

March 2007

v2.0

# *The Winter Players*

*Tanith Lee*

contents

[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#)

©1976

1

*Sea Grey*

[^](#) [»](#)

The winter sea was cold and grey as the voices of the gulls that flew over it, but where it entered the bay before the little shrine, the water turned to a sour vinegar green. Most of the lower steps that led down from the wall of the shrine to the water were also green, dark as slabs of raw emerald, for the sea covered them at high tide. When the storms came, waves would smash over the wall of the shrine, into the courtyard beyond.

A girl stood on the lower steps in the windy afternoon, drawing up her nets to reckon what the tides had brought her. In one net there was a fish. She shook it back into the water. She had no need of it, for the villagers sent her food. She gathered the shells and odd wandering debris of the ocean. Once there had been a rotting pouch with tarnished coins in it—the wealth of a drowned man, or an offering cast from a ship to the demons of the sea.

Today there were no coins.

The girl's hair was a smoky, ashen bronze. She held it from her face with one

hand as she examined the shells and placed them in her basket. She would paint them with strange swirling designs and give them to the villagers when they came. They liked to have them, thinking them lucky once she had handled them, since she was the Lady of the Shrine, the priestess. Presently she let down the nets again, and started back up the stairway.

Her name was Oaive, or so they called her, a name like the sound of the sea. She was seventeen years old, but she had been chosen before her birth. One day she would have to choose her own successor, by a secret method written in the Book of Lore. But this was not her problem yet, nor would it be for a long while, until she became old or she fell sick.

Oaive was of the fisher-people. Her mother had cared for her, and taught her to read and to weave. But she had shown her daughter no love, whether she felt it or not. A woman who knew she must lose her child was a fool to love it or make it love her. Oaive's father had perished in the sea several months before she was born.

Oaive learned early on that she was different. The children never added her to their games, and they were never rude to her. Even when she was a baby they looked at her as if she were full-grown. Neither was she given chores, as were the other girls. She went to the shrine instead, to be instructed by the priestess.

The priestess was almost ninety years of age. Her flesh was pleated and then repleated on the pleats. Her eyes were pale and moist as fish-skin. Her body creaked when she moved. At first Oaive had nightmares about her, and about the sombre stone place with its doors of iron. Later, she grew used to these things. She accepted her lot, as the beast accepts the yoke.

Finally, when she was fourteen, the priestess had shown her the hidden room where the Relics were. The Relics were inexplicable, holy, secret. None but the priestesses might look at them. One was a Ring, one a Jewel, one a short, narrow Bone. Each had its aura. Once Oaive had seen them, the priestess began to teach her the Mysteries of the shrine.

After that, a great change took Oaive. She had never felt affection for the ancient woman, but now she sensed a bond uniting them, the bond of continuance which the shrine made. It came to Oaive that she was not beneath a yoke; she was the guardian of the people. She stood between them and God. She was glad at last that she would never court or wed, or bear children, never huddle warm among her folk as the flocks of the sheep-people huddled on the chill slopes. She did not belong to the flock. She was the shepherd.

At the end of that year, when Oaive was fifteen, the priestess died, and Oaive became the priestess.

The wall of the shrine was built of stones. The shrine itself stood at the centre of the courtyard which the wall enclosed. A platform ran around the outside of the wall, leading from the seaward stairway to the great doorway set in the western side of the wall. When she had come around the platform to the door, she found one of the fisher-people there before her. He was a boy of about thirteen, already sea-hardened as a barnacle. He nodded respectfully to her.

"Greeting, lady. The Elder sent me. A stranger has come, to visit the shrine."

Over the boy's head, the winter sun was getting low on the hills, and heavy cloud made another hill-line behind the first. There would be rain before night.

"A stranger? It's an ill time for journeying."

"Yes, lady. So the Elder said, but the stranger laughed—he said it was his penance to travel in winter—a priest laid it on him, beyond the mist."

"Beyond the mist" meant the unknown terrain inland, where none of them had ever ventured. Sometimes men did come from this direction, over the hills and rocky heights, through valleys where, they said, smoking waters poured like upturned witches' cauldrons into the rivers below. Occasionally in summer weather, travellers had even crossed the sea to seek the shrine. But all such were rare. There had been two in Oaive's time, one for each year of her priesthood.

"He is in the fisher-village, then?" Oaive asked the boy.

"Yes, lady. Since noon. He's like no man I ever saw before—" the boy burst out, worried and intrigued at once, and eager to tell. "He wears a cloak made from a black wolf, and the head is on it still, and the claws. He said he killed it himself. He has a long, long shiny grey knife at his side. My father says it's a sword. His teeth are very white, but his hair is the colour of—of the knife itself, like an old man's hair—but he is young. And his eyes are grey, too—"

"Well," said Oaive gently, "when will he be coming to the shrine? At sundown?"

"At sundown, if you permit."

"Yes. Go now and tell him. Take my greeting to the Elder."

The boy bobbed, and turned and ran back down from the headland towards the fisher-village.

At sunset, as at dawn, Oaive spoke the Ritual in the shrine, and those who came there wished generally to be included in it, and perhaps to burn an offering.

A cold wind was stirring from the hillside. Oaive felt it pass like an omen. She had been trained to know such things, both external signs and those signs she felt within herself. From the moment the boy spoke of the stranger, she had been uneasy. A young man with an old man's hair, and a sword at his side. She did not believe the story of a penance. Why should he lie?

The shrine was bleak in the sinking light. She crossed the yard and entered the priestess's place at the far end of the court.

It was a single chamber, windowless and shadowy. She did not mind the shadows, she knew them. She noted, as ever, the narrow bed scattered with luminous drying shells. On a shelf, in clay vessels, draughts and unguents she made for the villages; the Book of Lore instructed her on the proper seasons for the gathering of herbs, or the wild sea-wrack from the beaches. Beneath the unlit hanging lamp stood her loom, a damson-dark cloth growing on the frame.

She put down her basket, and lit the lamp. She began to weave, hands and feet busy, thoughts running free.

She could do nothing yet. Her instincts had warned her, well and good. Now she must wait and see.

The rain fell just before sunset, as the sky was deepening beyond her door.

She was tying off the thread of her weaving, for it was almost time for her to go to the shrine. She heard the rain, and looked up, and there in the doorway a man was standing.

She was not sure how long he had been there; the shadow before the rain, his shadow across the threshold were all one. The lamp lit up the loom, not the man, and the cold sky was behind him.

"Good-eve," he said, quietly. His voice was a young man's voice right enough, but bold and sharp as a flint, ready to scratch. "Will you tell me where I might find the priestess?"

"She is here," said Oaive.

"You?" He let out a mocking oath, one she did not recognise, though the village men had several. "I beg your pardon, holy-lady, but I never thought I'd find you at such ordinary woman's work."

"Has it ever been then," she said gravely, "that you find things always as you thought them?"

He laughed. She liked the laugh, and did not like it. It made her want to laugh also, and she mistrusted him. She rose and trimmed the lamp and angled it a fraction as she did so, and the light reached his face at last.

He was as the boy described him. He looked almost familiar. Lean as a wolf himself in his wolf cloak. The wolf mask had two white gems set under the brow-ridges that flashed like life. The rest of his garments were grey, as if to match the blade at his side and his long hair which shone like the winter sea, and his eyes like bits of mirror. He smiled. His teeth were white and sharp as his voice.

"Am I as they told you, lady?"

"They did not tell me your name," she said.

"Oh. If you want to name me, call me Grey, for my hair."

"Are you afraid to give me your true name?"

"It is my penance, lady," he said solemnly. "I may not give it."

She knew he was lying, but she did not say so.

She took up her shawl.

"It is now the time of the sunset Ritual, if you will follow me to the shrine. Is it blood you wish to be cleansed of, or something else?"

"I have heard," he said, "that there are things in the shrine which will heal wounds, cure ills, lift curses. Did I hear right?"

She guessed then. Fear gripped her like a hand. "Faith will do all this," she said. "You must have faith." She drew the shawl over her head and went out into the rain. He came after at once.

A smoulder of brightness on the hills showed the sun's going. The rain fell in straight shafts like the hunter-people's fletched arrows.

She passed under the arch of the shrine and on into the rectangular space beyond. Reddish lights burned in niches. The altar slab stood at the room's end. It was black with the fire of offerings and the Ritual fire, made every dawn and sunset. Three iron doors were set in the wall behind the altar.

The shrine smelled of fish-oil from the lamps, of dank stone, rusty iron, smoke and the sea.

"Well," he said, the stranger at her back, "it's modest. Where do the doors lead?"

"To other rooms," she said. "Please don't speak again to me, until I tell you. I must begin the prayer."

"Very good, priestess," he said most humbly, and once more she sensed his scorn. He was older than she was, and older in deeds, too, as much as years. She was aware of this merely by instinct.

"You must stand at the altar," she said. "Think of nothing, or of God."

"With my eyes shut," he promised, "and my heart open."

She left him by the stone slab and went to the central door. She felt him watching her as attentively as the cat watches a mouse. There was a wheel on the door. Only she knew how many turns to give it, and in which directions. These actions were hidden from him by her own body. The door swung open.

The small chamber beyond was pitch-black, yet she was familiar with it from long use, as the blind are familiar with their own regions. She went to the chest and took the utensils from it and the pot of incense. She carried them out to the altar and arranged them in the proper pattern.

Then she did the magic thing, one of the Mysteries of the shrine. She did not do it to cause fear, though it caused fear in some, but only because it was part of the Ritual.

She called fire. She called it from her own self.

The heat began in her right shoulder blade and ran along her upper arm and whorled in her elbow. As the fire swelled in her forearm, the skin glowed and became transparent, showing the red blood and the bone structure under the flesh. Then the fire ran into her forefinger and she let it drip free upon the altar. It flared up in pale darts, and the incense she had scattered there smelled sweet.

The stranger's face showed nothing, but his eyes were wide as a cat's eyes. If he had had a cat's ears, they would have been laid flat along his head.

Oaive spoke the whole Ritual then. It was not lengthy.

Whenever she had said it in the past, a sort of silence and serenity had come over her. These prayers were so old, only the priestesses understood them, for they were in the same antique tongue as the Book of Lore. Yet today their power did not enfold Oaive. She recited, but her mind was elsewhere. The presence of the stranger was like a cold air.

Presently she said to him, in the way of the Ritual: "Speak now. Tell me what you wish."

"A blessing and absolution from my penance."

"Do you crave these with a whole heart?"

"Oh, yes," he said, "but there's only one thing that can help me."

The hair stiffened on her arms and the nape of her neck. She asked: "One thing. What thing?"

"A fragment of Bone," he said softly, looking straight in her eyes. "Only the Bone can give me peace."

If she had not guessed before, she could not miss now.

"What do you mean?" she asked, to see how he would go on.

"The Relic. The Thing of the shrine. You must be acquainted with it, lady. In far lands they called this the House of the Bone. That is what I was sent to find."

She said slowly: "If there are Relics, they are secret."

"One is a Bone."

"They are secret."

"No."

She was frightened, but must not let him see it. She held herself still and said: "I will say the prayer for you, which is the custom. This is the sum of what I may do. Do you wish to offer? A piece of your hair or of your clothing is the usual offering."

"I will offer silver," he said, "to you personally, if—"

But she began the prayer suddenly, before he had finished. The phrases were dust in her mouth, they nearly choked her.

He kept quiet till she stopped. Then he said: "I have no offering, unless you let me see the Bone. That's all that will help me. I told you that."

"You told me lies," she said.

"In that case, I have no offering, priestess."

He looked at her one moment more, his eyes gone white as the wolf skin's gemstone eyes—the only thing that told her how terrible his anger must be. After this he turned and strode from the shrine, the sword clashing against the doorpost as he went.

One was a Ring of ancient greenish metal. One was a colourless, brilliant Jewel. One was a tiny slender Bone, the length of her finger-tip, smooth with age and handling. They were said to be miraculous, and they had a feel of miracles, and of stranger things, too.

No one but the priestess knew of the Relics.

They were kept in a box of black wood in the secret room. The room lay below

the chamber where the incense was stored, behind the iron door with the wheel. Each priestess took her novice to the room before teaching her the Mysteries of the shrine. The Relics were never given a history, never explained. Their explanation was lost in time.

No one but the priestess knew of the Relics.

*No one.*

Yet *he* knew, the grey-haired man with the wolf's head on his shoulder.

How? What did he want?

He had gone striding out into the rain, but would he be coming back?

She stood alone in the shrine, her hands pressed flat on the surface of the altar.

Shortly, the rain stopped. The night was falling like another, darker rain.

He came back at midnight. She was not sleeping, for she had been expecting him. He came silently as a thief, for he was a thief, yet she heard him.

The door in the wall about the shrine was shut and barred. The wall of stones was treacherous and high. Still, he climbed up the wall and over it. It would take more than the wall to stop him. She had secured the door of her chamber, too, though she did not think he would come there, and she had been right. His soft footfalls went on across the courtyard to the shrine. It was a blind night, the moon long down.

She waited. Suddenly he cried out, and next came a string of muffled profanities. He had found what she had left there.

There was no door to the shrine. When the sea leapt across the wall it would pummel in over the floor. But there was a trick to close the way to creatures of flesh and blood.

She had murmured before the open archmouth, an hour after sunset. She had called the shadows, and hung them across the arch like curtains, and seemed to set them burning in hot black tongues.

It was another knack the old priestess had taught her, to call shadows, to make them seem to burn.

Perhaps an ordinary thief would have fled. He had watched her make fire in the Ritual, now he met this: he had seen what she could do. But he did not fly. She had known he would not.

She felt him stand there before the shrine. Not stupidly, not wondering what he should do. He was gathering himself. After a while she heard him speak.

"Shadows don't burn," he said. Nothing more, but it was enough. He grasped the fact that he could overcome the illusion by not believing in it, and he had schooled himself not to believe. She sensed the flames going out in smoke, and she knew he went by the smoke into the shrine.

She was brimming with a peculiar, sad fearfulness, but she unfastened her door and went out to the shrine. She crossed the threshold where even the smoke had faded. Though he had walked soft, she walked more softly, and he did not hear.

He was on the other side of the altar, before the central door. Yet only she knew the correct turns of the wheel. If he had tried it, he surely had lost heart.

When he stepped back from the door she thought for a moment that he had, but instead he called quietly: "Old door, old wheel, you know the way you must turn. How many times have they turned you, the witch-women of the shrine? You remember. You know. Turn then. I will make you do it."

Oaive shrank inside herself. He understood, she realised, the logic of sorcery, and had the concentration of mind to put his understanding to use. She had half-guessed this from the beginning; now she was positive. He was armed with as much magic as herself, and maybe more.

And the iron wheel was starting to obey him. Slowly, rustily, unwillingly, it was turning.

So she called on the deepest reserves within her. She summoned up a sort of psychic cloak to cover herself—an Aura. It made her appear far taller than she was. It clad her in a fierce unglowing light as if lamps blazed in her skin and eyes. It made her feel invincible, but it would drain her, this power. She could not maintain it long. It was really the last chance she had against him.

The wheel had reluctantly completed its turns. The door hung open, and he had entered the place beyond.

Oaive followed him. When she reached the door, he was already searching for the secret room.

Her unshining brightness flooded the chamber, and he spun round and stared at her. For a second then, she saw he was unnerved.

"You have abused the shrine," she said. Her voice had taken on a sound of dry striking crystals—almost, it made him flinch. "Go," she said, in the terrible auramantic voice. "You will need many years to work off the curse you have already invited."

Another man would have run howling. Not this one. He shuddered, but more as if he were shuddering off his unease than from fright.

"Don't meddle, lady," he said. "I see you gleaming there like phosphorus, and your head near touching the roof and your eyes like daggers. But I recall quite well you're merely a girl whose crown comes no higher than my chin. You've put on your witch-look to frighten me. It does not. I don't believe in your curses. There's only one thing scares me, and that's not here."

She held the Aura steady. She said: "Go, or there will be worse."

"Let there be. I want the thing I told you of. I would have dealt courteously with you, paid you if you had agreed. But no. So, I am a robber. The secret way isn't in the walls, so it's in the floor. Yes. I see your eyelids flicker. It's in the floor. Good."

He knelt, ignoring her. He found the uneven panel almost immediately.

She felt the Aura sinking. She could not hold its tension. She seized the last of it like a spear. She lifted her arm, ready to cast the failing power at him, to stun him. She could summon purely physical help from the villages before he could recover—



But he had jumped to his feet, startling her, and her grip on the bolt of energy faltered.

"Very well," he said, "if you want to fight. Sword for sword, my girl."

And he was gone. At least, the *man* was gone. In his place there stood a pale nightmare: a silver wolf with eyes like dying venomous moons.

Just for an instant she glimpsed it, just until, rising up, opening its salt-white jaws, it breathed on her a breath as cold as snow, and with one paw smote her backwards into night.

## 2

### *Grey Wolf's Running*



She came to herself in the hour before dawn, and her head ached. For a little she could not recollect what had happened. Then memory returned to her, everything.

She got to her feet. A lamp was glimmering near her, which showed the stairs leading down into the secret room below.

He had been there, of course. The wooden box was on the topmost stair, open. The lamp caught the flash of the Jewel, the dull polish of the Ring. He had left the lamp for her, so she could see at once that these two things he did not want and scorned to take. Only the Bone was gone.

She felt a sense of failure and loss that was hard to bear. She needed to weep, to ask someone to aid her. But she was unused to shedding tears, or to seeking counsel or comfort. She was the priestess. She was alone.

Oaive moved slowly across the shine, out of the doorway into the court, and presently from the court to the platform above the bay. The sky had cleared, but the stars were paling. The sea had shrunk away from the coast. Everything was lightless, formless, sounding faintly of wind and waves.

She thought: If I never tell of it, who will know? The priestesses examine the Relics, no other. But she remembered how he had said that even in far lands they called the shrine the House of the Bone. Or had that been another lie, like the lie of his very person? Man, or beast? After all, if God might be found under the holy roof, what need for relics, mysteries, symbols? Yet there was this dreadful emptiness inside her, as if he had stolen part of her own self. What did the Bone mean to him, grey man, grey wolf, that he must steal to have it?

She debated. She tried to see what she should do. Even the Book of Lore could not help her. There was no mention in it of theft or shape-changing or demons.

Eventually the sky began to widen with dawn over the ocean. The red sun made its road on the sea as if sparks were kindling on the pewter water. Six or seven small

boats, black against the sunrise, stood a few miles out; the vessels of the fisher-people, taking up the last catch of the night.

Oaive turned. She looked inland. Each of the nearer hills was dimly coloured by the dawn, but the farthest were dark still. The sheep would be stirring there, and the shepherds, and the hunter-people, too, with their dogs, seeking deer before winter locked the woods in ice.

Each year they prayed that the winter would be mild, kind to them, yet even mild winters were harsh on this savage shore. Food grew scarce, the people died.

And this winter, she thought. Who can reckon, since a third of their luck has been snatched from the shrine?

She knew then. It appalled her to know, but she was also elated, for she saw her path, evident as that sun-path on the sea.

Quietly and deliberately she began to speak the Ritual, there on the headland. She did not call fire. She had no incense. When the prayers were done, she walked towards the fisher-village.

There were three Elders, one from each village. They sat in the communal long-hall of the fisher-people, and the rest of the folk had come crowding in as soon as they heard the priestess had summoned them. It was almost noon.

There were no windows in the long-hall. Fish hung from the beams to smoke in chains of blackened silver. Torches and fires dispersed a hot yet cheerless light without much warmth.

Most of the men were older than Oaive, and the Elders were very old, yet she felt none of her youth before their years. She felt older than any of them, for the centuries of the shrine were on her.

She had told them of the thief. She had not told them of his magic. They would guess him a magician to have bested her.

"Lady," the Elder of the fisher-people said, "what are you meaning to do?"

"I must seek him," she said. "I must get back what he took."

They made a sound; they had been hushed before.

"If you go, who will tend the shrine? There has always been a maiden."

"The Relics are older than any maiden who ever served there. The Relics are the purpose of the shrine; it was built to house them. Two remain. I will bind them with seals no thief can break. Then I will pursue the third."

They fidgeted, avoiding her eyes. Because they respected her office and her power, they did not argue, only asked questions.

"If you are gone, how shall we observe the Ritual?"

"I will speak the Ritual for you, as ever," she said, "at dawn and at sundown, without fail, as I travel, wherever I may be. I shan't forget. It will be the tie that links me to you. To maintain the shrine you should choose women by lots. They will

sweep the floors and light the lamps, as I do. Whenever you go to pray or to offer, you keep the shrine holy. God will be near you, if you reach for him. You do not need a priestess so much as faith. Indifference kills faith, and lack of faith puts out the torch of God that burns in each of us. That is why I cannot be indifferent to the theft of the sacred thing."

"Lady, you may be long away."

She was aware the Elder implied that she might die, and never return.

She bowed her head. Their perplexity hung on her like a cloak.

"If I am long away," she said, "you will have to elect a new priestess from among you."

"But that is far from tradition. Each must be taught. Only you know the ancient language—how can she read the Book unless you teach her? She will not be able to recite the prayers."

"Then," said Oaive, "she must simply pray as her heart suggests to her."

They muttered sullenly. She was abandoning them. They did not understand her impulse, the importance of this deed to her. Naturally, they had never seen the Bone, experienced the quickening that seemed awake in it. But it was more than this. It was not merely what had been stolen... she could not really explain, even to herself, what impelled her to follow the thief. It was like breathing. She could do nothing else.

The faces of the women were like rock, except for one or two who wept. She took some of the older ones to her chamber by the shrine. She showed and explained the unguents and philtres to them, and what they were to be used for. At first, the women seemed to be refusing to comprehend, out of resentment, but at last a widow in the group, used to fending for herself, became practical, began to answer yes or no, and to ask sensible questions.

When they had gone, Oaive put away the shells she had not painted. It was a fine white day; she did not need to light the hanging lamp, as she sat to tie off all the threads of her weaving. As she was doing this, suddenly she noticed that two had frayed and were broken. A fist seemed to clench on her heart. Was this also an omen? The broken thread, sign of severed ties, or of death itself. She recalled the words of the Elder. But she set her foreboding aside; there was no time for it.

An hour before sunset, she began her search for a clue.

She felt sure the violated shrine would have retained some evidence of his coming, his wolf's going, however slight, to help her. Even if it were only a hair from his sea-silver head.

She picked about the court as intently as a bird. She discovered nothing. Eventually she thought of the wall over which he had climbed.

She went outside the courtyard, and studied the rough surface of the wall. In the angle between two blocks, a tiny scrap of grey cloth was caught, torn off by the sharp teeth of the stone.

So I have you, she thought with grim triumph. Her heart beat fast, warming her. She was surprised by her determined hunger to catch and destroy him.

She said the sunset Ritual, on purpose, outside, standing on the steps facing the bay. The sky behind her was angry, and the sea darkening. She had a sense of insecurity and excitement, as if she might never see this spot again.

Afterwards, she went inside. She put the piece of material between her palms. She shut her eyes, and forced her mind into the fibres of the cloth.

It was difficult, then more difficult. She must hold the course of her brain as the fisher-people held the course of their boats. In the end her will pierced through as abruptly as a needle.

The cloth had been in the grey man's possession; ripped from him, it still belonged to him, still hankered for the garment of which it had been part.

The cloth had memorised the pulse of a wrist, an iron armband, it came from the left sleeve of his tunic... Now there was a slap of reins, a horse galloping in Oaive's mind, a rider bowed to meet the wind. Beyond the mist, across the hills, inland, where the rivers tipped over heights to rush and foam. Westwards.

Oaive withdrew her concentration. She could follow him from this moment on, the wolf-thief. The cloth would be her guide.

She felt tired. She lay down to sleep, ready clothed for her journey, her feet bound with strips of hide, over her knees the cloak of fleece the sheep-people had given her long ago.

She did not sleep at once; when she did, she had a dream. She dreamed a rope bound her to a post standing in the sea, and she cut the rope and walked away inland, into the glare of the furious falling sun.

It took her three days to cross the hills.

Southwards, the great woodlands spread blackly into a distance of softer blackness. Like the sea, once begun, the woods appeared to have no end. And north and west the surges of the hills, pocketed with caves and like the backs of half-bald pitted stony animals, seemed equally limitless.

She missed the sea almost at once. The sound and sight of it, its old drowned smell. She missed, too, the safe shrine, the familiar routine of her days. Here everything was unknown, even how she must deal with it. If she had had no purpose, she would have been terrified by her freedom.

She carried a little food in a bag at her waist, not much. She knew which plants to eat, and where they might be found; she did not want to be weighed down by provisions. He was a day and nearly two nights ahead of her. Nevertheless, she paused, dawn and sunset, to say the Ritual. The words were flimsy out here; they had lost their meaning away from the shrine.

None but the sheep-people dwelt in the hills, grazing their flocks on the thin grass. Men and beasts were small and woolly, and both had bleating voices. The shepherds greeted her formally; even so far from the coast they knew her as their

priestess. After the second day, when she no longer met them, she began to lose the sense of who she was. Her own people were behind her now.

The thief had a horse; occasionally she noticed its droppings on the ground. He must have tethered it, while he was at the shrine, in a cave or one of the dry-stone bothies the shepherds used during lambing. The scrap of cloth was her guide. If she concentrated on it, she could feel the pulse in his wrist and glimpse the horse galloping. She would not lose him, but could she ever catch up?

Presumably he rested, the horse would need to rest. Sometimes she came across the ashes of a fire. At night, when she was too tired to go on, she lay down in her cloak under a bush or rock. She herself seldom made fire. Her feet were hard and strong, and she was also strong. She did not sleep more than three or four hours.

On the evening of the third day, she gazed from the last slope, and saw below her how the hills crumbled away into an ocean of wasteland, a wild heath. The long grasses tossed and rippled like the waves of the sea. The trees were gaunt, twisted and solitary. A white moon hung low, and the wind seemed to be blowing it by degrees off the edge of the sky.

The openness of the terrain disturbed her.

She crossed through grasses that stood as high as her ribs. The moon set, but the blackness was ferociously gemmed with stars.

In the morning, there was a village. She had slept within reach of it and not known, just over a rise in the land.

There were ten huts set among a winter-stripped dapple of fields, their roofs constructed of turf. Smoke rose thick as birds from the chimney-holes.

The one who called himself Grey had passed through this place, she could tell.

A track led into the village, creeping between the huts to a space of beaten earth where there was a well. Two women were already there, filling their household jars. They looked up and right at her.

"May I draw some water?" Oaive asked them. The women did not speak, but most villagers were odd at first towards strangers. She said again: "May I draw some water? I've come far and I'm very thirsty."

The two women did a peculiar thing. They moved back from the well and from her, still staring at her. One set down her jar carefully, the other held her jar too tight. Just at that moment a girl came from a doorway near by. She took in everything immediately, and let out a high wordless screech.

Oaive began to be afraid. She calmed herself. In spite of them, she let down the bucket into the well and drew water, and drank from her cupped hands. While she was doing this, she was aware of the space filling with people, close-packed together because they kept such a lot of room between themselves and her.

Finally she looked up. There was a tall broad man a short distance from the front of the crowd. She spoke to him.

"My thanks for the sweet water."

His face was closed tight on itself, determined to give nothing away. He said, barely moving his lips: "You'll be going now."

"Yes, if you wish. Have you seen a man in grey, with grey hair?"

"You will be going now," the man repeated blankly.

"Answer my question first."

There came a seething from the crowd, like a pot on the boil. Suddenly something sharp struck her shoulder. Someone had thrown a flint.

"Stop!" The man shouted about him. "Are you all fools?" He squinted back at Oaive. "Yes. He has been here. And told us you would come after."

The water she had drunk was raw in her throat. She should have known, she thought, that the grey wolf would learn, by his own powers, that she followed him.

"Why are you afraid of me?" she asked the man.

A woman's voice yelled at the back of the mob: "Drive her out! Kill the witch—kill her!"

Oaive turned in the direction of the voice.

"If I am so terrible," she said, "how do you imagine you can kill me?"

She left the well, and walked exactly towards the crowd, which parted to let her through. She went up the track between the last huts. As she reached the outskirts of the village, a shower of small stones rattled behind her.

Clever Grey.

She could guess his story, and the way he told it.

The wicked witch from the coast pursued him, for the sake of vengeance. Probably without cause. He had twisted the ears of her pet cat, or trodden on her toad. The witch was mad, evil, and had sly magics. Avoid and beware of her. She might only seem a young girl but that was just the guise she took on to fool you. Under it she was old and foul, with snakes for hair... And when Oaive went back over his words to her, and his deeds, she wondered if he, too, believed some of his own tale.

She walked the rest of the day across the wasteland. There were no more villages. But the next day, at noon, she marked a huddle of dwellings, and skirted them. A man was out in the scrubby fields. When he saw her, he turned his face and strode off too fast.

She had meant to ask for food on her journey when her provisions were gone. Perhaps she could have performed some service in payment—healed a sickly child with her herb-lore, or cleaned pots if there were no other task. Now no one would give her food and no one would want her aid. Grey had seen to this. She had underestimated him, for all she had glimpsed of his skill.

She lived entirely off the land after that. She ate the sour roots that grew on the heath, and drank from the bitter streams. The waste was a tindery green, brown with autumn's burned-out gorses and wild iron-purple heathers. Often it rained, but never for very long. The cloak of fleece kept her warm and almost dry.

She said the Ritual dawn and sunset. Sometimes she forgot a word. It was as if the alien landscape had eaten it from her mind.

On the ninth day of her travelling, Oaive saw a ruined tower on a hill with a sprawling village wrapped round it.

There was a bell ringing; it had a dismal sound, like a burying. She had meant to keep clear of the houses, but there was a pool near the base of the hill, among some trees.

As she was drinking, she noticed a procession winding down from the village towards the pool. There were men in black robes she took to be priests. Their faces were rigid and pale, and they were shaking the wooden rattles the superstitious used to disperse demons.

On either side of the priests, and behind them, came men with a whole pack of dogs, restrained on short leashes.

All at once she realised it was not a procession.

She got up and went out of the trees, and paused on the other side of them. The villagers paused too. The priests pointed. One dog bayed and set off the other dogs. Their tongues hung from their mouths like tongues of flame. She knew these people were going to set the pack on her. They had kept the dogs mean and hungry—they would tear her in pieces. The bell went on ringing in sombre pangs.

The men slipped the leashes. The dogs came springing down the slope like rocks, directly at her.

Oaive put her hands to her face. She wanted to scream, but she held herself firmly and compiled her strength. She shut her eyes and breathed deep. I cannot see you, therefore you cannot see me. You cannot scent me, you cannot sense me. I am a shadow of the tree. I am not here.

It was hard to hold the illusion together. The panting and howling of the dogs seemed likely to blow her magic from her like a fierce wind. The tide of them lapped round her. Their bodies thudded against her legs and they sniffed at her ankles. The need to open her eyes, to look, was overwhelming. Then the dogs were running on, past her, back the way she had come. They had not found her. The spell had worked.

She did not glance towards the people on the hill, who were shouting and cursing. As far as they were concerned, the witch had vanished into air. She knew if she looked at them, however, they would see her again, so she did not turn their way.

The tolling of the bell and the baying of the dogs stayed with her many miles across the waste, and that night she dreamed of them, and for several nights to come.

The land seemed to change in a night. She lay down to sleep on the heath, but the spoked wheel of the dawn sun showed her, on the horizon, a rocky, rising place, a place like the stairway of a giant's house. She had been weary and had not seen

these rocks ahead, black on the black sky.

She said the Ritual, and went on, and an hour or so later she began to apprehend how high she must climb.

It was a merciless ascent. The wind beat her as she scrambled from one ledge to the next. Her whole body ached almost unbearably, but she seldom rested. Two hours after noon she reached the summit, and sat down there to get her breath and her bearings.

It was like being at the top of the world. The waste behind was a greenish shadow. Before, the rock cascaded into a plain dense with trees, where a huge distant stretch of water lay like a broken looking-glass, its surface scored bright as pitted silver. She thought for an instant she had come to the sea again, but then she took in its tideless, static quality. This was a lake. Miles off, other heights, like her own vantage point, stabbed over the lake. Here and there a thin white pillar joined rock-peak and water: a waterfall.

Oaive had never seen anything like this in her life. The wind was like a flashing blade; like old wine, it went to her head. Then she remembered her purpose for sitting there at all.

She stared across the wooded lake-plain. Nothing moving caught her eye, only a great winged bird stooping low above a cloud of pine.

Oaive took the piece of grey cloth from her belt, and held it between her palms. Presently she lifted her head, eyes wide. It was as though the spark in the cloth had died. Nothing came from it any more, no pulse, no picture, no guidance.

The great bird hung motionless, as if nailed to the air, then plummeted from sight.

She was a fool. If Grey knew she followed, he would guess her method in the end. So he had bought, bartered or stolen a tunic from one of those villages he had warned against her. When he judged the moment ripe, he had exchanged the old garment for the new. The tunic, now he no longer wore it, relinquished its borrowed sentence, and the link, cloth with cloth, snapped. She had lost him. Or had she?

Grey was there on the plain. Her instinct *told* her. It was the lake he was making for. He would need to cross it. And perhaps he was at ease, finally thinking her outwitted...

She began the descent towards the trees, and her hands, rock-bruised already, started to bleed.

The sun had set by the time she reached the foot of the rocks. Pine trees and larch grew thickly under the slope, dividing the last burnish of the afterglow with their slanting shade.

She slept in the wood that night. It was mild, and small animals, not yet wintered-down, galloped about in the scanty undergrowth; a fox pattered by like rain over the carpet of fallen needles.

Before sun-up, she was pressing on with a determination to find Grey or his trail.



How had he brought his horse across the rocks, or had he? She had noted none of its droppings this side of the height. She said the Ritual at dawn, but speaking as she walked.

A mist had come up like smoke, filling the wood. The trees were soon wrapped in it, their hard stems appearing to become transparent.

Abruptly, through the mist, she saw a man standing ahead of her in a clearing.

Oaive hesitated. He was facing her, tree-still, and he made no movement and no sign, even though he must see her now. Perhaps he was afraid of her, like the others. Perhaps he had a flint ready to throw, or worse, a spear or a knife.

She slowly raised her arm, to greet him, to discover how he would react. When he did nothing, she went forward again.

There was something peculiar about him, this man. Not merely how he waited there, motionless, silent. The shape of him was somehow wrong, his stance, the manner in which he held his arms so stiffly...

Then suddenly she was close enough to glimpse what the figure really was. A scarecrow.

Two sticks for legs, fixed firmly into the earth, two awkward stick arms. The body was a sack of straw, tied tightly about three-quarters of the way up, to give the illusion of a head. In the villages by the sea, they made such things to keep birds from the crops. This one was a little different. A face had been daubed on it, two round black eyes and a grinning mouth. It had a cruel and acutely horrible look, laughing mercilessly at her there in the mist. Over its sack body and stick arms and the tops of its stick legs hung a single garment. A grey tunic with a torn left sleeve.

Yes, he had known. He had stolen the scarecrow from a field, clad it in his tunic, and left it for her like a message, a mockery, having painted the mockery on its scarecrow face.

The hair shivered on her neck. The scarecrow frightened her, and for a minute everything frightened her, what she had done, what she planned to do, the wood and the plain beyond, and the whole world outside the shrine.

But the mist was fading, taking doubt with it. She went by the scarecrow, and found herself in the outskirts of the pines. And saw what the pines had hidden from her.

The ground slanted downwards unexpectedly, clothed in muddy winter fields. At the bottom, about half a mile off, a shallow valley had been formed, that ended near the skyline where an arm of the lake reached back into the land. In the valley, a second wood, a vast forest of wooden dwellings and stone towers.

A ray of the early sun ignited the lake beyond. Ships lay out on the water, seeming tiny from here as scattered seeds, with gnat's-wing sails.

That was the way he had run, her enemy. She was certain. He had even taken time for his joke—the scarecrow thieved from their fields. No doubt he had sold the horse, here, or the other side of the rocks. He would have used the coins to buy passage on a ship; he would already be sailing for another shore. She sensed him

gone, ahead of her yet.

But he was still the quarry, she the hunter.

Did he maybe think witches could not cross water?

### 3

## *Red Ship*



"My brother," she said persistently, "are you certain you've not seen my brother? You cannot miss him, I'm sure. His hair is red as a carrot, and his shoulders—like so—one higher than the other. And he is freckled—"

"No," said the man impatiently, "I have not seen him."

"But I was told in the town that a man came and asked for passage on a ship. I was told. Wasn't he my carrot-haired brother? The wretch who left my father and me with the farm to manage alone through the winter—yes, and took our savings from the cracked pot under the hearth-stone. Oh, if I can but catch up with him! Didn't he come here seven days ago?"

"It was the day before yesterday the traveller came, and left yesterday eve," grumbled the man, anxious to be rid of this chattering nuisance of a farm wench, "and he was a rover, a man of breeding, with a sword at his side."

"And red-carrot hair?"

"No, no, by all the—*grey* his hair was, strange hair on a young man. And a wolf pelt on his back. Is that likely to be your brother, eh?"

"If you say you saw him—"

"I do say. It wasn't a humble passenger's place he wanted, either, but to hire a ship and pilot and crew to himself. Kurl's Red Ship it was. And there's Kurl's boy, Kurl. Go bother him, and leave me in peace."

Oaive had not known if Grey would have agitated the people here against her too. She thought not, for he would imagine he had left her behind; besides, it was not an isolated village, suspicious of any stranger. Rumour could not get such a hold here. This town traded with other towns across the lake, and the ships went back and forth from shore to shore, and some farther, out from the lake at its western end, where a wide river breached the stronghold of mountains.

Still, Oaive had risked no chance. She had gone straight to the harbour where a tall tower guarded the brink, and the vessels were massed like a swarm of bees on the water. There, opening her eyes wide as wide and hanging her mouth open as well, she managed to give an impression of being very young and rather stupid. She invented a story and made a lot of fuss. She knew the knack people had of answering the one question you did not ask. If she had demanded information

concerning Grey, perversely, they might have refused her. But, through her pecking and jabbering round them like a hen after her make-believe brother, people were helping unintentionally in their efforts to be rid of her.

Kurl's boy, Kurl, was a scruffy, sullen lad tarring the keel of a boat in the shipyard by the harbour. He pulled at a thin whisker or two on his chin, as if encouraging them to grow.

"Yes, Old Kurl hired a man his Red Ship. Just the ten of them went out. Dog, Gil and six more for the oars and to crew her, Old Kurl as pilot and the grey man. She's but a small craft."

"Grey man?" Oaive whined, "My brother has—"

"Yes, girl. So I'm hearing. But this one is grey. It's the ship that's red."

She made an "O" of both her eyes.

"It's his whim," said the boy sourly. "My father, Old Kurl, he's a fool for wanting to be known. So he paints her red, and stains the sails red. And when anyone sees her they supposedly says: 'Aaah! There goes Kurl's Red Ship'." He gave a sneer.

"My brother would go east," Oaive insisted stubbornly, "so the ship will go ea—"

"The ship won't. It's going west, to River's Mouth," cut in young Kurl triumphantly. "Thus you had better seek your kin elsewhere." And he turned back to his task.

Oaive snivelled briefly into her sleeve and went away.

There was a deal of the day still left. She could do nothing more till night came. She went up the street, into the busy market-place of the town. Here she picked out a good spot, not too far in, but near the well where the women would come. She sat cross-legged in her cloak. When a woman passed near enough, Oaive called in a soft compelling voice: "Let me tell your fortune, lady. Let me bring you luck."

Almost all the women she called looked about at her, and many stopped, most to haggle, trying to get something for nothing. A few pressed a brown coin into Oaive's palm, and let her scan theirs.

She read more by touch than by the roads of the hand, but she read truly. Occasionally she saw some bad thing, and then she advised them how to avert it. Generally their lives were to be uneventful, fruitless as dead trees, and then she embroidered her talk somewhat, to make them happy. It is not unpleasant to anticipate good. It hurts no one, and if the good never comes, you can still be hoping it will.

Late in the afternoon the air set cold and the clouds were large in the sky. Oaive took her coins to a line of baker's ovens and bought a loaf.

When the sun had fallen and the dusk pressed low on the streets, the men came from the harbour and into the houses or wine-shops. Oaive went back to the lake. A beacon was burning at the head of the stone guard-tower, and three or four men went about here and there to keep watch on the ships. She drew the shadows round her and walked soft. When a man was close, she shut her eyes and was invisible.

She chose a narrow boat in the dark the far side of the tower. Its sail was furled,

but she did not immediately require its sail. She charmed the rope that bound it to the quay. She stepped into the boat, and the rope released the boat from the ring, and dropped on the deck.

Oaive spoke to the boat: "You need no oar, you need no sail, you need no wind to move you." She whispered old words, and the boat stirred under her like an animal in sleep. Presently it glided out on to the lake.

The water was smooth as ice. The yellow light from the tower floated on it. If anyone saw her, or saw the oarless boat flying so far without sail, they did not accept the evidence of their eyes, and remained quiet

Oaive sat aft in the boat to steer.

A fish leaped in the lake like a dagger.

About midnight the clouds blew overhead. Oaive let out the sail and it bent like a bow. She tacked before the wind and the boat ran light as a deer. Oaive was of the fisher-people. She had learnt something of their way with boats before ever she visited the shrine.

She steered among a colonnade of waterfalls.

Later she secured the sail, and the tiller by the rope to her waist, the sailor's trick, so any sudden change of wind or the vessel's tempo should rouse her, and slept a few hours.

Grey was only a day ahead of her. He had idled, carelessly. Only one day ahead, in Kurl's Red Ship.

In the morning the land was a ruff of shadow to north and south. Behind and before was only white water under a white sun.

She ate a piece of bread. The lake-wind still carried her, she had no cause to use magic. What she had done already surprised her. The spells were all off-shoots of more ordinary ones concerning binding and unbinding, the art of Aura, and the influence an adept might gain over the perceptions of others. When she had been taught the beginnings of these sorceries, she had never thought she would use them quite as she had, possibly never thought to use them ever.

At noon the wind died again, and Oaive motivated the boat. It occurred to her then that she could catch up to the Red Ship, for, with the wind down, they had only oars. In the midst of the crew, Grey would not resort to a trick like hers unless he had discovered her pursuit.

She sat by the tiller, watching, waiting.

The day ran by like the water.

Just before sunset the westering solar disk was divided by a tall mast, its sail furled on the yard. As the outline of the whole vessel stole up into view, Oaive saw it was the Red Ship, becalmed on the copper surface of the sundown lake.

She did not alter pace, and gradually she made out figures. One stood aft, not the pilot. She knew it was Grey.

Something like a dart of pain went through her, head to feet. And in that moment she was aware he saw her too.

Oaive heard him shout, across the water between them. He was not shouting at her but because of her. He raised his arms. Then the wind came.

It fisted the smaller boat like a blow. Oaive was flung sideways, snatching hold of the tiller. The sunset dazzled into premature blackness. The wind appeared to come in a huge funnelling like an enormous wheel bowling down the sky. She understood that he had called it, summoned this wind as a man whistles a hound.

The sail unfurled and cracked taut on the Red Ship's spar. The ship raced westwards, and the water plunged aside like scythed sheaves. The violent wake slammed Oaive's craft like a whip.

Her sense of spell-weaving left her. The wind drove her boat now. The wind broke the lashings of the sail, which fell free and flapping. She was afraid and angry, both at once. The boat dashed on.

Lake and sky were the colour of lead. She could no longer distinguish the Red Ship, it had vanished in a whirling of wind and cloud. The water seemed to be boiling as if enormous creatures were struggling up from the depths of it.

A lightning slit the seams of the dark. For a split second Oaive glimpsed the ship like a black swan in flight, transfixed by the glare.

What power of magic he had, to wake this. The elements went mad, and he had done it.

It was as if a whale thrashed under the boat, wanting to rise.

Suddenly the whale did rise, a juddering of the lake's back that sent the boat spinning. Oaive clung to the tiller. Everything reared upwards and fell down, and the water poured in. The world seemed to be standing on end. The boat hit a vertical wall of liquid. With a tearing bang the sail parted from the yard, and the boom swung inwards. Almost delicately, the edge of it struck Oaive across the forehead.

The lightning burst inside her eyes. She felt the tumbling craft pitch her out, but only vaguely, as if it did not matter. The water was so cold that after an instant she no longer remembered where she was.

She was warm, gently floating down through black silence.

*Fool. Stupid witch-fool. Someone cursed in her ear. Don't drown, you damned and worthless girl.*

She tried to blot out this disturbing voice. The silence was more friendly.

*Fool. Listen, fool. The Relic. The Bone. I stole it from you. Are you going to let me take it after all? Oh, its easy to drown, easier than making the effort to beat me. But you're going to, by the blood and soul in your body, you are.*

Somewhere she hurt. Her body hurt. Abruptly she was righting, kicking. Her head broke the skin of the lake and her hands gripped and ripped at the air to hold

her up. A tough gritty piece of the air snagged between her fingers. She clenched her arms around it. It was the broken yard of her boat. Splintered planks were strewn in every direction, bobbing aimlessly. Presently the water gushed out of her like a pain.

She was lying over the yard. The lake was calm enough that she could see reflected in it the clearing sky and the stars behind. The wind was finished. She had meant to send back the boat she had taken, to the town, but there was no hope of that now. The boat was finished too.

There was a path of light through which she was moving. She raised her head. A rope was tied to the yard, pulling it, and her with it. The rope went up and over the side of the Red Ship, near where the lantern burned. Two men were hauling her in like a fish.

"Well, lady," he said, standing over her. "Well, well."

The deckhouse was low, windowless and dark, set amidships. Its walls were painted red outside and in, and the floor where she sat was heaped with rugs of scarlet wool. The coals in the bolted-down iron firepan were also red, as if to match everything else.

She had lost her cloak in the water. One of Kurl's crew had brought her a rough blanket to dry herself. None of them had spoken, or looked at her.

At first she had been so exhausted, she had not cared about her capture. She was confused. Surely Grey must have intended her to capsize, why then have her saved? Perhaps he did not want the responsibility for her death? He could have killed her in the shrine, and had not.

The hostile crew reminded her of the hostile villagers. This bewildered her further. Grey was the magician, they had seen it. How could they think *her* dangerous after he had called the storm-wind?

Eventually he came into the deckhouse.

She thought she should hate him, as before, but she felt no fury, none of her former hunger for reprisal. Instead, she had a most extraordinary sense of relief, because his face was familiar and unafraid.

"Well," she repeated, "what now?"

"What now indeed. Aren't you going to blast me with your magic? You note they did not tie you up. No rope, of course, could hold you."

"Why are they in fear of me? After what you did—"

He smiled. His wolf teeth fascinated her. "I told them *you* did it. You were an accomplished witch; you brought the storm. I only tried to avert it with my poor and evidently feeble spells. When you fell in the sea, you should have heard them cheer. I made them rope the yard and fish you up. I said a ducking in water washes the witch-skill out of a woman until next full moon, and it would be bad luck to let you drown. How about that for a clever story? They'd believe anything if you make it sound silly enough. Anyway, you did lose your magic in the lake, did you not?"

When the wind came, you panicked like a goose with the wolf after it."

"You choose your words aptly," she said, "Grey Wolf."

She had anticipated this tide would bring his malice to the surface, but it did not. His eyes went suddenly pale and sightless, as if he felt the onset of an old sickness which he knew and dreaded.

She recalled the voice in her ear as she was drowning, the voice which had nagged her alive. Grey's voice.

Oaive began to talk slowly, feeling her path to each sentence: "You could have stolen the Relic without visiting the shrine beforehand—yet you came, and in your fashion you told me what you meant to do. You realised I must go after you. You put trouble in my road—but I overcame it. Perhaps you knew I could. When I lost you, there was still a kind of guidance, as if I were *meant* to find you. The tunic on the scarecrow was like a signpost. And you wasted time in the town when you could have moved swiftly. You hired the gaudiest ship... you summoned the storm and you could have been rid of me in it. Instead—"

"You should have mastered the storm," he said to her. Amazed, she watched his face grow bleak with anger. "You could have mastered it. The power's there in you, if only you had the brain to harness it."

"So you wished me to—*overcome* your magic? It was a test of me? You are disappointed that I failed. Why?"

He stared at her, long, and very intently. She could meet any pair of eyes, it was in her training. But his eyes were not easy to meet. She could not read them, and somehow they demanded to be read.

"I can't tell you," he said in the end. "Maybe you'll reason it for yourself. It's a strange game we're playing, you and I. Though there is a third player also. He doesn't know it yet."

She said hesitatingly: "You appear to want my help; I can see no other reason for your actions. But you are more powerful than I."

"Am I? What is power?" he said.

"A spell is power."

"Spells are words, and words are merely noises. The spell is the crucible in which the ore of the magic is formed. But the magician is the stuff of the ore. I imagine not all the priestesses of your shrine were as clever as you—or were they chosen in some special manner that determined who would possess power? Anyone can learn the chants and gestures of the occult art; they can get every syllable and wave of the arm exact, but if there's no magic in them, there will be no magic made. Otherwise this world would be crowded with wizards, would it not?"

"I was instructed in these things."

"You are the sorceress, not your instruction. Don't limit yourself. I judged a while since what you might be capable of. When I went to your shrine and I found you sitting at your loom, like any fisherman's houseproud daughter, I thought nothing more of you than another. But when you brought down the fire, your worth shone

through you like the flame. Then I thought: Here is a witch with witch-hair like tawny pale metal, and she can wring water from stone and set hills jumping. You proved me right till the storm, Oaive."

He had never spoken her name before. He must have asked it of the fisher-people. It made a curious bond between them, she was not certain why it should. What he said of her magic frightened and excited her. Yet she seemed half to recognise the truth of it, dimly, like figures in fog.

She said: "Give me back the Bone you stole, the Relic. I promise I will try to help you."

"Ah, no," he said, "you miss the point. I must take the Bone, and you must track me. I am bound. It is the game I mentioned."

"This is foolish."

"The binding that was laid on me was far from that," he said, and his mouth was white.

"Am I to follow you blindly, as if we had never had this meeting?"

"Yes."

"If you tell me nothing," she said, "I can do nothing."

"I will tell you my name," he said softly. "Yes, even though you could use my name to harm me. I am called Grey by many, but by a very few I am called Cyrdin. I tell you partly for selfish ends. One day I may need you to call me by that name. Perhaps you will not. Who knows?"

"Cyrdin," she said. A welling of compassion thrust within her. "Grey Cyrdin."

"I was born grey-haired," he said. "They gathered from that portent I should be a great sage and sorcerer. This hair shaped my life, such as my life is."

A man pushed open the door of the deckhouse. It was the one the crew tagged Dog for his long pointer's nose. His coming changed the mood between them. Dog carried a jug and a loaf. He put them near the fire-pan, and went out, glancing neither at Oaive nor Grey.

"Tonight," Grey said to her, "eat and sleep here. Tomorrow we resume our roles of hunter and quarry. At dawn, Kurl will weigh anchor. You'd best be gone by then. I have a notion the crew plan to sell you as a slave in River's Mouth Town—that's if you show no symptoms of returning witchery. On the other hand, they may get scared and throw you overboard, despite my advice. Once ashore you should be safe enough. It's but half a day's trek to the river. After that, seek my trail on the mountain road."

"First, how shall I cross to the shore?"

He smiled at her. "Make magic," he said. She stared at him. "Truly. I am not joking with you. There are a thousand ways for an adept to get dry over water. I explained my faith in your ability. Are you going to give up, and let me steal the Bone?"

"If I am as powerful as you make me out, I could kill you here, and take the Bone



immediately," she said with bitter emphasis.

"Do it," he said, "I dare you." And grinned and went out of the door.

Oaive reached for the jug the man had left her. She drank the sour wine. She felt betrayed, almost humiliated, because she had stopped hating Grey. But it was no good. She could not condemn or fight him any more. She sensed him in the grip of a terror and tragedy worse than any she had experienced or observed. And he had trusted her with his true name, although, as a witch, she might turn it against him. What he had told her, what he said she must do made no logic. Yet she found herself willing to do it.

She bowed her head and began to concentrate in upon her own mind, searching.

In the half-light moments before dawn, she went like a shadow to the prow of the Red Ship. Kurl himself was aft, keeping watch by the wheel. The lake was glass.

Oaive let fall the rug she had taken from the deckhouse. It settled and spread like blood on the water. She had no spell; she leaned towards it. "Bear me up," she murmured. "Bear me up as if I were weightless."

Kurl heard the murmuring. He swivelled in her direction but could not make her out, for she had shut her eyes. Lids fast closed, she got over the rail and let herself down upon the rug. Her feet touched the wool. Her mouth was parched. She would not let herself think what she did. The rug would carry her. She had no weight.

The rug was not wet. It dipped a fraction, no more. She grasped her brain in a vice.

To the shore now. Swift as a gull!

The rug darted forward eagerly, taking her with it. She opened her eyes. Cold as ice, and sweating with a fear she dared not let herself feel. If she doubted, she would sink. It was that simple.

The rug danced, carrying her. The water shattered before them.

Behind her, Kurl bellowed. He had seen her. She had no time or emotion to spare for him.

The shore came closer, a pebbled shore, glittering as the sun rose and started to strike sparks on it. Oaive's desperation to reach it was like an iron plant growing in her spine. She ached with it. She pulled herself towards the shore by her will and her eyes.

Then the rug ran up on to the pebbles.

Oaive cried out. Strength deserted her, but the ground was firm and safe. She had succeeded, worked the magic without spells, by her will alone. As Grey had told her she could. She began to laugh. Half-turning, she saw the Red Ship aswarm with its crew.

The sail splayed to the wind, and it fled across the lake, away from her.

Oaive laughed, holding pebbles in her hand.

## *Land of White Swords*



A waterfall crashed in the lake, its sound broadening and retreating on the wind. The town of River's Mouth stood nearby, exactly where the lake narrowed and the river began. There was a wall about the town and behind the town another wall, this one of low mountains. They tumbled up at the sky, and the river wound away into them, shining.

Oaive avoided the town. From the slope she had seen a scarlet sail among the shipping and Kurl and his men might have talked about witches. She did not blame them. What she had done alarmed her, too. She took the track that ran beyond the town, the beginning of the mountain road.

At the river-ford they were selling shaggy ponies for the uplands. Grey might have purchased one in order to keep ahead of her. She had given over puzzling about his motives. A new truth was fastening on her.

Circumstances had prevented her speaking the Ritual yesterday and today, but this was not what troubled her. She had *forgotten* she should speak it until long after the hour was past. She had told the Elders she would not forget. When the sun set this evening, behind the heights, she halted, and chanted the old words with extra care.

She knew in her heart the quest had altered for her. The shrine was fading from her mind like a lamp going out. Grey had become the quest, and the Relic of Bone merely a symbol. He was like a question she must answer. So much she understood, though she felt shamed by her unintentional faithlessness to her people.

She met a shepherd in the dusk driving his flock. With her last coin she bought from him ewe's milk, and bread. He was a big dark man, unlike the shepherd-folk of the shrine villages.

She slept on a mountain that night, and next day walked over others. She was now used to seeing and doing things that were strange to her. Strangeness itself was becoming usual.

The road terminated abruptly on the second day, at a tiny crow's nest of a town, perched against the sheer wall of a crag. The crag seemed to be the last of all the heights, large enough to block out anything beyond it.

In the winding street, a woman said to Oaive: "I never before saw hair your colour. You must be the one."

"Which one is that?"

"The one the grey man told me to spy out for."

This was new. Despite their conversation on the ship, Oaive had been half-expecting fresh obstacles and tests left in her path.

"Maybe I am she. What then?"

"Not much." The woman laughed, pleased with her errand and the importance of it. She led Oaive into a stooping house, and gave her a thick cloak of woven stuff and a packet of food. "He says you will need these," said the woman, for Oaive was staring. "He says go through the Rock Gate and take the pony-track down. And then, he says, guess the route as you did before." The woman's eye corners crinkled. "Odd goings-on, I must remark."

"Where is the Rock Gate?" Oaive asked.

"I will take you, if you will tell my hand."

"Did he say I would do that?"

"He said you are a witch," said the woman, "but I'm thinking he's fond. What witch would go footsore as you do, when she might fly?"

"What witch indeed," said Oaive.

She read the woman's palm swiftly. She was to have luck, which cheered them both.

This was an icy day. Oaive put on the cloak Grey had bought or stolen for her, and was glad of it. The woman conducted her through the town. At the back of the highest street stood the wall of the crag. When they were close, Oaive saw a stairway and, at the bottom, an archmouth cut in the rock face.

"Here's the gate. This is the way he went. Not many come or go through this door."

Oaive touched the woman's shoulder, and stepped under the arch. It was a passage, black-chill but not long, which wormed through the mountain. She looked back once, and the woman was waving from the entrance. The omens were not good—the dark tunnel, the signal of farewell... Then Oaive came to the rock's other mouth, and paused.

The world had altered. She was in another country.

The crag descended to the floor of the plain below in terraces. The plain itself was slate-blue with shadow and distance. Far to the north a lost curl of the river was gleaming. Otherwise the view looked empty, clear to the horizon. There were new mountains there, not like these she had already travelled. They were slender and pointed. They stood in a rank like teeth set in the jaw of the land. She realised they must be immensely high, for their heads flashed burning white with snow. Oaive studied them, recognising their shape as if she gazed on her own birthplace, rather than Grey's.

More than teeth, they resembled swords, dipped in white blood, balanced on their hilts against the sky...

The plain was barren and bitter cold. When the sun set, the sword mountains

turned black and terrible against its redness.

Five days she was on the plain, for weather and terrain made things harsh for her, and difficult. She met neither animals nor men. Sometimes she passed a ruin. Trees grew here and there, marking brackish watercourses. Maybe in spring the landscape would wake, but she did not think so. It was as though a plague had passed over it, killing everything, and then even the plague had died.

Thin snow sprinkled down. At night she created fire. The light and crackle of the flames seemed to echo all over the desolation. She considered the woman's words, how, she had said, a witch would fly. Oaive wondered dazedly if she could. Grey would tell her she could.

She reached the mountains on the sixth day.

They did not look real. They shimmered like effigies of polished marble. The plain meandered in valleys around and between them. She found a sort of road of cracked stone, and hail began to smash on it.

When the hail slackened, she stared up and saw that the road ended half a mile away, because a mountain had fallen in its path. This had occurred perhaps a thousand years before. A massive jumble of blocks, its highest tips were still blanched with snow; forest had fastened on its rifts like ivy on a collapsed building. The other mountains stood aloof, ignoring it. Their time, no doubt, would also come.

The forest called Oaive, but its voice was a wail of pain. She wanted to run away, it was so strong, this impression of distress.

She went on, towards the first swathe of trees.

Oaive dreamed she was a bird. She was flying over the fallen mountain. It was huge, the mountain. It stretched for miles, and between its bones and away and away to the west beyond it ran the evergreen forest.

Even the river came back from the north to forge a channel southwards through the trees below the mountain. The course was narrow here, but on its banks were the ruins of many villages. Young pines pushed through their walls. Oaive flew in at broken window-shutters, and out, as the wind did.

At sunrise, in the dream, she came on a towered stone house, standing on the eastern side of the river nearest the mountain. Inside the courtyard was a choked well. The wind had scoured through the open door, and left cones and twigs on the floor of a great lightless hall. The vast hearth was empty. A wide stairway led to upper rooms. In one of them a four-footed beast resolved itself from the cobwebs into a bed with a frame of carved pinewood.

Oaive perched on a post of the bed. A ray like sunshine sprang across the chamber. For a second she saw a little boy, not more than three years old, running and laughing there in some private child's game. His hair shone like pale iron.

Then she heard wolves.

They were all about her—in the house.

Their voices were composed of sadness and evil.

Oaive opened her eyes and sat up. She had been asleep beneath the trees, but now the sun was gliding above the forest. There were no wolves, no sound but the rushing of boughs.

The old man came unexpectedly towards her out of the forest. He was stooping awkwardly, picking up sticks and adding them to a bundle on his back. When he glimpsed her, he looked terrified, and when she spoke he turned and groped away.

After that, Oaive began to feel the forest was watching her, that hidden people observed her with morbid dislike. At noon she passed through a clearing. Three well-kept huts stood there, but the doors were fast shut and there were no signs of life, despite the smoke leaving their chimneys. She sensed ears straining and hands at mouths, and went on.

She made towards the river she had seen when she slept. She believed the dream had been true in some oblique fashion, and so was not surprised when she caught the glint of water below.

The sun was low when she reached the river's edge. It was as she had foreseen it, the channel matted with weeds, the ruins decaying on its banks. She felt a compulsion to seek the stone house. She did not want to meet the dusk in the open.

She found the house between one step and the next. The round moon was rising among its towers. This was Grey's home; he had been born under its gaunt roof to the sigh of the pines, as she had been born to the sighing of sea tides.

The door hung on its hinges. The floor was littered with twigs, as in the dream. Everything was like the dream, the hearth, the stairs, the shadows.

Oaive shivered. The house did not frighten her, but she felt an anguish in it.

She pushed closed the door, and spoke words to bind it closed. She spoke a word to the hall, telling its ghosts: Be still. Gathering twigs from the floor, she set them on the hearth, and called fire out of herself.

It was hard to do, as if her magic did not want to help her in this place. The glow sped down her arm, at last, and burst upon the wood.

The flames filled the room with sudden brilliance, and she saw then the man who sat on the far side of the hearth from her, where the darkness had been before.

Her heart hit her breastbone. She kept perfectly still and made herself stare right at him, and she feared him at once.

The face of the man was very long and white. It was like the faces of the sword mountains; even the features, though curiously elongated, were almost flat, like an unfinished carving. He was heavily cloaked and hooded. The hood cast a shade over his unprominent brows, but she could see the eyes. They were impossible to describe. They were the colour of malevolence.

His mouth was virtually lipless, a slash. It opened, and he said: "You shall call me by the name of Niwus. You will need to name me. We are to have dealings together."

Oaive continued staring into his eyes. She gathered herself. "You tell me a name," she said. Her tone was steady and cool as she had made it be. "You tell me nothing else."

"I tell you much. You read my person. What do you read in me?"

"Great power," she said. It would have been stupid to deny it.

"You are right. *Great* power. What else?"

"You would have me presume," she said.

"The sea witch is exact. Sharp eye and sharp brain the eye serves. We are both priests. My shrine is here, some way up the fallen mountain, close to the sky, Oaive."

"I respect your wisdom, priest-lord. You know my name and where I come from; you knew that I would enter this house. Accept my homage."

"I will accept it, when it is truly given. I gained this knowledge not from my powers, but from my servant. I hazard you think I speak of a familiar or demon. No, Oaive. I speak of the grey man who stole the Relic from your shrine. For you see, he thieved the Bone for me, for White Niwus the priest. His Master."

Her mind ebbed to a sort of numb darkness. She remembered the boy from the fisher-village informing her excitedly: "...the stranger laughed—he said it was his penance to travel in winter—a priest laid it on him..." and she remembered too how Grey had murmured: "...there is a third player also."

"Does this surprise you?" Niwus asked her. His voice smiled; he did not. He would never smile. "Yes. It was my word he acted on. At all times. I foresaw that you would pursue the Relic, yet I told him he must provoke and anger you, put trials and barriers in your way. You would never have consented to journey here willingly. But you were proud, Oaive, jealous of your charge. You must pit your wits against the impudent stranger. You must hunt him down and vanquish him. Grey has been an excellent quarry, has kept your interest in the chase until the very end. And now you look into the snare, and you find a different animal from the one you sought."

"He gave you the Bone," Oaive said. "I am not necessary to your scheme."

"Wrong. You were the guardian of your shrine and the things of the shrine. This gives you an uncanny sympathy with the Bone—a link—which obviously you do not properly appreciate. I might acquire this sympathy, but it would take time, and I have wasted too much time already. You do not even understand the nature of the Bone, do you? Or my need of it?"

She thought of what Grey had said to her, that power came from within the magician himself, not really from ritual or spell or object. She wondered if Niwus had been told of their meeting on the Red Ship. Grey himself had seemed a mighty worker of magic. It came to her abruptly that the sorcery had not been his, but the loan of Niwus, intended to aid Grey on his master's business.

"Where is Grey?" Oaive said.

"He will be here directly. I have summoned him in a manner he recognises. This was his home once. He was born here. This hall was very different then. There were tapestries and lamps. His mother worked coloured thread at a great loom with

silver lion's feet, and the black and red hounds of Grey's father lay before the hearth, growling over their meaty scraps. That family ruled all the region in those days. When Grey was birthed, he was heir to chests of bright coin and miles of rich land. And the priest lived humbly upon the mountain. It is a strange story that altered things."

Despite the binding spell she had set upon it, the door cracked suddenly open. Grey stood there, his wolf-skin cloak folded about him. His face was like a stone. He did not look at her, but came up the hall to Niwus.

Oaive said gently: "Tell me the story now, if you will, priest-lord."

"Yes. Maybe I shall. Or better, Grey here shall tell you."

Grey's eyes were fixed intently on nothing.

"What shall I tell the witch, my master?"

"Tell her the story of the nobleman's small son and the poor priest on the rock."

Grey began to speak, casually and lightly.

"When the nobleman's son was born with grey hair, they thought it was a sign on him of occult gifts. Actually, this was not so much the nobleman's belief as the conviction of the villages along the river which gave him fealty. However, Grey's mother heard the talk, and she too became convinced. She persuaded her husband that they should send the boy for instruction to the hermit-priest on the mountain. He was a devout man, this priest, and skilled in magic. But one winter he grew sick, and on a particular night he died. And this was how the nobleman's son—the boy I am calling 'Grey'—found him in the morning; bolt upright in his chair, and cold dead."

Grey paused. "Here is the amusing part of the story, isn't it, my master?" he asked, but Niwus never stirred. "Grey was thirteen years old, and he was afraid when he discovered the priest. He comprehended his tutor was dead, but he wildly dreamed that perhaps he could restore him. As a healer, the priest had access to a number of spells of cadamancy, the art which has to do with death. The boy had seen the tablets on which they were written, though the priest had forbidden him even to touch the box where they were locked. Now, in his grief, the boy smashed open the box and took out the tablets, and worked the spell; his sorrow and fear gave him the strength to call the magic. But the thing he drew was not the soul of the priest, which had already travelled too far to return. The conjuration attracted instead a wanderer, one of those spirits whose attachment to this world makes them chary of the next. Not all of them are evil, but many are. This one was old; it had wandered a great while and forgotten its past. Yet instinctively it seized the chance to live again in flesh. The spirit entered the body of the priest and, in doing so, absorbed the knowledge and the sorcerous science the priest had stored in his brain. When the boy saw flickerings of consciousness in the eyes and limbs of his tutor, he rejoiced. Then he found out his mistake. The rest of the story is very simple. The name of the spirit, or at least the name it manufactured for itself, was Niwus, and by that name it bound me. This was done in a moment. The priest had possessed understanding of sorceries he never used, being a good man, but Niwus did not reject these branches of learning. For six years since, I have served him.

During those years the appearance of the priest's body has changed greatly. You will note, he resembles something unfinished, or bloodless. This is a reflection of his nature. Oh, Niwus doesn't mind how I insult him. He admits I have reason."

Niwus spoke. "You have not told her of your father."

"Ah. My father. I guessed we should come to that. Yes. He set himself against the magician, to get me free. It was a hopeless battle, and he lost it."

"Rather more," said Niwus quietly.

"Rather more? Very well. Oaive has seen what shape I become, she imagined, at my own will." Grey glanced at her for the first and only time, then away. "The snow was down, I remember, and Niwus stood in the snow outside this house, and he whistled me and I must come like his dog. I was sixteen. It was a feast day, and there were many in the hall, and the villagers had bonfires burning by the river, glittering in the water. My father came to the doorway, and he called his men to him, and the men of the villages too. He defied Niwus. He shouted to God to defend him, and drew his sword. Then Niwus said words. You could see them as he spoke them. They showed like mist on the air, and after that they faded. And as they faded, the spell in them took hold.

"My father sank on his knees. His mouth slavered, his hair grew down his back and over his arms. In the hall my mother screamed, but her scream was altered halfway. My father's hunting dogs were round the hearth. All at once they began to yelp and howl, and the whole mass of them burst out of the door and fled. Not a man or a woman of my family, not a man who stood beside my father, did the spell miss. Niwus had cursed us into wolves, Oaive, and wolves we remain. We *are* wolves. Except for Grey. The magician sometimes changes him to a man. But when Grey is wolf, his brain is nearly a wolf's brain."

Again Grey stopped.

Again Niwus spoke. "Tell her about the black wolf."

"Yes," Grey said, "the black wolf-skin I wear. It's a sort of joke of my master's that I should. I killed the black wolf, not with knife or bow, but by sinking my teeth in his throat when I was as he was. He was the leader of the pack. Wolves will fight for pack leadership. Now I am leader."

"Who?" said Niwus. "Who was the black wolf that you killed, whose pelt you wear as my joke?"

Grey's eyes were white with the tide of fury and pain so hardly held back. His voice was noncommittal.

"My father was the black wolf. I killed my father."

Oaive held her breath. The air seemed thick with poison. She looked at Grey, then she looked at Niwus. Niwus murmured something. The word seemed to hurt her ears, even her mind. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, Grey was gone.

At the edge of the firelight a grey wolf half-stood, half-cringed. Its irises were slots of silver. It snarled deep in its chest, watching the magician.



"Go, wolf," said Niwus, "go bawl at the moon." And the wolf flung round, and ran from the hall into the night.

## 5

### *Black Room, Black Road*



Oaive sat in the dark. She was trying to think what she should do.

With her eyes shut, it was easy to pretend she was back in the shrine by the sea, and the noise of the forest was the sound of the waves. For a moment she let herself pretend this. But it was no use. It was no answer.

Niwus had been gone three or four hours. He had told her that in the morning, at dawn, she would come after him to the top of the fallen mountain. That was where the hermit-priest's dwelling was. That was where Niwus would work magic with the Bone, and she would help him. She did not want to help, to participate in his game of cold sorceries, but she knew he could make her do so. His power was everywhere, like the smell of the winter itself. She had dared use none of her own abilities in his presence. She had not argued or spoken at all.

She thought of Grey. Of wolves.

She must not think of these things. She must think of a plan. She stared into the burned-out hearth.

The sun woke her. Its light edged under the lopsided door. She had been dozing. She had not thought of a plan.

Then she felt it. It was like a rope tied about her, tugging.

Niwus was calling her.

She thought: He *needs* me for this spell. I am important.

Outside, she paused long enough to say the Ritual before starting her climb.

The land shelved up steeply from the river-bank. It had taken her almost all day yesterday to cross the mountain's shanks and reach the river, but here there were ancient trackways that enabled her to move quickly.

Just before noon the trees began to thin, and she could see great distances again, across the forest to the lower valleys and their stalagmite peaks. Then she saw a building outlined above her on the flashing air. Compact and dark, it suggested to her an animal crouching to spring, but when she got closer, she found how dilapidated it was. Part of the outer wall of the hermitage was down, and wild plants sprawled on the stone. It stood out on an empty treeless plateau. The sky looked near as a roof.

Oaive went to the arch in the ruined wall, through the courtyard, and came to the main chamber, a hall one storey high. Inside the doorless doorway she could discern only blackness. It was like the shrine. She wished she were back there.

"Niwas," she said, "I am here."

Someone spoke to her out of the blackness. "Enter then."

She could see no alternative. She obeyed.

It was pitch-dark, despite the opening behind her. After a moment she made out another door ahead. The lintel and the upright of the door glowed very faintly.

"Walk this way," the voice said. It was Niwas' voice, unembodied, floating in space.

When she passed through the door, she was in a room that appeared to be much larger than any room in the hermitage could possibly be. The high domed ceiling was pierced by small slits of windows that she had not seen from outside. A cool unnatural daylight shafted down from them into the area beneath. Each of the shafts was distinct from the rest, and they crossed each other like broad silver threads, with the gloom between still thick as wool.

At the room's centre stood an altar of granite. Beyond it, in the beam of one of the light shafts, Niwas was sitting in a tall-backed chair.

"Oaive," he said immediately, "call fire to the altar."

She took a step before she meant to. She stopped herself.

"If I am to assist your magic, tell me what it is to be, so I can do my part properly."

He said nothing. He held up a hand of pale twig-like fingers. On the smallest finger was a ring of yellow gold. He had the Relic, the tiny narrow bit of Bone. He was rolling it like a plaything, back and forth, between thumb and forefinger.

"Here it is," he said. "It's very powerful. I don't know why. Perhaps it is only because generations of priestesses have venerated it, and built up its power. You venerate it, do you not?"

Oaive had caught back a cry. For it was more than veneration. It was like regaining her lost child, or a treasure from the sea.

"From the beginning of this second life of mine," he said, "I have sought the Bone and its magic. I do not recall what life I lived before this. I lost my memories when I lost my flesh. Now, I daily forget the memories of my spirit-existence since I have flesh again. Yet, from the very first, it always seems to me, I sought the Bone and its magic. I knew it. It is a sort of dread, and a sort of yearning. Presently and together we will bind it with spells. Then I shall grind it in powder. I shall eat it; its sorcery will pass into my blood, become part of me. I shall not have to fear or seek it any more. Its magic will be mine."

"No " she said.

He looked at her. "No?" he asked. "No?"

She trembled, barely knew what she was saying. It was idiocy to defy him, yet she

did it.

"No, I will not help you."

"I will make you help."

"You cannot," she said. "You dare not harm me, you need my assistance. If I refuse, you can do nothing."

"I can punish you," he said. "I can cause you to wish you had not invited my impatience."

She felt her rebellion like rock inside her.

"Do that," she said.

There was a shift in his eyes as if a worm had twisted through the sockets behind them. Then he blinked out like a candle flame.

The light of the high windows died. It was blind black; she could see nothing. She circled involuntarily about and her hand slapped on stone. She groped along it. She went on and on. There was no longer any break in the wall that she could find, no way out.

He was gone, and he had trapped her in the belly of the hermitage, if this really were the building she had seen at all... The black pressed between her lids like fingers trying to thrust her eyes more deeply into her head.

She lost her balance abruptly. In the dark she could scarcely tell up from down. She made herself sit on the cold floor. She quietened herself. She spoke spells of unbinding. They did no good. Of course, the prison might be entirely an illusion.

She leaned back on the wall, and tried to call fire from herself, to give her light. It would not come. The magic he had worked here was too great. What spell was left her?

*Spells are words, and words are merely noises. You are the sorceress, not your instruction. Don't limit yourself.*

But, Grey, I cannot even call fire.

Despair clawed up inside her. She began to weep. She had not shed tears since she was a child.

A man was walking over the snow. His feet and his long cloak made blue runnels in its whiteness. There was no sound in the forest. Then sound began to come in snatches from one direction only.

Emerging from the trees behind the man, she located the sound. Bonfires were leaping all along the river bank, reflecting in the water. There was music, pipes and stamping, the chink of bells.

Above, on the slope, the towered stone house, the snow trampled into slush about it by countless feet. Torches blazed in the courtyard, and the open door of the hall exhaled light.

The man whistled. She knew he did, though she did not hear him. He stopped

still about twenty paces from the wall.

Grey came from the entrance in the wall. He was younger and very pale. He nodded to the man in the snow, and began to walk towards him. Then there was shouting. The sound of pipes and dancing ended. Somebody strode out after Grey. This man was tall, twice Grey's age, with coal-black hair. A sword pointed from his hip. He shouted and men ran to him, from the house, from the villages below, burning branches in their hands, knives, staves and stones.

"This is the end of it," Grey's father said. "You will grant my family peace."

The man in the snow did not reply.

Grey said: "Father, let it alone, let me go with him."

"Be silent. You have done enough. Now I will undo it. God is my defence." He called out to the sky, and the sword grated from its scabbard.

Then Niwus spoke.

"You howl like a wolf, and the pack bay at your heels. You shall be what you seem."

Oaive struggled to wake, to leave the dream. She did not want to see. But she saw it all. The words on the air like smoke, the men falling to their knees, and the change which remade them. She heard the women scream, and their voices break midway into beasts' wailing. She saw the hounds run out of the hall with their eyes starting from their heads.

After that she woke up, but it was not like waking. She felt as if her soul fell back into her, as if it had gone travelling. She remembered then the other dream, how she had seen the house, and Grey as a child, playing there...

There was a gleam in the blackness. She flinched from it. Little whirling specks of brilliance came together and formed Niwus, or his shape, at the other end of the room.

"I have returned for your answer," he said.

She did not know how long she had been here; it seemed to have been days, but her mood had altered. Her tears and her dreams had honed her mind in a fashion she did not properly understand.

"You shall have my answer," she said wearily. "I am sick of the dark. Let me free, and I will do whatever you want."

"Excellent," he said.

He spoke a word to the shadows. They folded like cloth and packed themselves away.

She saw the hermitage as it truly was, at last. Dusk shone dully through the broken roof on the weeds and cracked walls. He stood by the altar.

"Come here," he said. "Call fire as I asked you before."

She walked slowly to the altar, moving dejectedly. She called fire. It was easy,

now he was allowing her to practise her magic. The flames whirled on the stone. She accepted the fact that when she had helped him create the spell, her usefulness would be done. He would probably kill her.

The Bone lay on his palm. He offered it to her. "Take that, and consider what it was to you—that is how the sympathy is established between it and you. Then say what I tell you to say."

She hung her head as she took the Bone. But when her fingers closed around it a ragged surf of joy and confidence dashed over her, and almost made her betray herself.

Standing there, as if utterly wretched, she began to put on her Aura, and assumed it suddenly. The unseen glory sprang up about her, she felt weightless, towering. Then she stared at him.

Niwus' face was expressionless. She had never noted an expression on his face.

"Why do you do that?" he asked. He did not trust her, but neither did he fear her. She had surprised him when he thought her tame.

The Aura was at its peak. She raised her arm and cast down it the bolt of energy the Aura could be formed into. The light and the strength went from her, stunning and shocking her. She saw it explode from the fist with the Bone locked in it.

There was a flash like lightning. Niwus reeled aside. He made no noise, but she knew the charge had struck him, and he had had no shield.

Now there were only minutes—or seconds, for he was horrifyingly powerful—in which to escape, evade pursuit, hide herself.

She was recovering from the blow she had dealt. She fled by the altar, through two doorways, and came out on to the bare plateau.

She ran and scrambled towards the first trees. Branches whipped at her, but she snatched them to aid her progress down. Once she skidded and fell, but she never let go of the Bone in her fist.

When she had to pause for breath, she glanced back. Through the trees she could still just see the crown of the hermitage against the pallid darkness of the sky. Nothing moved on the plateau. Yet.

When she could neither run nor walk any farther, she chose the only refuge she could. She climbed a quarter of the length up the gnarled pillar of a cedar. Its boughs were broad as beams, and broader. She rested between them, the layers of foliage angling away below her. It was not safe here, but safer than on the ground.

The forest had seemed to have no end. She could not find a way out of it. Sometimes she had glimpsed the river, but never come to it. Even allowing for her agitation and the overcast, moonless night, she suspected a web of sorcery trapped her on the mountain. She had been aware of no pursuit, which troubled rather than reassured her.

Exhausted, she laid her head on the mast of the tree. She did not mean to sleep, but she slept at once.

The cold woke her.

When she opened her eyes, the tree appeared to be soaring upwards through a maelstrom of white ribbons. In the end she grasped that it was not the tree which was flying, but snow coming down.

She pulled her cloak over her head, and curled herself into it. It had been snowing a long while before it roused her, the blackness of the tree was already heavily patched with white.

Finally, the snow stopped. Beyond and beneath the cedar the forest was quite different. The trees were like menacing white animals with shaggy coats and no faces.

Shadows flicked between the trees. To begin with, it might only have been the sheer whiteness bothering her sight. However, when the shadows thickened and drew closer, she could no longer believe that. A sombre river was tumbling down through the forest towards her. It made no sound, but it had eyes. Wolves.

They loped all together, not hurrying, but steady, darting in and out of the trunks. There were many of them; she could not judge how many. They had been men once, and women, but now they had forgotten. They were only wolves. Niwus' wolves, his slaves and subjects. Niwus had sent them to track her.

The tide of wolves came in over the snow, and burst around the cedar.

They might have been all the same wolf, each silent, each staring up at her. When she looked straight down through the boughs, burnished eyes shone from between the roots of the tree.

If she shut her own eyes, would the spell of invisibility work? She shut her eyes, but she could trace no power in herself. She was too tired, too afraid. Grey had been right, then. It was not the spell but the vitality of the sorceress that mattered.

The wolves were pawing at the foot of the cedar. They began to whine and grunt to each other. Farther off, one let out a full-throated iron howling. The howl smote inside Oaive's head and her hair rose. Other wolves began to howl. The howls blended in different metallic colours.

Suddenly there was a disturbance right through the middle of the pack. A tall cloaked man was parting them like grass. Niwus. They leapt aside from him, biting and fighting their neighbours out of their way. He moved to where she could see him.

"While you were useful, you might have lived, witch. Now I cannot trust you, you will not live. I shall call you down. You will not resist. You will give me back the Bone. Then I will give you to them, my servants under the tree."

She had put the Bone in her belt when she climbed the cedar. She took it and gripped it in her hand. She knew a fear worse than any she had ever known.

How could she build a barrier against the magician?

She squeezed her eyes shut again. She held the Bone against her face. She thought of the shrine by the sea.

She could hear Niwus speaking the words to force her down from the tree. If she

listened she would have to obey him. She must not listen to Niwus, but to the boughs which hummed in the wind like waves. Yes, it was working. The shrine was her home where she had grown and learned. She was sliding away from Niwus, deep into her own mind, towards the shrine, the House of the Bone...

Yes. This was clever.

She could not hear Niwus any more.

She could hear instead a priestess, speaking the Ritual in the shrine. It began with one voice, but shortly there were countless voices. She was hearing all the priestesses who had ever served the shrine. She was reaching back, back into the past of the shrine, back to its beginning, to the Relics themselves, which were the source of the shrine's holiness.

*A Ring, a Stone,*

*A Finger-Bone—*

Abruptly, she was no longer in the cedar. She was running on a black road in a black mist, and something hopped before her—the Bone.

She had let it fall and it had taken on life. It was leading her towards a place she could not see in the dark. The prayers of the priestesses had faded, or rather become part of the sea-murmur beyond the mist. *Beyond the mist*—even as she raced on, the phrase struck her. It was the expression the villages on the coast had used, when they meant the unknown terrain that strangers came from. How curious to think of that now...

The sensation of ground under her feet ended. She was falling. Then the mist tore open, and she dropped through it, out of night into the harsh brilliance of a winter dawn.

Oaive knew where she was, and how she came there. She had travelled in time. And in place.

In desperation, she had dared match her own power against Niwus, and that power had pushed her across geography and across centuries, to the one sanctuary that might protect her and strengthen her—the site of the shrine. This was the era of the making—or discovery—of the Relics. They were the source of the shrine's magic as the shrine was the source of her magic. She had not planned, but instinctively she had catapulted herself into this earlier world to seek them and to seek their history, as a weapon against the magician.

Of course, she had travelled in time before. They were not after all dreams, when she had seen Grey as a child, or the casting of Niwus' curse. Now, however, she had not journeyed alone in mind, or spirit—which had given her the illusion of dream—but in flesh. She was *physically* present.

Oaive opened her fist. The Bone was gone. She had guessed it must be. It was only another proof that she should seek it again here. The Bone had led her here. It

was her magnet.

She did not feel any panic or bewilderment. She did not ask herself if, having entered the past, she could return to her present. This was because she had experienced, for the first time and to the full, the might of her own sorcery. She marvelled. Grey had told her; if she would believe in herself, she could do all she must.

Presently she looked about. In the east, the sea rolled at ebb-tide. The bay was shallower than she remembered it. Behind, the spine of the western hills was sharper and more cruel than it would come to be, licked smooth by centuries of rain and sun. There was no shrine; they would build that later. There was an altar, though: a rough stone black with fire, jutting up from the headland.

On the mud flats below the cliff a few men and women were walking, looking for edible shipwrecks, crabs or mussels. Sometimes they would dig in the mud with knives of dark red metal.

The sun stood the width of two hands above the water. Oaive turned and went to the altar. She began to say the Ritual.

Gradually she became aware of people coming up the cliff path from the beach, and along the brow of the cliff itself. They stopped when they saw her, dead still. None of them talked. Oaive finished the prayer. She called fire. It scalded down her arm, and when the arm glowed, showing its bones, the crowd whispered round her. Flame bloomed on the altar.

Oaive looked at the people.

Their faces were blocky, primitive, full of admiration and fear. But it was not the kind of blind fear that made them run away.

She smiled at them, experimentally, and they showed their teeth back at her.

One of the men came up and spoke to her. He was not as tall as Oaive. The words he uttered were in a language she could grasp; it was like her own, yet bizarre, and with a different accent. She made out that he was the son of the Elder. He was asking her to come with them to their village. Obviously, they recognised and revered magic. He was saying could she heal a sick child?

She answered very slowly, looking at him to see if he understood. She would do whatever she could to help them. The man nodded vigorously. Certain gestures—smiles, nods—had remained the same then.

They began to go back along the cliff top, urging her to follow them with movements of their heads and hands.

## 6

### *Blue Cave*



Their village occupied the area where the village of the fisher-people would be. But it was not like the fisher-village. The ground was marshy where it drew off from the sea, and everything was built up on short wooden legs to keep it clear of the wet. The dwellings were huts constructed of mud, with a hole rather than a chimney to let out smoke. There was no long-hall, and the Elder's house was hardly bigger than any of the others.

The Elder's teeth were black with age; his mind seemed to wander, and the younger man recalled him with urgent proddings. Next, Oaive was taken to the hut where the sick child lay. There were several women there who gazed at her hopefully. Oaive tried to explain the herbs they should give to the child, but they only gaped, so she beckoned them to follow and went up to the hill-slopes. She was not absolutely certain she would find growing there anything she knew, but after a time she did. She and the women picked bunches of plants, and took them to the village to seethe in water over the smoky fire.

Oaive had started to identify the speech of the people. It was the Old Tongue—the language in which the Book of Lore would be written. She saw she had never uttered it in the correct accent: she set herself to learn. They had already adopted her into their colony as their healer and priestess. Presumably accustomed to dealing with simple facts simply, they ignored the strangeness of her arrival among them. She was useful, therefore acceptable.

In two days the sick child was well. By then, they had given Oaive a hut to live in, supplied her with food and a pot of the dark red metal in which to cook up her potions. She was the village witch. They were proud of her.

She did not know how long she would have to stay with them, earning their trust, before she could begin to question them. She needed their guidance to find what she sought, but she must move slowly. She had plenty of time—that was the irony. For, however long she lingered among them, she could return to that moment in the cedar tree when she had cast this sorcery, or to any other moment she chose—assuming that she could return at all. She never let herself doubt this, which was harder now.

Yet she felt a responsibility for the village, as she had felt responsible for her own people when she served the shrine. So she worked unremittingly for them. All day, women would slip in and out of her hut, to learn from her, watching the pot of herbs and her hands as intently as dogs looking for scraps. Against her going, Oaive began to teach her craft to the quickest of the little girls that came in with their mothers. It was best to instruct a child; the craft adhered to them better before their brains had been crammed with other things.

Oaive was trying to get the accent right. They would trust her the more if she sounded more like them.

Sunrise and sunset she climbed the path to the altar on the cliff, and said the Ritual. It gave her an odd sensation to speak those words on that windy headland so many years before they would come to be spoken. Truly, she was playing games

with time.

Days went by like waves on the shore. Then a month had gone.

One morning she woke and the snow was down.

The land was a snapping white, and ice lay like green fish-scales at the edges of the sea.

No one went out much that day. They had stored food against the coming of the snow. They had a sort of huddling antipathy to it that kept them in groups. When night fell, they crowded into the Elder's hut. Somehow most of them squashed inside; even the dogs lurked by the door, growling softly. The villagers began to tell stories.

Finally, Oaive walked across to the Elder's hut, carefully stepped over all the dogs, and went among the people. They shoved each other aside to give her room close to the fire, where they could see her. Only the Elder obstinately forgot who she was.

It had occurred to her that she might glean some clue to the Relics from listening to the stories, but she did not. They told of the Cruel Winter King, and the Lord of the Fish, who sometimes sent his folk aground on the beach to feed the village, and sometimes did not, and of the wild demons of the sea. The tales were just like those the shrine villages would tell in the future.

Then a silence fell, and into the silence a man said: "A demon has come to live on the hill. It cries like a wolf, but the wolves never come this way in the cold."

Oaive's blood seemed to alter direction.

"Yes," another man said, "at moon-change I saw fire burning under the hill. When I went near, there was no fire but a blue light in a cave. Someone sat in the cave mouth and looked at me and never moved. His face was white as chalk. It was Lord Death himself, I believe."

Oaive drew in a breath.

Niwus had followed her.

She should have foreseen. Why should he wait? It would be easy for his magic to track her and come after. But then, why sit on the hill, and not seek her here? Perhaps he would, if she did not go to him. Perhaps he would punish these people who had sheltered her, as he had punished Grey's people. Yes. Niwus had meant the man to see him, meant her to hear of it. Niwus wanted her destruction now as badly as he wanted the Bone.

The entire crowd was looking at her. A woman said: "Is it true? Is it Death himself? Which of us has he come for?"

For me, Oaive thought bitterly. She said: "No, it is only a winter demon. He means you no harm, but I will go and make sure."

They murmured, pleased.

There seemed nothing else she could do. Having no longer any room for subtlety,

she said directly: "To make me able to meet the demon, I will need your help. Are there any sacred things that you keep here?"

Again a murmur, this time puzzlement. She had anticipated a variety of reactions; that it should be only this disappointed and depressed her.

The Elder's son frowned. "No, lady. There is nothing."

"Not here? Near the altar?" She frowned. "I must know. I am your priestess."

"But, lady, we would say if we had anything you might find useful."

"A circle of metal," she said, testing them, "a shiny gem, a piece of bone."

Their eyes were beaded with light from the fire, intent and guileless. They would have helped her any way they could, so much was obvious.

The Relics had yet to be found in this era she had come to. She had travelled wrongly, her instinctive magic had misjudged. She must face Niwus alone after all.

I am stronger than I was. I must trust in *myself*.

"I will go tomorrow," she said. A shadow darkened her heart

There were clouds like sharks with open jaws in the sky that morning. At the door of Oaive's hut, one of the little girls was standing with a cake of bread and some heather beer for Oaive's excursion into the hills.

"Will you come home, or shall the demon kill you?" the child asked, harsh yet unmalicious as the ice ramming the bay.

"If he does, I will make the demon go with me to Death's place."

"Good," said the child with approval.

"Will you remember what I have taught you, if I don't return?"

Yes. I remember. About the weeds and the bark in water and the sea-grasses and the words of the spells—and everything. I even know the special thing you say to the stone on the cliff. I have whispered it with you every day for days."

"When you are older, you will be the priestess, maybe."

"Maybe," said the child reflectively. "Then they will give me a hut, too."

Not many came out to see Oaive off. They thought it might be unlucky, and clearly were anxious and guilty that they had not been able to supply her with the mysterious items she had mentioned.

The snow was knee-deep, with a brittle, slippery top layer that broke. It was not pleasant walking on it. She thought: I left by this path once before, or rather, I *will* leave by this path in the future. Strange to admit I might die today, and yet still I shall live there, centuries ahead of myself. But it was not the hour for riddles.

When she was already on the lower slopes, she glanced over her shoulder, and saw the little girl running after her, sometimes falling over and not caring. Oaive stopped and waited.

The child scrambled up to her and stared at her.

"You won't come home. Say farewell to me."

Oaive turned colder than the snow had made her.

"How do you know this?"

"I have a feeling—as you said we should feel it, like tiny feet under the skin."

Evidently the child had witchcraft in her beyond Oaive's teaching. Oaive swallowed down a cindery taste, and smiled at her.

"Farewell, then, and guard your people when you are grown."

"I would rather travel beyond the mist as you have," said the child.

Oaive was startled. "Do you mean travel inland?"

"No. When you came here there was a dark place on the air. I was on the cliff, and I saw. The place was all mist, like a doorway out of a hut in leaf-fall. You jumped down from it, out of the mist. Then it closed up. It was funny," said the child. Her face screwed up, and she giggled. She swung round and skidded off, and her hair burned like a dim smoky flame down the hill.

Her hair is like mine, Oaive thought suddenly. And for some reason that filled her with pride, and with anger. And then the answer struck her like a thunderbolt

The sun was setting when she found the cave. The red light was going down behind the hills when a blue light ignited between them. That was where the cave was.

The way over the ice was easier here, the drifts packed hard. The cave mouth loomed up, a jagged rent of azure, colouring the snow. It looked empty. Then, as she came in close to the hill-wall, she saw a man seated on a rock just inside the entrance. It was Grey.

The cave behind him was all stippled and striped with the strange light. Grey's shining hair also appeared blue, and his skin and the whites of his eyes, and the gem-eyes in the mask of the wolf cloak. His teeth were like sapphires.

"Welcome, Oaive," Grey said to her. "You cost him some magic. You gave him a deal of trouble."

"You mean Niwus," she said.

"I mean Niwus. I mean he wishes you dead."

"Yes."

"All this—the pretty cave—all a lure to get you here."

"Yes. I know it."

"Then why come, Oaive? Why seek him out?"

"I have lost the Bone," she said. "Now both he and I must search, must we not? Perhaps we can search together, and fight for the prize later."

"He'd win that fight," Grey said. He looked at her contemptuously. "You're a poor sorceress, after all. I thought better of you. I thought you could master the magician, but you're only a silly little village conjurer off the coast, with a sleeveful

of crackpot tricks to impress idiots."

His words were like lashes across her face. She winced at the bite of them. With a dry hot fury she said: "And you? What are you? His slave, half-beast, half-fool. You walk like a man, and carry a man's sword at your side, and you never ventured a blow of sword or deed for yourself. Do you dare, in your weakness, to call me weak? In your rank stupidity do you *dare* to call me *silly*?"

He let out a bark of laughter and sprang off the rock. He came directly at her, and she thought he would hit her, and her hands were ready to hit him right back. Instead he took her by the shoulders. "Oaive," he said. "*Good*, Oaive." His face had altered. In an exhilarated whisper he said: "Beat him."

"Don't test me any more," she said, "you have no claim."

"Humbly your pardon, lady," he said, still delighted at her.

"Where is Niwus?"

"He is here. Are you in a hurry for death?"

"Where?"

"The cave. I am to take you to him. What will you do, Oaive, when he raises his hand to kill you?"

"Maybe I shall only die, and you will stay bound till eternity." She walked by him into the hollow hill. The cave widened upwards into a great vault.

"I am bringing her, my master," Grey called.

"Yes," someone answered ahead of them. "I heard you. Every dangerous word."

There was a fire at the cave's spine, an indigo fire that whined as it burned. Niwus sat there on a shelf of stone.

She hated his bloodless face, his hands, she hated the gold ring he wore, everything about him. The sinews in her legs turned to straw as she confronted him.

"So you lost the Bone among the copper-people," he said. "That was intelligent, Oaive."

"Listen," she said, "I travelled time. I can do it again. How long will you pursue me?"

"Forever. If necessary."

"I had best show you, in that case, where to seek the Bone."

"Show me."

"It is one of three Relics," she said quietly.

"Well? I am waiting."

"Grey," Oaive said, "draw the sword."

There was a brief silence. Grey said very lightly: "For what do I require a sword, under the protection of my kind master?"

"Grey," she said. The power stirred in her, her head sang. "*Do it.*"

He put his hand on the hilt of the iron. It came from the scabbard, ringing softly.

"Witch," Niwus said, "remember me, and be careful."

"Niwus," she replied, "I am showing you how to seek the Bone. If you are too dull to see that, you are too dull to utter threats."

His terrifying eyes swivelled like a lizard's to Grey's sword. Oaive advanced across the cave. *Fire does not burn.* She moved straight through it, up to Niwus. She stretched out and, with a quick tug, pulled off the ring he wore.

"A Ring, a Jewel, a Bone," Oaive said. "This is the Ring. They will find it in the Blue Cave, tomorrow, or next year. The metal will tarnish and turn green with age. You will leave it here because you will die here." She pointed at the black wolf skin, at the gem-eyed wolf's head on Grey's shoulder. "One of those white stones is the Jewel; I wonder which? The copper-people will find that here also. It will lose its whiteness but not its brilliance. It will be knocked from its socket in the last struggle, when Grey kills you, Niwus, with his sword."

She detected the whine of the fire again. It had mouthed her feet and her skirt, and not even warmed them.

Niwus said: "Complex lies, witch. They don't disconcert me."

"I am glad," she said. "I don't intend your alarm. Merely your death." She stared at Grey. "You reckon me a sorceress," she said. "Do what I say, and we shall see."

Grey's face was full of shadows and dread. He nodded. She could sense his heart pounding like her own.

"Grey," Niwus said, "obey me."

Oaive brought her hands abruptly on to Niwus' forehead, holding him tightly at the temples. "Grey," she cried, "finish it now!"

Instantly Niwus thrashed to get loose. He writhed and the world writhed. The cave groaned, and particles of rock shot from walls and roof.

Niwus was speaking the word that twisted shape and form.

Grey was already running forward. Midway, the force of the word caught him. He spun aside, shouting out.

A wolf landed at the brink of the fire; its shadow danced behind it. Its irises were pale blank slits, no reasoning left

*When Grey is wolf, his brain is nearly a wolf's brain.*

The wolf edged around the fire. Its shadow went too, emphasising what it did. It crouched, and the hide slid over its ribs as it gathered air into itself. Next second it exploded into a massive leap to clear the flames and reach her throat.

Oaive seemed to catch the moment like a white-cold flame between her fingers. She saw the wolf suspended in space, straining at her. She somehow held it back, and held Niwus as frantically. Niwus' flesh was like frozen clay, dead stuff already. When he had lent Grey his magic so long before, Grey had turned himself from man to animal. That single time he had acted like man not wolf. And on the ship he had said: *I will tell you my name. One day I may need you to call me by that name.*

Oaive strove to release herself. It was a clamour, an agony, like dying or being born. Then the magic came and brimmed her over.

Niwus was small. He had no strength, she could subdue him easily. The power in her sizzled, flared.

"Cyrdin," she said, "Cyrdin, you are a man. Believe what I say."

The wolf dropped down, its feet scattering the blue fire. It yelped.

"Cyrdin, men cannot be cursed into wolves."

The wolf shook itself; it tried to rear up on its hind limbs. It whimpered from the pit of its lungs.

"Man, not beast, Cyrdin."

The power was suddenly so huge she felt herself dissolving in it. Niwus muttered magics, but the power deflected them, scorched them.

"Cyrdin. *Man*. Not *wolf*."

She knew she had won.

It was like a cloud-burst. The power flooded from her, enveloping everything.

Niwus was floundering in her grip, a swimmer drowning in heavy seas.

Grey was across the fire. He was a man. He jumped forward, his arm lifted. The sword dazzled like stars. Oaive's hands let go of Niwus as the sword cleaved through him.

Oaive screamed. She fell backwards.

The pain was worse than she could imagine. It swallowed her whole side, beginning at the roots of her fingers.

In striking Niwus dead, the sword had slashed off the tip of her right forefinger. As she had known it must. She had refound the Bone; later the copper-people would also find it, with the other Relics in the cave. The Bone was hers. It had always been.

The body of Niwus crumbled away into a heap like rough flour. Even the bones crumbled. It had no odour. Of course, the flesh of Niwus had been dead six years. Presently, it was indistinguishable from the powdery floor of the cave.

Oaive sat against the wall and watched this happen, while Grey bound her hand and stopped it bleeding.

Grey's head was bowed. His face was cold and locked with shame. When he had finished, he sat beside her in the blue firelight. The wolf head of his cloak winked; its left eye was gone.

"I never dreamed it could be so simple," he said. "I always concluded it would take a blast from hell itself to be rid of him. He clung on my back so long, I thought I couldn't shake him off. It was so simple. I feel I should have guessed and killed him years ago, without your help. Then this would not have happened to you."

"You were too much his slave to do it alone," she said. "I was nearly that too. You had the right of it. I must have faith in myself but you also must have faith in yourself. You taught me my part. I taught you yours."

"Your hand—"

"My hand will heal."

"Granted. Thus, what now?"

"I wonder," she said. She gazed about her. She was calm, melancholy. "I have been wondering for some while. After we leave this place, the copper-people will come, probably in the thaw. They will take the Ring and the Jewel and the Bone from the dust, and venerate them as mystic symbols—not least because I spoke of them before I abandoned the village. The people will say I conquered the demon, but they understand so little about me, less about the demon, that they won't be able to clothe the facts in satisfactory myth. The history of the Relics will be forgotten. Sometime they will build the shrine about their altar. The priestess of the shrine will be the child to whom I passed on my healer's knowledge. Customs will grow up around the shrine, belief and magic, and the seeds of power. Eventually I shall be born, far in the future, and become one of that order, unaware that I began it."

"So it was not Niwus' game we played," he said. "Do you suppose God is playing with us? Some god or other?"

"Perhaps," she murmured, "perhaps not."

"But is it done?"

"No," she said.

"I surmised it was not."

"There is still the future," she said. "Even though Niwus died here in the past, in the future he has yet to be. The wandering spirit will enter the priest's body, he will force you into bondage, he will curse your house. You will kill your father and run with the wolf pack. Then Niwus will send you to steal the Bone. With his sorcerous gift, he always sensed the Bone would destroy him, and, in trying to avoid destruction, he caused it."

"But consider, the three of *us* have given the Relics to this people. It will all begin once more. In the future you will thief the Bone, and I will go after you. I shall confront Niwus and travel the Time Road, then we will fight him again in this cave—and again the Ring, the Jewel, the Bone will be left in the dust for the people to adopt. It is endless, Grey. We are caught on a wheel of time, turning forever."

She held her bound hand before her. "Maybe we have come this way before, and acted out these things before, and sat here afterwards to talk of them. Except that now I see a remedy, a method of breaking the circle. Or have I tried to break it before, and failed? Or have I not dared to try? Maybe I, or you, or both of us were too afraid to change so much. For to break the pattern will be to alter both our lives."

He said, glancing at her: "You had better say it all."



"I had better. Let me tell you first the alternative. The people in this earlier world are kind and innocent. We could remain here."

He took her sound hand in his.

"One with one," he said.

"Yes. One with one, you and I. No other way."

"That's as I see it," he said.

They looked at each other. She said: "I hazard that is what we did before. Possibly we journeyed inland, across the hills—I think we never saw the building of the shrine. But I don't remember that we were happy. We were far from our own folk; guilt and memory came in between—and horror at what lay ahead, the next turn of the wheel when it was all to be done again... I will tell you the rest. I have travelled time. I can go forward. I can go to the fallen mountain on the night when the hermit-priest died there. I can wait for the boy who is to be Grey. I can prevent you from speaking the spells of cadamancy. I can stop you calling the spirit of Niwus into the priest's body. You were very young then; I will comfort you and make you obey me."

"Then none of this will happen—will have happened."

"None of it. We shall be free of the trap."

"I shall grow up," he exclaimed, "with a smattering of sorcery, to be a nobleman's son. I shall live well in the towered house above the river villages. My father will hunt and laugh, my mother will make tapestries at her loom—there will be no wolves in the forest, no murder, no black pelt—" Grey's face was lit, his eyes glittered. Then the inner lamp went out in them. "And I shall never steal the Bone for Niwus, I shall never come near the shrine by the sea. We will never meet, Oaive."

"More than that," she said, "we will never leave in this cave a Ring, a Jewel and a piece of Bone, since we shall never have come here. *There will be no Relics*. Neither shall I ever have stayed among the copper-people to teach them healing or prayer. There will be no shrine, no Ritual. No priestess. In my future, what shall *I* be?"

"Oaive," he said, "it is too much. Everything on my side, and nothing for you. We will stay where we are. For this turn of the wheel, and for all its turns."

She smiled. "I saw your face. I saw the light in it. If I ignored your happiness last time, I cannot any longer." She let go of his hand. Her fingers raked in the dust, and closed. She drew the power up inside her like a wave. "Farewell, Grey."

It was swift now. The black mist came swirling in and lifted her away into itself. Faint as the sea behind her, she heard him call out her name.

It was not hard to locate that night. The misery and hurt of it marked it out.

She came to the hermitage on the fallen mountain, and the pines soughed below in the wind. She sat by the dead priest till the sun rose and the boy came in at the door. His hair was grey, and he stood there staring at her.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "He has died, but I will help you. I promise."

*Sea Blue*

The summer sea was wide and blue as the great sail of sky rigged over it, and on the cliff top above the bay there were garlands of flowers laid out on the ancient altar.

Three girls sat on the cliff, laughing together, and arranging herbs to dry in the sun. One had a heap of shells in her lap. Her hair was a smoky, ashen bronze, and she held it from her face with one hand as she examined the shells and placed them in a basket. Her name was Oaive, a name like the sound of the sea. She was seventeen and, like her two friends, she was a witch.

You never knew how many would be born with this natural witch-power, but generally there were two or three naturals in each generation. They were long-lived; Oaive's tutor was in her nineties and still thriving. Generally the older adepts taught the younger, but occasionally it was the other way about, when some new psychic ability manifested itself in a younger one. Often it was a woman's daughter who would inherit her own power, for the people had no lore which said a sorceress must live separately and not marry.

Though Oaive's mother had not been a witch, they had been close. The mother was proud that her child would be a healer and spell-maker for the fisher-folk and the shepherds and hunters on the hills. After her mother's death, Oaive had been sad a long while, but with the coming of summer her sorrow eased.

Suddenly the oldest of the laughing girls jumped up and pointed down the cliff path.

"Someone is coming from the village. A stranger."

"Oh, you are always seeing things. It's probably only a stray dog."

"No, it is an old man."

Oaive and the other girl got up to look too.

"It never is an old man, but a young one."

"He must have come hill-over," said the oldest girl to Oaive. "Hill-over" meant the unknown terrain inland, where none of them had ever ventured.

The three young witches stood with the sun behind them, and waited for the stranger. He strode right up to them.

The witches looked at him favourably. Though his hair was shining grey, he was young and well dressed. The blue cloak made his eyes seem blue. He smiled, and his teeth were white as the wave-crests out on the ocean.

"Good day," he said. "Will you tell me where I might find your sorceress?"

"She is here," said the oldest girl.

"And here," said the other.

"Also here," added Oaive. "As you note, we are not short of witches."

The man moved around to get the sun out of his eyes. His face changed subtly. He looked at Oaive. "Yes," he said, "you are the one."

Oaive gazed back at him. It was strange. She seemed to know him, and he to know her, though they had never met.

"I? What have I done?"

"No," he said, "surely not you. You lack the years. Did your mother have witch-power too?"

"No," said Oaive, "I am the first in my family."

"My mother was a healer," burst out the youngest girl, "and her mother, and—"

But the oldest girl grasped her arm. "I am supposing we are wanted somewhere for some reason," she said, and, nodding to Oaive, she yanked the youngest off down the path.

The grey-haired man grinned. He said: "I have come a distance and a half to find one like you, with just such hair."

"Why?"

"Because when I was a child, one like you came into my life and kept me from a mistake so bad that when I remember it now my blood rattles."

"What mistake?" she asked. It was so odd, she felt on the verge of recollecting this story she could not conceivably know.

"It was to do with cadamancy, the summoning of a spirit. She stopped me before I opened that dark and dangerous gate. Or was it you stopped me?"

Oaive laughed. She liked him. "Not I."

"Well then. We'll put that aside. I am something of a magic-worker too, which is how I found you."

"I don't understand. I also can find things and people—but you must have some part of them by which to track—a lock of hair, or a piece of their clothing."

"Ah. I had something. Something you gave me—or the woman, whoever she was. It led me to you. So how do you account for that?"

"Show it to me," she said.

He opened his hand. There on his palm lay a smooth little bit of bone.

"That is not mine," Oaive said, astonished. "It's a finger bone, and see—" She held out her hands, both whole.

He said: "You, or she, left it in the priest's hall, on the altar there. It was wrapped in a cloth. She, spoke some word over it, I think to preserve it, as if she expected it might vanish out of place and time. To me she said: 'Do not look at it now, but when six years have passed, look at it then, if you want, and afterwards seek me with it, if

you wish.' I am glad I did."

"I am glad," said Oaive.

"What is your name?" he asked her.

"Oaive. And do they call you 'Grey'?"

"A few call me Grey, but my name is Cyrdin. How long must I court you?"

"Not long," she answered, "not very long."

