

Seabird- An Invitation
-Book 1 of Seabird- The First of the Narentan Tumults

by Sherry Thompson

Gryphonwood Press 545 Rosewood Trail, Grayson, GA 30017-1261

SEABIRD-AN INVITATION. Copyright 2007, 2009 by Sherry Thompson

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American copyright conventions.

Published by Gryphonwood Press www.gryphonwoodpress.com

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law.

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons is entirely coincidental.

First printed as a portion of *Seabird*: November 2007

Prologue-Into the Place of Three Tombs

One hundred years ago, on a world unknown to Earth

"We won't need any more torches." The old enchanter gestured toward the sparkle of blue reflecting off the cavern walls ahead. "Stream light will serve to guide us now."

Nortis bowed toward Lord Thaddis, then dropped the new torch he had just retrieved back into the moldy wooden chest by the wall. The partially spent torch in his other hand cast sporadic light along the rough stone passage, picking out seepage paths and ice-edged pools underfoot. Nortis checked the rope knotted about his arm and examined the bonds on their prisoner's slender wrists. As she strained away from him, little puffs of vapor escaped from under her voluminous hood, marking her rapid breaths.

She murmured, "Please! You're in peril! He isn't--"

Nortis fumbled for his dagger in alarm. He hissed a furious, "Silence!" intending to add more, but the telltale quaver of the single word convinced him that was pointless. Could there be any action borne of more folly than threatening a sorcerer, even one bound?

"What did she say?" Thaddis was already several yards ahead of them, the enchanter's bent silhouette defined more by the blue glow beyond than by the flickering torchlight.

"J-just 'Please!'. And I think she started to threaten me. Or us."

"Humph! She can't harm us, Nortis. Trust me." Lord Thaddis turned and resumed walking toward the glimmering Stream.

Nortis used his forearm to blot his sodden leather sweatband. Then, drawing a determined breath, he nodded and tugged the rope.

Why had he told the enchanter only some of her words? He shook his head. Everything was confused--not as it should be. Though he loved and revered his master, he yearned to be finished with this task. To return to their home in the northern forest, the enchanter in his study and he taking care of his master's needs and his modest retreat.

In all his travels, he had never visited a prison chamber devised for sorcerers, nor had he ever had charge of a follower of Wenos Zex. How vulnerable and fragile the bound Neroli female appeared as she walked beside him. Who would think such malevolence could be spell-cloaked so thoroughly? Why did she keep up this pretense of innocence even now? What had she meant about 'peril'? And the words, 'He isn't....' Who isn't? Lord Thaddis? He isn't what? Would to Alphasis he had let her finish her words! Finish them and finish a spell of destruction as well?

No, not possible. Thaddis claimed she couldn't harm them. As one of the Order sworn to defend the land from evil, he would know. Still, it wouldn't hurt to take precautions.

Nortis thrust his left hand within the pocket of his woolen jerkin and gripped the silver amulet he had hidden there. With his fingers pressing the sacred seabird hard against his palm, he hurried toward the great Stream.

The soft footfall of the Young One whispered beside him but Nortis counseled himself to refrain from looking towards her. If she spoke again, he simply wouldn't listen.

As for her warning of peril, she knew where they were taking her and why. She very likely knew the names of the Zexian sorcerers she would be joining. Three prisoners inside and one to be added. Lord Thaddis would have to find the door between the two Streams and he would have to open it, however briefly. Could a prisoner get out as she entered? Would she try to help the others escape by distracting Lord Thaddis?

As the enchanter drew closer to the sparkling blue light of Alphasis' Stream, he paused and lifted the five-sided wooden box he carried until he held it above his head.

Nortis drew a breath in anticipation of the chime-like language of blessed enchantment he had heard on a few precious occasions.

Thaddis glanced toward him. Then, muttering guttural words mixed with hisses and whistles, he tossed the box upward as if aiming it at the rough-chiseled ceiling. The box rose and then hovered in place.

Nortis shuddered at the hideous sounds coming from his master's lips--sounds only Zexian sorcerers would speak. This was nothing like the language of enchantment. What had that Neroli sorceress done to him?

Like the slow unfolding of a nightmare, his master's cloak darkened from enchanter blue to sorcerer dead black. Horror ripping through him, Nortis stared at the colorless cloak. This was no trick of the light, no shadow cast by Stream-light.

The prisoner struggled against the rope like a thrashing fish. Then voicing a cry of pain or despair, she squatted on the cavern floor and pressed her hands to her chest. With the hood over her bowed head, she looked like nothing more than a pile of quivering cloth.

He isn't, she had said. How could she know more about his master than he did? Simple. She knew herself innocent, maybe guessed the real reason Thaddis wanted her. What was inside the box? Implements needed for a ritual?

Nortis collapsed against the icy wall for support. Loosed by his shaking fingers, the remaining torch clattered on the stone floor of the passageway. As the torchlight sputtered and died, Nortis saw Thaddis plainly for the first time. He had lied to himself even more thoroughly than Thaddis had lied to him. How could he have ignored the peculiar sounds behind locked doors, the scrolls whisked out of view when he entered the enchanter's study--so many warning signs, so many hints about what his master had become? Too late now.

Thaddis, the sorcerer Thaddis, glanced back toward him and demanded, "Nortis! I told you to forget the torches. Bring the prisoner here. Quickly!"

At the brief glance, Nortis pressed himself even harder against the chill stone but Lord Thaddis was already facing the floating box and the Stream just beyond it. Lifting his hands again, the sorcerer spoke once more in Zexian chant, then thrust outward, palms forward. The waiting box ceased its hovering and obediently floated away from the bank out over the flowing Stream light. Muttering in approval, Thaddis nodded as the box proceeded on its slow journey toward the far bank of the Stream.

Nortis scrabbled at the wall for balance. Cold malevolence flowed past him--Lord Thaddis striding toward the prisoner in his keeping. His knees seeming to melt, Nortis collapsed onto the rough-chiseled stone. He barely felt the rope being loosed from about his arm.

"Get up!" Yanking on the rope of the whimpering prisoner, Thaddis called over his shoulder, "Come along, Nortis! Or I'll give them two instead of one!" He drew away, this time accompanied by the soft patter of a second set of footfalls.

Nortis scrambled to his feet. His fingers and palm a solid fist about the amulet, he tottered toward the blue-green Stream ahead. Its light dazzled him, even though the brilliance was partially cloaked by the two figures standing between him and the bank.

Lord Thaddis had his hood pulled low over his eyes, as he had earlier that day, complaining of the sunset glare when they left the trees of Kolora behind and before they entered the cavern.

Nortis forced down the groan of guilt that throbbed in his throat. While he had wondered about his lord's gesture, he had been more occupied watching for a threatening move from the prisoner. No. He just hadn't chosen to admit what it all meant. After all, Lord Thaddis had been kind to him. For his own purposes, he reminded himself. He was daemagos.

He gripped the amulet so tight the sharp edges of the silver seabird wings cut into his palm and fingers. He had only one hope left. Not even daring to move his lips, Nortis voiced a silent cry for help to Alphasis.

He needed to do something, but what? How could he leave the Young One female a prisoner in the sorcerer's hands? If she did nothing that required her imprisonment between the twin Streams, then Lord Thaddis must need her for a ritual. What kind--

Nortis' thoughts stopped abruptly with his steps. He stood at the very edge of the Stream. Thaddis and the Young One were somewhere ahead, hidden beneath the flowing blend of water and light so vital that the ancients called it Living Water.

He started down the broad steps, his feet, his calves and then the lower part of his thighs caught in the fierce swirl and eddy of vibrant light. He grasped the crystalline blue link chain that crossed the Stream from bank steps to bank steps, and took a great breath. Then he stepped forward briskly, continuing down the steps until his head followed the rest of him into the glorious swirl.

He felt the touch of the water calm him, as he struggled towards the other bank of the Stream. His thoughts slowed their frantic scurry through his brain--slowed, clarified, focused. He didn't have the strength to stop a sorcerer. Only an enchanter could challenge one of them. He might, possibly, be able to free the Young One female. Strategies for releasing her played out in his thoughts, and he knew with a crushing certainty that even that was beyond him. But he had to do something besides follow the daemagos meekly and watch him perform ...

"Watch and remember."

The gentle voice seemed to come from the surrounding water, or from inside his head. Only the water swirling against Nortis' nose and mouth prevented him from gasping. The chain was tilting upward, and his right foot found the first step of the submerged staircase leading up to the inner bank of the Stream. With an unconscious nod of awed acceptance, Nortis climbed up the steps and gasped a lungful of air.

The sorcerer and his prisoner stood several yards farther down the inner passageway. Nortis took a few steps away from the Stream's bank, then felt himself stop. This time his failure to continue wasn't due to fear. He knew himself to be in the right place. He stood. He listened.

Lit by occasional glimmers of Stream-light, Lord Thaddis faced the moisture-streaked left wall of the ancient passageway. No physical sign betrayed its presence, but the door to the sorcerers' prison must be concealed there.

Thaddis was already talking, to the wall or to the somethings beyond or within it. "No, no one knows of my plans, or even that I've learned fragments of your Zexian spells. Just listen to me! I have researched it secretly for many years now, and I have brought all that is required." Thaddis gestured to the small huddled shadow close beside him. "Even this. All I need is your assent to my conditions." He held up one finger, like a teacher admonishing his pupil. "Confirmed by your oaths to your overlord, Wenos Zex, of course."

Seeming to read acceptance in the answering silence, he continued, "I will set you free from your chamber if you will grant what I ask of you."

"What do you ask of us?"

Nortis stifled a gasp at the sound of intertwined voices, the words spoken in the Elder speech but with inflections reminiscent of his master's self-revealing incantation earlier. The sounds confirmed the location of the five-thousand-year-old prison for Rabada, Zabnar and their Sorcerer-King, Pazgar.

"I ... I ask only a small thing, in return for your freedom."

Nortis frowned, divining a subtle tremor in Thaddis' voice. Doubtless, the imprisoned sorcerers perceived it as well. Could they use Thaddis' fear against him? If they did, what would become of him and the Neroli woman?

"I wish to be king of the Tethran Elders."

Nortis guessed that Lord Thaddis added details to that astonishing pronouncement but sharp barbs of cruel triple laughter shattered his words. Nortis stayed still with great difficulty, gleaned just enough courage to do so from the memory of the voice he had heard within the Stream. He still clutched the amulet, all the while marveling that Thaddis managed to hold his ground so close to the fabled prison and its denizens.

"Go on." A quiet male voice prompted, the con-descending softness edged with restrained scorn.

Two other voices prompted an echoed chant of, “Yes, please,” the mingled sounds more serpent-like than human.

“I will free you if you grant what I ask.” Lord Thaddis straightened and drew a great breath. Throwing back his hood, he spoke with renewed assurance. “Hear this! Permit the reigns of my children and grandchildren over all the Tethran Elders to be peaceful and undisturbed by your presence, and I will release you. My eldest is hid within Fiori even now, awaiting my signal that you have granted my request.”

“And you believe this son loyal? You believe he awaits your arrival?” Each syllable echoed the sadistic mockery of the prisoners’ earlier laughter.

Thaddis nodded. The passive response made Nortis wonder what his former master truly thought, to reveal his aspirations and be answered with such merriment.

For a few long minutes, the only sound was the swirl of the Stream. Thaddis waited, his eyes fixed forward, his hand twitching the rope of the bound Young One. Nortis considered leaving while he had the chance, only to feel the utter certainty that he had not yet borne witness to everything.

Still, at some point, he would have to try to make his escape with the information he alone could provide to the Sephan dynasty of Tethra. Neither Thaddis nor the prisoners would allow witnesses. Nortis shifted his feet nervously but the three sorcerers were speaking again, their blended voices echoing and interrupting each other.

“Your favored son, his daughter and her brother will have a hundred years only.”

“But--”

“Your grandson, Thalidor, will die an old man and a king. Even as the Tethran queen who sits upon the throne this moment, is old, having ruled many years.”

Thaddis shook his head but the softly vicious voices stopped any protest he meant to voice. “One hundred years, friend Thaddis. The Thorin dynasty takes power today, or not at all. Choose quickly!”

The sorcerer drew breath, and then nodded, expelling the air in a great sigh. “Accepted.” He gestured toward the wooden box, and its lid pivoted open. An iron candlestick and black candle floated out, followed by a knife fashioned from blood-red stone.

Nortis caught a muffled sob of horror from the bound Neroli. He took a half step in her direction with no clear idea what he intended to do.

The same gentle voice stopped him at once. “No, child! She is mine. Go quickly back through my Stream. Wait for me.”

Nortis hurried to obey, nearly slipping on the steps from the tug of the Stream-tide before he realized he had yet to grip the narthrous stone chain. He gasped a hurried lungful of air and plunged down the remaining steps, then hastened forward as swiftly as the tug of the Stream-tide would permit.

He scrambled up the far staircase and stumbled a step or two down the passageway, finally coming to a halt. His body bent forward with his palms pressed to his knees, he drew in air--and tried hard not to think of what was conspiring on the far side of the Stream.

Just as he was recovering, a shriek of agony swept from the Stream. He whirled in its direction, in time to see bright Stream-water froth across the bank toward him. Its blue-green hue was threaded with a dingy yellow, then sullen with the taint of long-dried blood. The screaming continued. It was coming from the midst of the Stream itself, and it was male, not the voice of the Young One. There were words in it, cries for help, half-muffled in the triple echo of taunting laughter.

One shriek of agonized betrayal rose even above the laughter. “What of your promise to make me king?”

Crazed laughter, cries of cruel triumph and taunting words vied with each other for dominance.

“You said that you wished to be king, yet did not ask us to make you king.”

“Only your children and grandchildren will rule Tethra.”

“That bargain will we keep.”

“No! How can this be? I’m not of the Shadow like you.”

“You were not when you entered here, but you are now. For you made common cause with us--”

“... and performed the rites of the Shadow before us.”

“Welcome, brother! One of us now, for a few moments.”

Black waters, tinged with iridescent red, swelled toward Nortis. He cried out and turned to flee before them down the passageway, only to stumble. A hand light as a feather touched his, steadying him ...

Nortis paused in his writing and held his left palm toward the dim lamplight. The seabird shape was etched into his palm and would remain so to the end of his days. He'd lost the necklace somehow when he had been touched. That didn't matter now. His vision dimmed by tears, Nortis wrote the last few words on the scroll with an unsteady hand.

The soft patter of a light footfall warned him the messenger promised by his Neroli hosts was here. Swallowing at the familiar sound of the footsteps, he held back new tears. "She is mine," the echoed memory of words whispered within him. Nortis sighed and nodded.

When the messenger entered the cabin, he turned toward him and murmured an apologetic "Almost finished."

As he sealed the scroll tight, he reconsidered how best to keep it secret and safe on its journey to the Throne of Wisdom, far to the east. None of the shadow must learn of its existence. Rummaging through his few possessions in the small leather pouch by his cushion, he brought out his precious bits of the Book of Prophecy. Nortis sorted through them slowly. Which one?

Yes, of course. He wrapped the small fragment of the Ancient Writings tight about his account, then fastened it securely on all sides with the last remnants of the wax. One line of the writings shone softly in the dim light:

"From the meeting place of Wisdom, I come forth ..."

Nortis whispered the next line of the prophecy: "From the place where goodness dwells serene."

He handed the scroll and his instructions to the silent Young One, and watched him walk out the door as softly as he had entered. When the hundred years passed, who would read his account? Who would come to them? From where would they be sent?

Nortis pushed back strands of his straggling hair. How, in the last few hours, had it turned white? No matter. He had performed his part within the Obedience for good or ill. He drew a great breath of satisfaction and, focusing on the golden tongue of flame within the clay lamp, he began to speak to his divine overlord.

I-An Invitation

Earth: Just over one hundred years later

"... hear me? You're turning into a lobster!" Her younger brother's voice penetrated the birdsong and sweet-scented breeze of Cara's dream. She opened her eyes a cautious slit, then closed them against the glare of the summer sun. Salt air and the stench of rancid popcorn oil assaulted her nose.

"I'm all right, Sandy. Leave me alone."

"Wake up! You'll be all blisters, and this is only the first sunny day." This time her brother's words were accompanied by a handful of damp sand on her arm.

Cara wanted to clunk him.

Beisha murmured from her other side, "Just get up."

Cara scrambled to a sitting position. "Okay, okay, I'm up!" She glanced around. Beisha turned over with a violent twist of her blanket and looked to be asleep in the next instant. Sandy's earphones were askew and he was shifting the wheel on his iPod. Farther down the row of towels and blankets, Sharon and Ben were getting up. Seeing Cara, Ben mimicked drinking as they started toward the boardwalk steps.

Shading her eyes with one hand, Cara pulled aside a swimsuit strap for comparison. Her exposed skin already glowed a lot pinker than she would care to be by nightfall, the curse of having auburn hair and the pale skin that went with it.

"Darn! You're right."

Her brother raised his eyebrows, removed his earphones and grinned. "Nice to hear you say I'm right about something."

Cara grinned back and put down the Sun Stop. Her friends were probably listening to every word. *Good one, Dad, insisting Sandy stay close when we're on the beach. Just because of that stunt on the jetty.*

"Stop fiddling with the pod and throw me my caftan."

"Caftan? Oh, the cover-up. This thing makes you look like a pair of curtains on a rod." Sandy tossed the caftan to her and dodged out of her grasp in one quick movement.

Slipping the folds of navy blue cotton over her head and past her sore shoulders, she struck a pose. "Well, I think it makes me look like a Bedouin. Got the sand. Just need camels--"

"More like his tent!" Sandy raced through towels and umbrellas down to the water, ready to do battle.

Cara rolled her eyes. Even Sandy was too old for this by now. She glanced toward her friends on the closest blankets. Safely dozing.

Hey, I'm supposed to be watching him. I can dunk him under at the same time. Cara started toward the water but wobbled to a halt, when three beach umbrellas sprouted tree branches, then leaves. Cool shade pooled around her, and a lavender leaf fluttered past. The nearest umbrella vibrated slightly. Rough coppery branches snaked from the canvas panels, put forth pale leaves then evaporated into nothing.

Cara turned to another tree just in time to see violet leaves blur then vanish, leaving only sun-faded blue canvas. She turned again. The whole grove of trees had vanished. Not one umbrella had so much as a twig on it.

A flock of birds squabbled behind her. Curious about their fussing, Cara glanced over her shoulder. Just one seagull crouched on the sand, pecking away with determination at a fragment of pizza crust. No birds flew by. People were laughing and talking. The surf pounded its eternal beat. Sandy's earphones were vibrating to the rhythm of a track. She strained for the return of bird chatter, ready to pounce on its source this time. Nothing.

Not quite nothing. The trailing edge of her dream whispered of a chattering she had heard amidst the flowers and birdsong.

Cara ran her fingers through her hair, and took a deep breath. It might have worked if the air she inhaled had smelled of ocean brine, rather than a blend of garden and spice shop.

It's okay! I'm still half-asleep. I got up too fast. I've had too much sun. Sunstroke. That's it. Each explanation sounded weaker than the one before. One especially mischievous brain cell suggested she was still dreaming. She shook her head, dismissing that--or even weirder theories before they came to mind.

"Sunstroke. Must be sunstroke."

She walked back to her beach towel and collected her share of the beach things, tumbling them together into the towel. Was that everything? Didn't feel like everything. She glanced toward the water.

Sandy was trudging back, his challenging grin turned to disappointment. Dad's decree wasn't fair to him either. He needed to be hanging out with kids his own age. Showed how desperate he was, trying to drag her into one of their old games, only to have her bail on him.

Well, she couldn't take chances. She'd been ill for the last month of school. Maybe she was getting sick again. Sunstroke, maybe, could do that. If she fainted on the beach, she'd be facing either a week shut up in their rented beach house or medical incarceration at the Children's Center. Sandy would just have to be pissed.

Tomorrow, it's cutoffs and a sweatshirt. I've got the whole summer--

"Hey! You leaving already?" her brother shouted as he passed the bunched umbrellas.

"Yeah, I guess I better get out of the sun."

"I'm staying, okay?"

Cara stood back up, scraped wet sand off her sandals with her toes, and put them on. *He knows the rule. Oh, whatever.* She shrugged. "Stay here with the guys. Swim right in front of the lifeguard, and--"

"No jetty. Give me a break. You sound like dad." Sandy flung himself on his towel.

"Okay, tenth grade, just don't drown. I'd never hear the end of it."

He'll be just as safe without me. He's wised up since then, and all I can do is stay alive when I'm in the water.

Sandals in place, sunglasses on and towel in hand, Cara stepped over to the other blankets. She tapped Rich's foot with hers and grinned at the "Mmph?" response.

A moment later, the brown-haired young man opened his eyes. "What? Lunch? No, we had lunch. What?" His eyes drifted shut.

Before he could fall back to sleep, Cara said, "Me, leaving. Sunstr ... Sunburn. Eight tonight?"

Rich nodded, his eyes still closed. "Aunt's coming down for dinner. Make it nine." The last word blended into a yawn.

With a brief wave to her other friends, Cara started threading her way through blankets and towels toward the old wooden steps up to the boardwalk.

What was all that, really? Was it bits from my dreams? "In a world where dream-aliens invade, no one can predict when boardwalk steps will transform into a waterslide or a coral reef!" She clambered up the weathered and warped boards, slipped into any opening between people heading down, then jumped over the last step to the crowded boardwalk. Safe. Maybe.

Suppose it is sunstroke or something like it? Can I use it to ditch the shelter stuff tonight with Mom and Mrs. Renzetti? No, too theatrical, too made-up sounding. I had a dream, Mom! No. Hallucinations from sunstroke. Yack! Please take me to the hospital--I'm tired of hanging out. Just the sun. A dream won't get me out of anything. Probably was a dream ...

She zigzagged between families and couples, bikers and a half-dozen girls squealing and laughing as they took turns trying on a huge floppy hat. Two seagulls swept past, both croaking like an arguing couple interrupting each other. She stopped under the awning of one of the shops before she noticed where she was.

Here I am again. I could find my way to this shop with my eyes closed.

The Spindrift Gift Shop specialized in silver jewelry. Spindrift pretended to be exclusive, but it didn't have to pretend to be pricey. Even so, she and Beisha had been in and out of the shop a dozen times in the last three or four days while the weather had been bad.

She felt drawn to one case in particular, where a necklace with a frosty silver pendant like a soaring osprey glimmered. The first time she saw it, she put back the Ojibwa dream-catcher earrings she planned to buy. Then, she had seen the price of the necklace.

The shade from the awning intensified the slight breeze. Spindrift's showcase window reflected everyone passing behind her, blocking any sign of the cases inside. Suppose the necklace had been sold? Better check.

The owner glanced up from the rear of the store, and then went back to examining some sheets attached to a clipboard. Good. Cara crept over to her display case. Wow, the necklace was huge. The distance between one wingtip and the other must be four, five inches. Cool how the chain was fastened to the wings. She leaned farther down and looked up through the glass shelf at the price on the tiny tag. Unchanged. The price wouldn't be reduced until the Labor Day weekend sales. By then, either she'd be gone, or the necklace would be.

She hissed at it, "Why can't you be ten, even five dollars less?"

Digging out her wallet from the towel hodge-podge, she looked inside--even though she already knew how much cash she had.

She still had her birthday money, plus a bit she'd accumulated before she became ill. It was enough. Barely. Now that she felt better, she could pick up the chores she used to do--assuming she could dodge enough volunteer work. Six to eight tonight was already shot. The emergency credit card her parents gave her beckoned. She pulled it out, stared at its pristine surface, and then rammed it behind her driver's license. *Seventeen year old gets three months house arrest at summer resort. Film at eleven.*

If I'm careful, I'll have enough for the necklace and I can still go to Cyber Palace a couple of times. Or, I could take a chance and not get it until the weekend. When Mrs. Robeson gets here, I can make some money baby-sitting and mowing her lawn. Then, there's Mr. and Mrs. Scarpitti, and Dad owes me for washing the car yesterday, even if it rained last night. This would be so much easier if Mom had let me take the job at Pizza Mania. Midnight's not that late! "Work some restaurant breakfast shift." As if! Well, it isn't like I have to go to the arcade every night. Gotta go tonight though, or Rich can't 'teach' me Quark Brigade.

"Having another look at your seagull, sweetie?"

Cara looked up to find the man behind the counter opposite her. Sweetie. Yuck.

"It's not a seagull," Cara started to turn away, then stopped. "It's one of those ..." Her words trailed off. Major disapproval had wrinkled Mr. Store Ogre's face into a prune. She remembered the sign at the door: no food, bathers, baby carriages. If he didn't like sand and damp towels, he should have opened his store in the city. On the verge of apologizing, Cara decided on a different approach. *Best defense is a good offense, Dad says.*

“That’s not sterling silver, is it? It’s too white and frosty.”

“Hm. No, the matte finish makes it look different. This is pure silver. Most jewelry is silver alloy. You understand that the price is ... commensurate with the quality?”

She flushed. Yes, she understood—he had seen through her ploy. Time to leave before becoming even more embarrassed.

The owner’s voice cut into her thoughts. “Over in this case, we have some other seagulls. The prices are quite reasonable.”

How dim bulb was he? It wasn’t a seagull. She opened her mouth and closed it. It wasn’t an osprey either but it was definitely some kind of seabird. She shrugged her answer. It wasn’t right for that necklace to remain in the hands of someone who didn’t recognize it for what it was—even though she couldn’t name it herself.

Cara took a deep breath and looked right at the owner. Before she had a chance to change her mind, she said, “No, thanks. I’ll take this one.”

Dropping the small bag and her almost empty wallet into her towel, Cara made her escape.

“That has got to be ...” Cara shook her head. *Great! Now I own a necklace that goes with nothing, and I still don’t have a pair of dream catchers. Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant. Good thing Beisha is still back on the beach. She’ll never let me hear the end of this. All because some pompous old guy thinks it’s a seagull, and I think it’s a ...what?*

Cara stopped and sat down on one of the rough, green-painted benches outside the frozen-yogurt shop. She had the strangest feeling she had forgotten something. She rummaged through her damp and gritty belongings. Her wallet, her magazine, an almost empty water bottle and her beach tag. She’d left the Sun Stop but Sandy would see it. The iPod was his baby.

Well, nothing seemed to be missing. She dumped the bottle in the trashcan, then pulled out the Spindrift bag. As she took the necklace out, the breeze returned bringing with it the fuss of birds. Or was it squirrels chattering? Squirrels at the beach? Not so much.

Seagulls this time for sure but she wasn’t going to look for them. She didn’t need to because that’s what they were.

She bent down and focused on the craftsmanship of the necklace. The silversmith had engraved it in such detail that every feather was distinct. An expression, an intelligence in the bird’s eyes made the face come alive. Not just intelligence. Joy. Perhaps joy at the freedom of flight?

The breeze grew stronger, chilling her burned skin. She put the necklace away. The breeze died. The chattering stopped too. Hot sun beat on her arms, reminding her of one reason she left the beach early. What had she been imagining the last few minutes?

One spot on her left foot stung like a bee sting. She probed it absently for a splinter and muttered, “Yeah, right. Umbrella trees. I’m going loony-tunes from the sun.”

Cara swept everything off the bench back into the towel then continued her walk toward the beach house.

The battered yellow screen door swung open with its usual squeak. Cara heard her mother and Mrs. Renzetti talking in the living room down the hall.

Over the squeak-groan of the old printer, her mom called, “Cara, Sandy, is that you?”

“Just me, Mom. Sandy’ll be out a while longer.”

“Put your swimsuit and towel into the washer and start it. The drip-dry is loaded. Don’t leave sand in the shower stall and don’t track any in here.”

Cara mimicked every word of her mother’s to herself as she started the washer and rummaged for shampoo. She barely suppressed a giggle.

She made the shower as cool as possible and used lotion afterward, but the damage was done. She whistled as she looked at her red face in the mirror, then hurried into old jeans. Time to get a lemonade before the washer stopped.

Sandy came in just as she finished taking her load from the dryer.

“Sandy, is that you?” Mom called. “I need you to start the dark wash. When you’re finished, I have some things I need you and Cara to help me with.”

Cara grabbed the basket and ran up the steps with it, repeating her mother’s litany about sand under her breath. What did Mom want them to do now? Probably load the car for the shelter, make calls for volunteers at the Children’s Center, or something equally lame. Some vacation this was, the way things were going. This was the big one, too. Last summer before she graduated from high school. She raced from room to room, leaving deposits of clothing in each, stopping last in her own room.

She dropped the basket on the floor and snatched up the bag from the nightstand. Something felt odd about this necklace but she couldn’t figure out what. She fastened it on and studied it in her hand mirror. It looked all wrong with her shrieking-orange shirt. Just as she’d figured. Too fancy for her kind of clothes.

Maybe with the caftan. Why, haven’t you heard? Well, my dear, dark navy is the new black. This season, formals will have high necklines in front and plunging backs.

Cara picked up the newly laundered caftan and put it on. She fished around between the caftan and the shirt collar, and pulled the necklace out on top.

As she glanced into her hand mirror, everything around her faded then refocused.

A wave of nausea caught in her throat, then dissolved. A breeze puffed cool on her skin and stirred her hair. With it came the scent of foliage and the sound of chattering or chirping.

Cara nearly dropped the mirror. She stood in a parkland of widely spaced trees and blooming shrubbery, the leaves impossible colors of purple-blue, copper and misty green.

2-Not Kansas

Cara gasped and spun to look behind her--just more trees and plants. Was that Sandy’s voice? She peered beyond a tree toward the frail whisper of sound and tried to shriek, “Sandy! Mom!” but just a croak came out. The fragile thread of sound snapped as if a window had just closed. Breeze-churned leaves rustled. Birdcalls poured after them into the brief silence. Something chortled and hissed like a laughing snake. A yard-long animal bright with ginger fur lumbered under the lower branches of clustered limeade shrubs. Shadow, light, twisting branches and the brief flight of a parrot-bright bird knit themselves into a solid tapestry, obliterating any sign of her room. Spicy scents slid past, and then a tangy puff as the breeze shifted direction. The closest shrubs had fluttering round leaves resembling the ones on a eucalyptus--if an iridescent lavender variety existed.

Did any of this actually exist? She started to put down the hand mirror but changed her mind and thrust its handle into her back jeans pocket. *S’long as this stuff’s not like poison ivy.* Her fingers brushed against the cool dampness of the leaves. The scent in the air grew sweeter but even more alien. All her senses had turned traitor. Cara wiped her pollen-dusted palms together, then rubbed them against the front of her caftan. The plants were real enough. Cara muttered, “Better than the alternative,” envisioning how she would have felt if her hand had passed right through the leaves.

“Is anybody there?” Her voice trembled like a child’s in an empty house. Judging from the varied sounds, the tiny movements amongst rustling leaves, this place was far from empty. Someone might be listening--and suddenly she wasn’t sure that was a good thing.

Cool grass tickled her toes between the sandal straps. She glanced at the ground as she shifted her feet over the spongy surface. The carpet-soft groundcover resembled mint-green dandelions more than grass, the feathery flowers violet rather than yellow. Variations between flowers, leaf imperfections and tiny insects hovering close to the stems proclaimed every plant real--while whispering that it was also a fragment of a painting created by a colorblind master artist. Leaves couldn’t be violet. Violet flowers? Only in dreams. Nightmares.

Get a grip. Violets are violet. Didn’t I see actual violet leaves on a plant even before those umbrella trees? When? Where? She glanced around but the only violet leaves were on the more curvy-branched trees. A puff of air brought a lemony tang with it, and her mouth watered. She shook her head. Violet leaves. Where had she seen ...

Yes. She conjured up a half-remembered image--three tiny purple ferns, delicate as downy feathers, curled up from damp rich earth. A hawk-like shadow swooped past and then a huge greenish-gray mass hurtled down,

obliterating them. All parts of the jumbled nightmare she had on the beach that morning. When she woke up from it, Rich had teased her about being spooked by the lifeguard's whistle.

Cara tried to suppress her memories of the rest of the dream but they seeped in--the screaming of the crushed plants, blood trickling from under the claws of a reptilian foot, the blood leaking into the cracks of the dead earth.

A chill slid down her back like the tracing of an icy finger. She jumped and looked behind her but saw no one. She didn't like this feathery dandelion stuff! She wished she didn't have to walk on it.

Sudden quiet surrounded her like cotton batting. A shadow slid across the ground. Something black as a macadam road flitted out of sight over the highest tree leaves. A raven maybe, but with a freaky long tail.

Fragments of periwinkle sky between the snake-curving tree branches suggested an approaching storm but only wisps of pale pink clouds attended the full sun. A sunset sky might play with such colors low on the horizon. Not at noon. The sun must be lying--no way was it noon. They'd had lunch hours ago.

The grunts and cries of animals or birds returned. An industrious plant gifted the air with a spicy fragrance. She caught a tiny movement toward her sandaled feet and jumped aside as something long and very thin slithered between the pale leaves.

Birds burst into a bright chorus behind her. Cara turned to see a group of teenagers slipping into view. She backed up into tall willow shrubs, her gaze locked on the group as more appeared from behind distant trunks and between stands of shrubs like her own. They chattered for all the world like birds greeting a new day. Uniformly slender, they wore either ankle-length dresses or trousers with tunic-length tops.

Everyone was moving about rapidly but no one got in anyone's way. Pairs and threesomes would dart away from the others, then rush back. Was it some kind of game? Maybe a friendly contest between teams? If they were playing a game, it had no rules beyond hurrying away from the main group and hurrying back to it.

Cara crouched lower in the shrubs and hoped to avoid notice. *I called out to anyone who might be listening but I expected like one or two people, not some classroom fieldtrip. I need to pull myself together before I let them see me. They're not looking for me anyway. Either they didn't hear me or they didn't understand what I said. How could they? They speak Chirp or something.*

She looked for hidden wings and felt foolish for doing so. Still, with this sky and these trees, anything could look like anything. Well, if anyone had wings they didn't show. She refocused on what they were doing. When the closest pairs came back to some of the others, they carried brown stuff or else the more brightly colored leaves heaped on their crossed arms. They handed some of their finds to those bearing woven bags and helped them store each new addition with its kin. Foraging. The word sprang from an old lesson and made itself at home amidst the group. Foraging appeared harder and more fun that it had on a textbook page. One pair of bag-keepers traded places with their partners to take a turn in the search. Hard to believe they could be working so hard, yet sound so cheerful.

The first of the foragers walked past her hiding place. Up close, very few of them appeared to be teenagers. Many were clearly older, a few gave an impression of great age--wrinkles clustered about their eyes, and wide fans of laugh-lines crept into their hair. The lower portions of their faces were smooth and free of the looser skin of the aged. No one had grey or white hair.

Cool. Add sunglasses and always young looking. If you're careful, nobody knows how old you are but you get to travel all over and see and do things. I guess, back home, people might freak if they found out, like if ... Like vampires. Okay, they're not vampires. They must eat that stuff they're collecting.

Most of the slender foragers had passed. As they moved into the larger trees, those in the lead began disappearing behind the knotted trunks.

Teeth clenched on a cry, Cara scrambled from her bit of cover. She didn't know these people, but then who would she know here? Maybe some of them spoke English. Maybe they could help her find her way home. No way was she going to be left alone.

Arched stalks shattered softly and chaff spun through the air, littering her clothes and stinging her face. She pressed her fingers against her nose to hold in a sneeze, and ran. After only a few steps, she felt something fall. Swearing in frustration, she stopped and turned back. The mirror. She scooped it up, sneezed twice and took off again.

Two of the people turned at her approach--one a small-boned, honey-tan male with black hair and the other a tall but slender female with pale gold skin. The rest of the foragers stopped and looked back. The man wore a light blue tunic and darker trousers. The woman wore a long-sleeved pale yellow dress. Her braided light brown hair crowned the top of her head rather like a coronet. Neither one of them looked surprised or afraid. *Bet they spotted me when they went by. I wonder why they didn't speak.*

At a chirped signal from the woman, the others gathered closer together and stared at Cara, their heads tilted to one side in a manner suggestive of curiosity. She stopped at once, daunted by so many eyes focused on her alone.

Someone spoke. From the rising inflection in the tone, Cara suspected she had just been asked a question, but its meaning trembled beyond her reach. Cara took a tentative step nearer to the pair. The man's voice sounded gentle, and neither person appeared dangerous.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand your language. Does anyone here speak English?" She searched through her first year French and added without hope, "... l'Anglais?"

Several voices emerged at this. No one spoke to her but, from the gestures and glances, they were discussing her. Pairs whispered to each other, their eyes gliding in her direction, then away.

The woman in yellow gave a signal that silenced all except the man in blue. He asked the woman a question. She nodded, and he turned and walked toward Cara. She wanted to run into the woods, but forced herself to hold still. If she ran, where would she go? He stopped less than a yard away from her, close enough for Cara to see every creased fold of skin around his blue eyes as if all the wrinkles from his face had gathered there. He spoke again and he reached out with one extraordinarily long and slender hand. Almost bird-like, Cara thought. All their hands were far too narrow and long-fingered. A shiver of wonder mingled with a shudder of horror.

Cara tried to flinch away from his approaching fingers but he moved too fast. His deft, warm hand rested on her forehead. He repeated, "Hapfe yoon bane enshaflec?"

"I don't know what you're ch-chirp." she began.

The man smiled. He touched his palms to her temples. She pulled back but his strong fingers closed against her head like a velveted vise. He closed his eyes, murmured fleetingly, and then stepped away.

Cara felt her blood tickle and throb and then the warmth of a flushed face. The subtle itching from the chaff litter stopped and her eyes stopped watering. Everything around her grew clearer and more distinct as if a nearly transparent wisp of cloth slid to the ground. Her heart and breath paused, then shifted to a faster tempo to make up the lost time.

How could her sight be indistinct one minute and clear the next? It wasn't like the man had offered her contacts. What had he done to her with a mere touch and a few words? Why had her blood tingled?

"Have you been enchanted?"

"Have I been ... Wait! What did you do to me?"

The man smiled and answered in gentle tones, "We needed to speak the same language." He added patiently as if he spoke to a child, "We now do. So, tell me. Have you been enchanted?"

"Just now? I guess it depends on what you call what you were doing." *One thing to pretend pulling a quarter from someone's ear, but grabbing a stranger's head?*

The man glanced at his companion, bewilderment vying with amusement on his face. She shrugged and nodded sideways toward Cara. He stifled a sigh as he turned back to her.

"No. Were you enchanted earlier? Before we met?"

He looks serious. Maybe he's nuts.

"Actual magic?" Cara managed a shaky laugh. "No, I wasn't 'cause I couldn't have been. Whatever's been happening, it's more likely ..." She stopped. More likely what?

I wonder if he had something on his palms. She wiped the sides of her head with her fingers. *Bad as the pollen. I'm probably just spreading it. Next thing you know, I'll have purple spots.*

The woman spoke to Cara for the first time. "You speak not as the Peralike, the Elders, speak yet you look to be one of them. What you see is real, Outworlder. I assure you of it. Under the Obedience, an enchanter might send you elsewhere if you wish it. Or, if he be a sorcerer ..."

The woman stopped. Turning, she stared about her in evident alarm, and then made a gesture. Two of her companions walked toward the closest trees to stare up into the flower-sprinkled branches. Then they shifted to other trees and repeated their scrutiny.

Cara could only manage to say, "Oh." *What are these two on? And what are those other guys looking for?*

"Answer me. You look like one of the Pera but are not, nor are you of the Young. Therefore, you are an Outworlder. How came you here dressed as the Great Ones of the Elders are wont to dress?"

"I ... don't know?" Anxiety and frustration churned together within her, and then words rushed out. "I don't know what's going on but maybe there's been a mistake? I'm not elder or young or great. Honest, I'm not supposed to be here and I need to go back home. Your friend here, the magician? He grabbed the wrong person.

"Oh, not to be rude but where I come from you don't grab people's heads and mess with ..." She stopped, feeling her eyes grow moist. She would not start crying in front of these strangers. "Sorry! I'm sorry. Could you, please, just tell me where I am and how I can get home from here?"

The man answered, "I ask forgiveness. I did not know touch offends you but we needed to speak the same language. As to the rest, the sneeze-feathers would have made it even more difficult for you to see if I had waited."

The woman offered her a gracious smile. "We hear your words, Outworlder. We can well guess your confusion, but there can have been no mistakes. An Outworlder would not visit us without a great purpose. For many days now, hints of such a reason have whispered upon our every side. Peril approaches us, some say on ancient feet."

Cara started to ask a question but the woman gestured, and she subsided. Better to wait until the woman finished, and then ask again about home.

"This place is the Westgarth of Melwood and we are the people known as the Neroli, or the Young Ones. I greet you for all and, on behalf of all Narenta, I thank you for coming to us."

Cara forced a smile. Courtesy urged her to respond with "You're welcome" but she hadn't done anything. She ran through the fast-fading words--Westgarth was a place and Neh-roll were people. Maybe. Which was Narenta and why was it, were they, grateful?

"Hi. Nice place you've got here." Cara bit her lip and wished she could as easily take back the words.

The woman smiled. "As to how you may return--"

Someone from the waiting group gave a cry of horror. The man in blue grasped Cara by the shoulders and shoved her toward the closest tree. Over his shoulder, she glimpsed the others looking up, saw the streak of a tiny object falling, and heard a plop--too loud in the surrounding silence.

One woman cried aloud in a voice filled with hysteria. Their leader pushed through the group and clasped the woman to her but her gaze was directed to something on the ground. As soon as the man released her, Cara slipped around him and ran to the others. She heard his footsteps behind her, and a second later heard birds chirping. She couldn't remember noticing when they stopped.

A small dark red object lay amongst spattered leaves--the remains of a bird that looked like it had been ripped almost in two lengthwise. Behind her, she heard one muttered word. "Noika."

The leader stepped back from the distraught woman. She glanced up, and then gestured to the others. "Away from this clearing."

"Why?" Cara sputtered the word in confusion. "I mean that was nasty, her getting hit with some prey a hawk lost--"

"Not prey. A warning or, hopefully, more a taunt." The leader's tone brooked no interruption or disagreement. She beckoned them to follow the rest of the group as they hurried toward the shade under close-clumped trees.

Seeming to regain her composure, she continued as though the incident hadn't happened. "As to how you may return to your home, first we must know if you are to return so swiftly. This I doubt, since you have only just arrived, and the noika confirms my words. We must learn the manner in which you came at once! If someone forced you here with sorcery, you are in peril. We all are."

"Okay." *How do I answer that?* "I don't know how I got here. It just suddenly happened." Cara tried to keep her tone level but it wouldn't cooperate. "Like I said, this must've been an accident."

The woman sighed and shook her head. "I know little of this but I doubt it an accident, since such comings and goings require much planning. I doubt also a sorcerer is involved." She offered a chagrined smile. "Or perhaps I merely hope not. By the very fact that you are an Outworlder, I hold that Alphasis meant for you to come or you would not be here. Perhaps your strange voyage has caused you to forget. We will speak more of this later." She turned away.

"Wait! There's people expecting me." Cara grabbed for the woman's arm. "They'll be wondering where I got to."

The woman lifted Cara's hand from her arm with gentle fingers. She said nothing.

Cara understood the response as refusal but near panic made her push anyway. "Look, I don't want to cause any trouble. Just promise you'll send me home later, once you've talked to this Alfis person."

"Assuredly! If it is Alphasis' will!" The woman's voice kept its soft tone but steel lurked under the surface. "Remember, we also have been waiting." Then she turned away and the small band began moving.

Many curious glances slid over Cara, so she suspected some of the quiet conversations must be about her. She didn't want to walk near the woman with whom she had spoken. Somehow, she had made her angry, and the woman's body language betrayed tension even when she called instructions or helped others stow their treasures.

She decided it safer to walk with the man who had touched her as long as he didn't try to again. She fell into stride beside him. "Gotcha! How come you can speak my language now but you acted like you couldn't earlier?"

He smiled, his bright blue eyes twinkling. "You are mistaken. We do not speak your language. You speak ours."

"I ... Oh." *I don't. I'm not. I mean I couldn't be. What have they done? What is going on here? I need to wake up! I've got to make this stop!*

They walked some distance without speaking, through a wood that looked and felt and smelled like Spring personified. Candy-sweet scents mingled with green-onion-like odors. These, Cara traced to the plants and trees around her. An elusive nutmeg scent enveloped the foragers themselves.

In the branches overhead, birds called in clicks and whistles but none did so with the right sound. The too-intense clear sky maintained its strange darkness, warning of an approaching storm each time she glanced up. She stopped looking up.

Cara enjoyed a good hike but as time went by, she began to think their walk would be endless. The longer they kept walking, the more time before they sent her home. She considered doing the kid thing and asking where they were going and when they would arrive.

Before she could speak, a young man or boy sprang down from a tree. He carried a bow and had a quiver of arrows strapped over his slender shoulder. No one else had a bow or any other weapon. Bow and arrows--must be a pretty primitive culture.

The Young One walked to the leader and saluted her with his right palm to his breast. With a glance toward Cara, she drew him away and asked a quiet question.

Was he the one they were looking for earlier? Cara turned to the man in the blue tunic. "Why's he got a weapon? Is he hunting?"

Her companion paused a moment as if to digest and analyze a strange fact. "He is one of our border guards. The weapon is called a bow and is a gift to us from the Peralike." He half-smiled. "We have little need of such weapons. We do not hunt."

Cara caught a touch of distaste on his face before the twinkle in his eyes returned.

"We do not need such things to guard us from the Daetaga--the daemagos and their following--but it pleases the Elders to have us carry them. They worry overmuch." The wry smile on the man's face faded. "Or so we hope."

A few feet away, the hushed conversation between guard and leader ended. A frown wrinkling her smooth forehead, the leader watched as the guard climbed his tree and disappeared into its deep violet foliage. Then she signaled for the march to resume.

Which shadow concealed the guard? Cara studied the tree but saw no sign of him. She considered moving closer but then the leader spoke to her.

“A strange question from one strange to our lands, who herself goes armed.”

“I’m not armed!” Cara protested. *She heard me ask that? How?*

“No?”

Cara’s eyes followed the woman’s gaze to the hand mirror she had carried all this time, often tucked under her arm or in her back pocket but sometimes held in her hand like now.

The fear lurking in the woman’s eyes made Cara gulp down a hysterical laugh before it escaped. *A little more and I’ll get hiccups from being polite. Haven’t these people ever seen a mirror? Besides it’s in my hand, why would she think it’s a weapon? These guys act awfully jumpy. Did something nasty happen recently?*

Details from her dream nudged at her but she shoved them away. She couldn’t handle that right now. “It’s just a mirror, not a weapon.”

“What is this marrow, if not a weapon?”

“Mirror. You use it to look at yourself.”

“To look. May I examine it?” The tremor in the woman’s voice belied her air of placid authority.

“Of course.” Cara held it handle-first toward the leader. As the woman grasped it gingerly, she couldn’t resist adding, “Just don’t release the safety catch.”

“What?” The leader studied her solemnly. “Do not release what?”

“Uh, nothing. Just a joke.” Cara squirmed under the woman’s scrutiny. “I guess it wasn’t funny.”

“What do I do with it?”

“You look in it--into the shiny part.”

The woman raised it and could not suppress a start. Then scorn replaced the hint of surprise. “Humph! A toy.” Turning the mirror over twice, she shook her head and returned it.

As she walked away, Cara sought out her walking companion. “I think I’ve insulted her. What’s Fearless Leader’s name anyway? Oh, what’s yours? Sorry.”

A wary look sprang to the man’s face. He stepped back.

Now what? I’m trying to be polite here. “What’s wrong?”

“You are indeed odd. You carry a weapon which is not a weapon, and ask names yet give none yourself.” He cocked his head to one side in an inquiring gesture.

Cara blurted, “Oh. I’m Cara, Cara Marshall.”

“Caracara Marshall?”

“No, just one Cara. My name is Cara Marshall.”

“Cara Marshall, some call me Abdis and others Blephis.”

“You have two names?”

“As do you.”

“Yeah, but is one your real name and the other your nickname? Or, like us, is one way proper? Like Mr. Abdis Blephis? Or, are you actually Blephis Abdis?”

The man stared at her as though she had grown an extra head. “Cara Marshall, one does not learn that just by asking from either we Neroli or the Peralike. The Chosen, of course, are a different matter.”

Of course. Cara mentally threw up her hands in surrender. *Ask a simple question.* All she could do was return his stare.

“I sense that the names you gave me are your own true name. I am pleased you trust me but, even in the Wood of the Young, it is dangerous to share such knowledge. It is truly perilous for an Outworlder to do so since daemagos may seek to harm you.”

Daemagos? Who’s that?

With a nervous glance toward the others, he murmured, “Your arrival confirms my own fears. Your words provide a timely warning to cleave to the old ways. To be prudent.”

Cara grappled for some hidden logic to his words. “So you’re saying if Daemagos knows your name or mine, that gives him some kind of power. That right?”

“They. Certainly. This not so in your own land?”

“Well, there’s identity theft.” She winced at Abdis’ stricken expression. *Good job, Cara. Can you say, not helping?* “Maybe for us it’s an old superstition?”

“Here, that is not so. Do not speak your name in front of others, however gracious they appear to be. Daemagos may wear the seeming of the Pera, even the seeming of one of their enchanters.” He studied Cara’s face, and frowned. “You must remember this! But to answer the rest of your question, the lady may be called Clepta.”

“And she’s your leader?”

“Of course. You are most perceptive--she is indeed fearless. Lady Clepta is the Ancient for she is the eldest and therefore the wisest amongst us.”

“That isn’t always the same with us.”

“Why not?” Abdis blinked in surprise. “The most wise shall be he who is most experienced in the ways of the tribe. Wisdom is strongest when steeped over many years, and the best guide is he who has been down the path the greatest number of times. Is this not so?”

Cara hesitated. She hadn’t expected her comment to be taken so seriously. “I guess I never looked at it that way. Anyway, are you Clepta’s son? I mean, you’re walking with her.” *Husband, clueless!*

“You are upset. Why? Because you sense I am older than you thought?”

Cara shrugged. His intuitive guess reminded her of her mom, and not in a good way.

“We are from different houses. I walk with her because I am the second eldest here. It is my duty to learn all I can for the time when I shall be eldest. I have answered your questions. You must allow me a question. Why do you carry the marrow toy? You said to look at yourself but surely you know who you are without it?”

“Of course I do,” Cara snapped. “Look, I’m sorry about the attitude! This is ...” She waved a hand by way of apology. “Anyway, we use it to look at our clothes after dressing, too.”

Abdis frowned, and then shook his head. “You can look upon your clothes before dressing and see the manner in which they are made and whether the color pleases you.” He stretched out a slender hand to touch his sleeve. “Even once clothed, I know that I wear a blue tunic made of flaxenhead wool. While I cannot see it, I remember that the neck opening of this tunic is embroidered with the pattern of teintree leaves. What more could the marrow tell me?”

“Mirror. It’s like this. Just before I came ...” Cara hesitated. “Here. Melwood, right? Anyway, I wanted to see if my necklace went with this caftan so I picked up the mirror. But just like that ...” *That’s when it happened. The second I had it in my hand.*

“Why did you stop speaking? Please hurry forward as you explain. It is best we not stray.”

Most of the group had disappeared into the undergrowth ahead. Cara broke into a weary jog trot. *These guys keep up a fast pace. Don’t they ever stop? Today has gone on forever. Bet it’s jet lag. Earlier in the day here than at home when they ... world-napped me.*

Abdis was waiting for an answer.

“Oh, I stopped because I was trying to figure things out. Maybe wearing the necklace and the caftan together brought me here? Or them, plus the mirror. Bizarro, I know, but this world is pretty ...” She shut her mouth on what was heading toward another insult.

The normal twinkle in Abdis’ eyes changed to intense curiosity. “Tell me more of what happened before you left.”

Cara told him all she could remember. The more she spoke, the more the conviction grew that the necklace had played a role. She had held the mirror before. The necklace was new.

“I think it’s the necklace! If I take it off, I bet I’ll find myself at home!” Cara reached back and groped for the catch.

“Cara, do not do it! I doubt it would work but it would be dangerous to try. It is not wisdom for such as you to remove yourself from the protection of the Seabird. Wear it, guard it, as long as you are here. It came to you for a reason.”

Cara dropped her hand. She had grown used to his twinkling eyes and good humor, but she saw no hint of them now. “Such as me? What am I?” she stammered.

“As you are? Defenseless.”

“I’m what? Anyway, I give.”

“This is well, little daughter.”

Cara started at the sound of Clepta’s voice. *Where did she come from? She was talking with another tree guard a second ago.*

“Here we will camp for the night. I wish you to repeat the tale of your arrival for others, that we may best decide what is to be done.”

Clepta’s forceful tone softened. “In exchange, we will tell you many things about this world, things that you will find valuable to know for your safety while you are here.”

She smiled in a manner much like Abdis, and fanned her fingers. “Come.”

Safety? That’s reassuring. Glad I’m out of here soon as they catch on to their mistake.

3-Battling Priorities

Ahead, the maze of trees and shrubs scattered and withdrew to circle a field of short turf and rock. Patches of warm light from the setting sun ventured across the foragers in the lead. Sunset gleams played amongst the highest branches on the far side of the clearing. The shadows of evening gathered amidst the smoke of new fires, nearly obscuring dozens of Young Ones. Their murmured voices rose into shouts of welcome as the first foragers joined them.

Cara and Abdis joined the smoky kaleidoscope of work and welcome last. A breeze drifted out of the circle to greet them, laden with strange scents and twilight chill. Cara shivered in spite of the caftan layered over her jeans and shirt.

Abdis touched her arm and pointed to one group indistinguishable from the rest. “Those are members of my house. Others remain at our fastness in Melwood Keep or in other dwellings. The fastness is a day’s gathering east but we will not be going there yet. We will make you welcome at our fire.” Shifting the strap of his bag on his shoulder, he nodded for her to follow.

They worked their way between groups gathered at each fire. Everywhere, family members were retrieving selections from the foragers’ bags or bringing wood or kettles of water back to their fires. Crude pots hung over flames built within the blackened stones of several fire pits. A few fires boasted skewers laden with bits of green and hunks of yellowish-orange. A Neroli squatted at each end of these, watching and turning them with care. New scents of cooking food wafted past them in the smoke, the interlaced smells reminiscent of vendors at a fair.

Two laden Young Ones emerged from what appeared to be a dense thicket. The second one turned and pushed on the branches of one bush. It pivoted, unmasking a cabin of bound underbrush built within the bushes. Cara turned away from the camouflaged hut to discover Abdis was standing a few yards away from her amidst several Neroli. She scrambled to catch up.

He pointed to someone and said a name as she ran up beside him, and she suspected he thought he was already talking to her. Everyone had Abdis’ black hair and honey brown skin. She tried to focus on the remnants of his introductions as she was offered a shower of names followed by nods of greeting. Intense, almost electric blue eyes stared at her with a blend of awe and unabashed curiosity. Her own blue eyes must look nearly colorless to them.

“Hi. Hello! Thank you!” Over and over until Abdis ran out of introductions. The names all sounded alike and the faces echoed an eerie similarity.

Cara blinked and caught herself tipping sideways. *Talk about asleep on your feet.* She glanced about sheepishly. Either no one had noticed or they were too polite to laugh.

Abdis’ relatives drifted back to their duties. Abdis himself squatted by a steaming pan at the fire, fishing bits and pieces out of his bag and tossing them in. She stood where they had left her and felt her eyes drift shut. This wouldn’t do! She needed to focus on something.

She turned. The scattered Neroli slipped in and out of view in the play of orange flames and smoke-blurred dusk. Some glanced at her, their expressions betraying curiosity and excitement. A few ... Somebody was scowling. She studied those in the closest group but no one was looking at her now.

Who would be scowling? I'm tired but I didn't dream that. I get why Clepta might frown but not some stranger.

A slender girl jumped up from thrusting small branches into the fire, and waved at her. Abdis called the one walking toward her Dulcima--one of only two or three names she hoped she had caught accurately. Cara stifled a yawn. She remembered her because Abdis called her his great-great-grandchild. Conceded, she had an authentic child-like expression in her eyes but four generations just wasn't possible.

The young Neroli smiled and held out her hand. "Come. You are tired and likely confused. Come sit with me." She drew her to a muddle of woven mats on the far side the fire.

Cara collapsed onto a random mat. *Sitting. Sitting is wonderful. Nearly forgot what it felt like.* She stuffed her hands into her jean pockets for warmth, but her right knuckles encountered unexpected resistance. She pulled out the culprit, a rolled-up paper with a bright sticker.

Dulcima stopped talking and leaned forward. Cara tilted the paper cylinder toward the fire and giggled. *It's a postage stamp! Lisa's letter? I scooped that up and shoved it in my pocket. How did it get rolled up?*

"My letter from Lisa. I don't get it. It's all curled up and the writing's weird."

"I would learn of you if I may." Flame light glowed on Dulcima's face and sparkled in her eyes. "What is your world like?"

Cara stared at the child and swallowed. She put the letter away. *Okay. Where do I begin? And, what should I leave out? She's just a kid.*

"It's not like this at all. More crowded. Big buildings, cars, machines. Uh, right now it's summertime--hot and humid."

That wasn't even close. Cool breezes off the water this time of night. The only sight of the ocean, ribbons of foam picked out by the boardwalk lights. Silence at the top of a Ferris wheel. Hundreds of voices and the jangle of music at the bottom. Pizza Mania and Cyber Palace. Flirting with Rich or some other cute boy. She had missed the promised lesson in Quark Brigade.

"It sounds like the land of the Peralike. We have small houses in Melwood, but the Elders have great, tall ones. They live many very close together. What are machines?"

The image of the boardwalk at night collapsed. Machines. For a moment, the word was just two alien sounds linked together by chance. This day would never end. Home was receding with every breath, every word spoken. A sigh locked with a whimper, producing only aching silence.

Dulcima was waiting for her answer.

"They're kind of like big tools to help us do stuff."

"That too is like the Peralike. In their land, one can see ships, and mills that grind grain by the power of water and many other marvels." Her voice wistful, Dulcima tilted her head and asked, "Is that which you carry also a machine?"

Cara glanced at the mirror she had dropped beside her when she sat. *Oh, yeah, the contraband weapon.* A wry smile escaped her as she remembered Clepta's fear of it, then her scorn, and Abdis' courteous puzzlement.

"Clepta called it a toy. Sort'a is. Want to have fun with it?" She placed it in Dulcima's hand with the glass facing the fire. "Hold it like this. Good."

Guiding Dulcima's hand, she taught her how to reflect the light of the flames to dart like a firefly about their encampment. Dulcima trilled delighted laughter.

"Tell you what? Why don't you keep the mirror?"

Cara retrieved the transformed letter from Lisa. If only she could read it! *Must be Neroli writing. Bet Abdis did this. Or Alphasis, or who knows? Whoever dragged me here. Very funny. First, some magician world-naps me without warning or explanation, and then he plays games with my mail!*

"You are lonely for your home, are you not? I have something that may please you." Dulcima opened her woven provision bag and drew out a small bag tied with a thong. "Here. A gift for a gift," she said, holding it out.

With eager hands, Cara opened the bag and shook out its contents. A crystalline rock resembling fire opal settled unto her palm. Myriad blue and green hues rippled and swirled within it, the turquoise light outshining the red flames within the stone circle. The cool shades reflected on her skin like clear sunlit water--changeless yet ever-changing as a tropical sea.

Hand and stone faded and spread into distant restless motion. She floated over an ocean, moving faster than the waves below, moving farther and farther out to sea. Grayness edged the horizon, then spread through the water and climbed the air. She rushed toward it, or did it rush toward her? It filled her sight with rugged pinnacles of gray rock and her ears with multiple bird cries--a call like seagulls yet not like them.

She hovered over the island, past age-carved stone and promontory, drawing inward, downward, lower and lower, until she settled in a quiet place, a valley of rock in an island of rock. At last, she stood before a huge blue-green stone, its shape reminiscent of a chair or throne but for someone or something not of human proportions or dimensions. Cara trembled and grasped a nearby rock for support ...

"It is narthrous, said by some to bring luck. It brings to mind the good will of Alphasis and those of the Shadow do not like it. Cara, are you unwell?"

Cara started and looked around her. Had she dropped off to sleep? Small wonder. She smiled at Dulcima and held out the stone. "Thanks for the offer but I think this stone's too valuable for you to give away. Wouldn't your parents be angry?"

The child laughed. "They don't even know I have it. Besides, I have others."

Dulcima lifted a silver chain from around her neck to display a small narthrous stone suspended from its end. She shook her head and the silver loops swayed on her ears. These too had tiny stones suspended from them.

"I have saved that one these months because of the scratching on it. Turn it over. See? The Seabird, the emblem of Alphasis. We, the Neroli, do not wear such amulets for, as Lady Clepta says, we are bound already as a people of Alphasis by mind and heart. It would be fitting for you to have it though, since you came to us wearing the emblem."

"What? Oh, the necklace. Dulcima, who is Alphasis?" Cara added, "Does he live on an island?" *Now why did I say that?*

Dulcima's eyes grew wide with astonishment and perplexity. "Who does not know who Alphasis is? Even daemagos, sorcerers of the Shadow, know. Even those far, far beyond these lands. He rules all, not just Neroli and Peralike, but also the Chosen. It is they who live on islands."

"Who does? The Chosen?"

"Dulcima! Come and bring our guest." Dulcima's mother beckoned from the gathering on the other side of the family fire. "The meal is ready and Lady Clepta wishes to speak with Cara as soon as may be."

Both girls glanced her way impatiently, if for different reasons. Dulcima whispered, "Speak nothing of the stone but I think if you wish to read your scroll, you may find that it will help you. I ..."

Dulcima made a face as her mother called more urgently. She held out her narrow hand. "Come, Cara. And thank you for the marrow."

Cara allowed herself to be led past the fire. Her mind teemed with questions, darting about as had earlier the light from the mirror. She ate the spicy-herby soup and the bitter-flavored bread with relief. The goo from some violet seedpods everyone had shared while still foraging hadn't settled well with her. They had smelled like bee's wax and stale coffee. This meal tasted and smelled more earthlike, thank goodness!

Dulcima explained how the day's harvests contributed to their dinner. Cara hardly listened until the girl mentioned the mills of the Elder Ones to the south that ground the meal used in their bread.

"Elders? Peralike, right? Lady Clepta said I resemble them."

"Yes, very much. I like them! Some Pera come to us for teintree nuts that they grind into meal. Also, we give them the rocks that some of us dig in the foothills of the mountains. They carry these to their cities in the south and, in time, the rock comes back all melted and shining like this." She pointed to the chain around her neck.

"Do you give them the blue stones, too?"

Dulcima glanced around them, and she whispered, "Narthrous is found sometimes when my people dig in the hills for the others but we do not send them to be melted. Lady Clepta says it is not wisdom to send such away from our land for Alphasis set them here to protect us."

“From what?”

“From the Daetaga, the Shadow dwelling in the mountains.”

“But you said your people have mines there.” Cara stopped. Each puzzling answer spawned more questions. Better to wait until she had a good night’s sleep before she tried to make sense of it.

Dulcima turned to whisper with one of her relatives, a male who could have been Abdis’ brother. Freed from the need to talk logically—or talk at all—Cara stared into the flames. At least fire still acted like fire.

And music still sounded musical. Cara turned toward a thread of melody entwined amidst the woodland’s vibrant night sounds. Many of the Young Ones had settled close together around a central fire, intent on a handful of musicians. Two played flute-like wooden pipes and a third a sort of bodhran or hand drum.

Four others, including Abdis, played harp-like instruments. The strings ran from side to side and were plucked by two slender wands, one held in each hand. At intervals, a musician would use a wand to tap one of the silver bells suspended from the curved wooden frame--producing a high, clear sound that lingered in the air. The music enchanted her even though she couldn’t understand its pattern. She waited in anticipation for each striking of a silver bell.

The music stopped. The gathering began breaking up amid calls of goodnight and quiet laughter. Cara stood up and stretched. Abdis was walking to their fire carrying one of the “harps”.

“Abdis! I loved your music! What’s that thing called?”

“It is the miniba, the bell-harp.” He handed the miniba to one of his relatives. “Come. Clepta awaits you.”

Oh, no. The interview. She followed Abdis, with dread clenching at her throat. One last chance to convince Lady Clepta that her appearance here was an accident or mistake. Did she know the secret of how people did the world-hopping thing, so she could go home?

Her family must be having fits after all these hours. By now, Mom and Sandy would have called Dad’s work number in the city to tell him they couldn’t find her. Had they called the police too? The FBI? Mega-trouble, even if she landed home in the next instant.

How can I explain this? What did you do on your vacation? Well, I sat in an interrogation room for like years and tried to explain I hadn’t been kidnapped when, really, I had.

Abdis led Cara to the fire where they had been playing. Lady Clepta already sat there like a rustic queen on a section of a log, its smooth patina reflecting the warmth of the flames. Cara tried to plan what she should say but her thoughts took turns wandering or shutting down completely. How long had Clepta’s log been used for seating? How old were the stone fire circles? Who had made the bell-harps? Did the Neroli store them in the hut? Wondering about what she saw beat coming up with a new argument to try on Clepta.

Abdis motioned for Cara to stop a few paces in front of the Ancient. He continued walking until he stood behind her, his position and alert bearing much like a bodyguard for a celebrity. Cara just stood, wriggling self-consciously under Clepta’s steady gaze and faint smile. At last, she gave the open-handed salute she had seen the border guards use. She regretted it as soon as she did it--she was a guest not Clepta’s servant.

“Greeting, Cara. Please be seated.” Clepta gestured toward a woven mat close to where Cara stood.

As Cara settled at her designated place, five others gathered onto the mats to her right. The remaining Young Ones were talking around their fires or settling down to sleep. No one looked their way.

Abdis spoke. “Many here are yet unknown to you. I shall name them in turn by your leave. Lormis, eldest here present of ...”

Cara returned the perfunctory nods of the first three he introduced as she recited their names--Lormis, Manara, Pinaca. Two to go and the names were already melting into a jumble of sounds. Their skin and hair color and clothing varied as much as they did between people at home but they might as well look like clones for all-

“Nabis, eldest of the house of Moontree.”

Uh-Oh. Another one.

Nabis had gray eyes and a steely stare. She found herself nodding in response to the anticipated nod Nabis failed to give. *Hey, take a chill.*

“Cenelis, eldest here present of the house of the Silver Bear.”

Bear. The ginger-furred animal she had seen when she arrived flashed into her mind. Cara nodded greetings to Cenelis. *Not like bears at home. If I'm speaking their language like Abdis says, how come their bear doesn't mean our bear? Theirs was smaller ... That Nabis is still glowering at me. Bet he was the scowly one before. What's his problem?*

"I am Abdis, eldest of the house of the Rain-washed Sky. This is the Lady Clepta, the Ancient of the Melwood Young Ones."

Cara caught up with a couple of quick nods.

Lady Clepta stood, lifted her hands and chanted, "May Alphasis reign long, may the land prosper, may the Three Peoples be guarded and guided. Alphasis, grant that we serve within the Obedience and remain always under the Protection."

Through murmurs of agreement, Clepta continued, "Cara, repeat what you have told Abdis about the seabird talisman and of your coming to Narenta."

What did you do on your vacation, huh?

Cara turned to the five and ran through all that she could remember. Flanked by impassive and ageless eyes, she tried to emphasize the pure chance of it all. She suspected the Neroli might be a little telepathic so she was careful not to lie. Still, she took care in the way she described the hallucinations and her purchase of the necklace.

It was all so weird and she was so tired, it came out in a jumble of impressions, punctuated with stopping to describe beach umbrellas and boardwalks then backtracking for fragments she had forgotten to mention. She hated speaking in front of a class but at least she was usually awake when she did it.

Cara tried to gauge the effectiveness of her words but all the Neroli wore the same mask of bland attention. She had never seen such good listeners, or ones who gave so little indication of their reactions. By the time she was running out of things to tell them, the mess probably resembled a child's garbled tale or a dream. If she lived it and felt that way, what must they be making of it all?

Well, nothing left to say. Cara glanced toward Abdis, the closest she had to an ally. Did even he think someone deliberately chose her and brought her here? No one had told her to come. No one back on Earth knew where she had gone or even knew this place existed. The truth of the last claim invited sheer panic but, right now, she needed to hold it together and make them send her home.

Cara nodded at Lady Clepta. Now what?

"You have told us all?"

"Yes, Lady Clepta." Cara considered mentioning the narthrous stone. No, she had promised silence to Dulcima.

"Hear then the ways of this world. As we could not judge without your tale, so you cannot without ours.

"This is Narenta, the world of the Three Peoples. In the deeps of time were only the Chosen, the seabirds. They are masters of the Ancient Writings, of healing and of all learning. Theirs it is to guard the Thrones of Wisdom and of Healing in the lands in the midst of the sea.

"The second peoples ..."

"Please, Lady Clepta. Why are they called the Chosen?"

A murmur of voices rose beside Cara but she didn't turn. For an instant, she read astonishment in Clepta's eyes. Because she had dared to interrupt or because of the question itself?

With no trace of emotion in her voice, Lady Clepta answered, "Alphasis came to this world and chose that people to serve him within the Obedience. He often chooses to reveal himself to us in that form as well. However, Alphasis rules all the world: the Chosen, the Peralike, and we the Neroli. He likewise rules all our sister worlds and the darknesses between the worlds."

Cara nodded. She pondered the reference to darknesses between worlds. Did that mean these primitive people knew about space and planets?

"As the Chosen is the root so is the Peralike the stem. The Elders took shelter here at a later time and they looked to the root for their sustenance. Coming after the Chosen, they live now in many places throughout Narenta. Some, the Tethrans, are our neighbors to the south, and are ruled by King Cybis and the Orders. Much

wisdom and many skills have they brought to us. In no way the least is how our three folk may protect and aid each other against the Daetaga. Alphesis has cast his Protection about them and they follow him gladly.”

She paused and Cara dutifully nodded.

“The Neroi are the branch of the tree. Our knowledge is within ourselves, just as a tree knows how to bud and blossom in the spring. Nonetheless, we honor the Ancient Writings and we seek to learn all we can and teach what is good for the beasts of the earth and for all forms of life. Ours it is to guard the Throne of Growing and Making. Though I am the Ancient, it is Alphesis who rules this wood, this world and all these worlds.

“And you, the Outworlders, are counted by scholars as the fourth folk. Since you are born elsewhere than on Narenta, Alphesis himself summons you here at times to aid us. All our peoples honor you and your peoples for your courage and your willingness to aid those who are in peril from the Daetaga. Do you hear my words?”

“Yes, Lady Clepta.” Cara added cautiously, “But I still don’t understand what you expect me to do.”

Amusement touched Clepta’s eyes and lips. “Do you not see? Outworlders are our champions, called by Alphesis at times of gravest peril to aid and defend Narenta with your wisdom, your courage and your skill of enchantment.”

Cara couldn’t suppress a grin. “I knew it,” she whispered to herself. Aloud she added, “Look.” A giggle tried to follow the word through her lips.

She shook her head, wondered how best to break the news she had suspected from the beginning. She tried again, “Look, I’m an Outworlder if you say so. But I’m not particularly clever or brave and, believe me, I can’t even do card tricks. Someone messed up, Lady Clepta. I’m sorry but-”

His voice harsh, Nabis interrupted, “Did you lie when you told the Ancient that you heard her words? Know then that Alphesis commanded you be brought here, for is it not his sign you wear? It is by your own account a talisman that came to you just today, on the same day Alphesis willed you to come.”

Oh, great. I knew you’d be trouble. On earth, bet you’d be a prosecutor.

Cara turned and responded with some heat, “I bought it! It didn’t ‘come to me’. Weird things happened even before that. I’d already felt ... I mean I had already seen some trees. I think I heard you guys, too. I thought then I was hallucinating, you know? Except ...” Cara shrugged. She didn’t know how to put those earlier “tugs” into words, and reminding Clepta might not be a good move.

A soft voice cut in--Pinaca’s. “You confuse the Outworlder. She knows not our ways. Cara, think. You say you sat upon a seat and looked upon the seabird. At that moment, you sensed something you could not explain. Perhaps that is the moment when Alphesis or his messenger spoke to you. An enchanter might be able to pass a message to another world, using a Thought Stone.”

Cara shook her head.

Before she could respond, Pinaca did so for her. “If you no longer remember, try to recall it. Neither chance nor the errors of an enchanter brought you here. In this place, there is no chance. There is only will: His, yours, ours, and that of those of the darkness. To believe in chance is a great folly and, for an Outworlder especially, dangerous.”

Cara gazed into Pinaca’s warm yet ice-colored eyes. She had been alone on that bench. How could they expect her to recall a message or a conversation that couldn’t exist? *I might as well try to remember watching the wizard himself as he did his world-napping trick.*

Pinaca’s words about dangerous beliefs and Clepta talking about peril sounded paranoid. Still, if they knew what they were talking about that explained their skittishness. Even Dulcima had mentioned the evil in the mountains. How far away were those mountains? Abdis said it would take them extra time to get back home. Why? Did they intend to escort her into enemy territory and leave her?

The eyes of the eldest Neroi held her fast. A faint wisp of suspicion appeared and Cara clutched at it in relief. They had some kind of power--telepathic, empathic, one of those things. So far, she had seen hints that they “received” but maybe they also “transmitted”. If she tried to recall some kind of SOS message from their world, how did she know that they wouldn’t make her “remember” stuff that hadn’t happened?

What good would I do them anyway? They need to try again and find the right person. Imagine being the real hero, sitting around waiting for the world-nap express, and nothing.

Cara took a breath and turned to face Lady Clepta. “I wish I could help you but I’m not the Marines or a comic superhero. I didn’t have any conversations with a wizard. Someone messed up and snatched the wrong

person. On Earth, we don't have magic and things don't 'come to us'. I'll bet your magician grabbed someone from the wrong planet."

"It is as I told you!" Nabis leaped up and faced the Ancient. "She professes to know nothing of this place or of her role here. Who could say that from amongst the worlds except those who even refuse to acknowledge Alphasis? I believe her a spy, or worse."

Abdis opened his mouth but the other voices drowned out anything he said. He kept at it, Cara noticed, focused just on Clepta. She guessed he was repeating the same thing to be sure at least The Ancient understood him.

A couple of the others sounded as angry as Nabis. Her brief pang of relief turned to fear. "Wait! Wait! I'm not a spy, and I'm not your enemy. I'm nobody's enemy. I just want to get home. Look, I'm trying to help the best way I know how--I'm warning you you've got the wrong person. I'd be useless to you. I don't go around fighting evil. Why can't you accept that?"

Nabis turned to her from whispering to Manara. His eyes glinted like the edges of swords. "One who refuses to acknowledge the will of the Ancient, much less the will of Alphasis, is either unfriend or enemy."

Manara added, "Will you renounce this willfulness? You do no credit to your world, and you do our world harm with this delay. We have lost tree guards already--"

"Silence, Nabis, Manara!" Lady Clepta interrupted. "Abdis has spoken to me of another way. Tomorrow, we pass the Shrine of the Seabird of Sacrifice. The Outworlder may prove her good intent by entering the shrine with us as we ask that the reason for her presence be made known. In this manner, Cara herself may be convinced of the purposes of Alphasis. Is this agreed by the council?"

Silence. The reluctant nod of several heads.

"Then so shall it be."

Abdis walked in silence beside Cara as they went to his family fire. She glanced toward him twice--intending to ask him about the shrine just to get him talking--but he seemed so worried and disappointed she found herself looking away both times. Had her words been that much of a surprise?

What did they expect me to do--transform into a Delta Force squad? All that's going to happen if they make me stay is that they'll get me killed while the real superhero gets to keep having their fun heroic life somewhere. Good plan. Just scoop me up, get me to pledge allegiance to some other country or king or something, and go do battle. 'A talisman that came to you just today'. Yeah, right, Nabis. If I had any "wisdom", I'd have bought the dream-catcher earrings. What would you have said then?

She flung herself down by the fire where she had been sitting before, and fell asleep at once.

When she awoke, the moon hung high over her. Golden in color and too large, it coated the winding branches with creamy light. No one else seemed to be awake. The only sounds were quiet breathing, the wind in the treetops, and a high-pitched "jit-jit" coming from the nearest shrub.

Cara lay awake with open eyes and went over everything from the council meeting. She tried planning what she would say when they got to the shrine, before things could get any more out of hand. More out of hand? Was that possible?

When sleep proved elusive, she tried to remember the names of the council members, and then began to invent their real names. Nabis soon had a dozen descriptive ones. If, heaven forbid, she had to stay here, she'd have to come up with a fake name for herself. Not that wizards or whoever hadn't already done her enough damage.

Her mind drifted to the strange way in which Clepta appeared to overhear all that she and Abdis said. She, Abdis, and Dulcima must sense emotions too. On the other hand, maybe sensing her emotions helped them to guess her thoughts. Had Clepta sensed she left out stuff during her "testimony"? Had Clepta overheard Dulcima giving her the stone?

Cara sat up. How could she have forgotten the stone! Dulcima said that it might help her read her letter. It didn't make sense but she wanted another look at the stone anyway. Cara reached under the edge of the mat and found the bag then fished the squashed scroll from her jeans pocket. She glanced up at the moon and then

toward the embers of the campfire. Not much light to read even if the words were in English. Rather, even if they were in ... Youngish, Youngili? Nerolinese? Still the stone gave off some light of its own. That might help.

Cara tumbled the stone into her hand, and couldn't help marveling again at its beauty. The colors inside it swirled around like water until you tried to catch them at it, then they just innocently reflected the moonlight, appearing as solid as the veins in any ordinary stone.

She popped the stamp off the scroll and unwound it a bit with one hand, then held the stone against the lettered surface like a penlight. Cara blinked. Or the world did. The scroll trembled, and the ink on the parchment slid about like tiny bits of black mercury. Cara gasped. She straightened the sheet to make it level, afraid that the letters would pour right on over the edge and into her lap. By the time she had taken this precaution, the fragments of ink had already settled into their new homes--a flowing script that was more intricate than any calligraphy she had ever seen--and one that illogically now made perfect sense.

'Dear Cara,

'Finally a few minutes to write you! Denise dropped off to sleep. Karen and the twins have settled down to a game of Monopoly, I think. I guess maybe your first postcard was held up. I know how resort mail is. You may get this by August if we're lucky.

'Dad's worked out something for fall for Denise. The state university has a school of special education and they take in children with learning disabilities and other handicaps on Saturdays. Some of the students help evenings, too. The state pays half and the family pays the other half in most cases. Dad's not sure what we'd do about that part but he says they sounded encouraging. Anyway, that takes care of fall. They don't have the service over the summer, so I guess you won't see me at the beach.

'Hope you feel better now. You looked pretty good when you got back to school but, believe me, I know how weak you can feel when you've been ill for a long while. You didn't have to explain why you couldn't help out here. I understood.'

Cara bit her lower lip and tried to keep reading, but tears blurred the rest of the words.

'Never got a garden in ... I think I hear Denise, so maybe I better stop here ... Send lots of postcards, especially. Oh, and play a game of Quark Brigade at Cyber Palace for me. Love, Lisa.'

Cara crumpled the letter and threw it toward the fire, only to miss by a foot. She jumped up from the mat and grabbed up the bit of parchment, flinging it straight down into the flames.

I couldn't, Lisa! I wanted to help. I thought I could but I couldn't. Not when Dad rented the place, and the last summer, too! I've ... I've got my own problems. Sandy bugs me to teach him French, when what he really needs is to work on his English. And ... And I was sick. Is it too much to ask to be left alone on your vacation?

She returned to her mat and lay back down on it. Tears crept from the corners of her eyes into her hair. She wiped them away. She wanted to be home. Even cooped up with Lisa all summer, taking care of all her sisters and brothers. Poor Lisa. What a bummer, losing her mom like that.

Of course, she had kind of lost everything today--not just family but her world. She would not think about it!

So ... had Lady Clepta overheard Dulcima give her the stone? Probably not, or she'd have brought it up during the "interrogation". To be fair, Clepta had been pretty good to her. That Nabis, on the other hand. Wicked nasty! Now she had to visit some shrine and that meant not getting home for at least one more day. Shrine. Sounded like church. Not really her thing ... Had to finish planning what she was going to say there.

As she drifted off to sleep, a half-formed question floated by. Where had her sunburn gone? Would it be waiting patiently for her when she got back?

She slept. And dreamed she climbed toward an empty throne in a rocky land. When she reached it, she started to cry. She turned away and sank to the rough ground.

And, as she turned, lightning seared the sky and a cold wind swept up from the sea.

4-The Shrine

Midday sunlight was flickering through the leaves, when someone further up the path called out, “Flaxenheads! Hurry before they get away!”

Everyone laughed. Dulcima urged Cara toward the rosy light of a new clearing ahead. The leading Neroli had encircled a herd of honey-white animals rather like two foot tall llamas. Dulcima, Cara and the other late arrivals were given the task of going from animal to animal and shearing them. Working as a team, Cara tumbled each flaxenhead so Dulcima could cut off its long silken wool. The first two resisted Cara’s efforts until she caught onto the knack of pressing on the hindquarters first. Arms about the long neck, a tug, and over they went.

The “herdsmen” smiled and chatted amongst themselves and the “sheep-shearers” laughed. Like the others, Cara and Dulcima paused at times to stroke their charges. As soon they were clipped, each flaxenhead leaped to its feet and went back to browsing off shrubs scattered through the clearing. They never moved far or very fast. Cara tried waving arms, shouting, pleading and shoving to get each flaxenhead away, so they could disentangle strands of silken wool from gnarled roots and cropped foliage. They rolled up and slid each precious fragment into the bags while Dulcima described how villagers made yarn and garments. She was showing Cara some of the collected plant parts used for dyes, when Abdis approached. Cara pondered her reluctance to speak with him. Was he angry about what she said last night?

Combing a bit of fleece from his tunic front, Abdis blew it into the air like thistledown. “Cara, we’ve decided to stay here and cook a midday meal. That will require we remove all the flaxenheads from the clearing, before we can gather up the last wool strands and light fires without injuring our benefactors.”

His tone gave a hint of his former good humor before it faded into gravity. “We are quite close to the Shrine of the Seabird of Sacrifice. Now is the time of which we spoke at the council.”

Cara handed a tuft of fleece to Dulcima and nodded. “Thanks. Look, I’m sorry if I upset you last night. It’s just tough, trying to remember stuff that didn’t happen.” She offered an apologetic smile. “Ever try it?”

Abdis seemed about to speak but only nodded. He pointed to the far side of the crowded clearing. “It’s that way.” Glancing at his great granddaughter, he added, “Careful with the strands, child. We’ll be back in a while.”

He walked away.

Cara waved to Dulcima then began threading her way after him through the knots of animals, bushes and people.

As soon as she guessed he could hear her, she called out, “I did try to do what Pinaca wanted. This morning. Remember if anything peculiar happened back home when I checked out the necklace?”

Abdis glanced back and paused long enough for her to catch up.

“He looked happy. I mean the seabird did. Or joyful--like he liked flying. But my necklace, the amulet, looks the same way now.”

The first traces of a trail etched a leaf-strewn curve between violet tree trunks. No one was on the path ahead. Cara bit her lower lip. She touched Abdis’ hand and whispered, “Abdis, wait. I don’t want to do this. Clepta and Nabis will start in on me again when we get there. Nothing’ll happen and that’ll just make it worse. Meantime, my family must be going crazy.”

“Are you so afraid to hear the truth, Outworlder?”

As soon as she heard the voice behind her, Cara felt her body slump in defeat. Wouldn’t you know? Turning to face Lady Clepta, she forced assurance into her answer. “I’m not afraid of the truth. I know what the truth is. I’m tangled up in someone else’s life, thanks to mistaken identity.”

The Ancient’s eyes burned. “We do not seek to entangle you in our affairs. We wish only to find out what is required of you, then to send you on your way. Then we shall return to our own matters. Come.”

Clepta led them along the tree-shaded path. Narrow sunbeams flashed down from close-woven branches on their right, picking out the curve of half-hidden stones and enriching the tints of the groundcover. Leaves rustled just yards off the path. A wedge-shaped head peeked through the disturbed foliage. The deer-like creature chewed on a mouthful of orange leaves, his curled pink tongue gathering up the fragments before they could fall

from his mouth. Motionless, he watched as they filed by. Then he turned for another mouthful, revealing with the movement a tangle of delicate horns. When he leapt away, Cara could only blink and stare. She hurried to catch up with the others, and went back to reciting what she planned to say after they left the shrine.

At first, the familiar forest sounds traveled with them: the calls of birds, the chitter and patter of small furred animals, even the rustle and crack that spoke of larger animals hidden in the dim underbrush. A few minutes approached an hour, then drew past it. Sounds faded, fell away, were lost in an ageless hush. No sound remained except Cara's thoughts and her footsteps. The quiet footfall of the Young approached silence.

Cara concentrated on making as little noise as possible. If someone were listening, her footsteps would betray her as an alien. An unfriend, Nabis had said. She might soon be unfriend to everyone she knew here and others too. Yet how could she avoid that except by taking on responsibilities she couldn't hope to perform? *Should'a stayed under cover when I saw them. Yes, and then what? I've been trapped since I got here. Maybe even before-*

Was someone out there? She looked up from her feet, sensing something directly ahead--and just avoided colliding with Clepta's back.

The path had faded into the edge of a circular clearing, walled with balconies of twisting branches and domed with the periwinkle sky. Before them lay a circular golden meadow, dense with tall feathery plants reminiscent of an autumn crop never harvested.

Scattered through the golden grasses peeked wildflowers of small size but intense jewel-like hues. A puff of fragrant air sent the tops of the grasses nodding. Some of the flowers rose into the air and fluttered about--deep red, blue and pale green insects rather like dragonflies. Was the soft shush and rustle just the shifting grasses or also the delicate sweep of their many petal-like wings?

They came within yards of a small white structure before Cara looked up and saw it. Centered in the meadow, the building had six sides and a domed roof. The corners resembled columns, and the whole structure was made of white stone veined with cream. Not marble, Cara decided. The building where her dad worked had marble steps and trim. This was richer, less stark. What was alabaster? Wasn't that a white stone?

Clepta led them around two sides of the building until they came to an open door surmounted by a lintel with a bas-relief image of a seabird. Its shape and meticulous detail exactly matched her necklace. Frowning up at it, Cara followed Clepta and Abdis through the doorway. She started to trace the ridges and ripples of her necklace but dropped her hand. Others were entering behind her--all the Young Ones from the council the night before. This was it. Her heart rate quickened and every planned word evaporated. She turned to face the Ancient.

Clepta curtsied toward the far wall, and then stared upward. Her gaze drew Cara's own. Someone had placed a seabird-shaped plaque at the very top of the wall. Its black surface had tiny glittery bits scattered on it, possibly to represent stars in a night sky. Cara blinked. The raised panel receded, becoming a bit of night sky glimpsed through a window cut into the wall.

Whoa! Has to be an optical illusion! It didn't get dark in the last few minutes! She blinked, then tilted her head and blinked again but she couldn't trick her eyes into seeing a raised panel. Patches and slender bars of sunlight brightened the dim interior, their sources the five windows in the remaining walls. Fragments of distant foliage and patches of daytime sky peeked through these. She turned back to the crystal and ebony silk of the seabird window, and trembled in wonder. A dozen half-formed questions welled up. The solemn serenity of that night view quelled them all.

"Cara, now is the time." Clepta beckoned her toward the center of the round floor. "Stand here, gaze upon the seabird and try to remember what your task is in this land. What message were you given when you first looked upon your talisman? We shall seek for guidance and strive to help you in such manner as we are able."

Yes, with telepathy. Cara walked over to stand exactly where Lady Clepta had been. As the two slipped past each other, she considered protesting that she didn't need instructions for someone else's job. No words came and then it didn't matter. All seven had formed an arc behind her with heads bowed.

Cara faced the wall but she couldn't look back out that window again. Her gaze fixed just below it, she cried out in silence. *I don't want to be here! Please, can this be over with?*

One minute slid into another. She looked down.

A tangle of patterns covered the entire wall below the Seabird window--bas-relief representations of animals and plants, some familiar to her but many more strange. Also depicted were large seabirds and two kinds of

human-like figures. The larger must be the Elder Ones. So, Lady Clepta's Three Peoples, from her lecture last night.

An etched diagram like a simple schematic of a solar system occupied the space between the Three Peoples and the floor. The system couldn't be Earth's--the third planet appeared to have two moons. For a second, Cara felt terror in the pit of her stomach.

Rich says astronomers keep finding evidence for planets but nothing like we can just go to. Nothing like this star system with more, what are they, well more small planets than gas giants. How far away from Earth are we? Way too far for our guys to spot? She glanced back up at the window--the Seabird flew over everything, its outstretched wings covering even the planets as if in protection. She frowned at the window. *The night sky? Or a view in space? That's enough! Stop looking at it!*

She settled on the many bas-relief panels to either side of the central one. Most of the work depicted seabirds and the two humanlike peoples grouped together and arranged in panels. If the sculptor's plan was to tell a story, Cara couldn't get the sense of it.

Details of the sculpted images started to shift--fading from one place in a grouping and slowly reappearing elsewhere. Cara drew closer to the wall as one set of figures faded and another began to form. Three people walked down a stony, fire-lit passageway far ahead of her. The narrow cavern grew wider and higher or the figures shrank away to nothing more than a shifting shadow cast by torchlight. The shadow paralleled her steps, then became two shadows. Someone was beside her but she couldn't see who it was.

Danger lurked ahead beyond the haphazard flickering light.

She looked down, unsure of her steps, and saw three delicate plants growing in a wavering circle of bright sunlight. Filled with helpless foreboding, she could only watch as the three-clawed foot crushed them.

Warm sand lapped about her feet like gentle water. Hidden within it, something sharp as a thorn--or a claw--jabbed her. She groped by her injured foot and lifted out a tiny star. Feathers brushed her shoulders then pressed to the rest of her body as they enveloped her with the softness of a comforter. The star's light grew as she stood up.

Three pairs of malicious eyes glared at her from beyond the star's light. Cara shuddered and looked away from them, down toward a patch of sunlight--coming through the shrine's window with the night-sky view. She looked up. Still a night sky. The wall below it bore only the original images of the three peoples and the solar system; the other walls the rugged pattern of unworked stone. She flinched and stepped back.

"Alphesis, we hear you."

Relief swept through her at the sound of Clepta's voice. Reality, or what passed for it here.

"Cara, tell us what you have seen."

"Nothing." She swallowed and managed to whisper, "Okay. I saw pictures. There and there. Evil eyes and a tiny star. People walking down a passageway. A big clawed foot squishing some tiny plants. That one I've seen before, even back home. I didn't fall asleep, honest! But everything was eerie, like I was dreaming. I guess maybe my mind wandered."

Clepta gazed into her eyes and Cara stared back. *That's all you're getting, Lady Clepta. Nothing made sense and it doesn't fit anyway. Someone probably telepathed it to me. You? Why? You take this stuff seriously, and who knows what spin Nabis or Pinaca will put on my daydream about a dinosaur crushing some seedlings? Probably say I'm the dinosaur.*

Okay. One more thing. She drew breath and added firmly, "I'm sorry, Lady Clepta. I didn't see any wizards. I didn't even see my necklace. No beach, no bench, no boardwalk--and no one spoke to me. I saw sand but I don't think it was on a beach."

"Are you sure?" Abdis asked. She turned to find herself caught in a vigilant and expectant stare. Did he think it mattered where the sand was? Or was he--

"No." Clepta shook her head. "She saw nothing because she closed her mind."

"You did not wish to see, since the seeing frightened you. Hear me, then. Alphesis wills that you travel eastward through Melwood until you reach the sea. On the coast, you shall find some of the Chosen who will help you reach the Throne of Wisdom. Alphesis did not deign to tell me your mission for it is yours and not

mine. Had you opened your mind to know it, you would have found it easier to accomplish. Nonetheless, the task remains.”

Okay, this is it. Cara cleared her throat and tried to start the speech she had planned. A croak came out instead. She drew a new breath and began over. “I’m sorry but I really can’t do that. You see, even if there’s a task, it’s not mine. If there is an Outworlder superhero and I’m not saying there’s not, well if there is, someone better try again and call for them. The longer you guys wait to do that, won’t things get more dangerous?”

Was someone else listening to them? Cara glanced toward the sun-filled doorway but saw no one. Far in the distance, she caught a rumble of thunder. Bright light glimmered in all the windows except the seabird-shaped one. Could someone be listening through it? Clepta and Abdis were watching her--maybe waiting politely for her to finish speaking. Good idea. Get on with it and get out of here!

“Right now, my job is to find my way home. I still hope you’ll help me with that but if you won’t then I guess I’ll have to find someone who will.”

Lady Clepta drew in her breath. Cara felt astonished too. She had actually had nerve enough to say the words. She’d rehearsed them every time she woke up last night and then off and on most of the morning, and now she’d actually done it.

Why are they looking at me like that? It’s not up to me! It’s their problem and it’s up to them to get it right, not just settle for whoever comes along. Someone from here would be better equipped anyway. They’d have the right skills like foraging or shooting bows, rather than washing clothes and playing “Quark Brigade”. One of those Chosen should volunteer or they should magic off a new send-help gleep. While they’re magicking the proper summons this time, they can put me back.

Clepta had tears in her eyes. Cara could hardly look at her. *Good grief! I tried to word this so not to hurt anyone’s feelings.* She tried to swallow back a pang of guilt and, with it, the urge to unsay what she had just said. *Hey, if I give in, I’ll be halfway to the land of the Chosen by tomorrow. It’s not like this is just a favor to please grandma.* She lifted her chin and faced the Ancient, mindful of the babble of voices around her but pretending not to notice it. *Can we please just get out of here?*

Nabis grasped her by the arm and forced her to face him. “Villain! Would you cast aside the welfare of an entire world, merely because it is not your own? Can you truly believe that it doesn’t concern you?”

“It does concern me.” Cara tried to pull away from him but he wouldn’t let go. “I like you guys. I’m sorry you’re having problems.”

“Nabis! You will do no violence in this house, or you shall go forth. Release the stranger’s arm.”

Nabis let Cara go and bowed to the lady. He answered in a controlled voice, “Your pardon, Lady Clepta.” Turning, he left the shrine.

Cara rubbed her arm but Clepta’s use of the word, stranger, hurt more. With her last few shreds of courage, she faced the woman and finished, “Lady Clepta, all I’ve done here is get you all upset. I’m sorry, because you’ve all been kind.” *Except Nabis.* “But it’s time I let you get back to your life while I try to get back to mine. Someone must know how to send me back home.”

Sorrow still in her eyes, Clepta nodded. “You cannot know how bitterly you will rue this. The mission will be performed, for no mortal from any world may prevent Alphasis. But I fear you will only come to understand this wisdom through great pain and grief.”

She paused as though to give Cara a chance to respond. Cara couldn’t think of anything to say.

“As you wish then. We will provide an escort to the borders of our land. In which direction would you set out?”

“Abdis told me the Elder Ones have most of the wizards and that they live south of here. So, I guess I’m off south.”

Cara worked at keeping an outward appearance of assurance but her mind cried out at her own decision. She glanced toward Abdis, hoping to see a sympathetic face only to glimpse his grim stare at the floor.

“Manara, the tree guard Sataris is to be found. He will conduct the stranger to the southern border and return. Tell him to seek out the watch, see that all is well, and make report to me at Melwood Fastness.

“Abdis, see to the provisioning for the stranger. The others shall make the people ready for our return to the fastness. I shall remain here a short while. Expect to meet me at the Stream of Green Leaves.”

Amidst murmurs of “Yes, my lady.” they went out through the open arch of the shrine. Cara looked back but caught only a glimpse of the Ancient. She stood with her back to Cara and with her gaze fixed on the seabird, or what lay beyond it through the strange window.

Abdis walked beside Cara as they returned through the meadow. It was still mid-afternoon but the meadow colors were dampened and dull, the air chill.

Abdis was talking in feverish haste as though he feared she would disappear before he finished. “... no circumstances, divulge your true name to anyone you meet until you are on the Isle of the Seabird. Rather in Fiori, at the royal court of the Elders. Think of another name to use now so that you will have it ready when you reach the borders of our land. Remember what I told you. Do not take off the necklace. Alphasis protects those who wear it.

“Beware of any structure or monument made of a dull, red metal or of dark red stone. They are evil, Cara, the work of Daetaga, the Shadow. Do not touch the metal. Do not gaze upon the carvings on the stone.”

He paused and studied her face. The others passed them by on either side of the dim path.

“Cara, reconsider! Even now, you may change your mind. In such a short time, you have become a friend. I would not lose you. I would that your family not lose you through mere folly or pride. Go to the east and learn of your mission!”

“I can’t.” She wanted to add more just for Abdis but it had all been said. Cara turned back to the path and continued walking, a pace or two in front of the Young One.

They found those about the mid-day fires ominously quiet. Cara guessed the news of her decision had gone ahead of them via the words and interpretation of Nabis. No one spoke to her. All busied themselves about their tasks but some who glanced her way did so with unfriendly eyes.

Dulcima raced towards them, and threw her arms around Cara. She sobbed, “It isn’t true, is it? Tell me it isn’t true! They can’t send you away.”

Cara knelt and wiped her eyes. Then she smiled and said as bravely as she could, “Dulcima, they’re not sending me. I’m sending myself. I’ve got an errand to do in the south.” She could have bit her tongue at the word, errand. “I’ve got to find my way home, you know? I couldn’t stay here always. This isn’t my world.” The last words echoed in her mind. She stood up.

Abdis had already begun gathering supplies, working as though he hadn’t a moment to lose. Cara watched him in sympathy--his feelings were so plainly written in his actions. With Dulcima’s hand in hers, she walked to his side and began stuffing the provisions in a small bag evidently intended for her use.

Dulcima stood a moment in thoughtful silence then went up to Abdis and pulled his arm. He started and looked down. With a glance toward Cara, she stretched up and whispered to him.

He turned. “Dulcima says she has given you a narthrous stone which she found. She should not have done so.” His voice was gruff. “But since you have it, it may as well be properly mounted for your journey. I shall get what is needed.”

In a moment, he returned, holding a few weapons. Seeing Cara’s puzzled expression he explained, “I suggested to the Ancient this morning that we bring a few weapons from the Fire Meeting Hut so that you might head to the Isle armed. The Ancient would still wish for you to have a weapon. Try these here. Take whatever is to your liking. As you know, we need them not. Peralike warriors brought them to us at their king’s command.”

“I don’t want a weapon. I just want to travel in peace and get home.”

“You may wish to journey in peace but it is another thing to have the power to do so. Some of our own people have learned this recently. Choose.”

Reluctantly Cara sorted through the small cache of weathered and worn weapons. The weight of the three swords persuaded her not to take one but each was on a belt together with a hunting knife. Cara removed a sword and its scabbard from their belt and took the largest knife to Abdis. “All right, if you all insist, I’ll take this.”

He nodded. “I shall have the belt cut to size. In the meantime, let me see the narthrous stone and I shall mount it. Flaisa and her cousin have wires and tools.”

Cara undid the pouch thongs around her wrist and emptied the stone out into her palm. As she held it out to him, Abdis' eyes widened. He whistled low, producing a very human sound.

"A stone, they both say. Just a narthrous stone." His words were light but they failed to cover the tension in his voice. "Dulcima!"

Cara gave Dulcima an encouraging smile that she didn't see. She was staring up at her great-grandfather. *Great. I know that look. Thought it wasn't a big deal, only to find out it's huge. Poor kid. Bet she wishes she never gave me that stone. Never met me. Anything can I say?*

"Where did you find this?"

"At the shrine last fall when we camped here. I was looking at the pictures and it ... fell out of the wall."

"It fell?"

Dulcima nodded solemnly.

"Did you scratch the symbol of Alphasis on it?" His hand trembled as he pointed to the stone.

The child's eyes grew round, and she shook her head emphatically. "No, no! I wouldn't do that without asking leave of the Ancient or you, great-father. That would be to pretend that it was a Discerning Stone."

Laughing, Abdis knelt and grasped his great granddaughter by her slender shoulders, kissing her forehead. "Of course you wouldn't, dearest. Of course not. But did you not realize that the etching already marked it as a Discerning Stone?"

Without waiting for an answer, Abdis looked up at Cara. "You have been given a great treasure, given freely and therefore truly yours. Guard it well and tell no one that you possess it, especially not Nabis."

Abdis smiled with a trace of his old twinkle returning. "You may seek to escape your task but I suspect that it shall stalk you wherever you go. Knowing you will carry this lightens my heart. May it bring you aid in time of need."

He jumped up. "I must take care not to cover any part of the design when I wrap the wires about the stone. We will need a long thong so that you can carry this concealed. Perhaps a chain."

He left and when he returned, to Cara's amazement, he was whistling. Had the identity of the stone changed his mood so swiftly?

Quickly fastening the stone to a sturdy chain, Abdis urged her to put it on at once. She did so, but he gestured with jovial irritation, "No, no. Under your robes. Show just your talisman. Remember, the stone must remain secret. There."

Cara glanced down at the seabird necklace as she tucked the stone out of sight. "Well, at least I've come up with an alias. Someone of the Many ... Delia of the Many Necklaces, at your service, sir. Abdis, I've got to know something. Everyone believes the seabird necklace brought me here."

"Probably. But by the command of Alphasis."

Ignoring the comment, Cara continued, "If the necklace brought me here, why not take it off and go home?"

Abdis sighed. "It is not that simple." His voice sounded strained. He looked tired. With any trace of amusement banished, his eyes hinted at his true age. "Still, you will not believe me until you try. Since you also wear the narthrous stone and are not in immediate danger, remove the seabird necklace a moment and hand it to me."

Cara fumbled with the catch in her eagerness. She handed the necklace to Abdis, and more than half expected the forest to fade away. Nothing happened.

"What do you say now? If the necklace brought me, wouldn't it take me back? Tell me at least you see all this was a mistake or a coincidence."

Abdis returned the necklace. "No, you cannot leave until you have fulfilled the reason for your coming. If you wish to go back quickly, set about your task at once."

A soft snort of disgust escaped her but Cara clenched her teeth on the words, "not mine". She answered instead, "Ok, I give up. You sound just like Clepta and Nabis and the others. I thought you were different."

"I had thought you different also, Cara. Come with me to meet Sataris. It is time for you both to leave us."

5-Venturing South

The moment her guide stopped, Cara sank onto the closest bed of leiten tree needles. Sataris had called a brief halt to collect a rare herb used for healing. It was two, no, three days since they left the band of foragers and began traveling south. At first, they followed the same trail the foragers had used heading north. Later Sataris abandoned it for another which took them through hilly stands of the fir-like leitens, then something purplish but cedar-like which he called moontrees.

Cara removed her sandals and plucked stray tree needles off the bottoms of her damp feet. That done, she rubbed first one foot and then the other--and wished for the hundredth time she had put on joggers back home.

The first day they saw no one, but on the second day and again today Sataris led her close to small permanent settlements of Young Ones. Close but never through them. Perhaps Sataris had orders to bring her directly south and was obeying this to the letter. Whatever his reason, she was relieved. A stop at a village would require explanations she'd rather not be made.

Cara studied her taciturn guide as he stowed the herbs in his provision bag. Since he had the dark hair and steely eyes of Nabis, she suspected that he, too, came from the house of Moontree. She could have asked of course but his short answers to earlier questions suggested he didn't welcome conversation.

Even so, he helped her answer a question on their first day together. She was curious about the length of the Narentan day compared to Earth's, but wasn't wearing a watch. No one was. She asked Sataris if he could think of a way they could compare the lengths of the units of time in their two worlds. At his instruction, they spent the next few hours as they walked both estimating how long it took for ten minutes to pass. Though Cara's Narentan vocabulary also used "minutes" and "hours" as measures of time, Sataris had used their experiment to demonstrate that Narentan minutes must actually be shorter than Earth minutes.

Further, he'd explained gruffly, each Narentan hour had one hundred minutes and Narentan days were divided into twenty-eight hours. He muttered through a series of rapid calculations Cara deemed worthy of any Earth geek. Claiming that the number of minutes in an hour and the length of the minutes themselves roughly canceled each other out for the two worlds, Sataris concluded that Narentan days were about twenty-eight Earth-hours long. That done, he promptly went back to ignoring her.

Twenty-eight hours. No wonder she tired so much before the end of a day and fought insomnia every night.

Sataris turned to her and called out, "Come, Outworlder. We have only two hours before dusk."

Reluctantly, Cara put on her sandals and got to her feet. Hoisting the provision bag, she followed him.

Sataris pointed out a new path that lifted to the spine of a ridge then plunged down its far side. After that treacherous drop, he said, their descent grew gentler as the path settled into a zigzag between lightly wooded hills.

They scrambled up and over the ridge and settled into the alternate straight-ways and switchbacks of the path down. Streams appeared and then combined into waterfalls and rapids. A fickle breeze gifted them with cool spray whenever the path crept too close to the frothing streams.

The more widely spaced trees allowed frequent glimpses of wildlife. A herd of flaxenheads drank at a stream to their left while a ram stood guard on a nearby hillock. Sataris didn't name the occasional large squirrel-like creatures with cream-colored fur but their appearance made him grumble or curse under his breath. Twice, delicate antelope-like animals slipped like mist behind soft-rustling leaves. These Sataris named bokhorns, the emblem of one of the six houses.

Cara remembered golden-eyed Manara of Bokhorn house, and she in turn reminded her of the council. Her defiance of Clepta had been eroding as she walked, leaving gloomy regret. Yesterday, she had actually come close to asking Sataris to turn back but couldn't force out the words. What would Sataris' reaction have been? Perhaps his orders would not have permitted him to return to Clepta's band no matter what she said. Why go back anyway? To avoid walking all the way to another country? To bungle a role that couldn't possibly be hers?

Imagine someone from here going to Earth to straighten things out! Yes, please fix Earth's problems, Sataris. What, you're just a tree guard? Well, I'm just a student.

The brief flirtation with amusement faded. Sunset-warm hues enriched the bark of the closest trees. *Another day and night, and no closer to going home. How much farther to Tethra, then how long until I find a cooperative wizard? Hopefully, they aren't all curmudgeons like Sataris and Nabis. Hey, wait! I've got no*

money to pay for their services. This is hopeless. She felt tears welling in her eyes but she focused on keeping in step with her guide. *Hey, it's also a day closer to the day I'll finally get home.*

Midway through the morning of the fourth day, they stood on the last height before the edge of the forest and the Southmarch of the Land of the Young Ones. Wind swept over them from the east. A sea breeze Sataris called it, though Cara couldn't catch the salt tang. She had wakened to a rain shower during the night and the chill air spoke of more rain to come. She was grateful for the jeans and shirt under her caftan, though the damp cuffs chafed her ankles. Her sandaled feet ached with cold.

Sataris pointed. "Here where the leiten trees draw back from the stream on either side is the last outpost of the Young Ones on the Southmarch. There we shall part for I must gather information all along the march and report to the Ancient at Melwood Keep."

"How far's it to Elders?"

He studied her, head tilted, his ageless gray eyes without expression. "Where the Land of the Young ends begins that of the Tethran Realm of the Elder. Below, you see the western portion of their Province of the Two Rivers."

"You're kidding! It's all just hills down there. And bushes. Where's the people?"

"In the south, Outworlder." His face held no expression; his eyes were hooded.

Caught between fear and anger, Cara persisted, "How far south?"

"Some of the closest are less than a day's journey away. A few shepherds live in the hills and many farmers dwell in the valleys. There are a few millers scattered along the two rivers. Some fishers live close to the River Sweetwater, the first of the rivers."

"That's it? That's your idea of directions?" When Sataris made no response but to continue his steady gaze, Cara asked, "Look, I could miss them completely and not even know it in those hills! Isn't there a town or really populated valley?"

"Others lurk westward in the empty place bordering on the Province of the Two Rivers, but you would not want to meet them. The cities of the Elders are several days' journey to the south, beyond the Sweetwater and Nonz. Of course, you could go east from here to the sea ..."

"I know the Chosen are to the east. Thanks for your directions. I'm heading south like I said."

They scrambled down the slope and made for the stream. A voice hailed them and a small, lithe Young One dropped noiselessly from a nearby tree. Sataris hurried to her and was soon in deep discussion, gesturing to the east and west. He seemed to have forgotten her.

Cara studied the terrain ahead. The trees thinned quickly here. Within a hundred yards a tree remarkably like scrub oak and a species of mint green shrub unknown to her dotted the landscape. Soon even vegetation of that size disappeared, replaced by splotchy patches of greenish and purplish short grasses.

Cara stood a moment uncertainly. Was this it? Was she supposed to make her way alone now? True, they had said farewell and she had thanked Sataris. Still. Well, no one had promised her a guide past the border. She picked up the provision bag and took a deep breath. Determined to match Sataris' steady gate, Cara walked quickly along the bank of the stream. As she passed the last tree, she remembered a history lesson. "Exiled" suddenly had new meaning.

The country ahead wasn't as desolate as it first appeared. A few miles to the east, she could see a flock of what appeared to be real sheep rather than flaxenheads. Here and there--even farther to the east--were the semi-regular borders of fields soon to be planted as the season turned to summer. Grain crops to be sent to the mills? The dwellings were few and always far to her left, in the direction of the sea. She considered heading over to them--the land that way was relatively flat--but from what she had heard, what would a wizard be doing way up here? If she were going to travel east, she might as well have stayed with the Young Ones.

Directly before her, the wide stream flowed between descending hills as it went into the vague distance. The sun broke through cloud cover ahead long enough to glint on wide water. Was that the first of the two rivers? The Sweetwater Sataris had called it. She struck out, guided only by the stream she followed. Where the stream and river joined appeared to be a building, probably a mill, and the closest dwelling to the south.

The pathless terrain proved more difficult than she had expected. With ground this rocky and rough, she understood why no one farmed in the hills. Where she could, Cara tried to walk through heather-like plants but, as the ground sloped downward, she left them behind.

Mauve grasses grew in coarse tussocks. Each had dark, nearly invisible creepers springing from its roots that grasped at her ankles. Her pace slowed as she picked her way. The edges of the creepers were tough and bore tiny burrs that remained embedded in her flesh each time she stopped to get the creepers disentangled. After a couple of hours, Cara felt like she had dozens of tiny bits of glass or metal under the skin of her fingertips and ankles. She searched everywhere but never found a path. Evidently Young and Elder didn't visit each other very often.

The sun slid through the clouds toward the horizon but the meeting point of her stream and the river refused to draw closer. She reminded herself she was much lower now, making it hard to judge distances. The surrounding low hills blocked sign of any landmarks she had seen earlier.

The clouds darkened, producing a misty rain that hung in the chill air. Her damp hair kept clinging to her face. Tired of constantly stopping to push it back, she worked it into a rough French braid.

The sun was close to setting behind the western mountain range before it found an opening in the clouds. Beams shafted through the narrow slit between mountaintops and clouds, sped east and were stopped by two huge objects beyond the hill just to Cara's left.

A thick post leaned toward the mountains, its dull red reminiscent of the paint used to protect metals from rust. A design like never-ending ribbons--weaving, writhing in and out--encrusted the surface from top to bottom. Random sections of the post bulged like pus-filled sores.

Near it, a cube shape claimed the next hill's closest slope. The cube lacked the tips of its corners, either by design or from natural weathering. An intricate design scarred it as well. Movement rose and fell on its roiling surface--a suggestion of leering, evil faces.

"Sculptor must have been a sick-o." Cara muttered. Loud as a shout, the words vibrated in the dim silence.

No chirping birds. Where are the birds? She swerved to her right, away from the shapes and quickened her pace. Even without Abdis' warning, Cara knew she would have hated both shapes at once. She was tempted to glance over her shoulder to see if they were still in view but resisted the urge.

Anything that uncanny ... Well, the farther away I get the better. Glad the sun got through just then or I might have camped back there. I need to camp soon, though, or I'll get lost or bump into things. Yack! Like one of those things. Really thought I'd reach a building tonight.

I don't get it. I only stopped twice today. Not for long, just like Sataris. That rocky ground and that grass did it. Ouch. That's about it for the sun. I hope I'm far enough away from those ... things and not too close to anything else weird because this is going to have to be it. Is a valley safer than a hill? Hills sometimes have weird monuments. There's my stream. Just go with the flow in the morning.

As she rummaged through her provision bag, Abdis' careful planning in choosing her supplies was obvious. Her ceramic water flask, cocooned in a dense spiral of tough cords. Rough-woven packs held dried plants—mostly leaves and berries but none with names she could remember. Cubes of the bitter bread were carefully ensconced in a tight-fitting box with no hinges or latch. Flint, steel, and a small bundle of kindling fell out of the bag last. She dumped then one after another on the ground. Kindling. Each day's march, she was supposed to look for kindling for the following day. Oh, well. Now, if only Abdis had packed a chunk of Boy Scout preparedness.

Doing exactly what she remembered Sataris doing, Cara cleared a spot near the stream and gathered the driest bits of heather and other wood fragments that she could find. She had practiced with her flint and steel each night when Sataris was lighting the fire but she still had trouble lighting the kindling--but that proved a breeze compared to making her collection of damp wood burn. Smoke poured toward her like a predator seeking prey. She moved from where she had settled, and then had to shift again when a breeze helped the smoke find her.

Finally able to breathe and keep her eyes open, Cara looked up to see that it was nighttime dark. Only a pale glow in the sky behind the western chain of mountains marked where the sun had gone. *One time when I would've liked a longer day, this happens.*

Still, the fire snapped and popped as it worked away at the damp bits of wood, and its glow reassured her. Cara forced down some of the bitter teintree "pine nut" bread and swallowed enough water to wash away most of the flavor. Then, she leaned against a sturdy bush and drifted toward sleep.

A scraping sound yanked her back to wakefulness. The fire had burned low. Was that the soft rustle of a footstep? A human-shaped form was descending one of the circling hills.

Her heart beat quicker. Knife. That's right, she had a knife. She worked free the rusty blade. *What on earth am I going to do with it, if I need it? Slice bread?*

The person approached and stopped, standing between Cara and the stream. The red ember glow picked out a female figure much taller than herself. She was dressed in a caftan-like robe with a divided skirt, and made of a cloth woven in an intricate red and gray pattern. The woman tossed back the long black braids of her hair and called out jovially, "So here you are at last! They sent me to help you, though you've led me on a merry chase."

As she spoke, she removed a low boot from her left foot, turned it over, and gave it a vigorous shake.

Cara lowered her knife. "Who sent you? The Young Ones?"

The woman glanced up from brushing at the bottom of her foot and answered, "Yes, the Neroli. Did you not know there are grave dangers here about? We must leave this place quickly." Putting the boot back on, she muttered something about "tether weeds".

"In the middle of the night?"

"Yes!" the woman answered, refocusing on Cara. "For your safety. I assume you wish to remain alive until you reach ..."

"... the cities of the Elders!" Cara interrupted, lest the woman begin lecturing her about the Isle of the Chosen. "Can you, uh, point me to the right road, or whatever?"

"To where?" The woman stepped fully into the faint light, a quizzical expression on her thin face.

"I'm going to the Elders, to find a magician! Can you help?" Cara answered more sharply than she had meant.

"Oh, I'll do more than that!" The woman smiled. "I shall go with you along the road to protect you. You may call me Ruselda. What shall I call you?"

"Call me, uh, Delia."

"Greeting, Delia. Let me help you gather up your belongings."

When her few possessions were back in the provision bag, Ruselda handed it to Cara. Retaining the water flask, she carefully poured the remnants of its contents over the last embers of the fire. As the warm glow fled the surrounding grasses, the dim light of a low moon shown through broken clouds in the eastern sky. The light behind the Elder woman served to accentuate her height and the unbroken sweep of her robes.

As if at the touch of Cara's gaze, Ruselda turned and said, "Child, where did you get that necklace? You are not of the Elders and the Young Ones do not wear the seabird talisman. What kind person has protected you so well?"

Cara shrugged and answered as noncommittally as she could, "No one really. I got it, uh, near where I live. Actually, I just bought it the other day. Is it really just like those of the Elders?"

"It appears to be in this light. You say you bought it?" Ruselda studied the necklace through squinted eyes, and then scowled briefly toward the ivory moon. "Here, let me see it more closely."

"Do you have any idea how it got to my world?" Cara reached for the clasp, but Abdis' warning whispered, *Do not do it! Wear it, guard it as long as you are here.*

Cara dropped her hand and stammered, "Someone told me not to take it off. A ... a very wise man. Perhaps in the morning, you could ..."

"No matter." Ruselda favored her with a cool smile. "It is like the others, as you are. Let us be off then, Delia. We have far to go."

Like me? What others? Outworlders?

Cara tried to keep her confusion to herself but it must have slipped into her eyes. Ruselda blew air softly between her teeth. She elaborated with slow and deliberate condescension, "I was unclear. Your necklace is like that worn by those of the Elder race. You, of course, are not like the Elders."

Not like the Elders? Isn't Ruselda an Elder? Sataris said this was Elder country. She can't be a Chosen--they're birds. She just said Elders wear seabird necklaces. Her necklace is different--all intricate pieces of red and black. Looks familiar ... Duh! It ought to! You saw it on that red post!

As if confirming her guess, the necklace shifted and began writhing about Ruselda's neck.

Ice clutched at Cara's heart and throat. She gave a sudden violent shiver. "Look. I've been doing okay so I think I'll pass on the help. Actually, I think you'd better go away now. I ..."

Her trembling fingers groped for the knife she had put away only minutes before. *Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!*

"Fool!" Ruselda echoed Cara's repeated thought with uncanny accuracy. "You cannot hope to find your way in these hills. To try to do so alone dooms your journey to failure."

Ruselda sighed, and clasped her hands as though to regain control of herself. "Delia, do you think you can thwart your fate so easily? I know why you are here and even why you have that necklace. Do you?"

"I don't care!"

"It matters not!" Ruselda stormed in the same breath. "Whether you care or not, whether you know or not." She added more softly, "It doesn't matter. I can help you. Right now, you don't even know which way to turn, the better to relieve yourself of the burden you bear. I can ..."

"Go away!" Cara raged through clenched teeth. "I don't know who you are but I don't trust you. If I wanted advice and guidance, I'd've gotten it from the Young Ones, not from some stranger like you. Only help I need is a magician ..."

"A 'magician'" Ruselda mimicked. "Only those who know nothing of us, call us that." She smiled and tilted her head slightly, "but you shall learn more of us, I think."

Cara managed to free the corroded dagger from its sheath at last. She lifted it with shaky fingers and took her other hand from the sheath to fumble at her neck.

Ruselda watched the movements with a calm smile. "Yes, child, hold to your protection while you may. Did they tell you we cannot touch one who wears that bird bauble? True, and untrue. No matter. Before the dawn comes, you will give it to me freely."

Cara shook her head. She tightened her grip on the knife's haft, and tried to steel herself to strike out with the blade.

"Go away." Her voice sounded half like a whimper in her own ears.

"No." Ruselda answered swiftly, with a broader smile. "You have not the power to banish me from your presence. But, see, you interrupted me. Perhaps they told you I may touch one protected as you only with the greatest planning and precaution?"

When Cara failed to answer, the woman shrugged. "No? Careless of them. I haven't the time for those preparations and, I confess, tonight I lack also the patience." She gestured in the air. "My hounds, the Fenroi, have both." She paused a moment as if listening, her smile frozen in its iciness, her eyes fixed with watchful amusement on Cara.

From the distant hills swept echoed threads of howling. The sound briefly propelled Cara into movement. Her mind produced the commands to throw the knife at the woman and run, but her body obeyed different imperatives. At the first twitch of her hand, the woman muttered and gestured toward her sharply. Cara's hand moved but not in the direction she wanted. She fought the pressure as long as she could, even once she knew she couldn't resist it. In less time than it had taken Cara to drag the rusty blade free, it was sheathed again.

That left running. The woman seemed to read her mind. She stopped making her first gesture and began another, muttering a new variety of hideous sounds. Cara choked back a horrified gasp. Something glue-like and heavy welled up around her feet. She put all her strength into lifting her left foot but only succeeded in raising it about an inch. Ruselda watched her struggles while muttering the same hideous sounds repeatedly until Cara let her foot drop.

The distant howls grew closer and deeper of throat. Wild canine voice mingled with voice, asking and answering questions in an eerie language that was part predator and part something Cara couldn't guess at and

didn't wish to. As the calls grew clearer and more complex, Ruselda glanced toward the hills then back at Cara, her smile as icy as her eyes.

Cara stared into the woman's triumphant gaze like a cobra-hunted mouse until a voice pierced the horror that enveloped her, a voice she knew and trusted, *May it bring you aid in time of need*. Cara coached herself frantically, *Abdis. Discerning Stone. Yeah, but what do I do with it?*

Not daring to breathe, Cara tried to move her left hand. It answered her command--at least for the moment. Ruselda would doubtless stop any aggressive gesture she saw. Right now she was staring toward the wolf-like shrieks and moans of her creatures.

Cara tensed in preparation. *One shot. She knows about the necklace but not the stone. Grab it. Look into it. Okay. Fast before she sees.*

Ruselda glanced her way. Satisfied, she focused again on the howling. As soon as she did, Cara pulled on the chain and groped for the stone itself. Look in it, and then what? Ruselda turned back to her at once and her eyes followed the movement of Cara's hand on the chain. Her tainted smile briefly registered amusement then swallowed that human response whole.

Out of the corner of her eye, Cara could see shifting shadows on the moon-dim hills. Three shapes were topping a nearby rise. Ruselda nodded toward them in greeting.

As soon as she looked away, Cara made her move. For an instant, her hand touched the Discerning Stone and her eyes were on Ruselda, and she saw her, really saw her. The cold expression remained but it clung to just a shattered caricature of Ruselda's outward face. Malice alone held the disintegrated fragments of humanity together. Ruselda's ice-white eyes pinioned her gaze with the strength of a spell and her smile stretched into a ravenous curve.

Cara stumbled as a sandal caught on something. She kicked off the other shoe and kept running. She couldn't remember how the spell broke or when she started to run. Her scream was a dreamlike ghost. Reality was a monstrous smile on an inhuman face, so vivid it turned the ground and sky around her into wisps of vapor and shadow.

Existence was fleeing, as long as she could, as fast as she could. Air ripped through her lungs in ragged gasps. The thorny plants and rough ground punished her feet like needles and knives. The soft, persistent thud of paws sounded behind her never receding but never growing nearer. The howls had stopped.

Disoriented and painfully gasping for each breath, Cara glimpsed something ahead, dim through the shattered smile. A long low barrier and a massive oblong beyond it, both edged with frail moonlight. The frightened bleats of a sheep approached then receded. She ran down the length of the fence searching for an opening, a way to get to the building and safety.

The Fenroi drew close enough to hear their panting. She clawed at the knife. It came free just as she found the opening. She scrambled up the fenced path to the building's shadowed door and pounded on it with desperate strength. Knife raised, she whirled to face the Fenroi.

Their wolf-like shapes expanded and shrank, the outlines blurring together and pulling apart. Perhaps three wraiths wove their sinuous path toward her, perhaps a dozen or just one. The knife in one hand and the stone's chain in the other, Cara tried to focus on whichever livid teeth and claws were closest rather than the raw hunger pulsing in them all. The wraiths circled her warily but each movement brought them closer. Their eyes gleamed the dark red of the monuments, and they growled.

Cara kicked the door behind her. Why didn't someone come?

The first creature leaped. Slashing wildly with the knife, Cara swung the stone by its chain, though she hadn't a clue what the Fenroi's reaction would be. *May it bring you aid*.

Crystalline blue and silver formed an arc brighter than moonlight. The Fenroi hissed and changed direction in mid-leap, just avoiding the stone's touch. Even so, it yelped like an injured dog. Two other wraiths tensed, ready to go to the attack. They cocked head to head, as though passing a message between them. Planning.

Cara pressed herself against the door and nearly fell over backwards.

A deep voice called out, "Quick! Inside!"

Strong hands grabbed her and pulled her through the door. With a thunderous slam, wraiths and moonlight disappeared. A rasping sound, a grunt and the heavy boom of wood on wood followed. In complete darkness,

Cara could not see her deliverer but--muffled by odd creaks--rose the voices of the Fenroi reporting failure to their mistress.

Relieved tears stung Cara's eyelids. She whispered earnestly, "Thanks!"

"Follow me. No, here. Hold my hand and we will go back to the house."

"Are you crazy? We can't! They're still out there. They'll catch us!"

The man chuckled. "Well, since my mill and my house are all one building, I don't think that's very likely."

6-Introductions All Around – Again

Cara smiled at her hosts in gratitude. Her rescuer, a burly, middle-aged man with shaggy gray hair and dark eyes, was intent upon filling his long-stemmed pipe. The miller's wife, also gray-haired, looked worn from years of heavy work. Her eyes--the same color as her hair, but with narrow dark rings around the irises--struck Cara as odd. However, she found the serene expression on her kindly face very soothing.

The woman bandaged Cara's feet, then the miller handed her a pair of his woolen hose. Cara pulled them on with great care; it had been all she could do to hold still while the woman repaired the worst cut with a couple of tiny stitches. The socks were too big and the bottoms of her feet throbbed, but the salve the man suggested was beginning to kick in. The miller said it was magical and came from "the Isle". He must mean the Isle of the Chosen. Did people here never talk about anywhere else? Though, to be fair, he had just said it in passing.

"There now, dear; I should think you'd be wanting something hot," said the woman. "You sit by the fire while I get it ready."

Cara snuggled into the borrowed blanket. The couple's quiet kindness had calmed her. The soothing murmur of their voices had somehow driven away the image of Ruselda's smile leering at her from every shadow and even through the shuttered windows.

Their huge fire-lit kitchen felt safe as a fortress, although she credited most the heavy barred doors between her and what skulked outside. Rough, white-washed plaster walls glowed with warm fire light. Plates and pans on a much-used sideboard reflected the light from an iron lamp centered on a table far too low for its generous width. No chairs or benches surrounded the table--they would have been too high. A random population of cushions scattered bits of color everywhere. The only other light came from the smoky fire and from two candles; one on the woven-twig chest beside her, the other on a wooden chest at the other end of the hearth.

A boy, blond-haired and strong, sat in the shadows there, scrutinizing her but saying nothing. No one said anything. Waiting for her?

"My name is ... Delia. I'm from another world. Earth. There was some sort of foul-up and I'm trying to find my way back."

Nods of acknowledgement were followed by more silence. This was almost as bad as talking to Young Ones. Cara cleared her throat and continued, "You saved my life, sir. If I can do anything to repay you ..." She stopped mid-sentence with the realization that she had no way to repay anyone short of giving up the Discerning Stone--and wouldn't Abdis just love that?

"Well, pleased to meet you, Delia. I am Hythe na Hath. This is Cona, my wife, and that is Bran na Brechfa, my apprentice. We are honored and thank you for coming to us."

Cara nodded. *Honored. Wonderful. Better change the subject.* Thinking the young man to be about the same age as herself, she asked, "Your son?"

The miller's wife set a steaming bowl of fish stew before Cara, and then sat down at her side. "No, but we do have a son. That's a drawing of Harone above the sideboard. Done by a Young One friend. Bran is Hythe's apprentice because our son has gone to study with the Chosen."

Oh, good. The Isle again. "Do you mean he's on the Isle? The Young Ones told me some people go there to study. Or to serve Alphesis? You must be very proud. How long will your son be gone?"

Cara caught the quick glance exchanged between the miller and his wife.

"We don't know," Hythe answered. "The length of training varies, and many do not return to their own villages. Some stay on the Isle and some are sent to other villages to help people understand the Ancient Writings or to heal or teach. Harone has been on the Isle for more than two years now. When he came home last harvest, he told us that he hoped to spend his life serving there."

"He can only return at harvest, then?"

"No. Once the early training is complete, they are permitted to come and go as they please."

Cara sensed a forced cheerfulness in the woman's smile, and heard her whisper, "Of course, most never do."

"Naturally." The miller must have heard his wife's words, too. "Their joy is so great they cannot bear to leave even for a short while," he added.

"I'm sorry." Cara regretted the words as soon as she spoke them. All eyes riveted upon her.

"Sorry for us? Well, don't be, Delia," replied the miller. "We miss our son but that's not all there is to it. We think of the people Harone will aid and instruct, and we are very proud. Aren't we, dear?"

He grasped his wife's hand and kissed it. "Yes," Cona said, then spoke words that Cara couldn't hear. Hythe made a face at her and chuckled.

Cona turned toward Cara. "Forgive us our moods, Delia. Harone's birthday was two days ago so we've been mooning a little. In addition, there have been strange tidings from across the river--it's been an anxious time for us and our neighbors. But, please, if you are permitted, tell us your story."

"Yes, please!" boomed the apprentice. "And begin by telling us how you came by a narthrous stone."

Cara jumped. She kept forgetting about the young man sitting in the shadows. "A Young One gave the stone to me." She had looped the necklace back around her neck when she came through the kitchen door but forgot to tuck it out of sight.

The miller laughed. "Obviously! Gifted by a Young One is the only way. I've got one myself; use it to chase away unwelcome visitors like those just here." He pointed to the room's closest corner.

Between the two heavy wooden doors stood a spear, its butt end in a cup attached to the floor. A metal chain near the tip held its shaft against the wall. The spearhead was undoubtedly narthrous--its blue-green reflection lit up the wall plaster like sun dancing on water.

Cara wondered what Abdis and the other peaceful Neroli would make of a narthrous stone spearhead. Turning back to the miller, she ventured, "That's pretty unusual, isn't it? Why did you decide to use the stone for a spearhead?"

Hythe laughed. "Self-preservation?"

"Hythe, dear, I think she wants to know more than that." Cona went on, "My husband was a spearman during The Insurrection twenty years ago."

Bran snorted. "Insurrection? They killed old King Thalidor."

"Bran! Don't speak of what you do not know." Hythe waved his hand in apology. "Our pardon, Lady Outworlder. It is still a sore subject."

The miller glared at Bran, as he continued. "Thalidor came from a line of usurpers. No one killed him--he took his own life when his warriors lost the last battle to young Lord Cybis and his half brother. After that battle, Cona and I came here and built the mill."

Hythe shrugged and gave a self-conscious grin. "It seemed natural to replace my spearhead with the stone that was given to me. What young Bran and I would both like to know is why they gave you a piece of narthrous. It can't be that, like me, you built a mill close to Neroli land. They gifted you because you're an Outworlder, I suppose. What did you do? My mistake! What is it you're about to do?"

Cara squirmed inwardly at the question. "I gave someone something but I didn't do anything." *And that's all you're getting out of me.*

"Not yet, but soon?" Cona prompted. The three nodded solemnly and waited for her to continue but Cara didn't answer.

A rustling sound broke the long silence. She flinched and glanced up in time to see a small dark creature flutter past. "Bat!" She scrambled closer to the fire.

Cona called out gently, as if addressing a small child, "Velvet! Don't go startling our guest. Come here, little one."

The creature launched itself sideways, skimming past Cara to land with practiced ease on the woman's sinewy wrist. It produced a purr-like sound--deep for its diminutive size--then rubbed its tiny head against Cona's thumb. Its furred body sported hawk-like, feathered wings.

Cara watched as the creature preened its wing feathers, voicing a throaty rumble in fits and starts. Velvet was obviously not a bat. *Lots of birds here though, even one of the three races. The necklace--the Alphasis emblem is a bird. No birds by that post and that cube, though. No, don't go there!*

The miller's wife provided the perfect distraction. "I'm not an expert, Delia, but that doesn't look like Hythe's narthrous stone. What is scratched upon it?"

"You're right, dear," added Hythe. "That's a seabird there. Harone spoke of the Alphasis emblem and narthrous stone once but what did it mean? Lady Delia, did they say it was an amulet?"

Cara tucked the stone away. *Bit late now, doofus. Damage is done. Still, if I can't trust people as kind and down-to-earth as these guys, who can I? She glanced at the apprentice. He was staring at her, again. Swear, if I still had the mirror, I'd be checking for spinach between my teeth. One of the hazards of being an Outworlder? Well, some of the Young Ones stared big time at first. Better get used to it. Maybe Hythe and Cona take it better because their son's on the Isle.*

Bran leaned forward into the light. "That's a Stone of Discerning, isn't it? I've heard tales of them but I just assumed them a myth. Nonsense."

"You've hit upon it!" Hythe slapped his knee. "That's what it is, indeed! Why did you think them only myth, Bran? It's too bad you haven't met our son yet. He can go on and on about stones and spells and enchanter weavings--"

"Does he know about magicians, then? Do any of you know a magician?"

"Scroll enchanters?" responded Cona. "No, dear, not around here. They dwell mostly in the cities of the south, unless there is war."

Bran chuckled, and then began in a singsong voice, "Never read the enchanter's spell. Met his woman in Acorn Dell--"

"Hush!" interrupted Cona. "What will our visitor think?"

"That some of us have a sense of humor?" Bran shrugged, and then winked at Cara.

Her face warm, Cara returned the young man's smile.

With a "tut-tut", Cona turned to her husband. "Hythe, you know the Writings better than I. Speak Delia Outworlder a proper bit of poetry."

Hythe nodded and cleared his throat. "Not that well, my dear. Not any more. Still, there's a piece I used to know that you might like, Lady Delia, seein' as how you come from another world. It's about an Outworlder like you. Let me see if I can remember it."

His voice trailed off and Cara's thoughts wandered. Her eyes closed, permitting a remembered sight. She opened them quickly. Cona gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

Hythe continued. "I think I've got it! The poem starts with an Outworlder asking Alphasis a question. Then a talking key--a mystical treasure from the beginning of the Order--it responds:

'From the meeting place of wisdom, I come forth;

From the place where goodness dwells serene.

From the red sunrise of the dawn, I come;

Where grow the nine hazels of virtue and art.

From the wide circuits of...'

Some place. I don't remember where. Then, uh ...

'There is a land where righteousness is instilled...'

Then there's some talk about traveling.

'Into the deathly dwelling of a king,

Into the abode of the tombs...'

There is more, but I can't bring it to mind now. Getting old, I guess."

Glad of anything that distracted her, Cara murmured, "Thank you, Hythe. Some of that sounds like on the Isle of the Chosen. Like sunrise and east, and the wisdom place?"

Cona nodded. "The Throne of Wisdom."

A throne? I saw ... Oops! Not now. "Doesn't it sound sad? Especially the last part about the tombs. It's as if the poet knew he was leaving everything behind. Maybe dying?"

The apprentice interrupted with a snort. "Well, that Outworlder is dead by now, for certain. You were going to tell us how you got here."

"Yeah, but maybe the short version ..." *Hythe's stuff was too gloomy by half. Wish Bran had finished his poem instead.* Cara lost herself in descriptions of gift shops and flaxenheads; she dreaded reaching the end of her tale. "... and then Hythe pulled me in."

"Do you mean to say that the stone allowed you to see Rabada as she truly is?" Looking dubious, Bran challenged her, "So what did she look like?"

"No comment." Cara shuddered.

"Knew it." Bran mocked and leaned back into the shadows.

Cara leaned toward him. "What's with Rabada? She told me her name was Ruselda."

When his apprentice didn't answer, Hythe explained for him, "Ruselda and Rabada are one and the same. Rabada, they say, is her real name; Ruselda her use-name. Many years ago, Alphesis bound Rabada to the mountains, along with two other daemagos or sorcerers. Since Yule, a few Young Ones and some travelers to the west claim to have seen her. Others did not live to tell their tales. The Fenroi chased you—Rabada's 'hounds'."

"They looked like wolves to me, but ghost-like. Uh, cunning. Evil. Can an animal be-?"

Hythe gestured impatiently. "Neither wolves nor hounds but phantasms created by Rabada's black art. They are deadly. I'm not surprised that the stone only made them cautious."

"Tell me about it! How do you keep your sheep with them around?"

"There's the spear. Of course, I've never had to use it. We see true wolves rarely, even in winter. Rabada has never before come this far east, and her hounds are not flesh and blood so they relish delicacies other than sheep for food ..."

Cona stopped her husband with a gesture and warning frown.

Hythe cowed at her and looked about to continue, only to shrug. "But enough of this. It is long past time for sleep. Cona will show you a place to rest."

Cara clutched the blanket. "I can't sleep. I know I can't. Every time I close my eyes, I see her face--what's left of it. I'll just sit here by the fire."

The miller's wife squeezed her hand. "Poor little stoah. You'll not sit here alone; I'll stay with you. As for you men, off with you!" She shooed the two out of the room, then took the kettle from the fire to refill it. "We'll have a proper cozy, you and I, until you nod. I'll brew some moonleaf tea to clear your mind and cheer your thoughts."

Cara was dubious but made no objection. She wondered if she would ever again close her eyes without seeing that hideous face.

"Cona, if Rabada knows that I'm hiding here, won't she try to break in? You're all taking this so calmly."

"No, dear, she can't break in by strength alone. Like many homes in Tethra, ours is warded with protective weavings. You were protected too. She tried to threaten you with her hounds when you refused to go with her or give her the necklace, because she couldn't just snatch it away. Likewise, she cannot enter the closed door of a warded home uninvited. Now the Fenroi can, but they cannot breach the walls by themselves."

"Aren't you afraid of her?"

Cona handed Cara a heavy mug resting in a shallow bowl. The handle was almost too hot to touch and the steam flushed her face.

"It's wise to be afraid. Still, she hasn't paid us the slightest mind all these years. Remember, she's not from hereabouts but from the mountains--as are all followers of the Shadow. When it's time for you to go, we'll all think what is safest for you to do, though by then she'll doubtless be about other mischief anyway."

Cara sipped the strong tea, then added some of the dark purple-red syrup Cona offered. They said little more, but she found the click-clack of the woman's knitting needles--in harmony with the ticking of the clock and the patter of the rain--comforting.

The walls began growing leafy tree branches, and she felt warm sand sooth her feet. She lay back and closed her eyes, letting the sunshine pulse red through her lids. Young Ones were chattering and playing music nearby. Or was it birds singing ...

7-Life at the Mill

Cara awoke to find sunlight streaming through the front kitchen windows. She limped to the open door beside them. A sharp contrast of light and shadow played across the miller's weedy yard but it revealed little of last night's chase. Shouldn't the door be closed? She reached out for the latch.

"Delia, dear, you'd best be off that foot," Cona called from the other doorway. "Stay within and give it time to heal before you go exploring. And leave the door be—I'm about to start ironing and you know that's warm work!" The miller's wife bustled over to her, her arms full of clothing. "I've saved you some porridge; sorry it's a bit thick now. There's milk and fruit, too."

As Cara circled around the laden table, the scene of moisture-laden air drew her to a small back window. Dark sky peeking through fleeing clouds over wide water filled the simple square frame. Cara thrust her head nearly through the opening to get a better look. Separated from the house by a narrow but steep-tilted bank surged a river, its surface frothing from the previous night's rain. She turned. "Anyone missing a river? I may have found it."

Cara shrugged in response to Cona's mystified expression. "Kind of a joke on myself. I steered toward the river all yesterday then forgot about it by this morning."

Cona gave a dry chuckle. "Mayhap, running for your life distracted you."

"Never. So, this one's the Sweetwater?"

"Yes. The stream you followed south joins the Sweetwater just west of us. That's why Hythe built his mill on this spot. The current for our mill race is very strong--best you'll find."

Cona took a wedge-shaped chunk of blackened metal from the outer stones of the fireplace. She held it with a heavy cloth, and tested its bottom with a moistened finger. "I'm glad I brought the wash in before the rain yesterday."

The first of several sheets awaiting the iron was spread across the sideboard. From beneath its pale taupe weave peeked a tiny dark foot and feathery tail. Pursing her lips, Cona held the hot metal a few inches above the moving lump. As the hot iron approached, Velvet exited with an outraged squawk and a flutter of wings. The young woman and the old shared a laugh.

"About the mill, someone named Dulcima says you guys grind something of theirs into meal for them. So Hythe deals with the Young Ones?"

"Oh, aye," Cona called over her shoulder. "But most of our custom is fellow settlers here on the north bank."

"And the south bank? There's a city or town there, right? What's it called?"

Cona gave a bitter laugh and turned. "Did someone tell you that? Rabada?"

Cara answered cautiously, "The Young Ones. But maybe I misunderstood."

A worried frown on her face, Cona nodded. "I daresay if you thought they meant a town was right south of here. Only thing straight south is the Bastion or rather Riven Gorge and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of boulders. Ask Hythe about it later."

Boulders and gorges? How do I get through that? Oh, this can't be happening. Cona's really pissed off by whoever lied to me but it isn't as if Nabis said it. At least a couple of Neroli told me Elder towns were south. Including Sataris! "In the south, Outworlder." Him and his non-explaining. Well, too late now. No point in upsetting Cona. "Sorry. You were telling me about the mill and your neighbors?"

Cona allowed her frown to fade before answering but she still seemed thoughtful. "Yes. The farmers to the east send barges up the river with their harvest, which Hythe and Bran grind into flour and meal and send back."

Yack! Goat's milk or maybe yak's milk. Cara set down her cup, and took a bite of a wrinkled plum-purple fruit resembling a winter-stored apple. It tasted like the syrup she had put in her tea the night before. She pointed to it and, with her mouth full, mimed "What is it?"

“Crucefruit ... from the crucke tree. Our arbor is just east of the house, over the hill that way.”

Cara swallowed, and took another bite. “It’s really good! Kind of like apple, kind of like raspberry but chewy.”

Ask Hythe later. How about now? “Cona, would Hythe mind if I went to the mill and watched the grinding? I’ve never seen it done.”

A sparkle of amusement in her eyes, the miller’s wife shook her head. “I daresay you haven’t or you’d know that millers only grind when there is grain. This is early spring--time to put crops in, not harvest them. All the same, go if you like. Watch your foot! They’ll be mill-workings scattered everywhere, no doubt. Hythe said they would repair the damsel today. When you come back, we’ll use that balm.”

Wondering what a damsel was, Cara headed for the mill’s door.

The creaks from the night before grew louder as she went through the heavy oak door. It took a few moments to find the miller, who was working behind the grain hopper--a container littered with fragments of grain and hulls, shaped like an inverted pyramid and big enough to hold a person.

Hythe greeted Cara and put down his tools to show her around. He explained how the wheel used a system of gears and shafts to turn two enormous millstones positioned one atop the other. Soon--absorbed with drivers, shoes and shafts--she was handing him tools.

After working for over an hour, she remembered the last time she had seen Bran was the previous night. “I like being your apprentice but where’s the real one?”

“Bran? Oh, we had just finished prizing the damsel,” He gestured at a skewer-like length of metal, “When he noticed your knife on the floor. It struck him that your pack must still be at your campsite. He went to look for it.” Dropping one tool and picking up another, Hythe muttered, “He should have been back by now.”

“Wasn’t it dangerous for him to go?”

Hythe stood and brushed the dust and chaff from his tunic and trousers. “He has my spear and he’s close to flowing water the whole way. Here. Hold this end up for me.”

“What’s the stream got to do with it? Can’t wolves swim?”

Hythe stared at her in amazement. “Like I said--flowing water. Mind your fingers now.” The long metal tongue of the damsel slid into place. “Wolves can swim, even Fenroi, I guess; but flowing water is feared by all evil beings. Another reason we’re safe here by the river. Imagine someone your age not knowing about flowing water. Keep that in mind, girl!”

The miller had no sooner said the words than he offered a sheepish smile. “I’m sorry, Lady Outworlder. What is true here may not be so elsewhere. I just assumed ... Never you mind.” He beamed Cara a smile. “Should you ever want to hire on as a miller’s helper, just let me know!”

A shadow crossed the mill floor through the light of the open window. “There’s that good-for-nothing apprentice, now. Bran! Get in here!”

Bran came through the door, her bag in one hand, Hythe’s spear resting on his shoulder. His trousers and the lower parts of his tunic and vest were soaked, making Cara wonder if he had run into the water seeking safety. Bran’s hand trembled as he handed her the bag. Before he could speak, Hythe continued his rant.

“I don’t pay you board and training to go swimming! What have you been up to?” Hythe shouted. “I’ve wasted half the day waiting for you to help me with the millstone.”

“My apologies about the millstone, Master Hythe; I’ll help you with it directly. But see here what I’ve killed.” Bran swung the spear around. Tied to it was a brown-furred animal a little larger than a rabbit. “It was on the other bank, and I had to cross over. Had the worst time finding it in the brush and I could hardly come back without your spear. That’s what took so long, sir.”

“Well, well. There’s good flesh on that cwabor, considering it’s still spring.” Evidently pleased by the promise of a tasty supper, Hythe softened. “You harness the team, Bran, and I’ll set up in here.”

“Are you going somewhere?” asked Cara.

“No, Delia. We need the team to move the top stone so we can work on them. Look here now, you take that cwabor in to Cona afore she sets her heart on cooking something else.”

The miller picked up a coil of rope and threaded one end over a pulley. He began whistling. Gingerly, Cara took the spear with its forlorn burden dangling from a rope tied to the shaft. She found it distasteful seeing her dinner still furred and whole.

In the kitchen, Cona crouched at the edge of the hearth oven, her face red from the heat. Cara sniffed appreciatively as the miller's wife replaced fresh-baked bread with risen dough.

"Well, look at that, will you. Hythe's favorite! Where did he come by it? In the grain hopper?"

"Bran killed it when he went to retrieve my provision bag."

"You don't say? A fat one for this early in the year."

Cona set the loaves in the window, and then wiped her hands on her apron. She untied the cwabor from the spear and laid it on the table, then began whetting a knife. Preferring the view outside to what was about to happen in the kitchen, Cara went to the window for another sniff of the bread. She was rewarded with the sight of Hythe's team lumbering past. Their bodies were elephant-shaped but not nearly as large; they had the blunt faces of cows and were covered in coarse reddish-brown hair. Spiraled horns swept in an arc over their shoulders.

"What are those animals?"

"Why, oxen, my dear. Boxen and Buceph. Are there no oxen in your world?"

Oxen and oxen. Bear and bear. What did Abdis do or forget to do when he touched my head?

"We've got oxen but they don't look like that."

Cara watched as Bran directed the team to the mill door with a switch. When they were out of sight, she turned to help Cona.

As she worked beside the miller's wife, Cona told her about the habits of farm animals, how to can vegetables, and the secret of keeping a hearth oven at a constant temperature. Housework was certainly much harder here than at home, even without children to attend ... Remembering Lisa's letter, Cara hastily focused on opening a crock of vegetables.

Her mind wandered in another uncomfortable direction--toward Abdis and the Young Ones, and the mission they had described for her. Rabada had lased in on her too with the mission thing. Now that she had seen one of the Shadow, an actual daemagos sorceress, her former certainty had shattered into confusion. No matter what Hythe and Cona said, they were in danger with Rabada so close. The Neroli had hinted at the loss of tree guards. Was it the mission of the Outworlder to protect them? Had she made a mistake?

Stop it! Stop it! I can't buy into their ignorance. Yeah, I'd like to help them but that doesn't mean I can. Like, duh. Can't people just look at me and see I'm no superhero? Do I need to hold a flashing sign? Last night proved there's nothing I can do about Ruselda--or Rabada or whoever. Those arms dealers from the Elders should take on the demon and her dogs themselves instead of handing out weapons. I'll tell them so.

Suppose the Elders won't admit that one of their magicians could have screwed up this bad? She chewed her lip. Could someone really have picked me out on purpose? Why would they grab me with all the cops and spies and soldiers back home to choose from? Ooh. Maybe the guy who grabbed me was a daemagos! Yeah, he kills the real superhero everyone's expecting and sends me instead. Great way to sabotage the Outworlder Rescue Operation. Except, again, why would a daemagos grab me instead of their pick of criminals, terrorists and people guilty of genocide?

Ruselda, Rabada ... R-hag offered to help me bag the Outworlder gig. Makes me want to try doing it, just for spite. Funny if Abdis was sort'a right. Fastest way home is find out what's expected and try to do it. Nothing like a life-sized picture of me screwing up to convince whoever needs convincing to send me back.

Cona interrupted her thoughts. "Delia, did you hear me? Run tell Hythe and Bran to wash up for supper. Then hurry back, and help set the table."

Hythe and Bran talked about what they'd done while they ate so Cara found no chance to ask about Tethran towns and what kinds of Elders lived in them until after the dishes were cleared. All she needed to know was what to expect on the southern bank of the Sweetwater compared to the southern bank. There must be a wizard closer than "the cities in the south"--a destination that seemed to be retreating from her with every passing hour.

“Hythe, you were a soldier. Why aren’t there guards and maybe forts here north of the river? The Young Ones have guards all along the edge of their forest.”

Hythe took a draw from his pipe, and answered. “Well, Delia, it’s this way. We are a colonial province--too big and too under-populated to justify fortifications and armed patrols. Those of us who choose to live here do so because the land is free for the taking. We understood before we came that there would be no protection like there is in the south.”

Cona clucked her tongue. “Now, Hythe, that’s not exactly true. Only the western part of our province is unprotected. She glanced toward Cara. “Our part. The eastern part--toward the sea--has many fortified towns. Sword patrols guard that whole area.”

“Many towns? What, three or four? Cona, I’m telling this.” His tone was cranky, perhaps thanks more to his pipe refusing to light than Cona’s interruption. Cara tried to hide her amusement as the miller laid aside his flint and steel contraption, emptied the pipe and began again.

“You see, Delia, there’s nothing out this way evil folk from the mountains would want unless they start plant’n crops. Like I told you, they can’t abide flowing water. If they intend to cross the Sweetwater and head south--toward the capital or some other target--they will have to do it at a bridge. Closest bridge is leagues to the east, and bridge-taking is not easy.”

Out of Hythe’s view, Bran yawned and mimed falling asleep. Cara smiled. It did seem a lecture was in the offing. Still, some of what Hythe had to say might be of use. Closest bridge leagues to the east. What about the closest wizard to the east? She returned her attention to the miller.

“... bridges over the two rivers but closer to the sea and fortified. If those holding the bridges think they will lose them, they burn them or tear them down. So you see, the Shadow wouldn’t go east from here because of the patrols, and they wouldn’t go south from here because that would mean crossing the river with no bridge.”

To Cara’s surprise the usually silent Bran commented, “What they would do is go between the headwaters of the two rivers, as they flow down from the mountains.”

Hythe looked to be only half-listening as he rolled up his small bag of tobacco. Teeth gripped about the pipe’s mouthpiece, he gave a gentle snort that sent a stream of smoke from his nostrils. “But that’s well south of us at least.” The tobacco secure, he looked up, adding, “Now for the Daetaga, they’ve still got a problem, only now it’s taking a bridge over the Nonz.”

Cona nodded. “But Bran’s right, too. I heard that the heartland of Tethra was attacked once when a Shadow army kept marching east between the two rivers until they reached the seaports, then took ships and went south. What a terrible time that must have been for those living in their path!”

Hythe grumbled his agreement. “So the scrolls say. The sorcerer, Lord Pazgar, led his army through not too far south of here. Rabada probably rode with him, Delia, since he was her overlord. Anyway, they and their followers sank most of the royal fleet at Nonza Bay. Then they attacked the southern port cities. By ship, what’s more!”

“Pretty daring, for those afraid of running water,” muttered Bran.

“I suppose. As for southern bridges, the Nonz has more than the Sweetwater. They’re fortified but if one of the strongholds could be overcome, the Shadow would have a way south right to our capital.”

Unable to curb her impatience, Cona interrupted again, “Hythe, you just said that no one could take a bridge.”

“Now, Cona, I only said it wouldn’t be easy.” He winked at Cara.

She gave a shrug and grin in effort to keep neutral. Time to get back to what she needed to know. “Cona just said people lived between the rivers, so someone’s south of us. I mean Pazgar needed someone to invade or it wouldn’t have been an invasion.”

Bran muttered, “If they were settlers like this side of the Sweetwater, there were a lot less of them after he passed.”

“But people resettled that area later, right?”

Hythe nodded. “Of course.”

“Earlier Cona told me about, uh, some place south beyond the river. Where’s the closest--”

“That’s Riven Gorge.” “The gorge.” “The Bastion.” The three answered promptly. All three looked inclined to elaborate but Hythe started a second before the others. “It’s all of a piece, Delia. That Lord Pazgar we were

talking about? Well, before his defeat, he held great stretches of land between the mountains and here. His people built the Bastion as his strongest fortification east of the mountains--called it The Bastion of Corruption. It was across the river, almost directly south of us.”

“Corruption?” Cara pondered. “Was he like politically corrupt?”

Hythe snorted. “Corruption like rotting flesh. Like the fates of those he dragged to the bastion and sealed underground in his dungeons a mile below the surface. As for ruling, Pazgar was his own law. Thought he was.”

“Oh, like a warlord! So did he build this Bastion before or after that invasion by sea? He’s the same one, right?”

“The one and only.” Bran cut in. “He is unique-”

“Was,” Cona prompted.

Looking nettled, Bran stared at her and answered, “Is or was. It depends on how you look at it. Regardless, he holds place as the most powerful daemagos who ever lived anywhere around Tethra-”

Cona interrupted, “Until Alphasis arrived here and taught we Tethrans how to get free of his hold on us.”

Hythe yawned. “Now, the Tethran army helped of course but Alphasis tore down-” The man yawned again.

Cona took the opportunity to finish for him. “Alphasis rooted up the Bastion, ripped it straight up out of the ground! He let the boulders that had been its walls drop where they would.”

Cara saw her disbelief mirrored on Bran’s face. When had the conversation taken a left turn into myth?

Bran muttered, “And, here we go into-”

“As I was just saying,” Hythe interrupted in a grumpy tone, “After Alphasis left a great hole in the ground and enough stone to build a sizable city--should anyone be foolish enough to use that site as its foundation-”

A couple of things clicked together. Cara commented, “Oh, I get it now. Alphasis rallied everybody. After Pazgar was defeated, you were able to leave the army and--since it was safer around here--you decided to build your mill.”

Cona and Bran laughed but Hythe made a face that might have been wounded pride or just plain incredulity. “Lady Delia Outworlder, with all deference to you, I’m not young but I’m hardly over 5000 years old!” He made as if to stand up, gathering pipe, tobacco and his lighting tool into his hands.

Cona soothed him, tears of mirth in her eyes. “No one said you were, dear. You know it was just a joke so don’t try to alarm her.”

“What did I say?”

“Besides calling your host as old as Pazgar?” Bran muttered, evidently absorbed with the lines on his palms.

Cara sputtered, “What? No, I didn’t! I thought this was the same war as, uh, the usurper. So, Pazgar isn’t the usurper you defeated?”

Bran smirked. “Wrong by only 5000 years.”

Cona’s amused expression had dissolved into frank puzzlement. She glanced at her husband.

Hythe sighed. “It’s too late for this. Tomorrow-”

“Please. I hate being this confused.”

“Hm. Well, to say it quickly, Pazgar was at the height of his power 5000 years ago. Rabada was too, for that matter.”

“And Zabnar,” Cona added.

Hythe nodded. “Yes, him too. Alphasis came and helped us against them as he had done before with our race and as he continues to do. The usurper,” He paused to skewer Bran with a warning glare. “Thalidor died by his own hand just a few years ago after Lord Cybis defeated him. You were thinking about that war—the one in which I fought as a spearman.”

“Thanks.” *Okay, usurper and Hythe, real history. Five thousand years, Alphasis, Bastion stuff, myth.* “Got it. One last thing. Which way’s the closest city. Or the nearest wizard actually?”

“East several days’ journey, more or else, depending on how big a city you’re looking for. Nothing’s directly south but Riven Gorge where the Bastion was. Our people resettled down there eventually but east of the ruins. Wizards? If you mean enchanters, that’s hard to say. Much farther south in our larger cities or on their lands surrounding the cities, when they are home. I hear King Cybis commands them to go where needed, including up to our provincial cities, but I don’t know when or why he chooses.”

Cona added, "Yes, they say enchanters sometimes ride with the Sword patrols if something evil's afoot. Mostly east of here but they might do that anywhere."

"Why do you need to know, Delia?"

Cara shook her head. Gloom enveloped her so thoroughly she felt she could hardly bear it. East, east and east. All her options had just shrunk to one. No one spoke. The ticking of the clock filled the silence, its repeated sounds like a foot tapping impatiently for an answer. An admission.

Cara sighed and answered the waiting silence, "I've got to return to Melwood. I guess I'll try to find Clepta and Abdis first. If I can't, I'll go east from there on my own. The Chosen are just as likely as a wizard to know if there is a way for me to get home. Besides, if I'm really here to help you, well ... Clepta said go east."

Hythe nodded. "Good. From what you had told us, that seems best."

Cona patted Cara's hand. "You must contact Harone when you reach the Isle."

"Of course," Cara answered but she was desperately double-checking in case she had missed an alternative. No point in fording the Sweetwater if even fewer Elders lived on the other side. What if Rabada had a rowboat and followed her across? What if there were things on the other side just as bad as Rabada ... or even worse? And no wizards there anyway. Probably best to stay within screaming distance of help until she got herself home. Why go directly east from here hoping for hospitality from dozens of farmers, always wondering if Rabada was following, when she could backtrack and in just one day be within Melwood?

"You could get to the Isle much faster if you ford the river then go southeast to the sea," Bran offered.

"Nonsense! That's neither the shortest way nor the safest, Bran," protested Cona. "Have you forgotten the reports from people eastways of Riven Gorge these past weeks? I fear more than Rabada and her hounds are on the move."

"It doesn't matter. I prefer using the route Clepta said Alphasis told her. Call it superstition or cowardice or whatever you like, but I'll feel better."

Cona smiled. "I know why."

You do if you're thinking screaming distance. "I think I better get going at dawn. I'd just as soon not get caught in the dark on the moor again."

Cona stood. "In that case, you'd better turn in. I'll show you to the loft and help with your bed."

By the light of a candle, she led Cara up ladder-like stairs to a wide platform built over the kitchen for warmth. She set the candle on a wooden crate beside a straw-filled pallet that had been pushed against the wall, and then covered the straw with two thick quilts. From her perch, Cara could see the millworks below. Good thing she didn't sleepwalk.

As the old woman turned to go, Cara reached out to touch her sleeve. "Cona, thank you for all you've done. I've got to tell you something. My name is Cara, not Delia."

The woman smiled. "And my husband and I are Hythe and Cona as we told you. Get you to bed now, dear."

You should have trusted them as they trusted you. Tears stung her eyes as she blew out the candle and drew a quilt up to her chin. Muffled sounds came from below, then all was still except for the groaning waterwheel and the sounds from the river. Not frogs, but creatures just as sonorous were congregating out there.

Cara tried to think of pleasant things--of the forest, of Abdis and the children among the flaxenheads--but Rabada's ghastly face and the terrifying Fenroi disrupted the fragile path toward sleep. She grasped the narthrous stone but it offered little comfort. Was Rabada to be feared both day and night? If flowing water really were a barrier against evil, she would walk in the stream the entire way if she had to. Thankfully, her foot had nearly healed. Someone should patent that balm. Determined to sleep, she closed her eyes.

Creak. Creak. Creak. Was that wheel never quiet?

Cara cried out, awakening herself. Rabada's face had come floating at her. The cruel mouth had opened to speak, but only creaked. She turned over with a thump, and tried to submerge the dream amidst memories of a conversation she had shared with Hythe regarding windmills. When he had finally understood their workings, he'd told her half-jokingly not to mention windmills to the people of the coast towns because they might put him out of business.

Creak, creak, tap. The loft vibrated.

Cara sat up and looked around. Nothing. She had just settled back down when she heard the slow scuffle of shoes on wood. The loft trembled again. She reached for her knife but found only the empty sheath.

She shrank against the wall as a shadowy form rose into view. "Who is it?" she called, her voice trembling.

"It's Bran." He climbed off the ladder. "Collect your gear, you're coming with me." The narthrous tip of Hythe's spear lowered until it pointed at her.

"Why?" *Can I get down that stair-ladder to the kitchen?*

"Call out if you like--I drugged their tea. Neither will it do any good to run. I am very good with this." He patted the spear's haft. Motioning her away from the wall, he selected a key on a small ring and locked the door, then tossed the ring over the edge of the loft. "Get ready. We have an appointment to keep."

Her heartbeat masked any sounds Cara made as she replaced the caftan, belt and shoes she had just shed, and then thrust the items Abdis gave her back into the provision bag. She suspected each task done brought her closer to some unknown danger but nothing inspired a way to escape.

When she was finished, Bran tied her hands in front of her with short lengths of the rope looping between her knotted wrists. That seemed an odd decision and a bit of luck for her, until he gestured toward the ladder. "You first."

She walked to the edge of the loft and looked down the shadowy row of rungs. *Oh, glory, how am I going to shift my hands as I go down? Very carefully,* answered her mocking thoughts. She turned to her grinning captor and tried to stall. "Where are you taking me?"

"Want to know?" He shrugged. "Why not? Riven Gorge."

Cara just stared at him.

Bran's eyes widened in consternation. "Forgive me if I've dismayed you. Pray, never breathe a word of this to my master, lest I be reprimanded. Now, if you would, please descend."

Cara worked her way from the platform to the ladder and started down. Bran hadn't given her an inch of rope to spare. *If I break a leg and can't be kidnapped, will Bran's friend let him have it? Like I'd live to gloat over it. Nearly there. Just a little more.*

Her bag plummeted past her, its rough surface grazing her head. She lost her grip and her foot slid off its rung in the same moment. The shriek in her throat was overtaken by an ooph of expelled air as she dropped the short distance to the floor.

The bag was right beside her. Bran had yet to reach the bottom. As he stepped down, she swung the bag at his head. Quick as a cat, he slammed her left forearm with the spear shaft. She yelped, and the bag tore free from her grasp.

"Pick it up," he ordered with a smirk. He gave the rope a vicious tug. "Let's go. Like I said, I've got an appointment with a friend."

8-Ill-met by Lamplight

Bran led her out the mill door and past the house through a stand of diminutive trees Cara took to be the crucke orchard. They trudged east along the riverbank for nearly an hour until they reached a place where the bank dipped to river level. A variety of hoof marks scarred the muddy border between plants and water, marking it a fording place for man and wildlife alike.

Up until this minute, Cara had hoped they might run into somebody or Hythe would catch up to them, and she had looked for a chance to yank the rope free and run. When the rope snagged on a shrub's branch earlier, she chose to wait because she expected a better opportunity. Now, she wondered for what more she had been hoping.

Once we cross the river, there's no hope. At least the Fenroi might have been quicker. Not with Rabada! Depends on who Bran's friend is. Or, maybe what.

Bran strode into the water and pulled the rope. She followed, peering over the provision bag to see. Her arm ached and she longed to rub it but Bran had tied her wrists too close together for her to reach her forearm. Bastard. Just enough space for his purposes. Not an inch more.

The undulating margin between mud and water glowed softly. As Cara walked toward the glimmering strip, phosphorescent creatures scuttled away from her feet. She picked her way between their fleeing waves and took a couple of steps into the river shallows. Icy water poured into the old boots Cona had given her, promising to numb the reawakened pain of her laceration before they reached the other bank.

Glowing dots and globs floated just below the surface all around her as the water rose to her hips and beyond. The delicate beauty of the creatures reminded her of jellyfish.

Hope they don't sting. That's it--I'm officially certifiable. I'm about to be killed and I'm wondering if I'll get a bee sting.

Cara fought to keep from falling with every step. Loose rocks shifted under her feet. One slid away so abruptly she nearly fell. The bag proved an awkward burden. She was tempted to drop it into the river but, knowing Bran, he'd hit her with the spear shaft again.

Interminable struggling and skidding banished further thought, even apprehension.

She had climbed nearly the length of a huge slanted boulder before realizing she was working her way up the slope of the riverbed and was within a couple of yards of the bank. Her aching legs trembled with exhaustion. The last slope felt nearly vertical. Bran stood at the top with Hythe's spear pointed toward her. She wanted to laugh as his precaution.

They rested briefly on the stony south bank. The moon shone on the river in a sparkling path that led toward the mill. Cara looked for the building but it refused to emerge from the distant shadows. Soaked from the waist down, she shivered in the cool night breeze. Her boots were full of water, and her right foot was throbbing through the numbness.

"Come on or we'll be late."

Bran pulled the rope and started over the crest of the bank. Cara picked up the pack and followed. A memory nudged her. Bran had been wet to the waist when he returned to the mill. He told Hythe he had crossed the stream to retrieve the cwabor, but it was too shallow to make him that wet. He must have forded the Sweetwater like this, either to arrange this meeting or to get instructions. How could a kidnapper survive flowing water? Was that only sorcerers-

Cara tripped on a half-exposed rock. The pack flew from her hands as she tried to break her fall. Bran halted and glared at her impatiently.

"Get up!"

Furious, Cara longed to pound him one, but the narthrous spearhead pointing at her looked more lethal than beautiful. She tried not to think of the kind of wound a spearhead inflicted. Resigned, Cara reached for the pack instead and they continued their march.

You've got to concentrate on these stones! Between them and the creep maybe whacking you again, you can't

...

We started maybe two hours ago. More. We have to be getting close to wherever or whoever. Bran made his round trip in ... I don't know when he left. Who are we going to meet way up here? Not Rabada. She can't ford the river. She has to go west toward those headwaters or east toward the closest bridge. West and east? Yeah, that's right. Unless she has a boat. No, she won't have a boat. She can't have a boat.

Never mind. Who then? Bran doesn't have the clout to meet bosses.

Everyone said so many things. Does any of it matter? What did Hythe say out in the mill? Not a clue. Whatever it was it tied into everyone discussing Pazgar and his attack by ship. Who would be at Riven Gorge now? If he still has an army, who's in it? Hythe's evil twin.

Stop it! Stop it! Come on. Think!

Followers. No one said what they're like or what they're called. Who takes orders from Pazgar today? Rabada for one--he was her boss when he ruled where the gorge is now. Everyone said centuries ago, even Bran. How long do people around here live? Even the Young Ones don't live for centuries, do they? It doesn't make any sense! None of this makes any sense.

Okay, the "Bastion of Corruption". Who's there? It had dungeons. Dungeons, bastions, corruption. What next, dragons? These people are nuts--all of them.

Okay, get a grip. What else? Bad guys lost. Alphasis ripped out Pazgar's fortress like a tooth. The dungeons were a mile deep. Oh, useful, Cara. What you need is more trivia! If Pazgar has Rabada as a follower, what is he like? No. Can't go there. Bran wouldn't be calling Pazgar his friend. Maybe someone just wants a ransom. Maybe this is all a huge dream. Or I'm nuts. Or they're nuts. Oh, they have to be nuts!

How long had they been climbing like this? Why were they going up to get to a gorge? Why were there so many cracks in the ground and why were they getting wider? The first ones had been only inches across and looked like shadows cast by tree branches.

Earlier they had passed an occasional boulder like a standing stone set up to mark a path, casting strange shadows in the stark moonlight. Loose gravelly pebbles covered the ground. The boulders increased in number with the climb, until they were surrounded by an orchard of stones. Their path took them through dark shadows and patches of moonlight, accompanied by the skeletal rattle of the pebbles underfoot.

The boulders were all nearly rectangular; some nestled firmly against their mates. Like rings of concentric circles, the cracks in the ground formed a rough pattern, growing deeper and wider as they climbed. The ruined walls she had envisioned evaporated before the reality of scarred earth yards across, each gashed and ridged foundation receding past her line of sight on either side.

After all these centuries, if it had been centuries, shouldn't there be plants? The last thorn bushes had been down near the river. It was unnatural to have almost bare ground without any plant life. Weeds sprang up in cracked cement.

She studied Bran's face when he stepped into the moonlight. He appeared a little edgy but not freaked out like she was. Of course.

The closer they got to the summit, the more frequently fissures masquerading as shadows would open right at their feet, a yard across and many yards deep. The gravel-like scree challenged them to climb around any large opening without sliding in. Boulders flung oddly shaped shadows across their path, shadows that didn't align properly with the shapes of the rocks and the contours of the ground. Several times, Bran swore to himself and changed direction, thanks to one of the formidable cracks.

Bran gestured for her to stop, and their mingled gasps filled the silence abandoned by the rattling gravel. Without speaking, he grabbed the provision bag and motioned for Cara to sit beside one of the few boulders protruding from the crest. Her eager drop to the ground started a miniature avalanche of pebbles into the nearest crack. Bran scowled at her but still said nothing.

Sitting cautiously the spear's length away, he drew the water flask out of the bag and drank. He put away the flask without offering it to her. She didn't care. Her mouth was parched but her stomach promised to repel anything that came its way.

The moon was lower but it hinted they were perched at the very brink of the gorge itself. Cara noted the direction Bran faced and began searching for a roughly human shape amid the fingered shadows stretching from the remnants of the huge stones. It would be human, wouldn't it?

Bran gave a dry cough and whispered to her, "Looks like we have some time to wait after all."

Whispering without knowing why, Cara asked, "Who is coming to meet us and what do they want with me?"

Bran snorted. "You'll find out when the moon sets. First thing, they want that Stone of Discernment."

"They could have had that without you dragging me up here. You might have taken it from me at the mill."

Bran gave a contemptuous laugh. "Think I'm a fool? Narthrous stones lose their power if not given by the owner. If I just took it from you, they wouldn't pay me for it. Wager they have ways of ensuring your cooperation in giving it up." He looked her over. "I'd have had my own way, if they'd given me time ..."

"Don't be so sure!"

From his answering grin, he didn't believe her and that infuriated her even more. She began a choice insult, only to have Bran speak right over it,

"They've been expecting you, Delia. Only a handful of Outworlders have ever come and you're the first in hundreds of years. Daetaga hasn't particularly enjoyed your company but then you're not likely to enjoy theirs. Pure waste if you ask me."

"Who is the Daetaga? There's daemagos, I know. Are the rest like mercenaries or bandits? Or more like terrorists?"

Bran didn't answer. Her gaze followed his to the moon, where it hung on the eastern horizon like a ball balanced on a table edge. More to keep her mind off its imminent fall than for any other reason, she asked, "If narthrous stones lose their power when stolen, why did you take Hythe's spear? Its power must be gone now."

For a fleeting moment, Bran lost his confident smile. "Yeah, well, I expected he'd let me hold onto it when I got back with your pack but the bastard handed it to you instead. Doesn't matter. I'm good with a spear no matter what it's fashioned from. Trained, you know, by some who want the old dynasty back. Now shut your mouth!"

Minutes passed. Cara watched the slow disappearance of the moon in dread. Only glimmers of its light still reached them through cracks in the rock formations, when pebbles rattled somewhere off to their right. Bran leaped up, grabbing the spear in both hands. Cara stood slowly, her back to the boulder against which they had been resting. Her pulse thudded in her ears. Her breath raced to catch up with it. The eerie objects around them took on a new layer of unreality.

The last light of the setting moon revealed someone riding along the gorge edge toward them. While still a few yards away, the newcomer dismounted, paused to retrieve something from his mount and finally strode toward them, holding what appeared to be a dark lantern open just a slit. Faint, rhythmic hisses grew louder with his approach.

The stranger stopped in front of Bran and spoke quietly in a voice as smooth as oiled silk, "Do you bear arms against a colleague, brother Braznar? See my hands. I bear no weapon."

A long-taloned claw-like hand came out of the shadows, lit by a crack of gray-green light from the lantern. The creature appeared to be wearing some kind of studded gloves, until he flexed his hand. Bony claws protruded from the bent knuckles as the fingertip talons lengthened.

The pale greenish light from the lantern illuminated the creature's sharp teeth, edging a protruding wedge-shaped mouth fixed in a grimace of a smile. Light reflected briefly from ridges running up the face in the shape of a narrow inverted V, and glittered on the eyes half-hidden to either side of the ridges.

Cara shivered as if caught in a winter gale.

Bran lowered the spear, but his expression was still wary.

"Come, come, Braznar. We have much to discuss."

Grumbling, Bran rested the spear against the boulder.

"This is it, I presume?"

The shadowed figure brought over the dark lantern, opening it wider so that the light fell across Cara's face. She blinked, and then the light was gone. The stranger hissed and placed the lantern up on the boulder.

"Good. This is an Outworlder indeed. Now for the rest of your bargain. Where is the stone?"

The overly smooth voice scraped at Cara's nerves. She longed to get away, to put great distances between herself and this creature that she could not see clearly--and didn't want to. More than just the sound troubled her. Each time the stranger opened its mouth, the taint of something rotting caught in her throat.

Bran's hand touched her neck as he groped for the silver chain of the narthrous stone. Cara flinched away from his touch in disgust. Before she could do anything else, Bran lifted a knife and pressed the flat of the blade against her throat. With adrenaline-borne clarity, Cara recognized her own knife that she had been unable to find at the mill.

He shifted the newly polished blade so that its tip pricked her throat just below her left ear, and then reached forward again. With a furious gesture, Cara pulled out the stone herself. In spite of her cooperation, Bran still kept the knife pressed to her neck. He studied her face with slitted eyes, searching for any hostile reaction.

"Hands away from the stone!"

She glared back at him, envisioning shredding his face with her nails.

"Look at it well with your lantern and you will see that I have kept all my bargain." Keeping the knife in place, Bran gripped the chain with his left hand and lifted the stone without touching it. Cara winced as the chain dug into the back of her neck.

The shadowed form hissed an alien expletive and answered, "I know what she has there quite well without holding the lantern nearer. Now take your payment."

Metal flashed. Warmth sprayed Cara's chin and neck. Bran screamed. Through watering, burning eyes, Cara glimpsed a hand askew on a bloody wrist. Retching—back pressed to the boulder—she gaped at fragments of movements caught in stark lamp light.

Bran groped for the spear and snatched it up with his right hand. His attacker, crouched in a fighting stance, thrust his sword at the man's chest. Bran swayed sideways. The blade ripped through his heavy vest and tunic. His left arm pressed to his chest, he jabbed at his enemy. A baleful hiss told Cara that Bran's aim had been true.

Tottering on the gorge edge, the emissary slashed at the haft of Bran's spear, severing it a few inches away from his foe's hand. Dropping the useless piece, Bran lunged under the sword's arc. He skidded to his knees, grabbed the spear's point end and thrust it upward from where he was.

A sickening cry burst from the emissary. Stabbing futilely at Bran, it lost its balance and fell into the gorge.

For the space of a couple of precious seconds, Cara's mind didn't want to work but when the butt end of Bran's spear dropped near her, thought and movement returned. Enveloped in a blanket of unreality, she grabbed up the yard-long piece of wood. She couldn't run down the treacherous slope under a dark sky. Her only hope was that the victor would be too weak to overcome her.

Bran staggered slowly to his feet with his back still toward her. Cara crept toward him cautiously, hoping her movements were masked by his labored breathing and recurring cough. The short staff whistling in the air, Cara aimed it at the back of Bran's knees. The blow landed solidly, punishing her muscles and reverberating through the bones of both arms.

But Bran didn't follow his foe into the gorge. Tottering at the brink, he fell back to his knees. Still clutching at the broken spear with his good hand, he scrambled to his feet in less time than it had taken Cara to strike him. Even in the dim light from the lantern, Cara could see the murderous gleam in his eyes as he turned. She retreated and searched frantically for the dropped hunting knife. Bran struck first. His breath coming in tearing sobs, he threw the broken spear. Cara cried out as the point cut into her leg.

Bran staggered toward her, his injured hand pressed firmly against his body, the good hand reaching toward her like a claw. He yanked the hunting knife from her hands before she had a chance to strike. His lips were pulled back from his teeth in a snarl of pain and rage. Cara gave more ground as she tried to put the boulder between them.

A large, pale object plunged from the sky, then changed trajectory and velocity just yards from the ground. The tempo of feathery whooshes altered as it spun to face Bran, and then shot forward. A high, feral shriek ripped through Cara's ears and shredded the last remnants of her nerves.

Bran struck at the oncoming claws with the knife. The huge bird swerved away then dived to strike at the Elder's eyes. Bran ducked then made a wild slash through empty air, but he lost his hold on the weapon in the process. The bird dived toward him again. Bran cursed and twisted, keeping his good hand raised to protect his face. A step back, then another. Pebbles rattled. Bran cried out and scrambled to keep his balance. Stones clattered. A small boulder tipped ponderously toward his feet. He stumbled backwards and was gone, leaving the echo of a shriek behind.

Cara fell forward on her knees and stayed there, too sick and dizzy for a moment to do anything else. When she tried to get up, her leg hurt so much that she could hardly stand.

A strange voice spoke; the sounds mingled tones close to her speaking range and others so high-pitched that they hurt her ears. "You must get on the werewright's pony and leave here at once. They will soon wonder why it has not returned. Here. Take the knife."

The bird hung aloft beside Cara, the force of its mighty wing strokes fanning cold air against her wet face. Cara cautiously lifted the knife hilt from the mesh of its claws. She turned the knife about until she could grip the hilt in both hands with the blade toward her, then sawed at the tough rope fibers.

"I can't get on the pony. My leg's hurt. The spear ..."

The world weaved and swayed. Lantern-made light and shadow became stark and indistinct by turn. As soon as she freed her hands, Cara leaned back and clutched at the boulder behind her. Her leg hurt but her whole body felt peculiar and that terrified her, because she didn't know the reason.

"You must leave here at once if you are to survive."

The bird pivoted and called to the pony with a series of hisses. The pony's ears flicked forward. It trotted over to the hovering seabird. Cara fought to remain conscious. She stared up at the saddle in despair. It was only a pony, not a full-sized horse, but she might as well try to climb a mountain.

The seabird hopped onto the pony's saddle and spoke to it again. It nickered, put its ears back as if in protest, and then slowly sank to the ground. Relieved, Cara staggered toward it and mounted. The effort took all her strength. As consciousness faded, she wrapped her arms around the pony's neck and prayed that she wouldn't fall off.

9-Haunted, Hungry and Hunted

She dangled over the abyss of Riven Gorge, supported only by needle-thin shafts of bone driven deep into her flesh. Agony itself choked her cries of pain. Misshapen fists formed, cloud-like, in the darkness around her. Each hurled toward her in turn to pummel her muscles with bruising force or rip jagged furrows into her skin with their bladed knuckles.

A voice jeered inside her head, pledging she would not fall--the bony skewers would hold her firm.

Cara searched for the source of the voice. Up toward the cliff edge a shape lurked that was not a punishing fist. Ruthless hatred, the will to destroy, wound tight upon itself and forced into a shape that was not a shape. A smile, drawn thin over nothingness. Cara shuddered and voiced the whimper the repeated blows from the shadow fists had been unable to draw from her.

A smile with no face.

The unshaped hatred voiced its agreement with a shattering laugh. Icy fingers shafted into her eyes and probed relentlessly at her memories--picking through, rejecting, selecting one at length.

A cat without a smile. A smile without a cat.

Cara awoke, panting and damp with sweat. Hard ground chilled her back, and her muscles and bones ached as they did when she lay too long in one position. She lifted her head. Short broad-leafed vegetation the color of new-minted pennies surrounded her, circled in turn by lavender flowering shrubs, but her strength failed her before she could sit up.

Where are Abdis and the others? No, I left Melwood. Okay, Rabada, the millers. Bran and his friend, Reptile-man. Just now, voices, shrieking and moaning. Who was that? Was that me? No, bunches of voices and weird horror movie faces. A smile without a face. Cheshire Cat-man digging into me. God, what a horrible dream.

She shuddered.

The sky was pretty if, as usual, not quite the right color but she needed to figure out where she was more than look up at the sky. Cara accessed her reserve of strength and the seriousness of the throbbing ache in her thigh. Then, with a great breath, she fought to lift her back off the ground. She winced. Keeping vertical with the aid of one shaky arm, she clutched at her leg. Through the stained rip in her jeans just above her knee, she caught a glimpse of a dark blue bandage that looked familiar.

Vaguer but more recent memory fragments slid into place. A great white bird who insisted she mount a pony, even though she protested she was too weak. Someone who gave her leaves to place on her wound and helped her to tear a strip from the caftan as a bandage. A strange voice comforting her when the pain intensified until she could hardly bear it. The same voice warning her to lie quietly while it went ... where?

Cara released her leg, and sat up straight. On her left, her battered provision bag lay amidst thick-leafed shrubs. To the right, a few rocks and a steep upward slope blocked her view of anything beyond them. Directly before her, the pony munched on shrubbery leaves.

Except it wasn't a pony. Cara knew a bit about horses. She and a friend used to clean stables and curry horses for free rides a couple of years before, until she had decided that the effort wasn't worth the recreational part.

The creature stood about the right height and had a horse-like head. In most other respects its only resemblance to a pony or horse was that it appeared to be a mammal. The back of the "pony" began low over the front legs and arched in a shallow convex curve toward the hindquarters. The hindquarters weren't as

rounded as those of a horse were but shaped more like the back legs of a tiger or lion. The oddly shaped tail added to the feline resemblance. Ropelike at its base, it grew thick and soft with hair halfway toward the tip.

Cara waited for the pony to shift position as it continued to browse. Three hooves formed each foot, the middle one much larger than the slender side hooves that barely touched the ground. The hoof shape reminded her of drawings of ancient bones in a biology text.

The pony stripped leaves from the shrubs at a great speed, her teeth ripping the soft parts of the leaves away, leaving behind the veins. Tough veins. Cara rolled over and reached toward the nearest bush. She tugged experimentally on a broad lavender leaf. The parts between the veins pulled away in her hand. The veins began wrapping around her. She gasped and jerked her hand away. Narrow streaks of yellow striped her fingers. She wiped the stuff off on her caftan.

The gesture drew her attention to the stain blackening the top of the navy cloth. Bran's blood. Cara shuddered. Dead now, along with his friend-turned-foe. The huge white bird was the only reason she was alive. What did Hythe and Cona think of their sudden absence?

They're probably worried. Where does that leave my family? How many days, now? Six? Seven? I can't believe I've been here long enough to lose count.

Okay, someone helped me then left me here. Just for a while, he said. Was it that bird or someone after that, or was that part of the dream? Wish my memory would get in gear. Where's my rescuer, anyway?

She listened for footsteps, searched through the shadows between shrubs and then beyond amidst the closest trees. No one. What should she do if they didn't come back?

A shadow passed high overhead. Cara flinched and looked up in time to see a white shape plummeting toward her.

The great bird landed on one of the larger rocks to her right. Shaped rather like an osprey, it was larger than an eagle and far more beautiful. Pale, opalescent tints tipped the white feathers with the delicate rainbow hue of mother-of-pearl. The broad, rather owl-like face turned and studied Cara squarely with both blue-green eyes, the gaze intelligent and full of concern. This had to be one of the seabirds or Chosen. The seabird bobbed his head and half spread his enormous wings in what appeared to be an avian salutation.

"Hail, stranger from a far land. It gives me joy to see you are recovering." He spoke in the voice from her dreams, or rather from her memories. As before, the higher pitches of his speech hurt her ears.

Her eyes still caught by the bird's keen gaze, Cara could see the sparkle of joy. He certainly deserved a courteous answer if for no other reason than saving her life, but how did you talk to a bird?

Whoa! Not a bird, idiot. He's human. Grab a clue ring.

"Hi! I mean, hail ... sir. Thanks for taking care of me. I mean saving my life. Well, both. Thanks!" *Oh, good job. Hail, Cara, captain of the Olympic Babbler Squad.*

Before she could change her mind, she added, "I'm Cara, an Outworlder."

The bird nodded solemnly. "This I know, Cara. The Young Ones have sent this to us by their Thought Stone. I am Kataro, one of many sent to search for you here in the Land of the Two Rivers."

In spite of the occasional clack of his bills, his words were clear enough, but Cara suspected it took a lot of concentration and effort for Kataro to form them. Abdis had instilled the language shared by his people and the Elders but not the seabird language, as far as she knew. What did Kataro's natural language sound like? Like seagulls back home?

Stop mixing up birds and his kind of humans! Last thing you need is to piss him off. He's looking at you as if you're some kind of weirdo. Which you are, but why let on? Say something nice.

"You know, Kataro, you look just like my necklace."

The seabird straightened a wing feather carefully before responding.

Okay, what was wrong with that? It's not as if I complimented his feathers and asked if they came from Nieman-Marcus.

"Beyond doubt, the necklace you wear came from this world."

"Yeah. So everyone says. I just can't figure out how it did it. I mean how it got there."

Kataro preened another feather.

"Alphesis sent it to your land to draw you to us in our need, and you came. We are grateful."

Here we go again.

He stared at her a moment without blinking, his head tilted ever so slightly to one side. With the Neroli, that seemed to mean curiosity but the softness in Kataro's gaze persuaded her that this was a seabird-type smile.

She smiled back, heartened by the gaze or by her own interpretation. "Well, you're welcome, I guess, except I haven't done anything. Speaking of which, have you got any idea what I'm doing here? Lady Clepta insisted I could have found out but I wouldn't listen. Now that I'm, well, kind'a willing to listen, I don't know how to find out. Sorry! I know this isn't your problem, but if daemagos are taking out contracts on me anyway, I might just as well be trying to do whatever it is. If I knew what it was."

"Actually, I have a theory," The seabird shook his head. "To guess aloud will serve neither of us. This is sure. First, you hasten to the Isle of the Chosen. Followers of the Shadow are on the move and they know that you are here."

Cara groaned. "Yeah, tell me about it! Bran, the creep, had just brought me to them when you showed up. On the move? So they're out tracking us? How far from the gorge are we?"

"We are still very close. You were too ill to travel far, so we've been hidden in this small, protected valley for three days. As for your first question, those of the Shadow seek us on either side of this valley, and before and behind and above it."

Cara glanced up anxiously at the innocent-looking sky. Were some seabirds enemies?

"Do not be alarmed. The blessing of Alphasis is on this place."

Alphasis again. Cara just stared at him.

Kataro added patiently, "He placed a mineral beneath the soil here, just as he did in the Neroli forests. Thanks to its presence, our foes cannot sense us nor set foot here. Still, we must leave the dale soon for you will be safer the farther you travel east and I have important news to bring both to my nation and to the Elders."

"You're on assignment and you hung out here for three days? Wow! Sorry that I slowed you down so much." Cara added, "Look, I'm doing great now. You can take off as soon as you like."

The Katara's eyes softened in what she took to be another smile. He hopped lightly from his stony perch and balanced precariously half on her shoulder and half on her upper arm. Fluttering his wings to stay in place, he ran his beak through her tangled hair. It hurt and she could barely keep her balance against his weight.

"See." He half-hopped, half-flew back over to the rock "You can barely abide even a portion of my weight on your shoulder. We must wait another day, perhaps two."

"But the news you've got to deliver!"

Kataro's eyes smiled again. "My mission will mean little if you are unable to complete your own. Much will hang on your actions, not mine." A vigorous shake of his head stilled Cara's half-formed protest. "Quiet, Cara! My duty is clear--I'll stay with you as long as you need me."

"Oh, cool!" Cara laughed at Katara's perplexed expression. "Sorry! In Outworlderese, I'm relieved plus I don't think I deserve you. Thanks! Whether I'm the Outworlder Special Ops you're expecting or not, it'll be good to have someone in screaming distance. Sorry! More Outworlder. I mean I'll try to make saving my life worth the trouble. You know, like that. Thanks for bringing along the provision bag. I hope the food and water bottle survived."

Kataro brought her the bag. His great wings making a swirling wind around Cara as he approached, and then hovered effortlessly before her with the bag's strap clutched in one clawed foot. He was so strong and so beautiful. His gaze reminded her of the expression on Lady Clepta's face when she was standing in the shrine, or the way Cona had looked when she talked about the Isle. Delight, peace, calm—one of them, all of them. Like the expression of the seabird on her necklace. Putting that aside for the moment, Cara looked for something to eat.

Cara awoke from a nap she hadn't intended to take and was immediately glad of the waking. She had been dreaming--remembering--about the hideous pain and sickness she had experienced right after she had been wounded. Struggling to put even the dim memories from her mind, Cara sat up carefully and stretched. Night had fallen but the sky was clear. The gold-tinted moon, though beginning to wane, was still in the sky.

Kataro stirred and turned toward her. "How does it go with you, Cara?"

“Better, thanks. The pain’s a lot less, and sitting up isn’t such a drag. What time’s it?”

“Not long before moonset. You’ve slept for six hours.”

“Not too shabby.” Remembering fragments from her dream, she added, “What kind of leaves did you put on my leg? I remember you told me to bind them close and tight. What were they for?”

“Werebane, a remedy against the spear head’s poison.”

“The narthrous stone? Why would narthrous hurt me?”

Kataro shook his head, amidst a soft rustle of feathers. “It wouldn’t, my lady. You are, or soon will be, one of the Light. Narthrous won’t harm you just by being narthrous. The point did little more than scratch you. Your peril came from the mingling of the werewright’s blood with your own.”

“Where-right? That’s Bran’s friend, Reptile-man?”

“Werewright.”

“Whatever. Was that, uh, werewright HIV-positive?”

Kataro gazed at her in confusion, at last, shaking his head. “I don’t know that word.”

“Did he have AIDS, or something else?”

Kataro shook his head again, his expression mystified. “The werewright seemed healthy and it probably was. Werewrights do not generally suffer any of their kind to live who are ill. Their sorcerer lords would not permit that.”

“I don’t get it. Why would his blood be dangerous to me if he wasn’t infected with something?”

“Oh, a disease borne by blood! No, their blood is more deadly than any disease.”

Cara started to interrupt him, but reconsidered. More deadly?

“Werewrights have their name with good reason. Long ago, they were ... changed within their bodies so that they might better serve their Shadow lords as weapons.”

“Bioengineered?”

“Hm. Another word we do not have. Perhaps, if I explain. Werewrights were made to be warriors for the sorcerers of that time. In addition, the sorcerers altered their blood making it deadly to that of other races. Should it be allowed to mingle with any of ours then we begin to change physically into their shape. But, alas, it is impossible for our bodies to change that thoroughly or that fast. Without werebane to treat the wound, and that immediately, the one wounded dies in just a few days.”

Cara shuddered. “Pretty powerful DNA! Even with werebane, it makes you sick and delirious. I remember—well, let’s say more than I want to.”

“That danger is past. Try to sleep again for a while.”

“Right.” Cara cringed at the harsh tone of the one word, and added more gently, “I’ll try. But first, answer two questions for me.”

“I have answered many more than that. You must sleep to mend.”

“You got it, but not knowing stuff creeps me out. The rocks and gravel we climbed through were the ruins of Pazgar’s fortress?”

“Yes. When Alphasis removed the stones of the fortress, they heaped themselves around its foundation in obedience to him. No plants or trees have ever taken root on those bitter rocks, nor ever will.”

“And, Riven Gorge itself is where the building was. Well, the dungeons?”

“Again, you are correct. I didn’t know you arrived so well versed in the Chronicles of Alphasis’ Coming.”

Cara grinned sheepishly. “Nah. Hythe and Cona told me some stuff. That Alphasis must have had all his followers working for years to move all that. Like our Egyptian pyramids but in reverse.”

“Pyramids? I know nothing of that, but the removal of the Bastion was done in a moment by Alphasis himself.”

Cara started to protest but decided to let it go. She had messed up with Lady Clepta. She saw no point in antagonizing Kataro even if she found it a little hard to believe that a magician could uproot and topple over a humongous building, like a team of demolitionists.

“Yes, five thousand years ago. I’ve heard. The important thing is that it was done.”

Probably by an earthquake or an army--or dynamite. Do they even have dynamite? All this about a magician demolishing Evil-is-Us HQ makes about as much sense as Rabada and Pazgar being centuries old. Ooh, maybe

a couple of daemagos are making out to be a couple of badass ancient villains. I can see these people buying into that with their hand-me-down traditions. Maybe I'm here to expose the imposters.

"Cara, I said try to sleep now. Questioning and thinking have their place but they make the mind restless and the body with it."

"Hey, no fair! I said two questions. That was all one question."

She could hear his strange clacking laugh in the dark. "I hope the second question is shorter than the first."

"You have to report stuff but you're going with me instead. Just making sure that's the right decision. I don't want you to get into trouble."

Kataro was silent for a moment, his gaze seemingly directed toward the ground at the base of the rock on which he was perched. At last he glanced up.

"I will not tell you all. It's late and the details are nothing you need to know. Nevertheless, I perceive that you will not settle to sleep unless I speak.

"Foremost was finding werewrights and converts to the Shadow in the gorge and round about it. That is ill news for the Three Peoples. None of the Shadow has dared approach the ruin of Pazgar's keep in over five thousand years. In addition, we have long believed that Pazgar and others were bound to the mountains and couldn't leave them. Recently, we had begun to doubt this but now you have seen proof."

"Me? They were bound but aren't anymore? What's 'bound'? How did they become, uh, 'unbound'?"

"Four new questions." Kataro chuckled. "Their answer is a long tale. No wheedling will persuade me to tell it tonight. Suffice for now that Alphasis bound them beneath our mountains shortly after the destruction of the bastion and other like structures. As to the freeing, none know with certainty, though I have always suspected the treachery of an Elder possibly named Thaddis."

He added, "What I need to report isn't their presence but what they are about. At the lowest point on the southern wall of the gorge, the sorcerers are excavating a tunnel, probably headed south and east to go under the Nonz River where it flows closest to the Sweetwater. From there, perhaps they hope to reach the capital or a seaport."

Cara sat up in amazement. "That's impossible. Even in my world, tunnels under rivers and harbors are pretty rare and still difficult to make. Where'd you, they, get that kind of technology?"

"We have knowledge too and, better, ancient wisdom. However, the Daetaga are not concerned with machines or technology. They can make a narrow passage by the evil power that dwells in them, by sorcery."

"Humph." Cara dutifully tried to revise her grasp of Narentan reality again but it was too much for the moment. "You don't think my task is to prevent them from digging the tunnel, do you?"

"No. We can deal with that. According to the Writings, Outworlders' missions require a talent or learning we don't possess. I trust our enchanters have weavings strong enough to break their spells. All we need do is warn them. That and get you to the Isle as quickly as we can."

Cara let out her breath with a woof. "Busy place, you've got here. Thanks for getting me up to speed. Boy, I wish I'd done as Clepta and Abdis said! If nothing else, I would have never met Bran and that werewright, or gotten hurt. Kataro, you're smart. Tell me your theory about my task. If it's not to prevent the tunnel, what?"

"I've found this talk valuable, too. It comes to my mind that your mission involves setting right the treachery of which I spoke. Now to sleep with you!"

Kataro flew past her and perched on a branch of the tree behind her. He tucked his head under his wing with an air of finality. Cara lay down again, her head buzzing with unanswered questions.

Overhead, the stars patrolled the sky in countless companies.

Kataro awakened Cara at dawn. She ate quickly, gathered the little she had and tied the bag to the pony's saddle. Her leg was so stiff, she had to try three times before she got herself into the saddle and the aching throb in her thigh had erupted into jabs that made her wince. Riding wasn't likely to soothe it.

They left the small valley cautiously and turned east. Kataro encouraged her to hasten before he took up his position above and just ahead of her. Without the valley's protection, he reminded her, they were vulnerable to spies of the Shadow. At his insistence, they found the southern bank of the Sweetwater and stayed as close to its bank as they could while still under cover of the trees.

The seabird explained that Daetaga shunned not only water but also light. “Remember your own encounter with the werewright. He arranged to meet Braznar in the dark after moonset. Even starlight is painful to the great ones of the Shadow. Nonetheless, never rely on daylight alone to protect you. The daemagos will brave the full light of day if their goals require it, and they hold enough power over their followers to force them to do the same.”

“The werewright used a lantern!”

“Yes, but their lanterns yield a form of light they find harmless. Flowing water is another matter. We believe that it burns them like acid though the damage is not as lasting. A great one or even a werewright can enter a stream but they will do their best to avoid this. The pain must be very severe, and the wounds that the water gives them quite debilitating though temporary. Enchanters suspect that daemagos suffer great mental and emotional distress from the touch of water. They believe it can be lasting and, for them, lethal.”

Cara leaned back in the saddle to look up the seabird. “I just remembered something that puzzled me at the time. Bran forded the river. How did he get away with that?”

“As you doubtless realize, Braznar was merely a hired spy--not entirely evil or entirely of the Shadow, yet.” He sighed. “We, all of us, move towards the Light or towards the Shadow with each decision we make. In most cases, we are not aware of this. Braznar is not the first Elder to turn to evil for gain nor will he be the last. Had the negotiations been successful and had Braznar attempted to re-enter the river, things might have been otherwise. Then, or perhaps later, he would have found that he followed the Shadow whether he knew it or not. Hardly the first to learn that.

“Ride on quietly now. We are still close to the gorge and many of the Shadow’s spies have sharp ears.”

Toward the end of the long Tethran morning, Cara began to tire and to ache from the jolting ride but she didn’t mention it to Kataro. The more distance they put between themselves and the gorge, the better. The seabird flew effortlessly overhead, seeming barely able to keep the speed of his great wings in check. Cara suspected he was having even more trouble keeping his wings from catching on tree branches, since he never flew above them. He explained that the sight of a seabird this far inland might rouse curiosity.

Kataro kept to his pledge of the previous night and told Cara more about the Daetaga. From the precision and formal wording of his explanations, Cara suspected he was quoting ancient scrolls word for word.

“Once, a small group of great ones of the Elders sought to gain control of this world...”

“Great ones?”

Kataro glanced back. “An old name for enchanters. Those enchanters were the first who learned to wield the powers under the tutelage of Alphasis. But one particular group of those original great ones rebelled against him, their rightful leader, even though it was his planning and foresight which had brought this very world into existence and which had aided them to come to it and survive on it, in the infancy of their race.

“For many years, times were bitter but perhaps not as bad as they might have been, for these sorcerers fought amongst themselves. Their struggle so occupied them that many living things escaped destruction. The rebellious great ones who managed to survive, my nation calls the Shadow. Yours--rather the Elders--say Daetaga.

“In time, only three of the evil great ones remained here in Tethra: Rabada, Zabnar and--worst of all--Lord Pazgar. They built structures such as you have seen and attempted to control the Three Peoples using them. These were focal points of their power and places for their rites. Each had or, perhaps I should say, has his proper stone and device. Zabnar’s Werestones of Torment. Rabada’s Stones of Endless Destruction. Pazgar’s Stones of Enmity.

“Those three gained control of much of this land, and there seemed to be none to help us for the whole world groaned under the rule of the Shadow. Then Alphasis came to the Isle of the Chosen. He strengthened and enheartened all the Three Peoples of our world, reminding them of their history and their heritage, reminding them that he still watched over their welfare. The great ones of the Shadow heard of this and were consumed with fear, so they sought to take his life.

“Yet, in the moment of their supposed victory, he overcame them. Alphasis himself unmade the Bastion of Corruption, as you know. Elsewhere on our world, similar structures built by other daemagos fell before his

power. The armies of the Three Peoples broke the strength of the Shadow and it retreated to the mountains from whence it had launched its attack.

"The armies of The Obedience also destroyed the power of the lesser stones and other devices but, in their haste, they did not pull down all of the structures, riding past them in pursuit of their enemies as they fled to the mountains, some here and some there.

"Lastly, Alphasis bound all the Shadow sorcerers, the daemagos, to the mountains even as he had planned when this place was created."

Cara called up to the seabird, "Wait! Too much, too fast! Besides, this was like ages ago, right? Are you claiming that Rabada and those other two--"

"Pazgar and Zabnar."

"Yeah. Are you saying that those were the same ones as like now?"

"Of course, yes."

Cara shook her head, but decided once more to let the claim go. She needed to know more before offering her theory about imposters. "Okay, whatever. Why didn't Alphasis just kill them all?"

"It was as he had known it would be from the beginning. He would not permit their destruction. The game, as it were, was not yet over. He predicted that eventually some daemagos, even some of their mightiest, would turn back to the Light and that they would help destroy the remnants of the Shadow forever."

"And, did they?"

"Well, not yet. That is in a time yet to come."

"So, if he could rip out buildings and he bound them, how could they get free? You mentioned treachery--"

"Later, Little Chick!" Kataro answered in an excited voice. "Stop the pony. I'll be back."

Puzzled, Cara obeyed. Kataro glided serenely toward the river then plunged into the water. Comprehension dawned as the seabird broke the surface with a great fish in his claws. Drops of water flew glittering from his wings in all directions.

"I thought a stop for a meal might be appropriate," he called as he swooped back toward her. Challenging avian aerodynamics, he wheeled about, lifting the fish for display. Drops sprayed across Cara's face. He carried the fish to a low branch in a nearby tree, and Cara dismounted with a relieved sigh. Her leg was stiff though not nearly as sore as it had been but she ached all over from the jolting gait of the pony. She leaned against Kataro's tree and unpacked the provision bag. Little remained inside.

Kataro called down, "Would you like some fish? There's more than enough though I fear you daren't light a fire to cook it."

"Sushi, huh? Yeah, I had that once and it didn't kill me. Ok." Cupping her hands to catch the ragged strip, she asked, "Why haven't we been followed?"

"To the contrary, I'm sure we have been. The Shadow would like us to think that our escape was this easy to make us careless. Undoubtedly, they're waiting for the right moment to spring a trap."

"Reassuring, aren't ya?"

Cara shifted position restlessly. Kataro's answer made her apprehensive for the first time since they had left the protected valley. Suppose someone was watching them right now? Her eyes darted from tree to tree but everything appeared to be as it had before--not that she knew what to look for. She could only hope that Kataro did.

She stared at the piece of raw fish in her hand. Wrinkling her nose, she bit off a piece, chewed as briefly as she dared and swallowed it. As soon as she had gulped down a mouthful of water from the water skin, she asked, "So, where do you live and what do you do? Well, when you're not going around rescuing damsels in distress like me?"

The seabird laughed the clacking laugh of his people then dropped off his perch to land in front of Cara in a flurry of wings and wind.

"As to where I live, it shouldn't surprise you to hear that I live at sea, on one of the small islands north of the Isle of the Chosen. My responsibilities often take me to the Isle, and for that I'm very grateful."

"What's your responsibilities, and to whom?" Cara swallowed another mouthful of half-chewed fish, and tried to concentrate on Kataro's answer rather than the slippery texture in her mouth.

"I'm a teacher and keeper of the Ancient Writings, like many of my race. Others serve as advisors and healers and in other roles. My responsibility is to Alphasis, of course."

Cara mulled over the "of course". All the conflicting references to Alphasis confused her. Hadn't Kataro just spoken of Alphasis as if he were in the past, thousands years ago? Now he acted like was still alive. Clepta claimed that, too.

She gulped down more fish, and considered what Sandy would say. He had rattled off the plot of an SF movie once in which the "immortal" villain had turned out to be a ruthless computer left on a dead world by an ancient race. Well, a race it had killed. Was there an ancient mainframe named Alpha-something in an underground bunker somewhere? In the movie, the crew of the visiting spaceship were all killed--gruesomely, from her brother's avid descriptions. Yack. Time to switch to something less gross.

"Hythe quoted poetry about wisdom. Do you teach on the Throne of Wisdom? Is that how it got its name?"

"We don't teach on it but nearby. Those who would learn come to the Isle and we speak to them from the Ancient Writings and other books of wisdom. We have two of this region's three Thrones on the Isle--Wisdom and Healing. The Chosen who teach near each Throne teach that for which the Throne is named, but teaching takes place in several other special sites. These places are just traditional, named in an ancient time so long ago that no one is sure how they came to be. Some believe each was named for a great act of Alphasis which occurred there."

"Hm. Who do you teach?"

"Elders, the younger Chosen, sometimes even some Young Ones. Whoever comes to learn."

"Ooh, wait! Do you know a young man, Elder, named Harone? He's the son of Hythe and Cona that I told you about. They asked me to try to see him if I went to the Isle."

"Harone na Hythe? Yes. I believe I've seen him a few times. He comes to a colleague of mine to study the Book of Prophecy. Very thorough student I hear. And handsome, too."

To Cara's amazement and confusion, Kataro tilted his head and winked. Her face hot, she stammered, "Oh, I, I wasn't asking for myself. I just promised I'd say hi from his parents. Shouldn't we be starting again?"

"First, a swift glance around. The Shadow must certainly be intending to try some attack by dark. It has been far too peaceful. I find it difficult to believe that no spy has found the pony's trail."

Cara tied the provision bag to her saddle and mounted. "Are you going to fly above the treetops for a better look? You said they could spot you too easily that way."

"I'll fly south a bit, below the level of the trees, then pick up altitude quickly and have a quick look around. If they see me, it may be to our advantage--they'll think we're south of our true position. Be vigilant while you wait! At the first sign of anything troubling, ride into the shallows of the river!"

He flew off, a white flash through the purplish-greenish haze of new leaves. Cara soon lost track of him though she kept watching anxiously in the direction in which he'd disappeared.

As minutes passed, she felt very alone and unprotected. She searched for the first sign of his return, and was rewarded by a flash of light high in the air to the south. At home, she would have taken it for an airplane, the sun reflecting on its metal wings. The white glimmer sank rapidly toward the earth. A few minutes later, she glimpsed Kataro flying toward her. Nudging the pony to a trot, Cara went to meet him.

He flew around her head in a circle, greeting her with a flurry of wings that blew her hair in all directions before he resumed his usual place.

"A party of werewrights parallels our path about four miles south of the river. Others from the Shadow have ridden ahead, probably in the hope of separating us from the river and driving us south toward the other werewright band before we can reach the Abandoned Bridge. The bridge will serve as our refuge tonight if we can reach it. It is still out of sight, even to my eyes. A mist that may be of Shadow-making covers the forest to our east, from the river southward. More proof someone is planning to attack. We must be wary."

Cara stared south and then east, along the bank of the river. She couldn't spot anything ominous. *Would I know something ominous if I saw it--aside from a werewright waving at me?*

"Did you see any seabirds? They'd help us if we're attacked, wouldn't they?"

"They would, were they aware. I saw no one except possible settlements of farmers and shepherds, all far to the south of us. Some few people live in the forest but a cabin made of wood is not as easy to detect as a score

of mounted werewrights. The werewrights must have instructions not to attract attention, not an easy command for them to obey. In former times, they commonly left fire and destruction in their wake.

“Any of my nation would try to stay below treetop level—so they may be nearby but out of sight. The chances of two of us flying surveillance at the same moment are very, very small.”

“Suppose we don’t see anyone before the Isle? What about your report on the tunnel? How long will it take them to finish it?”

“I can’t answer that. I don’t know when they started. As for seeing someone,” Kataro answered heavily. “The trick is finding someone we wish to see before finding those we do not. Still, if we see no Elder or seabird soon, I will have to fly south to a house and ask the people there to relay the message. I don’t want to do that if I can avoid it. Such a move would probably draw no new danger to us but it would imperil the innocent Elders I tell. The inhabitants here have been lucky so far.”

10-Shapes in the Mist – I

Throughout the long afternoon, Cara and Kataro followed the southern bank of the Sweetwater. Trees and shrubs in spring bloom always surrounded them, with only their variety and number changing at times. Kataro never strayed into the open grassy patches nearer the water edge where both riding and flying would be easier. He explained safety was more important than a clear path. Daetaga had vicious flying creatures that would report any movements they detected on the ground.

Cara wondered if he meant the same creatures that Abdis had called noika. She hadn’t thought about the predator that had dropped a torn bird down on Clepta’s people since the day it happened. Kataro’s words added a sinister touch to what she had assumed was an accident or a prank.

Two River Forest reminded her of Melwood though the air was warmer here. In spite of the fresh greenish-purple shoots, the orange and green flower buds and the nesting and mating calls of the birds, Cara grew more uneasy the farther she rode. She appreciated Kataro treating her like an adult but she felt burdened by his thorough descriptions of their peril.

In turn, Kataro had to deal with her—a helpless Outworlder who was endangering him rather than helping his world. She ranked less than Quark Brigade’s first level Pawn. Proof, again, she was no superhero.

Time slid past them like the river water, snatching away precious hours of the sun’s protection. Shadows grew. Warming shafts of sunlight through the trees became increasingly rare. Shortly before full sunset, they reached the mist Kataro had seen at mid-day. They came upon it suddenly, like a curtain dropping onto a stage. The seabird called a warning but Cara rode into the mist before she was able to check the pony.

Shifting white and gray surrounded her, broken only by fuzzy glimpses of branches just out of her reach. She turned the pony and retraced her steps. Half-seen branches resembling ones she had passed enticed her onward but the fog stayed with her, not thickening or becoming thinner. If Kataro was speaking, she couldn’t hear him. No birds of any kind perched on branches or flew past.

She stopped the pony again and, fearing hostile ears, called out to Kataro in a whisper. The sound died on her lips, absorbed sponge-like by the palpable gray-white. She drew a breath of moist clinging air and tried again, “Kataro! Are you there?”

“I’m over here.” His words sounded muffled as if they came through a wall. Was that Kataro or someone, something, pretending? “Dismount. Turn to your left. Walk slowly in the direction of my voice. You have not enough control over the pony to guide it accurately in this. You’re facing south right now.”

That sounds like him. Can’t just stay here. Cara did as he instructed. A broad violet branch with pale green dogwood-like blossoms on it loomed up. On it perched the seabird. He hopped to the pony’s saddle.

“I am grateful that my sense of direction is keener than yours. Go forward through those teintrees. You’d better draw your knife.”

“Great.” Cara bit her lip. Too loud. She added in a murmur, “You expect them to attack soon? Kataro, listen! I hear voices!”

“Quietly,” Kataro murmured. “This is no natural fog. The spell twisted your path toward the south and away from the river as soon as you entered it. You know best how it reacted when you tried to come back out of it. I

wish there had been a way to avoid the mist entirely but, to reach the Abandoned Bridge, we had to continue east.”

“Couldn’t we fake them out, and start going south?”

“Toward the second band of werewrights? Remember, this spell just tried to confuse you into riding south--for their purposes. The only safe place for us is the ruins of the bridge where we will be surrounded by water. It should be very close--”

“Them, too.”

“I know, Little Chick, but we can do this. Just a bit farther east and toward the river bank. Concentrate on the direction of the river, and try not to panic. Rabada tried to terrify you into doing her will. Whoever is out there is trying to confuse you into it. Hush, now.”

Cara walked forward cautiously, while Kataro remained perched on the pony’s saddle close behind her. She held the knife in her hand so tightly that her fingers began cramping. Phantom shapes, alone or in pairs, loomed toward her. Before she could call out or attack, they resolved themselves into tree limbs, shrubs, a boulder--each object wearing its innocent appearance like a cloak obscuring a lurking, watching presence.

Strange voices called out in wordless pain or anger through the pale gray void, the scattered syllables wandering from gibberish to nearly decipherable sentences. What would happen if she understood what a voice said? She was tempted to put her hands over her ears but suspected it wouldn’t help.

The rage and anguish of the voices intensified the further they went, proof they were heading toward their source. Images of what would materialize ahead or what stalked behind tore at her nerves. Werewrights were most likely yet a premonition muttered, “The mist is sorcery and that takes a sorcerer. Rabada is out there and she’ll come out of the mists to greet you with her inhuman smile.”

Cara looked back and murmured, “Kataro, could you say something? Those voices! My mind’s playing tricks, or someone is.”

The seabird ruffled his feathers. “If it will help.” He whispered, “Just keep going. Every step is closer to the bridge. I’m here with you. You have the Discerning Stone and you have the river just to your left. Alphesis will protect you.”

A steady churn and gurgle joined with his soft repeated words. The river sounded so close! Why hadn’t she heard it earlier? Maybe the sinister mist, or the someone in it, had blocked it. The mist thinned to her right, revealing tree trunks and possibly a cluster of shrubs several yards away.

She whispered, “It’s breaking up!” With a glance over her shoulder to make sure no one was following them, she urged the pony in the direction of the clearing mist.

“Not that way! There’s danger. Cara, slow down!” Kataro left his perch to hover in front of her.

“What danger? The fog’s clearing! Right now, I’d rather see almost anything, even a werewright, as long as it’s distinct.”

“Sh! Would Rabada’s face be welcome?”

Cara stopped as he bade but she answered impatiently, “I said ‘almost anything’.” She pointed. “Besides, look it’s just a cottage. See that reddish glow in the windows? They must have a fire going.”

Sheathing her knife in relief, she dropped the pony’s reins and started forward.

“Cara, don’t! It’s sorcery!” The seabird’s claws clutched at the shoulder of her caftan.

Cara spun toward him, wrenching herself free with a rip of cloth. “Chill already! It’s a shepherd’s cottage. You can tell your news to him. It’s hardly in the fog at all.”

“It’s an illusion, Cara. I see it too, but--”

“We made it!” She turned back toward the little house.

Kataro flew in front of her and held her back with repeated blows of his wings. “Cara, listen to me! You turned right again--away from the river! Remember? Right--or south--like earlier. As for the cottage, get out the Discerning Stone and look again.”

Cara stopped. What was Kataro’s purpose in his instructions? What difference did it make that she had turned a bit to her right? A cottage was a cottage, wasn’t it?

She drew out the Stone reluctantly, remembering what she’d seen the only time she had used it. Balancing the stone on her palm, she lifted her eyes from its crystalline beauty to the cottage.

Eyes bored her through, and a soft voice whispered between her ears. She recognized him at once. His voice had taunted her. His mind had probed hers, settling at last on the reference to the Cheshire Cat. Cara whimpered, and her hand released the stone as if it burned. She backed up so abruptly that her back hit the pony's shoulder.

"Cara! Run toward the sound of the water! I know where we are now."

Cara bolted obediently in the direction of the river. Her mind closed off what she had just seen while the surge of adrenaline inspired by the sight propelled her forward. Behind her, Kataro called to the pony and it plunged past her into the mist, followed closely by the seabird.

Arrows whizzed and thunked with terrifying force into the closest tree trunks. She ducked down as low as she could and tried to weave her way through fog-shrouded shrubs. Something yanked at her waist. Cara gasped and glanced down at the spent arrow tangled in her caftan. Too close! Way too close. She put on a new burst of speed and dodged around a tree, her ears attuned for the sounds of the river before her and the sounds of pursuing feet behind. The loudest sounds were her breathing and the thuds of arrows striking the other side of the tree.

Cara took a great breath like a diver preparing to plunge into deep water. She fled the transfixed tree with all her remaining speed, following what might be the dark shape of the pony ahead. More arrows whirled through the air but off to her right. A cry of discovery sounded behind her, followed by the hiss-thump of arrows striking the nearest branches. An enraged voice shouted words she didn't understand. An arrow passed so close to her head that its flight stirred her hair.

From somewhere ahead came a high-pitched hawk-like cry, followed by a shriek. The ground tipped under her feet. She half-ran, half-stumbled down the sheer bank and splashed suddenly into the river. Its frigid waters iced her legs, stopping her short with shock. Just ahead swam the pony, leaving a wake like a small boat. From behind her came another scream, followed by a splash just a few yards away.

Kataro called down, "Keep moving! There! See that dark mass with the water foaming around it? That's a fragment of the old bridge. It's safe! I'll follow."

Off to her left, the sky was still brilliant with sunset colors. Fish made splashing and glooping noises around her.

Or arrows did.

She scrambled forward until she was in deep enough and then, taking a breath, she dived under the surface and swam a few strokes toward the dark stone platform. The river current confused her--she was used to swimming in a pool for lessons. She never went far into the ocean.

Kicking to the surface, she gasped more air. The ruins had veered off to her left. Magic or just the river current? Ducking back under, she fought her way upstream. Just as she was ready to surface, her left fingers brushed something rough and then a hard edge struck the underside of her right forearm. She grabbed out blindly and found a stone ridge. She pulled herself up onto it. Kneeling brought her head just above the surface. She gulped down air.

This couldn't be where Kataro meant--the ruin must have a submerged foundation or a causeway leading to it, invisible from shore. She staggered to a wobbly stand on the stonework with the current tugging at her legs, and tried to reorient herself. Off slightly to her left and still thirty yards away, water swirled and foamed around the island-like bridge remnants. Seeming to float just in front of it, stood the pony.

Cara glanced back towards the shore. Fog billowed and pushed at the edge of the water. Shadows of tree trunks and branches fought clear of the gray mist, only to be swallowed back into it.

She stumbled toward the pony and the bridge, braced for the rough causeway under her to drop away at any moment. Missing stones threw her off-balance but she reached the pony without tumbling over an edge. Water from the animal's swishing tail struck Cara like bees in flight but they couldn't make her any wetter.

Just beyond rose the shadowed rectangle of stone. She kept going until she could touch the foundation wall. Cracks and pockmarks betrayed more missing stones. Patches of the wall were slick with the growth of plants.

Gripping a rough ridge of stone as high up as she could reach, Cara felt for a stable toehold. With a wrench of quivering muscles, she pulled herself up. Panting and aching, she grabbed a second hold with one hand and worked a foot into a tight groove, then pulled up again. Dim twilight greeted her. She kept inching her way up until she could crawl forward and sprawl facedown on the surface. No mattress had ever felt this comfortable.

Cara rose to her knees and looked around. A few yards away, a fragment of a broken arch towered, still supporting a horizontal slab. The ancient arch rose straight at first then curved toward her, stopping abruptly before it had completed a quarter of its arc. She ran wearily toward the base of the arch and counted herself lucky to find a crevice just big enough to creep into, where the arch met the rough weathered platform.

Ten feet for the foundation, then the additional drop to the river bottom under the submerged causeway. Even so, she barely stood as high as the top of the riverbank. For all her struggles, this felt way too close to land and to the sorcerer. Where had Kataro gone?

The pony remained back on the old causeway--too out in the open. Would they shoot her? Of course, there was no place up here to hide an animal that big, and no way to coax her up here if there were.

There! A dim white patch flashed in the trees downstream and rapidly grew larger. Cara wrapped her arms about her shivering body, as the seabird alighted next to her, his wings just adding to the chill on her soaked skin.

"Where did you get to?"

"Downstream to get a glimpse of our friends from a safe angle. Tell me, Cara, what did you see with the stone?"

"My nightmare coming to life! Looks like I owe you, again." She hated the quiver in her voice. Whispering, she added, "I'm such an idiot. I only just said the mist was playing tricks."

"Don't apologize. Instead, tell me precisely what you saw. My instincts sensed evil, but I have no stone. 'My nightmare' tells me nothing. Describe it exactly so we can better plan what to do."

"You want to know what to do?" Cara laughed, aware herself of the hysteria in the sound. "I know what we can do! We can cross the river here, or else wade in it all the way to the sea."

Kataro shook his head. "Cara, look at the river. It has become too wide and deep since you and Braznar forded it. The pony would never gain the other side. To keep out of the strong currents, you would be too much in the shallows for protection. We'd be in easy range of arrows."

"Speaking of which, send the pony away! They'll shoot her if she stays where she is."

"Good thought. However, stop delaying, and tell me what you saw. I know you would rather not bring it to mind but it's important!"

Cara nodded. Kataro flew down to the pony and spoke in the same strange language he had used to address her before. She promptly plunged back into the river and swam toward the shore. Within minutes, she had disappeared into the trees upstream.

As promised, Cara began her description when he returned, "Okay. First, a cottage looking all safe, you know? Oh, yeah, you do know. You saw it too. Then maybe you felt like all you had to do was go through the door and everything would be all right. Spell, right?"

Kataro nodded.

Duh. Next stupid question? "When I got it out--the stone--the cottage just ... wasn't there. Where it had been--at each corner where it had been--stood a carved block, dark red like ... dried blood. I saw one like it before, before I reached the mill. That and a red metal column."

"You were fortunate to see so little in the northern moors. Many were built there and few of them ever removed. Go on!"

"In a minute! There! Over there. See?" Cara pointed to dark shapes walking between the mist-blurred trees and the bank. "I can see someone moving!"

Kataro nodded. "Of course. Even if they hadn't followed so closely after us, they would guess in what place we would take refuge. Doubtless, they were receiving orders on how best to approach the situation."

"Shouldn't we do something?"

"What? I cannot fight so many. You have no bow. We can only rest, and wait. While you to tell me all, that I may better know with whom we deal."

"I hate it when you're right," Cara muttered. "Kidding. Well, the corner blocks were carved all over with faces. They looked really deformed, almost monster faces."

“Some ... some had smiles kind’a like Rabada’s but most looked terrified or in pain. I, uh, felt or knew that they had been like that almost forever. The faces kept shifting, and that made them look alive. Or maybe they were. Are.

“In between the stones was a whole bunch of werewrights and one of the sorcerers, I guess.” Cara gave an involuntary shudder. “He stared. He ... he talked ...” She clasped her shaking hands together, and bit her lower lip, her eyes trained toward the riverbank.

“Who? What did he say?”

Her voice quavering, she answered, “I don’t know. Wasn’t Rabada. That leaves, uh, P-sorcerer or Zab-whatever. Sorry but I’m blanking on names. He made it look like there were faces inside the cornerstones. I said that. He was taller than the werewrights. His robe, caftan, didn’t hang right. I think maybe it was disguising his shape, and I don’t think it was normal human, well, normal Elder. His face kept changing like the faces on the pillars. Maybe the same faces.

“And then.” She drew a breath and blurted out the rest, “Then, I saw my own face, floating inside his face, clear like a mirror, and in terrible pain, and he spoke inside me. Like, like in my nightmare! But, no, but different. This time, I knew he wanted to put me into the stones, like his other victims. I guess his spell tried make me believe that he could just ... snatch my thoughts or my soul or something, and lock me with him inside a pillar. The spell was so convincing, I almost believed it! I ... So I let go the stone and backed up and you know the rest.”

She turned toward the seabird who sat facing the riverbank, deep in thought. “Could he? No, don’t tell me! I think I’d go all catatonic.”

Kataro looked away from the shore. “What it means is that you have seen Zabnar, one of the three bound within our western mountainway in the time of Alphesis’ coming.” He muttered, “And if those two be no longer bound, who is to say that Pazgar no longer walks the land?”

“So that’s Zabnar, the wizard who gets his jollies by pretending he can lock people inside of stone blocks. Nice guy.”

At Kataro’s unblinking gaze, Cara subsided. “Sorry. Tell me the rest. I guess I need to know about him.”

“What else is there to tell? He is a sorcerer, one of the Shadow. You know already from Braznar and the werewright that they seek to acquire your Discerning Stone, and then kill you.”

Cara shuddered at the stark words. She glanced briefly toward shore, hoping that she would see nothing. The dark figures had retreated into the mists, leaving nothing to see except a sinister blend of images from memory and nightmare. How could such a fragile wall as the river’s shallows protect them from that sorcerer and his followers?

“Kataro?” she whispered with tongue and lips deprived of all moisture.

“Yes, Little Chick?”

“Nothing.” Cara shook her head. “No, something. You’ve got to talk to me, cause otherwise I’m gonna freak. I know these guys hate water and all, but Look, it isn’t that much water. You told me they can go into water if they’ve got to. And they’ve got bows.”

“Do you fear fire?”

Cara shrugged. “Yeah, of course. But-”

“Even a small amount of it? Say, the width you see between the bridge base and the shore?”

“I get what you’re saying, but it’s just water.”

“You know better, Little Chick. Whatever is true in your own world, here it is the nature of flowing water to attack the nature of evil. Don’t you believe what I’ve told you about the Shadow?”

Cara grimaced in embarrassment and shrugged again. “Well, some of it. But why water?”

“Flowing water reacts so because Alphesis bade it to. That is why Alphesis bound all the daemagos to the mountains using streams of water. I told you this! He planned this from the beginning when this place was created. Remember?”

Mystified, Cara shook her head.

“Ah!” Kataro added a humanlike chuckle. “I never did tell you about the prison chambers, did I? Or, how I believe the daemagos in one of our chambers were freed?”

“Nope. You went fishing instead.”

Kataro nodded. "I remember now. Forgive me, little one. If my theory is correct, it would make your purpose here clearer."

Cara shrugged but kept scanning the shadowed river edge. "Clearer than mud would be good, but right now I don't care if your hunch is right. Just keep talking."

"Of course. Where to begin? This world is not as the worlds of the Outworlders."

Cara barely managed to stifle the sardonic laugh that welled up inside her. *Really? Never would've guessed.*

"Our world is divided into many large areas each surrounded by mountain chains. By his art, Alphesis made the mountains as barriers that none could traverse by climbing, be they good or evil. The only way to travel from land to land is by means of passageways under the mountains. Two streams cross every mountainway. Since evil cannot survive the flowing waters of the two streams, it cannot go from land to land."

"Why bother?"

"To protect each land from outside evil. The streams have limited the movements of the Shadow for countless centuries. An evil power may spring up in a land, but it cannot spread. Yet the Three Peoples of neighboring lands can go to their sister country to help them."

"Then something went majorly wrong, and the next thing you know the bad guys were attacking with ships. On water. Zabnar's gang could be over there building rafts right now."

"Not without the necessary tools and supplies."

Which maybe they brought. Zabnar would expect us to cross water.

"How close do you think your seabird friends and the other searchers are?"

Studying the crescent moon, Kataro mumbled, "Hopefully, closer than they were."

Cara glanced from the seabird, back toward the shore. "Waiting until moonset, huh? That's what I figure, too. Look, Kataro, there's no point in sitting here and just staring into the trees. I've been doing that and, believe me, it hasn't helped. You might as well keep filling me in on stuff. I promise to keep watching, and I know you will, so what's the harm?"

"Harm if my words are frightening you."

Cara shifted uneasily and tried to push herself a tiny bit further back into her scant shelter. "Are you kidding? I'm at 'terrified' and counting. You can't say anything as bad as staring at myself inside of Zabnar's face. Yack!"

Kataro studied her for a moment then nodded his reluctant assent. He muttered, "As you wish, Little Chick. I owe you that much at least."

"Owe me?" Laughter welled up inside Cara at the absurdity--laughter that stopped at her lips when she saw the embarrassment in the seabird's gaze. "What?"

Kataro voiced a laugh of his own, a small and rueful one. "Remember, you asked me what I did when not rescuing Outworlders?" At Cara's uncertain nod, he continued, "I admit I enjoyed the question, and the honor implied in it but I didn't answer quite as honestly as I might have."

Cara interrupted in perplexity, "You told me you got sent by the Young Ones, that they gave you, I don't know, a message in some thought stone thing? Is that like remote control telepathy?"

"I wouldn't know. Not personally." Kataro shook his head emphatically before Cara could speak. "No. Just let me tell you. I'm an academic far from home on an errand of my own. Well, it started so at least. A friend, a colleague who teaches Elder prose and poetry had been clearing out his eyrie a bit. He found a small scroll given to his grandfather by a traveler long ago and he brought it to me as," Kataro frowned, "a dinner gift. We give gifts to those who invite us to share special meals."

At Cara's nod, he continued, "Karpak thought it would interest me because a finely-ornamented verse from the Book of Prophecy was wrapped around the main scroll and then layered with so much wax that the calligraphy was unusually well-preserved for--"

Cara interrupted, "I'm not getting this. Are you coming to a point soon?"

The seabird laughed. "Even my confessions sound like lectures, do they? Forgive me. The, uh, point is that Karpak's grandfather treated the scroll as an art object, neglecting the scrawled message delivered in the same woven pouch. The message bid the scroll be guarded but not be opened for a hundred years. Alas, the year in

which the message was written was nearly indecipherable. I was so intrigued I could hardly focus on my duties as host. To teach the Book of Prophecy properly requires grounding in history—

“Uh, Kataro?”

The seabird straightened a feather and then another before speaking. “Suffice it to say, late that night, I deciphered enough of the accompanying message to prove the scroll should have been opened nearly 20 years earlier. I opened it at once. According to colleagues, three sorcerers should have made an appearance in Tethran lands nearly eighteen years ago. Since they didn’t, my colleagues concluded a certain Koloran folktale was just that, a tale. Their theory also cast doubt on an important prophecy. I had always believed the tale historic and the prophecy true. And here was the proof in my claw, written by an Elder who witnessed the freeing of the sorcerers!

“Even so, I chose to seek firsthand proof. I flew to the Gorge hoping for any trace of Daetaga. I was alerted to both your arrival and your peril by pure happenstance—while seeking evidence to prove a hypothesis. Dozens of warriors and enchanters were commanded to look for you. I, who was not charged to seek you, found you. Well, I did and, unfortunately, so did my proof.” Kataro stopped, and stared hard at the riverbank.

“Eighteen years. Better later than never,” Cara ventured.

Kataro nodded, though he still faced the wooded area. “The best time for those of the Shadow to make an appearance is never. Let me check about us a moment. Remember you’ve sworn to remain alert.”

He launched himself nearly straight up with the last word.

11-Shapes in the Mist – II

“They wait in the same place as before ...,” Kataro murmured as he dropped down beside Cara. He faced her and added brightly, “Where was I?”

Cara tried to focus on his face in the dim light of the crescent moon. “You’re even more worried than when you left! Why?”

Kataro began preening a feather. Once it was in place to his satisfaction, he answered her, “I suspect the werewrights who rode south of our path have joined the sorcerer and those with him. It’s difficult to verify without a stone, but the number of werewright warriors and ponies gathered amidst the trees appears to be greater now.”

With the memory of her face trapped inside Zabnar’s still fresh, Cara had to force herself to ask, “Would you like me to use my stone and see if ...?”

“No. We face as many as we face, regardless. And there’s nothing we can do until they attack.” He added, “I fear raising your hopes but I also sensed the presence of those of the Light—”

“The rescue team? Outstanding!” Cara leaned forward and stared left, downstream into the fog.

“Wait. Don’t become so excited. The trace was faint, meaning they are not that close. Too far away to judge in which direction they are traveling. But Zabnar and his followers are certainly between us.”

At Cara’s disgusted groan, he resumed, “I think I sensed others of my kind amongst them. Whether they know we are here or will reach us in time is in Alphasis’ hands—”

“Outworlder!”

Cara gasped and turned back toward the river shore. The shadow of a werewright detached itself from the vague tree-made shadows surrounding it. In one hand, it waved what appeared to be a leafy branch.

“Will you speak with me, now that your spy has returned?”

Cara looked toward Kataro for his opinion. He murmured at her questioning glance, “The werewright will lie. Just remember that.”

Cara snorted. “No kidding.”

She began to creep out of her crevice then changed her mind. If she could hear the werewright across the river shallows then he could hear her. Why make herself a target?

“Yeah, I’ll talk. What do you want?”

“What my master wishes,” the werewright answered, lowering the branch. “At the moment, a truce. My overlord commanded me to offer your freedom in exchange for the Stone of Discerning you hold and possession of your seabird spy.”

Cara gaped in horror and disbelief at the last casual words. She clamped her lips tightly on the various angry responses that sprang to mind, and forced herself to remain calm. Losing control would just amuse him. Cara took a deep breath and answered, “He’s not a spy. He’s my friend-”

The werewright interrupted, “Your spy is a most promising target. Those white feathers are quite visible-”

“Shut up, liar!” Cara sprang out from the protection of the crack in spite of herself. “You’re not in range, and you know it! Where’s your boss? Where’s the coward hiding?”

Kataro murmured urgently, “Calmly, Little Chick, calmly! Duck down again. He’s provoking-”

“Not in range? Of course not. As for Lord Zabnar, he and his personal guard engage even now with those who sought to help you. My people outnumber yours. Negotiate while you have the chance for soon it will be too late.”

Dubious but uneasy anyway, Cara turned to Kataro for his reaction.

He responded, “Unlikely. As I said, the presence of our allies felt not that close to me.”

Cara shook her head. “But if Zabnar’s been riding in their direction and our guys have been riding this way, it’s possible?”

“I think it unlikely they are already near enough to each other to be in conflict. More likely, Zabnar hides even now amongst the trees, listening.”

Cara nodded, then called out, “Y’know what? Tell mind games guy we’re gonna pass.”

Kataro whispered, “Not in Outworlder.”

Cara groaned. “Great translation job Abdis did. Okay. Hey, werewright? We,” Cara groped briefly for a properly formal expression, “We decline your offer.”

The werewright nodded. “As you wish. I offer one more fact, which you may consider the remaining minutes until moonset.”

He turned slightly. In the same instant, metal cracked against stone within a yard of Cara’s right hand. Cara propelled herself backwards so quickly that she struck her head against one of the stones forming the walls of her hiding spot.

Kataro spoke sharply in his native tongue, as he half scrambled and half flew into the crack to join her.

“Whoa! What was -that-? Kataro, you ok?”

The seabird nodded. “I’m fine. That was a quarrel.” He tipped his head toward a thick metal-capped stick laying on the rocky surface a few yards away. “There.”

“Nice.” Cara eased down from her kneeling position, to sit heavily on the cold stone platform. She touched the back of her head gingerly.

“Bozo! We had a truce! Uh, what’s a quarrel? Looks like a little spear.”

“The bolt from a crossbow.” Kataro shook his head. “My fault. I should have considered that possibility. In neighboring lands, sorcerers sometimes arm their followers with crossbows. Not normally here, or so I have read. Werewright crossbows are very small but they have a greater range than the short werewright bow.”

“At least!” Cara responded fervently. “I can’t get over he broke our truce! I mean, technically, we were still talking.” Cara snorted. “Like it matters at this point. Kataro, what does the Shadow want with my stone anyway? I mean this guy would’ve let me go if I gave it up?”

“And if you’d given me over as a prisoner.”

“Believe me, I haven’t forgotten that!”

“If you think upon it for a moment, you will understand. Without my small protection and that of the Discerning Stone, you would be vulnerable. Much easier to kill or preferably subvert to their will.”

“Wait! He, Zabnar, offered me my freedom in exchange for you and the stone. So for some reason they want-”

“Lady Cara, they want the stone and they want you dead!” He added gently, “Little chick, you do see the werewright would never have honored that agreement, had you assented to it?”

Cara put her hands over her eyes and cheeks for a moment. Dropping her hands, she protested, “No, that can’t be right.” She drew a deliberate breath and went on firmly, “He promised-”

His voice edged with anger, Kataro interrupted, “He lied! Those of the Shadow are treacherous.”

“I know, but ... Okay, forget it. They have that crossbow. Maybe more than one. And, I’d guess the moon’s going to set in an hour.”

“A half hour. Less. But help may be coming-”

“You said they couldn’t be that close!”

Kataro made no response.

She reached out and touched Kataro’s closest wing. “Sorry. I know it doesn’t sound like it but I’m really trying not to lose it. Really. Maybe, we could talk them into just taking the stone and leaving. I don’t want to give it up but if they swore or something, and if you could check to see if they really-”

Kataro shook his head firmly. Cara opened her mouth and closed it—she was out of arguments and even rationalizations. Time passed. Close beside her, Kataro uttered soft high-pitched sounds in his own tongue.

The lower hook of the moon slipped out of sight behind the tops of the trees downstream. A few minutes more, and the dim light from the crescent’s upper portion flickered into and out of darkness as new leaves moved in a gentle breeze. The fog was seeping through the trees, creeping toward the water’s edge. It slowed. Stopped. River water flowed past its padded feet.

Cara whispered, “Question. If they don’t ever tell the truth, why even bother to negotiate? They must tell the truth sometimes or people-”

Kataro broke off his quiet sounds to answer her, “People, the Three Peoples, and Outworlders sometimes choose to believe things they find comfortable. Or,” he shrugged with a rustle of feathers and went on, “we wish for things so strongly that we refuse to see the truth. Do things which, examined dispassionately, obviously are not to our good. I had meant to tell you about Thaddis. It would have helped you understand Daetaga treachery better. Not just Daetaga-”

“Kataro! The moon’s set!”

“Be calm, Little Chick. Draw out the Stone and think upon Alphasis.”

Cara kept staring at the hidden shore as she fumbled for her stone. Removing it from around her neck, she wrapped the chain across her left wrist and drew the two ends across her palm. She made a fist. The stone dangled only about six inches from her closed hand. Not much of a weapon but she was less likely to lose it if she gripped it like this.

That done, she asked, “How can I think about Alphasis when I’ve never met him?”

“Try, Cara. Think on the stories we’ve told you--like Alphasis’ destruction of the Bastion. You walked right through its ruins.”

The stone in one hand and the knife in the other, Cara tried to do what he said. However, the shore commanded all her attention—not as it appeared but as she envisioned it would at any moment.

Kataro stood just inside the opening, between Cara and the riverbank. She could hear him speaking quietly in a strange high-pitched tongue.

For what felt like hours, Cara peered between one feathered shoulder and the cracked edge of their refuge. No movement. No sounds, besides Kataro and the river.

But something. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a face in the fog. She turned toward it but it was gone as suddenly as it came, only to reappear elsewhere again and again.

The Discerning Stone swayed by its chain—reflecting the trembling of her hand or offering its power? *No. I’m not going to use it. I know what I’ll see.*

Strange cries came from the shore: sometimes a wordless wailing, at other times a clamor for revenge and destruction. The sorcery of Zabnar.

She closed her eyes and slipped back to the dim memories of her pain right after she was wounded. The details of her sickness remained blurred and chaotic but she knew Zabnar had the power to make them distinct as though it all were happening again. He could make it permanent, too. Shut her up in a stone with nothing but her agony and his gloating.

The voices would draw closer, shutting out all other sounds--swirling around her, while nightmare faces looked on as they remembered their own ancient entrapment. Bestial faces crying out in glee to see her

immobile with terror. Tortured faces crying out warnings nearly masked by their own shrieks of hopeless agony. Then his face, Zabnar's, gloating and cruel. His many hands springing from the masking cloak--reaching out not toward her but past her as he gripped the stone wall itself and wrapped her in its death-cold embrace. Her last sight would be his face, as fluid stone edge met edge, as they froze and locked themselves tight together. Blackness. Paralysis. Despair.

The pain began. Sickness and terror followed it, ready to claim whatever shreds remained. The time she'd fallen from her tricycle, her hand burned on the casserole dish. Already these served as mere background to the pain of her appendix. Her chin was cut. Her feet, but she had to keep running! Blue glittering light sped toward her, blossoming into the sting of ripped flesh. She was so sick. Her fingers hurt so she wanted to rip them off. Someone laughed as the tricycle tipped over and the hard pavement rushed up and hit her knee. She cried out but couldn't hear herself for the sobs and taunts and whimpers around her.

"Cara! Think on Alphasis as I told you!"

She jumped and glanced guiltily toward Kataro but he was studying the shore, not her. Swallowing down a wave of horror, she stared at the shore as well. The voices still shrieked and gibbered and groaned. *How many has he trapped? How can I possibly escape where so many others failed? No. I have to stop this!*

Cara forced her gaze from the shore to the dim form of the seabird, remembering his order. *How can I think about Alphasis? I don't know anything about him.* Cara shook her head. Not true. She knew about him through others. The expression on Kataro's face when he had greeted her. Cona and Hythe, and Lady Clepta. Three races, all with different faces, all with the same assurance—a kind of calm focus. That was the other thing they had in common.

They had all helped her or tried to, even though she was a stranger, even though she'd kept insisting she had no intention of helping them. They had taken terrible risks to do it, too. Especially Kataro—and Hythe who had dared open the mill door with the Fenroi only yards away. Then there were the ones Kataro said might be coming to help them, who might be out there right now fighting their way toward the river.

They'd all helped and they'd all spoken of Alphasis. Kataro said his responsibility was to Alphasis, Clepta kept talking about doing things if it were Alphasis' will, Hythe and Cona talking about the joy of living on the Isle from which he apparently reigned. Quite a contrast to those who didn't speak his name. Who hadn't even once-

Unwillingly she followed Kataro's steady gaze back toward the shore. The strange faces in the mist were fading, disappearing one by one. She stared about her carefully. *Not one face now. No movement at all. No eerie voices. Those ought to be a good signs unless Zabnar and his homies have decided on a different approach—one involving crossbows for instance.*

Was the fog thinning? It was impossible to say objectively. It could be imagination or wishful thinking. No movement and no faces. However, faint sounds in the distance and a clanging sound. Swords? She thought she heard a scream, inhuman but not like the Zabnar voices earlier. She strained to listen. Fighting. Definitely, sword fighting. Those were human voices crying out in defiance. The sounds faded; had Zabnar and his werewrights beaten back their attack?

Kataro leaped from his perch and began flying rapidly toward the clearing shore. He called back, "Cara, wait here!"

"No! I'm coming!"

"All's well, I think. Stay there!"

Cara stood and stared at the place in the mists into which Kataro had disappeared. She couldn't be sure, but she thought she could make out shapes amongst the trees. One, no, several of them were white... Seabirds! Cara scrambled from the crevice and worked her way down to the lower platform of the bridge. She stared briefly toward the shore, and then splashed into the water.

By the time she reached the bank, seabirds were speeding past along the tree line. From their fierce hawk-like cries, they were chasing the last remnants of the werewrights. Cara climbed toward the bank's crest. She caught a brief glimpse of scattered torch lights flickering somewhere deep in the forest, and then a moving shape blotted out the light.

He was racing almost directly toward her, skirting the very top of the embankment as he glanced over his shoulder. Cara caught the dim gleam of a blade, then something worse--the stench of rot borne on the wings of frantic hisses. Cara crouched to avoid being seen but the werewright changed direction and began scrambling down the slope. Crouching wouldn't help now. Staying as low as she could, Cara propelled herself forward, her arms crossed and braced to strike the werewright's shins.

He saw her a moment before stumbling into her. She heard the swish of his blade. Powerful shins struck her forearms with the unyielding force of logs.

Cara tumbled over backwards, flailing wildly in an effort to slow her fall. One hand closed on rough cloth. A glancing contact with something metallic stung the fingertips of her other hand. Then blows rained on her from every direction--the muddy slope, the arms and legs of the werewright--which blow came from which was impossible to tell in the seconds that lasted an hour.

Somewhere in the frantic plunge down the slope, Cara heard herself and the werewright both cry out in a duet of pain and horror. She saw metal spin through the air and quailed at the thought of landing on the blade.

She wasn't moving. Her head was underwater. She got her bruised arms under her body and lifted her upper torso until her nose and mouth rose into the air. Shrieking bored into her ears like twin knives. The sword lay only a foot away from her, half in the water and half out. She stared in horror at the toothed edges and scrambled away from it, still on hands and knees.

The scream altered to frustrated grunts and labored breathing. Just a few feet away, the werewright was fighting its way toward dry ground. Cara staggered to her feet. She looked from the approaching warrior to his half-submerged sword and knew what she needed to do.

She grabbed up the blade, startled by the weight of her lethal burden and spun toward her approaching foe, lashing out and missing. Metal flashed as the werewright unsheathed two daggers. Cara wrapped her left hand about her right and, taking a great breath, struck out again. Her thrust came to a quivering stop. The werewright pulled back and growled.

She had no chance to try again. One of the returning seabirds was already striking at him, forcing him back into the river from which he'd just escaped. Cara turned away and stumbled back up the slope, wishing she could shut out the shrieks of agony behind her. The stained sword was still in her hand. She dropped it as if it were glowing hot from the forge.

Cara stared at the glimmers of seabirds as they settled in nearby trees and watched numbly as the torch light grew from a scattering of distant flickers to one large cluster of warm light. Cara drew one slow breath and then another, her arms held tight against her body in an effort to keep from shivering. Nothing from the last few minutes felt real. She focused on the perching seabirds and made herself try to guess which one was Kataro. Why hadn't he flown directly back to her to tell her what happened?

Cara kept walking. Just as she reached the tree line, a flash of white sprang from the direction of the torches and raced her way. She was about to duck, when Kataro changed direction and began flying in circles around her head. Hair swirled into her eyes too fast for her hands to shove it back. A rapid stream of screeches, whale-like calls and clicks assaulted her ears.

Cara laughed in spite of herself. "Kataro, stop it! I can't see where I'm going. And you're speaking in Seabirdese."

With a final flourish, he swept up to her and attempted to rest one claw on the wrist of her outstretched arm. It dipped from the sudden weight. He let go at once and hovered before her, generating a steady breeze that swept her hair back in place.

"You are heavy! What gives?" Her voice sounded strange in her own ears, suggesting a calm she definitely didn't feel.

"A good friend of mine, Kalapa there on the branch, guessed we would take refuge here. She gathered everyone she could to aid us."

Cara turned in the direction he indicated. Kalapa dropped to a lower branch to salute Cara with the head-bob and half-spread wings characteristic of her people.

"Hail, Cara, Outworlder and friend of friend."

"Hail, Kalapa. How did you find us?"

"I observed that a band of the Shadow tracked prey. Some waited at the Abandoned Bridge while others rode east and then to the bridge as if they drove their quarry toward a trap. I had seen members of both the Sword and Scroll as I flew west so I went back and alerted them. We were fortunate that the werewrights waited until the dark of the moon to attack, since that gave us time to reach you."

"Thanks, Kalapa! You saved my life. Our lives."

She had said that three times in about a week. Four times if she included the help of the other seabird at the river edge. Was her only contribution to this world destined to be giving others a chance to save her? The "chances" were coming far too frequently. Cara shuddered. *All it will take will be one missed chance, and that's all she wrote*.

Kataro explained most of the rescue party had pursued Zabnar and the bulk of his werewrights until satisfied that they wouldn't return that night. Cara nodded in response to his words but she was more interested in learning who made up the Peralike part of the team. Did they have a wizard with them?

The mounted members of the group had gathered in a clearing some thirty yards away, their presence marked by the welcome warmth of a dozen torches. Some—clad in mail, white surcotes and crimson capes—took leave of an Elder in a dark tunic and trousers. Holding their swords straight up, they touched the flats of the blades to their foreheads. He returned their gesture with a nod and his palms pressed to his chest. The ones in armor turned away and rode into the dark trees, carrying half the torchlight with them.

The remaining members of the party turned about and rode toward her. Two seabirds rose from nearby branches as the group passed, to fly above them. All five of the remaining Peralike carried torches. All of them had swords, and a couple had bows. The other four wore rough work clothes like their leader.

The man in the lead was same one whom the departing warriors had saluted. Why didn't he have a red cape like them? Why did they separate? The light from the torch he carried revealed dark hair, a trimmed beard and a powerful build. Cara's mind dutifully absorbed that much before he rode close enough to make out details of his face. Then, wonder bordering on terror overwhelmed her.

About the leader, barely cloaked, was a presence like nothing she had ever experienced. She had no words for it or, at least, her thoughts were unable to form the necessary words. Cara froze and just stared—wishing him far away, wishing at the same time that he draw near. He drew nearer but the powerful presence that overwhelmed her faded with his approach. By the time he was close enough for her to make out details of his features, conflicting urges to run, kneel and hide had faded to impulses she could manage.

His hair and beard were both touched with gray, his weathered face stern with the expression of one used to commanding others. Language returned bringing, with its presence, words that made no sense. *The eyes of eagles*. Cara shook her head but the words persisted, seeming to fit the expression she read on the Elder's face. Cara felt she could have watched him forever if she could just get over the accompanying awe. He dismounted with the others and led them toward her. She stood still and forced what she hoped was a grateful smile. He was, after all, one of her rescuers.

"Lady Cara Outworlder, greeting." The words rumbled from him. Surrendering his torch to the man closest to him, he gave her a slight bow with his hands crossed on his chest and his fingers spread. As he straightened, his brown eyes studied her curiously. She caught a hint of a smile in the searching gaze, muted by an even greater hint of fatigue.

Cara opened her mouth but nothing came out. She barely managed to match his half bow with one of her own. This was far worse than when Kataro had greeted her for the first time.

"You are unhurt?" the leader asked gently.

That helped. Cara managed an uncharacteristically soft, "I'm fine, uh ..."

The Elder favored her with a chagrined smile. "Pardon, my lady! My name is Halprin."

Cara gaped at Halprin for a moment, finding the smile and his humble words equally surreal. She gasped, "No, it's okay! Thanks for the help!"

Halprin nodded. "I thank you for yours, my lady, on behalf of the Order and all of Tethra." He turned slightly to his left, adding, "This is Lord Hathel, physician, enchanter and good friend."

Cara turned to the Elder at Halprin's side as the two transferred care of the torches. Dressed like the other man, he was shorter and more slender, with brown hair graying at his temples and in his moustache. Like his

companion, his long hair was tied back with a bit of leather, and he too was drenched with sweat and spattered with the dark green blood of werewrights.

Cara held out one hand then switched hurriedly to Halprin's crossed hands and bow. She was relieved she remembered the gesture before looking into the physician's brown eyes. They were filled with the same daunting gaze as Halprin's though it was fading too.

Lord Hathel returned her bow and added a warm if weary smile.

Better. Cara smiled back. "Hello! I mean, greeting!"

Hathel introduced her to the other Elders--two men and a woman--and to the two remaining seabirds. Cara felt like she was some kind of dignitary being handed down a reception line. Then, it struck her that she was--from their point of view at any rate. The introductions complete, Cara's rescuers all faced her expectantly. Waiting for orders?

"Excuse me!" Cara turned toward Kataro. "Want to help me find the pony?" *Say yes! I have to find out why I freak when those two look at me.*

The woman Hathel had introduced as Gedra responded, "We'll find it."

Cara glanced back and shook her head, "It's okay. Kataro seems to have a ... a way with ponies." She turned back toward the seabird, with a look of entreaty on her face.

"My lady, please remain here! We will find it," Gedra insisted.

Three of the Elders and the other three seabirds broke into groups and started back through the trees. Hathel and Halprin stayed close but started talking to each other, their expressions grave. Cara drew a relieved breath at even such a small reprieve.

"Little Chick?"

Cara grimaced at the seabird's bewildered expression. She murmured, "Sorry! I just ... Look, who are those guys?" She pointed circumspectly toward Halprin and Hathel.

"Why, Lord Halprin and ... Oh!" Kataro voiced a muted laugh, and flew to a closer branch. "Enchanters, little one." he whispered. "Lord Halprin is leader of the Order of the Scroll, the Tethran enchanters. We're very lucky he led the rescue party. He was undoubtedly the one who put Zabnar to flight. That's not an easy accomplishment even with a patrol of the Sword backing him. And, as you heard, Lord Hathel is also an enchanter and his friend."

"Okay. Are all enchanters ..." Cara nodded to complete the sentence, since no words seemed fit to do so.

"Yes." Kataro studied her face with care. After a moment's thought, he added, "Interesting. You must be sensing their semblances. Perhaps, the Discerning Stone--"

Kataro glanced past her into the trees. "We'll speak later. They found the pony and you will need to mount at once. Lord Halprin will want us to get well away from here before we can camp and rest."

Resting. Sleeping. Cara yawned as if from his words. Fatigue and pain consumed the last traces of awe and of horror. "I've been so scared for so long, I'd forgotten how tired I was. It must be terribly late. Early! I hope we're sleeping in tomorrow morning? This morning."

"Sleeping in? In what? Cara, you know there are no houses around here."

Cara laughed and tried to explain as she walked to the pony.

12-Detours and Destinations

The campsite was so quiet when Cara awoke that she imagined herself alone. The fleeting thought worked like an alarm clock--she struggled free of the blanket and sat up. Kalapa and Kataro were perched on the branch of a tree a few yards away, awake but not speaking. The two enchanters sat cross-legged on the opposite side of the fire with their heads bowed and their hoods nearly covering their faces. Two of the warriors were at opposite edges of the camp, each with a bow across his lap and a quiver of arrows close by. The one woman warrior sat by the fire, rubbing a foot-long knife with a cloth.

Cara stood and stretched, making more noise in the process than everyone else combined. The morning breeze chilled her with its dank air. As she gathered the borrowed blanket about her, she looked at her ripped and mud-splattered clothes in dismay. Sometimes the lack of a mirror was an advantage.

She walked over to the seabirds' tree and called up, "Morning! Do you think it's safe for me to go wash up a little at the river edge?"

Kataro answered softly. "Eat first. Gedra needs to put out the fire and finish stowing equipment. But quietly, Little Chick."

"Why?" Cara whispered, "Did someone see werewrights?"

Kataro shook his head. "All is well. Kalapa and I checked less than an hour ago. But the enchanters are in the midst of their morning prayer and meditation."

Cara sauntered from the tree in a curve planned to bring her back to the fire facing the meditating enchanters. She stooped to pick up a slender branch just beyond the fire circle and simultaneously lifted her head to peer under the edges of the enchanters' hoods. They both stared into the flames, eyes open and unblinking. Their expressions evoked an echo of the wonder and fear that gripped her the previous night, and her maneuver suddenly felt presumptuous. It hadn't been imagination. Better if it had. She straightened, and hurried over to Gedra, leaving the branch behind.

The woman looked up and smiled without stopping her knife polishing. She indicated the nearly empty pot of boiled grain by the edge of the fire with a nod that set her vertical comb of a dozen blonde braids swinging like the mane of a horse.

Cara studied the warrior out of the corner of her eye as she dished up the last of the cereal into a small tin bowl. Most of the Elders she had seen so far were dark-haired. The exceptions were Bran, and two of Halprin's warriors--Lamar and Gedra.

Gedra was exceptional in other ways as well. A thin scar began on her left cheek, passed through a badly mended ear, then served as a handy division for two of her braids. A leather and metal contraption gathered the braids into a stiff column. Translucent gray hooks, possibly werewright knuckle claws, ornamented the ends of each braid.

Gedra wore trousers like the men but shaped and stiffened leather protected her from neck to waist in front and fastened in the back with four wide straps of leather. Besides the knife, she bore a sword even more massive than the one Cara had handled briefly. Her bare arms testified she had no trouble wielding it.

Cara took a drink from the water skin and stood up. She felt a kind of awe for the woman though not of the same kind she felt when she looked at the enchanters. The cereal dish tasted the same as that served by Cona but the company was radically different. How was she going to manage riding all day surrounded by two enchanters and such deadly looking warriors? She couldn't envision starting a conversation with any of them.

On the other hand, it wouldn't hurt to make the attempt while she actually had something of consequence to say. First clearing her throat as softly as she could, Cara made herself speak brightly, "Gedra, right?"

The cloth-wielding hand stopped, and the woman smiled. "Yes, my lady."

"Just Cara, please. You call me 'my lady' and I'll start looking around for some woman in a tiara."

Gedra's smile broadened into a grin. "I have orders to the contrary, but thank you. Was there something you wanted of me?" She thrust the knife into its sheath and made as if to stand.

Cara wondered if she expected an order that involved going off and killing something. Feeling like she'd awakened a hibernating bear, Cara responded hastily, "Oh, nothing. I just wanted to say I'll take the bowl and stuff down to the river with me and wash them along with myself." She glanced down, adding, "Well, best as I can anyway."

"You'll need this then. I'll want it back." Gedra groped about in a leather satchel. Cara was tempted to explain that she already had a knife, but the woman drew out a rough wooden box and handed it to her. Cara took it with some perplexity, and opened it, to reveal a block of pale yellow almost as big as the inside of the box.

"Soap," Gedra explained.

"Thanks!" As Cara turned toward the river, Gedra called out, "Food implements first. Timor!"

At her call, the dark-haired warrior closest to the stream stood and beckoned her. Followed more closely by the man than she wished, Cara walked toward the riverbank. At least, Timor stayed up on the edge of the bank as she scrambled down the slope to the water's edge.

Everyone else had mounted and was waiting when Cara and Timor returned from the river. Lords Halprin and Hathel greeted her with nods and their hands crossed on their chests. As soon as she mounted the pony, the enchanters led the way through the trees. Cara followed behind them by a few feet, with the two seabirds flanking her. The warriors took up positions in the rear. Occasionally, one or both of the seabirds would leave briefly to survey the area at Halprin's request. When that happened, one of the other Peralike always took their place by Cara's side until the seabird returned.

No one said very much at first but the journey proved less unsettling than Cara had feared. Kalapa proved to be nearly as good a companion as Kataro was but she spent so much time naming the plants they passed, Cara felt like she was supposed to be taking notes.

When the warriors spoke to her, they were deferential but friendly. They talked in soft tones from time to time, mostly about weapon practice, equipment and horses. Sometimes one would share a terse anecdote, laden with cryptic references. Lulled by the sounds, Cara dreaded to hear one or another voice a short "huh". The signal would be followed by tense silence and subtle gestures as the warriors stared about them.

The two enchanters were also quiet and they spent most of their time with their backs toward her. She wondered if they also stared through the trees without blinking.

They had been on the road for about four hours when Halprin turned in his saddle and called back, "Twenty minutes."

As she dismounted, Kataro called down, "Kalapa and I will be back, Little Chick."

Regretfully, Cara watched them fly through the trees. The Peralike were friendly but she would have preferred to have "lunched" with Kataro, as they had done the previous day.

That was only a day ago! A lot has sure happened. She shook her head. *A lot seems to keep happening.*

Two of the Peralike passed close beside her on their way toward one of the larger trees. She followed after, wondering if this lunch could prove worse than raw fish or mashed seedpods.

As she looked for a place to sit near the people in front of her, she noticed that one was Lord Hathel. She stood where she was uncertainly. Hathel helped the other man remove his tunic, revealing a blood-spotted bandage. She hadn't thought about anyone being injured during their rescue from Zabnar. Were other bandaged wounds hidden within the group? When Hathel began to loosen the bandage, Cara turned away.

"My lady."

Cara came back from her sober musing to find she had almost walked into Halprin. He studied her quizzically, but she sensed no trace of the awe-inspiring presence about him. *This could be as good a time as any to talk with him. I survived Gedra. Besides, I have to ask if other people got hurt. I have to start dealing with being in a war zone with a bunch of soldiers.*

"Halprin? How bad's he hurt? Did it happen last night?"

The enchanter glanced toward the two under the tree in concern. "Yes, Timor was wounded last night. It's not life-threatening." He gestured toward their horses, adding, "Come eat before we start again."

Cara studied the enchanter's face as they walked over to his horse. *He's upset. Wonder why.* He handed her a bit of dried fish from a canvas bag, then tore a piece of pita-like bread in two and gave her half. *Well, so long as I've got my mouth open...*

"I'm sorry Timor was wounded. I didn't realize, I mean I should have realized some of you guys might get hurt chasing off Zabnar and the werewrights. I hope no one else was." She stopped scraping crumbs off the bread and looked up. "It's my fault. If I'd kept to the original path, this wouldn't have happened."

Lord Halprin smiled. He gestured toward a massive fallen log, the color of wild violets. "Come sit a moment."

They settled on the log, scattering an orderly line of beetles in the process. Halprin continued, "Thank you, my lady, for your concern but remember that a werewright wounded Timor, not you. In fact, Timor might have remained uninjured, had we worn mail." Halprin took a drink from his water skin and handed it to Cara, then stretched out his legs. "The decision to travel unarmored was mine."

"Still, I feel-"

Halprin shook his head. "It is the life we have chosen. We are honored to help you as we are honored to do all things our lord requires of us. What we do, under the Obedience, is as nothing compared to what Alphasis has done for us. Or, for that matter, what you as an Outworlder will do for a world which is not your own."

Cara said half to herself, "Wonder what that'll be anyway."

"So do I."

Cara glanced up at the enchanter in surprise. "You don't know? I figured you would."

Halprin laughed ruefully, the fine creases of laugh-lines showing themselves for the first time. "Oh, I have theories but, alas, too many of them."

Reaching within a flat container he had brought over with him, he removed another piece of bread. Tearing it like the first piece, he offered Cara half.

"Thanks. We have something like this at home. This is a lot better than Young One bread!"

"So you've had teintree meal cakes then?" Halprin shook his head. "Terrible stuff! Bitter. I can barely get it down even with a great deal of water."

Cara grinned in spite of herself. "Hey, me too!"

Halprin responded, "The wonders of our many worlds will never cease to amaze. Who would have guessed that an Outworlder and I would have the same taste in bread?"

He glanced back the way they had come. Hathel and Timor were approaching. Timor's tunic and sword belt were back in place, and he was in the process of reattaching his cape at the neck. Only the stained tear in his tunic hinted he had been wounded. Hathel looked tired though he hadn't appeared to be earlier. Fatigue from performing his duties as healer?

"The seabirds are returning." Halprin pointed to two white shapes racing toward them through the treetops. "Time to start again." He took a step away from Cara, and then turned. "Forgive me, my lady! How is your own wound?"

Cara smiled. "Uh, non-life-threatening."

Halprin shook his head. "My lady, if there's pain—"

Cara interrupted. "It aches but, really, I'll live." She added, much to her own astonishment, "Thanks for lunch!"

Halprin smiled and nodded then turned to mount his horse. Cara stared at him a moment as he spoke to the seabirds. *Who'd a thought!* Shaking her head in bemusement, she carefully mounted as well.

Kataro flew to her as soon as he finished reporting to the enchanter. Before he could say anything, Cara heard Lamar protesting, "My lord, shouldn't someone stay here with the Outworlder while the rest of us investigate?" Halprin shook his head but Kataro's greeting drowned out the words of his response.

"Little chick, there is a situation we must deal with before we can continue our journey."

"Not Zabnar!" Cara's thoughts burst from her lips.

The seabird shook his head. "Possibly but we didn't see him. Kalapa saw several noika, serpent-hawks used by the Shadow as spies. They're clustered about a burning cottage not far south of us, so marauding werewrights likely started the fire."

"Some of Zabnar's crew, huh? So we've got to go check it out?"

"Sadly, we have no choice. It would be wise to avoid the noika, but circumstances won't permit."

"Circumstances?" Cara asked uneasily. Already sure of his answer, she added, "They killed the people who lived there, didn't they?"

Kataro answered grimly, "All but one, Halprin believes. Like you, he has a Discerning Stone and he used it when Kalapa gave her report. He believes there may be a survivor, perhaps a child that the werewrights overlooked and that the serpent-hawks have yet to—" The seabird stopped speaking abruptly.

Cara nodded. "Gotcha."

Before the seabird could continue his explanation, she urged her pony forward until she rode behind the enchanters. About twenty minutes later, they led everyone off the path and into the forest. As they worked their way through the trees and dense underbrush, Hathel observed, "This could well be a trap. With the Sword patrol and the other seabirds gone to warn the closest settlers—"

"I know." Halprin shrugged. "It makes no matter. A young Pera is alive inside that cabin, a child or perhaps a baby."

"You couldn't get a good look?"

Halprin shook his head. "Too much in the shadows, no matter which way I approached it but the details don't matter. My concern--the seabirds will be outnumbered, and I doubt anyone will get a clear shot through the trees. Do you know the *napha d'ar nei*?"

Hathel grunted. "It's been a while. You mean the more recent Latimin version, after evoking full spectrum, hand dextrous?"

Cara made a face as the conversation between the enchanters became incomprehensible between one word and the next. Warriors flanked her. The seabirds were leading the way, just as Kataro had done yesterday. He glanced back--but not at her--evidently asking Halprin a question. She dropped the hand she had half-lifted to wave at him. Struck with the knowledge that he was about to fly into deadly combat against foes that outnumbered them, she whispered, "Alphesis," then stopped. She couldn't think what to say next.

To whom was she talking? A myth, a long-lived person or seabird miles away on an island, a Narentan mass delusion, some kind of god, or maybe an ordinary person posing as someone else like the Wizard of Oz? Who could be sure? Sandy's description of a murderous machine left by an alien race might be closest to reality. Kataro or the others would have to do their own praying or rubbing of lucky talismans. Kataro the college professor. Had he ever been in a fight until a few days ago?

They worked their way through close-packed trees for some twenty minutes more before Halprin motioned them to a halt. Cara caught a whiff of acrid smoke as they dismounted and then began creeping through the underbrush. She wrapped the end of the Discerning Stone's chain tight about her left wrist. Before she could draw her knife, Gedra glanced toward her and motioned for her not to.

Fragments of sunlight flickered in a clearing just yards ahead. The enchanters slipped through the last of the trees, each with a seabird perched precariously on an outstretched arm. They crept a bit to Cara's left, then further forward. Stopping, Halprin nodded. The seabirds lifted into the air as silently as the first flakes of a snowfall. A few paces behind the two enchanters, Lamar had strung his bow and was readying an arrow.

Gedra and Timor motioned for Cara to crouch. She did so, but used the opportunity to take a couple of paces forward first. She wanted a glimpse of what would happen and had decided that her bodyguards would just have to deal with that. As she settled into her chosen hiding place, a heavy hand rested on her right shoulder. She glanced up, expecting a frown of disapproval from someone but Gedra was looking forward and she couldn't see her expression. Timor had settled on Cara's other side, one hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword.

Cara caught a movement just ahead. A signal? Chaotic motion and sound answered the question. Two white blurs plummeted into the clearing--seabirds screeching defiance. Several dark streaks swept up out of the smoke toward them, revealing jagged blood-red beaks, the blur of dark wings and coils of long dark tails. Just as claw swept toward claw, and heavy beaks struck out, a duet of strange words sang together like chimes. Both enchanters gestured as one.

Cara blinked instinctively as if to brilliant light and felt a tickling on her skin rather like goose bumps.

Two dark objects dropped like stones from the sky, one bouncing off a branch in its plunge earthward. Vying hawk-like cries echoed through the trees accompanied by the twang of a bowstring and the hiss of an arrow in flight. A fluttering welter of white and black feathers plunged through a streak of sunlight and dropped out of sight behind the top branches of a bush just within the clearing. A cry of avian fury rose into a shriek of pain.

Cara heard curses and the ring of steel as Timor and Gedra drew their swords. Something dark flew directly at her but Cara ducked a second too late. The serpent-hawk gripped a claw full of hair as it skimmed over her then yanked viciously. Her head snapping back, she fell over backwards. Steel flashed above her. A spray of hot liquid burned the left side of her face. Blood-red claws and darkness swooped out of the sky. She swung the stone in its general direction.

She rolled to one side and scrambled back to a crouch. Her left eye was stinging and watering but she caught a glimpse of Timor slicing through the wing of a second serpent-hawk. It spun crazily to the ground, then leaped into the air. With one hand to her eye, Cara struck out again. This time she felt the recoil of the stone as it bounced away from the creature. Gedra's blade swept down and pinned the writhing body to the sodden leaf-encrusted ground.

All was silence. Cara's protectors rose on either side of her, and she followed. Her hands and legs trembled, and remnants of blood blurred her vision. Smoke drifted into her lungs and she coughed. Her blood vessels or her nerves were itching just below the surface of her skin. Stamping her feet and arching her back in response to the strange sensation, Cara watched as warriors and enchanters converged cautiously on the smoke-enshrouded clearing.

Before joining them, Cara paused to get a better look at the noika. Aside from the beak and claws, it was dark as a tarred road with a sheen of spilled gasoline on its surface. Forked at the end, the tail was unnaturally long and flexible. Cara's eyes refocused on the shape. Not a tail. Not really. The dead bird looked more like a feathered serpent, the long but powerful body armored with scales that superficially resembled feathers. The beak and claws were red because they were drenched in blood. She shuddered in disgust.

With a swift glance into the branch-laced sky and then behind her, she went after the others. Where were Kataro and Kalapa? Kataro she spotted almost at once. He was on the ground, alternately biting at, and then clawing at his left foot with the other. Alarmed at his distress, she ran to him and knelt.

"Kataro?" What's wrong?"

The gore-spattered seabird stopped his frenzied struggles with a sigh. "Cara! Good! Are you hurt?"

"I've got a bit of whip-lash, and the feeling that something's crawling around under my skin."

"Whip?" Kataro asked in astonishment then stared back towards the edge of the clearing.

"Not literally," Cara protested. "Never mind. Can I help?"

Kataro looked back toward her. "Please. I need you to yank out the loose pith under my third claw."

In response to Cara's questioning expression, he held up his left foot. "There. The soft part on the underside of my claw is bleeding. Its scales caught on my foot and cut into the under part of the claw. Only part way, though. The pith's still attached and I can't pull it free."

Cara stared at the damaged claw in horror, imagining a similar injury to one of her toes, but Kataro appeared more impatient than in pain. She reached down delicately with finger and thumb. The claw was three times as long as her thumbnail. The tapered spike protruding from under it was over an inch long and looked like it was still stubbornly attached. She gripped it and pulled as gently as she could.

The seabird gave a ragged gasp. His claws tightened, one scraping across her thumb.

"I'm sorry, Little Chick."

Cara let go. "My fault. I really was trying not to hurt you."

Kataro protested, "I appreciate your concern but I think you need to be ruthless instead. Think of it like a splinter."

She tried to do as he instructed but her fingertips lost their purchase on the skim of blood.

"No matter. It can wait until Hathel is free."

"No, I've got it." She reached for her knife. "I'll just turn my head when I start to puke." She pressed the knife tip to the base of the fragment, then gripped the pith hard and pulled it toward the blade. Her stomach roiled in warning. Kataro burst out with a sharp sound that might have been a seabird curse. The bloody claw shard came free, bringing with it a dangling bit of skin. Cara threw it down.

"Good job. Where's Kalapa?"

"I don't know," Cara started to answer but the seabird was already in the air and flying past her toward Hathel.

The enchanter knelt by a tangled mass of black, white and red. Cara remembered the tightly linked foes plummeting toward the ground, and dreaded getting a better look. She reached Hathel as he finished disentangling the dark body coiled about Kalapa. She was lying nearly on her back but her eyes were open and fixed on Kataro. She kicked impatiently at the dangling body before Hathel could toss it away. As soon as she was free of it, the seabird righted herself and spread her wings, giving them a tentative flap. Blood dripped from near one shoulder.

"Hello." She glanced toward Cara with a trace of a smile in her eyes.

Cara stifled a giggle, and answered as seriously as she could, "Hello? Do you mean 'greeting'?"

Before Kalapa could answer with more than a long-suffering roll of her eyes, Halprin approached. He glanced at the seabirds and herself, evidently taking note of their physical condition, then spoke to Hathel.

“As we suspected. The fire’s just smoldering.”

Hathel left off his ministrations of Kalapa’s upper wing, and stood up. “Zabnar’s ploy to get our attention?”

His expression grim, the other enchanter glanced about the clearing and nodded. “Yes. This was more than werewrights stopping for a meal or simple revenge. I’ll search the cabin.” He gestured as Hathel started to draw his sword. “No, stay here! Keep them together—he may have left a lingering spell. I’ll be right back.”

Halprin turned and walked swiftly toward the cottage door, indicating to the scattered warriors to remain where they were with a downward sweep of his hand. He paused just outside the door and murmured a few words then made a gesture with his left hand. The tingling under Cara’s skin returned and then faded. Halprin drew his sword and, opening the door slowly, he stepped into the darkness within.

Cara thought she heard the distressed squall of an infant. She glanced toward Hathel. “Sounds like it’s still alive. What’s a lingering spell?”

Hathel’s face was grim and his voice had an angry edge to it as he answered, “A spell we might trigger if we stray into the wrong place. Stay close!”

Sighing, the physician knelt once more. He probed gently at the joint between Kalapa’s shoulder and upper wing and he began murmuring. Soft chime-like sounds floated through the air, and light seemed to play across his face.

Cara trembled and looked down at her muddy boot tips. The tickling just under the surface of her skin faded--she didn’t remember when it started. She turned and focused on the activity around the cabin. The warriors had gathered the bodies of three humans together and were arguing over the wisdom of building a bonfire in such a wooded area. Cara stared sadly at the blood-drenched remains, then frowned and stared harder.

“They, they were disemboweled!” She choked out the words, afraid something else would follow the sounds up the length of her throat. Horror and unreality gripped her with icy fingers. She turned away.

Hathel nodded without glancing up from Kalapa. “Yes. Werewrights find internal organs easier to digest. Fingers seem to make ...”

His words faded. She staggered away from the others, knowing she was about to vomit but hoping not to make a scene ...

“Lady Cara!”

Her hands shaking, her breaths quick pants between the stabs of agony, Cara yanked at her tortured fingers. Blackness surrounded her. Jeers echoed in her ears. Pain filled her, throbbing out from the marrow of her bones. She yanked desperately at her thumb, but it wouldn’t rip free.

Strange words echoed down the length of a light-filled tunnel. Cara blinked and tried to focus on the bright kaleidoscope bobbing toward her. The colors shifted and Hathel’s face flickered into view, framed by patches of orange-leafed sunlight. He was asking her a question.

She opened her mouth to answer and saw Halprin leaning toward her as well. Iron fingers probed at her larynx. A leaden hand forced air rhythmically from her lungs. Words, in a voice not her own, sounded through her open lips, “Greeting, commander.”

The anger smoldering on Halprin’s face burst into the flame of fury. Cara cringed away from it. She gripped Hathel’s arm and she struggled to her feet. The nausea had passed, likewise the desperate need to yank off her fingers. The two words she had been forced to speak overlaid each other in endless echoes as they faded. She remembered that gloating tone--the voice in the nightmare.

“What?” Cara swallowed, and gripped the physician’s arm even more tightly. His free hand touched her forehead but he said nothing.

Halprin answered in the studied voice of someone trying desperately to control his emotions, “This was the rest of Zabnar’s message. He left the first part of it for me in the cabin. Are you uninjured?”

At Cara’s nod, Halprin continued, now addressing Hathel more than her, “It was a baby.” Hathel drew in a quick breath as he started to respond but Halprin gave him no chance. Fury edging every deliberate word, he added, “They cut it, then rubbed werewright blood into the wound. He knew we’d sense the life and come-”

“You’re sure it was deliberate?”

Halprin nodded. The rage fading into raw pain, he responded, “‘Zex’ cut into the child’s forehead. The executed werewright holding werebane in his claws. They were herbalists, you know—they collected such things.” He turned away, but Cara heard him mutter, “The werebane was only inches away from the baby.”

“Is it okay?” Cara started to ask, but the expression on Hathel’s face stopped her cold. Stifling a sob, Cara stared after Halprin as he strode toward his warriors.

As they rode toward the eastern edge of the forest, the gloomy silence broke at times into brief conversations. Most of these concerned words Lamar had overheard between the two enchanters. More of the Shadow—a large group or groups—rode somewhere behind them. Lamar said Hathel wanted to investigate, but Halprin forbade it because the numbers were too great and their first duty was the safety of the Outworlder.

Cara wondered in silence if Halprin feared finding another grisly booby-trap, but she rejected her theory. The enchanter’s concern for her safety reassured her even though she considered it effort wasted on the wrong person. Beyond that selfish reaction was its opposite—these people had been through enough since yesterday. They shouldn’t risk their lives to confirm something the enchanters already knew.

After the first half hour on the road, Halprin and Hathel began talking though they spoke even more rarely than usual. Did anyone besides them and herself know what had happened? She doubted it. Maybe they didn’t want his warriors or the seabirds to know about the gruesome message.

She marveled at Halprin’s composure. Whenever he glanced back, calm masked any remaining rage, a calm that puzzled her yet soothed her. It hurt her heart to think of what had Zabnar had done solely to torment his enemy. Halprin had raged at the sorcerer’s brutal act but somehow he was able to deny Zabnar any lasting hold on him. The words, “the eyes of eagles” still whispered to her—she still couldn’t remember where she had heard them.

They traveled with no more stops until they reached the edge of the wood lining the Sweetwater’s southern bank. As they rode free of the last trees, the ground beneath their horses’ hooves was still in shadow while, ahead, golden-orange from the setting sun shown on every nearby plant and shrub and outlying tree. Its light glowed too on distant crofts and cottages, giving the illusion they were crafted of flame.

The company urged their horses to a faster pace. Soon they were approaching a small village along a rutted path through neat rectangles of plowed earth separated by crumbling stone walls less than a yard high.

Many of the scattered workers were plowing or casting seed. Those who glanced over at their passing stopped work and stared. Most of the laborers were too far away to recognize their visitors so Cara decided any group of horsemen riding out of the forest must be rare. Had the other fighters from last night ridden through here earlier? They passed through the opening in a stockade wall constructed of upright stakes rising from pale bricks.

Cara found herself surprised by the unpainted buildings, thatched with brushwood, turf or both. Livestock wandered everywhere. They drew rein and waited for two shepherds and several dogs to drive the rest of their flock into a partially roofed enclosure then clattered past what must have been an open-air market. To Cara’s disappointment, it was deserted.

Their path was still the same dirt track they had followed through the fields, except for the dubious addition of several types of animal dung dissolving into the mud. The far wall of the stockade peeked from between buildings up ahead. To their left, a wider road entered the village through a second gate, and then crossed their path. As they approached the crossing, Cara looked up the road. It boasted an occasional stone along one edge. Perhaps three people walked toward them in the distance, one leading a large animal that might be a horse.

Rush hour traffic. What did I expect after seeing horses and swords and so on all these days?

Ahead stood a large building from which hung the sign of The Burning Tree. As they rode into its muddy courtyard, the horses scattered fowl to left and right. Like most of the smaller buildings, the two-floor inn was built of wood. Its walls gave little indication they had ever been painted, with the exception of a whitewashed patch surrounding the main door.

Halprin and Hathel turned left, leading them right past the inn door and through a gate in a high fence. Several dogs snarled at them, until the hostler came out of the stables to their right. “Ho, Figh and Bluthe! Don’t be scaring away the paying guests now! Posha! Back!” He strode forward as though to strike the dog that sat

bristling in front of Cara's nervous pony. Posha, seeing him coming, whined as if she had really been struck and disappeared after the others into the stable. Cara laughed.

Halprin dismounted at once. Drawing off his leather gloves, he folded his hands on his breast in the traditional greeting. Reverence in his eyes, the hostler bowed.

"Commander Halprin, we are most honored! What brings you so far north?"

"Ill news and an Outworlder, Thelbis. The archon?"

"Within, talking to the goodman."

Halprin nodded. "I've news for him. Six mounts. Send the boy to say we need lodging for six, plus two of the Chosen."

Thelbis glanced at a lad who stood nearby and the boy ran off toward the inn door.

Halprin continued, "We'll need the horses to be ready an hour after dawn."

"I'd wager you're riding to the Isle."

Lord Halprin smiled. "Then you would win. Come within when time permits. I'll tell you what I may."

Cara and the rest of the company dismounted and followed Halprin up the shallow brick steps to the broad open door. Each enchanter and warrior ahead of her paused before entering and did something that made a scraping sound.

When she reached the same step, Lamar pointed to a vertical cast iron grid bolted to one side, surrounded by chunks of muddy dirt and trodden plants. "Boot-scraper."

She dutifully scraped what she could off the bottoms of Hythe's old boots, nearly pulling them off in the process. *Wish I had my own boots. And a bath. And clean clothes. 'Long as I'm wishing, I'll take a clue what I'm doing.*

Dismounting the pony was painful; the climb up the short flight little better. The back of her neck and her upper shoulder blades hurt, adding to her overall discomfort. Cara didn't want to think how much she would ache by morning. *I forgot pain relievers and a heating pad.*

A newborn evening breeze followed them through the door into the common room of the inn. It was chilly with the damp feel of rain to come.

Oh, and no rain tomorrow please.

Generous flames in a rough stone hearth glowed on the faces of those gathered around it and threw warm glimmers of light on the common room's dark-stained walls. A few Peralike claimed two of the three room corners lit by lanterns on built-in shelves. Every man was dressed in the same kind of rough clothing worn by her rescuers—trousers, tunics of various lengths and the occasional vest constructed of finished leather or suede. Most of the women wore ankle-length full skirts but a couple of them wore trousers.

One of the people at the hearth was in the midst of a story but, when Cara approached, the woman paused and stared at her in amazement. Other faces turned in her direction, followed by a sibilant wave of one repeated word, "Outworlder." A couple of the more forward folk within the room rose from their cushions and introduced themselves respectfully.

Carefully keeping between Cara and the common room guests, Halprin graciously returned the greeting for them all. Cara watched the repeated greetings and responses without saying a word but each time someone new approached, she took care to offer the crossed hands and nod greeting. Why exactly was Halprin doing the honors? Whatever his purpose, she was relieved. She had muffed her first hello to both Kataro and Halprin but, more important, Halprin had the presence of mind to provide her with a use-name. Safa, or was he saying Sapha? Either way, it would do as long as she didn't need to sign anything.

At last, people stopped coming over to them. Hathel led the group to the remaining corner with a lamp. Like her companions, Cara claimed a cracked leather cushion. She glanced at the sooty but inviting-looking wall and decided her caftan would give as much dirt as it received. Leaning against the wall, she stretched out her aching leg. Halprin walked away from them and started to talk with an elderly man. Their faces were grave.

A servant offered her a small pot of warm water, a sliver of yellow soap and a towel. She took them gratefully, even though she and the others needed more than a "cat wash" at this point. She removed the filthy caftan at once. She might as well give up and just burn it.

As she washed as best she could, Cara wondered again why everyone knew she was an Outworlder. Peralike so far all appeared to be normal humans from back home. Well, maybe with the exceptions of Halprin and

Hathel, though the difference there wasn't physical. Was she emitting "Outworlder vibes" like they gave off "enchanter vibes"?

Perhaps Kataro knew about it. Cara looked for him and found he was talking to a small group of patrons who had split away from the storyteller's audience. From what he was saying, her experiences on Narenta so far was the topic. More and more people turned from the storyteller or stopped their own conversations. Some even abandoned where they were sitting to draw close to the new crowd. The storyteller smiled and shrugged, then followed the others.

When he finished recounting her escape from Rabada, many shook their heads in wonder and dismay. Others turned and whispered to their neighbors, with occasional awestruck glances in her direction. Kataro kept going, recounting bits of what had happened at Riven Gorge and their rescue by Halprin and his people.

He had perched himself close beside Kalapa on an odd wooden structure rather like a low quilt-rack, the small outside toe of one foot curved over the top of Kalapa's nearest outside claw. Cara felt a twinge of jealousy. Furious with herself, she shook her head. At once, most of the eyes in the room shifted to her. She offered a weak smile. *Oh, great. Like paparazzi without cameras. Hey, move on. Nothing to see here.*

Before Kataro reached the end of their adventures, the kitchen servers and the goodman set up two rows of long, low trestle tables, then brought in stacked dishes and the evening meal. Cara watched their supper arrive in anticipation: her last properly cooked meal had been the day Bran kidnapped her.

They gathered around the closest end of one table, everyone carrying their cushion with them for seating. Before the seabird-quilt-rack was even at the table, Kalapa left them and flew in pursuit of the goodman, past the small serving counter and through the kitchen doorway. She flew back to the table minutes later and spoke at once to Kataro.

Cara took a wooden-handled fork, a tiny hammer and a high-edged plate from the stacks being passed about, but she kept her head cocked to her left in hopes of hearing what Kalapa said. Before she could catch anything, Halprin rose from his place opposite her with a wine goblet uplifted in his hand.

"We thank you, Alphasis, for your great gifts to us. We remember that greatest of gifts and humbly thank you for it. 'In the Remembrance'."

He took a sip from the goblet and passed it on to Gedra at his right side. She murmured the last three words and, taking a sip, passed it on as well. Cara followed suit when her turn came, though she wondered what everyone but her was "remembering". The massacred family?

The brief ceremony had stopped the conversation between the seabirds. Had they resumed speaking, Cara conceded that she still wouldn't have overheard what they were saying. Local folk visiting the inn for a meal or a pint resumed their conversations as soon as they were seated. Others were coming through the door--Cara could hear its repeated creaks of protest.

A kitchen servant offered her three options, but none of them meant anything to her. She chose verric because she could pronounce it. A few minutes later, the woman set a small handle-less bowl near her. Steam rose from whatever it was, promising warmth.

Gedra passed her a deep covered bowl. Inside were fleshy roots looking like they couldn't decide if they were turnips or carrots. Liking both, Cara speared a large one and then passed the bowl. From her right, Hathel tipped a serving dish and allowed several oval objects to rattle on to her plate. Using his fork, he talked and gestured for several minutes. With his voice barely raised loud enough to make his instructions audible over the varied conversations, he explained how to crack open and eat her crottled greeps. She gave up the brief attempt at eavesdropping, and concentrated on her food. Her wandering food. She grabbed her fork and smacked one greep tottering on the plate's rim, then skewered and cracked it.

So this is greeps. Doesn't the meat from strange animals always taste like chicken, or is that an urban legend? These critters taste like ... beef cubes stewed in clam broth. No, make that half-raw school cafeteria burgers marinated in clam juice. Yack! Where's sushi when you need it?

Cara wrinkled her nose and tried to hold down another greep long enough to crack it as instructed.

Voices around her grew more light-hearted throughout the meal. A few people sounded like they were arguing but most of the voices were raised in banter and song and laughter. Evidently, the people in the inn had decided to put aside Kataro's ominous tale for at least the length of the meal.

Cara suspected her companions were in better spirits just from being somewhere warm and safe. Kalapa made a joke about the egg shape of the greep shells, and Cara laughed along with the rest. From across the table, Lord Halprin pressed her to try a dish of purplish tree leaves. Did people here call dishes of “greens”, “purples”? Tree leaves or not, they proved to be tender and tasty. Hathel toasted her with words that she couldn’t hear, thanks to all the overlapping voices.

Cara picked up her bowl of greenish liquid, to offer a toast of her own. She didn’t know how verric was made but, based on its immediate stimulating effect, it must be Narenta’s equivalent of coffee. Feeling very adult, she thanked everyone and then offered a toast to their safety and victory. Before she could drink, Gedra took the bowl and handed her a pint of ale to use for the toast. Grimacing, Cara drank a mouthful. She really hated the flavor of beer--Narentan ale, too.

Everything’s weird here, even the good stuff. I have friends who are talking birds! I mean intelligent, uh, human seabirds. And friends --bodyguards--who are enchanters. Actual wizards! I’m hanging out with people who belong in a myth. Meanwhile, the hotel guests and the manager, I mean goodman, act as if I’m the one who’s a myth. Is he like especially good? Why not call him a hotel manager? Anyway, if he bows to me one more time, I’m seriously going to lose it.

The goodman and his helpers began clearing away dishes. As they did, a woman brought out one huge pastry after another until five stood at each line of tables. Hathel assisted in cutting them and placed the first chunk in Cara’s dish. It smelled of fruits and an indecipherable blend of spices. She lifted a piece toward her mouth. Pieces of syrupy crucefruit nearly masked something that could only be a variety of bean. Beans a dessert food? Cara shrugged and popped the morsel into her mouth. Warmth, flaky crust, spiced sweetness. What could be better?

The warrior named Lamar rose from his place at the table and went to where the seabirds were perched. All three talked briefly, and then went over toward the fireplace. Kataro and Kalapa perched on the wooden frame the warrior carried over. Conversations around the room became softer, then ceased at the sound of clear notes.

The seabirds began singing a duet to the music of the wooden pipe played by Lamar. Ethereal yet linked to the vital rhythms of breath and blood, the notes floating from the warrior’s slender pipe fit no pattern or style from Earth. The lyrics sung by the seabirds resembled whale song more than anything.

Though she couldn’t understand the words, Cara felt delight steal into her heart, bringing sorrow with it. Their balanced intensity overwhelmed her.

Tears--formed from unbearable joy and poignant regret--burned Cara’s eyes. She peeked at those closest to her self-consciously. Uplifted faces, tremulous smiles, eyes shining with tears surrounded her. As it should be, something responded within. Some people moved their lips as though they silently sang their own version of the words. Not aloud—she knew somehow that would have been wrong.

Others listened, above in the rafters. The firelight shimmered with their presence. Who? What? She wanted to look up but didn’t dare.

Afloat on the flow of words, she turned to Hathel then to Halprin. They wore the same expression which had awed her so when they first met. *Why do they look like that sometimes? For that matter, how? It’s mostly in their eyes, as if I’m seeing through them to ... what? Or, who. Their real selves? What does that even mean?*

The question evaporated. Its answer didn’t matter. She closed her eyes and gave herself up to the music and the voices. Peace, love, security flowed in, filled her, lifted her away ... The song ended. Everyone remained quiet. In the silence, she felt the last whispering echoes of words and music drift away. The tangle of emotions faded—faded like high tide, leaving peace behind. Breathing, the rustle of cloth from shifting bodies, the clearing of throats, all joined together but only partially filled the room’s emptiness. She opened her eyes.

First Halprin, then several of the others, stood and murmured thanks. Most of them headed toward the staircase or the front door. She considered going then decided to give herself a few more minutes. If verric really were like coffee, she wouldn’t get to sleep at once anyway.

A two-part song sprang up at the other table, and spread slowly to hers. Cara was intrigued by the complex pattern of clapping and she tried to copy it. She caught only snatches of the rapidly sung multi-part verses. The women singers seemed to be asking the men how they would respond to various circumstances during a sporting event. She was having trouble getting the rhythm and her hands in sync, but she enjoyed repeating the nonsense syllables of the chorus with everyone.

After the women's part and a chorus, either one or a couple of men would sing a verse. Rarely, evidently pleased with an answer, one of the women would spill a few drops of her drink into a singer's cup during the next chorus. Crowing laughter would erupt, and then the women would return to their part. Cara was still trying to decipher what the sport was, when Gedra spilled some ale into Timor's tankard. Timor stood and headed toward the stairs. Nodding a farewell to those still at the table, Gedra started after him. Her face growing hot, Cara stumbled over the words of the chorus.

The seabirds called to Cara as they rose from their shared perch. She joined them at the foot of the stairs, remembering that she had yet to compliment them on their singing. The seabirds barely acknowledged her words. Instead, the pair gravely beckoned Cara to follow them up to the rooms. Her thoughts still on the song, Cara noted absently how difficult they found it to fly up the stairs with their wide wingspan.

When Cara opened the door to her tiny room, firelight greeted her from the little hearth. Kataro flew past her and perched on the narrow window's sill while Kalapa landed on a low table. Cara lit the candle lamp on the table and slid it to the edge to give Kalapa more room then she joined Kataro. He was blocking her view of the courtyard but she could hear heavy rain and feel repeated puffs of damp air. The water gurgled through a nearby gutter and clattered above on the wooden shutter. No glass again. She guessed from what she had seen here and at the mill that Peralike only used their shutters if the rain threatened to come in. Or sorcerers did.

"Glad to be inside."

Kataro and Kalapa both laughed. Kataro answered, "Wish we were outside."

"Couple of ducks! So all the bad guys just died out there in the rain, huh?"

Kalapa paused in preening a feather to respond, "Would life were so simple. The leaders of the Shadow considered such things centuries ago when they began preparing werewrights to serve as warriors. Tree resins from jeyse briars in the foothills are boiled and the extract used for their scales. They also make use of blended waxes from moontree seeds and green needle false berries. The berries have a hallucinogenic side effect when--"

"Kalapa!" Kataro interrupted. "You know your plants like no other seabird on the Isle but I think all Cara needs to know is that rain drops are not the same as flowing water."

"Of course not," Kalapa retorted. "And feathers aren't Elder hair."

"Neither are werewright scales. Not the point--"

"Guys!" When Cara got no response, she added a touch of Kataro's sternest tone. "Say, guys! Time out! What do you call the song you sang? It was great!"

The two seabirds gave each other a glance that Cara interpreted as sheepish. It crossed her mind that she had made substantial progress in reading seabird emotions over the last couple of days. Good thing their eyes were so expressive.

"We sang a song of the followers of Alphasis from the 'Paeans to the Seabird', one of the Ancient Writings."

"Kataro, she needs information about another song. Don't you think that the time has come?"

Kataro appeared lost in thought but he turned toward the other seabird. "Yes. The time had come.

"Cara, why don't you sit on that soft cushion beside the fireplace? We need to discuss matters that concern you deeply."

Cara looked from one to the other then sat where directed. Kataro lifted the lamp and placed it on the floor near her, then he joined Kalapa on the table. The blend of lamp light and hearth fire lent their feathers a golden tint.

"It's about my task, isn't it?" *They always tell you to sit when you're going to get a shock.*

13-Coming to the Edge

As soon as Cara settled by the fire, Kataro began, "We have news regarding your mission here--a last bit of information that reduces our many theories to one. Kalapa overheard a disquieting comment from the Goodman when he was laying the table so she asked him for details."

Kataro glanced toward the other seabird. "Which I'll allow her to tell."

Kalapa's expression suggested she didn't see this as a favor. "You know of the mountainway passages?"

Cara nodded.

"Well, my old friend, Goodman Rathnar heard a disturbing tale a couple of days ago. Some travelers from the west reported the Shadow has set up a barrier in that mountain passage, preventing any of the Three Peoples from elsewhere coming to our aid. The barrier's sorcery destroyed several Thalassan merchants and their animals before they could retreat from its grasp. The Koloran Young Ones confirmed this. They lost one of their own a few hours earlier and were too late to warn the Thalassans."

Kataro continued for Kalapa, "This is the final proof we needed, Cara. We are in the time of the First Tumult, and that means you are the Outworlder who will be named The Opener."

Cara waited for him to elaborate. When he didn't, she ventured, "I'm sorry but I don't know what that means."

Kataro glanced toward Kalapa and Cara thought she caught the hint of a sigh. *Did he think all that made sense? If he wants a reaction, he better fill in some gaps.*

"I forget myself sometimes, Little Chick. What is it that you don't understand?"

How about all of it? "I'll tell you what I do understand. That'll be faster. I'm an Outworlder, so everyone thinks I'm some kind of superhero. Everyone, even Rabada, believes I'm here to pull off some kind of earth-shattering, Narenta-shattering rescue of you from three sorcerers that terrify everyone--including yours truly. Okay, so, Alphasis beat all the sorcerers once and put them into special prisons between magic streams. Now your three got out and they're building a tunnel so they can invade, uh, South Tethra? But you say you don't need me for that. Guess that leaves me to help you either kill the sorcerers or put them back in jail or sorcerer hell, or whatever it is."

Cara drew a breath and added, "Just to clarify that one--I'm supposed to do a better job of fighting them than enchanters like Halprin and warriors like Gedra even though I don't know magic, I can barely pick up one of those swords and I don't fly--except to Grandmom's."

At the startled expressions on the seabirds' faces, Cara muttered, "Abdis, I'll strangle you. No, I don't literally mean 'fly'. Or 'strangle'.

"Oh, finally, nobody's surprised I'm here. Your bad guys have known pretty much where I am for days and, if they don't know my room number here at the inn, it's only because the rooms aren't numbered. Rabada knew who I was, everyone downstairs knows who I am, and Bran said they were expecting me--like I arrived late even. Guess I took too long washing my hair."

The two seabirds stirred and glanced toward each other as Cara finished her tirade. Neither spoke.

Cara bit her lip, briefly regretting what she had just said, but every word was as true as she knew how to say it. She just wished now she had spoken more calmly and courteously. She shook her head.

"Sorry, guys. I shouldn't have dumped on you two for stuff that's been building up since before I met you. Let me try again, okay?"

Kalapa gave an astonished nod. Kataro started to speak her name, but Cara shook her head. "Could you wait, please? You see, I've got more. Now, here's what I don't know. How did we get from the sorcerers being shut up in their prison to them keeping you guys from getting in and out of the country?"

Seeing Kataro about to respond, she held up one hand and added hurriedly, "While we're at it, I don't get 'tumults' and 'opener' and, well, most of the stuff you just said. Ever think my not knowing might just prove I'm the wrong person?"

She smiled ruefully and shrugged, "Kataro, you know how you call me 'Little Chick'?"

"I don't say it as an insult."

"Hey, no! I like it--it's kind'a sweet. So, maybe you could treat me like I really am a little chick for a few minutes? I may be an Outworlder but I'm a lot more lost than you people seem to think."

Kataro nodded. Cara was relieved to see that he appeared more amused than angry.

Kalapa asked, "Tumults, first?"

At Cara's shrug of assent, she continued, "In our Book of Prophecy are foretold Seven Tumults or 'great struggles' to mark the end of the First Age. Each would have its proper sign to mark it, and none would know

the time or place of each until the sign appeared. At the end of the Seventh Tumult, Alphasis will renew the world and the Second Age will begin. The closing of the mountainways is the sign of the First Tumult.”

She glanced inquiringly toward Kataro, who answered, “Nicely done, Kal. As to how the sorcerers escaped ...” He turned back to Cara. “I’ve told you part of that, remember? You have heard us speak of the Ancient Writings? Well, there are other writings known to master-scholars like myself. One of these is Koloran in origin, ‘The Story of Thaddis’.”

“Uh, maybe you said that name once.” Cara stifled a yawn. *Lecture time, but I guess I asked for it.* “Where does he fit?”

Kataro responded, “You wanted to know how the three sorcerers escaped. I believe it Thaddis’ doing. Would you like to hear the Koloran tale?”

“Koloran? Hey, isn’t that the waxed-up scroll? Seems like I better. Shoot.”

Kataro frowned in response to her words, then shook his head and began, “There was an ambitious man named Thaddis who came for instruction to the Throne of Making and Growing. That is far to the north, on the border of Melwood itself.

“He learned what was taught him very quickly, until one day his tutor came to know that he had discovered how to reverse the enchantments of making, to destroy. The tutor confronted him with his crimes and told him that he would lay the matter before his colleagues and brethren and especially before the Order, which is the council of the Great Ones, the enchanters of Alphasis.

“So Thaddis killed his tutor secretly but he realized he could stay at the throne no longer. Pretending grief for his dead master, he drew apart for a time. He took a loyal servant ignorant of what he had become; also, many ancient scrolls and provisions, and went to live in the mountain foothills west of the capital, close to the Koloran Forest.

“Years passed and Thaddis learnt much evil until he finally judged himself ready to carry out his plan. He wished nothing less than the sovereign rule of Tethra, the land of the Elders, and he thought he knew of a way to attain it.

“He and his servant went through the passageway under the mountains until, by his arts, they came to the hidden chamber between Alphasis’ Streams, where the three sorcerers were imprisoned. There he struck a bargain as he thought--his kingship for their freedom--with the understanding that they would not stir during the rule of his children or grandchildren. But dealing with the Shadow is perilous.”

“I know.” Cara shuddered, thinking of Bran and the werewright, plus the werewright negotiator at the Abandoned Bridge. She nodded for Kataro to continue. He did so--speaking or, perhaps, reciting for a long time.

At length, Kataro concluded, “And they laughed to hear his cries of agony. Meanwhile, the servant escaped through the waters with that speech and that laughter echoing behind him. When he reached the closest Koloran settlement, he told them what had transpired. He also wrote down all he had seen and heard under the mountain. From that day, the Kolorans say, his hair became white as camslips, though he had been a young man before he came to the mountainway.”

“But you said no one believes this really happened?”

“No. Indeed, very few people--mostly Kolorans--have heard the tale at all. It was just recently that my colleague gave me the servant’s scroll. We who had heard only the traditional Koloran version found it difficult to believe that the three would bide their time for so long, the pact with Thaddis or no. The last of his grandchildren, Thalidor, died eighteen years ago. For the first time in over one hundred years, the rightful king sits on the Tethran throne. For the eighteen years of his reign, some of us have searched for clear signs of the rising of the Three without success.

“Enchanters from all Narentan lands journey to the various Daetaga prison chambers once a year to confirm each has the number of inmates recorded in ancient times. No one has ever reported an escape.

“Some in outlying districts mentioned seeing strange things, but the only sure hint we had of trouble was the increase noted in the number of Shadow followers in the western mountains. The reports we gathered of the things people saw often were contradictory. Apparently, the Daetaga have been carefully cloaking their presence

at Riven Gorge and their movements elsewhere, to lull us into thinking their time had not yet come. Their strategy worked better than they thought--nearly every scholar dismissed the whole Koloran tale as just that.”

“Sounds like he got what he deserved. Thaddis, I mean,” Cara added hastily. “Ok, so how have the magicians, sorry, sorcerers managed to block the tunnel in the mountains?”

“We know only what Kalapa found out earlier tonight.”

“Oh. Okay, what does that have to do with the task everyone says I have?”

Kataro responded gently, “In each of the seven times, it is prophesied that the Three Peoples would be in peril. Unlike the age of the Coming of Alphasis, their rescue would be through one sent by him rather than by himself. The champion would be a follower of Alphasis but not from this world. He or she would be an Outworlder, like you, one with a power none possesses in our own world. Outworlders have come to us-”

“Hey, Kataro, back up! I’m an Outworlder, but I haven’t got a ‘power’ and I’m not a follower of Alphasis.” She laughed, “I admit I prefer his followers over the Daetaga, but that doesn’t make me Halprin.” When neither seabird answered, she added patiently, “No power. Not a follower. Not a bit of magic. Doesn’t that disqualify me?”

They gazed at her with sympathy. Kalapa answered her, “The Shadow has no doubt about where your loyalty lies. Also, tomorrow we will be on the Isle of the Chosen where in all likelihood you will meet Alphasis.”

She said something else but Cara just stared at her. *People actually meet Alphasis? How? Lady Clepta and the rest act as if he’s like a god. How do you casually walk up to a god and say hello? Or, maybe not a god. A spirit? More of a ghost? He lived over five thousand years ago. Rabada’s like five thousand years old. He had better not look like her! Nobody here time-travels, right, like in that movie? That was so sad ... Yeah, that’s relevant.*

So you walk up and ... there he is, and ... Clepta said he mostly chooses to look like a seabird. There he is, looking like Kataro but not so much ... Looking more ghostly or god-like ...

“... but let the prophecy speak for itself, Little Chick. Here are the words recorded in the Book of Prophecy. First, it describes the locking of the mountain gates and the appearance of an Outworlder in the Land of Youth, the Young Ones.

“This is what follows:

““And then the Outworlder spoke, saying, “What should I do?””

But Alphasis only answered, “Listen.”

And, the Key of Opening lifted up its voice, saying,

‘From the meeting-place of Wisdom I come forth;

From the place where goodness dwells serene.

From the red sunrise of the dawn I come,

Where grow the nine hazels of Virtue and Art.

From the wide circuits of splendor

Out of which, according to their judgment, truth is weighed.

There is a land where righteousness is instilled,

And where falsehood wanes into twilight.

I travel towards the Plain of Age,

Through the mountain-heights of Youth.

I go forward to the hunting grounds of evil,

Into the deathly dwelling of a king,

Into the abode of three tombs;

Between burial and judgment,

Between battles and their horrors

Among Tethra’s mighty men.””

Cara mulled over his words, at last murmuring, “Way creepy! Hythe, of all people, repeated part of that! How come he even knew it?”

“Because you needed to hear it,” Kalapa ventured in a whisper.

Isn't that what they call "circular reasoning"? "Let's say you're right, Kataro. I'm the prophesied Outworlder. Since I wouldn't listen to Lady Clepta's advice, I never asked the question, back at the Shrine, I mean. What was it again? 'What should I do?'"

"Yes, Little Chick."

Cara couldn't think what to say next. *Wish I'd said something, thought something in that shrine! Except I was scared. Really wiggled-out by that place. Too late now.*

The rain on the awning sounded loud in the quiet room. Finally, Kataro spoke. "You are back on the path now. Alphasis has caused you to hear the prophecy, and you are going to the Isle as he wished you to do. It's better to obey belatedly than not at all."

"I can see why he would want me--or the real Outworlder--to stay with the Young Ones and move east. Much safer. However, I don't understand the prophecy, except 'the meeting-place of wisdom' has to be the Isle of the Chosen or maybe the Throne of Wisdom. What's nine hazels?"

Kalapa answered, "The Chosen traditionally divide all knowledge into the nine branches of the hazel tree. We believe that there are nine virtues, each one related to a branch of knowledge. When we speak of the winter hazel we mean that of knowledge alone, but the virtues are the hazel tree when it blossoms and bears."

Kataro added, "So, my college on the Isle or perhaps, as you say, the Throne itself."

"The Plain of Age is the land of the Elders?"

"And the Mountain-heights of Youth are the high plateaus of the Young Ones, close to the mountains."

"But what is 'the deathly dwelling of a king'?"

Kataro and Kalapa glanced toward each other briefly. Cara leaned forward, her fists clenched in her lap. *Here it comes.*

"Little Chick, there is only one in this land who was both daemagos and a king—Pazgar. His 'deathly dwelling' is, or was, his prison under the mountains."

"Not his Bastion?"

Kataro shook his head decisively. "That's impossible since Alphasis destroyed it. Also the next part reads, 'Into the abode of three tombs'".

Cara spoke slowly, hearing her own words with distaste. "So this Key of Opening is supposed to go to the mountains, somewhere near the prison chamber, to open the gate that the sorcerers closed."

Kataro nodded but neither seabird spoke.

Drawing a deep breath, she went on, "But even a magic key wouldn't be able to travel there under its own power." She looked toward them, reluctant to continue. "Someone has to take it to their barrier or whatever, near the sorcerers' old prison. Wait! In their old prison. The poem says 'into', doesn't it? Someone is supposed to get through their barrier alive or enter their prison chamber, or both, and then come up with a way to set everything right. With them chasing after, probably. And you're still convinced that someone is me."

Cara saw love and pity in their eyes and it didn't help one bit. She waited. Neither offered a second and more comforting theory. The single word, no, welled within her and fought to come out but she clamped the sound back down her throat with a swallow. Trying to keep her voice even, Cara continued,

"Okay. Okay. I want to help you—I really do now—but remember I may not even be the right person. Have I done anything here that proves I am? How about a bunch of things that proves I'm not? I couldn't face Rabada when I met her. I almost gave in to Zabnar's spells twice. You said yourself, Kataro, we were lucky Halprin arrived and chased Zabnar away. We both know I couldn't have done that.

"And that prison chamber? Sounds, like I said, sounds like sorcerer hell to me. How do you expect me to go into there on purpose to undo anything they've done? How do I survive it? Or even pass the barrier that's already killed some people?

"You know how I used to say someone grabbed the wrong person? Well, I didn't know what I was talking about then. Now I know and, really, I don't have what it takes to do this stuff, no matter how much I want to. If nothing else, I don't have a 'power'. If you want that barrier down, you had better find someone else to do it. If you can't find the right Outworlder, your best choice would be Halprin. I really like him and I'd hate for anything to happen to him but he's the one with the power, not me. If he decides to go, I promise to go with him and do whatever I can to help him. I--"

Kataro broke in sternly, "You speak as if Kalapa and I invented this between us! We didn't choose you nor do we have authority to choose another. Alphesis chose you and brought you here. Since he chose you to perform the Act of Opening of the First Tumult, he'll see to it that you're able to do it when the time comes."

Cara gave a weary sigh. *How many times have I heard this?* "Right. 'Alphesis wants you to do this.' 'Alphesis will protect you from that.' 'Alphesis brought you here.' Well, I haven't seen Alphesis. All I've seen here are Rabada, Zabnar, and their followers. Now, them I believe in. At least I know they exist."

"Cara! You know you don't mean that!"

Sheesh! Overreact much? Cara answered soothingly, "Kataro, I'm sorry. I don't know what I meant but I sure didn't mean joining them." She shrugged. "Look, you know me now. I'm not an enchanter. I'm not a soldier or a spy. I haven't a clue how to get a-hold of that key." Cara laughed ruefully. "I haven't a clue, period. So, what should I do?"

"Try asking Alphesis that question, Little Chick. Neither he nor anyone else expects you to do this alone. You just offered to help Halprin, were the mission his. You know he and others will do our best to help you."

Cara nodded miserably. *I'm never going to convince anyone. I'm never going to get home. Zabnar couldn't have trapped me better.*

Kalapa spoke into the growing silence. "Try to sleep now. You will find courage comes when you need it, not when the danger is still to be confronted."

I don't need courage. I need out of here. Sounds of a clock striking flowed through the open window. She stood and turned away, furtively wiping a tear from her cheek.

Kataro flew to the windowsill. Turning to face them, he wished them good night.

Cara managed an answering smile. "Good night, Kataro."

"Good night. I'll stay here with her." Kalapa looked at Cara, concern in her eyes. "I think she needs someone close by for a while."

The strokes of the clock faded leaving only the patter of rain. Cara answered with half a groan and half a growl. The clock had struck three times now and she was no closer to sorting out her thoughts than she had been the first time.

She sat up. The table where Kalapa had been perched earlier was empty. She had lain quietly in one position with her eyes closed until the seabird was satisfied and flew outside to join Kataro.

Cara stood up and went to the window. Pushing open the shutter a bit further, she rested her arms on the sill and looked out. Rain still fell but perhaps more lightly. She could make out little else, for the stars and moon could not penetrate the cloud cover. Resting her head on her arms, she stood so for a long time, her face and arms growing cool and damp from the outside air.

To think all I was worried about was how being world-napped was ruining my vacation! Cara smiled.

Getting killed can do that, too. How long has it been? Less than two weeks! Ironical. Earlier today, I was thinking how much had happened between yesterday at lunchtime and today. Little did I know.

Chilled through, Cara turned from the window and went to sit near the dim fire.

I hate people acting as if I came here because I wanted to, thanking me in advance for doing something even before they know what the something is, much less, whether I can pull it off. Cara, Opener-Woman, the superhero. Why don't they see me as I am? Cara the terrified. Kind'a like Dorothy in Oz. How did it go? "Dorothy, the small and insignificant." Hey, girlfriend, want to trade?

Cara found the poker and prodded random embers. *Even if I only have the dimmest clue about what's going on in this world, I get to be Cara, Mover and Shaker. Well, the shaking, I can do. Hey, maybe that's my 'power'!*

Kataro says no one expects me to do this alone. Yeah, right. That's why everyone keeps talking about how it's my mission, why they keep thanking me, because I don't have to do it alone. Hey, I'm not stupid, people. You expect Alphesis to help me. All I know is he seems to have dumped me here, and not said a word since.

Of course, everyone else went on enough about him to make her shriek. Clepta and Abdis. Even Dulcima. She straightened and turned from the fire. That first night when Dulcima had given her the stone, she held it in her hand and all sorts of weird stuff appeared--the ocean, an island and finally a chair made from narthrous. It frightened her. Why? Cara stared into blankness a moment, and then pulled on the chain of the Discerning Stone until she held it in her hand. She didn't look at it. The island had to be the Isle of the Chosen, so she had seen

either the throne of Wisdom or Healing. The prophecy mentioned “wisdom” and Alphasis was supposed to live on the island.

Could the stone show whether what everyone said was true? If she looked into it and saw that throne again, then she would know the “mountainway suicide mission” was hers. That, maybe even, Alphasis would help her with it. If not? Well, not.

Cara glanced at the stone and then away. If it came to it, could she stand to know she must go to some place of death, to face sorcerers who even terrified the people who lived here? Maybe, if the prophecy and the mission and Alphasis were all real. Being part of an actual prophecy would be kind of reassuring.

And if Alphasis were real? Cara stopped abruptly on her way back to the window as air turned into vacuum. Everything would change. She would change. How could she be the prophesied “Opener” and then go back to being just Cara Marshall? One thing for sure, if she survived she wouldn’t be a free agent anymore. Not here. Not home, either. No doubt—team up with Alphasis once and you “can’t go home again”. Not mentally. In some ways, she suspected she was already beyond that point. She’d seen things here that would have her parents freaking if she were just watching a movie. She had even tried to kill someone.

If you once fought evil and survived, could you ever close your eyes to what was around you? Could you act like what you had seen and what you had done hadn’t happened?

“The necklace came to you for a reason.” Abdis said. Even before that, Lady Clepta asked her why she was dressed like the ‘great ones’ of the Elders. She had seen enough since then to realize that both Halprin and Hathel had silver necklaces like hers. One of the fighters--Lamar?--had commented that her caftan reminded him of the formal robes of the enchanters. If she came with clothing so similar to them, wasn’t it likely she had a role like them?

Did that mean she was going to end up as spooky as Halprin and Hathel? One minute, they were normal and the next ... Maybe they channeled Alphasis, sort of. That would explain some of the things they could do, even how Hathel’s face had changed when he healed Kalapa.

If she had a role like theirs, if she were part of the team, it all wouldn’t just politely go away when she went back home. This whole thing was interplanetary, at minimum. There’d been the alien solar system schematic in the shrine, and Clepta claimed Alphasis ruled “all these worlds and the darkneses between the worlds”. Someone told her Alphasis brought the Peralike race from another world that his enemy had destroyed. Alphasis was able to world-nap her from Earth, so it was part of his “interplanetary dominion”. If he could get there, then so could his enemy, Wenos Zex. Now wasn’t that a nice thought?

Time to try looking into the stone. She recited the options to herself. Islands and chairs, all true. Nothing, nothing. She took a deep breath and tried to keep her hands from trembling. She went to stand at the window and then lifted the stone.

Time passed.

Nothing. With a sigh of relief, she let the stone slide down on its chain. She slipped back into bed and had nearly dozed off when the ghost of a question floated toward her. Had she proven anything just now? If so, what? That all the people she loved and respected the most in this world had lied to her? Or just that she couldn’t make a decision like that by staring into a stone.

Maybe she was asking the wrong question. If Alphasis brought her here, he must have seen something about her that Narenta needed. Except then, why didn’t he say something to her—like tell her what it was? The sorcerers were powerful. The enchanters were powerful. Sum total of her powers? Nada.

How can I hope to survive that prison? For that matter, how do I find it? Thaddis used magic to find it. I can’t. Like I want to find it. What’s wrong with this picture? It’ll probably kill me. If I’m the Opener, does that give me any kind of immunity? Do Outworlders ever die trying to complete their quests here? Bran said something about me being the first in hundreds of years. Does anyone know the fate of the ones before me?

My power. All this might work if I had super powers but guess what, I don’t. Don’t want them either. I kind of like being human--and alive.

Cara twisted about on the thin mattress, at last sitting upright. She half-murmured, half-thought, what should I do? Yeah, really. What on Earth or Narenta or Haley’s Comet, am I supposed to do?

No voice, no thing, no inspired thought answered her. She forced herself to lie back down. Assuming she survived, assuming she actually got back home in one piece, she'd still have to deal with the reality of Alphasis and enchantment and sorcerers--with how her role here would change her. Why did things always have to be so complicated?

Shaking off the thought, she turned over and tried to will herself to sleep.

Cara thrust her head forward. Tap. The same jagged piece receded then fell back in place. She pushed sideways with both wings but nothing moved at all. She was still gathering strength for another peck when she heard a ping. Faint light touched the edges of the crack she had made. The horseshoe shaped brightness thickened and its ends flew toward each other. The sun appeared. She blinked at its radiance.

14-Flight to the Isle

Cara awoke with a start and turned toward the door. Still half-asleep, she listened to the sound of voices in the hallway. Gedra's, Hathel's and another person she couldn't identify. Dawn crept through the closed shutter in chill gray strips. The fire had gone out. Cold, dank air chilled her skin.

Sighing, Cara sat on the edge of the low bed and rubbed her bare arms, as she tried to put some order to her thoughts. She had been dreaming about something alive crawling around on the ceiling and something dead out in the stables, wet with blood. Cara shuddered. So much had happened, was it any wonder most of it had lodged in her subconscious?

A door closed down the hall, the sharp sound followed by the hollow thudding of boots on wood. A fresh image flashed through her mind--waking up from a nightmare at the sound of Gedra knocking on her door and calling to her. She had opened the door a crack-

That wasn't part of her dream—and the nightmare had happened. Cara moaned and buried her face in her shaking hands.

She remembered waking not long after she finally fell asleep to find herself curled into a tight ball on her bed. Noises filtered through the window, first the flutter of wings and then the hiss of a serpent-hawk. She couldn't move, not even to cry out or sob. She couldn't do anything but feel the solid invisible shell that pressed against her skin and wouldn't let her out. Every cell of her body was suffocating.

A tingling in her blood rescued her--a touch across the surface of her skin and a tiny almost chime-like sound that made her eyelids flutter closed. Her body relaxed and she could move.

A minute later, Gedra pounded on her door and called out to her. When she answered, Gedra fussed with her for leaving the door unlocked, then raced across the room to close and bar her shutter. Then she was gone. Muffled clangs, thumps and grunts drifted through the shutter, followed by a shriek—but none of it seemed real. She struggled to lock the door through the obscuring image of a wound-scored body on the stable floor. Once that was done, she stumbled back to bed and must have fallen asleep in minutes.

Someone was knocking at the door, for real and right now. Cara took a deep breath to brace herself for whatever would happen next. Standing and slipping the tattered caftan over her head, she called out, "Yes? Who is it?"

"Espeta, Lady Sapha. Lord Halprin sent me."

Espeta? Frowning as she tried to remember a face to match the name, Cara went to the door. The large iron key still sat in the lock. She turned it and lifted the latch, only then reflecting that it might have been wise to bring the knife over with her. Well, too late now.

"Come in."

As soon as the woman stepped into the room, Cara knew who she was--the goodman's wife who had brought in all the pastries the previous night. The woman's eyes were light blue and round with fear or awe. The warm color of old ivory, her long hair was working its way loose from hastily made braids. In her arms, she carried a greenish bundle of heavy canvas-like cloth. This she held out to Cara, who took it, not knowing what else to do.

The woman cleared her throat. Glancing nervously back into the corridor, she whispered, "Lord Halprin bids you hasten, my lady. You are, my lord says, you are to use the backstairs. There." She indicated the direction with a tip of her head. "They go down to our kitchen. We have breakfast waiting, and my lord said he would join you in a few minutes."

With a hasty bow, the woman slipped back out the door and scrambled down the dark hall as if a sorcerer chased her. Cara stepped out of her room and watched the woman open a narrow door then disappear as it closed behind her. The room doors were all closed. Were any of Halprin's people still here? From the voices and footsteps passing a few minutes ago, she suspected not. Better hurry. Halprin had said as much in any case.

When she reentered her room, she unfolded the green bundle to reveal an old and much worn cape made from material with the tough thickness of a tarpaulin. She ran her fingers over the surface and wondered if Peralike used the same substances werewrights did to waterproof cloth. The separate hood was a shade darker, suggesting the owner usually wore just the cape. From the sound of the rain hitting the closed shutter, she would need both of them.

Halprin has us sneaking down backstairs and Espeta's terrified. What all happened? Dropping the hood back on the mattress, Cara concentrated on getting ready and downstairs fast. If Halprin was in a hurry, then she wasn't about to keep him waiting.

Ten minutes later, Cara slipped into the hall and walked to the door through which Espeta had disappeared. Opening it revealed a dark staircase. Only a yard inside the door, the flight made a sharp turn on sagging wedge-shaped steps. Dim gold glimmered on the dusty wall at the turn, promising light enough to see once she closed the staircase door.

Cara glanced behind her and stepped inside, one hand on the hilt of her knife. She crept from tread to rotting tread carefully with her eyes on her feet, having always hated steps that were anything but perfectly rectangular. The staircase turned and turned again, leading her toward warm light and the subdued sound of two worried female voices. Neither voice sounded like Gedra's.

Walking into the hearth-lit kitchen, Cara sighed to herself as its two inhabitants hastened to bow.

A few minutes after she arrived in the kitchen, Halprin came in through an outside door. His sodden blue cape scattered generous drops along his path across the rough bricked floor. He pulled back his hood to reveal face and hair that looked as though they had been unprotected from the rain. Espeta clucked in dismay and hurried toward him with a dry cloth. The serving girl seemed fixed in a permanent awed bow. Wiping his face, Halprin returned the cloth with a nod of thanks. He walked over to where Cara was sitting near the hearth, the two women giving ground before him like tiny boats in the path of a three-master.

Halprin squatted between Cara and the hearth edge. She stopped eating the boiled grain and ignoring the steamed fish before her, answering his grim expression with, "Greeting, Halprin. So?"

"I saw them to the edge of the village. Now it's our turn."

The brief exchange reminded her of her conversation with the seabirds the previous evening. Halprin must believe she knew what had been happening. Where were Kataro and Kalapa, anyway? She tried again. "Okay. I'm ready but tell me what happened last night. I get it that some of the Shadow attacked us but I was in my room the whole time."

"Good!" Halprin shrugged. "Werewrights and serpent-hawks--I assume they were part of Zabnar's following. Lamar and I were outside on guard at the time, and it's a good thing too. The seabirds cried out a warning and the same moment we heard a shriek out in the stable. Serpent-hawks were landing on the roof and trying to get into the windows before we knew they were even there. I understand that Gedra went to your room to check on you?"

Cara gave Halprin a sheepish smile. "Yeah. She threw a fit because I left the door unlocked and she closed my shutter. Then she ran down the hall. The whole thing's a little blurred. I know I was paralyzed until just before she banged on the door--kind of like Rabada did to my feet but all over. I woke up and I couldn't move but then I felt that kind of feeling like when you guys do an enchantment?"

Surprise flickered in Halprin's eyes. The enchanter smiled. "Really? Hathel must have freed you. He didn't say anything about it while we were fighting. Later I suppose he thought it didn't matter. Well then, Zabnar was within striking range. Hathel should have told me. He's already left with the others."

"All of them? To do what?"

"As soon as we foiled the attack and the survivors fled, I decided we needed some kind of subterfuge to get you safely out of the village. The others, I sent ahead as decoys. Once they are sure it's safe, they have orders to scatter and warn neighboring settlements that Daetaga have slipped into this part of the province. If all goes well, they will rejoin us at the Isle. I sent others out early last night to ride west and warn all they could. Now we have to get you out of here and head east."

He paused and looked down at the plate with the fish on it. "Are you going to eat that?"

Cara laughed. "Not if I can help it. Back home, we don't generally have fish for breakfast."

Before she had finished the words, Halprin reached down and picked up a big chunk of the fish, popping it in his mouth. "We had better get moving. Espeta brought you a cape and a hood? Put them on, and pull the hood well forward."

"Yeah, I hear the rain."

Halprin answered gruffly, "I'm more concerned we protect you from eyes than from rain. I asked Goodwoman Espeta to give you an old cape in case we're being watched. Now, out to the stable as quietly and secretly as we can."

He nodded toward the two women, simultaneously dropping several coins at Cara's place. As he reached for the door latch, Halprin glanced back. "What do Outworlders eat in the morning?"

"You don't want to know." Frowning at the rain billowing over the doorstep, Cara pulled the hood forward, bowed her head and scurried after the enchanter.

The courtyard was empty unless one counted bits of slashed leather and a scattering of arrows, waterlogged in puddles that were too green. Cara made a face. Werewright blood was dark green.

She raced through the stable doorway, practically treading on the enchanter's heels. A soft rustle sounded in the shadows to the right, and Halprin turned toward it. Fear gripped Cara's throat then fled her in a gasp as the innkeeper came out from between two saddled horses.

Halprin murmured, "My gratitude, Goodman Rathnar. I'm sorry about Posha. She was a good watchdog."

Glancing toward a bloodied blanket covering something under the glow of the candle, the man nodded. His face was pale, his eyes haunted.

Cara sighed to herself, remembering the dog that had challenged her and the pony on their arrival. One death after another. Would anything survive by the time she completed her mission?

Looking even more anxious than Cara felt, the innkeeper offered, "I'll come--"

"No," the enchanter interrupted. "Go inside and get everyone ready to move. Alphasis be with you."

Some of the fear fled from the innkeeper's face. Rathnar bowed and then bowed again to Cara. "My lady, an honor." Drawing a short sword and pulling his hood forward, he hurried out the door.

The dim light coming from the single candle sconce hampered Cara so it took a moment to locate the pony she had been riding. Not yet saddled, she was tied by her halter to the far wall near a closed shutter. Before Cara could take more than a couple of steps that way, the enchanter grasped her arm and turned her toward him.

"You'll be riding the mare, over by Calyx. Your pony would be too slow." Halprin smiled. "The mare was Rathnar's and she's fast, but remember she now belongs to the Crown, not to you."

"Well, technically, the pony wasn't mine either." Cara started toward the saddled horses, only to be stopped a second time. She felt self-conscious. Halprin was very close and very attractive, and his hand on her arm was pleasantly disturbing. She couldn't imagine why he had stopped her twice now. Rather, the explanation that sprang to mind made her face warm. She was suddenly glad the light was behind her.

"Cara." Halprin paused as if stopping to choose his words. "You mentioned something a few minutes ago that concerns me."

Cara's thoughts snapped back from their wanderings. Relief and regret fought for dominance. Not trusting her voice, she nodded to show she was listening.

“That you can sense when either Hathel or I perform a weaving,” the enchanter continued, evidently seeing only the nod. “Do you also sense ... Are you uneasy when close to either Hathel or myself?”

Stifling a hysterical laugh, Cara managed to answer, “Yeah. Well, I used to be. Okay, actually I still am some of the time, and when you guys do an enchantment, I feel-”

“An itching or tickling sensation somewhere under the surface of your skin, and a sound or a light that is neither.” Halprin finished for her, with a pleased smile. “I expected as much. The first, the sense of unease, many Peralike feel when around us. We say that they sense our semblance. The latter, sensing the semblance of an enchantment or a spell, is very unusual in those not trained in the ways of the Order. Pay it careful mind when you feel it, Cara. If no enchanter is nearby performing a weaving, odd or unpleasant physical sensations may prove a warning of a spell being cast.”

Relieved, Cara asked, “That’s my power?”

Halprin chuckled and shook his head. “Sorry but no, Opener. It must be an ability no one in my world has.” He studied Cara’s face intently, “Now, a bit of a weaving to disguise you until we’re well out of town. Close your eyes. This could be disorienting.”

His hand brushed her face, and then he began speaking in a strange language. Gentle echoes of chimes swept over her like the tickle of an electrical charge, making Cara gasp and tremble. A moment later, and they were gone. Cara opened her eyes and knew that more than a moment had passed. Halprin studied her again, at last nodding in satisfaction. He looked exhausted.

“Hurry now! I cannot sustain it for long.” He strode to his horse and Cara followed. A moment later, they slipped out the stable door, to be greeted by a barrage of raindrops. “Slowly, so as not to attract attention,” Halprin murmured. He loosened his sword in its sheath then he urged Calyx to a slow trot.

Cara pulled the hood and cape closer and remembered the innkeeper’s wife with gratitude. It was her only pleasant thought and she clung to it, as she followed the enchanter out of the courtyard toward the eastern edge of the village.

Cara soon recognized the signs of preparation for war, especially the smithies crowded with people waiting for the repair of weapons. Were the youngest ones just as scared as she was and, like her, wishing none of this was happening?

Others joined them on the roads, fleeing eastward to comparative safety, driving flocks, or pulling or driving wagons laden with a few possessions. Cara remembered snatches of scenes from when her parents put on CNN. Comparative safety might be no safety at all, depending on their destinations or what the Daetaga would do with the abandoned homes and lands. She had never imagined what it would be like to be part of such an exodus.

Her spirits already at low ebb, Cara grew more miserable as the hours passed. She and Halprin hardly spoke, their concentration on getting to the port as swiftly and safely as possible. They had passed three villages and a distant city when the sun returned, casting early afternoon shadows forward in their path.

Cara’s eyes drifted shut and popped open to the slowing rhythm of the mare’s gait. Must be another snarled crowd ahead ... The cape was damp. She ought to remove it ... Coarse fibers scraped her chin. Cara straightened hastily. The rough mane of her horse bobbed before her.

Then a hand reached over and grasped the nearest rein. “Cara? Do you wish to stop?”

Cara glanced sheepishly toward the enchanter.

He smiled at her but his eyes looked as tired as she felt. “We’re stopping for a bit,” he added firmly. “There’s a good place for it, off the road up there.”

She looked off to the right. Masked by shrubs and weeds growing on a rickety fence, a rutted path branched from the crowded main road. A wagon, drawn by oxen and laden with barrels, creaked toward them along the path and turned east just in front of them. They rode slowly up the path through farmlands or an orchard of some kind. Cara yawned and blinked, then tried to focus on the shrubs closing in on them from either side. Something was wrong with them--they were nearly the color of werewright blood. Another yawn mutated into a gasp, she looked toward the enchanter.

“Hideous, aren’t they?” Halprin murmured, glancing from side to side. “Empire shrubs. Our ancestors brought them when we fled to Narenta.”

“They’re dark green!” Cara intended to add, “Like evergreens back home” but the disgust on the enchanter’s face stopped her. She felt embarrassed, as if admitting to the similarity with Earth plants would be admitting to something shameful. Instead, she asked, “If you guys don’t like them, why did you bring them?”

Halprin chuckled and shook his head. “That was direct. You must be waking up. The empire berry is a source of lamp oil.” He stopped Calyx close to the wide door of an old warehouse. Leaning toward Cara, the enchanter whispered conspiratorially, “And verric is made from the root.”

Cara watched Halprin dismount, her foggy mind still trying to parse the meaning of his last words. Suddenly, she jumped down from her horse. Verric! Narentan caffeine!

Cara sipped at her second bowl of blood-green verric, her eyes fixed on several men and women working at the berry press a few yards away. Sweat mingled with the unpleasant stench of empire leaves. The rim of the barrel she was sitting on cut into her thighs just above her knees. The barrel she leaned against curved the wrong way to provide the proper support. Her throat and the back half of her tongue were still burning from the cauterizing heat of her first mouthful. She hadn’t felt this comfortable in days.

However, she suspected they were about to get moving again. The enchanter had just appeared in a lamp lit doorway further along the wall, and then turned to continue talking with people in the room behind him. He held a small black bag in his left hand. As soon as he stopped speaking and headed toward her, she slid down from the barrel top.

“Leaving?”

“Soon,” Halprin answered. He dumped the bag of verric root on top of one of the barrels and turned toward the wide outside door. “I had hopes we might meet up with Hathel here.” He shrugged and turned back toward Cara. “We made good time this morning. We can afford to wait a few more minutes.” He removed his cape and draped it over the same barrel.

Cara had already removed her cape. The weather was changing back toward spring, and the moist air wafting in through the doorway was almost warm.

“You worried?”

“About what?”

“At home, we call that kind of an answer, ‘hedging’.”

“Hedging?” Halprin’s grim face softened with a hint of amusement. “No, I’m not particularly worried. I suspect they’re already at the Gorge, and have finished the enchantments. They probably surprised Pazgar and those with him. Of course, he’ll have another plan in readiness, probably heading east through the province with the ultimate goal to take a bridge. If they choose not to risk the battle for a bridge, they’ll find little wood for rafts. Unlike the Sweetwater, we allow few trees to grow on the northern bank of the Nonz. I’ve warned everyone I could. We should have a few days.”

“I meant Hathel. And Zabnar.”

“Oh.” The enchanter’s smile faded. “Then, yes. Hathel should be here by now. I doubt, I hope Zabnar isn’t the cause of his tardiness. He failed to capture you so he and his werewrights should be retreating west to join Pazgar. He has no way of knowing that we foiled Pazgar’s tunneling attempt but regardless his work as distraction from the Gorge would be at an end. We—”

Halprin spun away from her. Cara heard the ominous sound of metal on metal, and ducked before she even saw the blade driving toward her throat. The barrel behind her rocked with the impact of the sword just inches above her left ear. She wrenched her dagger free and thrust upward at the hand on the blade’s hilt, feeling the soft resistance of flesh and hearing a scream. Someone, Halprin, yanked on her left hand. She scrambled toward him under the flash of another sword. Lightning ripped along every blood vessel. Crying out, Cara managed a step or two toward the open doorway but forced herself to turn back. Halprin might need help.

“Hold still!” Halprin snarled. The point of his sword dug through the leather vest of one attacker and made it nearly impossible for him to obey the command. The other one moved feebly on the red-stained floor between them, blood pulsing from his throat.

Humans. Elders, not werewrights. Cara glanced at the red staining her knife, and then looked back toward the furious enchanter and his squirming prisoner. She walked towards them on legs made of sponge.

Halprin glanced toward her. "Are you hurt?"

"No." The word quivered into multiple syllables. She tried to steady her voice as she added, "You are. Your arm."

The enchanter nodded. He called out genially towards the doorway, "Greeting, Hathel! You're late!"

They reached Sweetwater Delta by mid-afternoon. As they rode over causeways and bridges, the salt tang blew inland to meet them. In spite of a freshening sea breeze, the air remained warm. Cara flung back her head and filled her lungs.

First towers then walls loomed into view as they clattered down a sloping causeway until a great city rose before them, walled about on the landward side but open to the glittering sea on their left. Scores of ships lined the dock in the northeast-facing harbor. All were sailing ships with brightly painted hulls and sails. Many were tied up at the wharfs, sails bound fast, but others were heading out to sea or dropping anchor even as she watched. Her spirits lifted, Cara drank it all in.

Soon the city walls cut off their view of the harbor. They passed through the outer gates slowly. Beyond, refugees from the province through which they had been riding surged down the middle of narrow streets or gathered in clumps in any sheltered curve of a wall.

Had Hythe and Cona been warned and fled to a northern port? More likely, they had only reached a smaller town farther to the west and more vulnerable. She tried to dismiss the thought. Others like it had chased through her mind all afternoon. Concern for Halprin's warriors and her seabird friends, who had yet to be seen. For Halprin, though Hathel had pronounced the wound superficial. For the goodman and his wife, marked by the Shadow as ones who had helped an Outworlder.

I owe them. I wouldn't be alive and safe without them, but chain-fretting isn't doing them—or me—any good.

A toddler burst from the shadowed side of a building wall and ran toward them eagerly, then stopped and stared at the horses. Overwhelmed, he turned away, took a step or two, turned again and started to cry. A grey-haired woman hurried over and gathered him up. Standing half in and half out of shadow, a second woman—far pregnant—called out to them. She had one hand on the arm of a young girl nearly as tall as herself.

Cara lost sight of them as she and the enchanters turned past the building's corner but she didn't lose the memory. *Add in all these poor people. They're the ones I'm here for. Wonder when she's due. Husband might have been at one of those forges. Stop, stop.*

They're already worried. Terrified. What would they be if they knew their rescuer just tried to brake a horse for that kid by slamming down on a stirrup?

I can't keep doing this! My brain needs a timeout before I go completely squirrely. Too late. All this stuff is like a bunch of squirrels racing around in my cage-brain, each popping through the door one after another. Well, guys, the cage door is open. I'm going to be Tourist-Woman for an hour—short of a new assassination attempt. Okay, give it a rest! Tourist-Woman. Never met a city that wasn't worth gawking at.

Cara took a long breath, lifted her head and looked around. The air was tainted with rotten fish, sweat and smoke, luscious with cooking, spices and perfumes. Even the smallest dwellings sported colorful designs on their walls. Determined to play tourist, she asked what they meant. Halprin explained they were chalked tokens of ancient families, guilds and the ranks of minor officials. Hathel pointed to the closest, interpreting the vibrant basket-weave design as a history of family artisans in one direction and an advertisement for fishing tackle in the other.

Seabirds hung far aloft riding the thermals, or winged purposefully just above the heads of the crowds of Elders. Brown-haired or red-haired like herself, the city's people swirled around her, bright in striped robes or bare to the waist and sporting necklaces of shells and silver and oddly shaped fish bones. Some, especially the children, paused and stared at her, awed recognition in their eyes. A few even reached to touch her, only to be foiled by the yellow-caped city guards Halprin had requested when they reached the outside gates.

Their progress from land gate to water was so slow that they reached the harbor less than an hour before sunset. Lord Halprin hurried forward alone, speaking only briefly to those who greeted him by name and asked for news. He walked down the quay to a small ship and called out a message, then beckoned Cara and Hathel to follow him. She was glad to dismount, for they had stopped only the one fateful time that day. After several days of riding a pony, riding a galloping mare instead had her aching all over again.

Cara followed Halprin up the gangplank, Hathel close behind her. They kept walking but she sank gratefully onto a fixed bench near the bow, and watched in fascination as men climbed up the rigging and released the single square sail, painted--a sailor told her--with the Sword and Scroll crest of King Cybis. Other sailors urged their horses up the gangplank, or hauled up the two anchors fore and aft. Her eyes drifted shut.

Cara woke moments later. Most of the men had disappeared. *Abandon ship!* She giggled. A man shouted. She heard a rumble below deck that she couldn't identify. Certainly not an engine. Cara leaned over the starboard railing. A dozen oars bristled below her. Another clear call and they rose and then dipped, and rose again. At their urging, the ship glided slowly past the other shipping out to the open sea. As they cleared the harbor, Cara tried to get a look at the whole city but the sun shone in her eyes. When she turned back seaward, the oars had been shipped and the ship was alive, her sail responding to the breeze.

Halprin and Hathel were talking to the captain and a small knot of sailors. Uncomfortable at the gravity of their faces, Cara turned away. Seabirds were approaching the ship from the seaward side--she could hear the excited speech of their visitors from the deck. Cara wondered how close they were to the Isle.

She glanced back up--the seabirds were heading toward her. Cara called out in delight, "Hi! Did you check to see if your Isle was still there?"

Kataro and Kalapa flew down to her in a spiral, alighting on the closest rigging.

"Ships are so slow!" Kalapa scoffed.

"If we'd left the dock when you did, we would have been there and back by now."

"Braggart! So is everything as you left it, Kalapa?"

"Better! The lilies are all in bloom, and so are the capelet trees."

"And the camslips! They always begin opening three days before the Day of Merciful Healing, Little Chick."

"Sounds like Capistrano's swallows."

"Who? What does he swallow?"

Cara shook her head and managed to gasp through her giggles, "Nothing. Go on."

Kalapa complied instead, "Cara, I can't wait for you to see the procession to the Throne of Healing."

Kataro warned, "We may not be able to stay that long. We have no way of knowing what Alphasis intends but--with sorcerers on the move--our visit is likely to be short."

He turned to Cara, "We'll show you all we can in the time we have. Our homes, of course, and Kalapa's apothecary and the Chalzanene Gates. Those you'll see tonight--the perfect time!"

"And Kataro's scrolls, and his study, and the Paeanic Choir ..."

Their excitement was infectious. Cara peered eagerly over the bow for her first glimpse of gray rock. Just as the sun was setting, they approached Chalzanene Harbor. The sunset colors glowed on the ships and transformed the Isle's rugged gray crags and pinnacles to a faerie castle of delicate tints of rose, gold and pale purple, the sky behind the peaks a nearly electric blue. The sight was fleeting--as the ship was being made fast, the sun set taking the glory it had lent with it.

They disembarked in twilight. While the seamen worked to transfer the horses to the pier, Cara was occupied with another matter. The sun was gone and the moon was not in the sky, but light shimmered just a little way past the wharf. She stared inland, closed her eyes and, opening them, stared again. If she had traveled north rather than east, she would have sworn she was looking at the Aurora Borealis. Except they weren't near Narenta's poles. Except the vibrant colors formed a strangely narrow pattern that brushed the island itself. Except the colors weren't quite typical aurora colors, but blending and pulsing sheets of deep violet, electric blue and a turquoise that bordered on pale green.

Someone close by her voiced a delighted laugh with just a touch of triumph in it. Cara turned to the seabirds, who had settled on a wooden crate close beside her.

Before she could point or speak, Kataro explained, "The Chalzanene Gates. Pity we didn't arrive a half hour earlier. They're even more beautiful during the last moments of sunset."

“Cara?”

The enchanters rode up and Halprin leaned toward her, the reins of her own mount in his hand. She turned away from the sight of the gates reluctantly and she mounted. The seabirds took flight. Halprin urged his horse across the wide pier. He held a torch between them, as she fell into position by his side. The hooves of Hathel’s horse clattered on wood, just behind them.

Halprin murmured, “If you like the gates now, wait until we draw closer.” Cara turned and found him grinning like a child who had been given a gift.

They rode up the slope of a grassy path and over the ridge of a wide-stretching hill. Iron posts appeared occasionally, set back alternately from one edge of the path or the other. Each held aloft an ornate lamp, close enough to serve as a marker for their route yet not so close as to allow safe travel without a torch. Curious, Cara reined her horse off the path and over to one of the massive lamps. Its weathered frame was shaped like a tree. Golden flame flared windblown from the ceramic cup, etching the iron branches circling about it in vivid relief. She turned back to the road, rejoining the waiting enchanters.

The Chalzanene Gates had to be close--Cara could see the slender silhouettes of small plants at their shining feet. She followed the layered veils of shimmering light straight up until they appeared to change direction about thirty feet or so from the ground. From there, the violet-blue and pale green lights receded--fleeing from her or beckoning like a path leading to the distant stars. What would it be like to walk those pulsing sheets of turquoise and midnight blue light? To stand on, float along, a never-ending path. Not never-ending. Going ... where? Filled with longing, Cara gazed at the point where the path seemed to end ... and found that she was staring at a spot directly over her head. It made her dizzy. She looked straight forward again. Again, the vibrant blues, the violets and delicate pale greens of the gates receded, forming a path she could not walk, bound for a place she could never reach. She drew a breath and forced herself to look away.

Leather creaked near her. She looked toward the enchanters and saw that they had dismounted. As she did the same, she whispered, “Is it magnetic? Is there a satellite up there?” She searched through half-remembered terms from science classes. *Solar wind, electro-magnetism? Not even close.*

“There is no ‘up there’ to which they flow and then cease.” Halprin murmured, close beside her. “We believe they keep going forever.”

“Unless you fly over them.” Kataro interrupted softly. “I did once. Inadvertently. I was thinking about a passage I had just translated and forgot where I was.

“I flew right over them!” Voicing a delight-filled yet nervous laugh, the seabird added, “Colors. Exhilaration. I can’t ... You can’t do it if you try to though. Come, Little Chick. They’re waiting to welcome you.”

Her pulse throbbing suddenly in her ears, Cara started to ask, “The gates are waiting?” Then she saw an ancient seabird perched on a silver litter borne by two young Elders dressed in dark hoods and lectens. A third Elder held a lamp in one hand and a short sword upright before his face in the other. Its silvery surface glittered with the light of a thousand violet stars.

The venerable bird bobbed his head and half-opened his wings in the traditional salutation. “Hail, Kataro and Kalapa, master-scholars and kinsmen. Hail, Lord Halprin, Commander of the Order of the Scroll. Hail, Lord Hathel, honored one of the Scroll. Hail, Cara, Outworlder and Defender of the Three Peoples. My name is Kamar, Scholar-Lieutenant of the College of Wisdom. The guesthouse isn’t far. Kinsmen, do you intend to stay with our honored guests or do you plan to fly to your homes?”

The two seabirds looked toward Cara. Seeing their hesitancy, she said, “Go ahead. I’ll be just fine. I’ll probably be asleep in an hour.”

Calling out farewells and plans for meeting in the morning, the seabirds left.

The young man with the lamp and the sword led Halprin, Hathel and Cara up a dim path. Cara blinked as he slipped through the “distant” light of the Gates and was gone. With a nervous glance toward Halprin, she took a step forward. Light swept from the night sky toward her like a violet tsunami wave. Then it was behind her, leaving an odd scent in the air and a pang of longing in her heart.

The guesthouse stood before her. The young man waited at its open door. Firelight, faded and pale to her eyes, lit an empty hallway within.

Bidding them farewell, the Peralike youth used the hilt of his sword to tap an ancient bronze bowl just inside the door. Then he walked back outside. The bowl was still chiming when several cloaked and hooded figures hurried down the corridor and bade them follow.

15-News from the Mainland

One cloaked figure led Cara down the hall and into a large square room, dimly lit with lamps in each corner but with no fireplace. A half dozen young Peralike sat on cushions with scrolls open before them. Others wrote with quill pens on long, narrow sheets supported by wooden tables no bigger than footstools. Heads lifted one by one and eyes touched on Cara, and she caught flickers of “Outworlder awe”. No one spoke but a couple of the Elders offered faint smiles then hastily returned to their studies.

Their guides led the enchanters straight through the room. Hers turned to the right, through an archway and into a short corridor. The woman stopped at a door on the left side and unlocked it with a bronze key. She turned and, after peeking back down the hall past Cara, she pulled back her hood. She was perhaps two or three years older than Cara was, and slightly taller. Bits of her light brown hair strayed from her double braids. Her eyes were pale green or blue, but dark-ringed about the iris. She smiled and bowed with her hands crossed just as Halprin and Hathel did.

“Welcome, Lady Outworlder. My name is Liricia. A bath is prepared and a meal will be brought in due time. Do you wish for anything else?”

Cara warmed to her guide at once. “Greeting. I’m Cara. Would you mind if I asked you some questions later? I don’t know much about this place.”

Liricia’s smile warmed. “Of course, though I shan’t be able to stay for long.” She handed Cara the key, pulled her hood back in place, then pattered back down the hall.

Cara pushed open the door and peeked inside. The only rooms she had seen so far were at the mill and the inn. This was as different from both as sunlight to shadow. Sweet-scented candles were scattered about on tables, in wall sconces, even on the wide windowsill. Two small tables, a few velvety cushions and a futon-like bed failed to fill the generous size of the room to its capacity. The walls and floor were a white stone finely veined with the blue of a spring sky. Cara whispered, “Score! Must be the luxury suite.”

Tapestries nearly covered the walls. Silken yarns on the largest recorded Alphasis’ destruction of the Bastion of Corruption. The work consisted of three panels--the first and last were small and showed respectively the Bastion as it had originally appeared and the cavernous Riven Gorge. The middle panel was so realistic that the stones seemed in motion. Surely, she had seen one move out of the corner of her eye! At the top, Alphasis flew above the scattering stones. He looked at her intently. Too intently. Cara gasped and turned away. She closed her eyes and listened to the throb of her heartbeats in her ears. After a minute or two, she drew a breath and turned back. The stitching was painstakingly intricate, but it was just that. *Get a grip! First the gates. Now this. You’re really going crackers.*

The pristine room reminded her of how dirty she was. A promising gurgle of water led her to a sunken square in an alcove lined with tile, the water in it laden with flower petals. On a shallow shelf lay rough squares of soap, soft towels and a curious wooden comb-brush. Freshly watered ivy vines explored a low wooden chest, or so Cara thought until she walked past and saw folds of cloth in the candlelight. The caftan-like robe draped across the chest had a full but divided skirt, suitable for someone who spent time riding. Cara pondered the ivy pattern. She had seen no ivy plants here, and the faithfully produced greens were as alien to Narenta as the empire shrub hues.

As desperately as Cara wanted a bath, she took a moment to examine the plumbing. A small pump handle and nozzle produced cold water. Water was heating above a coal-filled brazier. Between it and the edge of the tub ran a pipe with a palm-sized wheel that probably controlled the flow of hot water. She touched the wheel and pulled her hand away. The gadget needed a warning sign advising caution. A large iron wheel on the other edge of the tub probably controlled the drain. Enough for now. Cara turned to the daunting task of removing a week of filth.

She was trying to towel-dry her hair when she heard a soft knock. Slipping her feet into woven shoes lined with green velvet, she hurried to the door.

An hour later, Cara had told her whole tale at the insistence of Liricia. In exchange, all she had learned was that the woman was a scholar-apprentice, not a servant as she had originally thought. That, plus apprentices knew how to bake mouthwatering bread, how to cook spicy shellfish dishes and how to brew extremely strong verri. She did need to find out one thing before tomorrow. Her worried thoughts that afternoon had served one purpose by reminding her she had promised to check on Hythe and Cona's son. With war coming, that small mission had taken on new urgency.

"Before I forget, I'm supposed to look for someone. His name's Harone. He's the son of the millers I told you about."

"Father?" Liricia prompted.

"Hythe. Mother's name Cona."

"Harone na Hythe," the apprentice murmured to herself. "Millers." She sighed and answered apologetically. "No. There are large numbers of us and I'm only in my first year."

"Where's a student database when you need it," Cara muttered to herself, choosing to ignore the confused expression on Liricia's face. "Let me think. Kataro told me stuff about him ... Oh! He's studying prophecy? Does that make sense? With a colleague of Kataro's."

"The Book of Prophecy?"

Cara nodded, hoping that was correct.

"With Kalak, then." Liricia favored her with a delighted smile. "Egreth studies with Kalak. He mentioned a man descended from millers." The woman's eyes took on a hint of mischief, "Spoke of him with some jealousy I thought."

Dish! Cara grinned, savoring the prospect of a bit of earth-like gossip.

"Egreth told me Master-scholar Kalak claims the man, Harone, is one of the best scholar-apprentices he has ever tutored. He has learned much of the Seabird language, while Egreth still struggles with the kl'kakas. Kalak is like a young bird again, Egreth says. He thinks he sees his successor for when he steps down. And," Liricia giggled. "It won't be Egreth."

"But Harone can't be much older than us! He'd be a professor so soon?"

"Oh, not for some time. Kalak is to step down in the Year of Galanth, but he will probably try to stretch it to six years. Egreth says his health is not of the best, but he greatly enjoys the teaching and the debate with his fellow master-scholars. Look amongst the largest cluster of scholars' towers north of the Throne of Wisdom. The son of your friends would be dressed in a purple lecten with a white border." Liricia gestured toward her own simple green robe. "This is a lecten. Go to the correct towers and you need search through only a few dozen of us. Tell me now. What are your plans for the morrow?"

"Well, I'm not really sure. The seabirds said so many things, like about a holiday coming up, but I think tomorrow is the grand tour. Kataro and Kalapa want to show me their homes and offices ... uh, work places? And so on."

"Will that be before or after you seek an audience with Alphesis?"

Cara opened her mouth but nothing came out. *She makes it sound like it happens all the time--like you just call the receptionist and set up an appointment. Okay, don't be rude but don't commit to anything.* "I ... I don't know. That is to say, I'm not sure if I'm supposed to go see Alphesis at all."

Liricia frowned. "Forgive me. I just assumed that is why you came to the Isle. Why did you come then? Is the act you have been brought to perform to be done here?"

Cara ignored the questions. "Liricia, have you ever seen Alphesis?"

"Yes."

The joy encapsulated in that one word warmed her like the sun to one chilled by winter snows. Cara started to say more, to ask for details, but the words didn't come. Frankly, she wasn't sure if she wanted details. Liricia looked just past her but she hardly seemed to be in the room. Uncomfortable in the silence, her eyes downcast, she murmured, "Maybe I better go to bed now. I've got a lot to do tomorrow and ..." She glanced up. "Of course, you do, too," she finished lamely.

Liricia studied her face with unsettling keenness. "Of course. Unless you rise very early I shan't see you in the morning, so farewell and may Alphasis protect you, Cara."

"Good night, Liricia. I'll see you ... when I see you, I guess. Good luck translating that Scopar scroll, was it?"

Liricia nodded and smiled. Then she deftly picked up the tray and was gone. The room suddenly felt empty and cheerless. Hurriedly, Cara got ready for bed. When she blew out the last candle, somehow it didn't surprise her to see Liricia's radiant smile.

"Maybe working with Alphasis won't be so bad," she thought. She yawned and fell asleep almost at once.

Cara sat up and looked around the sunlit room in confusion, until she saw the table where she and Liricia had eaten. The sight brought to mind Liricia's words. Liricia has actually met Alphasis. Would she meet him before the day ended? She hurriedly washed and dressed. After all that had happened recently, anything seemed possible. She was trying to decide whether she was supposed to remain in her room, when a shadow fell across the open window.

Kalapa landed on the sill, knocking two of the candles into the room in the process. Without so much as a greeting, the normally courteous seabird asked, "Kataro hasn't come yet?"

"No, Kalapa. At least I haven't seen him. Of course, I just woke up--"

"Would you like to breakfast out here in the garden? We can watch for him from here."

"Cool." Cara walked over to the window and looked out. "Look at that sunlight! It already feels almost as warm as yesterday afternoon!"

"We have a strong ocean breeze today, and you will be climbing. Bring your cape." Kalapa responded absently, with her back to the Outworlder and her eyes scanning the sky.

"I'm afraid I'll have to go by the door." Kalapa didn't respond. "I'll be around in a moment," Cara added, then gave up. Kalapa was certainly preoccupied.

Slipping on her old shoes, Cara hurried down the hall. She looked for Liricia as she went but no one, lecten-clad or otherwise, sat studying in the central room. The hallway leading to the door was empty as well. It must be really late. Classes would have started if it were like her own school. She struggled to open the heavy outside door, and then found herself blinking in the sunlight.

Someone clad in dark blue was standing a few yards away from her, looking to her left. One hand rested on the head of a tall staff. Bound about his dark gray-touched hair was a fine thread of silver. He glanced toward her and smiled.

Halprin. Cara smiled back, managing a casual wave as she walked toward him. Clad in the formal cape, a small locket-like square of silver bound to his forehead, the enchanter looked like royalty. She resisted giving him a servant's 'obeisance bow' with difficulty. Nodding, with hands crossed on her chest, she murmured, "Greeting."

"Greeting." The enchanter studied her curiously from head to feet for a moment then turned his attention back to the steep slope up the island. "We have a bit of a walk before us." He pointed high into the air, revealing the tawny glimmer of the robes beneath his unlaced cape.

Cara looked toward where he pointed and groaned. A stony rib of rough gray rose from somewhere behind the guesthouse. It climbed rapidly into the sky as it snaked north, disappearing behind mountain mists then reappearing as a glittering spike of steel--bright against the cloudless sky.

Halprin laughed. "That was cruel. Forgive me!" He nodded toward the guesthouse door behind Cara. "Here he comes." With an embarrassed grin in response to Cara's continued glare, he added, "I am sorry! Only Hathel and I have to make the climb. The seabirds don't make reaching their Thought Stone easy for the wingless."

He turned back to his yawning fellow enchanter and bowed. "Ready? You have your walking staff?"

Hathel returned the gesture and mumbled a garbled "Greeting" in the midst of another yawn. "No. Hate them." the physician grumped, offering Cara a nod and bow. "Let's start."

"Why?" Cara sputtered.

Halprin answered soberly, "Duty, Lady Cara. Our liege is in Fiori awaiting word from us." He bowed again, "A fine day, and good adventure to you!"

Hathel nodded toward her then hurried after the rapidly moving enchanter. Cara caught a handful of words from Halprin before they disappeared around the side of the building, “So, Hathel. With which fellow physician did you talk half the night?”

Flowers grew abundantly along the path, but Cara was reasonably sure that the garden where Kalapa awaited her arrival must lie elsewhere. She glanced at the guesthouse in an attempt to orient herself, and then found herself staring at it with open mouth. The whole building was fashioned of the same stone as the walls of her room. The sun glowed on the blue veins of the stone, tracing pattern too intricate and beautiful to be accidental.

She had not really seen the style of architecture when they arrived the previous night. It bore an uncanny resemblance to the shrine, even the same kind of columns and the seabird engraving over the door. Cara backed away a bit, just to confirm that the roof of the building was domed. It was, several times over--probably one dome for each major wing and each a different shade of bluish stone. It took her a few minutes before she remembered she had yet to find the garden.

Kalapa awaited her, pacing impatiently along a carefully clipped hedge and evidently oblivious to the rustle and dip of successive shrubs supporting her weight. She was humming a cheerful tune to herself--a little silly sounding even by Earth standards--but she kept pausing to look up at the sky. As clearly as if she heard someone speak, Cara knew that Kalapa had something to tell her, something she was longing to tell another.

Kalapa saluted her. “Ah, there you are! The scholar apprentices have brought us a table and the morning meal.”

Cara asked, “No sign of Kataro yet?”

The seabird turned back to her. “No, not yet.”

“I think congratulations are in order?”

Kalapa stopped her pacing and flew to the table. “What gave it away, Cara?”

“Duh. You and Kataro, of course. You two talked about when you’re going to get married?”

“Perhaps, in two days, just before the Feast?” Kataro flew over the hedge and lightly dropped beside Kalapa unto the table. “If that suits you, Kalapa?” He bobbed Cara a quick greeting.

“I am well suited, beloved.”

Cara found she couldn’t stop grinning at the two of them. She had never thought herself much of a romantic but just watching the seabirds together filled her with a bit of their own joy. When the meal was over, she had to remind her companions that they promised to show her the Isle.

Soon they were ascending the pathways that led to the rocky center of the island. For a while, Cara walked up a gentle path through groves of trees and past a handful of beautiful buildings surrounded by gardens. Each structure had a different style from the next--the types of stone used for construction varied as much as the building shapes and the surrounding foliage.

The variety of flowers astonished her. Their scents filled the air and Cara breathed it in, wishing she could hide some of it away to bring out on a cold winter evening at home. *From that glimpse in the stone, I assumed the Isle was entirely volcanic gray stone. What a cool reality check!*

Eventually they left this pleasant place behind, and Cara began to climb in earnest toward the real heart of the island. Here the gentle path changed to steep stairs, with benches provided to rest along their way. At first trees sheltered each bench but, as the land grew rockier, they were left behind. Cara would have believed no paths hewn for humankind could be steeper, had she not seen the heights the enchanters needed to scale in order to speak in thought to their king.

Cara and the seabirds weren’t alone--others, mostly lecten-clad Elders, walked before or behind them but they passed few people descending this early in the day. Many of the scholar apprentices held objects that Cara couldn’t identify. The seabirds explained that these were scrolls wrapped in cloths for protection, or writing kits filled with quill pens and inkpots.

When she reached the summit of the cliff encircling the inner island, Cara stopped. The pinnacles and precipices rose in a thick crescent before her exactly as they had appeared in her vision. What she had taken for human-crafted towers from aboard ship proved to be natural rock formations, if anything so majestic could be

so lightly described and dismissed. Austere, but also serene, the landscape commanded the attention of three scholar-apprentices standing near her. They paused briefly at the summit like her before choosing a gently curved downward path into the shallow calderas-valley set like a jewel within the surrounding cliffs.

Following Kataro's advice, she choose a path with a crushed stone surface and narrow borders of ground cover that bobbed up and down and swooped in great arcs to avoid sheer drops and slender chimneys of stone. At last, it led into a copse of nearly sequoia-tall towers. Lighting on a rough rim of stone near the base of one tower, Kataro and Kalapa told her these were the oldest towers still in use. Ancient and volcanic in origin, the chimneys had been carefully hollowed out for use as archives and study chambers for the Chosen and other scholars. The outside walls had been left as nature had made them, and wisely. No tame design of builder or architect could improve on blue sky and warm gray rock in perfect harmony.

"How long have they been used?"

Kalapa shrugged and Kataro added a clacking laugh.

"Thousands of years, Little Chick. Someone would have to sort through hundreds of archived records of teachers then add together the spans of their individual teaching tenures to even make a guess."

Kalapa warned, "Don't speak more of it or he will grow curious, drop everything else and go find out."

Kataro offered Kalapa a glare that was obviously faked.

Kalapa raised and lowered the feathers on the top of her head as if agitated. "I didn't mean to offend, Kataro dear, but I know you. Shall we show Cara your study next?"

Smiling, Cara followed her flying guides down a path toward the central craters. The seabirds waited for her to catch up, perched on a jagged outcropping. Then, they began pointing out various sights scattered throughout the shallow valley that constituted the center of the island. Their deep affection for their homeland was clear.

Sometimes, to right or left where patches of level land extended away from the path, little groups of three or four scholar-apprentices sat together talking earnestly. The seabirds explained that these weren't classes. All day long, a series of single scholar apprentices visited a master inside the tower where the Chosen and others had their archives. Rarely did any master attempt to teach more than six. The scholars of a 'class' never met each other in the master's chambers—most towers didn't have the room and masters preferred to work with each individually.

"Then these groups outside are one master's apprentices comparing notes so to speak?"

"In most cases. A few may be pursuing their studies under different masters but meet to discuss a related subject of interest to them all."

Kalapa broke in, "Kataro, isn't that Harone na Hythe in the group beyond the bridge? In the purple lecten. No, on the left."

Cara eagerly followed their gaze and made a guess at the young man they meant. He sat with his hood thrown back showing his dark hair, but she couldn't see his features at this distance. Then, he and the two with him hurriedly stood and began walking briskly down different paths. Cara tried to catch them but she stopped in spite of herself when she came to a bridge, a natural tongue of rock that joined two segments of the path. Harone was about to disappear amongst a cluster of towers, while she crept cautiously over the stone arch.

She looked up from halfway across the bridge and growled, "He's gone!"

"Don't worry, Little Chick. We'll make sure you see him before you leave."

Cara hardly heard him. A tiny sheltered valley spread beneath her feet like a florist's basket with the little bridge serving as its handle. "I didn't think there were many plants up here. Can we get down there? Love those trees! Weird though, looking straight down at them! Oh, but not to you I guess."

Kalapa answered, "Dozens of valleys like this pocket the central part of the Isle. The foliage you see is what grows naturally here. Those with the silver leaves and indigo flowers are the capelet trees, sacred to Alphasis, while the white and the pale green flowers are both varieties of camslips. I'm afraid you can't get down to this particular valley but there are others like it nearby that you can visit if there's time."

Shortly thereafter, they arrived at Kataro's study tower. The seabirds entered via a window shaped like an inverted pyramid close to the spire-like roof but Cara had to climb up inside like the Elder scholars. Rough steps wound upward into the core of the study tower, first clockwise then, above the yard-wide landing, counterclockwise. Only two narrow slits served as windows so she climbed most of the time in near darkness.

When Cara reached the open archway leading into Kataro's antechamber, she could do nothing for a few minutes but lean against the wall and pant.

She gasped, "Thought I was in good shape."

Kataro led her to his study, which was barely ten feet across and yet soared to an arched ceiling over 30 feet above her head. Cabinets especially made for the storage of scrolls covered most of the wall surfaces. Above these were clay tablet "bookcases", their upper edges nearly meeting as they curved toward each other near the ceiling. Four pieces of wooden furniture protruded from gaps between the cabinets. Their purpose threatened to remain a mystery until Kataro lay a newly retrieved scroll on the flat surface of one of the reading platforms and then settled on the heavy padded bar at its outer edge.

He brought down scrolls and clay or stone tablets so ancient they looked like treasures that belonged behind museum glass. The leather and wooden scroll tubes were as carefully crafted as works of art. Some bore intricate locks that Kataro opened delicately with a single claw tip. Most documents were written in one of many elegant forms of calligraphy—including the one that the Discerning stone had allowed Cara to read—with inks and on materials with as many hues and textures as the lands through which she had traveled.

Kataro demonstrated a kind of seabird shorthand that his people used to write rapidly on wax tablets and then he challenged Cara to talk as fast as she could while he transcribed her words. She couldn't read the resulting digs, grooves & claw punches but Kalapa turned the tablet toward her and read Cara's recital of nonsense song lyrics flawlessly.

Kataro explained that while the seabirds had opposable claws and therefore could write with pen and ink, they found it a slow process. Instead, they recorded permanent materials on clay tablets, or had the scholar apprentices transcribe anything requiring a permanent record from wax tablet to parchment.

Next on the itinerary was Kalapa's apothecary near the Throne of Healing, followed by dinner at her home. Kataro didn't live on the Isle itself but only flew to it when he taught or required the use of his archives.

The broad path to the apothecary curved along the rim of a larger valley than those they had crossed earlier. The rim walls were nearly perpendicular to the outer edges of the valley floor but they only rose ten feet above it. Ahead weathered and overgrown steps descended from the rim to join a faint trail through short plants and scattered capelet trees.

Cara asked, "Can I go down those steps? I think I can get a quick look at the trees and stuff, cut across and then climb back up using that flight over there. If I keep moving, I might make better time than going around the edge."

Kataro and Kalapa landed on the nearest tree. Before they could tell her no, she hurried forward and clambered down the flight, then started toward the closest copse of capelet trees.

Kalapa called out, "Cara, this is the valley of the Throne of Wisdom. We had hoped you would feel led to come here today but you're not required to approach a Throne unless you feel the time is right."

Kataro added, "You were told to come to the Isle but we don't know the reason. Most likely, Alphesis wishes to offer his counsel but, perhaps, the Isle holds a bit of lore about the Key of Opening. Alphesis of course will choose to instruct you in his own time."

Cara stopped where she was, and looked back. Both seabirds remained perched in the tree but they were watching her. They were too far away for her to read their expressions.

I've faced two sorcerers and survived. Why panic about meeting Alphesis? Maybe I'll get some questions answered. Night before last, I was complaining about him bringing me here and not saying a word since. This morning, I was looking forward to this minute.

Cara nodded. She turned and continued walking along the path but when she saw how close she had come to an open gate, she came to an abrupt halt. Fear, but not fear of harm, tethered her to the outside of the gate.

Why am I this freaked? Why can't I just ... move? I move, I go in and ... Yeah. All this becomes real. Too real, too much ...

The first time she looked into the narthrous stone, she saw this throne and the distant glimpse awed her. How could she possibly walk up to it? To him? Her knees started to buckle. She grabbed for the gatepost but pulled her hand away before she touched it.

Not going to collapse. What will they think? Why couldn't he just come to me like the sorcerers did? Surprise me?

She welcomed the flutter of approaching wings behind her.

"You have no reason to be afraid, Little Chick."

"I know, but I am. I guess that doesn't make sense."

"Many have felt fear when they reach these gates, afraid of that for which they seek."

Cara said nothing. Kalapa's words puzzled her.

"Little Chick, don't be disturbed. You are not required to enter against your will. Alphasis speaks to us wherever he chooses, and wherever we choose. If you decide to talk to him, come back here or do it wherever you are--like in your room."

Cara grimaced. "Yeah. I may have messed that up. I think he tried last night."

"What?"

"I was looking at a tapestry on the wall of my room, and the picture of him sort of came to life. It scared me--like being here so near the throne does--so I looked away. When I looked back, it was just a picture again. So he tried to talk with me but I stopped him. Or did I? Can I stop him? I mean, if he destroyed the bastion--"

"Yes, you can stop him." Kalapa's eyes were a little sad. "But only in that way."

"Try not to let it trouble you, Little Chick. The proper time will come. Let's keep going. We have just a short flight to Kalapa's apothecary."

The visit to the apothecary shop bewildered Cara. Once she found out what 'apothecary' meant, she expected to see pills in bottles everywhere. Instead, carefully gathered leaves and roots, seeds and bark, mortar and pestle, and tiny parchment packets or silken bags holding medicinal powders filled every shelf and table surface, the walls and even obscured most of the ceiling. The shop smelled nothing like a pharmacy or hospital back home--more of a cross between a florist and a spice shop.

Cara watched Kalapa's two Elder assistants pound the various substances and weigh the resulting powders on small scales with tiny weights of ebony stone. Another assistant, Kassis, wrote out the ingredients needed on wax tablets as required, and flew to fetch the various herbs from the baskets hung on the ceiling.

None of the customers was charged, though the apothecary was on a small street with other more ordinary shops.

She asked Kalapa, "Do you run a kind of clinic? My mom and a good friend of hers work at one and, when they're not doing that, they spend half their time helping at a homeless shelter. Sometimes I ..." She stopped abruptly. The most honest way to finish her sentence was, "I find ways to skip out on helping, too."

Kalapa answered, "The medicines are free because we're located near the Throne of Healing. In other places in Tethra, patrons must pay whatever they can afford."

"How do you keep in business, then? I mean, you've got salaries to pay, rent, supplies," Cara looked around her and added, "Someone's got to pay for these cute little measuring spoons. I like these! May I have one?"

Kalapa smiled and nodded. "Everyone who works here volunteers their time. Many who come to the Isle give us gifts of medicinal plants. They come from all over this land, so the variety of herbs and other materials tend to balance out over time. Occasionally, a traveler gives us copper or gold. We always seem to manage."

"You fight wars against the Shadow in your world, as well?" Kataro asked in sudden concern. "You mentioned those displaced from their homes?"

"Oh, not like here! I mean, we have wars, too, but not against the Shadow. Well actually, I guess, some of them maybe have been. We're not fighting right now. I mean, not at home. Some of us are fighting but not where I live ..."

The two seabirds looked at her in confusion, and Cara found her words of explanation trailing off. "Sorry. It's complicated and I'm explaining it badly. Most times we have two sides fighting but it isn't like one side is Light and the other is Shadow. Well, they think they are, I guess. Light."

Kataro asked thoughtfully, "But there is no war where you live now?" Cara shook her head, and decided to leave it at that. Kataro had other ideas. "But there are those displaced from their homes, who shelter near your family." He sighed and looked down at her sympathetically, "Was it a natural disaster, then?"

Cara sighed back. She really wanted to move on to some other subject. “Not really. Oh, we had one, believe me! And someone did attack us recently and there is war but it’s not where we live. Well, it was in our country, the attack, but now the fighting isn’t. Well, most of it isn’t. Some of it is, but it’s not really fighting fighting, you know? Anyway ...”

Kataro stared at her, “The subject makes you uncomfortable. Forgive me. Kalapa, ready to go home?”

Cara bolted for the door.

To reach Kalapa’s house, they had to pass by the Throne of Healing—an alabaster throne set in a shallow pool of brilliantly blue water. Kalapa told her that the waters were well known to be healing. In fact, the Act of Alphasis associated with the upcoming festival had taken place there.

They arrived at dusk. The seabirds’ friends and colleagues lay in wait for them so a quiet dinner was not to be had. No one mourned its absence in the face of the engagement celebration. Kalapa’s tiny eyrie could not hold them all so it spilled into her garden. No one cared--the weather was still mild and clear.

Cara soon gave up trying to remember names. Her confusion reminded her vividly of the first evening with the Neroli but neither that nor anything else could dampen her spirits.

At the onset Cara decided to put her worries aside for the evening but her resolution would have been unnecessary. She listened for hours to ancient tales and incomparable music like that which she had heard in the inn only days ago, and she had to repeat her own story many times. The candlelight shone on face after face with eyes shining and joyful, and mouths open in song or laughter, until Cara as if she were in a dream. She wished for the evening to never end, and indeed many hours passed before she found herself resting in a quiet corner as the last of Kataro’s and Kalapa’s families and friends departed.

They decided that Cara might as well sleep where she was. Kataro explained, “If you could fly back, you’d be there in a few minutes, but the walk is quite long and I daresay you’d rather not try the stone bridges at night anyway. I’ll drop by the guest house and assure Lord Halprin that you’ve come to no harm.”

At first she tried to help Kalapa straighten up but she yawned so often that the seabird laughed and told her to go to bed before she put them both to sleep.

“Kalapa?” The squawk and thump of a door closing.

Cara opened her eyes and stared at a distant wall she didn’t recognize.

“Sh! Out here in the garden, Esper.”

Footsteps approached and receded into the overlapping murmur of soft voices. Cara opened her eyes a second time, and watched in fascination as the world pivoted and the wall became an arched ceiling. *Where am I now? I haven’t slept twice in the same place since I came here.*

She sat up and looked at the woven comforter wound about her legs and the sea green cushions peeking from beneath it. They weren’t familiar either but the sculpture of a diving seabird on a nearby table was. *Kalapa’s. What did I do, fall asleep in her living room? Oh. Not much choice with no spare bedroom.* She put on the new caftan and her shoes and folded the coverlet. Did the cushions go around the table? It sounded like Kalapa and Kataro and at least one other person were out in the garden.

“Harone”. The single word drifted clear of the faint murmurs on a puff of cool air. Cara picked up the comforter and followed the voices. Had Kalapa or a friend of hers gotten word to Harone that she was looking for him? She caught a glimpse of the seabirds and one of the Elders from the apothecary shop through partially opened shutters.

Just as Cara started to call out to them, Kalapa whispered, “Kataro, please! You needn’t tell the Outworlder about it immediately. When we do, perhaps we can word it so it won’t sound so gruesome. She thought a lot of Hythe and Cona.”

Everything around Cara altered into a surreal caricature of itself. With hands clenched on the coverlet, she listened.

“I know. Any news of their deaths will upset her--but such a brutal way! I don’t know how Harone is managing as well as he is. Aside from Alphasis, Kalak told me, they were all he had in the world.”

“This is horrible! You found out from Kalak?”

“No, before that. When I reached the guesthouse last night, Harone was there. He had only just found out himself—some report by an Elder who lives out in that province who came here when the Sword evacuated them. Cara’s story is all over the Isle and Harone had heard it. He had actually broken into Cara’s chamber, thinking to find her there.”

“I don’t understand. What did he want with Cara?”

“I’m not sure even he knew. Grief was making him nearly mad, so I doubt he was thinking clearly. The stories circulating about the Outworlder mention her encounter with Rabada and it wasn’t much of a leap from that to what her ‘hounds’ did. I guess Harone blamed Cara for what happened and he’d come for revenge. He had caught hold of the refugee’s belief that their door was left open—which would explain how the Fenroi got in. Bran must have done it when he drugged them or when he left with Cara. The only mercy was that they were apparently still unconscious.”

“Do you think Bran did it on purpose?”

“Who can say? Nor does it matter much. Nevertheless, you’re right, Kalapa. She’ll need to hear the truth eventually but not necessarily today. When we do break it to her, we must be sure she hears a carefully worded version. And we must prevent the two from meeting, which shouldn’t be difficult.”

If there was more to the conversation, Cara didn’t hear it. Her mind shut off sounds while her body turned of itself and walked toward the outside door. For a few precious minutes, nothing penetrated her thoughts. The conversation was as if it had never been. The world outside was silent and seemed devoid of anything living. She walked forward on a path but saw nothing else.

And then she saw everything. Every willful action, every word, until the instant Bran had leveled Hythe’s spear at her. Blinded with tears she walked rapidly along any path that met her. Her mind worked as rapidly as her feet, and everything her thoughts touched pointed to her guilt. If only she had obeyed Alphasis’ message through Clepta. If only she hadn’t let pride prevent her from turning back in Melwood. If only... If only...

Wound all through her thoughts were the faces of Hythe and Cona, and Hythe’s own innocent words when he began to describe the ways of the Fenroi. The face of Rabada too was before her. The sorcerer knew what she was really like. She had sensed immediately that she saw her mission as more of a burden to be cast aside no matter whom it hurt.

Cara ran down the path, even as she had run on the moor, but there was no escape. This time the thing from which she fled was within her.

Cara stopped and sat on a stone bench by a path to catch her breath. She tried not to cry, not even to think, with hands clenched so tight her nails cut into her palms. However, she glanced up and saw a dark-haired young man in a purple lecten walking toward her. He looked sad, or perhaps angry.

She fled from him as if he were a vengeful wraith, not daring to look up for fear he would be before her, condemnation in his eyes. It didn’t matter. Whether he caught up with her or not, she knew he blamed her. How could he not?

I’m such a coward, even now. I’ll bet that was him. If I had even the smallest bit of decency, I would just face him and let him get it over with. Only there’s no getting it over with. They’re dead, and I did it.

She crossed rapidly over a narrow stone bridge with hardly a glance, clattered down a flight of steps, and then through an open gate.

The path faded. Emancipated from its rule, Cara wandered aimlessly through short turf, sprinkled with tiny wildflowers. The tears stopped but the pain in her heart felt too great for her to live. She clung to that. In old stories, they spoke of grief that killed. *That would be about right. What have I done here that’s been good? Just giving people a chance to save my life. When I wasn’t getting them hurt or killed.*

And so she walked and thought, and tried desperately not to think, for what felt like hours. Time had ceased. It was inevitable that she would so walk and so think forever. She had no reason to ever do otherwise. Never again could she face any of them. She remembered Kalapa’s words. *They don’t want me to know because they know as well as I do that it’s my fault. Oh, Alphasis, what am I to do? Why didn’t I try to listen to you in the shrine? Just two days ago, I looked away from the tapestry, and...*

“Oh!”

One moment she was pacing, eyes downcast. Then, the place where she stood was bathed in brilliant light, a light so bright and pure that the sunshine seemed feeble. Cara cried out and fell to the ground, for when she tried to look toward the source of the light, she caught a glimpse of a stone chair. She was before the Throne of Wisdom.

Cara covered her eyes with her hands, not daring to look up, knowing that this time the Throne was occupied.

"I ... I'm sorry, Alphasis." Her heart pounded and her hands trembled so that finally she had to clasp them together. Soon it would be over. He would punish her as she deserved and ...

"Child, look at me."

For a moment, her terror seemed the greater from hearing his voice, until she became aware of the kindness she heard in the words. Still, she felt she daren't look up. Then Cara remembered the tapestry. Would she refuse to look again as she had that night? She daren't not look! If it killed her to look, she had to do it. With clenched teeth, she raised her head ...

... And found herself on an island of peace and joy ... for Alphasis looked upon her with eyes so full of love and compassion that her heart seemed to melt.

Cara whispered, "You're not I thought you'd be angry. I guess I thought it all along. I ... I've messed up so bad. Oh. Sir, maybe you don't know yet. I've killed two people, Hythe and Cona." Fresh tears filled her eyes.

"Hush, child. You killed no one. The Fenroi did it; they and a door carelessly left open by another. You will never hear a word of condemnation from me about that. Already, you have heaped more guilt on your own head than you could bear. Will you release it to me?"

She nodded. Still a little fearful, Cara looked into his eyes. "But I did do other things. I didn't want to do what everyone said, so I pretended ..."

"Are you ready to obey me now?"

Cara swallowed, and answered earnestly. "Yes. What do you want me to do?"

"Look into my eyes as you did before, and I will instruct you."

Cara's gaze slid into his willingly. At once, his face began changing--growing even more beautiful and joyous until Cara felt she could hardly bear to look longer.

The tangy scent of the sea altered subtly. Behind Alphasis, the throne shrank and darkened or, perhaps, his clothing grew brighter. She blinked and opened her eyes to her own world--to the same familiar beach on which she had awakened just weeks earlier. Narentan images and memories faded, leaving emptiness behind. She grasped at the memories, an effort as desperate and futile as weak fingers on a slick rope.

She looked up at the lifeguard from her own position cross-legged on the warm sand. He was smiling but it was hard to see his face--the sun was behind him, shining golden-white around him, simultaneously transforming his white uniform to the glitter of sunlight on sparkling water. She followed his gaze to the patch of sand between them. The merest tip of a slender augur seashell protruded, its tiny point casting a long thin shadow toward her. She had forgotten about it. Cara reached down and began digging it up. It seemed to grow the more she tried to free it.

She was using both hands now, trying to keep up with the growth of the shell's tower-like shape within the ever-deepened hole. She leaned forward, tipping gently into the hole, only to find herself standing at the base of the augur shell tower. The opening in the shell arched an invitation. She went inside and began climbing ...

"They're looking for you. Farewell for now, daughter. Remember my instructions and keep safe the Key of Opening."

She cried out, "Don't go!"

He answered at once, "I won't."

Cara felt herself to be alone. She started walking along a pathway leading towards the coast of the island and the guesthouses. Her heart was singing and, had she but known it, the expression on her face might have awed even Halprin.

The guesthouse was crowded as she entered, alive with people giving directions and carrying things about. Before she had a chance to become more than dimly aware of this, Kalapa's familiar voice called out,

"There you are at last! When we came here looking for you, Alphesis spoke to us and told us we must leave immediately and hasten to King Cybis at Fiori."

Kataro came out of Cara's room, flying down the hallway to greet her. Kassis, Kalapa's young assistant, accompanied him.

"Cara, we've got to leave at once! The Shadow was stopped in their attempt to use the tunnel, but they're moving east between the rivers, driving all the inhabitants before them into the fortified cities. It's just a matter of time until they attempt to take a bridge over the Nonz."

Just like Hythe and his speech about the bridges. Cara's throat tightened, but she spoke calmly.

"I know. You're partly right but there's more." She added quietly, new tears gathering, "I know about Hythe and Cona too."

At the stricken expressions on the faces of the seabirds, she added, "It's okay." She stifled a sob, adding, "It'll be okay. Really." She took the supplies they had gathered and began packing them in her saddlebags.

"Do we sail back to that port city? Where are Halprin and Hathel?"

"Alphesis told us we must go further south before we touch land. Getting safely ashore may be a close thing. Halprin went back to the Stone to send a call for some knights of his mearis and his Sword captain to meet us at the place where we're to go ashore. Assuming we can land safely, travel to the capital is going to be dangerous. He should be returning soon. Hathel went down to the harbor at once to commandeer a ship of the Crown."

"When do we go?" Cara asked as she laced on leather buskins brought her by Liricia.

Kataro had left to have Cara's mare harnessed, so Kalapa answered, "Right now, I'm afraid. The ship's captain will wish to leave in less than an hour if we hope to catch the last of the tide. I was never more relieved to see someone come through a door than when I saw you just now! Several scholar-apprentices went off to look for you but this is a big island. Quick! Let's go out to the courtyard. Everything is ready."

Cara hugged Liricia farewell, then paused a moment before following the others. She stole a glance around the room and was bewildered to feel a pang of homesickness as she turned to go. She caught up with the seabird outside.

"Kalapa, who all is going?" She added in sudden anxiety, "You and Kataro both are, aren't you?"

"Yes, we're going. So are Lords Halprin and Hathel and Kassis, who insisted. Two or three others, all Tethrans we're to meet at the ship. Good, there's your horse. Here, this needs to be slung from your saddle, too." Releasing the provision bag into Cara's hands, she asked sharply, "Where's Kassis?"

"I'm here!"

The young seabird spoke from the dome over the door, his eyes bright with excitement. Cara suspected this was his first such venture. *Well, for a change I won't be the most inexperienced one in the group.* However, she found that a very small crumb of comfort, as she mounted the mare and nudged her to a canter down the harbor path.

End of Seabird- An Invitation

Part One of Seabird

The First of the Narentan Tumults

About the Author

One of the top award winners in the 2006 Genesis writing contest, *An Invitation*, book one of the *Seabird* duology, is the debut novel for author **Sherry Thompson**. Her work has appeared in *F/SF*, *The Best of Gryphonwood*, and *The Inkslingers*. Recently retired from the University of Delaware Library, Thompson is now at work on *Earthbow*, the sequel to *Seabird*.

Acknowledgements

I have so many people to thank that I begin to wonder what I contributed.

Thanks to my writing groups--Written Remains, OWW and Critters--and especially to the members past and present who critiqued sections of my manuscripts or who allowed me to learn by reading their work.

A special thanks (in no particular order) to Mike D and Mike D and Kev K and Ian M, my long-term and most faithful reviewers.

Thanks to my WR friends Joanne R and Katherine I for their suggestions and for their faithful support in more than just my writing. Thanks to Susan W for her friendly and persistent prodding. Thanks to my dearest and bestest friend of all, Demaris, without whom my life would be infinitely poorer.

Thanks to Debra S, my marathon reader, who read not only an early version of “Seabird” but also the first draft of its sequel, and a notebook of scenes that will be in the sequel to the sequel. Debra, I wish I knew where you are!

Thanks to Karen S, my editor, who received more than she bargained for when the manuscript arrived. Karen, thanks for the lessons!

A great huge, multi-faceted thanks to Dave W who has been there for me in more ways than I can count, during the last several versions of my book. Dave, you still astonish me by finding truths in the story that I know I didn’t put there. Thank you for tag-teaming Elvai with me. Thank you for your courage and your faith and your vision. And especially, thank you for sending me the “God is a card, sometimes” email.

A belated thank you to my mom, who overwhelmingly preferred nonfiction but who actually read the first draft of “Seabird”. Wow, what a feat of love!

Finally, thank you dear Lord, for your great gifts to all of us and for the amazing grace and guidance and inspiration you have given me. Thank you for the gift of your presence. Always in the Remembrance.

SherryT

Pronunciation Guide

Alphesis	Al'-fis-is (apostrophes indicate emphasis)
daemagos	day-ma'-gose
Daetaga	die'-uh-tah''-go (Two apostrophes trump one, so the main emphasis is on the 3rd syllable and the secondary emphasis is on the 1st syllable.)
Fiori	fee-ore'-ee
Kalapa	ka-la'-pa
Kataro	kuh-t-our'-o (Here's where my system breaks down. The middle syllable rhymes with our.)
Neroli	ne-roll'-ee
Peralike	pair-uh-like'-ee
werewright	w-ear'-right (First syllable rhymes with ear.)