families." Taga flung his arms out. "And even when he was dead, the ghosts he made would torment the ghost he was. I'm not worth all that. No way. Not even for dearest Yarm the family hope." He smiled at the little girl. "Want to come along?"

She gazed a moment at her brother, then nodded. "Why not. This ghost business is weird."

Taguiloa stared at her. "Your kind don't die?"

"Oh they die all right. And stay dead. Ghosts? No way."

"They don't have souls?"

"That's something they've been arguing about since el-dest ancestor learned to talk." She shrugged. "A waste of time and breath far as I can see." She watched as Jaril blurred then changed into a Hina boy. "This is the first reality we've seen where there are ghosts you can actually talk to." She shimmered and changed to a small golden lemur, then hopped up to ride her brother's shoulder.

"Well," Jaril said, "she couldn't come as a little girl, that'd make your friends uncomfortable."

Taguiloa pulled the door shut, turned the key in the lock and dropped the metal bit into a pocket, then started walking toward the gate through the rustling foliage of bushes he reminded himself he'd have to water in the morning. "You change your shapes so why couldn't she be another boy?"

The lemur gave a chattering sound that sounded indig-nant. Jaril grinned and patted her paw. "But Yaril's a female," he said. "She couldn't do that."

"Why not?" Curiosity driving him, Taguiloa persisted. "It's only appearance after all. If I dressed myself in wom-an's robes, painted my face, wore a wig and practiced a bit, I could make a fairly convincing appearance as a woman, though my real nature wouldn't change at all."

The boy turned those strange crystal eyes on him; when Taguiloa was sure he wasn't going to answer, he did. "The inner and outer are one with us. If we try to change the nature of the outer, we deny and warp the inner. So—" he grinned, an impudent urchin grin that acknowl-edged and mocked Taguiloa's voice—"that we seem chil-dren should tell you we are children."

"How old are you?"

"Hard to say. Time is funny. Six or seven hundreds of your years. Something like that."

"Children?"

"We grow slowly."

"Seems like." He tapped a finger on Jaril's head, re-lieved to find it solid, warm and a little oily. "Talking about weird, I find you changechildren stranger than any ghost I've ever seen."

THEY WANDERED THROUGH the night quarter, sharing jugs of wine, the lemur a popular little beast with her smooth soft fur and dainty manners; they got evicted from a few places when some weak-stomached drinkers refused to tolerate an animal drinking from men's wine bowls and others who liked the beast somewhat more than they liked the objectors jumped the objectors and started breaking the furniture; they visited a joyhouse, Jaril pouting and Yaril sulking when Taguiloa wouldn't let them go upstairs with him; they settled for entertaining the joygirls, Jaril clapping his hands and dancing, Yaril dancing with him, a small and elegant figure, bowing and swaying with the most wonderful grace, golden fur glimmering in the lamp-light. The lemur even played a simple tune on a gittern abandoned in a corner. They stayed there quite a while even after Taguiloa rejoined them, but eventually wan-dered on to watch a fight in the middle of the street, throw the bones with a circle of men on the sidewalk, losing and winning with equal enthusiasm, all three savor-ing the noise and activity about them, loud, raucous, mostly illegal and immoral, but full of vigor and the beat of life. Now and then Taguiloa got a jolt when he looked at Jaril's eager young face, then he'd tell himself, seven hundred years, Tungjii's tits and tool, and forget worrying

about corrupting the boy.

Sometime after midnight, he doused his head with ice-water, looked blearily about, collected the children and started threading through the narrow streets heading toward the Players Quarter.

They left the lamplit streets behind, left the noise and warmth and good feeling. Taguiloa shivered, the water in his hair making him cooler though it didn't do much to clear the fog out of his head. "I shouldn't have had that last jug."

Jaril shook himself like a large wet dog. Yaril--lemur leaped off his shoulder, shimmered and was a large owl beating upward at a steep angle. "Yaril's going to keep an eye on our backs."

"Someone's following us?"

"Not yet. Probably waiting for us. Tell me about Fist. What scares him?"

"Not much. Hanging. Temueng torturers. Dragons. He swears he won't hang, the enforcers will have to kill him to take him." His footsteps sounded like gongs in his ears. Jaril's feet made no sound at all. "He's cunning, knows when to back off, runs strings of smugglers, snatchthieves, thugs, I don't know what all."

"He figures he can handle you, a little pain and fear and you do what he says?"

"Yeah. I'd figure the same, were it not for you change-children. Why else would I put up with Yarm for so long?"

"And he's afraid of dragons?"

"A few years back, or so I'm told, Fist had a diviner read the gada sticks for him. The man told him to watch out for dragon fire."

"Ah. Maybe Yaril and me, we can make that reading come true." Jaril blurred and a twin to Yaril's owl went sailing up, narrowly avoiding tangling itself in the branches of pomegranate growing out over a wall.

Taguiloa stood blinking after him. "I'll never get used to that." As he prowled along through the shadows of the narrow lane, he wondered what had got into the changechild. Too much wine, for one thing. He thought about that and was more confused than before. They didn't have innards like normal folk, you could see that when they were smears of light. But Jaril had picked up a taste for wine rambling the night with Taguiloa and disposed of it somehow, managing to get nicely elevated on it, maybe it was like ghosts drinking the fragrance of wine and tea and cooked foods. What did changechildren eat? Jaril never said anything about that. Doesn't matter, he's a friend, can eat whatever he wants, doesn't bother me; good kid, Jaril, even if sometimes he scares the shit outta me.

Slowly sobering, he kept to the shadows and moved as silently as he could toward his own gate. Fist wasn't going to kill him, just break an arm or leg or both and tromp on him a lot and repeat the tromping as soon as he healed unless he gave in and took Yarm hack. Taga cursed the emperor's boils or whatever it was that stirred him up and made him grab at everything in sight. With the usual number of enforcers about and the Tekora's guard up to strength, Fist would have settled for a minor beating. Tungjii and Jah'takash alone knew what he'd get up to these days.

A horned owl came swooping down and changed to a blond child. Yaril. She came close to him, whispered, "Some men in the garden waiting for you. Yarm is there, two-legged elephant beside him, a couple others with clubs."

"Fist himself." Taga swore under his breath. "That's bad."

"I thought so. Mind if Jaril and me, we burn up a little of your garden?"

"What?"

"I remember what you said about fire. We won't let it get away."

Taga stared at her, then grinned. "Dragons."

"Well?"

"In a good cause, why not." He scowled and swore again. "Fist. Seshtrango gift him with staggers and a horde of rabid fleas."

Yaril giggled, looked up, giggled again, shimmered and was a replica in green and silver of the small crimson and gold dragon undulating past over Taga's head.

Jaril-dragon flipped his streamered tail in airy greeting.

Taga grinned up at the baby dragons. “You’re drunk both of you.” Silent laughter bubbled in his blood. The serpentine shapes waved laughter at him, wove laughter-knots about each other, exulting in a form that made them drunker than any amount of wine would. They settled down before the enchantment of their beauty wore off him (he was wine drunk too, far more than he should be) and started off toward his house.

He gave them a few moments then followed after, thinking they were going to impress the shit out of those thugs waiting like innocent babes in his shrubbery. The dragons moved swiftly ahead of him, darting in swift undulations toward his garden. He strolled along the lane between the high wood-and-stone walls that shut in the house-and--garden compounds of those players and artists wealthy enough to buy and maintain a place here. He had inherited his. There’d been some uncertain years after his master died when he was afraid he would lose the tiny house and garden, when he had to swallow his pride and borrow money from Blackthorn which he knew she wasn’t expecting him to repay. He did it—and repaid it—because Gerontai had taught him to love tending that garden; he knew every plant in there, every inch of the soil, even the worms and beetles that lived in it, he knew it by taste and feel and smell, he knew every miniature carp in the small pool, every bird that nested in his trees and bushes. It was his place of retreat and meditation and more necessary to him than anything or anyone else, even Blackthorn. Yarm had disrupted that peace, but once this nonsense was over, he’d have his retreat back. Negomas was proving a quiet, happy companion with a love of growing things and a gentle sureness in those outsize hands that were so clumsy othertimes. He had the wrong sort of body and no talent at all for tumbling or the new kind of movement Taguiloa was exploring, but Taguiloa was beginning to feel that he’d found someone to whom he could pass on the other things Gerontai had taught him. And maybe the changechildren could find him a Hina boy to learn the movements, a boy that would fit into the household and appreciate the peace. Taguiloa ambled along the curving lane dreaming of times to come, chuckling as he heard shouts, curses and screams ahead of him, cracks, crack-lings, shrieks, a scream. Baby dragons getting busy.

When he stopped by the gate, a red and gold dragon head popped over the wall, a gold crystal dragon eye winked at him, then the head vanished. He pushed on the leaves of the gate and they swung inward without a sound. Busy Yarm, there’d been a squeak in one of the left side hinges yesterday. He strolled into his garden, hands clasped behind him, stopped after a few steps and grinned at the tableau before him.

Yarm in a half crouch, fists clenched, his face twisted with helpless rage, his shirt and trousers slashed with thin charred lines and speckled with black spots still red-edged and smoking.

Fist on his knees howling with pain, the side of his face burned, his left shoulder and arm bubbling raw meat.

Two other men on their faces in the gravel of the path, twitching a little, speechless with terror.

Yaril dragon and Jaril dragon drifted down and hovered by Taguiloa, one on the left, the other on his right, both a little behind him like proper bodyguards.

“Greet you, Yarm,” Taguiloa said. “Come for your things? I see you met my friends.” He grimaced at the howling Fist, turned to Jaril. “Could you do something about that noise?”

Golden eye winked at him, dragon dissolved. In his light ray form Jaril zipped through Fist, wheeled about him, went through him again, then returned to dragon shape and took his place at Taguiloa’s shoulder. The howling stopped. Not a full cure, the man’s flesh was still ragged and raw, but at least it wasn’t oozing anymore. Fist got to his feet. He opened and shut his left hand. The muscles in his arm shifted stiffly, but the pain was no longer unbearable.

“They’ve promised to keep an eye on me and mine.” Taguiloa said. “They must have thought you had hostile intentions, waiting here in the dark like this. You don’t have hostile intentions, do you Fist?”

The big man was staring fascinated at the serpentine shapes, turning his head from one side to the other until Taguiloa began to get dizzy watching. Eyes glazed, fear-sweat dripping down his face, Fist coughed, said, “Uh no, sure not.” He turned away from Yaril and Jaril, reached over to touch his burned side. “Like you said, we come to get Yarm’s stuff. Meant nothing by it.” He kicked the nearest of his men in the ribs. “Isn’t that so, Fidge? On your feet, goat turd.”

Silent laughter from the dragons. Taguiloa glanced at Yaril, blinked as she began smoking about the nostrils and produced a small gout of bright blue fire. Fidge started shivering and had difficulty getting to his feet. Fist went so pale he looked leprous in that brief blue glow.

“Then Yarn might as well collect his belongings. Every-thing he owns is in those packs by the door. He’ll need some help hauling it, but then you’re here, aren’t you, so generous with your time and muscle.” He turned his head to Jaril dragon. “Light their way, my friend. If you feel like it, of course.”

More silent laughter then Jaril dragon went coiling after Fist and Yarn, prodding them to move faster.

When they were back Taguiloa said, “Good. There’s no reason for any of you to return, is there? My friends here might be a bit nastier if they saw you again. They were mild tonight, but their tempers get a bit tetchy when they’re hungry. I wouldn’t show my face inside these walls again if I were you.”

Silently, heavily the four intruders trudged through the gate and into the lane. Taguiloa pushed the two sections of gate shut and dropped the bar home with intense satisfac-tion. He strolled toward the house, laughter bubbling up in him, his own and that from the dragonets.

Yaril and Jaril dissolved and retrbrmed into ehildshapes, giggling helplessly, leaning against the housewall beside the door holding their middles. “You should ... you shoulda ..” Yaril gasped. “You should’ve seen Jaril chas-ing them through the hushes. You should’ve seen us herd-ing them off the grass, giving them hotfoots until they were hopping like ... oh oh ooh, I think I’m gonna bust.”

Jaril calmed a little, asked hopefully, “You think they’ll come back?”

“Not this summer.” He looked around at the garden but couldn’t see much. The crescent moon was low in the west and the starlight dimmed by fog rolling in. He couldn’t see any smoldering glows, turned to the children. “Fire?”

“All out. We made sure.”

“If you’re wrong and I burn to death, I’ll come back and haunt you.”

“We know,” they said in chorus. “We know.”

EARLY IN THAT long summer in Silili, Jaril went with Taguiloa to the Shaggil horsefair on the Mainland.

Loud, hot, dusty, filled with the shrill challenges of resty stallions, the higher bleating whinnies of colts and fillies, the snap of auctioneer’s chant, the wham-tap of closing rods, the smell of urine, sweat, hay dust, clay dust, horse and man, cheap wine and hot sauce, boiling noodles and vinegar, cinnamon, musk, frangipani, sandalwood, cumin, hot iron, leather, oils. Islands of decorum about Jamar Lords. Islands of chaos about wrestlers, tumblers, jugglers of the more common sort, sword swallowers, fire-eaters, sleight-of-hand men doing tricks to fool children, shell and pea men fooling adults, gamblers of all degree. Hina farmers there with their whole families, the infants riding mother and father in back-cradles, the older chil-dren clinging close, somewhat intimidated by the crowd. Foreigners there for the famous Shaggil mares whose speed and stamina passed into any strain they were bred to. Speculators there on the hope they alone could dig out the merits in colts neglected enough to keep their price low. Courtesans there for good-looking easy mounts to show themselves off in wider realms than the streets of Silili. Temung horse-beliks there to buy war mounts and Takhill Drays to pull supply wagons and siege engines.

Taguiloa strolled through the heat, noise and dust, en-joying it all, enjoying most of all the knowledge he could buy any handful of those about them with the gold in his moneybelt. He stopped a moment by a clutch of tumblers, watching them with a master’s eye, sighing at the lack of imagination in the rigidly traditional runs and flips. They performed the patterns with ease and even grace, and they gathered applause and coin for their efforts, but he’d done that well when he was twelve.

Jaril wouldn’t let him linger but tugged on his sleeve and led him from one shed to another, pointing out a bay cob they should get to pull the travel wagon, a lanky gray gelding that would do for Harra who admitted she was out of practice but had once been rather a good rider. The changechild wouldn’t let Taga stop to haggle for the beasts, but urged him on until they were out at the fringes where weanlings and yearlings were offered for sale. He stopped outside a small enclosure with a single colt inside.

Taguiloa looked at the wild-eyed demon tethered to a post, looked down at Jaril. “Even I know you don’t ride a horse less than two. Especially that one.”

“Yaril and me, we’ll fix that later, the age, I mean.”

“Oh.”

“Wait here and don’t look much interested in any of these.” He waved at the enclosures around them. “I’m not and suck your own eggs, imp.”

Trailing laughter, Jaril shimmered into a pale amor-phous glow, tenuous in that dusty air as a fragment of dream. It drifted in a slow circle above the corrals, flash-ing through the colts and fillies in them, finishing the survey with the beast in the nearest enclosure. It melted through his yellow-mud coat and seemed to nestle down inside the colt. That made Taga itchy, reminding him of antfeet walking across his brain, skittering about under his skin. He reached inside his shirt and scratched at his ribs, looked about for anything that might offer relief from the beating of the sun. He was sweating rivers, his heavy black shirt was streaky with sweat mud, powdered with pale dust, the moneybelt a furnace against his belly. Noth-ing close, not a shed about. These were the scrubs of the Fair, interesting only to the marginal speculators and a few farmers, without the money to buy a mature beast, but with land and fodder enough to justify raising a weanling. He pulled his sleeve across his face, grimaced at the slimy feel, the heavy silk being no use as a swab. When he let his arm fall, Jaril was standing beside him.

“We want him,” the changechild said, and pointed to the dun colt moving irritably at his tether, jerking his head up and down, blotched with sweat, caught in an unremitting temper tantrum.

“Why?” The colt was a hand or two taller than the yearlings about them, with a snaky neck, an ugly, boney head, ragged ears that he kept laid back even when he stood fairly quiet, a wicked plotting eye. Whoever brought that one to the Fair had more hope than good sense. “You can’t be serious.”

“Sure,” Jaril said. “Tough, smart and kill anyone tries to steal him. And fast.” He reached up, tugged at Taguiloa’s sleeve. “Come on. Once the breeder knows we really want him, he’ll try to screw up the price. He expects to make enough to pay for the colt’s feed, selling him for tiger meat to some Temueng collector. Don’t believe any-thing he tries to tell you about the dun’s breeding. The mare was too old for bearing and on her way to the butcher when she got out at the wrong time and got crossed by a man eater they had to track down and kill. Took them almost six months to trap him. Colt’s been mistreated from the day he was foaled and even if he wanted to behave he wasn’t let. Offer the breeder three silver and settle for a half-gold, no more. Don’t act like you know it all, that’s what breeders like him love to see. He’ll peel your hide and draw your back teeth before you notice. Just say you want the colt and will pay a silver for him, let the breeder rant all he wants, then say it again.” He gave Taguiloa a minatory glance, then a cheeky grin and trotted away, his small sandaled feet kicking up new goutts of dust

Annoyed and amused, Taguiloa followed him, knowing Jaril was getting back at him for the times he’d ordered the changechild about. He was a tiny Hina boy today with bowl-cut black hair and dark gold skin, except for his eyes indistinguishable from any of a thousand homeless urchins infesting the streets of Silili, dressed in dusty cotton trou-sers and a wrapabout shirt that hung open over a narrow torso and fluttered when there was any breeze. He rounded a haystack and stopped beside three men squatting about a small fire drinking large bowls of acid black tea. He waited for Taguiloa, then nodded at a fox-faced man, lean and wiry, with a small hard pot belly that strained the worn fabric of his shirt.

Taguiloa came up to him. “Salim,” he said, “you own the dun colt tethered by himself, back there a ways?”

“I have a fine dun yearling, Salim. Indeed, one whose blood lines trace back on both sides to the great mare Kashantuea and her finest stud the Moonleaper. Alas, the times are hard, Saom, that a man must be forced to part with his heart’s delight.”

“Bloodlines, ah. Then you’ve turned up the man-eater’s origins?”

A flicker of sour disgust, then admiration. “That a sothron islander should know so much! Oh knowing one, come, let us gaze on the noble lines, the matchless spirit of this pearl among horses. A pearl without price as such a wise one as you are must see at a single glance.”

“I know nothing of horseflesh,” Taguiloa said, glad enough to take Jaril’s advice. “One silver for your dun.”

“One silver?” The breeder’s face went red and his eyes bulged. “One silver for such speed and endurance. Of course, a jest at my expense. Ha-Ha. Twenty gold.”

“I noticed the spirit. He was doing his best to eat the plank in front of him. No doubt he’d prefer

man-flesh like his sire. Two silvers, though I'm a fool to say it."

"Never! Though I starve and my children starve and my house fall down. Fifteen gold."

"Eating your house too, is he? Think what you'll save on repairs by getting rid of him. Three silver and that's my limit."

"His mother was Hooves-that-sing, renowned through the world. Twelve gold, only twelve gold, though it hurts my heart to say it."

"No doubt it was because of her great age that she died in the birthing." Taguiloa wiped at his face and looked at his hand. "I'm hot and tired, my wife waits with a bath and tea, let us finish this. Three silver for the beast and five copper for his rope and halter. My boy can find a new fancy if he has to. Well?"

"You're jesting again, noble skim, such a miserable sum"

"So be it. Come," he wheeled and started off, knowing Jaril was coming reluctantly to his feet and pouting with disappointment. Might work, might not, he didn't really care, he didn't want anything to do with that piece of malevolence in the corral.

The breeder let him get three strides away, then called out, "Wait. Oh noble Sen, why didn't you say you bought for this divine child, this god among boys? That my heart's delight should find a home with such a young lion, ah that tempts me, yes, I can give my prize into such hands, though if you could bring yourself, noble Satim, a half-gold ..." He sighed as Taguiloa took another step away. "You are a hard man, noble Satim. Agreed then, three silver and a copper hand. You pay the tag fee?"

Satisfied with his bargaining, Taguiloa nevertheless glanced first at Jaril, got his nod, then waved a hand in airy agreement.

They stopped at the pavilion of records, paid the trans-fer fee and the small bribes necessary to get the clerks to record the sale and hand over the tin ear tag, a larger bribe to get a tagger to set the tag in the dun colt's ear.

As soon as he identified the proper beast, the breeder's job was done but he lingered, relishing the dismay on the face of the tagman when he heard the yearling scream, saw him lash out with each hoof in turn, saw his wild wicked eye, his long yellow teeth. The tagman started to refuse and retreat, but Taguiloa got a good grip on his arm. "The boy'll get him calmed down. Watch."

Jaril, climbed the rails and stood balanced on the top one, looking down at the the dun who went crazy trying to get at him. Somewhere deep in his soul the breeder found a limit and opened his mouth to protest, shut it when Taguiloa laughed at him and repeated, "Watch."

The boy found the moment he wanted and launched himself from the rail, twisting somehow in mid-air so he came down astride the colt. The yearling squealed with rage, gathered himself

And snorted mildly, did a few fancy steps, then stood quite still, twisting his limber neck around so he could nose gently at Jaril's *knee*. Again the breeder started to shout a warning, again he held—his peace as the dun swung his head back round and stared at him. Breeder stared at beast, beast at breeder and the man looked away first, convinced the beast was snickering at him. Fuming, he stalked off, aware he'd been fooled into selling a valuable beast for almost nothing.

After they bought the bay cob and the gray gelding, they left the Fair, Taguiloa on the gelding, leading the cob, Jaril riding the yearling. They left the three horses with a widow who had a shed and pasture she rented. In the days that followed Jaril and Yaril flew across frequently to train and grow the dun from a yearling to a lean fit three-year-old. Those same days Taguiloa planned the per-formances and rehearsed his troupe.

THEY WALKED OUT of Silili, Taguiloa, Brann, Harra, Ne-gomas, Linjjan, Jaril as Hina boy and Yaril as brindle hound. Taguiloa and Linjjan put their shoulders to the man-yokes of a tilt cart that carried their props, costumes, camping gear, food, and a miscellany of other useful ob-jects. Brann and Harra slipped straps over their shoulders and added their weight to the task of towing that clumsy vehicle. Jaril ran ahead of them with Negomas, both boys chattering excitedly about what they expected to happen, a sharing of ignorance and pleasurable speculation. Yaril trotted about, her nose to the ground, enjoying the smells of the morning.

They left the last huts of the indigent behind before the sun was fully up, negotiated the waste, cursing ruts and briars, then rocked onto a country lane where the going was a bit easier. There was dew on the grass and low bushes, the morning was cool and bright, the smell of damp earth and soft wet grass almost strong enough to overcome the pungency of cow dung and dog droppings. They hauled the cart through long crisp shadows cast by fruit trees, nut trees, spice trees and an occasional cedar or sea-pine. All the bearing trees were heavy with ripe fruit or nuts or pods of spice. As the heat of the sun increased and licked up the dew, it also woke the heavy sweet perfume of the fruits and spices, the tang of the cedars. Bees and wasps hummed about, nibbling at late peaches and apricots, nectarines and apples, cherries and pears. The air was filled with their noises, with bird song, with the whisper of needles and leaves—and with the squeals, groans and rattles from the cart as it lurched in and out of ruts, one of the not so small irritations of being Hina or foreign in a Temueng-ruled world. If they could have used the paved Imperial Way, they'd have cut in half the effort and time it took to reach the causeway between Selt and Utar, but bored Temueng guards harassed even the wealthiest of Hina merchants using that road; what they'd do to a band of players didn't bear thinking about.

FIVE HOURS AFTER they left Taguiloa's house, they came out of a lane onto the rocky cliffs where a few skinny long-legged pigs rooted among the grass and weeds, trot-ting sure-footed on the edge of cliffs rotten and precipitous. Jaril eyed them warily, looked up at his soaring sister who had long since decided that she preferred wings to feet, made a face at her then shimmered into a tall fierce boar-hound and went back to trot beside the sweating straining adults; the small wild pigs were the only non-working livestock on the island and had tempers worse than hungover Tern ueng tax-collectors.

The causeway towers were visible ahead, a barrier that had to be passed no matter how unpleasant or malicious the guards were; they needed to get their credeens there, the metal tags they had to have to show in every village or to any Temueng who stopped and required them. Taguiloa had travel permits for all of them, but the credeens were more important. It meant more bribes, it meant enduring whatever the guards wanted to do to them. These Temuengs were the scrapings of the army, left here while the better soldiers were off fighting the Emperor's wars of conquest. Taguiloa saw them every time he looked up, saw them watching the clumsy progress of the tilt cart, talking to-gether; the closer he got, the worse they looked. He began to worry for the women's sake. The guards had to let them by eventually, but they knew and he knew that nothing they did to him or Brann or Harra or Linjijan or the children would bring them any punishment. His stom-ach churning, he kept his eyes down, his shoulders bent, hoping to ride out whatever happened, knowing he had no choice but to accept their tormenting. Resistance would only make things worse.

THE EMPUSH TURNED the papers over and over, inspecting every mark and seal on them, asking the same stupid questions again and again, jabbing a meaty forefinger into Taguiloa's chest, hitting the same spot each time until Taga had to grit his teeth to keep from wincing. Only two of his four-command were visible, the others probably even drunker than their fellows and asleep inside the tower.

Brann endured the comments and catcalls, the ugly handling, though she was strongly tempted to suck a little of the life out of the Temuengs; might be doing the world a big favor if she drained them dry. She watched Harm and Taguiloa both stoically enduring their hazing and kept a precarious hold on her temper, but when the guards left their tormenting of the women and began leading Negomas and jaril toward the tower, she'd had enough. She went after them, covering the ground with long tiger strides. Harra bit her lip, then started whistling a strident tune that brought a large dust-devil whirling up the dirt lane and onto the Way where it slapped into the empush, distracting him so he wouldn't see what was happening. Brann slapped her hand against a guard's neck. He dropped as if she'd knocked him on the head. A breath later and the second guard followed him. Shooing the boys ahead of her, green eyes flashing scorn, she stalked back to Taguiloa and the empush.

Before he could object or question her, she caught hold of his hand and held it for a long long moment. By the time she released him, his face had gone slack, his eyes glazed. "Give us our credeens," she said crisply.

Moving dreamily, the empush fumbled in his pouch and drew out a handful of the metal tags. She counted the proper number and tipped the rest into his hand. "Put these away." She waited until he pulled the drawstring tight. "Give me the travel papers. Good. You're going to forget all this, aren't you. Answer me. Good. Now you can go into the tower with your drunken men and get some sleep. When you wake, you'll remember having some fun with a troupe of players, but letting them go on their way after a while. The usual thing. You hear? Good. Never mind the men on the ground. They'll wake when they're ready. Go into the tower and crawl into bed. That's right." She watched tensely as he turned and stumbled into the tower, stepping over his men without seeing them.

Taguiloa raised a brow. "They dead?"

"Just very tired. Take them a couple days to get back to their usual nastiness."

"Thought you wanted out with no trouble."

"Comes a time, Taga, comes a time." She gave him the travel permits and passed the credeens around.

"As long as he really forgets." Taguiloa ducked under the shafts and got himself settled once more against the yoke. Linjijan looked mildly at him, then away again; he'd ignored most of what had gone before, looking at the guards with such calm surprise when they poked at him that they left off in disgust.

Brann drew her hand across her sweaty, dirty face, grimaced at the streaks of mud on her palm. "It's worked before. In Tavisteen, well, you wouldn't know about that. Let's get moving. I feel naked standing around like this."

THEY WERE STOPPED at the Utar end of the causeway, but that empush was only interested in his bribe and let them pass without much difficulty. He had a sour spiteful look, but his men were out of sight, perhaps even out of call and he wasn't going to start trouble, not on Utar with his commander a sneeze away.

They curved around the edge of the terraced mountain that took up the greater part of Utar, keeping to the broad Way on the lowest level where the haughty Temueng lordlings wouldn't have to look at them, passed a third empushad of guards, and were finally freed of hindrances, rumbling along the causeway that linked Utar to the mainland.

At the widow's farm where they'd pastured the horses, they transferred the gear and supplies from the cart to the gaudy box-wagon Taguiloa had purchased from a disbanding troupe whose internal dissensions had reached the point of explosion in spite of their success on tour. They left the tilt cart in the care of the widow and after a hasty meal, started on the two-day journey through the coastal marshes. Taguiloa drove, Linjijan sat beside him coaxing songs out of his practice flute. Negomas rode on the roof with his smallest drum; he liked it up there with the erratic wind pushing into his stiff springy hair and blowing debris away from him. He played with the drum, fitting his beat to Linjijan's wanderings or playing his own folk music, singing in the clicking sonorous tongue of his fa-thers. Brann and Harra rode ahead of the wagon, Harra on the gray gelding, Brann on the dun colt forcegrown by the children, a well-mannered beast as long as she or one of the children were around and an ill-tempered demon when they weren't. Brann was working on that, but it would take time.

They rolled along the stone road raised on arches above the mud and water through the misty gloom of the wet-lands into heavy stifling air that blew sluggishly off the water and along the raised road, carrying with it clouds of biters. The dun's temper deteriorated until even Brann had trouble controlling him; even the placid cob grew restless and broke his steady plod as he twitched and snorted and shook his head.

"Vataraparastullakosakavilajusakh!" Harra slapped at her neck, wiggled her arms, began whistling a high screeching monotonous air that seemed to gather the biters in a thick black cloud and blow them off into the gloom under the trees. She kept it up for about twenty minutes, then broke off, coughed, spat and took a long long drink from her waterskin.

Negomas giggled and began beating a rapid ripple on his drum, chanting up a wind that came from behind and blew steadily past them, keeping them relatively clear of biters until they came up to the campsite the Emperor kept cleared and maintained for travelers, a large shed with wattle walls and a tile

roof, a stone floor tilted so rain-would run out, and a stack of reasonably dry wood in a bin at one side. It was very early in the trading season so everything was clean and all the supplies were topped off, the steeping well was cleaned out, with a new base of sand and charcoal, the water in it fairly clean and clear. There was a second shed for the wagon and stock, this one with high stone walls and a heavy gate with loopholes in it where a spearman or Bowman could hold off a crowd. With Yaril and Jaril to stand guard it would take a wolf hardier than any of the loners living in the swamps to make off with their goods.

THE NEXT DAY they showed their credeens at the gates of Hamardan, the first of the river cities clear of the marshes, and rode through the streets, Negomas playing a calling song on his drums, Linjijan making witcheries on his flute,

Harra riding the gray with her knees and plucking cas-cades of cheerful noise from her daroud. It wasn't market day but the bright noise of the music was pulling folk, Hina and Temueng alike, out of their houses and shops, and drawing boisterous children after them.

They made a wide circle about the city and then in the center of the flurry they'd created they rolled, trolled, caracoled to the largest Inn in Hamardan. It was a hollow square with few windows in the thick outside wall and a red-tile roof with demon-averts scattered along the eaves, a place where the richest merchant would feel safe with his goods locked in the Inn's fortress godons, and he himself locked into the comfort and security of the Inn proper. This was early in the season, few merchants traveling yet. End of summer, not yet harvest time, no festivals coming up, none in the recent past. Folk were ripe for anything that promised entertainment. Though they were players and low on anyone's scale of respectability, though half the troupe was foreign and worth even less than players, still Taguiloa knew the value of what he was bringing to the Inn and made a point of assuming his welcome. He drove the wagon into the central court and leaped down from the driver's seat with an easy flip, landed lightly on the pavingstones to the applause of the swarming children, bowed, laughing to them, then went to negotiate for rooms and the use of the court for a performance on the next night after the market shut down and the crowds it brought were still in town.

BRANN SET UP a small bright tent in the market and put Negomas beating drums outside it, Jaril doing some tum-bling and calling out to the passersby to come and hear past and future from a seer come from the ends of the earth to tell it. Though she carefully used nothing painful from the bits Yaril gave to her, she gave the maidens and matrons a good show and it was not long before word flew along the wind that the foreign woman was a wonder who could look into the heart and tell you your deepest secrets.

Twice male seekers thought to take more than she wanted to give—a woman alone, a foreigner, *was fair* game for the predatory—but a low growl from a very large brindle hound that came from the shadows behind the table was enough to discourage the most amorous. And she got twice her fee from these men, smiling fiercely at them and mentioning things they didn't want exposed, and a calm threat to show to the world their poverty or stinginess, whichever it might be. They left, growling of cheat and fake and fraud, but no one bothered to listen.

That night the Inn was jammed with people, anyone who could come up with the price of entry—city folk and those from the farms and fisheries around, the jamar and his household. The poorest sat in thick clumps on the paving stones of the court, the shopkeepers and their families packed the third-floor balcony, the jamar and his family had the choice seats on the end section of the second-floor balcony, the side sections of that balcony given over to town officials and the jamarak Temuengs. The wagon was pushed against the inside end of the court, its sides let down on sturdy props to make a flat stage triple the wagon's width. The bed and sides were covered by layers of cork, the cork by a down quilt carefully tied so it wouldn't shift about. The first balcony above the wagonstage was blocked off for the use of the players; a ladder went from this to the wagon bed, giving them two levels for performing.

It was a good crowd and a good-natured one. Brann and Harm took coin at the archway entrance to the court, the Inn servants escorted the balcony folk to the stairs and glared down street urchins who tried to sneak in for free. The Host stood on the second balcony watching all this with suppressed glee,

since he got a percentage of the take for allowing Taguiloa to use his court. There were very few clients in the Inn and fewer expected for the rest of the month, so it was no hardship to accommodate the players, something Taguiloa had counted on for he'd made enough tours with Gerontai to know the value of an inn-keeper's favor.

The noise in the court rose to a peak then hushed as the drums began to sound, wild exotic music most of these folk had never heard before, a little disturbing, but it crawled into the blood until they were breathing with it. On the second-floor balcony Taguiloa looked at Brann. "Ready?" he mouthed to her. She nodded. He put his hand on Negomas's shoulder. The boy looked up, smiled then changed the beat of his music, lending to the throb of the drums a singing sonorous quality; Linjijan came in with his flute, giving the music a more traditional feel, blending M'darjin and Hina in a way that was more com-fortable for the listeners. Then the daroud added its me-tallic cadences and the crowd hushed, sensing something about to happen. Taguiloa leaped onto the balcony rail and stood balanced there, arms folded across his chest, the soft glow of the lampions picking out the rich gold and silver couching of his embroidered robe.

"People of Hamardan."

The drum quieted to a soft mutter behind him; flute and daroud went silent.

"In the western lands beyond the edge of the world, maidens dance with fire to please their king and calm their strange and hungry gods. At great expense and effort I bring you FIRE" As he gestured, blue, crimson and gold flames danced above the quilting (Yaril and jail spreading themselves thin) "... and the MAIDEN."

A loose white silk gown fluttering about her, Brann swung over the rail and went down the ladder in a con-trolled fall, using hands and feet to check her plunge. Then she was in among the flames, standing with hands raised above her head while she swayed and the flames swayed about her. The drum went on alone for a while until the beat was so strong they who watched were trapped

2.38 Jo Clayton in it, then the flute came in and finally the daroud, playing music from Arth Slya, the betrothal dance when a maid announced to the world that she and her life's companion had found each other, a sinuous wheeling dance that showed off the suppleness of the body and the sensuality of the dancer. In Arth Slya there were no flames, the girl would dance with her lover. Brann danced it that night with what pleasure she could and more sadness than she'd expected to feel, danced it in memory of Sammag Schimli who had salvaged her pleasure in her body,

The flames vanished, the music stopped, the dance stopped. Brann stood very still in the center of the wagonstage, breathing rapidly, then flung out her arms and bowed to the audience. She ran up the ladder and vanished into the shadows to a burst of whistles and applause.

The drum began again, a quick insistent beat. Taguiloa leaped onto the railing. "People of Hamardan, see my dance." He flung the broidered robe away with a gesture as impressive as it seemed careless for he capered high above the wagon and the court's rough stone on a rail the width of a small man's hand. He wore a knitted bodysuit of white silk flexible as chainmail, fitting like a second skin; a wide crimson sash was tied about his waist, its dangling ends swinging and flaring with the shifts of his body in that impossible dance. Behind him, flute and drums blended in familiar music, Hina tunes though the drum sound was more sonorous and melodic than the flat tinny sound of tradition. At first the flute sang in a tradi-tional mode then changed as the dance changed, begin-ning to tease and pull at the tunes. Harra tossed Taguiloa's shimmer spheres to him, one by one. They caught the light of the lampions and multiplied so it was as if a dozen tiny lamps were trapped in each crystal sphere, shimmer-ing crimson, gold and silver as he put one, two, three and finally four into the air and kept them circling as he did a shuffle dance on that rail moving on the knife edge of disaster until he built an almost unbearable tension in the workers, who gave a soft whisper of a sigh as he capered then tossed the spheres one by one into the darkness behind him.

The drum hushed, the flute took up a two-faced tune; it had two sets of words, one set a child's counting rhyme, the other a comically obscene version the rivermen used for rowing. With that as background he did a fast, sliding, stumbling comic dance on that railing, swaying precari-ously and constantly seeming about to fall from his perch. Each time he recovered with some extravagant bit of business that drew gasps of laughter from the crowd. He ended that bit as secure, it seemed, on his

narrow railing as his audience were on their paving stones. With the flute laughing behind him, he flung out his arms and bent his body in an extravagant bow. The flute soared to a shriek. He overbalanced to a concerted gasp from the watchers that changed to stomping, shouting applause as he landed lightly on his feet and flipped immediately into a tumbling run. Above, the flute, drums, daroud began to weave together a music that was part familiar and part a borrowing from three other cultures, music that captured the senses and was all the stranger for the touch of familiarity in it. Taguiloa flung his body about in a dance that melded tumbling, movement from a dozen cultures and his own fertile imagination. The music and the man's twisting, wheeling body wove a thing under the starshimmer and lampion glow that earth and sky had never seen before. And when the movement ended, when the music died and Taguiloa stood panting, there was for one moment a profound silence in the court, then that was broken with whistles, shouts, stomping feet, hands beating on sides, thighs, the backs of others. And it went on and on, a celebration of this new thing without a name that had taken them and shaken them out of themselves.

WHEN THEY COULD get away from the exulting Host and the mostly silent but leechlike attentions of the jamar and his jamika, they met in the inn's bathhouse.

Steam rose and swirled about lamps burning perfumed oil, casting ghost shadows on the wet tiles; the condensation on the walls was bright and dark in random patterns like the beaded pattern on a snakeskin. Brann swam slowly through the hot water, her *changed* black hair streaming in a fan about her shoulders. Yaril and Jaril swam energetically about like pale fish, half the time under the water, bumping into the others, sharing their soaring spirits. Negomas paddled after them, almost, as much at home in the water as they were, his only handicap his need to breathe. Taguiloa lolled in the warm water, his head in a resthollow, his eyes half shut, a dreamy smile twitching at his lips. Now and then he straightened his face, but his enforced gravity always dissolved into a smile of sleepy satisfaction. Harm kicked lazily about, her long dark brown hair kinking into tight curls about her pointed face.

The first time the troupe had gone from a long hard rehearsal into Blackthorn's bathhouse, Harra had been startled, even shocked, as the others stripped down to the skin and plunged with groans of pleasure into the water and let its heat leach away soreness from weary muscles. Communal bathing was an ancient Hina custom, one whose origins were somewhere in the mythtime before men learned to write. A bathhouse was rigidly unstratified, the one place where Hina of all castes mingled freely, the one place where the strictures of ordinary manners could be dropped and men and women could relax. After the Temueng conquest, the bathhouses were suppressed for a few years, Temuengs seeing them as places of rampant immorality, unable to believe that sexual contact between all those naked people was something that simply did not happen, that anyone who broke the houses' only rule would be thrown out immediately and ostracized as barbarian. Harm's wagon-dwelling people lived much like those early Ternuengs, with little physical privacy and many rules to determine the behavior of both sexes, rules born out of necessity and cramped quarters, though her life had been different from that of the ordinary girlchild of the Rukka-nag. She had no older brothers or sisters. Her mother died in childbirth when she was four, and the infant girl died with her. After that her mage father spent little time with his people, traveling for months, years, apart from the clan, taking Harra with him. Absorbed in his studies, absently assuming she'd somehow learn the female strictures her mother would have taught her, he treated her as much like a son as a daughter, especially when she grew old enough for him to notice her quick intelligence, though he did engage a maid to help her keep herself tidy and sew new clothing for her when she needed or wanted it. He began teaching her his craft when she was eight, training her in music and shaping, the two things being close to the same thing for him and her; they were much alike in their interests and very close; he talked to her more often than not as if she were another magus of his own age and learning. But there were times when he was shut up with his researches or visiting other mages in the many many cities they visited or stopping at one of the rude hermitages where nothing female was permitted; then he settled her into one of the local homes. She learned how to adapt herself quickly to local custom, how to become immediately aware of the dangers to a young girl and how to protect herself from those while making such friends as she could to lessen her loneliness a bit.

Sometimes—though this was rare—her father stayed as long as two years in one place, other times she'd begin to take in the flavor of a city, to learn its smells and sounds and other delights, then he'd be going again. It was a strange, sometimes troubling, usually uncertain existence, and the burden of maintaining their various households fell mainly on her slender shoulders once she reached her twelfth birthday, but it was excellent preparation for survival when her father died between one breath and the next from an aneurism neither of them knew he had. And it let her assess at a glance the proper manners in a bathhouse and overcome her early training. Unable to control her embarrassment, she contrived to hide it, stripped with the rest and got very quickly into water she found a lot too clear for her comfort. She paddled about with her back turned to the others hoping the heat of the water would explain the redness in her face, but ended relaxed and sighing with pleasure as the heat soothed her soreness.

Now she was as much at ease as the others, as she watched Taguiloa's smiles and savored her own delight. Rehearsals were one thing but putting on a finished performance with that storm of audience approval—well, it was no wonder he was still a little drunk with the pleasure of it. She felt decidedly giddy and giggly herself.

"It could get addicting," she said aloud.

Taguiloa opened one eye, grinned at her.

The door to the bathhouse opened and several serving maids came in. They set up a long table in one corner and covered it with trays of fingerfood, several large stoneware teapots, more wine jugs, drinking bowls, hot napkins. The roundfaced old woman who supervised this bowed to Taguiloa. "With the jamar's compliments, sai5m-y-saiir."

Taguiloa lifted a heavy arm from the water. "The Godalau bless his generosity."

The old woman bowed again. "Saiim, the Host does not wish to intrude on your rest, but he desires you to know that the jamar has requested you perform at his house the coming night."

Taguiloa lay silent for a breath or two, then finally said, "Inform the host that we will be pleased to perform for the jamar provided we can arrange a suitable fee and proper quarters for ourselves and our horses."

The woman bowed a third time and left, shooing the curious and excited maidservants before her.

Taguiloa batted at the water and said nothing for a few moments, then he sighed and rose to sit crosslegged on the tiles. "A fee is probably a lost cause, I'm afraid. We'll be lucky if we get a meal and shelter. I'd hoped to get farther along before I ran into this sort of complication. Still, it could be worth the irritation. These Temueng jamars keep in close touch by pigeon mail and courier, so word of us will be passed on and reach Andurya Durat before we do." He studied Brann a long minute. "You will be careful?"

"I'll try, Taga. Slya knows, I'll try."

Harra got out of the water, wrapped a toweling robe about her and went to inspect the food, suddenly very hungry. She poured some tea and began trying the different things set out on the trays. "Come on, all of you. Leave the heavy worrying for some other times, this is heaven. If you're as hungry as me."

THE JAMAR WAS a big man. Even as tall as she was, Brann's head came only to his middle ribs. His shoulders were broad enough to make three Hina, his belly big and hard as a beer tun, his legs tree trunks, arms, feet and hands built on a similar heroic scale. He should have been ugly, but wasn't. He should have seemed fierce and intimidating as an angry storm dragon, but didn't. He gave them a mild, beaming welcome. "Hamardan House is honored by your presence," he boomed.

Taguiloa bowed. "We are the honored ones," he murmured, feeling a bit battered.

Jamar Hamardan escorted the troupe to the rooms within the House he had set aside for them, something Taguiloa hadn't expected, nor had he expected the luxury of those rooms. He didn't quite know how to deal with all this effusiveness. It made him uneasy. Temuengs simply did not treat Hina and foreigners like this.

The jamar hovered about them as they tried to settle themselves, silent and diffident but impossible to ignore.

His bulging eyes slipped again and again to Brann, Harra and the others; again and again he licked his lips, opened his mouth to speak, shut it without saying anything. Taguiloa tried to edge him out the door and away from the troupe so he would say what was on his mind, but he seemed impervious to hints and unlikely to respond well to being hustled out in spite of his apparent amiability. Taguiloa knew enough to be extremely wary at this moment, though the tension of keeping up the required courtesies wracked his nerves. He caught Harra's eye. Tungjii bless her quick wits, she gathered the rest of the troupe and hustled them out of the room. The Yaril hound settled in the corner of the room, her crystal eyes half-closed but fixed on the Temueng, a powerful defender if there *was* trouble.

Jamar Hamardan waited while the room emptied out completely, listening absently as Taguiloa continued his inane chatter. Abruptly the huge Temueng cleared his throat, shutting off Taguiloa in mid-sentence. "How many days can you stay here ... ?" He fumbled for some way to address the player. He wouldn't use the Hina *saō* though he obviously wished to be polite, and he wouldn't give the player any Temueng honorific—no Temueng could do that and keep his self-respect. He avoided the difficulty by falling silent and waiting with twitchy impatience for Taguiloa's answer.

"Ah ..." Taguiloa scrambled for some way to escape what he saw coming. "Ahh ... jamar Hamardan, *saō jura*, we have to be in Durat before the storms blow down from the high plains." He was deferential but determined, used his most careful formal speech and hoped for the best. If this Temueng decided he wanted his own troupe of enter-tainers, there was almost nothing they could do. Running meant giving up everything and he wouldn't do that as long as there was the smallest chance he could work himself free. "Stay here," the jamar said. "You won't lose by it."

"A generous offer, jamar Hamardan *saō jura*." Taguiloa spoke slowly, still hunting for a way out. "If I may, we need more than a place to keep the rain off and food in our bellies ..." He risked the touch of commonspeech after a sidelong glance at the Temueng. "We are at our best this year, *saō jura*. If I may, we have dreams ... but that is nothing to you, *saō jura*. I waste your time with my bab-bling, your pardon, *saō jura*." He lowered his eyes, bowed his head and waited.

The Temueng cleared his throat. "No, no," he said. "No bother." Silence.

Taguiloa glanced quickly at the Temueng. The big man looked troubled. He turned his head suddenly, caught Taguiloa watching him. "One week," he said. "My jamika grieves." He half-swallowed the words. "Our eldest son is with the forces in Croaldhu, our youngest was called to Andurya Durat." He looked past Taguiloa as if he no longer was aware of him. "He is her heart, the breath in her throat. A good lad for all that, rides like he's part of his horse, open-handed with his friends, spirited and impa-tient. Maybe a little heedless, but he's young." He cleared his throat again. "You ..." Again he searched for a word but settled for the slightly derogatory term used by temuengs for Hina females. "Your ketchin, they should keep the jam ika distracted. She was pleased by you last night. She smiled when you did that thing on the rail and the rest of it ... well, she slept without ..." He broke off, frowned. "Give her some time away from grieving, showman, and you can ask what you will."

Taguiloa looked away from the huge man stumbling over his love for his cow of a wife and for that calf who sounded like most young male Temuengs, arrogant, thought-less and as unpleasant to his own kind as he was to those who had the misfortune to be in his power. Never mind that, he told himself, a week's better than I hoped. He swept into a low bow. "Of your kindness; *saō jura*, cer-tainly a week."

The jamar Hamardan turned to leave, turned back. "One of the ketchin, she's a seer?"

"One can sometimes see past a day, past a night, *saō jura*."

"My jamika will ask the ketcha to read for her. I do not inquire how the ketcha reads or if she knows more than how to judge a face, whether she lies or speaks what truth she sees. I do not care, showman. Tell your seer to make my jamika contented. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you, *saō jura*."

The jamar hesitated another minute in the doorway, then stumped out.

Taguiloa stood rubbing at the back of his neck with fingers that trembled. Relief, apprehension, anger churned in him. A week. And who said it would end then? One week, then another, then another. It had to end there. Had to. He touched the shoulder where he'd felt his double-natured patron riding and wondered if this was one of Tungjii's dubious gifts. He scanned his immediate past to see where he'd

forgot and invoked his god. Noth-ing but ordinary chaos and the usual curses quickly forgot-ten. He forced himself to relax and went searching for the others to tell them what had happened.

TAGUILOA PULLED on a knitted black silk body suit like the white one he used in his act, then he slipped from his room and began his nightly prowl about the jamar's House, listening for whatever he could pick up, driven as much by survival needs as by curiosity. The week was winding to a finish, the testing of jamar Hamardan's good will was closer. He might let them go, or he could insist they stay yet another short while and then another, nib-bling their time away, never letting them go.

He moved through the maze of halls in the wing where the troupe was housed, heading to the storage alcove he'd found the first night he'd prowled the House. A pair of late rambling servants forced him to duck into the shadowy doorless recess, only to discover they were bound for that same alcove. He cursed the libidinous pair and searched for some place to hide. They probably wouldn't raise a row if they saw him, just take off to find another place to scratch their itch, but there'd be gossip later that would work around to someone in authority and make trouble for the troupe. There were narrow shelves set from the bottom of one wall. He went up them and tried to fold himself into invisibility. The shelves were far too narrow for that, but over him he saw a recessed square in the ceiling of the closet. He pushed against one side of the square and it tipped silently upward, He was through the opening and easing the trap into place as the pair came in whispering, laughing. Afraid to move, he listened to the sounds com-ing from below, but after a few moments of creeping boredom and stiffening limbs, he eased into a squat and looked about him; enough of the Wounded Moon's light came through airholes in the eaves to show him a maze of beams with ceiling boards between them. The roof was high over the place where he crouched, slanting steeply to the eaves. It was just like a Temueng to waste such a vast cavernous space on dust and squirrels, spiders and mice. The place was filled with noises once he let himself listen, gnawing, the patter of clawed feet, chittering from squirrels, shrieks from mice as housecats stalked and killed them, yowls as the cats fought and mated. His fears of being heard faded, he got to his feet, oriented himself and began prowling along the beams listening for voices in the rooms below.

In the days since that first prowl, he'd picked up enough to make him increasingly uneasy. Now he went swiftly along the ceiling beams, heading for the jamar's quarters without stopping at his other posts.

The office. Silent now. He spent a moment standing over the crack that funnelled sound up from below. Last night Hamardan was there talking with his overseer, one of his uncles, a shrewd old man who'd lost all but the youngest of his grandsons to the army. They were discuss-ing the increase in the Emperor's portion of the harvest, speculating cautiously about what it meant, both men not-saying far more than they put in words, their silences saying much more than those words about their curiosity and unease about what was going on in Andurya Durat. The old man had a letter from one of his grandsons announcing the death of another of them; the others were well enough, but not especially pleased with their lot. The letter included news about the jamar's eldest son; he was alive, unhurt but bored with life, despising the Croaldhese, loathing the food, the smells, the women, everything about that cursed island, including (very much between the lines) his fellow officers and the men he commanded.

Neither the jamar nor his uncle had any idea why the Emperor had suddenly decided to start sending his armies out to conquer the world; for two hundred years the Temueng Emperors had been content with the rich land of Tigarezun. They didn't like it. Tigarezun was important to them; they didn't consider the Hina had any connection with it, it was theirs; their ancestors' bones were buried in that soil (Hina burned their dead, the heedless creatures, how could they have any right to land if they didn't claim and consecrate it with ancestral flesh and bone?) but this coveting of foreign lands was foolishness, especially an island over a week's sail away. Especially any island. Temuengs did not like sea travel and felt uneasy on a bit of land that you could ride, side to side, in a day or two. And this warring was taking and wasting their sons. The two men spent an hour yesternight grousing and speculat-ing about the Emperor's mental state; he'd just taken a new young wife, maybe he was a crazy old man trying to feel young again.

Taguiloa padded along the beams checking out the rooms in the private quarter of the big House, day room, bath-room, conservatory and so on, only silence—until he reached the jamar's bedroom.

Wife weeping, husband trying to comfort her. Sobs diminishing after a while. Silence for a few

breaths. Heavy steps, quicker lighter ones, noise of complaining chair, the continued patter of the woman's feet as she paced rest-lessly about. Taguiloa stretched out on the beam and prepared to wait.

"She says Empi's enjoying himself in Durat; he's got a new horse and hasn't lost too much money at gaming and has a chance to catch the eye of someone important at court." The woman stopped walking, sighed.

"It's what he wanted, Tjena."

"I know. But I miss him so, Ingklio." Steps, couch creaking. "Why don't we go to the capital for the winter?"

"Too much to do. And the Ular-drah have been raiding close by. You know what happened last month to the Tjatajan jamarak. House burned, granaries looted, what the drah couldn't carry off they fouled."

"Uncle Perkerdj could see our land safe."

Hamardan grunted. "Not this year," he said with a heavy finality that silenced the jamika.

More creaking as she got back on her feet and started dragging about again, making querulous comments about her maidservants and their defects, the insults from some of the cousins and kin-wives, the disrespect of one of the male servants. The jamar said nothing, perhaps he didn't bother listening to her, being so familiar with her diatribes they were like the winds blowing past, a part of the sounds of the day no one notices. Taguiloa lay on his beam, half-asleep, telling himself he might as well leave them to their well-worn grooves, because the last four nights this by-play had ended in their going to bed. He yawned and grinned into the darkness. Had to be one monster of a bed and a sturdy one at that. The jamika was built to match the jamar, massive arms and thighs, breasts like muskmelons, only a head shorter than him. Maybe that's why he never took a second wife, she's the only woman in the world big enough he wouldn't crush her with that weight or look absurd standing beside her, an oliphaunt mated with a gazelle. The thought wiped away his amusement. If that was true, the jamar would do just about anything to keep his wife content. He certainly had no concubines, and was awkward around Brann and Harra, seeming almost frightened of normal sized women. Taguiloa nearly forgot himself and swore at old Tungjii. He held back. Bad enough to be in this bind without irritating the unpredictable Tungjii. Hisser favors were bad enough, but hisser's curses were hell on dragonback. He bruised his nose against the splintery beam and promised Tungjii a dozen incense sticks when he got back to Silili.

"What about the players?" Hamardan said suddenly. "Shall I let them go or would you like to keep them?" Taguiloa bit down hard on his lip, sucked in a long breath. "Oh Ingklio, would you keep them? That one comforts me so, she's a true seer, I know it, she's told me things no one else ... well, things, and if she's here, she can keep telling me what Empi's doing. He never writes." Heavy creaking again as she flung herself down beside Harardan. "Just think. Our own players. Can we afford it?"

"Hina and foreigners, how much can they cost?"

Fuming, Taguiloa listened as the discussion below him altered to an oliphauntine cooing. Enough of this; listen to them much longer, and I'll be sick. He got to his feet and ran the beams to the distant trap, let himself down and loped along the dark quiet hall to his bedroom. He stripped off the black bodysuit, sponged away sweat and dust, wrapped a soft old robe about himself and went down the hall to rap at Brann's door.

She let him in after a brief wait. The lamps were still lit, Jaril and Yaril sat cross-legged on the bed, their small faces serious, their crystal eyes reflecting light from the lamps.

"Jaril thought you'd be along soon," Brann said. She sat on the bed beside Yard. "Bad news." It wasn't a question.

"We're a little gift he's wrapping up for his wife." Taguiloa said. "You've been a bit too convincing. That great cow wants daily news of her wretched calf."

She said a few words in a language he did not know, but they needed no translation as they crackled through the air.

"And she's charmed with the idea of having her own company of players. Something to raise her status with the neighbors; she was a little worried about the cost but he wasn't, we're only Hina and a few foreigners, how much could scum like that cost? Throw a little food at us, a jar or two of wine and

we're bought."

"Mmm. Yaril, fetch Harra. We've got to talk. Don't frighten her but let her know its urgent." She looked thoughtfully at Taguiloa. "We won't bother waking Linji and Negomas." She looked at the door. "Harra knows a lot more about things like this than I do." She blinked uncertainly. "There's so much ..."

A tap on the door. Taguiloa got up, let Harra in, re-sumed his seat on the bench. "We're about to be offered a permanent home," he said. "Right here."

Harra wrinkled her nose at Brann. "I told you to tone those sessions down."

"Easy for you to say, not so easy for me to do. You didn't have that cow hanging over you sucking every word you said." She sighed. "I know. I got a little carried away, but I have to tell you, my behavior doesn't make much difference. The jamika wants to believe in me and she twists everything I say into something she wants to hear. Even if I don't say a word, she interprets the way I breathe." She moved impatiently, the bed squeaking tin-der her. "Anything helpful in what your father taught you?"

"Well, he wasn't very organized about anything besides his own studies, just taught me whatever interested him at the time. Mmmm." Harm frowned at the wall, sorting through the inside of her head. Suddenly she grinned. "I

have it. There's an herb and a spell that will set a geas on that man. Thing is, one can't work without the other. I've got a pinch or two of lixsil in my father's herb bag, but it doesn't need much. The maid that brings my meals chat-ters a lot, she tells me Hamardan eats his breakfast alone in his private garden when the weather's good. She says he's a sore-foot bear mornings and no one stays around him if they can help it. The weather's going to be dry and sunny the next three days, Negomas swears he knows and I think I believe him. So. You see where I'm heading. One of the changechildren drops the lixsil in his tea, I don't have to be that close, I can lay the spell on him when we're with the jamika. Brann, you handled those guards on the causeway, can you do the same with her? She's bound to kick up the kind of fuss we don't want when we roll out."

"Mmm. Brann looked wistful. "I wish I had magic. What I do best is kill people and awful as she is, Tjena doesn't deserve killing." Her eyes shifted from Taguiloa to Harra and back, then she moved her shoulders and visibly pulled herself together. "I can drain her so she's tottery and suggestible, then tell her that what she does the next few days will affect her son ... I'll have to think about it some more." She smiled and relaxed, yawned. "Anybody got anything to add? Well, lets get some sleep."

HINA SERVANTS set out the table and covered it with a huge stoneware teapot and a drinking bowl, a mountain of sweetrolls, a bowl of pickled vegetables, a platter of sausages and deep-fried chicken bits, a bowl of sweetened fruit slices, citrons and peaches, apricots and berries, a platter of fried rice with eggs mixed in. As soon as *the meal* was set out the servants left, moving with an alacrity that underlined Harra's maid's report of Hamardan's morning moods. When the garden was empty, a small gray-plush monkey dropped from one of the trees and scurried to the table. He leaped up on it and picked through the dishes, lifted the lid of the teapot and shook a bit of paper over the tea. He peered into the pot and watched the gray bits of herb circling on the steaming water. The bits turned translucent and sank. He put the lid back on and scampered away, diving into the bushes just as Hamardan stomped out, glared at the sky, then stumped to the table, pushed back the sleeves of his robe, splashed out a bowl-ful of tea and gulped it down. The small gray monkey showed his teeth in a predator's grin, then blurred into a long serpent and began slithering through a hole in the wall.

JARIL SLIPPED INTO the room where Harra was playing a muted accompaniment as Brann chatted with the jamika about her children, listening more than she spoke. He squatted beside Harm. "He's guzzling it down," he whispered.

Harra nodded. She began simplifying the music until her fingers wandered idly over the daroud's strings; she closed her eyes and began a soft whistling that twisted round and round and incorporated the play of her fingers. An intense look of concentration on her face, she wove the spell, the magic in it itching at Jaril, it made his outlines shiver and blur and started eddies, in his substance that acted on him like a

powerful euphoric. Her cold nose nudged at his hand. Yaril as hound bitch had crawled over to him and was pressing against him, quivering a little, her outlines shimmering, the same eddies in her sub-stance. She was as uncertain as he about this feeling as a longterm experience, but she was enjoying the sensation, being a measure more hedonistic than her brother, willing to live in the pleasures of the moment, while he tended to fuss more about abstracts and what-will-be than what-was in the point present.

Harra stopped whistling. "It's done," she murmured. "Go back to him and whisper what you want in his ear." Jaril jumped to his feet and went out.

Brann turned to watch him go, missing something the jamika was saying. When the querulous voice snapped a reprimand at her, she swung back slowly and sat staring at the Temueng woman, her back very straight, waiting in silence until Tjena ran down. "If you're finished?" she said with an icy hauteur that quelled the woman, then she looked down at her own palms. "We are at a change time," she said, bringing each word out slowly, heavily as if she dropped over-ripe plums on the table and watched them mash. When she heard herself, she lightened up a bit, reminding herself that the woman might be thick but she wasn't totally stupid. "Forces converge," she said, "weaving strange patterns. It is a time to walk warily, every act will resonate far beyond the point of action. It is time that those tied to you experience a like courtesy. Give me your hands."

She held the jamika's larger hands between her own, tilted her head back, closed her eyes. "The change is begun," she said. "The threads are spun out and out, fine threads wound about one, about and about, the links are made, son to mother, mother to son. What the mother does to those about her will be done unto the son." As she chanted the nonsense in a soft compelling voice, she tapped into the Temueng woman's life force, draining her slowly, carefully, until the woman was in a deeply suggestible daze. Softly, softly, Brann whispered, "Anything you do to us will be done to you, prison us here and your son will be a prisoner, send bad report about us to the other jamars and jamikas and your son will suffer slander, hurt us in any way and you hurt your son, hear me Tjena Hamardan jamika, you will not remember my words, but you will feel them in your soul. Any harm you do to us, that same harm will come to your son. Hear my blessing, Tjena Hamardan jamika, the benign side of the change coin. What good you do to man and maid in your power, Hina, Temueng or other, that good will bless you and your son, praise will perfume his days and nights. Good will come to you in proportion to the good you give, a quiet soul, a contented life, sweet sleep at night and harmony by day. Hear me, Tjena Hamardan jamika, for-get my words but feel them in your soul, forget my words, but find contentment in your life, forget my words." She set the jamika's hands on the table and heard a soft unas-sertive whistle die behind her and knew Han-a had rein-forced her words with one of her whistle spells. "Sleep now, Tjena Hamardan jamika. Sleep now and wake to goodness at your high noon tea. Lie back on your couch and sleep. Wake with the nooning, knowing what you must do. Sleep, sleep, sleep ..."

With Harra's help she straightened out the huge woman on the daycouch, smoothing out her robes and crossing her large but shapely hands below her breasts, smoothing her hair, fixing her so she would wake with as few as possible of those debilitating irritations that came from sleeping in day clothing. Brann frowned at her a moment, then trickled some of the life back in her, doing it care-fully enough she didn't disturb her sleep; she moved away from the couch, going to the door of the sitting room. Several maids were in the smaller room beyond, talking in whispers, working on embroideries and repairs while they waited to be summoned. She beckoned to the senior maidservant, showed her the sleeping form of the jamika. "Your mistress will sleep until time for tea; her night was disturbed and she was fretful."

An older Hina woman with a weary meekness from years of hectoring, the maid's mouth pinched into a thin line; she knew all too well what, fretfulness in the jamika meant for her and the other maids.

Brann smiled at her. "If she finishes her sleep without being disturbed, the jamika will wake in a sweeter temper and make your life easier for a while, at least until the moon turn's again."

The maid nodded, understanding what was not said. "Godalau's blessing on you if it be so, Sator," she murmured, then went quickly away from Brann, appreciative but uneasy with the stranger's powers.

Brann, Harra and the Yaril-hound went back to their rooms to pack, having done everything they could to ensure good report and an uneventful departure on the morrow.

THEY RUMBLED FROM the House early the next morning, leaving behind much good feeling among the Hina servants and a pair of contented but rather confused Temuengs. Linjijan, who'd grown restless and unhappy closed within those walls, was delighted to stretch his spirit and body—long thin legs propped up on the splash-board, neck propped on his blanket roll, he played his flute, the music ebullient and joy-filled, waking little dev-ils in the horses who'd also grown bored in their sumptuous stables and were inclined to work off their excess energy in bursts of mischievous behavior. Brann's dun shied at his own shadow, kicked up his heels, tried to rear, and gave his rider some energetic moments until she managed to settle him down a little. When they passed from sight of the House, she let him run a short while but pulled him back to an easy canter before he could blow himself and tire her more.

Harra laughed and let her gray dance a bit, then quieted him and added the plink of her daroud to the wanderings of the flute and the dark music Negomas was stroking from his smallest drum.

At midday they reached Hamardan again and stopped at the inn for a hearty lunch with hot tea and pleas from the Host to play again that night. Anxious to make up time Taguiloa shook his head to that but promised to stop there when the troupe returned to Silili.

CERTAINLY TUNJII rode Taguiloa's shoulder those next four weeks as they followed the river road north. The weather was perfect for traveling and for outdoor performances. In villages without an inn, they played to cheering crowds in the market square and more than once spent several nights in a jamar's House, though there was no more trouble about leaving when they pleased. Word flew ahead of them; it seemed that every village and inland city was waiting and ready for them, folk swarming about the show wagon, following in shouting cheerful crowds as they drove through city streets or village lanes. The hiding places in the cart's bottom grew heavy with coin and the mood of Temueng and Hina alike was as genially golden as the weather. Whether it was his timing, the long summer having worked up a mighty thirst in them for diversion, whether it was the strong leavening of Ternuengs in each audience, for whatever reason, the troupe met little of the resistance Taguiloa had expected to the strange and some-times difficult music and the improvisational and wholly non-traditional dance and tumbling he was introducing. He began to worry. They were a tempting target for the Ular-drah, the hillwolves through whose territory they would have to pass, a small party of players coming of a phenomenally successful tour fat with gold, on their own, no soldiers, two of them women, two of them children, only the dog to worry about and they wouldn't worry that much about her. He could hope Tungjii would stick around, but he knew only too well the fickleness of his patron and the quicksilver quality of such fortune as that they bathed in these golden glowing days, these warm dry silver nights.

They left the city Kamanarcha early in a bright cool morning. There was a touch of frost on the earth, glittering in the long slant of the morning light. The guard at the city gate was yawning and stiff, more than half asleep as he operated the windlass that opened the gate. Taguiloa tossed him a small silver and got a shouted blessing from him along with a hearty request to come back soon. As an afterthought, the guard added, "Watch out for the drah, showman, word is they're prowling."

On top of the wagon's roof Negomas grinned and rattled his drum defiantly. Linjijan was stretched out more than half asleep, lost in the dreams he never spoke aloud. Of them all he'd changed the least during the tour, no closer now to the others than he'd been before, an amiable companion who did everything he was asked to do without skimping or complaint and nothing at all he was not asked to do. He was no burden and no help, irritating each of the others in turn until they learned to accept him as he was for he certainly wasn't going to change. His flute was a blessing and a joy; that had to be enough.

Negomas and Harra were much together, studying each other's bits of magic. As Taguiloa had taken dance and tumbling and juggling and melded them into an exciting whole, had brought Harra and Negomas and Linjijan together and almost coerced them into producing the musical equivalent of his dance, so these orphan children of different traditions were blending their knowledge to make an odd, effective magic that belonged only to them and magnified their own power, the whole they made being greatly more than either apart.

Brann was as isolated from the others as Linjijan though more aware of it; she was simply too

different now from human folk and her purposes were too much apart from theirs. She was fascinated by the illusions Harra and Negomas created for their own entertainment and by the intimate connection magic had with music as if the pat-terning of sounds by drum, daroud, and Harra's whistling somehow patterned the invisible in ways that allowed the boy and the young woman to control and manipulate it. After leaving Hamardan, Brann had tried to learn from Harra, but she could not. It was as if she were tone-deaf and trying to learn to sing. There was something in her or about her that would not tolerate magic. Han-a found this fascinating and tried a number of experiments and found that any spells or even unshaped power that she aimed at Brann was simply shunted aside. Magic would not touch her, refused to abide near her. Harra and Negomas both could do whatever they wanted in her presence as long as whatever they did wasn't aimed at her. She wasn't a quencher, therefore, not a sink where magic entered and was lost; she simply wasn't present to it. At least, not any longer. She told Harra about the Marish shaman who'd netted her and the changechildren so neatly. Harra de-cided eventually that this had somehow immunized her and the children against any further vulnerability. Brann listened, sighed, nodded. "Slya's work," she said. "She doesn't want me controlled by anyone but her."

The countryside was brown and turning stubbly, the harvest coming in. The pastures were taking on a yellow look with sparse patches where little grass grew and fewer weeds. They were coming to the barrens where the soil was hard and cracked, laced with salt and alkali so that only the hardiest plants grew there and those only sparsely. Even along the river where there was plenty of water there was little vegetation and the trees had a stunted look.

For some hours they passed long straight lines of panja brush, low-growing bushes with smooth hard purplish bark, crooked branches and little round leaves hard as boiled leather. These lines were windbreaks against the winter storms that swept down off the northern plains, those flat gray grasslands that spawned the Temuengs. They left the last of the windbreaks behind a little after noon and were out of the Kamanarcha jamarak and into the barrens.

The road began to rise and the trees thinned and fell away. There was a little yellowish grass on the slopes but it didn't look healthy. The river sank farther below them into the great gorge that cut through the Matigunns; the road followed the lip of the gorge and the towpath contin-ued far below them, the stone pilings that marked the edge of the canal jutting like gray fingers from cold pure water glinting bluer than blue in the late summer sun. The canal was part of the river here, the stone of the mountain heart too stubbornly resistant for anything else; the towpath was a massive project in itself, old tales said it was burned out of the stone by dragons breath in the mythtime before Popokanjo shot the moon. There were no barges on the river yet, floating down or being towed up. In a few weeks, when the harvest up and down the river was complete, the trading season would begin and the huge imperial dapplegrays that towed the barges from Hamardan to Lake Biraryry would be plodding northward in teams of eight or ten, escorted by the Emperor's Horse Guards. The dapples were bred and reared only in impe-rial stables; anyone else found with one would be fed to them piece by piece because the dapples ate flesh as well as corn, human flesh by choice, though they'd make do with dog or cow or the flesh of other horses if there was no one in the Emperor's prisons healthy enough to be fed to them. The tow master for each team was raised with them from their foaling; he slept with them, ate with them, arranged their matings, tended them in every way, shod them, plaited mane and tail, washed and combed the feathering at their hocks, polished their hooves, repaired their harness, kept it oiled and shining. He did all that from pride and affection for his charges and also because they'd kill and eat anyone else who tried to come near them-. Even the fiercest of the Ular-drah bands left them alone. Barge travel was safe—but very expensive.

High overhead a mountain eagle soared in wide graceful loops, Yaril keeping watch over the road and the sur-rounding hills. She'd spot any ambushes long before they ripened into danger. Hana and Taguiloa were joking to-gether, both of them relaxed and unworried for the mo-ment; Yaril's presence was a guarantee that there was no present danger to the troupe. Brann rode ahead of the wagon, brooding over a problem that was becoming in-creasingly urgent. The children were hungry. The per-forming used up their strength far faster than she'd expected. She'd walked the alleys of Silili for a fortnight, taking the life force of every man who came after her intending to steal or rape or both, feeding

the children until they were so sated they couldn't take another draft of that energy they needed for their strange life, storing more of the stolen life in her own body until her flesh glowed with it. Since then she'd fed them from herself and from what animal life she could trap, dogs and cats that roamed the streets of the cities and villages they played in, careful to take no human life. She didn't want anyone connecting mysterious deaths with the troupe. She cursed the Hamar-dan jamar, he was the source of the trouble now; if it hadn't been for him, they'd have reached Andurya Durat already, the drain from the dregs of the city. A day or two more and she'd have to go hunting, anything she could find in these barren mountains, wolves two-legged or oth-erwise, deer, wildcats, anything the children could run to her. The children were patient, but need would begin to drive them and they would drive her.

By nightfall they were deep in the barrens. Yaril had found one of the corrals the dapples used when they walked the road to Hamardan, returning to pick up an-other barge. It was a stone circle with a heavy plank gate and three-sided stalls, locked grain bins and a stone wa-tering trough. At the roadside there was a tripod of huge beams that jutted out over the river, a bucket and a coil of rope; there'd be no problem about bringing water up for them and for the horses. They set up their night camp inside the circle, filled the trough with water, emptied half a sack of grain in the manger (they didn't touch the grain bins, though the children could have opened them; that was dapple food and they'd be stealing directly from the Emperor. Not a good idea). The night promised to be cold and drear though Tungjii was still hanging about since the sky was clear and no rain threatened. The chil-dren went prowling about the hills and came back with lumps of coal for a fire, reporting a surface seam about a mile back from the road. Leaving Brann and the children to watch over the camp, Taguiloa, Linjijan and Harra took empty feed sacks and fetched back as much as they could carry, more of Tungjii's blessing, Taguiloa thought, for there was no wood to make a fire and wouldn't be as long as they were in the barrens. And the nights were not going to get warmer.

Leaving Han-a and Taguiloa making a stew from the store of dried meat and vegetables, arguing cheerfully over proportions and how much rice to put in the other pot, Negomas and Linjijan rubbing down the horses and going over them with stiff brushes, combing out manes and tails, cleaning their hooves, Brann went with the children to stand beside the tripod where they couldn't be seen from those inside the corral. She held out her hands and the children pulled life from her she could feel them struggling to control the need that grew each night and she suffered with them. When they broke from her, she sighed. "You want to go hunting tonight?"

Yaril kicked a pebble over the edge and watched it leap down the nearly vertical cliff and plop into the water. "Might not have to."

"Ular-drah?"

"Uh-huh. A man's been watching us since late afternoon."

"Where's he now?"

"Gone. He left before we found the coal. Left as soon as it was obvious we were settling for the night."

"Ah. You could be right."

Yaril nodded, her silver-gilt hair shining in the light of the Wounded Moon. She giggled. "Our meat coming to us."

"How soon, do you think?"

"Not before they think everyone's asleep. They think we'll be trapped inside that." She nodded her head at the corral. "I say we turn the trap on them." She looked at Jaril. He nodded. "Me out at long-scout, night-owling it. Jaro staying with you to carry reports. What about num-bers? I think four or five of them is all right, we're sure hungry enough to handle them. Ten or more we'd, better scare off, we could cut some out, two or three maybe, hamstringing them so they can't run, what do you think, Bramble?"

Brann felt a twinge of distaste, but that didn't last long. The Ular-drah were a particularly unpleasant bunch with no pretensions to virtue of any sort, the best of them with the gentle charm of cannibal sharks. She nodded at the corral. "Tell them?"

"I vote no," Yaril said.

Jaril nodded. "Let 'em sleep. They'll just get in the way."

Brann sighed, then she smiled. "Just us again." Her smile broadened into a grin. "Look out, you wolves."

JARIL LOOKED UP. "Six of 'em. On their way." He blurred into a wolf form and went trotting into the dark.

Brann pulled her fingers through her hair, the black stripping away until it was white again, blowing wildly in the strong cold wind. She pulled off her tunic, tossed it to the ground beside the stone wall, stepped out of her trousers, kicked them onto the tunic. The air was very cold against her skin but she'd learned enough from the children to suck a surprising amount of warmth from the stone under her feet and bring it flowing up through her body. Comfortable again, she still hesitated, then she heard the yipping of the wolf and set off in that dii action running easily through the darkness, her eyes adapting to the dark as her body had adapted to the cold. She reached a small, steep, walled bowl with the meander of a dry stream through the middle of it, a few tufts of withered grass and a number of large boulders rolled from the slopes above the bowl. A horned owl came fluttering down, transforming as it touched the earth into Yaril. "You might as well wait here. They're a couple breaths behind me." Then she was a large gray wolf vanishing among the boulders.

Brann looked about, shrugged and settled herself on a convenient boulder, crossed her legs, rested her hands on her thighs, and cultivated a casual, relaxed attitude.

The Ular-drah came out of the dark, a lean hairy man walking with the wary lightness of a hunting cat. The rest of the drah were shadows behind him, lingering among the boulders. He stopped in front of her. "What you playing at?"

She got slowly to her feet, moving with a swaying dance lift, smiled at him and took a step toward him.

He looked uncertain but held his ground.

She reached toward him.

He caught her arm in a hard grip. "What you think you doin, woman?"

"Hunting a real man," she crooned to him. She stroked her fingers along his hard sinewy arm, then flattened her hand out on his bare flesh and sucked the life out of him.

As he fell, she leaped back wrenching her arm free. In the boulders a man screamed: others came rushing at her, knives and swords in hand. She danced and dodged, felt a burn against her thigh as a sword sliced shallowly, slapped her hand against the first bit of bare flesh she could reach, pulled the life out of that one, More pain. She avoided some of the edges, took a knife in the side, touched and killed, touched and killed. Twin silver wolves slashed at legs, bringing some of the men down, blurring as steel flashed through them, wolves again as swiftly. Three men drained, two men down, crawling away. Touch and drain. Man on one leg lunging at her, knife searing into her side. Touch and drain. Touch and drain. All six dead.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, she jerked the knife free and tossed it away, the wound healing before the knife struck stone and went bounding off. She straight-ened, felt the tingle of the life filling her. The wolves *changed*. Yaril and Jaril stood before her, held out pale translucent hands. They had expended themselves reck-lessly in this chase and the drain of it had brought them dangerously close to quenching. She held out her hands, let the stolen life flow out of her into them, smiling with pleasure as the mountain's children firmed up and lost their pallor.

When the feeding was complete she looked around at the scattered bodies, felt sick again. I've saved Slya knows how many lives by taking theirs She shook her head, the sickness in her stomach undiminished. Shivering, she strode back to the stone circle, Yaril and Jaril trotting beside her, looking plumper and contented with the world. She pulled her hands back over her hair, darkening the shining silver to an equally shining black. She stepped back into the trousers, pulled the laces tight and tied them off, wriggled into the tunic and smoothed it down. Sud-denly exhausted, she leaned against the stone wall. "I'm going to sleep like someone hit me over the head. Any chance we'll get more visitors?"

"Not for a while," Yaril said. "I didn't see any more bands close enough to reach us before morning,

but I'll have another look to make sure."

Brann nodded and stood watching as two large owls took heavily to the air. She watched them vanish into the darkness, hating them that moment for what they'd done to her, for what they made her do. A lifetime of draining men to feed them and Slya knew what that word *lifetime meant* when it applied to her. The flare-up died almost as quickly as it arose. There was no point in hating the children; they'd followed nature and need. And as for living with the consequences of that need, well, she'd learned a lot the past months about how malleable the human body and spirit was and how strong her own will-to-live was. Like the children, she'd do what she had to and try to minimize the damage to her soul. Like them too she was in the grip of the god, swept along by Slya's will, struggling to maintain what control she could over her actions. She followed the high stone wall around to the gate and went in.

Taguiloa sat by the fire, breaking up chunks of coal with the hilt of his knife, throwing the bits in lazy arcs to land amid the flames. He looked up as she came into the light, then went back to what he was doing. She hesitated, then walked across to stand beside him.

"How many of them?" he said.

"Six. How did you know?"

"Figured. Got them all?"

"Yes."

He tossed a handful of black bits at the fire, wiped his hand on the stone flagging. After a moment he said, "The three of you were looking washed out."

"We wouldn't hurt you or any of the others."

"Hurt. I wonder what you mean by that." He began chunking the hilt against another lump of coal, not looking at her. "What happens when we get to Durat?"

"I don't know. How could I? My father, my brothers, my folk, I have to find them and break them loose. You knew that before you took up with me. I don't want to have to choose between you ... and the others ... and my people, Taga, keep you clear if I can. I'll leave you once we get to Durat, I'll change the way I look." She shrugged. "What more can I do? You knew it was a gamble when you agreed to bring me to Durat. You know what I *was*. You want to back, out now?"

"You could destroy me."

"Yes."

"Make it impossible for me to work where there are Tem uengs. "

"Yes."

"You knew that in Silili."

"Yes."

"You know us now. We're friends, if not friends, then colleagues. And still, if you have to, you'll destroy us."

"Yes."

"All right. As long as it's clear." He smiled suddenly, a wry self-mocking twist of his lips. "You're right. I gambled and I knew it. Your gold to finance a tour and a chance for the Emperor's Sigil against the chance you'd get us chopped." He touched his shoulder. "Tungjii's tough on fainthearts. I go on. As for your leaving us, could cause more talk than if you stayed. You're part of the troupe the Duratteese are waiting to see. Until we perform at the Emperor's Court, if we ever do, you're part of the troupe, remember that and be careful."

She lifted her hands, looked at them, let them fall. "As careful as I'm let, Taga."

5. Brann's Oquest—Andurya Durat: The Rescue and Attendant Wonders

TAGUILOA STOPPED the wagon at the top of a stiff grade, sat looking down a winding road to the oasis of Andurya Durat. Dry brown barren mountains, ancient earth's bones sucked clean of life and left to wither, two files of them blocking east and west winds, funnelling south the ice winds of the northern plains. Andurya Durat, doubly green and fecund when set against those mountains, steamy damp dark green, lush, born from the hot springs at the roots of Cynamacamal, the highest of the hills, its angular

symmetry hidden by a belt of clouds, its cone-peak visible this day, splashed thick with blue-white snow.

Absently stroking and patting the neck of her fractious mount, Brann stared at the mountain, feeling immensely and irrationally cheered. It was a barebones replica of Tincreal; she felt the presence of Slya warm and comfort-ing. She would win her people free, she didn't know how yet, but that was only a detail.

Taguiloa watched her gaze at the mountain and wondered what she saw to make her smile like that, with a gentleness and quiet happiness he hadn't seen in her before. He turned back to the road, frowned down at the dark blotch on the shores of the glittering lake, sucked in a breath and put his foot on the brake as he slapped the reins on the cob's back, starting him down the long steep slope, wishing he could put a brake on Brann. Godalau grant she didn't run wild through those Temuengs down there.

ANDURYA DURAT. Stuffed with Temuengs of all ranks. Glittering white marble meslaks like uneven teeth built on the shores of the largest lake, snuggling close to the monumental pile still unfinished that housed the Emperor and his servants, vari-sized compounds where the Meslar over-lords lived and drew taxes from the Jamars in the south, the Basshar nomad chiefs in the north. Along the rivers and on the banks of the cluster of smaller lakes, there were Inns and Guesthouses that held Jamars from the south come up to seek an audience from the Emperor so they could boast of it to their neighbors, to seek legal judgments from the High Magistrate, come up to the capital for a thousand other reasons, and there were tent grounds and corrals that held the Basshars and their horse breeders down from the Grass with pampered pets from their tents to sell for Imperial gold, with herds of kounax for butchering, with leatherwork, with cloth woven from the long strong kounax hair, with yarn, rope, glues, carved bones and other products of the nomad life. Scattered among the Farms that fed the city were riding grounds for the horse and mallet games played with bloody kounax heads, a noisy brutal cherished reminder of the old days when the Durat Temuengs were nomad herders on the Sea of Grass, ambling behind their blatting herds, fighting little wars over water and wood. Times the old men among the Meslars spoke of with nostalgia, celebrating the ancient strengths of the People. Times even the most fervid of these celebrators hadn't the slightest inclination to re-create for themselves.

There was another Andurya Durat tucked away behind massive walls, the Strangers' Quarter, a vigorous vulgar swarm of non-Ternuengs. Shipmasters and merchants from the wind's four quarters, drawn to the wealth of the ancient kingdom. Players of many sorts, hoping for an Imperial summons and the right to display the Imperial sigil. Artisans of all persuasions, many of them working under contract to build and maintain the gilded glory of the vast city outside the walls. Inn and tavern keepers, farmers (mostly Bina) in from the local farms with meat and produce, scribes, poets, painters, mages and priests, beggars, thieves, whores. And children, herds and hordes of children filling every crack and corner. Winding streets, crowded multi-storied tenements with shops on the ground floor and a maze of rooms above, taverns, godons, the market strip, all these existing in barely contained confusion and non-stop noise, shouts, quarrels, music clashing with music, raucous songs, barrowmen and women shouting their wares, yammer of gulls, bubbling coos from pigeons, twitters and snatches of song from sparrins and chevinks, harsh caws from assorted scavenger-birds, screams from falcons soaring high like headsmen's double-bitted axes, sharp-edged and cleanly in their flight.

Taguiloa inserted himself and his company into this noisy multicolor polyglot community, just one more bit of brightness in a harlequinade as subtle and as blatant as frost-dyed leaves in a whirlwind, taking his troupe to the Inn where he and Gerontai stayed the time they came seeking to perform for the Emperor.

Papa Jao sat outside his inn on a throne of sorts raised higher than a Temueng's head, his platform built of broken brick, rubble arranged at random, set in a mortar of his own making that hardened and darkened with the years so the stages of the throne's rise were as clearly evident as the rings on a clamshell. On top of the pillar he'd built himself a chair with arms and a back and covered it with ancient leather pillows. It was his boast that he never forgot a face, something likely true because he wrapped his hands around the chair arms, leaned out and cried. "Taga. Come to make your fortune?"

"You know it, Papa Jao. How's it going?"

“Sour and slim, Taga, sour and slim.” Bright black eyes moved with a never-dying curiosity over the wagon and the rest of the troupe. “Ah ah,” he chortled, “it’s you been tickling gold out of Jamar purses.” The chortle fruited into a wheezy laughter that shook every loose flap of flesh inside and outside his clothing. He was a pear-shaped little man with a pear-shaped head, heavy jowls, a fringe of, spiky white hair he drew back and tied in a tail as wild as a mountain pony’s brush after it’d been chased through a stand of stoneburrs. “How many rooms you want? Four? Yah, we got ‘em, second floor, good rooms, a silver a week each, right with you? Well, well, rumor say truth for once.” He leaned round, yelled, “Jassi! Jass-ssii, get your tail out here,” swung back. “You want stable room for the horses and a bit of the back court for your wagon? Silver a week for the horses, we provide the grain, three coppers for the wagon, oh all right, I throw in the court space.” Leaned round once more. “Angait! Anga-ait! Get over here and show saii Taguiloa where to go.”

THE NEXT DAY Taguiloa busied himself burrowing into the complicated and frustrating process of getting the troupe certified for performing in Durat, working his way up the world of clerks and functionaries, parting as frugally as possible with Brann’s coin, returning to the inn that night, exhausted, angry and triumphant, the permit, a square of stamped paper, waving from a fist sweeping in circles over his head. Harra laughing. Brann clapping. Negomas slap-ping a rhythm on a tabletop. Linjijan wandering in with the practice flute he was almost never without.

Taguiloa’s return metamorphosed into an impromptu performance for the patrons of Jao’s Inn, Taguiloa dancing counterpoint to Brann, Han-a whistling, Linjijan producing a breathy laughing sound from his flute, Negomas playing the tabletop and a pair of spoons—the whole ending in laughter and wine and weariness. Taguiloa went up the stairs relaxed, mind drifting, frustration dissipated; rubbing against his own kind he had rubbed away the stink of Temuengs and their stupid arrogance.

WHILE TAGUILOA was swimming against the stream of Temueng indifference and stupidity, while Negomas and Harm were out exploring the market, watching street conjurers and assessing the competition, Brann set out to do some exploring of her own, hunting without too much urgency for a niche where she could make changes without interested observers; she wanted no connection between Sammang—if he had come to Durat—and Taguiloa’s black-haired seer. The Strangers’ Quarter swarmed with people. Not a corner, a doorway, a rubble heap, a roof nook empty of children, beggars, women and men watching the ebb and flow in the street. She worked her way to the wharves, finding more space among the godons as long as she avoided the guards the merchants hired to keep the light-fingers of the Quarter away from their goods. Yaril found a broken plank in one of the scruffier godons, flowed inside and kicked it loose while Jaril-hawk flew in circles overhead watching for guards.

Brann crept inside, stripped off the skirt and coins, stripped the black from her hair, altered her face to the one Sammang knew. She straightened, smiling, feeling more herself than she had in weeks, as if somehow she’d taken off a cramping shell. A sound. She wheeled, hands reaching, straightened again. Jaril stood looking up at her.

stay.” he said.

“Why?”

“I’m tired.”

“I should hunt tonight?”

“Uh-huh.” He looked around at the dusty darkness. “Who knows what’s hived in here. You’ll want the skirt and things when you’re ready to go back to the inn. Be nice if they were still here.”

She frowned at him. “You sure you’re all right?”

“Don’t fuss, Bramble, I gave Yaril a bit extra, that’s all. In case something goes bad round you.” He blurred into a black malouch and curled up on the skirt, his chin on the pile of linked coins, his eyes closed, running away as he always did when she tried to probe his thoughts and feelings. As Yaril always did. She shook her head impatiently, ran her hands through her hair, dropped to her knees and crawled out into the street.

Yaril walking beside her, a frail fair girlchild again, Brann began searching along the wharves for

Sammang or one of his crew. Ebullient Tik-rat who'd be whistling and jiggling about, center of a noisy crowd. Hairy Jimm who'd tower over everyone by a head at least, a wild woolly head. Staro the Stub, wide as he was tall with big brown cow eyes that got even milder when he was pounding on someone who'd commented on his lack of inches. Turrope, lean and brown and silent, Tik-rat's shadow. Leymas. Dereech. Rudar. Gaoez. Uasuf. Small brown men like a thousand others off a hundred ships, but she'd know them all the moment she saw them. And Sammang. There was a flutter at the base of her stomach when she thought of meeting Sammang again. She wove in and out of the godons, went up and down the piers jutting into the river, looking and looking, her face a mask, never stopping, fending off hands that groped at her, sucking enough life out of men who refused to back off to send them wander-ing away in a daze. From the west wall to the east she went, searching and finding none of those she searched for, stood with her hand on the east wall, tears prickling behind her eyes, a lump in her throat—until she con-vinced herself that Sammang would keep his men out of trouble while he waited for her and the best way to do that would be to keep them off the wharves. She rubbed at her forehead, trying to think. Where would he be? If he was here. How could he make himself visible but not con-spicuous? Hunh. Phrased like that the answer was obvious. If he was here, he'd be sitting in a wharfside tavern waiting for her to walk in.

She began working her way west again, drifting in and out of taverns as the afternoon latened, ignoring shouted offers from traders, shipmasters, sailors, and others who mistook her purpose, ignoring caustic comments from sev-eral tavernkeepers who objected to her presence or the presence of Yaril in their taprooms. As shadows crept across the streets and out onto the river, she came to a quiet rather shabby structure near the western wall. Her feet were starting to give out, her knees were tired of bending and she was about ready to quit. How easy once she was out of sight and touch for Sam mang to change his mind, call himself a fool, head for pleasanter waters.

Without much hope she pushed through the door, stood looking around, squinting against the gloom, trying to make out the faces of the dark forms seated at tables about the room. The man behind the bar came round it and crossed the room, a little rotund man without much force to him.

"We don't want children in here. You should be ashamed of yourself, woman, using a baby like that in the business. Go on, get out of here, go on, go go go." He waved pudgy hands at her like a farmwife shoeing chickens out of the kitchengarden.

She glared down at him, her patience pushed beyond its limit. "You calling me a whore, little man?"

He winced. "No need for hard words, what do I care what you do? Just don't do it here."

"What I'm going to do here is sit myself down and have a bowl of wine and my young friend is going to do like-wise." She pushed past him and went to one of the stools at the bar, swung up on it and sat massaging her knees. Yaril climbed up beside her, sat with her small chin propped on her palms, her elbows braced against the aged dark wood.

A chuckle came from one of the darker corners. Brann's stomach turned over and she felt breathless as she recog-nized the voice. Sammang came into the light, stopped beside her. "I greet you, witch. So you made it."

The little man started, opened his eyes wide, set a winebowl in front of her, one in front of Yaril, shoved the jug at her and backed hastily away without waiting for payment. She slanted a glance at Sammang, filled the bowls and sipped at the wine, sighing with pleasure as the warmth spread though her. "So I did."

He reached round her, caught the jug by its neck, went back to the table. Yaril giggled. Brann scowled at her. "Fin-ish that and go stand guard, if you don't mind."

Yaril nodded, gulped down the rest of the wine. Ignor-ing the goggling eyes of the barman, she wriggled off the stool and trotted out.

Brann squared her shoulders, slipped off the stool and marched with her bowl to the table in the corner where Sammang sat waiting for her. She set the bowl down with a loud click, pulled out a chair, dropped into it and scraped it close enough to the table so she could lean on crossed arms and look past him or at him as she chose. "Who's with you?"

"All of 'em; said they'd swim the whole damn river if I tried leaving them behind." He filled the bowl,

pushed it toward her. “Relax, Bramble, I’m not going to jump your bones out here.”

“Hunk! What about the Girl?” She sipped at the wine, her elbows braced on the wood to keep her hands from shaking, avoiding his eyes except for quick glances.

“I circled round by Perando, picked up a cousin of mine and his crew. He’s got her tucked away up the coast a bit. When did you get in?”

“Yesterday. You?”

“A week ago; been doing some trading, lucked into a few things that should pay expenses. Yesterday, mmm. Haven’t located your folk yet?”

“The children are going out again tonight. Tell Jimm to knock his tootom for me and stir up some luck; sooner this is done, the easier I’ll be.” She rubbed at the nape of her neck, frowned at the tabletop. There was a stirring in her that had nothing to do with the way Sammang made her feel, a sense of tidal forces moving that frightened her for herself, for her kin, for Sammang and the troupe, for everyone and everything she valued. She reached for the bowl, gulped more of the wine down and forced herself to ignore that fear.

“We’re ready to go when you are.”

She glanced at him, looked away. “I could know more tomorrow. Maybe we could meet here to make plans?” She had to fight to keep her voice steady. “If you’re staying here?”

He reached out, closed his hand around hers. “Finish your wine and come upstairs.”

“You sure?”

“I’ve decided face value’s good value. I missed you.”

“I ... I hoped ...” She emptied the bowl and stood, swaying as the rush of the wine made her dizzy. Sammang reached out to steady her. His touch was fire, more dis-rupting than the wine. The first time they’d come together in the cabin of his ship, it’d been easy and natural as breathing, this was more deliberate, colder ... no not cold, far from cold ... but planned, not a sweet happen-ing, but a deliberate step taken in full understanding of what she *was* doing. She was nervous and uncertain, afraid she couldn’t please him this time. “The barman?” Her voice was a silly squeak; she flushed with embarrassment.

“None of his business, Bramble-without-thorns.” Sam-mang touched her cheek. “Relax, little witch, we’ve plenty of time.”

FED UP TO FULL strength from the rats and snakes of the Quarter (Brann didn’t want angry ghosts shouting her presence to the night winds and maybe Temueng—ears), Yaril and Jaril flew out her window and swept on wide owl wings across the lake to the great pile resting on the roots of fire-hearted Cynamacamal. Brann hitched a hip on the windowsill and watched them vanish among the cloud shreds, staying where she was a while longer, enjoying the damp cool wind blowing up from the river. A long day. It was full dark before she could wrench herself from Sammang’s side, getting back to the inn just in time to celebrate Taguiloa’s success. Then she had to go out again on the feeding hunt. Now she sat in the window, her thin silk robe open to the nudge of the soft wind, remembering the feel of the solid powerful body next to hers, the smell of him, the hard smoothness of his skin, the spring of his hair. She watched the Wounded Moon rise over the Wall, up thin and late, dawn only a few hours away, feeling within herself a deep-down purring that was not a part of her, a little angry at it, unhappy that it was there, hoping Sammang wasn’t aware that he’d pleased Slya perhaps as much as he’d pleased her. She stretched and yawned, slid off the windowsill, padded across to the bed, dropping the robe to the floor as she moved, sinking into the flock mattress, sinking deep deep into a dreamless sleep.

Yaril and Jaril circled over the main pile of the palace, wheeled away as something wary and malevolent down there smelled them out and reached for them, long invi-sible fingers combing the air. They spiraled higher and stopped thinking, only-owls for a while, until they felt the fingers coil back down, felt the palace folding in on itself like a blood lily come the dawn. They drifted a while longer through the clouds, then went back to their swoops over the grounds, locating the guard barracks, the crowded warrens where the servants lived, the far more spacious and luxurious quarters of the Imperial dapples and the carefully tended fields where those monsters ran, the work-shops and greenhouses, the

foundry, the glass-making furnaces, the kitchen gardens, working their way out and out until they came to a new structure tucked into the folds of the mountain, an isolated compound still stinking of green cement and raw lumber. High walls, a guard tower over-looking a heavy barred gate. Torches burning low to light the space about the gate, lamps inside the tower, guards drowsing there but ready enough to come awake at a sound. The owls sailed across the wall and fluttered down onto a rooftop, then melted into light shimmers and slipped inside through the roof tiles.

Workshops. Spacious. Well-equipped, though there were no steel tools about. Locked up or carried away for the night, or for times when the tool users were sufficiently tamed that the tools wouldn't be a danger to them or the guards. The light smears zipped through the shops and passed into the living quarters. Room after empty room, then a sleeper, another, then more empty rooms. In all that vast place there were only twelve, of the twoscore gone to the Fair there *was* only a bare dozen left. Despite what the pimush had said—perhaps had said to escape a drawn-out dying—the Temueng soldiers had not been tender with the Arth Slya slaves. The changechildren wondered briefly if the Emperor still expected his double-hundred slaves from the Valley, wondered if the sribush in charge of the invasion forces had gotten tired of waiting and sent Noses prowling to find out what happened to the pimush and his captives.

When they'd probed the whole of the compound and made sure there were no others tucked away into the odd corner, they drifted back through the occupied rooms, naming the sleepers so they could tell Brann just who was there, knowing each because they knew what Brann knew.

Callim. Brann's father. He'd been beaten, probably because he declined to work. He was recovering, the beating must have been several days before, stretched out on the room's single bed, snoring, twitching as flies walked his back, the weals there sticky with salve. Cathar, Brann's oldest brother; slept curled up on a pallet in one corner, Duran her younger brother sat dozing in a chair beside the bed, waking now and then to fan the flies away.

In the next room over a man sat, dull-eyed, slack-faced, fingers plucking steadily at nothing, Uncle Idadro the etcher and inlayer, a finicky precise little man, never too adept at handling outsiders; his wife Glynis had gone to the Fair most years before but she died suddenly of a weakness in the heart and left him drifting, his eldest son Trithin, his only anchor against the world, he was wholly unable to cope with. This year he'd taken that son to the Grannsha Fair, the boy blessed with his mother's bubbling good humor and ease with people. Little friend of all the world they called him when he was a baskling then a trotling. No sign of Trithin anywhere within the compound; perhaps he was alive elsewhere, but neither of the changechildren believed it, more likely that the Wounded Moon, rose whole than that they'd find Trithin walking earthface again.

This is the roll of the living they call out to Brann later: Callim, Cathar, Duran, Trayan, Garrag, Reanna, Theras, Camm, Finn, Farra, Farm and Idadro. Eight men, four women.

This is the roll of the dead: Trithin, Sintra, Warra, Wayim, Lotta, Doronynn, Imath, Lethra, Iannos and Rossha.

At the end of this final sweep the two light smears hovered in the middle of an empty room and sang to each other the questions that had occurred to them. What was that thing in the palace, that thing with the groping fingers? How powerful was it that it not only caused the Emperor to commit genocide, but made Slya herself act deviously, wrenching them from their home space and sending them to Brann to change her so she could be a vessel for Slya, bringing Slya here disguised to fight her attackers? They circled each other and sang their uncertainty. Should they tell Brann what they thought about it? She knew some of it already, knew Slya slept within her and simultaneously slept within Tincreal, knew Slya drove her as she drove the stone of Tincreal, with utter disregard for her and those she cared for. The changechildren contemplated that disregard with a chill in their firebodies that paled the light and almost sent them into their hibernating crystals, the form their people took when all energy was drained from them and no more would be available for some considerable time, the dormant form that was not death but a state for which their folk had little fondness and exercised their ingenuity to avoid unless the alternative was the dispersal of real death, like burnt-out stars choked to ash and nothing. The children hovered and shivered and were more afraid than they'd been since they woke on the slopes of Tincreal and found themselves starving in sunlight. "She might send us back when she's finished with us," Yaril

sang.

“No” It was a long long sigh of a sound, filled with a not-quite despair; after all there was much to be said for this world and for the companionship they shared with Brann.

“We could talk to her,” Yaril sang, “when this is over. Brann too. If Slya returns us, she’ll have to change Brann back.”

“Brann,” Jaril sang, “is a brown leaf falling, not ignored but not restored. Why should Slya bother, after she gets the Arth Slyans free again and the vengeance she wanted for the slaughter? I think the great are the same in all realities, they use and discard, use and discard, this one and that, for what they consider the greater good. Their good. Poor Brann.”

“Poor us.”

“That too.”

Two small light smears, very young for their kind with much of the long slow learning of that kind yet ahead of them, swooped anger-driven through the roof tiles, melted into twin owls and went powering back to Brann, uncertain what they should or would say to her, hoping with every atom of their impossible bodies that she slept and dreamed of the bite of pleasure she’d worried from the chaos of her life. They didn’t know what to do, how the Slyans could be rescued without harming folk who were their friends, what to say to Brann if she asked their advice.

They glided through the open window, blurred into their childforms and tiptoed to the bed. Brann was deep asleep, her eyes moving under the lids, a small smile twitching her lips. Yaril looked at Jaril; he nodded and the two of them retreated into a corner and sank into the catalepsy that took the place of sleep.

JASSI STUCK HER head in the door, knocked against the wall.

Taguiloa looked up from the glitter sphere he was polishing.

“Someone to see you.” She winked at him. “Tightass highnose creep with Maratullik’s brand on him. Imperial Hand, eh man. You musta connect some good coming up.

Taguiloa set the sphere carefully into its velvet niche, got to his feet and began pacing about the room. This was an astonishingly early response to his permit; he’d expected several days of rest before the Temuengs took note of his presence, if they ever did. He stopped at the window, stared at the court without seeing any of it. I’m not ready He snapped thumb against finger, swung round. “That I did. Uh-huh.” He smiled at Jassi. “Tell your creep friend I’m busy but if he wants to wait, I’ll be down in a little while. If he decides he wants to hang around, offer him a bowl of your best wine so he won’t be too-too annoyed.”

“You could land up to your neck, Taga.” She eyed him uncertainly, but with more respect than before. “You that sure of yourself?”

“Jassi, lady of my heart and elsewhere, I’m not, no I’m not, but if you scratch every time a Temueng itches, you’ll wear your fingers down to nubs. Now go and do what I said.” He wrinkled his nose. “If he walks, come tell me.” She shrugged and left.

Taguiloa closed his hands over the window sill, squeezed his eyes shut, breathed deeply. This was make or break. He knew as well as Jassi that he was taking a big chance. If the slave walked out chances were he or another like him would not be back. Chance. He touched his left shoulder. Tungjii, up to you, keep your eye on us.

He pushed away from the window, hunted out the travel papers and the metal credeens he was holding for all but Brann. He stood looking at them a moment, then tossed them on the bed, kicked off his sandals, stripped. Moving quickly about the room, he washed, brushed his long black hair, smoothed it down, tied it at the nape of his neck with a thin black silk ribbon, making a small neat bow over the knot. He dressed quickly in the dark cotton tunic and trousers, the low topped black boots that he thought of as his humble suit. When he was finished, he inspected himself carefully, brushed a hair off his sleeve, smoothed the front of the tunic. Neat but not gaudy. Smiling, he collected the papers and creedens, left his room and went down the hall to Harra’s.

She let him in, went back to the skirt she was embroi-dering, using this bit of handiwork to calm her

nerves and pass the time. He looked around. Except for them the room was empty. "Seen Brann?"

"She went out with the changekids this morning early. Excited about something." Harra narrowed her eyes. "That's your go-see-the-massa outfit."

"The Imperial Hand sent a slave to fetch me." His eye twitched, he put his hands behind him, not as calm as he wanted to appear. "I'm letting him stew awhile."

"Don't let it go too long. But you don't need me telling you that. Think it could maybe be about Brann?"

"I don't know. He asked for me, Jassi says."

"Ah. Then it's either very good news and we're on our way to the Court or it's very bad news and the Hand's going to be asking you questions you don't want to answer." She paused a moment. "Last doesn't seem likely. If he was going to be asking nasty questions, he'd send an empush and his squad to fetch you, not some slave."

"Right. Here. You keep these." He gave her the troupe's papers and the credeens after separating out his own. "In case." A wry smile, a flip of his hand. "In case the Hand is sneakier or crazier than we know. Get Negomas and Linjjan back to Silili."

"And Brann?"

"If I don't come back, be better if you keep as far from her as you can. You know why she's here." He moved his thumb over his own credeen, slipped it into his sleeve. "Well, I've killed enough time. I'd better get downstairs."

"Keep your cool, dancer."

"I'll try, mage-daughter, I shall try."

TAGUILOA FOLLOWED the silent slave through the West

Gate onto the broad marble-paved avenue fronting the lake, thinking about the year he and Gerontai had come here. They'd got to the lower levels of the Temuengs, the merchants and magistrates and minor functionaries, but the powerful had ignored them and they made their way back to Silili without getting near the Emperor's halls. Meslar Maratullik was the Emperor's Left Hand, running the Censors and the Noses, head of security about the Emperor's person. Hope and fear, hope and fear, alternating like right foot, left foot creaking on the gritty marble. Following the silent sneering slave, he walked along that lakeside boulevard, past walls on one side, high smooth white walls with few breaks in them, only the massive gates and the narrow alleys between the meslaks; The lakeside was planted with low shrubs and occasional trees, stubby piers jutted into the lake, with pleasure boats, sail and paddle, tied to them. The lake itself was quiet and dull, the water reflecting the gray of the clouds gathering thickly overhead. No rain, just the grayed-down light of the afternoon and a steamy heat that made walking a punishment even in these white stone ways as clean and shining and lifeless as the shells on an ancient beach. Now and then bands of young male Temuengs came racing down that broad avenue on their high-bred warhorses, not caring who they trampled, whooping and yelling, some-times even chasing down unhappy slaves, leaving them in crumpled heaps bleeding their plebian blood into the noble stone. Taguiloa's escort had a staff with Maratullik's sign: on a placard prominently displayed so they escaped the attention of the riders.

Maratullik's meslak was a broad rolling estate on the lakeshore with a riding ground, a complex of workshops and servant housing, extensive gardens, self-sufficient within the outerwalls should some disaster turn the meslak into a fortress. Taguiloa followed the slave through the gates into the spacious formal gardens with their fountains and banks of bright flowers, the exquisitely manicured stretches of grass; he looked around remembering the noisy rat-ridden Quarter and knew if he was absolutely forced to choose between the two, he'd take the rat-home not this emptiness, but such a choice was most unlikely; what he was determined to ensure was a less radical choice, staying out of the slums, keeping himself and Blackthorn (if it came to that) in reasonable comfort after his legs went and his body would no longer do what his mind desired. What he had now suited him very well, the silence, meditation, comfort of his small house on the hillside, the noise and excitement of Silili nights.

It took twenty minutes to work through the gardens and corridors to a small glassed-in garden with a gently plashing fountain in the center, falls and sprays of miniature orchids, some rare kinds Taguiloa had

never seen before, one huge tree encased within the bubble, fans worked by ropes and pulleys from outside by slaves who never saw the beauty they maintained. There were wicker chairs scattered about, singly and in small clusters, but he was not tempted to sit despite the two-hour walk and his aching feet. He moved his shoulders, tightened and loosened his muscles to calm himself. There was no point getting angry at the Temueng and there were a lot of reasons he shouldn't. He knew he had to control his irritation. He didn't take easily to groveling, had lost the habit of it the past five years, but all that he'd won for himself in Silili meant nothing here.

The Meslar Maratullik Left Hand Counsellor to the Emperor came into the garden with a feline grace and the silent step of a skilled hunter. He was short for a Temueng, though he was more than a head taller than Taguiloa; his face was rounder, less bony, the features more delicate than most Temuengs'. He wore a narrow robe of heavy dark gray silk, finely cut, arrogant in its simplicity. As Taguiloa bent in the prescribed deep obeisance, he went cold with the thought that perhaps there was Hina blood somewhere in the Hand's ancestry. If that was true, he was in a doubly perilous position; he's seen too often what happened if a Hina in an important family was born with Woda-an characteristics, how that man made himself rigidly Hina, rejecting everything that would dilute the ancient Hina culture, how that man overtly and in secret tormented any Woda-an unfortunate to fall into his hands. And how often such a man ended up in a position like the Hand's where he had a great deal of power over the lives of others, especially those he hated so virulently. Taguiloa could trip himself up here without ever knowing precisely what he'd done to bring the mountain down on his head. Care, take care, he cautioned himself. Don't relax till you're out of here and maybe not even then.

Maratullik acknowledged Taguiloa's presence with a stiff short nod, crossed to the fountain, settled himself in one of the wicker chairs and spent some moments smoothing out the heavy silk of his robe. He lifted his head, his dark eyes as dull and flat as the silk, beckoned Taguiloa forward, stopped him with an open palm when he was close enough.

Taguiloa bowed again, then waited in silence, eyes lowered. A game, that's all it was, a game with bloody stakes. Yielding just enough to propitiate this Temueng that rumor made a monster, yet not enough to lose his self-respect, walking *the* hair-fine ridge between capitulation and catastrophe. He waited, his hands clasped behind him so they wouldn't betray his tension.

Maratullik was silent for a long time, perhaps testing the quality of Taguiloa's submission, more likely taking a bit of pleasure in making him sweat. "We have heard good things of you, Hina." The monster's voice was a high thin tenor.

"I am honored, *saõ jura Meslar*," Taguiloa murmured. He could feel sweat dampening the cloth under his arms; he fought to keep his grasp on himself, telling himself the Hand expected such signs of nervousness and would he be suspicious if he failed to see them. The two silences stretched on. Taguiloa's head started to ache. There *was* no way he could get anything like respect from this Temueng, but making a doormat of himself would only incite the man to stomp him into the ground.

"You have foreigners in your troupe."

"Yes, *saõ jura Meslar*." Taguiloa lifted his eyes just enough to catch glimpses of Maratullik's hands. At the word *foreigner*, the fingers twitched toward closing, opening again slowly and reluctantly. At Taguiloa's mild and noncommittal answer the fingers stiffened into claws. Taguiloa sweated some more. Trying to play safe was less than safe in this game. Should he amplify his answer or would that further antagonize the Temueng? After a few moments of hurried thought, he elected to wait for the next question and see how a more extended answer affected those hands, hoping all the time that Maratullik didn't know how thoroughly his small and delicate fingers betrayed him.

"Why?"

Taguiloa shifted from foot to foot, let his nervousness show a bit more, disciplined his voice to a dull monotone. "Three reasons, *saõ jura Meslar*." He spoke softly, slowly, choosing his words with care, his eyes flicking, careful not to look at the hands too long. "First, *saõ jura Meslar*, when I was younger, I made tours through the Tigarezun with my master Gerontai and I have taken notice of how eagerly the countryfolk greeted exotic acts and how well they reward those that please them." He winced inside at the pompous greed in the speech but the fingers were relaxing; he was conforming to expectation.

“Second, saõ jura Meslar, making a tour such as this is very costly especially in the beginning; aside from their other talents the members of the troupe excepting the children have contributed to outfitting us and will have a share in what-ever we take in, the foreigners of course taking a much smaller share than the Hina.” Glance at the hands. Almost flat out. Good. But don’t overdo the boring bit. Or the greed. “Third, saõ jura Meslar, though this will be of little importance to you, it carries a high weight with me, there are my own aspirations. I seek to blend tumbling, juggling and dance into something no man has seen be-fore. The music I found to accompany this new movement was also a blend, a music from M’darjin drums, Rukka-nag daroud, Hina flute, a music that is sufficiently different to be intriguing, sufficiently familiar for the comfort of the listeners. It is an exciting music, saõ jura Meslar, all who have heard it agree.” He bowed again and fell silent. Watch what you say; he’s far from stupid or he wouldn’t be where he is.

“Tell me, about your foreigners. The women first.”

“They are honored by your interest, saõ jura Meslar.” Taguiloa cleared his throat. “I know only outlines, saõ jura Meslar, I must confess it, I wasn’t interested in their life stories, only their coin and their skills. Harra Hazhani is Rukka-nag from far out in the west somewhere, you will of course know of them. She came to Silili with her father, he died and left her without protection or a place to go and a limited amount of coin so she needed a way to earn more. The customs and strictures of her people forbid her on pain of death to sell that which is a woman’s chief asset and besides she was a foreigner, only the perverse would pay for her. However she is an excellent dancer in her way and a musician of considerable talent. The other woman is called Brannish Tovah, she is Sujomann, out of the west too, from up in the far north somewhere, she says winter nights last half a year and the snow comes down until it’s high enough to drown mountains. I needed a seer who could also dance and she came well recom-mended. She’s bound to the wind by her god or so she said, goes where the wind blows, said she lost a husband and two children to ice and wolves, has a brindle boar hound she says is her familiar and a street child she picked up who has something to do with helping her in her rites and acts as crier to call clients so she can read for them. Like the Hazhani woman, she is forbidden by custom and her in-dwelling god to seek congress with men not her kind. Were she to be forced, she is bound by her god to castrate the man and kill herself. That tends to reduce the ardor of any who might find her interesting. To speak truly, saõ jura Meslar, I was quite pleased when I learned these things. Having women in a troupe is always a tricky thing, can lead to complications with the countryfolk if they consider themselves free to supplement their incomes on their back. The M’darjin drummer is a boy about ten or so, hard to tell with those folk. He has no father or relatives willing to claim him, though how that happened is not clear to me. I did not bother to probe for answers, I was not interested in anything but the way he played the drums. Linjijan the flute player is Hina and the second best in all Silili, the first being his great uncle Ladjinatuai who plays for Blackthorn.” He bowed and waited tensely for the Hand’s response.

Hands still loose on his thighs, Maratullik was silent for some breaths, then he said, “Both women come from the west.”

“So they said, saõ jura Meslar.”

The questioning went on for a short while longer, Maratullik’s hands relaxed, his voice gone remote and touched with distaste. He was no longer much interested in the answers and Taguiloa rapidly shortened them to the minimum required by courtesy. Short as they were, the Temueng interrupted the last. “You will perform here tomorrow night,” he said. “You will make the necessary arrangements with my house steward. Wait here.” He got to his feet and glided out, ignoring Taguiloa’s low bow, his attitude saying he had forgotten the matter completely, it was of that small an importance in his life. Taguiloa squeezed his hands together, froze his face into a mask, exultation bubbling in him; he struggled to keep his calm, but all he could think was, *I’ve won, I’ve almost won.*

HAIR A WHITE shimmer tied at the nape of her neck, clothes a black tunic and trousers, worn sandals on her feet, Brann walked through the busy market, making her way to Sammang’s tavern, in no hurry to get there, savor-ing the anticipation, enjoying the exuberant vitality of the scene around her. A face came out of the crowd, two more. She strangled a cry in her throat. Cathar. Camm. Theras. Her brother. A

cousin by blood. A cousin by courtesy. Faces she knew as well as her own. She began following them, trying to stay inconspicuous, afraid of losing sight of them.

Cathar sauntered through the market, his eyes alive with pleasure in the jumbled colors and forms, stopping to bargain for fruit and herbs, a length of cloth, joking with the cousins, in no hurry, unaccompanied by any guard she could see, paying for his purchases with a metal tablet he showed the vender. She wanted desperately to talk to him, but didn't dare approach him. After her first flush of emotion, her mind took over. What *was* he here for except as bait to draw her out? Otherwise, why would the Temuengs let him and the others beyond the compound walls, taking a chance they'd run? Not much of a chance with the hostages the Temuengs held, but how could they be sure? Had to be Noses about. She couldn't see any but that meant very little in this crush. Anyway, how could she tell a Nose from the rest of the folk here? Couldn't smell them. She choked back a hysterical giggle. Besides, what could she say to Cathar if she did go up to him? Hello, I'm your little sister. A foot taller, hair gone white, fifteen years too old, but I'm still Brann. Bramble-all-thorns. No, I'm not a crazy woman. I really am your sister. Eleven years old, never mind my form. Ha! He'd believe her, like hell he would. She chewed on her lip as she eased after them, trying to think of some way she could talk with him without giving herself away to the Noses.

Yaril tugged on her arm. She let the changechild lead her into a side street, where there was a jog in a building that gave her a bit of privacy.

"House of assignation," Yaril whispered. "There's one the next street over. You put on a Hina face and go rent a room, I'll bring Cathar to you."

Brann grimaced. "Yaril"

The changechild scratched at her head, made an impa-tient gesture with her other hand. "The door's got twined serpents painted on it. You just go and knock and say you want a room for the afternoon and give the old woman three silver bits and tell her your servant will be bringing someone later and let the maid take you up. When the girl's gone, you take your clothes off and put on the robe you'll find in the room and sit down and wait." She frowned. "Keep the Hina face. And you'd better make it a kind of wrinkled up face. Dirty old woman paying young men to service her. Just in case Cathar's Nose decides to check you out."

Brann wrinkled her nose. "Tchah! What a thing."

"You don't have to like it, just do it."

—Don't be too long. You sure you can convince him?"

Yaril giggled. "Cathar? You know your brother, never passed up a chance in his life. I'll get him there, you be ready."

SHE WAS SITTING at a table near the window when Cathar walked into the room, curiosity bright in his gray-green eyes, his dark brown hair blown into a tangle of small soft curls. She watched him with deep affection and nearly wept with joy to see him so much himself in spite of everything that had happened. He came and looked her over, a glint of amusement and interest in his eyes. He bowed. She felt a knot tighten in her stomach, she didn't want her brother looking at her like that even if he didn't know who she was and thought she was some rich Hina matron who got her thrills from picking up young men in the market.

She leaned forward, started to speak.

Yaril said hastily, "Wait." She darted into the shadows of the bed curtains, emerged as a smear of light sweeping along the walls.

Cathar's eyes widened, he looked from the light to Brann, began backing toward the door, his hand reaching for the latch.

"Cathar," Brann whispered, "wait."

"You know me?" He blinked, stood frozen with shock as Brann's face rippled and changed to the one she woke up with on the flight from the valley. He licked his lips. "What ... •"

Brann glanced at Yaril who was a small blond girlchild again. The changechild nodded. "No one listening right now. I'll keep an eye out downstairs just to make sure. He had a shadow." She flicked a

hand at Cathar. "Like you suspected." She grinned up at him. "Relax, baby, no one's going to hurt you." She tugged on the latch, pulled the door open and went out.

Brann sighed. "I don't quite know how to explain this. Cathar, sit down, will you? You make me nervous fidget-ing like that."

He narrowed his eyes, pulled out a chair and sat across the table from her. "I know you?"

"I'm glad it's you not Duran, he's so damn hardheaded he'd never believe me. I'm Brann. Your sister."

He leaned forward, frowning as he scanned her face. "You're very like Mum. Now. You weren't a few minutes back."

She pushed at her hair, still black, she hadn't bothered changing that again. "And I'm a dozen years too old and I'm a long way from home. And a shapeshifter of sorts."

"Well."

"Slya woke, brother, she changed me. Did they tell you, those Temuengs, did they tell you they sent a pimush and his fifty to clean out the valley?"

"They told me."

"Gingy and Shara are dead, Cathar. All the kids under eleven were killed. All the old ones too. Uncle Eornis. The Yongala. The rest" She closed her eyes. "I've gone over it so often. I saw some of it, Cathar, what they did to Mum, saw Roan get killed, uncle Cynoc. They set the houses on fire too, but they didn't burn too much, the houses I mean. I was up on Tincreal all day. You know. I found the children there. I came back and the soldiers were in the valley. I watched from Harrag's Leap, then I went after them. Slya changed me. I told you that. And brought the children. Yaryl has a brother." She opened her eyes, tapped her breast. "She rides me. Slya. I don't know what she's going to do. I killed them, Cathar. The pimush and his men. The children helped. They make a poison. It kills between one breath and the next. The pimush told me what happened at Grannsha. He said no one was killed. Jaril tells me about half aren't here, I suppose they were killed after all. Mum's all right. Well, as all right as she can be after what happened. Her looms weren't hurt. Tincreal blew about a week after that. Jaril flew back to see what happened. The hills are scrambled. You could only find your way back to the Valley if you knew where it was. But they're all right, the ones left alive. I forgot. Marran's dead, I found him killed. On the trail. Gave him fire. Didn't do that for the Temuengs. We think you're bait to catch me, you and the others they let out. The children and me, we think the sribush on Croaldhu knows his men are dead. Before I got off Croaldhu, I gave the Temuengs some sorrow. I expect they guessed I had something to do with Arth Slya. Which is why you and the others have Noses on your tail. How long have they been letting Slyans out?"

"About a month." His voice *was* cool, he wasn't committing himself to anything yet.

She sucked in a long breath. "You're as hardheaded as Duran. All right, listen. You remember the time you and Trihan caught uncle Cynoc in your dammar trap? Remember what he made you do, bury the offal from the killing ground all that summer?" She made a sharp, impatient gesture. "Either you believe me or you don't. Did they tell you why they're letting some, of you out?"

He shrugged. "Said they don't want their Hina waiting on us, we're supposed to do for ourselves, they give us a credeen to show and keep track of what we buy. And just send out those with close kin here. They said they'd skin Duran first then Da if I run. Same with the others. First few days we had guards breathing down our necks, but they left us looser after that. I haven't noticed anyone following us. Be easy enough to do." He looked around the room. "This was clever, Bramble." He grinned. "All right, I do believe you, though it's not easy when I look at you. What have you got in mind? Breaking out won't be that hard, but where do we go after we're out?"

"The shipmaster who took me off Croaldhu and brought me to Silili, he's here now, he's going to take you down the Palachunt and back to the north end of our island. Where the smugglers come in. You know. Best not to wait, get it done fast, less chance of something disastrous happening. You get the others ready to move sometime the next five days. The children know where to find you, they can get in and out without anyone noticing them. How is Da? The children told me he's been beaten."

"Yeah, he wouldn't work and he won't take any kind of orders. He's getting better, but not easier."

Mum's safe, alive, you're surer'

"Uh-huh. Last time Jaril saw her, she was setting up her loom." Brann smiled. "You know Mum; house half burned down around her, everything in a mess but as long as the roof is tight over the looms and she's got the yarn she needs, the rest doesn't matter."

"I'll tell Da that, might make him, bend a little if he has to. He can get about, if that what worries you.

"Do they ever check on you at night? Say after sun-down and before dawn."

"No. At least they haven't up to now. They change the guards a little after sundown about the seventh hour, leave them on all night, change again about an hour after dawn. I've heard them grouching about the long dull duty they're pulling."

"Then the sooner we can get you out, the longer it'll be before anyone notices you're gone. Barring some ill chance."

"Can't leave too soon or ..." He broke off as a large brown bird came swooping through the window, blurred and landed beside Brann as a slim blond child, blurred again into the Hina child who'd brought him here.

"Nose has decided he wants to be sure what you're doing up here. He's negotiating with the old woman now right now and in a breath or two he'll be up peeping through the voyeur holes." She darted to the bed and pulled the covers about, talking rapidly as she worked. "You, Cathar, get your shirt off, muss your hair, see if you can look however you look when you've had your ashes hauled. Brann, get that Hina face back on fast. And take those pins out of your hair. Look like you've been mauled about a bit, huh?" She scowled from one to the other, then marched to the table, caught up the bell, stomped to the door, leaned out and rang for the house maid. "She'll bring tea, you should've rung before."

Brann closed her eyes, sat back in the chair and concentrated. Her face and body rippled and flowed, the face and hands changing to those of a middle-aged Hina matron. She opened dark brown eyes, saw Cathar staring at her uncertainly. "I can answer any question you ask me, brother. In spite of what's been done to me, I am Brann. You were courting Lionnis, I forgot to tell you, she's one of the living too, remember the time Mouse and I spied on you?"

Yaril swung the door wide as the maid brought in a heavy tray with tea and cakes; she set the tray on the table, bowed, smiled at the silver bit Brann tossed to her. Yaril shut the door after her, came back to the table. "Eyes," she murmured, "in the wall now." She squatted by Brann's feet, her eyes closed, a mask of indifference on her pointed face.

Cathar pulled his shirt over his head and began doing up the laces, making quite a production of it, a twinkle in his gray-green eyes. He was beginning to have fun with this business, the realization born in him that there was hope, there was a good chance he and the others would get back to the Valley, home to the slopes of Tinreal. That hope was bouncing in his walk and gleaming in his grin.

His spirits were winding up to an explosion which she hoped he would put off until he got back in the com-pound. She watched him scoop up the gold coin she set on the table, toss it up and catch it, grinning, then strut out of the room, watched him and wanted to run after him and hug him until he squealed. Impossible. Damn the Temuengs for making it impossible. She poured out a bowl of tea and sat staring out the window, sipping at the hot liquid, fighting an urge to cry, overwhelmed by the love she felt for her brother, realizing how lonely she'd been the past months. Even with Sammang and the crew, even with Taguiloa and Harra, even with the intimate association with the children, she felt alone; nothing could replace the feel of her folk around her, where she breathed in warmth and affection, where the space she took up was one she'd grown for herself, where she moved suspended in cer-tainty. Not so long ago she'd been fretting about that closeness, feeling suffocated by it, now she was beginning to understand the dimensions of her loss. But she didn't have time to brood over it. She emptied the bowl in a pair of gulps, patted her mouth delicately with the napkin from the tray, swung to face Yaril. "He was a good one, girl," she said, making herself sound mincingly precise. "Go find me another such boy." She reached into a box and took out another gold coin. "Hurry child, I grow ... needy again."

Silent and expressionless, Yaril took the coin and went out. Brann filled the tea bowl and sat staring out the window, sipping at the cooling liquid. Now that the room was silent and empty she thought she could hear tiny scraping sounds the spy made as he fidgeted behind the peepholes, could feel his eyes

watching her.

The silence stretched out and out. The noise-in-the-wall sounds grew louder and more frequent. Then the sounds moved along the wall, very small noises that might almost be mistaken for shifts and creaks of the old house. Even when they were gone she sat without moving or changing the expression on her face, sat sipping at the tea as if she had all the time in the world. Yaril came back through the window again, a gold shimmer mixed with the gray light from outside. She flashed through the walls and came back to stand beside Brann. "He's gone."

"Think we convinced him?"

"Enough so he won't probe further, not now anyway. Or he'd be outside waiting to follow you. But just in case he left a friend behind, you better keep that form awhile."

Brann grimaced.

Yaril patted her hand. "Poor baby Bramlet."

"'Jahr' Brann striped off the robe, tossed it onto the bed, pulled on her tunic and trousers. "Let's get out of here. I don't like this place."

THAT DAY PASSED and the night and in the late afternoon when the shadows would have been long and dark if the heavily overcast sky had let enough light trickle through, the troupe rolled out of the West Gate, their planning done, two plot lines converging, everyone nervous and wondering if the whole thing was going to come apart on them and sink them beyond recovery, on their way to Maratullik's meslak, escorted by the slave who'd fetched Taguiloa before, this time on a lanky white mule of con-trary temper whose notion of speedy travel was a slightly faster walk than usual. A pair of silent guards rode ahead of them, another pair rode behind.

Yaril was an owl circling over them, Jaril rode with Negomas on top the wagon, both boys quiet, Negomas because he was nervous and rather intimidated by the guards and the great houses white and silent and eerie in the pearly gray light, Jaril because he wanted to avoid drawing notice to himself.

Brann rode beside the bay cob, looking out over the ruffled gray water, the stubby docks with their pleasure boats covered with taut canvas to keep out the rain. The street was empty, even of slaves, as the threatened rain began to mist down and the wind to blow erratically, drop-ping and gusting, dropping and gusting, throwing sprays of rain into her face.

The wagon rolled on and on, rumbling over the pebbled marble, the sound echoing dully from the walls, the slow clop-clip of the ironshod hooves extra loud in each drop of the wind. Taguiloa drove and Linjijan rode beside him, his flute tucked carefully away to keep it out of the rain. Linjijan stretched out on the seat, practicing his fingering along his ribs, wholly unconcerned about what was hap-pening around him. He was restful to be with right now; Taguiloa felt the calm radiating out from him and was grateful for it as his own pulses steadied, his breathing slowed, the tightness worked out of his muscles. He couldn't keep his dreams from taking his mind—if they made a good enough showing, if they managed to interest the Hand, they were set. Set for the court performance, the chance he'd worked so long to get. He tried not to think of Brann and her plans for this night, expelled from his mind any thought of the changechildren and what they would be doing while he danced.

Up ahead, the slave kicked the mule into a faster gait as the rain started coming down harder.

BRANN DANCED with fire, a soaring, swaying shimmering column of braided blue red gold, Jaril flowing bright, the drums heavy and sensuous in the shadows behind her, the daroud deep and sonorous, singing with and against the song of the drums. The Hand sitting in shadow watched without any sign he was responding to the music or the dance, but the adolescent Temueng males filling the benches on either side of him were stamping and whistling. Both things bothered her, the meslarlings' raucous callow be-havior and the Hand's silence, draining the energy she needed for the dance. She owed the troupe her best, so she reached deep and deep within and drove herself to increase the power and sensuality of the dance. Negomas and Harm seemed to sense her difficulty and threw them-selves into the music, making the great room throb and the Hand move in spite of himself, leaning forward, let-ting himself respond. And then it was over and Brann was bowing, then running into the shadows behind the screens set up to serve

the players.

Taguiloa touched her shoulder. "Never better," he whispered.

She smiled nervously. "It's a bad crowd," she murmured. "Stupid and arrogant."

He nodded, touched the chime that warned Linjijan and the others to begin the music. He caught up his clubs, began his breathing exercises, listened to the music, eyes shut, running through the moves in his mind. The dance was paradoxically easier on the high rail at the inns because he didn't have to work so hard for the clown effect.

Everything forgotten but his body and the music, he caught the cue and went wheeling out with a calculated awkwardness where he seemed always on the verge of winding himself into impossible knots and losing control of the clubs and knocking himself on the head.

AS TACUILOA FLUNG himself and the clubs about, Jaril was a shadow-colored ferret darting through the lamplit halls until he reached the outside, then a mistcrane powering up through the rain to join Yaril who was circling through the clouds waiting for him, a mistcrane herself now that the rain had turned heavy. They cut through the clouds to the far end of the lake and circled around the great shape-less pile of the Palace to the slave compound at the back.

"Guard changed yet?"

"Should have, but we better check."

They landed on the roof of the tower, blurred and oozed through the tiles into the rafters where they hung as mottled serpents lost among the shifting shadows from the smelly oil lamp sitting in the center of a worn table. The room was empty for a few breaths, then the guards came in, stomped about shaking off the wet, using their sodden cloaks to mop faces arms and legs, then a blanket off the cot in the corner, grumbling all the time about having to nursemaid a clutch of mudheads like that, not even able to have a little fun with the women, stuck out here the rest of this stinkin night to sit and shiver in case one of those know-nothing shits tried to run.

Yaril lifted her serpent head, looked at Jaril, nodded. She blurred into a beast rather like a winged marmoset with poison fangs, then moved silently along the rafters until she was in position above one of the guards. When she heard the click from Jaril that told her he was ready, she dropped on silent wings, gliding onto her target's shoulder and back, sinking her fangs into his neck, shoving off before he could close his hands on her, fluttering up in a steep narrow spiral as he collapsed, twitched a little, went still, his mouth open, a trace of foam on his lips. Jaril struck a second later than she did, his guard fell over hers, dead before he hit the floor.

They blurred into light smears, oozed through the roof and flew down to the gate. With a little maneuvering, they swung the bar out of its hooks, but left the gate shut for the moment so the gap wouldn't be noticed. They filtered through the planks, then were small blond children running unwet through the rain to the living quarters.

TAGUILOA KICKED the club into the air, then hopped about holding his foot with one hand while he kept that club circling in long loops with the other, a grimace of exaggerated anguish on his face. Throwing the club higher than before, he danced back and back while the club soared, hopped closer and closer to the club abandoned on the floor, the music rising to a screech. He bumped his heel into the floorclub, wheeled into a series of vigorous back flips, landed flat on his back and caught the descending club a second before it mashed his head, waved it in triumph then let his arm fall with a loud thump that cut the music off as if with a knife. He lay there a moment, then got to his feet with a quick curl of his body, bowed and ran off the padded part of the floor into the protection of the screens.

The Hand chuckled throughout the performance, apparently deciding he approved of these players. There was more stomping from the youths, a few whistles. Taguiloa went out, bowed again, then retreated behind the screens. Negomas and Linjijan began playing a lazy tune while Harra came behind the screen to collect her wrist hoops and finger bells. She nodded to Branco, then Taguiloa, flicked her fingers against his cheek, wriggled her shoulders, clinked her bells once to let Linjijan know she was ready, stood waiting until the music changed.

JARIL GRINNED UP at Cathar. "This is it. Time to go."

"Right." He looked over his shoulder. "Duran, go get the others," Back to Jaril. "The guards?"

"Dead. Gate's open. Downpour out, so there's nobody much about. We have to get to the lake, but that shouldn't be a problem; Yaril and me, we can take care of just about anything that pops up. All you and the rest need to do is follow us."

"Good enough. Duran's going to be handling one boat with me. Farra and Fann will take the other. Boats are ready?"

"Well, we wouldn't be here now, if they weren't."

"Didn't mean to insult you, just nerves."

"Yeah. Get a good hold of 'em, it's a long hairy walk to the lake."

With Uncle Idadro gagged and supported by Camm and Theras, Duran and Reanna giving their shoulders to Callim, the Arth Slyans followed Jaril out of the compound. Cathar closed the gates and put the bar in place with Garrag's help, then joined with him to act as rear guard. Garrag was a woodcarver who'd puttered about in the workshop without doing much, telling himself he was doing it to fool the Censor who was in each day to check on them, but he was a man who couldn't stand idleness, he had, to do something with his hands, even if it was only whittling. He'd found a short length of seasoned oak in the supply bin and shaped it into a long lethal cudgel. Though the chisels and other tools were counted and taken away every night, the Censor and his minions didn't bother with the wood. He carried that cudgel now and walked grim-faced beside Cathar, short-sighted eyes straining through the gray sheets of rain.

They moved through the rain along a twisting service path toward the main gate, the only way out of the Palace grounds. Yaril flew ahead, scouting for them, Jaril walked point, leading them through the maze of paths and shrub-bery, past the stables of the dapples, past the echelons of slave quarters, into the gardens before the gate, deserted gardens with gardener and guard alike inside out of the miserable weather; even the hunting cats loosed at night were snuggled away out of the wet. They came close to one of these lairs where a malouch lay dozing. Cathar and Gan-ag spun around to face the charge of the large black beast, but light streaked between them and the malouch, wound in a firesnake about the beast, sent him in a spin-ning tumbling yowling struggle to rid himself of the length of burn searing his hide.

He went whining off into the darkness and the light streak was once more a blue gray mistcrane flying precariously through the rainy gusts, predator eyes searching the foliage for other dangers.

HARRA STOOD POSED, listening to the whistles and applause and shouted suggestions, trying to ignore most of it. Spoiled young brats, many of them the prime sons of the meslars and magistrates here in Audurya Durat. She broke her pose, bowed and ran into the relative quiet behind the screens. "Louts," she muttered.

Taguiloa dropped a hand on her shoulder. "They like you and want you back."

"Hah. They'd like anything in skirts, especially if she took them off. She grimaced, pasted a smile on her face, stepped into the light, bowed, retreated again. "You're going to have a job getting them back, Taga; they haven't the sense to know what they're seeing. Godalau grant the Meslar has and does." She stripped off the gold hoops and the finger hells, laid them on the table, stood rubbing her hands together.

Taguiloa listened to the whistles and shouts that showed little sign of tapering off, knowing all too well what he'd have to face. It was a gamble sending Harra out to dance before this herd of spoiled youth, but he needed the rest time after the comic dance. He moved away to the food table the Hand had set up for them, poured some water and drank a few sips, just enough to wet his mouth, watched as Harra drank more greedily then dipped her fingers in the water and sprinkled it across her face. Out-side, Linjijan was playing a lyrical invention of his own with Negomas delicately fingering his drums to produce a soft singing accompaniment, their skill almost drowned by the noise of the watchers. Harra sighed, took up her daroud, frowned. "You want me to stay here so that won't go on even more?"

"No. I can get 'em. Go on out. I need you there."

She nodded, wiped her hands on the cloth laid out by the house steward, threw the cloth down, went

around the back end of the screen and settled herself as inconspicuously as she could beside Negomas, ignoring the flare-up of noise that only stopped at a sharp tap of the gong at Maratullik's elbow. She picked up the beat and fit herself into the music, then helped it change into the sharp dissonances and throbbing hard beats of Taguiloa's dance music.

Taguiloa shivered his arms, sipped at the air, closed his eyes and once again played over in his mind his first tumbling run and the dance moves immediately after; he'd be moving at speed, carried on the music, going faster and faster until he was at the edge of his ability to control his body. He tapped the small gong to let them know he was ready, shook himself again, then listened for the music that would lift him into his final dance.

* * *

JARIL CAME TROTTING back to the clump of trees where the Arth Slyans huddled in the cold soggy darkness. "We've eased the slave portal open. Yaril's keeping watch on the guards, but they've got themselves some mulled cider and are more interested in that than what's outside the windows. Keep quiet and move real slow. We don't want to have to kill these guards, we don't know when they're going to be relieved or what would happen if the next set found them dead. Be better if the alarm doesn't go up till the morning, better for Brann and better for you all. Follow me and keep in the shadows, I don't want you even breathing hard, and when we get out stay hugging the wall until we're far enough away from the guard towers it won't matter if they see us. Got that? Good. Come on.

They followed the child through the shrubbery; the storm wind covering any noises they made, tension winding higher and higher in them all until Cathar wanted to shout and break things and knew the rest were feeling much the same. They had to cross a small open space before they reached the narrow gate set within the larger one. Jaril didn't stop but went skimming across the gravel, his feet making almost no sound at all. Cathar watched the thin line of his folk move after the boy and winced at every crunch of their feet. He waited until the last were through then followed Garrag across the gravel, his back knotted with expectation of shouts or spears hurled at him. He was almost disappointed when nothing happened and he was through the portal and walking along the massive white wall fronting the palace grounds. Jaril brushed by him, passed back through the portal. Over his shoulder, Cathar watched the door swing shut, then saw a patch of light ooze through the wood, coalesce into the boy. Jaril ran past him, waving him on impatiently, no time to indulge curiosity now. Cathar moved his shoulders and grinned, then shifted into an easy lope to catch up with the others. Slya bless, what a pair they are. He looked at the nearly invisible mistrane flying above them, the pale boy-form leading them. Slya bless.

A moment later Jaril led them across the avenue and along one of the stubby piers. Two sailboats were set up and ready at the far end. Working as quickly as they could, Cathar and his brother, Farra and her sister Fann got the others settled into the boats, the sails raised, the lines cast off. The water was choppy, the wind difficult and the rain didn't help, but once they got away from the shore, that rain served to conceal them from anyone watching. Then the escape became a matter of enduring wet and cold and keeping the boats from capsizing. The mistranes flew with them guiding them until they were half-way across the lake, then one of them went ahead to take care of the guards at the outlet into the Palachunt.

When Cathar eased his boat into the outcurrent, the guard towers shone as brightly as usual with the huge lamps that spread their light out across the river until there were no dark patches for smugglers or troublemakers to slip past. He chewed on his lip, but the mistrane that guided them flew serenely on so he tried to relax and trust the children. A flicker of darkness sweeping past him, then there were two mistranes sailing the clouds above them. No shouts from the towers, no stones catapulted at them. Slya bless, what a pair.

They circled a number of moored merchanters, tricky sailing in the dark and storm, with the river's current both a help and a hindrance, then the cranes blurred into shimmering spheres of light hanging about the masts of a small ship moored away from the others.

When they came alongside that ship, a broad solid man, a panday with a clanking gold ornament dangling from one ear, leaned over the rail and tossed Cathar a rope. "Welcome friend," he called down. "Tik-rat, get those nets overside."

* * *

TACUILOA WHEELED ACROSS the matting, sprang off into a double twisting backflip, swung round and dropped onto his hands as he landed, used the slap of his hands on the mat to power him back onto his feet, then went on one knee in a low bow, the music behind him breaking as suddenly into silence.

Silence from the watchers, then a burst of applause, calls for more, more. But Taguiloa was exhausted, not even sure he could stand yet. He stayed in the bow, his arms outstretched at first then folded on his knee.

Maratullik touched the gong beside him and the applause faded to silence. He leaned forward. "A remarkable performance." He watched as Taguiloa got heavily to his feet and bowed again from the waist, acknowledging the compliment. For him at that moment, the Meslar was little more than a paper figure, unreadable, a mask that might have anything behind it, something a smooth voice came from, saying pleasant things. "Most remarkable. My compliments, dancer. Come here, if you please."

Taguiloa stumbled forward, exaggerating his weariness though not by much, wondering what was coming next.

"Accept this poor recompense for the pleasure you have given my young friends." With a sweeping gesture, Maratullik brought round a heavy leather purse and held it out, smiling at the roars and applause from the benches.

Taguiloa dropped to one knee in a profound obeisance. "Godalau bless your generosity, saõ jura Meslar."

"Introduce your troupe, Hina, they too deserve our thanks."

Was he preening himself before the sons of his peers or was he after something else. Paper figure making gestures? He was pleasing those louts if the noise was any measure of their feelings. Taguiloa stood slowly, holding the purse before him. "Linjjan. Hina, flute player, the second best in Silili, the first being his great-uncle the wondrous Ladjinau who plays for the dancer Blackthorn."

Nod from the Hand. Desultory applause from the benches.

"Negomas. M'darjin and drummer."

As before, a quiet nod from the Hand, a sprinkle of clapping from the youths.

"Harra Hazhani, Rukka-nag, dancer and daroudist."

Nod from the Hand. He scanned her face with some care but said nothing. Whistles and shouts from the benches that quieted as soon as Maratullik touched his gong.

"Brannish Tovah. Sujomann, seer and dancer."

Again Maratullik scanned her face, saying nothing, again he stopped the noise from the meslarlings when he tired of it. "My steward tells me the rain is heavy. Rooms will be provided for you to take your night's rest here. You may return to the Quarter come the morning." Without waiting for a response from Taguiloa, he turned to Brann. "You will please us yet more, oh seer, if you stay to read for us."

She lifted her head and stared at him coolly. Taguiloa held his breath. "Certainly, saO jura Meslar. If you will furnish a guard instructed to curb the enthusiasm of the overeager." Taguiloa let his breath trickle slowly out; this response fit within the margins of proper behavior though barely so. Brann, oh Brann, oh Bramble-all-thorns, re-member who this is and why you're here.

"You suggest ..."

"Nothing, Sao jura Meslar. I warn. My god is jealous of my person and prone to hasty acts."

"Ah yes. I know something of the Sujomanni. Which of their gods is yours?"

"The Hag with no name, saõ jura Meslar. She who spins the thread of fate."

"Thus your calling. Most fitting." He looked from bench to bench, quiet now except for some muttering, and moved his lips in a neat and mirthless smile. "We will forgo the readings, seer. This night. Perhaps another time would be more propitious."

"Your will is mine, saõ Jura Meslar." She bowed and stood silent, waiting with the others for their dismissal.

"Would it were so, Sujomann." He struck the gong and the steward came forward to lead them out.

WORKING SWIFTLY and with a vast good humor, the crew got the Arth Slyans stowed below deck.

The flight through the palace grounds and across the lake had used up the better part of three hours and even the fittest among the escapees was cold, weary and soaked to the skin. Rubbed down and dressed in dry clothing, hoisted into hammocks, wrapped in blankets, swaying gently as the ship hoisted anchor and started downriver, all tension drained from them, warm and comfortable, most of them drifted into a deep sleep.

Cathar was too restless to sleep. He tumbled out of his hammock and made his way back on deck. The masts were bare except for a small triangle of sail; the shipmaster was taking her away from her mooring as silently and inconspicuously as he could. Trying to keep out of the way of sailors passing back and forth along the deck, uneasy about his footing, wind and rain beating against his back, Cathar groped along the rail to the bow where the Panday stood staring into the gloom. He touched the man's arm. "Shipmaster?"

The Panday turned a stone-god face to him, a sternness in it that eased a little when he saw who it was. Even with that easing he didn't look very welcoming, his words underlined his dislike for mudfeet wandering about his deck. "You'll be more comfortable below. Brann's brother. Cathar, is it? Right. Soon as we're around that bend ahead we'll be racing. No place for passengers then."

"Why isn't Brann here?"

"Your sister has proper reasons for everything she does; leave her to them. She got you out, I'll get you home, that's enough. You'll see her when she's ready. Look, Cathar, it's three days coming up the Palachunt and usually two days going down for a shipmaster who gives his ship the respect she deserves. Us, we'll be racing the pigeon mail and taking chances that turn my hair white thinking of 'em. If we can make the mouth by noon this coming day, there's no way in this world the Temuengs can get word to the fort there in time to stop us. But, lad, one thing we don't need is interference on, deck. You keep your folk below, you hear?"

"I hear. Why are you doing this?"

"She's our witch as much as she's your sister. Someday when I'm good and drunk maybe I'll tell you the tale."

"Witch?" Then he remembered Brann's face changing and looked away, uneasy at the thought.

"Below with you. Now." A strong hand closing on Cathar's shoulder, turning him. "Get."

BRANN STOOD at the glazed window seeing the gray curtains of the rain and the flicker of the single lamp cutting the darkness of the small room. A movement in the window mirror, the door opening. She stiffened then relaxed as Yaryl came in, small black-haired Hina urchin. He came across and leaned against her hip; neither of them spoke for a while then he began singing, his voice a burr that hardly stirred the air.

Mistcrane, mistcrane flying high
Through the gray and stormy sky,
Wounded moon sails high and white,
River races with the night.
Oh, the mistcrane's ghostly flight
Flitting phantoms never missed
From their greedy master's fist.
Mistcrane's flight is finished now,
Shipman answers to his vow,
Phantoms waking from their fright,
Laughing in the face of might
As the sun soars shining bright.
Turn the key
Set us free
Blessed be we
When home we see.

Brann sighed, moved from the window. "Mistcrane's flight might be finished but there's a fistful of other threads to tie off. Watch while I sleep, my friend. I trust the latches on these doors about as much as I trust the walls."

WITH A STRONG following wind augmenting the push of the current and a clear sky opening ahead of them as they left the storm behind, the little ship groaned and strained and flew down the river, Sammang, Jimm and Tik-rat watching the water as if it was a treacherous mount that would try to rub them from its back given half a chance. They raced from point to point, trusting memories from the trip upstream, taking impossible gambles and bringing them off as if Tungjii rode the bow scattering blessings before them.

They emerged with the dawn from the twisting chute through towering limestone cliffs into the broad triangle of wetlands sloping down to the coast. Sammang sent Tik-rat into the jib-boom stays to spot snags, took in sail until the ship's speed was reduced by half, put Hairy Jimm at the wheel and kept the crew hopping as he went carefully down that treacherous stretch winding through half-drowned trees whose stale stench clung so closely to the soupy greenish-brown water that he felt as if he were eating, drinking, breathing it along with the swarms of pinhead midges blown from the trees on the heavy erratic wind.

They left the trees about mid-morning and picked up speed along the broad main channel of the delta, skimming along between stretches of saw grass and stunted brush. The air immediately seemed cleaner and many degrees cooler. Sammang sighed and moved his shoulders, rubbed his back against the foremast to get a little of the stiffness out of the muscles there. Tik-rat came off the ropes: rubbing at tired eyes, groaning and grouching but cheerful. Sammang laughed at him, then sent him below to tell the Arth Slyans they could come on deck if they wanted, get some sun and fresh air. He watched the youth go bouncing away and knew there was going to be a song about this race, one he'd enjoy but have to suppress for a while at least if he wanted to keep trading in Silili. He laced his fingers behind his head and pushed, exploding out a sigh of pleasure as he pulled against the resistance and worked his muscles. One last knot to unravel. The fort at the river's mouth. He glanced up at the hot pallid sky thick with birds. None of them carrying mail, he was ready to swear that. A witch-summoned demon might beat them but he had strong doubts so powerful a magus could be found in time to make a difference; Temuengs tended to distrust and dispose of anyone with that much power. He yawned, nodded at Jimm and went to see if Leymas had fresh kaffeh in the pot.

TAGUILOA STARED out his window at the busy courtyard below, fingers tapping nervously on the sill. Brann was out in the market somewhere, set up for readings, keeping herself visible while Imperial guards stalked about turning the Quarter upside down as they searched for the escaped slaves. He hadn't seen her since the troupe went wearily up the stairs a little after sunset. He didn't want to see her. He liked her, she was easy enough to like, doing the best she could to piece together the ruins of her existence. Trouble was, he'd got so close to being set for life. A breath away from court. A breath! Easier to endure losing what he'd had no real chance of getting. But to get so close ... if it didn't happen, he wasn't quite sure how he'd handle himself. He left the window and began pacing about the room with the barely contained energy of a caged tiger. Imperial guards stumping through the quarter; he could hear the sounds of their progress drifting in on the wind. Rumors. Jassi brought a clutch of them with his breakfast tray. The escapees were twelve identical sisters who performed unnatural acts on each other while the emperor watched, the description of those acts growing more lurid with repetition. Or they were snake men with poison fangs the Emperor kept as a weapon to scare the meslars into doing what he told him and they were stolen by the meslars who were planning to assassinate the Emperor and he knew it and that was why he was so hot to get them back. Or they were a coven of witches of talents so wild no one agreed on what they could be, turning lead into gold, whipping up an elixir that guaranteed immortality, seers who could tell the Emperor everything that was happening in every corner of the Tigarezun. Rumors. None that connected Taguiloa and the others with the escape. Tungjii took Brann's

plot and made it better, bringing the rain clown on them so they were shut up in Maratullik's house for the whole night, impossible they could have any connection with the escape. His mind told him, be easy, the Hand knows where we were, he can't suspect us. His gut replied, that we're so clearly out of it might be just the thing to make him suspect us. He doesn't need proof to maul us about, all he needs is sufficient malice and a shred of suspicion. Taguiloa kicked a chair across the room, stalked after it and jerked the door open, startling a maid into dropping a pile of dirty towels. He gathered them up for her and sent her down to find him some sandwiches and a pot of tea.

"You're nervous as the fleas on a dead dog." Jassi set her fists on her hips after she deposited the tray on the table by the window, narrowed her eyes at him. "Negomas says last night went good, what you fussing about? This business with the slaves? Peh! Taga, that happens a half-dozen times a year. We spend a few days dodging damn guards, then they'll catch the running fools and things'll settle back the way they were. Hey, you know why they leaving this inn alone? Cause you here, that's why. Grandda he even had a thought maybe he'd let you stay here free, well, that one he din keep in his head for long." She giggled. "So you got nothin to worry about."

He dredged up a smile, flipped a silver bit to her. "Just nerves, Jass, it's the waiting and not knowing."

She winked at him. "No sweat, Taga, you got it. We see a lot of 'em here and we know." A giggle, a side-to-side jerk of her hips, and she was gone.

He pulled the door shut and went back to pacing, gulping down several cups of the strong steaming liquid as he paced. The hollow in his belly that spurred him into ordering the sandwiches had vanished before Jassi came in with the tray. Helpless, that's what he was, nothing he could do to change what was going to happen; he couldn't remember feeling this helpless since the day four-year-old Taga drifted lost in an angry ocean clutching a ship's timber, sure nobody would ever find him.

THE FORT'S MAIN tower was a dark gray thumb thrusting into the sky. Sammang stood in the bow glaring at it when he wasn't scanning the water for the constantly shifting sandbars that were the plague of the coast along here. The Arth Slyans were below decks again, out of sight and out of the way. They crept closer to the fort. The sun was a hammer beating down, the glare from the water hard and bright, hiding the sand until they were almost on it, until it was almost too late to avoid jamming the ship into the soft sucking traps. They crept along, feeling their way through the water. The fort was silent. No one on the walls, no challenges. The ship came even with the dark mass. Silence. Hot, limp, cataleptic. They slid past into the deeper water, the brownish stain from the outflow vanishing into the blue of the open sea. Sammang drew his arm across his face, slapped at the rail. "Turrope, Rudar, 'Reech, get those sails up."

* * *

MID-AFTERNOON. A knock. He smoothed his hair down, composed his face, walked with slow controlled steps to the door and pulled it open.

Jassi grinned at him. "He downstairs again. That slave." She tapped at Taguiloa's arm. "Din I tell you?"

He cleared his throat. "Tell him I'm meditating, but I'll be down in a breath."

"I give him a jar of the good stuff. He happy. No sweat." She giggled. "You come down 'f you want, but he din ask to see you. He give me this."

Lead seals clanked dully at the ends of the red ribbon tied about the roll of parchment. He steadied his hand, lifted the roll until he could see the pattern squeezed into the lead. "The Emperor's sigil," he said softly. "Maratullik's man you said?"

"Yeah, I said. You gonna read that?"

Taguiloa smiled. "I am gonna read it." He carried the scroll to the window, rubbed the ribbon off, hitched his hip on the sill and flattened the parchment on his thigh. After skimming through the elaborately brushed signs, he started at the top and read it again. His name. The names of the others in the troupe. Horses. Wagon. Props. All listed. Commanded to appear before the Emperor and his consort two nights hence. Under the name **PLAYERS OF THE LEFT HAND**. They were further commanded to move next day into the rooms provided in meslak Maratullik where they would be the Emperor's resident

company. He set his hand on the notice, grinned at Jassi. “Com-mand performance. Before the Emperor.”

She slapped her hand on her thigh. “Din I tell you, din I? din I?”

“That you did, jass. Tell Papa Jao to lay on a feast tonight. Everyone in the inn and all the players in the Quarter you can fit at the tables. Scoot.”

He watched her swing out laughing and excited, shout-ing the good news as she clattered down the stairs, then frowned at the parchment. He had no intention of spending the rest of his life in this dead-alive steambath of a city. Breaking loose would take some tricky maneuvering, though. He couldn’t just pick up and leave. Seshtrango send the man boils on his butt and a plague of worms. He sighed. Brann and Harra would have to get to Maratullik somehow, change his mind. Or ... well, that’s for later. Maybe he’s not so hot to keep hold of us, just wants something to distract the Emperor from the way his secu-rity chief had lost a clutch of slaves. The troupe was a toy to dangle in front of him. Brann, do I owe this to you like all the rest? He tossed the parchment roll on the table and settled himself into a corner of the room to do his breath-ing exercises and meditate himself back into the calm he needed to handle what was happening.

ANOTHER LATE AFTERNOON. The troupe turns onto the lakefront avenue, this time passing through the gates of Maratullik’s meslak. Guards before, guards behind, slave on a cranky white mule. Lake water turned hard and bright as sapphire shards, the sun burning hot in a cloud-less sky. Rumbling past slaves trotting on late errands who cringe into the walls and watch the procession nimble along. Air burning in Taguiloa’s throat, catching there when Cymanacamal rumbles and belches a gout of steam .. The walls, the stone blocks of the paving creak beneath and around him. No wind, the latening day is so still every sound is a slap against his ears. Ominously still, once the noise of the mountain’s stirring has subsided. Premonition sits like an ulcer in his belly. He tells himself it is pre-performance jitters. This is perhaps the most important performance of his life, not because he will be dancing before the Emperor—he has few illusions about the qual-ity of the Emperor’s appreciation and a deep-seated Hina resentment of all Temuengs, especially those in positions of power—it is important because it will determine the course of the rest of his life. He sits with the reins draped loosely through his fingers letting the cob pick his own pace, a willed nay-saying in his head. Nothing is going to go wrong, disaster will not happen, nothing happened in the Hand’s house before that crowd of louts, nothing will happen when they perform before a court certain to be better mannered. Brann riding in front of the cob, Jaril perched behind her, Yaril-hound running beside her, her dun is restive, jerking his head about, drawing his black lips back, baring long yellow teeth. Harra riding beside the wagon, strain showing on her face. Nay-saying again, he will not see that strain, will not look at her again. Linjijan sitting up for once, fingering his practice flute, shifting continually. Even Linjijan the self-absorbed is restless and uneasy. About what? He will not think about Linjijan.

The palace gates open to take them in.

AN UNDERSTEWARD led them to a room opening off the audience hall where they would be performing and left them to get ready after telling Taguiloa that the hall was being prepared as he requested, matting on the floor, low stools for the musicians, a screened-off area to retire be-hind when one or the other of them wasn’t on stage.

There were screens here also, set up at the far end of the long narrow room, dressing rooms of a sort. Along one wall two coppers of hot water simmered on squat braziers with soft white cloths heaped high on small tables beside the braziers, fine white porcelain basins beside the towels. Taguiloa smiled as Brann went immediately to the basins, ran her fingers over them hunting makermarks. Against the other wall, nearer the door, a long low table with pots of tea, wine jugs, fingerfood in elaborate array. Runners of braided, reed taking the chill off the stone floor, a scatter of plump silk pillows. The Hand must have enthused wildly about them.

Brann felt a touch of pleasure in Taguiloa’s evident delight, a touch of satisfaction at this indication of the troupe’s high repute, but pleasure and satisfaction drained rapidly out of her as had all feeling since

her folk left with Sammang, except for an occasional twinge of uneasiness when she thought of what slept within her. She sang to it at night, Sleep Slya Slya sleep, Yongala dances dreams for you, and hoped the god would sleep until Brann took them both back to the slopes of Tinreal. In spite of the lethargy that seized on her the past three days, she'd struggled to present her usual face to the world, grateful to Taguiloa and the others for giving direction to her life when every other purpose had been stripped from her. Having to stay with the troupe and perform with them meant it would be a while longer before she had to make painful decisions about what she was going to do with the rest of her life, it was an interlude when she could relax, enjoy the approval of audiences, the friendship of Taguiloa, Harra and Negomas and the comforting indolence of Linjijan, and let life flow about her undisturbed and unexamined.

She stripped, took the dance robe Jaril handed her, and wriggled into it, smoothed it down over her breasts and hips, enjoying the slide of the silk against her skin, pleased by the way it clung and showed off the body beneath. "I'm getting very vain," she told Jaril, giggled at the face he made.

Taguiloa dressed quickly, pulling on a crimson silk body suit, tied a broad gold sash about his waist, began spread-ing the white paint over his face.

A commotion at the door. He turned toward the cur-tained arch, smoothing the white onto the back of one hand and between his fingers.

The drape billowed violently. A tall thin girlchild stalked in, followed by a seven-foot guard. Three steps in, she stopped and looked around with arrogant inquisitiveness. Hot yellow eyes landed on Taguiloa. "I am Ludila Dondi," she said, "sister of the Consort."

He bowed. "Damasatirajan."

She stared at him as if she expected more from him, but he felt safer silent so he continued to wait, mute as the huge guard who stayed half a pace behind her.

She brushed past him, took up the jar of facewhite, poked her finger in it, then wiped the finger on the wall, dropped the jar without bothering about where it fell. By luck it landed upright on one of the pillows; annoyed but forced to keep silent, Taguiloa caught up the jar and set it back on the table, stood watching as Ludila Dondi saun-tered about the room, poking and prying into everything. She slapped a heavy hand on a drumhead, ignored the alarm on Negomas' face as she beat harder and harder on the skin, laughing at the booms she produced. Negomas bit his lip and said nothing, but his brown eyes were eloquent. She gave the drum a kick, he caught it as it toppled and scowled after her as she strolled to Harra. "Are you the seer?" She put her hands on narrow hips and scanned Harra from head to toe with insolent thoroughness.

"No, damasaorajan."

"I am the Dondi, ketcha." She turned slowly, glaring about the room. "Where's the seer? I want the seer."

Brann stepped around the screen and bowed, antipathy sitting sour on her stomach. When she straightened, she watched the Dondi's face change. The Temueng girl felt it too. Hate at first glance. She was very young, long thin arms, long thin legs, black hair hanging loose, elaborate earrings in long-lobed ears, small mirrors bound in silver. A mix of some sort. Ternueng plus something else. And dangerous, for all that she was a child. She was empow-ered. Warning plucked at Brann's nerves, then she felt the god stirring in her and forgot everything else. No, she thought fiercely, no you don't, you don't ruin Taga's life.—No! She drew in on herself, pushing the god-force flat.

The Dondi walked around her, nostril lifted in a sneer. "You real or fake?"

"I am an entertainer, oh sabr the Dondi." Brann was pleased but rather surprised at how cool and controlled she sounded. "Which would you prefer?"

The Dondi prowled about her with awkward adolescent ferocity, tugging at Brann's hair, pinching her breast, pok-ing a finger into her stomach, drawing a hand down the curve of her hip, treating her like an animal on the block. Brann felt no anger, only a deeper and more intense loathing.

Bored with the lack of reaction, the Dondi stepped back. "Prophecy, oh seer."

"Certainly, satir the Dondi." Brann lifted her arms, pressed her hands together to make a shallow bowl. "Place your hand on mine, please."

"Which hand?"

“Whichever you choose, Sit& the Dondi. The choosing is part of the reading.”

The Dondi looked at her hands, started to extend the right toward Brann, then snatched it back. “Nol” She wheeled and stalked from the room, followed by the mute guard.

Brann shivered and looked sick.

Taguiloa came to her, touched her shoulder with his unpainted hand. “What was that about?”

“I don’t know.” Brann shuddered. “I think she was just curious. Or sniffing at us to see what we were.” She went silent for a breath or two. “I shouldn’t have come here, Taga. Should have sprained my ankle or something.”

“Couldn’t do that. Not with Maratullik breathing down your neck.” He soothed her, though he agreed with her, wishing he’d thought of it himself, but he didn’t want anxiety tightening her muscles and perverting her timing. “Make them drool, Bramble, make them pant for what they can’t get, make them forget you’re anything but a woman.”

She shook her head, laughed. “All right. All right, Taga. I get the message.”

“Good.” He went back to the table and began smooth-ing the white paint over his other hand.

* * *

BRANN’S DANCE went well, no one jumping up to denounce the fire as demon-bred or accuse her of running off with imperial slaves. Applause when she finished was enough to show some interest but not great enthusiasm. Taguiloa relaxed as the dance went on, satisfied that the Dondi’s visit was an aberration, not an indication that anyone here had serious questions about them. One thing bothered him. It was a dead house, Temuengs were sitting like stumps out there, barely could stir up a flash of response. He rubbed at the nape of his neck. Just meant more work, that was all.

The audience hall was a huge barrel-vaulted room, large enough to hold the Quarter’s market square and have space left over; hundreds of glass and gold lamps were clustered along the walls and hanging on gilded chains from the ridge of the vault, swinging slightly in the drafts, painting a constantly shifting web of shadow on the floor and on the forms of those seated about the dance mat, from the look of the crowd; most of the meslar lords in Durat. Royal Abanaskranjinga sat on a carved and gilded throne on a dais a double-dozen steps above the floor, behind him a carved and gilded screen. Taguiloa caught glimpses of dark figures moving behind the screen, proba-bly the Emperor’s wives and concubines and some of his older children. His present Consort sat six steps below him, her head even with his knees. On a cushion by her feet was a young boy, a stiff, determined look on his round *face*; no more than four or five, he was the chosen heir at present, the favorite among old Krajing’s many sons. Clos-est to the dais were none of the meslars, but a number of dark-clad Temuengs with the same mix in them as in the Dondi, behind them a clutch of men and women wearing heavy brown robes with cowls pulled forward so their faces were hidden in shadow.

TACUILOA FINISHED his clown dance and bowed, avoiding the Emperor’s hungry black eyes, eyes that caressed him, seemed to devour him. During the dance the Emperor had laughed and slapped his thigh, bent and whispered in his Consort’s ear. Hungry, hungry eyes. No wonder Maratullik wanted a distraction to take the Emperor’s gaze off him. Taguiloa bowed again and ran behind the screen.

Brann brought him a cup of tea and a towel. “It’s going well,” she whispered.

Han-a came behind the screen for her hoops and fingerbells. “It’s going well,” she whispered, then looked from one to the other as they broke into hastily stifled Ogees. “Fools,” she said amiably, and turned to wait for her cue, clinking the small gong to let Linjijan and Negomas know she was ready.

Taguiloa sipped at his tea and gazed at Brann. She was wound so tight that another turn would shatter her. He kicked a pillow across to her, sat beside her. After a moment he closed his hand over hers. It was damp and cold and oak-hard. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I don’t. It’s like the air is pressing in on me. Not jitters exactly, I don’t know.” Silence awhile. They sat quietly listening to the music, the scrape of Harra’s feet, the clink of her bells. “Who are those brownrobes?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m frightened, Taga.”

He patted her hand but said nothing. Reassuring lies wouldn't do here, he was too disturbed himself. He'd awakened the Emperor from his torpor and wrung laughter from him; he had a sense of approval flowing from the audience, but all the responses out there were just a hair off, nothing he could put his hand on, nothing he could ignore either. He was elated with his success and furious he couldn't enjoy it without this other thing niggling at him.

The music stopped. A ripple of applause. Harra came stalking behind the screen, moving with frustrated ferocity, stripping the bells from her fingers, the hoops from her arms. "They're half dead out there. I'd rather yestereve's louts." Setting the bells and hoops on a table with angry precision, she went scowling to the tea-table. She poured herself a bowl, gulped it down, poured another. "That was not an experience I want to repeat." She sighed and sipped, then lifted the bowl in a mock toast. "Luck to your feet, Taga. You'll need it." She shivered, set the bowl down. "Time to get back out there."

He felt the growing deadness of the audience when he wheeled out. It dragged at him, drained his energy. As if the black Temueng eyes and the yellow eyes of the mixes were mouths pressed against his flesh, consuming him as he danced for them. He forced himself to go on though his limbs felt leaden and his edge was gone. He pulled in, took fewer chances, and even then felt he danced on the rim of a precipice.

The music changes.

Taguiloa falters. Covers. Tries to go on.

A hot force takes his body, moves his feet in a complex pattern across the dance mat.

A rumbling in the ground below the palace.

The lamps sway and flicker.

The shadows dance in broken webs across the floor and the faces of the silent watchers.

Brann comes from behind the screen, dances toward him, her feet moving as his feet move. Her hair is white and shifting about her head as if windblown, though the air is heavy, thick, still.

Her face is strained and pale. She moves with a stiff resistance that matches his own, moves into the dance with him, weaving a pattern about and through the pattern he is weaving.

Moving gets easier for both of them. The—music grows wilder and wilder. The walls groan.

The Temuengs sit frozen.

Abanaskranjinga shifts about on his throne, tries to stand, beats his meaty fists on the throne arms.

The dance goes on, inexorable as the passage of seconds into minutes, minutes into hours.

The Consort struggles to leave her chair, panting and squealing as her body fails—to answer her will.

Brann and Taguiloa touch and retreat, swing away from each other, swing back. Loop out, converge, dance wheeling away.

The brownrobes shrink together, a mud-geyser surging and bubbling, heads bobbing up and down, throats throwing out a whining moan that is barely louder than the music. They struggle to escape, tugging and pulling at the forces binding them, but they cannot. Like flies in honey they cannot pull away.

The drums beat louder. Louder. LOUDER.

Negomas fierce and frightened, half lost in the music, his long black hands stroking and beating, working as if they belong to someone else.

The flute sings harsh, piercing dissonances that tug painfully at the rolling rumble, of the drums, denying its singing nature, screaming its pain. Linjijan sways, eyes closed, entirely bound into his music.

Han-a slaps chords and runs from the daroud, her eyes wild, white-ringed, her mouth pulled back and down.

The sound builds and builds, filling the hall, melding with the moans of the watchers, the rage-squeals and growls from the Emperor and those around him.

The walls sway and groan.

The floor slides back and forth.

Brann's feet come down solid and steady. She circles Taguiloa. Sweat runs down his face. His eyes have a glazed sheen. He touches her hand. His flesh is cold and damp. He swings away.

Flute shrieks, drum goes toom-toom, daroud jangles. The music stops.

Sudden silence.

Slya streams forth from Brann, takes form in the center of the mat.

Gasps, sighs, a wind of sighs passing around the room.

The great red figure stood planted on the mat, wisps of smoke from the smoldering cloth rising about legs like mountain pines, coiling up around the lavish fiery female form. One pair of arms crossed beneath her high, round breasts, the second set curved out as if to gather in all those about the throne, her hot red eyes glared at the Emperor.

“MINE,” she roared and the building shook some more. “YOU DARE PUT YOUR STINKING HANDS ON MY PEOPLE. YOU MESS WITH SLYA FIREHEART. ME!” She reached out and out, fingers extending and extending, two arms reaching, four arms reaching, fingers long and longer, gathering in the brownrobes and the Temueng mixes, three to a handful, ignoring the banes they cast at her, plagues and poisons, cast-fire and demon familiars, all the Kadda power and Kadda skills their unnaturally ex-tended parasitic lives had given them. “ME! ME! YOU ATTACK ME!” She squeezed. Stench of roasting flesh and burning cloth, shrieks, blood and other body fluids oozing between her fingers, raining onto the floor and those remaining. She flung the mess aside and started to reach again.

A round bald figure in dusty wrinkled black was sud-denly there, pushing the long fingers aside. Tungjii patted the back of the huge red hand, grinned up at the ominous figure. “Not the boy, little darling, not the boy.”

Slya glared at him, hair stirring like serpents about her head. Then, (Brann astonished, Taguiloa wearily apprecia-tive) the raking fingers shrank; red eyes rolling, red teeth showing in a broad grin, Slya patted the double god on hisser plump buttocks. In a voice like the groaning of a mountain, she said, “SINCE YOU ASK IT, TUTI.”

Huge face returning to a savage scowl, she turned her hot red gaze on Abanaskranjinga. “YOU!” Her voice the howling of a storm wind, the roar of a forest fire. “YOU FOOL, BELIEVING KADDA PROMISES.” One hand closed about him. She squeezed. His hoarse scream broke off abruptly though his arms and legs continued to writhe even after his body fluids began to drip on the marble steps. “HAH! LARDARSE, ATTACKING ME!”

Brann wrapped her arms about her legs, dropped her head on her knees, relieved in a way to have the waiting over, drowning in a vast lassitude; she wanted to stretch out on the mat and sleep and sleep and never wake.

Taguiloa sat on his heels breathing hard, watching the flame-red giant drop the squashed mass of the Emperor of Tigarezun, ruler of Temueng and Hina, a mess of charred meat, bone and slime. That’s it then. I gambled and lost. He managed a tired smile as he saw Linjijan gaping at the god: even Linji understood his life was being trampled under those large but shapely red feet.

Slya flung the body of the consort aside and ripped the screen from behind the throne. She winnowed through the women and children trapped there in the spell woven by the dance and the music, plucking out and crushing some, brushing others aside.

Tungjii caught up the weeping boy and carried him over to Taguiloa and Brann. Heesh lowered hisself to the tattered mat and sat placidly watching the god hunting down her enemies, squashing and roasting them, his eyes filled with sardonic amusement, cheering her on with broken murmurs.

Slya raked immaterial fingers through the palace and extended them until they swept garden and stable, search-ing out and pulling to her all the Kadda folk.

Cuddling the Heir against hisser plump bosom with one hand, Tungjii reached out with the other and stroked it over Brann’s silky hair, the touch warm and comforting. “One of ‘em’s going to get away,” heesh murmured. “That tricky little nit that came nosing about you. You better watch out for her.” Heesh stroked some more, hisser hand feeling like her mother’s, steady-ing, calming, understand-ing. “You want to know wh^y all this?”

Brann sighed, straightened her back and her cramping legs, looked round at himmer. “Yes.”

“Glemma, child. The Consort that was. She’s the rea-son. Ambitious. Got to be head oompah of the Kadda meld. Wanted more. Tried to tap the Fireheart ofCynatna-carnal. Ran into Slya who brushed her off like a pesky fly. Which embarrassed her and made her madder’n a cat in a sack. Made her think too. She teased old Krajink into marrying her and when she had him fast, she made him Kadda like her.

Happy enough to do it, old fool, thought he was going to live forever and be young and handsome while he was doing it. Brought the meld here. They tried again, all of them. Stung Slya, woke her up some. And Cynamacamal rumbled and shook and spouted some hot rock. Scared them. They wanted hostages to make red Slya behave. So she whispered into Krajink's ear and teased him into sending his armies to take Croaldhu and then round up the Arth Slyans and bring them here. She thought she could hide behind them when she tried again to drive Slya from Cynamacamal, then all the fire moun-tains. Thought she could make herself a god. Lot of lies told. People had to be convinced it was a good idea to bring the Slyans here. You heard most of those lies."

"And me?" Brann looked at the worn smiling face of the little god. "And the children?" She touched Yaril's pale blond head, then Jaril's. "Look at Slya, they can't do a thing against her, all the Kadda can do is die. Why all that happened?"

"The Kadda meld's a lot stronger'n it looks, little Bram-ble. Falling apart now because red Slya sneaked up on it, trapped it before it could get going. Glemma and her crew threw up barriers that blocked our friend when she tried to get into the palace and stomp them. They were more than she could handle without getting a jump on them, though if you ask Slya Fireheart, she'd deny any limit to her powers, claim she didn't act because she'd have to harm the silly little mortals clustered about the roots of Carnal." Tungjii chuckled. "We all have our pride, Bramlet. Anyway, she used you and my gifted friend here," he nodded at Taguiloa who listened angrily, but with inter-est, "to sneak her in past the barrier. Used you to spin the sticky web that caught the Kadda and kept them from uniting against her. Clever when she wants to be, our fiery dame."

Slya straightened, wiped her four hands down her na-ked sides, burning the ooze off them. Four hot red fists on her smooth hips, she looked around, smiled, and started to fade.

"No!" Brann leaped to her feet, enraged. "Not yet you don't." She caught hold of the god's leg, cried out as it seared her palm, but didn't let go. "No," she screamed. "You owe me. You can't run out like that. You owe me."

Slya looked down at her, made to brush her away. Again Tungjii caught Slya's hand. Heesh patted it, an affectionate scolding look on his round face. "Listen to her, sweeting. She's right, you know. You owe her a hearing."

The fiery fearsome god bridled like a girl the first time she came into mixed company after her passage rite. It was such a startling sight Brann almost forgot what she wanted to say. Almost forgot.

"The children," she cried as her anger came back. "Send them home. You're done with them. Why leave them away from kin and kind? They don't belong here. Send them home. And there's Taga and his troupe. Why ruin them? Why leave them to face the mess you made? You owe your triumph to us, Slya Fireheart. You used us. Make things right for us, or the world will know you are worse than the worst of the Kadda."

Slya spat a gout of fire that took out a section of wall. "WORLD? WHAT IS THE WORLD TO ME! NOTHING!"

"Am I nothing?"

Slya turned that fearsome red gaze on her, impersonal, indifferent, mildly angry. "YES."

Brann shuddered, drew a breath, closed her eyes a moment, searching for argument without much hope. "Then I'm your nothing," she shouted at the god. She waved a hand at the Temuengs beginning to stir about the fringes of the room. "Will you let them crush me? Will you let them laugh and say Slya lost half her chosen folk and let another dribble through her fingers?"

Slya looked thoughtful, then her red eyes brightened with a sly malice that turned Brann cold in spite of the heat radiating from the god. "TRUE." Voice like lava bubbling. "MY NOTHING." She looked around, her eyes lighting finally on Maratullik who was calmer than most, watching the destruction with an indifference equaling hers. A hot finger stabbed at him. "YOU! TOUCH MY NOTHING AND CAMAL WILL BURN YOU TO ASH, CAMAL WILL BURY YOU IN HOT STONE SO DEEP MAYFLY MORTALS WILL FORGET A CITY WAS EVER HERE." She stamped her foot. The walls groaned and the floor juddered beneath them. "THERE," she said complacently, and once again began to lose solidity.

“The children,” Brann shrieked at her, “and Taguiloa.”

Slya laughed, a high-pitched titter that cracked the walls. “I LIKE YOU LITTLE NOTHING. I MAKE YOU A BARGAIN. I OFFER YOU TWO CHOICES, YOU CHOOSE WHICH. EITHER I SEND THE CHILDREN HOME AND CHANGE YOU BACK AND FORGET ABOUT THE DANCER AND HIS FOLK, LET THEM STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE HOW THEY WILL, OR I PROTECT THE DANCER AND HIS FOLK FOR THE REST OF THEIR MAYFLY LIVES, TORCH ANYONE WHO TRIES TO HARM THEM AND I FORGET ABOUT YOU AND THE CHILDREN. CHOOSE, LITTLE NOTH-ING. WHICH WILL IT BE?”

Brann looked from Taga to Linji, Iarra, Negomas, to Yaril and Jaril crouching at her feet. Looked deep in the crystal eyes, remembering Yaril hunched and sad over the fire in the burnt-out storehouse when they were running from the Temuengs on Croaldhu, remembering the close-ness they’d shared, the times they’d rescued her, remembering also all the lives of men and beasts she’d taken to feed them, thinking of all the lives she’d have to take for them if they stayed. Looked again at Taga and the troupe, all of them in this mess because of her. Her responsibility. She lifted her eyes to the mighty figure rising high before her, writhing red hair brushing the ceiling lamps, a pleased smile showing the tips of square red teeth. She said she’d change me back. I could go home. The desire to be again what she had been at the start of summer, to be back among her folk, beginning her apprenticeship with her father, that desire raged in her, shouted at her. Back with her father, learning his craft, struggling to make a thing as fine as the das’n vuor pot and its hundred bowls. Her father. She could see his calm brown eyes gazing at her, affectionate, understanding, but implacable. She could hear him speaking to her, saying see your actions through, Bramble-all-thorns, what you have done you must answer for; I don’t want to see you if you abandon your friends. Sick and angry, she fisted her hands, forced her head up so she was staring into the shallow red gaze of the god. “Taguiloa,” she cried; she wanted to explain why, but she did not. “That’s my choice, let the children stay with me,” she finished and could say no more.

Slya laughed. Several lamps shattered and spilled their burning oil onto the sluggishly stirring meslars and their companions. “SO BE IT, LITTLE NOTHING. YOU OUT THERE HEAR ME, ANY OF YOU CONTEMPLATING HARM TO THESE FOLK OF MINE. I NAME THEM: TAGUILOA, HARRA HAZHANI, UNMAN, NEGOMAS. SEE THEM. HEAR THIS ALSO: CONTEMPLATE OR CAUSE HARM TO THEM AND YOU BURN. SO ...

She ran her red gaze over the Temuengs, stared a long moment at the Hand, moved on to a magistrate trying to straighten his tangled robes. He had just time to look up, startled, then he was a torch hot enough to melt the stone beneath his feet, ash and cinders a second later in a puddle of congealing stone.

Slya laughed. More lamps broke and a pillar cracked. She stretched her four arms, yawned, melted into nothing.

Tungjii calmed the wailing child heesh held on his knee, set him down and beckoned to Maratullik. “Take your new emperor and serve him well, Hand. He’s your luck now, make the most of him. His fortunes and yours are paired.” Heesh grinned at the calm-faced Ternueng. “Enjoy yourself, web spinner.”

Maratullik permitted himself a small tight smile, took the boy’s hand and led him away.

Tungjii rolled onto his feet, patted Taguiloa’s head. ““You too, Taga. Enjoy yourself.” Over his shoulder, he called to Maratullik, “Web spinner, you better believe Slya means what she says.” Heesh chuckled. “She likes to burn things, you know.” The chuckle lingering behind him, heesh faded into nothing.

Brann looked down at her charred palm already pink with new skin, then at the space where Tungjii had been. “That old fox.” She glared at Taguiloa. “I am so damn tired of jerking through the sneaky plots of every damn god around. I am so damn tired of being lied to and kicked around and having no idea what’s really going on. Haaah! Tungjii!”

Taguiloa nodded absently, his eyes following Maratullik. “I told you, Bramble, heesh is the family patron.”

Maratullik was busy talking in a low voice with several of his minions, sending them scurrying on

errands, watch-ing with cold amusement as the other meslars crept away from the hall, hurrying to get away from the destruction and begin their own machinations. As soon as a Hina nursemaid led the child-emperor off, he walked over to Taguiloa. “You’ve made things interesting, Hina.”

Taguiloa shrugged.

“You’ll keep a still tongue about it. You and your troupe.”

“Why not. If it’s to my profit.”

“Don’t count too much on your fire-breathing patron. If you prove too troubling a nuisance, someone will find a way to remove you.”

Taguiloa smiled at him. “Want to state that a bit more directly?” He laughed. “Don’t threaten me, Hand.” He moved his shoulders, straightened his back feeling as if he’d cast off a worn and cramping garment. “Hear me, Temueng. I don’t give shit about you or your games. I’m a player, not a courtier. What I want is to go back to Silili with the Emperor’s Sigil so I can do the kind of dances I want before the fools who think that Sigil means something.”

“You’re insolent, Hina.”

“Yes, saõ jura Meslar.” Taguiloa drawled the honorifics until they turned into insult.

“You really don’t care, do you.”

“No.”

“You could use your protection to wield a lot of power, Hina.”

“I don’t want a thing you want, Temueng.”

Maratullik narrowed his eyes. “Oddly enough, I think I believe you. I don’t understand you, but I believe you.” He beckoned a guard to him. “Get some slaves and see they pack up the players’ things, then take an empushad and escort them to my house; see them settled in.” He cut off the guard’s response, turned back to Taguiloa. “Get out of here now. Get out of Durat by sundown tomorrow.”

“With pleasure. The sigil?”

“I’ll have the patent delivered to you before you leave, Anything else? Another way I can serve you?” There was a warning in the clipped words, the Hand had been pushed about as far as he was willing to go.

“What about a barge and an empushad of imperial guards to keep us safe going south?”

Maratullik ground his teeth together, his face got red, breath snorted through his nose. He couldn’t speak, he opened his mouth, a grating sound came out.

Taguiloa laughed. “Never mind. Just wondering. We’ll take care of ourselves.” He turned and sauntered out, the others trailing silently, contentedly, behind him, the guard bringing up the rear of the procession. Harm had slipped on her finger bells and after a few steps started up a jaunty beat, whistling a tune to match it, turning their exit into a triumphal march.

6. Moving On

BRANN GAVE THE POT a final burnishing and set it in its velvet nest; she closed the lid and eased the flat little hook into its eye. Have to tell Chandro to drop this off at Perando for me. She smiled. Sailing man, like my Sammang, like another few I’ve known. I’ve definitely got a weakness for them, these sailing men. She looked up as she heard the squawk of an albatross dipping low over the ship. Yaril commenting on something, probably another ship. Hope it’s not trouble out of Silili. Couldn’t be, not yet, they won’t have sorted out the mess in the Tekora’s palace yet. She slid down in the chair until her neck rested on the top slat, swung her feet onto the table and crossed her ankles, lay stretched out contemplating the ceiling beams, dis-missing the recent events in Silili, thinking about her quest and its end. A strange time that was. Gods and mortals jostling and elbowing each other, all wanting some-thing different, getting in each other’s way, scattering lies like seeds at spring planting, nothing exactly what it seemed.

The ship heeled over suddenly, the chair tottered and fell, dumping her onto the floor. She scrambled to her feet and rushed to the table, caught the box before it tumbled off. “That was close. Sandbar, I suppose, they come and go round here. What Yaril was yammering about more than likely.” She stroked

her hand across the smooth lacquer. “Into the chest with you.”

She tucked the box into the heavy seachest at the foot of the bed, got dressed, went out to hunt down the cook and get something to fill the hollow under her ribs.

A Last Note—The End Being Also A Beginning

THE JADE KING drew the sword from its sheath, smiled at the new bloodmarks on the blade. “Curse still healthy?”

“Very.”

“Good.” He beckoned to his Vizier. “Pay her.”

And that was the end of that. She went out wondering who he was going to give that sword to and why he had to be so devious. Another mystery to add to those things she’d probably never know.

BRANN WENT WANDERING through the Jade-Halimm Market. It was famous through half the world, as much for the look of the place as for the rarities sold there, a spacious sunny place with ancient vines coiling over equally ancient lattices, living walls for the market stalls that were handed down from father to son, mother to daughter. They kept herds of small green lizards to eat the ivy clean of insects and sponged dust off the leaves every morning so these shone like the jade that gave the city its name. She saw a potter’s stall and stopped to look over the wares, picked up a simple unglazed cup, ran her fingers over it, made of a clay strange to her, a pleasant red-brown, thin, tough, with a satisfying solidity. She held it and felt a shock of recognition, a rightness so strong it burned like fire through her. The stall-keeper, a handsome young woman, was busy with another customer; Brann fidgeted impatiently, caressing the cup as she waited, liking it more the longer she held it. When the woman came to her, she held it up. “Who made this?”

“My grandfather, Kuralyn. Dayan Acsic.”

“Does he take pupils?” She set the cup down with great care, so tense she was afraid of breaking it.

“Yes. You would like to meet him?”

“Yes.” She sighed, then smiled. “Yes, very much indeed.”