



THE WIZARD IN THE WOOD

i a n m o o r e

The Sovereign Galaxies

- First Draft -

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For Ben

First Draft Disclaimer

This is a super rough first draft. I've had it printed like this partly as a wee treat for myself and partly to encourage myself to move on and write the first drafts of the other books in this series, thereby saving myself from the urge to endlessly tinker with and polish this part of the story.

For the sake of my writerly insecurities, don't read this unless you understand, really understand, just how rough a first draft is allowed to be.

Ta.

I.M.

The Master Changes

The Master Changes consists of six books paired up into a trilogy as follows:

The Hand of Aggraban

Book 1: The Great Dominions
Book 2: The Kingdoms of Man

The Sovereign Galaxies

Book 3: The Wizard in the Wood
Book 4: The Walker Between Worlds

The Children of Mab

Book 5: The Monster Races
Book 6: The Slave of Zane

Book 3:
The Wizard in the Wood

1

"We are great beings," said his master.

The old wizard was fully present, the eyes through which he regarded the boy, blue and lucid and ageless. And the glade was shafted with sunlight and clotted with shades, the forest quiet and still in deference. "Our thoughts are jeweled." He paused to smile at some inner thing he left unvoiced. "Our lives ... ah! They are labyrinthine architectures, designed by gods, illuminated by the mirrored sunlight of drawn out years and collected worlds, punctuated by the darknesses of long nights, underworld shiftings, well examined fears." He leaned forward, raising his eyebrows sincerely, wanting to impress his words into the being of his apprentice. "But we sleep, Ben. For most of the time. Ha! By necessity we sleep, because we live so long. By our own choice we go off wandering in dreams of other realities, and one is no less real than the other."

He sat up straight and shifted his head to either side, implicating the shining forest without taking his eyes from the boy.

"This place is no different. When I fall into my next sleepwalk, my next *funny time* as you call them, it will only be that I am waking from this dream to go walking in a different dream for a while. Yes, this body will remain here to get on with things while I'm gone, only it will be ..." he nodded impishly, "... *absent minded*, yes? This is what we do when life seems long to us. The part of my mind reserved for this realm would become exhausted if I stayed awake for all of it. You see?"

The boy deliberated, his face pretty and solemn, taking his time. The wizard sat back, pleased, and waited. Eventually the boy lifted his chin.

"Why don't we die?" he asked.

The wizard crinkled his nose, dissatisfied.

"A reasonable question," he said. "But not an inspired one. We don't die because we can't die. There's no more complicated a reason than that."

Again he waited while the boy dipped his chin in contemplation, searching for the question that would rightly please the old man. It came quickly.

"Why is it that other people do die?"

The wizard glowed with the approval that made the boy nervous with pleasure.

"Good. Good. That's the one. Why do other people die? Here is why: we don't die because we can't die. Other people do die because they don't know that they can't."

The boy took this idea inside himself obediently, turned it around while the wizard waited.

"It must get lonely," said the boy at last.

The wizard didn't answer immediately, but sat there in the shade, his face lit subtly by light reflected from leaves, the clearing behind him

flooded with gold and shadow, flying ants catching the sunlight like summer snow, the silence in the glade shushed periodically by the rustling of the breeze through the branches. Then he nodded gently, roused himself with a shrug.

"It's lonely for all of us, Ben. What is true for a wizard is no less true for anybody else. It's lonely for all of us. You can't do anything about that. It's the price we pay for thinking we exist."

The boy's face widened with dismay and the old man laughed. "Ah, come on, it's not all that bad."

He stood up smoothly, the skin creasing playfully around his eyes.

"Let's go and skim some stones."

"But you always cheat."

"Yes? And? So? What's the point in being a wizard if you can't cheat now and again?"

The boy saw the sense in this and ran on ahead to the river, trying to arrive there before his aged master, knowing that he wouldn't succeed no matter how fast he ran, being glad of it, not feeling lonely at all.

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His master's name was Eonmor. When the boy asked him if he was one of the great master wizards, of whom it was said that there were never less than twelve and never more than thirteen, the old man laughed.

"Great master wizard? That sounds impressive. I bet you'd have to be pretty special to be one of those, eh?"

The boy shrugged, baffled, and this made the wizard laugh hard.

"The trouble with people is they see mystery where it doesn't exist and walk right past, without noticing, where it does. Trust me, Ben, there is no such thing as one of these great master wizards. Either that or they are so common place that the title is rendered meaningless...more than thirteen, that's for sure. We are all of us masters, Ben. Maybe you can be one of the few to understand this. We are all of us masters – yet it takes a master to see it. And as soon as you see yourself as a master, you cease to be one. Better to simply be a boy...or an old man...or, at most, a humble, ordinary common or garden wizard."

The boy took this and buried it in his heart somewhere.

He lived with the wizard in a house shaded by a giant wych elm in a forest made of giant trees. It was a strange house, but not strange in the ways a wizard's house should be strange. It was strange because it was clearly an ordinary house that had simply been placed in the forest and then painted white throughout the interior. It was strange because, save for one part of it, none of it was magical. The rooms had scuffed wooden floors and doors, white plaster walls and ceilings. The furniture was ordinary wooden furniture, tablecloths were white, sofas were faded and overstuffed. The bookcases held no books of spells, only strange fictions. The kitchen was equipped only for the standard activities of preparing food, eating food and cleaning dishes. In each room, on each landing, there was a vase of wildflowers from the forest. It was almost as though the house were intended for nothing more than comfortable and simple living.

"Yes, yes," Eonmor had said when the boy pointed this out. "And what would be wrong with that?"

"I don't know. It's just not how I expected it should be."

"Precisely. Now understand this: *nothing* is as you expect it should be.

Nothing, ever. Learn that. And if anything does appear to be as you expected then you can be sure you haven't understood it. And so, ultimately, if nothing is as you expect it should be, then you would be foolish to expect anything at all, no?"

The boy hesitated on the verge of agreeing.

"I don't know."

The wizard beamed.

"Good answer. Bright boy, well done. But let's talk more about my house. It is strange to you because it is ordinary, yes?"

"Yes."

"But is it completely ordinary?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because of the magic door."

"Just so. Just so. Because of the magic door. So what do you make of my house, that seems so ordinary, yet has a magic door?"

The boy thought. First he thought of the most obvious answer, and then, remembering previous lessons, he questioned it. The most obvious answer was that behind the magic door lay all of his master's secrets, all of his wizardly paraphernalia and the keys to all of his hoarded power. To question this answer for being too obvious was to suppose the door did not lead to such things. But in this case what did the door lead to? The boy's mind encountered blankness.

"I don't know, Master."

Eonmor leaped to his feet.

"Good boy! Good boy! You avoided the most obvious answer. I saw it. And you're close to the real answer. I can see that too. Very well. Now, some things I will make plain to you, and some things I will have you discover for yourself. This is what I will make plain: I put this simple, ordinary house here for the soul purpose of providing me a setting in which to teach you." He stopped a moment and watched the boy carefully, then continued. "When you can tell me what lies on the other side of the magic door then the first part of your apprenticeship will be complete."

The boy accepted this silently, like a pond accepting a stone with barely a ripple. They sat in silence awhile before the surface of the pond was disturbed slightly.

"Why did you choose me to be your apprentice, Master?"

Eonmor's nose crinkled.

"Not an inspired question."

The boy struggled for a better one. The old man watched through narrowed eyes, then softened. "Not to worry. These are subtle matters. But I didn't choose you to be my apprentice. I *discovered* you are my apprentice."

The wizard waited for a response. After considering beneath a heavy brow for some time the boy decided to raise his eyebrows and pout until more information should be forthcoming. Something in this amused the wizard momentarily, but then he grew serious.

"I searched long for an apprentice. And I searched far. I thought I had achieved mastery and that it was the proper time. Then one day I was sitting in a tavern in Antura and I suddenly realised that I wasn't a master at all. It came to me in a flash, and of course I saw straight away that it had been blindingly obvious all along. This kind of thing happens to me all the time these days. I ended my search right there and then. I scolded myself

for my own self-importance and left the tavern feeling lighter and freer than I had in ages. It was right then, having decided to stop looking, that I encountered you. You see what life is like? It's important to notice that. And so I rescued you, brought you back here to the house I had prepared for my apprentice-to-be. It was only after we'd begun to heal...I was making bacon for our breakfast, when I suddenly realised...I had discovered my apprentice."

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The day Eonmor had rescued him had been the day he was supposed to die.

This was easy enough to know. It was a simple and cold calculation: it was his fifth day tied up in the basket in the back of the covered cart, and of the five baskets, each containing a child, that had been put into it, his was the last one left.

As the cart rattled heavily over the cobbled market streets of Antura, making its way to the city square, it was an easy thing to know that this day would be his last. For as blue as the sky was that he spied through the gaps in the basket and through the flapping canvas of the cart's covering, as relaxed and free were the spirits of the holiday crowds surrounding the cart on all sides, as insistent were the fanfares of the ribbon-flying horns, as optimistic and life affirming was the aspect of this day for almost all concerned, it was equally clear that the beast he was to be given to, and which squatted in the dark beside his basket now, was an indomitable thing which he had seen decapitate a horse with the swing of one frenzied arm. No rescuer would stand a chance.

But the real reason why it was child's play to tell that this was the boy's last day was the simplest reason of all: nobody wanted to rescue him. He had not been kidnapped. He had not been lost, was not the subject of a search. He had been sold. He was a commodity. For sure, if the unsuspecting miscellany of market traders, barterers and buyers were to discover what the cart concealed there would be an outcry of disgust and horror and fear, but it would be a fear for their own safety and sensibilities, not for the fate of a small boy who nobody had missed anyway.

And so, what hopes of escape inevitably flooded his being also, with equal inevitability, fell back again, scraping across the shores of his mind as they left. There was a part of him, despite his young age, which understood absolutely that whatever thoughts he had, whatever streams of consciousness managed to well up through the compressing layers of suffering and out into the glaring open reaches of his fear-brightened mind were merely the thoughts of a thing. They were of as much use and as little moment as the dreams of furniture, even to himself. He knew they were but distractions from hell, glimpses of child-made heavens held onto with the steel wire fingers of a child's determination. His world was now compartmentalized, all of the horrors pushed off into one room. And although he made the corridor that led to that room as long as he could, the door to the darkness inside remained ajar, and the corridor held no other door, only a dead end with a peephole in the wall to an unreachable land of sunlight.

Bound foetally within his confines, aching with the long hours of trying not to breathe, trying not to make a sound, he kept his body pressed as far from the monster as he could, his head turned away, his eye fixed to the gap in the weave of the basket. This was his window on the sunlit world

and the glimpses of luminous sea, caught briefly and with a hollow yearning each time the cart passed the end of one of the tall narrow streets that descended the hill to the mast-bristling harbour. He trained the focus of his ears away from the gibberings of the entity crouched behind him in the shadows and listened instead to the sounds of Antura and the sprawling market, which filled the great city square and overflowed into the surrounding main streets and back streets. The sounds came to him as ruthlessly as the sights, close and everyday yet utterly foreign, because he no longer belonged to them - the colourful calling of competing traders, the rehearsed duologues of countless barterings, chaotic articulations snatched from random conversations, pulling alongside then falling behind, the beating of drums, crackling of papers, the pattering of dried beans filling a tin, the sonorous tones of singing bowls, the needle-shaped sounds of Imurranian pipes and, somewhere above it all, the sound of the gulls, out of sight, out of reach, away in the blue beyond. He even tuned into those momentary scents he managed to capture from whichever variations of the sea breeze found their way into his claustrophobic little universe. Any new fragrance was held to greedily as a utility to help him blot from his awareness the beast's writhing stench. The spiced aromas and smokes made their way to his nose like envoys of a promised after life. Or were they the echoes of a previous life that he had long ago squandered?

But worse than representing heavens to come or heavens lost the sights, sounds and scents of Antura served as a continually changing, endlessly mocking signpost that there existed, just beyond the flap of a canvas covering, lives not drenched in horror: the lives of higher beings. And indeed it was so: even the lowliest of street urchins that he spied from his captivity looked to him like some remarkable, exotic demigod, full of will and power and freedom, and engaged in some shining purpose. They had all earned, through some quality of worthiness or another, the right to walk where they would, breathe the sea air and make decisions for themselves.

The cart bounced its way through the perimeter stalls and out across the relatively clear expanse that was the center of the Square. Bright flags snapped at the wind from the poles surrounding the fountain. Food vendors worked methodically at their carts, not expecting to shorten their queues until the late hours. At the far side of the square the cart reentered in amongst the stalls and made its way judderingly down one of the lesser streets before turning in to rest in the entrance to a side alley.

The world outside seemed to grow darker to the boy, save for one sun-drenched portion of the opposite side of the street that he could still see beyond the shade of the alley's entrance. Now that the stalls and the crowds had petered out, and the noise of the cart had ceased, he could hear the breathing of the creature distinctly. Noticing the cart had stopped moving the beast shifted its great weight expectantly and made the maddening whimpering call in the back of its throat that could sound like some deranged singsong of sympathy, only it was mixed with a vibrant thrumming note of hysteria that threatened to break out into gleefully insane laughter at any moment. Sickeningly the noise would become most expressive and human sounding when the creature was in the process of committing some atrocity too caustic for most people's nightmares. Then the voice would rise and fall in a gibbering, mocking intelligent commiseration, altering its pitch and volume to match the screams of the victim.

The boy fixed his eye on the patch of sunlight beyond the alley like it

was a vision of the gateway to a sacred garden, and he imagined with all of his will that he was standing there himself, outside the entrance to the inn, but as a grown man, free to ignore the cart across the street in the alley along with all of the other passers by, free to turn and walk away, to walk down to the harbour, to talk with friends and eat food and drink wine, to play card games as the sun sank and the city's streets were lit by the lights of the taverns, free to smoke and laugh, unconcerned by the plights of sold children. *If I could change places with one of you*, thought the boy, *I would walk away and leave you*.

He heard the voices of the driver and the two other men who had been riding the cart. They spoke in Ipran but he wouldn't have listened even if he could have understood. They were part of the world he was willing so fervently to disappear. With a child's superstition he was unwilling to let go of he convinced himself repeatedly that they would cease to exist if only he had the strength to not notice they were there. People passed to and fro across the entrance to the alley and he wished himself out onto the street with them, over and over and over again. When the two companions of the driver walked out onto the street and separated, each going in an opposite direction, he barely saw them at all, only shadows flitting across the sunlight.

The morning turned to midday and midday wore on into the afternoon. The people who passed the alley did not pause, despite the boy's efforts to attract their attention by screaming at them in his mind. They would pass by, and pass by, and pass by. The only ones to remain in his line of sight were those who lingered outside the inn, just prior to entering or just after they had exited, and these people he would immediately fall in love with, promising them his undying devotion if only they would hear his silent screaming and rescue him. The same scenario played itself out in his mind for each person who lingered there briefly: the way they would become aware of his terrible situation, the way they would be horrified and outraged and skewered with heart rending pity for this innocent and courageous child, the way they would bring suitable aid, an army of fearless warriors, and the way they would adopt him after the beast had been destroyed, letting him live with them by the sea, loving him, accepting him joyfully into their heaven.

But they all moved on, every single one of them.

By late afternoon his mind had lost the power to retreat into these fantasies and could only repeat the word '*please*', over and over again, applying it to whichever man, woman or child remained in his field of vision long enough. Eventually his mind fell completely silent. His eye hung open by default but it was numb, registering indifferently the comings and goings of the higher beings. The hopes had ceased to wash back and forth and the clanging of his terror had grown so loud and continuous that it was barely perceptible any more, there being nothing else to differentiate it from. Sentience itself retreated to such a meager level that he had no idea at all as to how much time had passed between his last coherent thought and the slowly dawning realization that the man currently standing in the sun outside the inn was staring across the street at the cart, and had been for some while.

The boy blinked and, sluggishly, his mind began to stir. He was a non-descript type of fellow: an average kind of height, an average kind of build. His clothes were unremarkable, his age neither especially old nor particu-

larly young. His beard and hair was of a very ordinary colour and length. Of all of the characters that had lingered outside the inn the boy found he was least inclined to fall in love with this one, not because there was anything at all unsavoury looking about him (the boy had already vowed unswerving love to one of the most criminally hardened miscreants he had ever seen in his life, not least because he felt this was probably the type most likely to stand a chance of helping him) but because, even after noticing him, he still found it very hard to keep his awareness on the fact that the man was there at all. In some way the man seemed such a nonentity that only a boy in an altered state of consciousness might be able to see past his lack of presence. Maybe it was that the boy's senses were heightened through his nearness to death, or perhaps it was simply that he was numb, and free from the normal internal dialogues of normal people. Yet even now the boy noticed how difficult it was for him to hold the man's presence in his mind, as though it was an oddity too trifling to be worth attention, and he kept having to remind himself that it mattered.

Please see me, said the boy, even as a parade of panes of glass seemed to pass between him and the man, some of which were smeared with grease.

... please see me ... please hear me ... please see me ... please hear me ...

The boy repeated his internal mantra with the searing energy, the raging power of the exhausted.

... please see me ... please hear me ... please see me ... please hear me ...

What reserves of strength he had remaining meant nothing to him and were gladly spent, as much in the hope that he would drain his own life force and die quietly in the expenditure as that his efforts would have any other effect.

... please see me ... please hear me ... please see me ... please hear me ...

The nondescript man frowned, and then he turned, as they all eventually turned, and stepped away.

... please see me ... please hear me ... please see me ... please hear me ...

He took a second step. One step more and he would be gone from the boy's sight.

... please see me ... please hear me ... please see me ... please hear me ...

Then he was gone.

... please see me ... please hear me ... please see me ... please hear me ...

The boy chanted on, tears rolling pointlessly down his cheeks. The beast behind him seemed to sense the thickening of his despair and crooned suddenly in the dark, its voice soft and human and riddled with dementia. It shuddered beneath its human-shaped clothes with what seemed a mixture of pent up pleasure and barely suppressed revulsion at the things it had in mind.

... please see me ... please hear me ... please see me ... please hear me ...

The boy's mantra slowed and thinned and faded out. He stared blankly at the wall of the inn and fought an urge to throw himself recklessly into the wild pit of terror waiting to swallow him, knowing how it would excite the creature, perhaps send it into a frenzy. The boy feared the bubbling insanity that he would be abandoning himself to, yet simultaneously he was preparing himself to go to that place, for he understood with the power of precognition it would be his final sanctuary.

Out on the street the nondescript man walked backwards into view, his gaze fixed plainly on the cart. A painful explosion erupted in the boy's chest, a sudden scalding hope that was physically indistinguishable from

fear. The man stood there and stared, face pinched with concentration.

Please see me.

The man didn't move. The boy held his breath. The monster shifted sharply in the shadows and then, remarkably, freezing all movement, it fell silent.

Please hear me.

The man continued to stand and stare. Without taking his eyes from the cart he moved his hands into several of his pockets until he produced from one of them something that might have been a small pouch or a paper bag. He took something from it and popped it into his mouth like a sweet.

Please ...

His hand returned the item to his pocket and he stood there for three beats more. Then, not especially fast, and not particularly slowly, he stepped out into the street and walked towards the cart.

The pain of hope expanded inside the boy until it seemed to stretch beyond the confines of his contorted body and out into the atmosphere, too much for him to contain. It threatened to snap his back, quickly becoming insufferable, and the boy knew he must protect himself from the atrocious grief that would swallow him once the man had turned and walked away, or been dragged into the cart and killed.

He's going to leave ... he's going to leave ... he's going to leave ...

The man's face was serious, but in a quiet, unobtrusive way. His eyes passed over the details of the cart as he approached. As he drew close he slowed and stopped, considering something for a moment with an air of indecision verging on indifference. Almost begrudgingly he chose to walk along the side of the cart on the boy's side, his eyes moving here and there, inspecting, as though he were thinking about buying it.

You're going to leave ... you're going to leave ... you're going to leave ...

The boy dared not breathe, nor did he dare to move a muscle, knowing with the certainty of a dream, that to do so would be the spark that caused the monster to explode into a berserk state that would obliterate himself and the man, along with the entirety of that side of the cart. As he drew level with the boy's basket the man looked down at the ground, frowning, and he paused. His head was at the same height as the boy's. He was close enough that the boy would have been able to reach out and touch his face, if things had been different, if the boy had been free and the man had been his friend perhaps, or even his father.

Please help me.

The man lifted his gaze and looked directly into the boy's eye.

Time froze, life ended, yet continued somehow in a vivid stasis. The man's eyes looked straight at him, and they remained fixed, as quiet and steady a gaze as had ever existed, a gaze designed to deliver only one message.

I see you ... I see you ... I see you ...

The space in the dark behind the boy throbbed with a silence and a stillness that seemed to be howling. In that moment, with hell wanting to burn and peel the skin from his back, and the bright blue eye of reprieve staring intimately into his soul, it seemed to the boy as though the fates of all were hung in the balance of the razor's edge. The immediacy of the moment stretched out to infinity and back, and never seemed to end, even after the man finally lowered his gaze and, not especially quickly, but not particularly slowly, walked away from the cart, back onto the street and disap-

peared out of sight.

He's going to save me ... he's gone forever ... he's going to save me ... he's gone forever ...

Slowly, slowly, slowly, the boy allowed himself to release a breath. In the dark behind him the beast began to tremble with fury. The crooning began again, very low and far away at first but shrill with mounting outrage. The cart shuddered then, and lurched violently as the creature snapped against its own invisible bonds. A shriek split the air that was pain and rage and terror and the promise of retribution. The cart bucked wildly on its axels as the monster thrashed against the magical glyphs scratched around it in the timber frame. Outside an indignant exclamation of surprise came from the driver's place followed by the bumping sounds of him tumbling from his seat to the ground.

"Ow! You bastard! What the ..." the driver's voice cursed its way from the front of the cart along its side to the rear where bolts were drawn and he groaned as he heaved himself up. The boy cowered in the depths of his basket, petrified by the raging of the thing, only wanting the man to subdue it, not wanting to be implicated in its outburst.

"Look at the state of you," said the driver in a surprisingly calm voice, but he was talking to himself. His voice then changed, became low and fast and guttural, sounding like a completely different person, or perhaps like something other than a person, as he chanted in some language that made the boy's skin crawl. Falling back into the furthest corner, the beast whimpered sorrowfully, almost sounding like a baby trying to cry and catch its breath at the same time. The driver continued to chant until even this settled down and all that was left was the creature's breathing.

"Huh," said the driver at last. "So what got you all worked up, eh?"

After a moment's silence his footsteps approached the basket and he lifted the lid, squatted, placing his forearms comfortably along the rim and peered down at the boy.

"Hello, Pigswill," he said. He reached into the basket and gripped the boy by the tops of his thin arms, which were bound to his sides, pulled him this way and that, checking the knots. Satisfied everything was in order he placed a hand over his own mouth and considered. Casting his gaze around the interior of the cart he found nothing amiss. Looking back down at the boy he considered some more. The boy stared at him and tried not to stare. He thought of the man outside and tried not to think of him. Suddenly the driver's eyes arrived at a conclusion.

"Ah," he said, and pointed a finger at the boy, nodding certainly. "You know what happened," he said.

Reaching into the basket again he removed the boy's gag. The boy moaned slightly as the wadding was withdrawn from inside his mouth and he found himself able to close his aching jaw. The driver unhooked a flask of water from his belt, took out the stopper and let the boy drink a little, just enough to moisten his throat, not quench his thirst. He placed a hand on the boy's head and stroked his hair gently.

"There's a good boy. Now, tell me what happened."

At first the boy found that he was too afraid to speak. The driver waited patiently, seeming to understand. Eventually the boy managed to shake his head.

"I don't know," he rasped, his voice seeming to be held on a distant breeze.

The driver regarded the child with a mild attentiveness then punched him in the face, breaking his nose.

"Ah, that's not nice, is it? Feels itchy, doesn't it? I hate getting hit in the nose. Now," he said reasonably. "Tell me what happened."

As soon as he was able to make coherent sentences the boy told as much as he could articulate about the nondescript man. However, the interrogation continued for some time further, the driver making him bloodier and bloodier as he told the child that he knew there was something he was keeping to himself and urged him to 'spit it out' for his own sake. The boy dredged his mind desperately for details. His eyes were blue. He ate a sweet. His face couldn't be seen. When the driver wasn't satisfied the boy eventually had the idea to invent something. He had a rat on his shoulder. A white rat. The driver laughed and stopped beating him. Replacing the boy's gag he immediately forgot about him. He scratched his jaw, his demeanor growing sober and distracted. "It's random chance, it happens," he mumbled to himself. Then he arrived at another, more robust, conclusion. "He's going to come back."

With that he promptly stood up, closing the basket as he went, and he hastened out of the cart. The boy heard his voice as the doors were bolted. "What? What! Do you all want something? Does any single one of you want a conversation with me? No? Eh? What about you? No, that's right, go on. You're wiser than you look."

The driver returned to his seat and cracked the reins, "Come on!" and the cart started forth with a jolt.

The boy had too much blood in his eyes to see much through the gap in the basket now, and the cart was bouncing too violently, and the alley had grown too dark, and even if he had managed to catch a glimpse of the nondescript man, he didn't think he'd be able to recognize him any more. His world span around him darkly now, and it was a world of noise and inhuman motion, a world of jarring bones, stabbing pain and pounding dread, a world swimming in blood, snot and tears. With gratitude in his heart the boy managed to release his involuntary grip and slide away, spiraling into unconsciousness.

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The sun had departed at a shallow angle and was still lighting the sky from beyond the horizon when they dragged him from his basket. There had been a lot of arguing and shouting, much of it in Ipran, but not all. The driver had been threatened, but his counter threats involving the beast and the activities it would indulge in, were it to be left uncontained, were more impressive by several grades.

The enclosure was a kind of courtyard, looked down on by the balconies of the four ghetto tenements that formed it, and accessed by the four tall narrow alleys that separated the buildings, one in each corner. A big square of dark canvas had been strung across the entrance to each alley with at least one man standing on either side. Communal food bubbled over a fire off-centre, the meaty vapour insinuating itself into every corner, embedding itself in the clothing of the Ipran tribes people. Away in one corner, beneath a striped awning, the cart was parked, the horses eating from nosebags but still harnessed. While two older women tended the food everybody else who came and went, bar the boy, was a man, old enough and fit enough to be a warrior. The boy had never seen so many Iprans in one place before.

The driver, not an Ipran, was in a black mood as he hauled the child across the yard, closely followed by two tribesmen who were both talking at him in fast, aggressive voices. Dumping the boy onto the ground the driver turned to face his antagonists squarely, staring them in the faces as they ranted, refusing to respond when they fell silent. Infuriated they talked even quicker and more loudly and he set off striding back towards the cart again. The boy lay in the dust, wanting to wriggle away like a maggot in his bonds but not able to summon the will to try. When the driver pulled the mallet, the iron stake and the chain from the box on the side of the cart the boy noticed with a sickening detachment that his body began to thrash in the dirt. Following the driver back across the yard one of the two men noticed the frantic exertions of the small child with the broken face and his words trailed off, the flame leaving his eyes to be replaced by some tugging uncertainty.

"This is no good, Jama!" yelled the second man, using the common tongue suddenly. "You risk everything! You have no right! You'd better pray we all die because it's over for you. Do you understand?"

Casting the chain to the ground next to the child the driver, Jama, stuck the point of the stake through one of its links and into the dirt.

"Nothing's over," he said, but it was said to himself through a grim smile. Then he began to pound the stake into the hard packed earth of the courtyard, undermining the renewed exclamations of the Ipran with the impassive *chank...chank...chank* of the iron mallet head on the iron stake.

...chank...chank...chank...

The sound filled the courtyard like the beating of a cold metal heart, until all other sounds died away, save for the scufflings of the boy, jerking and twisting on the ground, and the mewlings of his terror, muted by the gag.

...chank...chank...chank...

All attention was drawn to it. Tribesmen began to appear on the balconies, sensing something was happening. They appeared in the ground level doorways but found themselves clustering tightly, somehow not wanting to walk further into the courtyard.

...chank...chank...chank...

"You Iprans," said Jama, dropping the mallet and grabbing the boy, dragging him by his rope through the dust to where he was crouched. "You talk so proudly of your despair...the sufferings inflicted on your people." His big hands worked deftly at the knots. "You think you know what contempt is. Hah! You think I'm interested in your contempt?" First the boy's legs became free. Immediately they kicked out in all directions, not caring who or what they came into contact with, just wanting to be elsewhere. "Your contempt for me is like the fluttering of a whore's eyelashes tickling at my cheek..." The boy's arms came free and he made a violent jerk to escape, only to find one elbow gripped steadfastly in the driver's hand. He struck out at Jama, punching, scratching, gripping handfuls of skin and twisting. "...while I teach her her trade." Ignoring the attacks of the child Jama removed the gag. With a noise that was partly a snarl and partly a howl of grief the boy sank his teeth deep into the man's thick forearm. Jama simply looked up at the Ipran as his blood welled up and dripped to the floor. "You see this boy? This boy knows about despair and suffering. You say your people are alone? This boy is alone. Where is the Ipran raider who will answer his need?" One rope remained on the boy, a loose end dangling from a snugly fitting ring around his neck. Jama se-

cured this to the final link in the chain, then, with visible effort, he took a handful of the boy's hair and prized him from the bite wound in his arm. "This boy will teach you about despair." Jama stood up, holding the child in front of him by his upper arms. "After that, Khiren, maybe we'll be able to stop clucking like women and talk business."

Jama cast the boy from him and stepped back. Instinctively the Iprans backed away from the boy too, until all were outside the range given him by the chain. The boy swayed on his feet, nonplussed for a moment at finding himself standing, his arms and legs free. He looked at his hands for some reason, seeming to search the lines of his palms for some escape route he could recognise, then he slowly dropped them. His head listed to one side and his eyes rolled up to the rooftops, sliding way from the pit bottom of the courtyard and the ragged circle of spectators to the only thing that did not remind him of his waking nightmare, the heights above. Grunting dully he hobbled sideways, edging away from the cart, his expression changing from one of stunned vacancy to one of fully present misery, stretching taut into a silent grimace as the tears started to flow, his mouth opening wide, strung with saliva. Upon reaching the furthest extent from the cart that the chain would allow he tugged on it despite himself, despite his knowledge of the action's futility, feeling like he was performing for the satisfaction of the onlookers. Keeping his eyes turned upwards he knelt on the ground, let out a high-pitched keening sound meant for the ears of somebody somewhere.

Unwillingly he angled his head so that he could monitor the progress of Jama, who was walking around the edge of the courtyard, back to the cart. He began to pull in earnest on the chain and as Jama laid a hand on the first bolt the boy's restraint fell apart and his scream echoed through the arteries of the Iprans. An answering scream erupted from within the cart and the wooden vehicle lurched and bounced where it stood causing the men on the ground level to quickly retreat indoors, save for the two men that had harangued Jama and one man who had been sleeping by the fire who now awoke in confusion. The women tending the food huddled behind the pot, as though it were fortified, stooping to bring their heads low, holding hands, wielding big spoons and watching intently. Up the sides of the buildings the balconies and windows filled with men while the boy's screams mounted to unsustainable hysterics, his nails bleeding as he clawed at the knot fastening him to the chain. His heels dug into the earth, his legs strained uselessly to inch him further from the cart.

"Your point is made, Jama!" yelled Khiren above the screams, edging back into the shade of an awning with his companion. "We don't need to see this!"

Jama's hand paused on the bolt and he regarded the Ipran with mild interest. "No? Well, I disagree. I think this is exactly what you need to see." He pulled back the bolt and the boy's screaming rose in pitch and was momentarily cut off as he twisted his body so that it was further from the cart than his head, almost strangling himself as he did so. From inside the cart came a hooting, wailing song, exultant in its anticipation, triumphant before the act, tortured by the extremities of its own joy.

"You're a madman! You know that you have exposed us, don't you? You know there will be no hiding now!"

Jama shrugged and put his hand on the second bolt.

"The time for hiding is done. The time for feeding is here."

He pulled back the bolt and the boy quickly wrapped two loops of the rope around his neck and pulled on it with all of his terror-born strength, once again digging his heels into the ground and straining back, alive with the sudden hope of death. Stars burst in his eyes as Jama pulled the cart door open and the creature grew tensed and still in preparation for the words of release.

By the fire the woken man rose to his feet. Not especially quickly, not particularly slowly, he stepped over to the half strangled boy, knelt down to him, reached out a hand to his cheek.

From where he lay, writhing and straining in the dirt, eyes closed tight, the boy felt the gentle touch on his face. Another hand moved to rest lightly on his own hands, which were straining on the rope looped around his neck. Laid over the sound of his own choking he suddenly heard a voice, soft but very close. "Hey there...there's no need for that." A soothing calm spread through his mind and body and he opened his eyes. Somehow he couldn't quite make out the man's face, as though a pane of frosted glass turned in a breeze between them, couldn't see his lips moving as he spoke, and so got the impression that the man was speaking in his mind. "I see you. It's alright. I see you." There was so much warmth in the voice that the boy realised he must be dead already, dead and free. The man seemed a stranger, yet the boy felt he recognized his eyes from somewhere. They were blue, and up beyond the man's head was the sky, and that was blue also. The boy noticed he wasn't screaming any more.

Lifting the dishrag of a child, moving him forward so that the tension on the chain was released, the man lowered himself to sit cross-legged on the ground. Taking the boy into his lap he cradled him, kept his small face away from the cart, murmured quiet words to him. The boy listened with half an ear, becoming fascinated by the fabric at the neckline of the man's jerkin.

Silence blanketed the courtyard, pulsed in the column of air between the buildings, coiled like thick fog inside the cart. Jama cocked his head.

"This is a first," he said in a noncommittal tone from his place by the cart. "Khiren?"

Khiren and his second in command leaned forward from the shady anonymity of their awning and they peered at the man.

"I don't recognize him," Khiren suggested.

The skin around the corners of Jama's eyes creased unhappily.

"You don't sound sure."

Khiren peered even more intently at the man as though he were much further away than he was. The man lifted his chin helpfully and looked him in the eye.

"No," asserted Khiren.

"Ah," said Jama. "Then it's him."

"Who?"

"The one I told you about, the one the boy saw. The reason I abandoned my position and came here."

Khiren flared with anger and alarm, spitting an Ipran curse into the courtyard.

"You see what you've done! It's all gone to shit! I wish I'd never met you!"

"Stop whining," said Jama flatly.

The Ipran looked at him through cold eyes.

"You've exposed us all you piece of filth."

Jama tore his attention reluctantly from the nondescript man and regarded Khiren half-heartedly. Twisting his lips with disdain he sighed.

"Deal with it. Live with it. Be a man or run home sniveling to your mother. Just stop boring me with your complaints."

Khiren stiffened, his whole being suddenly filling with magma. But as the moment of eruption approached an invisible freeze seemed to cover him, preserving his flesh from bursting into flames, containing the conflagration threatening to pour forth from his eyes. Ripping his gaze from the object of its fury he glared up at the balconies and windows and barked an order in Ipran, throwing a gesture at the nondescript man and the boy. A jostling broke out amongst the tightly packed Iprans as those with bows hastily tried to arrange elbowroom.

Down in the courtyard the nondescript man adjusted his position and smiled warmly at the boy.

"I need you to be still. Can you do that for me?"

The boy couldn't remember when he had ever been spoken to in such a kind, attentive voice. He nodded earnestly, prepared to remain as a statue for eternity for this man. Indeed, the boy felt now that whatever face was to be found beyond the blur that hid it was the face not of a man so much as a god. "Good boy. You're a brave boy."

The boy watched as the nondescript man held out his left hand, palm up. Shifting his right arm, which was cradling the boy, he positioned his right hand in the air above his left, holding it as though he held a handful of invisible sand, which he was allowing to pour down in a thin stream to his palm. And now he began to move the right hand in a clockwise motion, around and around.

Being closest, it was the boy who first heard the faint but growing sound, the pulsing, glowing tone of an imaginary singing bowl. The distant note grew in strength so that by the time the first archers were loosing their arrows the Iprans were beginning to hear it too. Three arrows flew almost simultaneously into the expanding sphere of resonating air that now surrounded the man and child. As the missiles converged they slowed visibly, straining against the flow of the thickening tone. The first arrow arrived at the nondescript man's chest just as it ran out of momentum and the boy reached out to it as though it were a soap bubble, but it dropped out of the air and landed on his belly before he could touch it. The other two arrows fell softly to the ground on either side, each raising a little puff of dust. Now, the Iprans having had time to arrange themselves, a larger volley was let loose and ten or more shafts shot inwards towards their common destination, off centre of the courtyard. But the tone of the invisible singing bowl was stronger now, the air resonating more intensely, and the arrows all abandoned their missions, sighing to the ground far short, this time, of their intended victims. The nondescript man persevered with the circular motion of his hand. From his privileged vantage in the epicenter of the expanding bowl of sound the boy listened to the smooth, metallic throbbing of the air, hearing a whole series of tones, one layered upon the other, their harmonics rising and falling in an increasingly complex interplay. Then, suddenly, the pitch rose and the sound seemed to leave his ears, pushed outwards and away from him. From within a cocoon of near silence he watched as the Iprans clutched at the sides of their heads, mouthing unheard screams, falling to their knees or barging into one an-

other in an attempt to flee. A swirl of dust circled the courtyard in a clockwise direction, following the vibration of the air. Pots fell over, awnings flapped. One man fell from a balcony, folding irreparably in half as he hit the ground. Amidst the silent maelstrom Jama stood watching, unaffected somehow by the sonic wizardry but for a frown of consternation. Khiren thrashed on the ground, a line of blood leaking between his fingers where they clamped at his ears.

With a flourish of his hand the nondescript man brought the circular motion to an end, releasing the constricted air in the courtyard and letting it spiral upwards between the tenements and into the sky above.

Jama stepped cautiously forward through the raised dust.

"That was good," he said.

"Hmm," said the nondescript man. "Not good enough for you, it seems."

The driver lowered himself to the ground and sat cross-legged, eight feet from the wizard and the boy. All around the courtyard men groaned and trembled. When they tried to climb to their feet they found they couldn't keep their balance. From behind the cooking pot came the wailing of one of the women.

"No, I liked it, I really did. And you haven't even broken a sweat. You're something to be reckoned with. I can see."

The wizard remained quiet for a while, suddenly seeming to become moody, then he spoke softly.

"You're not especially concerned, are you?"

To the boy's ears it sounded less like his rescuer was engaging in adversarial banter than that he was admitting a disturbing realisation to himself.

Jama shook his head slowly and remained silent.

The wizard nodded towards the cart.

"What have you got in there?"

Jama looked over his shoulder to the cart and then back to his opponent.

"Shall I show you?"

The wizard was reluctant to answer.

"I don't think I want you to."

Jama shook his head and seemed to reappraise the man before him, a small wry smile revealing itself. He chuckled, without irony or spite.

"You really are something, my friend. I think I would have liked you."

"Ah," said the wizard. Silence ached in the air between them. "You know, I could simply take the boy and leave."

Jama considered, then winced.

"I don't know. My pet has to feed." He glanced around at the recovering Iprans. "He could dine on this lot, I suppose. They're angry at me like all the hells. It might serve me well."

"Is there nothing to be said for letting your monster go hungry?"

Jama sat and stared off into a middle distance, then his focus returned.

"No," he said. He smiled and rose to his feet. "Come on. Let's get on with this." The boy felt the nondescript man tense. It didn't feel good. Jama looked around at the air above his head as he edged backwards and to one side, leaving a clear path between the cart and his adversary. "You've made it really dusty," he said mildly.

The nondescript man lowered his head to the child and spoke quietly.

"It's time to get up. Hold on to me and don't let go."

The boy cast a glance towards the cart, let out a whimper and threw his

arms around the man. As the wizard climbed carefully to his feet the boy wrapped his legs around him, clamping himself to the final good thing left in his universe.

From where he lay, on his back, Khiren raised his head, his skull still reverberating with the terrible tone the nondescript man had conjured, deafening him to all normal sounds. But he could see well enough what was happening as Jama stepped to the side of the cart. The two figures standing alone in the expanse of the courtyard looked small and pathetically ordinary while the cart now seemed to gape like an open maw, the darkness inside coiling and twisting in readiness. Khiren found himself scuffling backwards towards the nearest wall.

The air altered subtly then, becoming absolutely still, like the moment of silence before an explosion. Jama spoke some words.

"Aztoth bel khrem rha'ppeer."

The words were spoken quietly but the nondescript man heard them. He paled visibly where he stood, gripping onto the boy instinctively.

"No," he said, but there was barely any sound in his voice.

The boy let out a strangled cry as the shadows within the cart spilled out into the courtyard, pooling quickly at first, within a radius of fifteen feet, then creeping forward slowly, reaching ahead with tendrils, expanding into the world like a seeping intelligent rot. A pregnant stillness ached from the black interior of the cart and the courtyard held its breath. Then a low, murmuring chuckle: bestial yet horribly humane, undulating with madness, dripping corrosively with the concentrated biles of its spite, yet insufferably sensitive, almost feminine, in its own understanding of terror. The beast emerged from the shadows of the cart into the shadows that had poured forth, where it crouched, huge and indistinct, waiting momentarily but somehow drawing closer.

And now it moved forward on all fours, its head bobbing as though it were scenting the breeze for their most intimate fears. It cooed to them knowingly from time to time, clucking and chuckling as though it had psychically discerned some new and tender terror, which one of them held dear. The air coiled thickly around the crawling shadow's centre of gravity, which was the beast itself.

The nondescript man hesitated, adjusting his balance again and again, seeming to consider some array of choices known only to him. Then, taking several steps backwards, he simultaneously drew from an inner pocket an object far too massive to have fit in there. The war sword was vast and brutish yet it scythed the air and followed its master's lead as though it had no substance at all. In a smooth, measured motion that bespoke grace and urgency combined, the man fell back into a battle stance, revealed now, in a strange refocusing of the eyes, in his true aspect. Where before had been a nonentity there now stood a tall imposing mage in gleaming white robes, embroidered intricately with the knots of ancient Laan in rich green and gold thread. His long mane of white hair and his flowing beard moved sinuously as though he were suspended under water, and behind him a web of light shifted like the distant surface of a river. Reaching into his robes with his left hand he drew out a second outsized weapon, a tall staff of living wood, three small green leaves sprouting near its tip. From the mane of white hair a visage glared balefully, a face that should have been handsome in the seasoning of its years yet now, in the throes of its current outrage, was nothing but bellicose and fell.

At the side of the cart Jama gaped openly, reaching out, without knowing it, to grip the nearest wheel. He pulled himself close to the cart.

"Jama," boomed the wizard, eyes fixed firmly on the beast. "You would do well to help me."

Jama shook his head unhappily and didn't seem able to find a voice.

"You'll have few chances like this one," called the mage. "Help me defeat this thing and you'll be free of the fate you're bound to."

The driver hugged the wheel of his cart and shook his head more fervently. "There is no defeating it! The best you can do is to flee. Most would never escape...but maybe you."

The wizard glared at him for a moment, then he glanced down at the boy.

"Maybe. Maybe you're right," and his aspect suddenly looked less bright and captivating.

With a mournful look Jama stepped backwards, covering himself in the deepening shadows. But his face could still be seen dimly, regarding the wizard with an expression of reproach that was almost longing.

The beast screamed suddenly, a long shrill scream that sounded like nothing but a woman being murdered. It snapped its jaws and headed forward, braving the light, intent on its meal. Without warning the wizard cast the boy to one side and charged with utter abandon at the creature. His aspect flared up brightly again, brighter this time than the sun, and his battle cry cracked the buildings with its rage. Expanding invisibly yet palpably, his presence seemed to fill the entire space and it was as if a demented giant had fallen on the dark abomination, searing the air itself with his wrath, cleaving ferociously with the massive blade, burning the beast with the spitting intensity of his lighted staff. The fury of his assault ploughed the creature clean across the courtyard and into a wall where he hacked at the screaming thing without let.

Impossibly the monster was not yet dismembered, though it was thrashing hysterically with pain and terror. In the moment that the frenzied wizard paused his sword so that he could bellow his unrestrained rage into the beast's face it managed, with a frantic twist of its misshapen form, to duck out from under the range of the savage sword and crash through the shutters of a window into the tenement against which it had been trapped. From within the building there now came a tremendous clamour of shouts, screams and crashes as the monstrosity rampaged, demented and horrified through rooms and up and down stairs, ripping to pieces any living thing it encountered, feasting on what terror it could find in an effort to assuage its own.

The wizard turned, his wrath spent already, his aspect diminished back to mortal dimensions. His robes, neither blurred by non-description nor gleaming with magic, were now revealed as plain and travel worn, free from shining embroideries. His long white hair and beard were not so white. Staggering slightly, he walked back across the courtyard to the boy. Returning the giant sword to an inner pocket that swallowed it whole, but keeping his staff at hand, he carefully knelt down. Iprans began to pour from the ground level doors and windows of the infected building, reckless in their need to flee but instinctively giving the old wizard and the boy a wide berth. He took hold of the child in shaking hands and patted him up and down his body.

"Are you alright, child? Are you unharmed?"

The boy lifted his battered and broken face and nodded earnestly. Each of his small, bloodied hands took a handful of the old man's clothing and gripped tightly. The wizard took him into a hug, rocked him ever so slightly. "Good boy...you're a good boy. Now I think we should be leaving."

He stood, lifting the boy in one arm and holding him close, carrying the staff in his free hand. Above them a balcony suddenly filled to overflowing with terrified men. Two Iprans spilled over the side and fell headfirst. Then, as the beast was amongst them, shivering them to pieces in its jaws, rending them into tattered portions with its huge crooked hands, those that were free to do so leapt voluntarily into the thin air beyond the balcony that suddenly seemed so benign and inviting, breaking their legs and backs and necks as they landed. Already, even in the scant moments since it had fled in a hysteria of fear, the demented horror had recovered and exceeded its previous strength, bloating on the terror it had drank from the souls of its victims. Now, twice its original size, and having no living men within its range, it pounded the low wall of the balcony to smithereens, letting out a shrill howl of righteous chagrin that demanded satisfaction. Its gaze suddenly fell upon the wizard and the boy.

A barely audible moan of broken dismay floated away on the outward breath of the old man. Turning determinedly from the freakish spectacle he set out striding towards the far corner of the courtyard where a ragged canvas was stretched across the entrance to the alley. As he walked Ipran raiders ran past on both flanks, heading for the same escape route. The piercing screech of the beast behind them rose strangely into the night, oscillating with outrage, seeming to climb into the heights above them where it hung momentarily before descending. Two Iprans crumpled suddenly to the ground in front of the sheet of canvas as the monster landed on them. It had turned in mid air and was already facing the oncoming wizard, cutting him off from the alley. Its cloak of shadows clenched and writhed around it, staining the air and poisoning the hope of those who beheld it.

The creature's demeanor had changed considerably since it had crept confidently forth from the cart, revelling in its own insanity. For now its limbs shook with an intolerable uncertainty, a jarring fear, outstripped only by its answering fury. There was no enjoyment, no shuddering anticipation in its actions now...only assertion and hatred.

The wizard backed away. As the tendrils of dark reached forth to touch him and the child he held forth his staff and planted it in the ground. As the staff made contact with the earth the tip shone once again. This time his aspect did not expand, his movements remained those of an old man, but the light was a light that might have been the sun in spring filtered through falling water, and the boy smelt wet moss somehow and seemed to feel the presence of cool wet rocks.

The beast squealed with spite as the shadow thinned and fell back slightly, unable to draw closer to the staff than six feet or so. In turn the radiance of the staff was thinned and dimmed by the creeping blackness, ultimately failing to penetrate to its heart. The area between the uncorrupted light of the staff and the impenetrable heart of the shadow became a shifting limbo of squirming shadow and shafting light, a place fit only for mortal things.

Then the beast leapt.

As it dove to close with the wizard it burned horribly, its head and arms

meeting a shower of sparks, its flesh steaming ferociously. Letting out a tremendous howl of determination it strained forward through the brilliance, slowing, slowing, as though the light was a thickening substance, until its jaws were inches from the wizard's face. But at this close proximity its very form began to wear down, corroding away as though it were being eaten by acid. The creature's howl changed pitch and became an ululating screech of anguish and it allowed itself to be thrown back by the light, its body half skeletal, its shadowy flesh hanging from it in tatters.

In the ensuing tantrum it leapt up the walls of the tenements ripping balconies from the buildings and tearing wounded Ipran raiders asunder in a frenzy of panic, much as a dog in pain will bite anybody within range, for it cannot bite the pain.

The wizard took a moment to look at the boy. The child was twitching and not fully present, his eyes rolling up into his skull, half sunk in some dream of madness.

"Hey, my boy," whispered the old man. "Come back here. I need you." With some massaging of his limbs, some gentle cajoling, the boy began to pay attention again, though he flinched violently at every screech of the entity, and cast about himself in a permanent panic, expecting assault from any and every direction. But the wizard kept bringing the boy's eyes back to his own hypnotic gaze, kept bringing the focus of his hearing back to his own calm and steady words. "You know, I believe you must be the bravest boy in all Piscea. Don't you agree? I'm certain of it. I've never seen a boy so brave. You might even be able to save us. In fact I'm certain of it. You see, I can get us away from here but I need your help. Do you think you can be ever so brave and help me?"

The boy found himself nodding.

"That's my boy. That's my boy. Come, I need you to hold my staff for me. I need you to hold it tight and hold it still. The light will shine, and while the light shines we will be safe. The monster will try to get to us. It will scream and it will charge at us, but if you are brave, and keep holding onto the staff, no matter how close it gets, no matter how loudly it screams, it will not be able to reach us. Can you do this for me, my brave boy?"

They were rules the boy could understand. He nodded again.

Across the courtyard the beast recovered enough lucidity to find itself clawing a wall to shreds, needing something to hurt, needing to dominate the world of matter. Its rapidly regenerating body trembled with a molten rage that could only be released. A wave of malice and frustration flooded the beast's bubbling minds. Around the courtyard lay the bodies of various Iprans who had failed to escape. It rampaged now, from one to the other, looking for something still living. Each corpse it found that failed to deliver some morsel of terror, pain or suffering was petulantly ripped to pieces, but this was no relief for such a creature and its self pity mounted into a tantrum of titanic proportions. By the time it did find one wounded survivor its mind was completely devoid of all cunning. In a mindless reflex, it pushed him into the dirt and raped him to death in seconds. The body disintegrated quickly but the monstrosity, barely sentient now, continued to rut the mound of gore. Eventually it became conscious that there was nothing left living beneath it, nothing to provide it the trauma it craved to feast on. There was nothing there but its very own need. A white emotion scalded its psyche then, an emotion that might have been rage or might have been terror, it really didn't make any difference.

It lifted its gaze, hungry to find something that it could render helpless and afraid, wanting, with a desperate need, for the regeneration of its body to be fueled by another creature's suffering rather than its own.

Ten yards away stood the small boy, holding the tall staff. A piece of the purest daylight caught on the end of it so that, while the distant sky beyond the rooftops deepened into a rich sea green and the first star began to shine, here in the courtyard day remained. By his side crouched the old man who opened a small leather pouch with shaking fingers and took something from it: a small glossy ring with an unblemished, mirror-like surface, which he hung in the air and caused to expand until it was as tall as a man. Though the ring's diameter had expanded the thickness of the metal, if metal it was, had remained constant. Surprisingly, the view through the inner plane of the circle did not overlook the far side of the courtyard, as one might have expected, but instead showed a view of the inside of a small, quiet room with white painted walls and wooden floorboards. A fat, comfortable looking sofa sat beneath a pretty little window, a small vase of wildflowers on the sill. Through the window could be seen a forest at dusk. Turning his head and catching sight of the portal the boy gaped in surprise but the old man placed a hand on his shoulder and directed him back to the approaching beast. In a voice worn and thin, a voice that whispered as though it had travelled on a breeze throughout forgotten lifetimes from a day long past, the old man spoke.

"Wait, my boy. We don't want the creature to follow us do we? Remember, hold the staff firm and do not flee, no matter what. Then we will be safe. Can you do that?"

The old man's back was stooped, his eyelids hanging heavy, his grip feather light. He leaned his weight on the boy's shoulder but it was insubstantial and the boy supported it easily. "Can you, my boy?" The words were barely audible.

"Yes," said the boy.

The old wizard's head nodded, a dandelion in a summer wind.

"Good boy. Good boy."

The monster leapt and the boy's grip tightened on the staff. As the air around them was shredded in a maelstrom of sparks, scalded in a cauldron of black steam, as it screamed in agony and madness, the old man sat back, breathing heavily. He sat back and he watched.

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In the quiet, white room with wooden floorboards the sounds of the screaming were dulled by distance, stretched and broken by their passage through the twisting of dimensions so that they seemed to flap, tattered in a temperamental temporal wind. When the wizard stepped through the circle, supported by the small child on one side and his staff on the other, he lowered himself gingerly to his knees and coaxed the ring to shrink back to its previous size. Unhooking it from the air with a careless gesture he allowed it to fall and roll, disregarded now, across the floor so that he could curl foetally on the floorboards, beckoning the boy to come close. Already his limbs were beginning to twitch and shake uncontrollably.

"I have to sleep now," sighed his voice, faint as a cobweb. "Will you be brave until I wake up?"

The boy nodded but the wizard was lost already in a fit of jerking limbs. The boy watched helplessly for long minutes in which the only sound in

the room was of the wizard's body scuffling against the floor. And then the old man was asleep and the room silent. With no available source of instructions and no experience of white rooms and sleeping wizards the boy simply knelt there by the old man's side, unsure if he could touch him. Dusk was turning rapidly to night in the woods outside the window. Without the light from the staff, shining through the portal, the room was very dark and the wizard becoming difficult to see. Beyond the room's single open door lay an ominous blackness so complete it could have concealed anything, or might even have been nothing but the Void itself. Growing afraid at the feeling of being watched by a quiet, strange house the boy eventually curled up on the floorboards by the wizard's beard and drifted towards sleep, his mind lighting up along the way with images and sounds and sensations, flashes of fear and brimstone, rolling eyes and tortured children, submerged rocks, flickering light and riverbeds, an insistent hatred, and his own hands, holding on tight, squeezing until they turned into stone.

Italics section...

Each chapter will end with an italics section that provides extra detail on Piscea, it's history and it's major players.

This italics section: Antura, City of Nights...

Conjure some of the atmosphere and history of Antura as it relates to the rest of Napra, Nestorea and Piscea. Give examples of some of its different nights, including the Night of the Beast (19th September?). Show the strange discrepancies between the way these nights are celebrated compared to the incidents that actually inspired them. Think of how Guy Fawkes' story became Bonfire Night.

NOTES ON CHAPTER

This chapter needs to incorporate Ben's backstory. How did he come to be in the cart and what kind of life had he been pulled from? The backstory needs careful thought. We also want more detail on the cart (Footnote from cart's second appearance: 'Cart details: what kind of details can be idiosyncratic yet nondescript at the same time? Take things that are normal (pots & pans) and show that on closer inspection there is something a bit 'off' about each item.')

2

The boy slept deep and long, his spirit absented to those blessed, timeless places where the waking pains of children are soothed and put aside. But the wizard's need for regeneration was even greater. As the boy slowly began to surface from sleep he made experimental openings of his swollen eyes, but the white beard lay before him still, sleeping solidly. Still nervous of the house, the boy slunk back into dreams, but each time he returned and cracked his eyes open he found the old man had not stirred in the slightest.

Skimming the surface of sleep like this brought the boy long lucid dreams involving white rooms lit by golden forest light, haunted by characters that, while not aggressive, were alien and fey and abstractly interested in him.

When he awoke fully it was with a creeping certainty that there was somebody else in the room. The wizard slept on undisturbed before him. Lifting his head he saw a bent old hag standing stock-still three paces in from the doorway and looking down at him from a hideous countenance. She was hunched over a twisted walking stick fashioned from a branch. A tremendous age had nurtured her features into grotesque proportions, her face made all the more startling by the large, black irises of her eyes which, alarmingly, seemed closer to the boy than the rest of her, yet were somehow caught in the process of sliding from her face. She was clad in black tatters and did not belong here, not in this room, not in this house, not in the waking awareness of his mind.

On seeing he had awoken, her eyes trembled in their sockets, seeming to take in a thousand details from about his body, and the tip of her tongue felt along the puckered surface of her upper lip. The glossy black irises grew larger, inviting him to fall into their depths, making him shudder, repulsed at their intimacy.

He looked at the old wizard, lying defenceless at his side and when he turned back to the crone she was already sitting on the floor beside him, her gruesome face pushed forward towards his. Too afraid to cry out, but equally too afraid not to whimper, he jerked away but was held and pulled back by a bony grip on his arm.

"Look at the state of you," she said, in a voice surprisingly soft and sensual. "It's no use struggling, you can't get away."

Then she released his arm and he remained where he was, unable to tell whether she had trapped him under a spell or he was simply too frightened to contradict her.

"You boys *have* been in the wars. Look at you." And she ran her withered fingers over his ruin of a face. "Oh, you're a pretty one, aren't you? Such a tender little morsel, I could gobble you up in one go. Would you like that?"

The boy shook his head fervently and she coughed, delighted. "Maybe not yet, then." She cupped his face in both hands and moved her eyes even closer to his until her irises threatened to merge into one shimmering black hole. "Let's take a look at your little friend then, shall we?"

Following her lead he turned to look at the wizard and gave a little jump of surprise when he saw that the old man was naked now, his lean body pale and young looking, dissected by tattooed glyphs and schematics.

"Look. See," she said, tracing the tattoos with a cracked, yellow nail. "These are protections. This hide of his could be put to potent uses if only I could get it off his back. But look here."

Around his neck was a cord on which was strung a small, unpolished grey stone with a natural hole through it. She lifted it in her fingers and turned it in the light. "I gave this to him. It protects against witches." She cackled, suddenly and explosively. "Ah, me," she said. Then a gleam caught her eye. "What do we have here?" Reaching out she picked up the fallen portal ring that lay on the floorboards still. The boy gave a little gasp and then stiffened. She spared him a slow, sly glance and treated herself to a slow, sly smile. "One good turn deserves another." Holding the ring up to one of her frightful eyes she spied the boy through it. "Ooh, it's pretty, pretty." From out of nowhere she produced a leather thong, which she threaded through the ring and then tied around her neck, where it joined a miscellany of amulets, beads, bones, feathers and stones.

Pleased and self-satisfied she preened and posed for the boy, and then she sent him to find the kitchen and build a fire. He obeyed, not knowing how to refuse, but on finding the small kitchen, which was all white walls, and wooden beams and furniture, like the rest of the house, with golden sunlight pouring in from the forest outside, he realised he didn't know how to build a fire and a panic stirred in his chest. Returning nervously to the room, fearing the old woman's rebuke, he felt the floor falling away from him as he saw that both she and the sleeping wizard were gone.

After a stunned period of standing and staring and not knowing how to think any more because he felt, in the quietness of the house, like a stranger to himself, the boy walked from one room to another, only to find that each swallowed him whole with its emptiness. At the foot of the stairs he paused, torn between the prospect of ascending to more empty rooms above or attempting to leave the house through doors that would, he was sure, turn out to be locked and inescapable. A part of him reasoned that it didn't matter what order he decided to do these things in and he climbed the stairs in a dream.

In the second bedroom that he entered he found the witch sitting on the edge of the bed, looking into the sleeping face of the wizard while she stroked his arm.

"Have you built that fire?" she asked without looking up. The boy shook his head and murmured a word that didn't contain articulated sounds. The old woman sighed and placed a hand on the old man's chest.

"Not to worry," she breathed. "Not to worry."

φ

Throughout the rest of the day she made several trips out into the woods, returning periodically with all manner of plants and bits of bark and items concealed in pouches, which she laid out precisely on the kitchen table. Using a mixture of natural and supernatural arts she tended to the

boy's superficial wounds, fixing the bones of his nose, salving his cuts and scrapes and applying pungent poultices to the swelling around his eyes. He watched as she spent the afternoon preparing a pot of food, which required incantations, hand movements and further trips out into the trees. In the evening she roused the wizard to a state of semi-lucidity and managed to spoon-feed him a broth that looked ordinary enough. His lips mouthed slackly at her bidding, his eyes staring without focus out over some nether realm.

"That's my boy," she cooed. "Who's a big boy?"

When the bowl was empty she allowed him to slip back into sleep again and she bathed the child in hot water infused with the small, orange heads of wild flowers she had gathered and a selection of dark leaves. The vapour from the water made his eyes blink. His limbs grew agitated in the potion and he began to mewl and panic but she placed her misshapen hands on his forehead and crooned a faraway song to him from an old woman's memory until he grew calm and soaked restfully. Afterwards she fed him a bowl of the broth, which tasted wholesome but contained questionable textures, and then had him drink tea until he slumped sideways into a mist of firelight.

His sleep was disturbed for a while and he would wake on a cot in the wizard's room to see the crooked old witch shaking bones over the sleeping man, or looming over the boy himself, scrying for the future written in his forehead, or simply sitting by the fire, her eyes lost in shadows.

Just as he began to believe the night would go on forever he opened his eyes to a sunlit room, his body aching dully but his mind clean. He had slept suddenly and completely. A fresh vase of wildflowers stood in the window.

The hag was gone.

The old man propped himself up on an elbow and looked down at the boy with a frown.

"Did you put me to bed?" he asked through a thick throat.

The boy shook his head: "The witch..."

The wizard jumped forward with a start, casting about himself as though she might have been perched in the form of a crow behind his head. His right hand gripped the stone on the cord around his neck but no crone appeared to torment him and momentarily his composure restored itself. He flopped back onto the bed in a reverie of relief.

"Ah, Mab," he said. Then he lifted his bedclothes and looked underneath. "Look at that," he muttered. "I'm stark naked. The woman has no respect."

Taking a long nightshirt from the headboard of his bed he put it on and then propped himself on an elbow again to look down at the boy.

"How are you feeling?" he said in a very calm and particular manner that did not contain the slightest trace of condescension, and in which the boy had never before heard himself addressed.

"I feel much better," he heard himself reply.

"That's good, that's good." The old man's eyes began to twinkle approvingly and he looked around at the sunshine. "The morning after the storm, eh?" He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. When he looked at the boy again it seemed to be with a mixture of all kinds of subtle emotions, but he smiled and looked happy enough to put his wizardly cares aside.

"This is the kind of morning that calls for the smell of bacon I think, don't you?"

The boy had no idea.

"Do you like the smell of bacon?"

The boy shrugged. "I think so."

The wizard seemed to grow younger with each passing moment.

"What's your name?"

The boy told him.

"Would you mind if I just called you Ben?"

The boy shook his head.

"Very good. In that case, Ben, please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Eonmor."

Ben looked at Eonmor, falling into love as the world falls into the sky.

φ

After the most delicious breakfast Ben had ever had in the whole of his short life¹ Eonmor took him out into the garden and sat him on his knee.

"Would you like to stay here?" he asked.

The patchwork of purple, yellow and pink bruises and dark maroon scabs that comprised the boy's face lit up with a hesitant but guile-free eagerness. He looked around at his surroundings. The pretty but unassuming house of stone and timber sat at the foot of a rock face. It was a large house but was made to look small by the trees of the surrounding forest that had grown to outlandish sizes. The boy could see how any normal-sized man or child walking the woods might feel like one of the faery folk. The upper reaches of the cliff were lost amongst the leaves while all around the trunks of the forest receded into hazily illuminated distances, monumental pillars erected by the earth, a temple built unto itself.

"Yes, please," said the boy.

Eonmor couldn't deny himself a gentle chuckle, but with a visible deliberation he sobered himself.

"Careful, Ben. This is an important decision and there are things you have to know before you make it. If you stay here it means you will be my apprentice and become a wizard like me. If you don't want that then I will find a good home for you, a place where a boy like you could be happy. You wouldn't have to fight monsters again."

The boy paled and his eyes grew shadowed and soulful. The old man stroked his head.

"Would I *have* to fight monsters if I was a wizard?" asked the boy.

Eonmor nodded.

"Sometimes."

"Every day?"

"No."

"Every week?"

"No. There would be lots of days when you didn't have to fight."

"Every year?"

"No, not every year. But there would be some years where you had to fight a lot of them."

Ben considered.

"Would I be good at fighting them?"

¹ What did they have for breakfast?

It was Eonmor's turn to consider.

"That would be up to you. Do you think you would be good at fighting them?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I might be frightened."

"Yes," agreed the wizard. "Sometimes you would be. But you fought well against Wargrin."

"Wargrin?"

"The monster we fought together."

The boy gripped on to the wizard's sleeve.

"Would they all be as bad as that one?"

"No. That's a very bad one. Some of them would be bigger, but very few would be as bad as that."

"Are there any that are worse than that one?"

"Hmm...probably. Probably, somewhere. But the most dangerous ones of all are the ones that look just like men." He cast a suspicious look at the nearby trees. "Or women, come to think of it. Especially women, in fact." He shook off a shudder. "So you see, you should think about this carefully. You can have a nice life if you want to...one where you don't have to fight monsters. You should think about it."

"If I go somewhere and just be a boy I could still be found by the monsters, couldn't I?"

Eonmor looked reluctant to respond but then, inescapably, he nodded.

"So it would probably be best to know how to fight them, I expect. Don't you think?" said the boy.

The wizard's eyes narrowed.

"That's the kind of question you can't be told the answer to...you can only discover it for yourself."

The boy looked out into the forest with a time worn gaze, one that the wizard recognised. When he hugged the child close to him small fingers held onto his earlobe.



The old man was a kind master who had a high regard for simplicity and for the simple enjoyment of life. Therefore, his teaching method was simply to live, and see what happened.

They would fish the river and the lake, play games amongst the trees, read stories to each other. It was summer in Solfar, and summers in Solfar were long and light and warm in those days, and so the boy suspected frequently that he had entered into a dream to escape his previous existence, which had gone on too long. From time to time his thoughts would turn to the magic door, the door that would end the first part of his apprenticeship, but where other boys would have picked away at the riddle, like it was the scab of a scraped knee, he was content to leave it where it was, unopened and unattended. For where could it lead to but away from these golden days in the forest?

Ben had no idea where Solfar was so Eonmor took a tremendous framed map of Piscea down from a wall and laid it on the floor where wizard and apprentice could kneel over it together.

"There's Antura, City of Nights, in Napra, where I found you, and here is where we are now." He directed the boy's attention to a pair of large islands to the east of Napra, off the coast of Caledon. "Solfar, in Enlan, by the River Urrwell."

"What does that say?" asked the boy, pointing at the largest word written across the islands.

"That says 'Elbion'."

The boy's mouth dropped open.

"You've heard of it, have you?"

"The land of the elves!"

"That's right."

Ben cast a look at the window as though expecting an elf to be standing there, waiting for him.

"But where are the elves now?"

"They are still here. Elbion is their nation and Enlan is the heart of their nation."

The boy's eyes grew wide and the wizard held up a pre-emptive hand.

"You needn't be afraid. They don't come to this part of the forest."

"Why not?"

"Because Mab brings us flowers, and the elves are afraid of her. They think of this as a haunted place."

Ben spun an image in his mind. A band of elves prowls, sleek and dangerous through the trees, when suddenly the light is sucked out of the air and the grotesque features of the old witch lean out from the shadows of a hawthorn bush. The elves flee in panic, crying out as they disappear into the night.

Ben smiled brightly.

"Yes, that's right," laughed Eonmor. "I'd keep away, too."

"But why does she bring us flowers?"

"That's a fine question. Why does Mab do any of the things she does? Maybe you could ask her the next time you see her."

Ben's forehead pinched unhappily.

"Would she be angry if I asked her?"

Eonmor shrugged unhelpfully.

"What would happen if she stopped bringing us flowers?"

"Maybe we would have to move somewhere else. But maybe we could scare the elves away ourselves, eh? What do you think? Maybe I could dress up as Mab, that might do it?" The old man hunched his back and gurned his face into an uncanny representation of the crone's. Ben laughed, delighted, but the laugh faded quickly as he remembered something.

"She got your ring."

"Which ring?"

"The one that helped us to get here."

Eonmor winced. His hand went automatically to his beard and he began to chew on a thumbnail.

"Yes? What did she do with it?"

"She tied it around her neck."

Eonmor winced some more and tugged at his beard distractedly.

"It shouldn't be a problem. She won't know how to use it. No, it should be fine. Not anything to worry about." After much wincing and beard pulling he shook the thought off. "It's done. We'll put it out of our minds."

"Is it a very important ring?"

"Only if you know how to use it. I have more just the same. She probably just likes it because it's shiny. We won't worry."

"Are you a very strong wizard, Eonmor?" asked the boy seriously.

"Ah," said the wizard. "I was wondering when you would ask me that. Well, it's not a simple matter, I'm afraid. Many people believe I am strong. Sometimes even I believe I am strong. But nobody really knows."

"Why not?"

"Because one thing that all wizards do well is hide their strengths and their weaknesses from each other. We let people believe that we can do things that we cannot do, and we hide what we really can do so that we might have the advantage of surprise if we ever need it. So maybe I am stronger than the next wizard we meet, or maybe I am weaker. We can't know because he is hiding his strengths and weaknesses, just as I am."

"I think you are strong," decided the boy.

"Oh yes? And why is that?"

"Because I saw you grow as big as the buildings, and the monster was afraid of you."

"Mmm, well, perhaps there are wizards who can grow even bigger. And yes, Wargrin may have been afraid, but he is still out there. And that makes me afraid. It is a tricky thing, Ben. We should always have complete confidence in ourselves, yet at the same time, we should be careful of being over confident. If you are going to be a wizard it would be good to learn these things."

Ben nodded.

"Will you show me some special magic?"

"Yes, of course," said the old man. "What would you like to see?"

"What is the most special magic you can do?"

"Ha, ha, ha," said the wizard. "I like that. Why should we settle for less, eh? Well, as you have asked me, I will show you. And this is something else that I wish for you to understand: I will always answer whatever question you ask as best I can. I will always try to show you what magic I can. All you have to do is ask. This means that it is completely up to your own imagination as to how much you will see and learn. I can answer questions for you, but I can't ask them for you. That is your job, and the one job you must try to do well if you are to be a wizard. Ask questions, the bigger the better. Yes?"

"Yes!"

"Excellent. Very good progress, my boy! What a day! Come then, let me show you the very best magic I can do, just because you asked."

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Taking the boy outside, Eonmor led him through the garden at the side of the house and into a small knot of hedges threaded with a path. After several twists and turns they emerged into the dark, narrow space between the back of the house and the cliff. The wizard took his staff from his robes and planted it in the ground so that the tip shone, providing them with enough light to conduct their business. Sitting cross-legged in the dirt he bid the boy to join him. Then the wizard produced two large pouches. He opened the first and proffered it to Ben.

"Take one of these."

Ben reached into the pouch and pulled out a sweet. Eonmor helped himself to one also, taking care to select a specific colour. "I like the orange ones best." He popped it into his mouth and his cheeks pursed with pleasure. Ben stuffed his sweet into his mouth. Its flavour was sharp and delicious and made his eyes water.

The wizard opened the second pouch and held it out to the boy. Peering in Ben saw that it was filled with portal rings, all identical, all perfectly polished and unblemished. He held a hand out tentatively and the old man nodded his encouragement. Dipping his hand into the bag he immediately noticed how they ran through his fingers, slipping and sliding around as though they were barely touching his skin. Lifting one out he let it lie in the middle of his palm so that he could look at it. It felt light as a petal. The substance of the ring was circular; that is to say, if one were to have taken a very sharp axe and sliced the ring in half the four cross sections of the two resulting pieces would have been perfect circles.

"Now, Ben, you have seen this type of ring before. Think carefully and then tell me: what do you think it is made from?"

Ben wanted to say 'metal', but he knew he wouldn't have to think carefully to say that. He lifted the ring close to his face and stroked it with a fingertip, staring intently at its lustrous, mirrored finish.

"I wanted to say 'metal'," he said carefully, "a shiny silver metal. But it doesn't feel heavy. It's shiny like a mirror, but it doesn't feel like glass. It feels funny, like my fingers can't touch it." An idea suddenly lit up the inside of his head. "It's made out of nothing!" he declared.

Eonmor's eyebrows rose up his forehead. His eyes bulged momentarily and then he let out a great roar of approval.

"Yes!" he cried. "You got it! By Protim's Box, you've surprised me! And first time, too! Well done, my boy. Well done. I can hardly believe it. You really are my apprentice. I knew you were, but...you really are!"

Ben grew dizzy with pleasure and didn't know what to do with himself. Eonmor took the ring from his palm and held it up.

"Listen carefully, Ben, because I know you'll be able to understand this. To make this ring I took a pinch of the world and I rolled it in on itself. People tend to think that the world is made out of great big layers of space and stuff...tables and chairs and rooms and countries and ground and sky and so on. People also tend to believe that each of these layers of space and stuff is a moment. The layer underneath us is the moment that just happened, the layer above us is the moment that will happen next, and the layer we are in currently is now. That is how the human mind perceives the world.

But tremendous layers of space and matter only really exist in the mind. It's something that we made up to try and explain ourselves to ourselves. It's just an idea. We all made it up together. In truth there is no such thing as distance and there is no such thing as time. There is only ever *here* and there is only ever *now*. If you think about it carefully enough you will realise you have never been anywhere else or any *when* else, but here and now.

Do you follow what I am saying?"

"So there is no such place as Antura?" asked the boy. "And there is no monster called Wargrin?"

"When Antura and Wargrin are part of the here and now they exist, because they exist in our mind. When they are not present in our mind they do not exist."

The boy thought about it."

"So if I never think of Wargrin again, I will never meet it again?"

"That is correct. Do you think you can never think of Wargrin again?"

After a few moments the boy grimly shook his head.

"No," said the wizard gently. "I don't think so, either. But that was as truthful an answer as I have ever heard, so well done. Good. Good. Now...listen carefully...when I take a pinch of the world and roll it in on itself to make a ring I am not really taking a pinch of the world because the world doesn't exist. I am taking a pinch of our idea of the world, and I roll it in on itself so that all parts of the idea are rolled up against and touching all other parts of the idea. If I roll it tighter it will touch against parts that seem to be in the future. If I roll it looser it will touch against parts that seem to be in the past. If I hang it in the air and turn it, it will touch against places that seem to be elsewhere, some quite near, some far away.

Now, here, take the ring and put it on your finger."

Ben did as he was told, placing the ring on his left index finger.

"It's a little bit big for you, but look, I can make it smaller so it fits." Eonmor squeezed the ring lightly and it shrank to fit the finger. "Now, at the moment the ring acts like any ring. You can put your finger through it and wear it, just as you would expect. This is because the ring has been rolled so that it is touching here and now. But if I take the ring back..." He took the ring from Ben's finger and held it in fingertips that stroked it ever so delicately. "...and I roll it just so, so that it is touching a different time and place...now if you put your finger through it your finger will seem to disappear. Do you want to try it?"

Ben shook his head, no.

"Why not?"

"What if I couldn't get it back?"

"Well, would that be such a great loss? Are you sure you need all of your fingers?"

The boy nodded.

"All ten of them? Are you certain?"

The boy was certain.

"Hmm, well I'm sure I don't know what a small boy like yourself would need to be doing with all ten of his fingers, but I suppose you know what you're talking about. Would you like me to try?"

The boy nodded.

"Oh, so you don't mind if I can't get *my* finger back?"

Ben giggled and shook his head.

"Charming boy," muttered Eonmor and he put the middle finger of his right hand through the ring, which expanded to accommodate it. And sure enough, Ben saw the finger enter the ring on one side, sinking into it to the knuckle, but no finger emerged on the other side.

The boy gasped and then squawked with delight.

"Does it suit me?" asked the wizard, brandishing his hand and grinning impishly.

"Yes!"

"Yes, I think you're right. It's a very pretty little ring. Shall I see if I can get my finger back?"

"Yes."

Pulling the ring from his hand the finger was revealed once more in its full glory.

"Ooh, that's a relief," said the wizard, flexing the miraculous finger back and forth. "So! A question for my apprentice: what do you think happened to my finger?"

"It went somewhere else," said Ben immediately.

"Of course. It went somewhere else. It is not difficult to understand, is it?"

"No."

"No. Of course it isn't. Now, my cowardly little pup, are you ready to try it yourself, now that I have risked all of the danger?"

The boy nodded enthusiastically, bouncing up and down where he sat.

"What a nasty little boy you are. Very well. Now this is not quite as easy as it looks so I want you to follow my instructions perfectly. Can you do that?"

Ben nodded.

"Well, we will see if you can. First you must sit up very straight and you must keep your head very, very still. Let me see you do it. No, put your back even straighter than that. Hold your head even stiller. Very good. Now I will adjust the ring slightly so it will fit your finger. Hold out your hand and keep your fingers nice and straight. That's it. Very good. You're an excellent pupil. Now remember, do not move your head. When your finger disappears you may want to run around in surprise but you mustn't. You must stay very still, no matter what happens. Yes?"

"Yes."

"And you must keep your finger very still at first. I'll tell you when you can move it. Yes?"

"Yes."

"Very well."

Eonmor slipped the ring onto Ben's outstretched middle finger and the finger disappeared. The boy sighed with suppressed excitement, but kept himself very still. "Very good, very good," said Eonmor quietly. "You're showing very good control. I'm impressed. Now tell me, where do you think your finger has gone to? Don't move your head."

The boy thought hard.

"It depends," he said.

"Yes?"

"It depends how much you rolled the ring."

"Yes, of course. Good. Good. It might be anywhere. But somewhere, out there in the Sovereign Galaxies is your finger, poking through a ring that is floating in the air. Perhaps it could be mistaken for a tasty worm by a hungry bird. What do you think?"

The boy's eyes widened at the idea, then they narrowed.

"No," he said.

"No? Why, on earth, not?"

"Because you wouldn't let it."

The wizard regarded the boy with a wry expression.

"You're a sharp boy. That's right, I wouldn't let a hungry bird carry off your finger. As we already know, a growing boy like yourself needs all of his fingers. Now...what do you think might happen if you curled your finger?"

The boy thought about this.

"I would feel my finger curling but I wouldn't be able to see it."

"Well, yes, that's a very good answer, but I think something else might happen too. Let's find out. Now, I want you to keep your head very, very still and slowly curl your finger, but no matter what happens, do not move your head. It's very important. Are you ready?"

The boy's head trembled slightly, wanting to nod, but he stopped it.

"Yes," he said.

"Good boy. Go ahead then, and slowly curl your finger."

The boy did as he was told and suddenly he gasped with surprise, his body jerking ever so slightly as he felt a sensation on the top of his head. Something was there with them in the space between the house and the cliff. It was behind him, and it was touching him on the top of his head. The wizard watched with barely suppressed glee. As the boy curled and uncurled his finger, feeling the corresponding touch on the top of his head, he slowly made the connection and then he began to laugh, and the laughter flooded out of him, tinkling like a stream, more free and untrained than the wizard had ever witnessed in him before. And now the wizard laughed too, partly with delight, partly with relief. And when the boy tickled himself on the top of the head, and was transported by a fit of giggles, the old man laughed freely, and various kinds of tears streamed down his face.

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After the laughter had passed and more sweets had been consumed, and Eonmor had taken back the portal ring, his mood changed. He gazed upwards from the narrow space between the wall of the house and the hard, uneven face of the cliff to where blue sky could be glimpsed through the canopy high above. In his hand the ring was turning over and over amongst his fingers. When he finally spoke it was with a strange candour, one that adults seldom use when speaking to children, the voice of an equal, and Ben knew that he was going to hear something momentous.

"Well, Ben, here we are, you and I: a wizard and his apprentice. I was an apprentice, long, long ago. My master was a master in the arts of air and water. He taught me in faraway Zaneb, before it fell to Zoestrosa, how to sound the singing bowl of the air that can stop arrows as they fly, and that can spin whole armies of men into the sky. He helped me find my seat of power, where water and air combine, by the River Saph in the enchanted forest, Fé Anadrei, in Imurran, which I can summon to my aid when I need strength and wisdom, which soothes my soul, even in the heat of battle. He led me to an intimate knowledge of the natures of the storm elements, just as his master had taught him, and his master's master, and his master's master's master. And he taught me all manner of strange sorceries from exotic disciplines that have long lain hidden beneath the ruins of ages, things that he had picked up during his winding and sprawling life. He taught me everything, it seemed – more than a mortal mind can contain. And yet..."

The ring came to a pause in its turning through his fingers.

"...that was long ago, and I have learned even more since then."

He held up the ring.

"Times change slowly, and then they change fast. I once thought of myself as a master of the air and water. Now I walk the Sovereign Galaxies. I will not teach you as another taught me. I will teach you as I have taught myself.

You will see new worlds, Ben. You will see amazing sights. And you will find that as the universe around you becomes grander, more spectacular in your awareness, the universe that exists inside you will become greater too. This is important, Ben, and I want you to understand it before we travel together: the greatness of anything that you see outside of you is

always matched by the greatness inside you. Always. So, as we travel through the portals, whenever you see a sight that takes your breath away, something that is so wonderful and huge that it makes you feel tiny and insignificant and meaningless, you must remember this: it is only because of your own greatness that you can apprehend such a wonder in the first place. Let that knowledge become a part of you now, Ben. For we will go forth together, and I will show you what a spectacular being you are. Do you think you will be able to remember that?"

The boy nodded solemnly.

Eonmor's demeanour relaxed. He lowered the ring and smiled kindly.

"Good boy. I believe you. Very well. That's enough words. Let's go somewhere, shall we?"

Rising to his feet the wizard hung the ring in the air, level with his heart, and he brushed it lightly with his fingertips, leaning in attentively as though he were listening to something barely audible. Then he stepped back and turned to the boy.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Ben looked up at the tall figure, who plucked his staff from the ground, and as he did so the fragment of daylight that was snared on the tip faded, but in the ensuing dimness his white robes and beard began to glow. He was smiling down at the boy and a gleaming ring hung in the air behind him. A swirl of excitement rushed up from the pit of the boy's stomach to his chest where it circled the chamber of his ribs and exited through the top of his head, making his hair stand up slightly. He rose to his feet and already, behind the wizard, the ring was expanding, the mirrored band of nothingness stretching, stretching, but retaining its perfect circle, until it was far taller than the man, and the lowest point had sunk into the ground. And through the circle was revealed a night sky, where the stars were brighter and closer than Ben had ever known stars to be, and there, filling half of the sky, tilting up into the universe like an eternally burning pin-wheel, was an immense spiral galaxy.

The wizard took his hand and they stepped through the portal together onto a smooth, dark floor of polished tiles that were all circular and that varied dramatically in size. The floor was slightly curved, and stretched out in all directions, uninterrupted but for four towers. Turning to look back at the portal, to see the back of the house through the circle, Ben's attention was immediately captivated. With his jaw growing slack he lifted his face, slowly and steeply, so that he could take in the presence of the huge planet whose crescent rose high above the shining portal, yet at its lowest point dipped far below the horizon. All together the daylight side and the inky night side took up even more of the sky than the galaxy. The vast expanses of its surface were a mottled swirl of gases: orange, red, gold, black and white, lit up by a sun that was sunk out of sight. Its great girth was belted by sixteen crescent moons, varied as marbles, aligned on the shared plane of their orbits, which was tilted in relation to the boy and wizard so that the nearest moon was directly above their heads.

The boy gaped helplessly, and the old man crouched down behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You see, Ben," he said softly by the boy's ear, "how wonderful you are."

The landscape was flat and smooth but for the four vast towers that grew organically from the floor at the corners of an invisible square that was, perhaps, as much as a league and a half wide. They leaned away from each other and were tiled after the same fashion as the floor (indeed there was no clearly definable point at which it could be said floor ended and tower began). Despite their distance, the three towers that were furthest from Ben and the wizard still presented themselves as objects enormous enough to compete with the spiral galaxy for the eye's attention. The tower that was closest to them, rising from a smooth, steep curve in the floor and leaning away as though daring them to try and walk up it, presented itself as a mind-numbingly big presence.

Ben stared up at its heights as Eonmor walked about nearby with his head bowed in the opposite direction, studying the ground.

"Ben," he called. "Come and sit in this circle."

Ben responded quickly, eager to earn his place. He saw that each dark tile was outlined by a black seam, the thickness of which was proportionate to the diameter of the tile itself. The smallest of the circular floor tiles was tinier than a pinhead, while the largest could only be seen by the nearest part of its seam because the rest of it disappeared beyond the horizon, dipping softly into the all-encompassing star field. The circular tiles were arranged so that the seams of the largest circles touched against each other, and the vast gaps between them were filled by smaller circles of just the right size. In turn the gaps left by these circles were filled perfectly by smaller circles. This process seemed to continue into infinity.

Ben sat down cross-legged in the circle allocated him by the wizard. It was about four feet across and seemed to fit him nicely.

"Don't be alarmed," said the wizard, and he gave the tile a tap with his staff. It turned slightly beneath the boy and, with the slightest of clicks, felt rather than heard, it lifted a few feet into the air. "It's like a flying carpet." With another tap against the tile's underside a bubble of energy suddenly encapsulated Ben, disturbing the air with a barely discernable shimmer. "Now you won't be able to fall off, and if we decide to fly high up you'll still be able to breathe." Eonmor found a much larger circle for himself. Repeating the tapping procedure he also rose into the air, centred in a bubble big enough to accommodate him standing. Ben observed how the underside of Eonmor's tile was curved smoothly. The shimmering force field surrounding the wizard aligned perfectly with the curved underside of the tile to form a complete sphere. A ring of lights, simple straight lines stood side by side, circled the under surface beneath a hard, translucent coating.

"These flying platforms are easy to pilot. They know where you want to go. All you have to do is know yourself. Follow me." The wizard's bubble flew away, spiralling up and around the nearby tower, and Ben followed as though it were the most natural thing he had ever done.

They stationed their little flying platforms high above the centre of the tower and Eonmor faced the boy, who was gazing around himself with big eyes. Despite the grandeur of the surroundings the boy couldn't help but be mesmerised by the tall, commanding figure of the wizard, standing in his force field, robes and hair glowing, staff held lightly so that it leaned in the crook of his arm, while behind him a number of crescent moons divided the sky.

"Now, Ben," he said. "It is time for you to do your job. Questions."

The boy took some time to look at the silent spectacle that surrounded him on all sides and he wondered what would be a good question. Listening in on his feelings he noticed a part of himself that was reluctant to hear somebody else's interpretation of this place. What would it matter what another called it? What would it matter how it got here? But this was a quiet, inarticulate feeling and he asked the question he felt was expected.

"Where is this?"

Eonmor didn't answer straight away but looked at the boy steadily. Eventually the merest hint of a smile played about his lips.

"Draxas," he said, inclining his head slightly towards the planet. He said nothing more. After a pregnant pause Ben realised more was being required of him.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing at the tower beneath them that was topped by a huge oval platform. The platform was very plain, not even possessing a balcony to mitigate the vertigo.

"Are you asking about the tower, or the platform at the top of the tower, or are you asking about the entirety of the object below us?"

Ben wasn't sure so he guessed.

"The whole thing," he said.

Eonmor made another of his small smiles.

"It is a space ship," he said. "It sails through space, the space between the stars and planets."

Ben's shifting perceptions shifted some more.

"Who does it belong to?"

"It doesn't belong to anybody any more. It has been abandoned by it's previous owners."

"Who did it used to belong to?"

"It belonged to a race called the Kaleida."

"Who are they?"

"They are a race of beings who have lived for a very long time. They are much older than mankind. They have lived so long that they learned how to build spaceships and fly from one world to another."

"Where are they now?"

"They swam away."

"They *swam*?"

"Yes. They grew older and older, and as they grew older their bodies grew bigger and bigger until they became giants. They grew so big that they couldn't build anything with their hands any more, but that was not a problem because by now they could build things using the power of their minds. So they used the power of their minds to build spaceships like this one. And still they lived longer and longer, and still their bodies grew bigger and bigger, until they were so big, and their minds so powerful, that they didn't need their spaceships any more; they could just swim through space like fish swimming in the ocean."

"What are they doing now?"

"They are helping the emerging intelligence of the universe to grow stronger. That means they are helping the universe to wake up and know itself."

"How are they doing that?"

"I don't know. They have gone beyond my powers of understanding and, therefore, they are beyond my ability to perceive them."

"But how do you know what they are doing, then?"

"Excellent question. Well done. I know that they are helping the universe to wake up because that is what we are all doing, whether we realise it or not. It is simply the nature of everything that exists."

"What will happen when the universe wakes up?"

"It will help other universes to awaken."

"What happens when they're all awake?"

"When all of existence is awake, we will help other existences to awake. And so it goes on."

"Doesn't it ever stop?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"For something to end, anything at all, *here* and *now* would have to come to an end, and there is no other place but here, there is no other time but now."

"If something can wake up then it must get tired sometimes?"

"And fall asleep again?"

"Yes."

"Clever boy. You are right. But each day you wake up you wake up that little bit more than you did the day before. Each lifetime you live you live a little bit more. Each time you return to the same place you know it that little bit better."

The boy looked out across the cosmos and then down at the spaceship.

"Can we go inside?" he asked, pointing.

"Let's take a look shall we? Follow me."

At first they flew away from the ship, letting it diminish in size until it began to look like one of the moons. Then the wizard led the boy around to the far side. The great ship stopped looking like a moon and started looking like a city for giants, floating in space on its very own flying platform. The designs of the buildings were so ancient they looked like they were from the distant future. But the lights of the city were still shining and the buildings were pristine like they had just been built. The two humans flew in and out amongst the streets and buildings, across rooftops and down thoroughfares, visiting the dreaming spires of a giant race that had long since awoken and departed.

For a long time they chased each other and played hide and seek amongst the silent, sentient architecture. And then, when the boy was ready, Eonmor took him inside to see further wonders revealing the inner workings of the minds of the elder races. The boy asked more questions and was shown more answers, and his altered perceptions shifted again, in multiple directions simultaneously, and he encountered new configurations, within and without him, that were altogether surprising, and yet achingly familiar.

By the time it was time to leave the floating city at Draxas, and return to the house in Solfar, the boy had caught a glimpse of the depths of his within in the reflection of his without, and he found he was ready to believe in his apprenticeship.

Italics section...The sights to be seen through the portals to the Sovereign Galaxies. Start with faraway dimensions and planets, end with the richness of Piscea: its ancientness and size, the long forgotten technologies buried beneath rock, sand and soil, the sleeping sorceries, the wide variety of peoples, the contradictory worlds existing side by side. How many sleeping armies and lost machineries dream of revival. Bygone gods brood in the shadows.

*Mention how those few who travel the Sovereign Galaxies can, unintentionally, make others feel uncomfortable. They see things differently to other people, therefore they look **at** other people differently.*

3

Two years passed.

The time in them stretched forth, long and taught, so that the boy's passage along it was frictionless, as still and undetectable in its motion as a held breath. The time passed unnoticed, each day filling with rich, golden water that brimmed over and flooded the world, lifting his floating soul to the sky until he was pressed into a flawless, blue painted ceiling that was held aloft by timbers of sunlight.

And the lake was well fished and the river well swum. The stones were well skimmed, the wood well walked, the books well read, the games well played, the stories well told and the witch well watched.

He was now seven years old.

For the most part during that short period of grace, which had been held aside carefully for the boy's recovery from too much time spent in shadow, the wizard had employed a way of conducting his business that did not disturb Ben's peace. At odd moments the old man would step out of the room and go discreetly to the hidden area behind the house. There he would open a ring portal, passing through it only to emerge back again an instant later having spent a day, or two months, or three years away, tending to what wizardly duties called for his attention. Once back he would return unmissed to the caring of the boy. Ben quickly got used to the idea that his master could gain a scar and lose a tan in the time it took for him to go and make tea.

During that period no visitors had marred the quality of the days, except for Mab, who could not be kept away by any means known to man or wizard. She brought fresh wildflowers for the vases and sometimes just lurked in the garden, peering at them from amongst the hollyhocks. Sometimes she would frighten the boy, and Eonmor would have to invent unexpected distractions to soothe his fears, like animated toys or talking spoons. Sometimes she would frighten the old man and Ben would have to shoo her tentatively away into the wood, where she could be heard cackling with glee and gasping for breath. Sometimes she would mope and cry outside the house with loneliness until they let her in and made her supper, and she might not make fun of them too much. But her mood could change quickly and it wasn't always easy for them to tell whether they could afford to be stern with her or were better advised to treat her as carefully as a wasps' nest. Sometimes she could be distant and distracted, making cryptic comments in faraway voices.

"Autumn's woes but whisper and grow," she told Ben on the morning that Eonmor began to allow visitors at the house in Solfar. "Seldom late comes winter's hate." She nodded at him encouragingly and he wasn't sure if he should nod back. They were at the side of the house. She had grabbed his sleeve unexpectedly as he was carrying water back from the

well and now she kneaded his arm uncomfortably as she pointed her eyes at him. "Where do you go?" she asked. "Tell Granny Mab. Where does he take you without her? Tell me, my darling boy. I know you go places."

"I'm not sure if I should say," said Ben carefully. "I don't mean to be rude," he added hastily.

A measure of lucidity entered her gaze then, like an old friend entering the room unlooked for. Her face changed, subtly yet profoundly, seemed to see him sanely and was not grotesque any more. She smiled a soft smile and nodded. "No. No," she whispered. Her grip on his arm loosened. "I fade in and out," she said. "Some years are like that." She stroked his shoulder, gently but needily. "Most years. I'd like to skip the winter this time...please?"

He didn't know what to say so he touched her cheek.

"This one has deep roots," she said, glancing at the sky fearfully. "I can feel them."

"The winter?" he asked, and she nodded, wincing. "You're afraid," he said.

She looked at him, smiled, shrugged, and they stood there together.

Eonmor came around the corner of the house looking for him.

"Ben? Ben, we have guests...oh. Mab." He stopped at the sight of them and looked from one to the other. "Hello," he said.

"Hello, Eonmor," she said. This was the first time Ben had ever heard her use the wizard's name.

"Hello," he said again. "How are you? You're looking well."

She seemed to consider him, seemed to be on the verge of some unexpected decision, then changed her mind. Her face slid away from his and she was turning away.

"Oh...something or other," she said, and she shuffled off into the garden.

Eonmor knelt and beckoned the boy to him.

"Everything all right?"

"She's afraid of the winter," said Ben.

"She said that?"

"Nearly."

"I see."

"What does it mean?"

"Only she knows for sure. It's only a guess, but...she's been in her crone aspect for a long time now. I think it's depressing her. She wants to return to being a young maid again."

"Can't we help her?"

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"She, more than most, is subject to the seasons. A season will come when you can help her, but it won't be this winter."

"I don't understand."

"I'll explain more fully. I will. But right now we have guests."

"How do we have guests?"

"I brought them."

"Is it time for me to find out about the places you go without me?" The boy frowned at himself, hearing echoes of Mab in his words.

"It seems so. I was intending to start introducing you to that other part of my life sometime soon anyway. But now something's happened. I'd like to keep you close by me while I attend to it."

"Is it something dangerous?"

Eonmor looked carefully at the boy.

"Maybe, Ben. Maybe. But you know I'll look after you, don't you?"

The boy nodded.

"And I have some good, strong friends who will also care for you. Come and meet them. And, Ben, here is your assignment: listen well, watch well, *pay attention*, ask questions later. Understood?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good boy. Come on."

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The three guests were in the sitting room. Introductions were made and the small boy was greeted politely and accepted without condescension into the meeting. He sat down on the settee between Eonmor and a man called Sternum who was small and compact and soberly dressed in a charcoal grey suit. He had a receding hairline shaved to a silver stubble. His eyes were grey, his features gentle. He smiled shyly at Ben as he took his seat and then, at Eonmor's bidding, gave a report.

"The master's house at Nazaride," he said, with a nod to Eonmor, "has been invaded by a presence of some kind. Flo and Cloé are guarding the entrances to the inner sanctum. The house in Zaneb doesn't seem to have been threatened, but I'm concerned that we don't seem able to defend one of them adequately at the moment. If they were both to come under attack at the same time..."

The gathering brooded on this silently. In the armchair by Sternum a woman was sitting cross-legged. She was small, had a streamlined shock of grey white hair and large, bright eyes containing many shades of blue. Her name was Ashar.

"A presence, you say, Sternum?"

He lowered his head and raised his eyebrows apologetically.

"We haven't seen anything, except a window open that shouldn't have been open. But we can feel it. It's strong. Ordinary people would have been driven out by it, I believe."

The boy looked at him then, trying to see what was not ordinary about him.

"What does the presence feel like?" asked Ashar.

Sternum looked upwards.

"It's a wrongness, a sickness. Makes me think of something that has been locked in a terrible place, festered bitterly in its own horror. It's a writhing, a seething. It's all emotion, emotion with purpose...but I don't sense any great intelligence there." He looked at her then, wincing regretfully. "All a bit vague, I'm afraid."

"No, not at all," she said distractedly, lost in some process of thoughts.

"Will Cloé and Flo be safe?" asked the third visitor, sitting forward in his armchair looking concerned. He was a medium sized man, very brown and weatherworn, with bright blue eyes. His hair was thick, brown and spiky, his arms sinewy and tattooed. His clothes looked roughly made, well used and durable. Against his armchair leaned a long sword in its scabbard. His name was Clemen. "I hate to think of them left alone with

something powerful enough to break into that place...especially if it's evil. Would they be able to resist it?"

He addressed all of this to Sternum who shrugged.

"I don't know," he said simply, and had nothing more to add.

Clemen made a hiss of frustration.

"Ashar," said Eonmor. This seemed to be enough of a cue for her to give her own report.

"The enchantments at Monnhill were...'disturbed' last night. Not broken, for they're still in place, but they were breached. The culprit was a projection, traced to your apartment. It wore your image, tried to pass itself off as you. When this failed it vanished. When it was first discovered it seemed to be looking through the titles on one of your bookshelves. Whether or not it found what it was looking for we have no idea." She plumped out her lower lip and shook her head. "That's all."

"I'm supposing this is more alarming than it sounds?" said Clemen lev-
elly.

"If it happened elsewhere it would hardly be worth mentioning. That it has happened at Monnhill...a place thought to be as secure, as safe guarded as anywhere in the west...Clemen, I really can't put into words how shock-
ing that is."

Clemen sat back in his armchair.

"Fair enough," he said. He turned to Eonmor. "You're very quiet, Eon-
tos."

"I'm saving it," said the wizard. "Can we have your report?"

Clemen took a deep breath and let it out with a cold, hard stare into
nowhere.

"Well, Penmor is the least protected of all your bases, having no en-
chantments, witches or elves to keep intruders away, just ordinary men,
and I'm guessing that's why we've had the worst of it. Your rooms at the
Yew Man have been completely ransacked. The creature responsible didn't
seem especially interested in the seven Rhondrans who ran up from the bar
and tried to stop it. From the accounts I've had it barely paid them any
mind at all, so intent was it on searching your rooms. But that didn't pre-
vent it from making short work of them. Two are killed. The rest are badly
injured at best, maimed at worst. After it had finished with them it contin-
ued with its searching until every conceivable hiding place in there had
been torn up. Then it loped off into the night."

Clemen's report had been delivered in cold, clipped sentences. Now he
fell silent and looked each of them in the eye, one by one, ending on Eon-
mor.

The wizard met his gaze stonily, then sighed and bowed his head. They
waited for him.

"Forgive me, Clemen," he said. He lifted his face. "I would say some-
thing for Tonna and Jansy...I just don't have the words right now."

Clemen smiled and a tear fled down his cheek. He nodded and sniffed.

"Get on with it," he said softly.

The wizard took a moment to collect himself.

"It is a given," he said slowly, "that these events come from a shared
source. Somebody wants something that they believe I have. The natures
of these...'intrusions'...vary extravagantly, but that, I feel, merely reflects
the different natures of my various homes. Whoever is doing this has the
breadth of resources to tailor each attack precisely to fit the target. What's

more, they don't care that I'm aware of the efforts. This gives me the greatest cause for concern, for to be so recklessly bold means they do not fear reprisals from me." He shook his head in consternation. "If I were Zane himself I would fear reprisals from me!"

"Does your intuition suggest anybody?" asked Ashar.

"One name springs to mind but I am going to deliberately ignore it."

"Why?" said Clemen.

"Because if I were the perpetrator of these attacks I would only have carried them out if I felt confident I could misdirect the blame to some other likely source."

Clemen nodded.

"Yes, you're right," murmured Ashar.

"With respect to the two men who died at Penmor," said the wizard, looking at Clemen, "the intrusion that disturbs me most is the one at Monnhill. I believed that place was proof against anything in Piscea. It may only have been a projection, but still...I'm staggered by that incident."

Ashar was nodding.

"Do you know what they are looking for?" she asked.

"No. It could be anything. It could be any number of things I do have, it could well be something I don't have. There's no point in conjecture until we know more."

"How will we find out more?" asked Clemen in a brittle voice. "What are we going to do?" The muscles around his jaw rippled.

Eonmor looked around at the four people sat with him.

"I," he said, "am going to take Ben and Sternum to Nazaride to investigate this presence. It's the one entity that hasn't fled yet. I would welcome the help of you, my friends, if you are willing?" He turned to Clemen, then Ashar.

"That's settled, then," said the woman.

He turned back to Clemen.

"Of course. Don't be stupid," said the Rhondran. "I've a question, though."

"Yes?"

"The boy."

"Yes?"

"You say he's been your apprentice for just two years now, and he's only studied theory so far."

"That's right."

"And he's seven years old."

"Yes, yes, yes, come on, hurry up."

"Don't be obtuse. You hurry up."

"I'm simply not leaving him behind, especially here when this is one of the few places I have that hasn't been interfered with yet. That's as much answer as you need." Eonmor put a hand on Ben's shoulder. "But I'll give you more. I have seen this boy's mettle. I saw it when first I met him, when he faced down a beast that would have curdled the oaths on your breath. If that is not enough, I will say only that he consorts frequently with the Mab. Now, can we go?"

Clemen's eyebrows rose high on his forehead.

"Maybe he should go first," he said.

Eonmor didn't want to open a portal directly into the house in Nazaride, the City of Bridges.

"I wish to avoid any chance," he explained, "of the entity passing through the portal to this house."

Under a heavy fog of nondescription they emerged from a portal under the stone bridge on Fallow Lane. A busy traffic of people was walking by in both directions. The wizard quickly closed the portal and the group of five moved off to the left, walking along the bank of the River Tove, standing out from the city people as a strange and motley little group, but drawing no attention at all.

They didn't talk as they went, just looked at the people, the buildings and bridges, the ships and boats. It was a bright day in Nazaride and Ben was surprised by the big, clean streets canopied by ancient trees, the colourful brickwork of the houses, the well mannered street traders, the easy, unpretentious air of affluence. There were indeed bridges everywhere, and not just across the rivers (Nazaride was seated at the confluence of no less than four major rivers) but over streets and buildings, connecting one hill to another, this place to that. The boy liked the city immediately and saw a hundred directions down which he wished to explore. That he was walking as part of a very select group of extraordinary individuals under a cloak of nondescription, on a strange and exciting mission, simply made every detail of his surroundings more vivid and eye catching. What could possibly be found that was disagreeable on such a day?

They arrived at Eonmor's town house and looked up at it, studying carefully for any signs of wrongness. On its own the house would have been imposing. It was a wide building, but seemed narrow because of its height. Yet standing as it did, amongst a row of identical, though differently coloured, houses and possessing no number of its own (it stood between twelve and thirteen) it was a place one might easily have walked past without realising.

"Does anybody sense anything?" asked Eonmor. There was a general frowning of concentration followed by the shaking of heads. All seemed fair so far.

They climbed the steep steps and the wizard pushed the door open without recourse to a key. A large, well appointed hallway greeted them, its floor patterned in black and white tiles, its broad staircase carpeted in deep red. Clemen, Ashar and Ben stood close together in the centre, unwilling to go further. Sternum went to the foot of the stairs and waited, ready to be the guide. Eonmor looked up and around, seeming to sniff the air, then he closed the front door. With a faintly echoing *snikt* the door locked, the sounds from the street were taken away and the light shifted. Ben suddenly had a feeling of being in a large, airless container and was glad of the sudden, reassuring presence of Ashar's hand on his shoulder. He felt a sensation then, though he couldn't have identified in which part of his body he felt it. It was a whispering, of one voice to itself, but multiplied many times, yet the boy heard no words, no sound at all. Without warning a stale, breathing dread closed around him.

"You feel that?" asked Ashar in a quiet voice.

"Yes," murmured Eonmor.

"I was hoping it was my imagination," said Clemen.

Eonmor stepped up beside them. He cast an eye down on Ben, as though checking he was still there, then looked at the others. He spoke very quietly.

"Yes. It's strong. As I said back at Solfar, it's unconcerned that we know it's here. It wants us to know. Ashar?"

Ben looked up at her as she took a deep breath and let it out. On the out breath her face suddenly twisted with revulsion and she gagged twice. With a grimace of disgust and anger she brought the reflex under control, but her face remained pinched and stressed.

"I suggest," she said, with a bitter colour in her voice, "that we stay together and that we do not open ourselves to it any more than we have to. Not at all if we can help it."

Eonmor nodded. "Very well. Let's all take that advice. Right, I think we should go and check on Flo and Cloé.

The inner sanctum was on the first floor. They mounted the stairs slowly. Ben held Ashar's hand in his left and Eonmor's in his right. The house palpated invisibly around him, pulling on senses he didn't have names for, watching him with an incessant, writhing hunger that made the walls sway on either side of him and the voices of the adults seem to come from another room, even as he walked with them.

The landing of the first floor had three sides, each with a cast iron rail that looked down over the hallway. A narrow passage, that began halfway along the left landing, led to the inner sanctum. As Eonmor turned to enter the corridor he pulled up short and held out his arms to stop the others. There was a dark shape standing at the end of the passage in front of the door to the sanctum, vaguely human in form but indistinct.

"What is it?" hissed Clemen.

"I think it may be Flo," said Eonmor. He drew out his staff and set the tip shining, dimly at first, but with a narrow beam growing stronger, directed at the shape. The group crowded around the entrance to the passage, trying to see.

Even with the light the figure was difficult to make sense of, seeming to shift and change subtly before their eyes. It appeared to be standing with its back to the door, but it was difficult to tell for it had no discernable features.

"Flo?" called the wizard.

The figure gave a start at the sound and turned fractionally in their direction, but it did not speak or move away from the door.

"Shall I put forth my senses?" said Ashar in a hushed voice.

"No. Don't be so eager to break your own advice. Let us keep ourselves closed. I'll try a few steps closer."

"Perhaps I should go and check on Flo's condition, Master?" suggested Sternum, preparing himself to duck under Eonmor's arm.

"Not so fast," said the wizard. "We'll go together...but slowly."

The wizard and his servant began to creep forward, closely followed by the rest of the group. After several paces the adults began to make suppressed noises of realisation and horror, but still Ben couldn't work out what it was that he was looking at. Even when a small part of the shifting darkness detached itself from the foot of the figure and moved towards the approaching group he couldn't seem to get his mind to decode what he was seeing.

"I don't think we should let that get too close," advised Clemen in a pained voice.

Eonmor knelt slowly and showed his palm to the approaching darkness. It slowed, ground to a halt, then lifted into the air, turning over and over so they could see it from all angles. Finally Ben's mind was ready for him to understand that it was a large cockroach, about four inches long. And even then his thought process was sluggish, not making connections.

He looked back up at the dark, indistinct figure with its moving, hallucinatory surface. The illusion of nondescriptness continued for two more heartbeats, and then he saw it clearly at last, saw the teeming and crawling of the cockroaches, saw that there was a human figure under there somewhere, a woman named Flo.

Letting out a strained, keening wail he pushed his feet against the floor and tried to back away. Clemen quickly snatched him up and held him close, encouraging him to bury his face in his shoulder.

"Hush now," he whispered, "we won't let anything happen. Don't worry."

But it was happening already. Ben whimpered and tried not to see the swarming insects filling his mind's eye.

"Eonmor," Clemen urged, "act quickly!"

The wizard kept his face towards the thing that was Flo.

"No," he said. "I will not act quickly. We have it cornered. We will deal with it carefully and thoroughly."

"There's a woman under there!"

"No. There isn't. Flo, Sternum, Cloé, none of them are human. You know this."

"Human, or not, it's Flo and she must be suffering!"

"Clemen," said Eonmor, "I need you to be quiet now."

The Rhondran sucked air through tightly gritted teeth but said no more. The wizard angled his head minutely towards Ashar. "I'm going to get closer, see if I can clear them from her face. Will you keep a watch out for any more that break away?"

"Very well. But do what you can to keep as much distance from it as you can."

The single cockroach was still rotating in the air before the wizard's palm. He moved forward now, and the floating insect moved ahead of him, heralding his coming. When his palm was about three feet from where Flo's face presumably was he stopped. The single cockroach continued to float forwards until it touched the seething mass of its brethren and promptly rejoined them, disappearing into the swarm. Two more detached from the main body and headed towards the wizard. Ashar immediately dropped to her knees and levitated the creatures.

"What do you want me to do with these?"

"I don't know. Can you just hold them there?"

"Two of them? No problem. If they all decide to come...that may be a different matter."

"Yes, well," said Eonmor grimly, "let's keep that to ourselves, shall we?"

"Sorry."

"Now then, let's see what Flo has to say."

He pushed his hand forward and Flo's head was lifted and pressed back against the door of the inner sanctum by the force. Slowly, the cockroaches were pushed back from her face, which emerged from the swarm covered

in fresh, bloody bites that were already healing even as they were revealed. She was a stout, middle-aged woman and the skin of her cheeks was soon smooth and unblemished.

"Hello, Flo," said Eonmor.

Because of the beam of force emanating from the wizard's hand Flo's cheeks and eyes and mouth were stretched on either side, as though two invisible palms were on her face, pushing her head back against the door.

"Hello, Master," said Flo in a tight voice. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too. How are you under there?"

"They're trying to eat me. I've got my finger covering the keyhole. And they're whispering horrid things."

"Have they told you who they are?"

"No, nothing like that, just nasty things meant to upset me."

"Clemen's very worried about you."

Flo found Clemen with her eyes.

"Ah, Clemen, you're here! It's been too long. And you're worried about me? That's sweet of you. Thank you."

"Hello, Flo," said Clemen, hesitantly. "Are you sure you're alright in there?"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far. I'm hoping I might be given some gentler duties sometime soon?"

"We'll see what we can do, Flo," said Eonmor. "We haven't seen Cloé yet. Do you know how things are with her?"

"No, I haven't heard from her. But I'm sure she's fine. She's guarding the other entrance and that one doesn't have a keyhole."

"Thank you, Flo. Will you be alright for a little while longer?"

"Just a little bit," she said.

"I'm going to have to let them cover your face again for a while. Ready?"

Her eyes pivoted anxiously from one side to another, but she managed a minute nod.

"As it must be," she said.

"See you soon, Flo," said the wizard, withdrawing his hand.

"Bye," she snapped quickly in a small voice, and then her face was gone.

Ben, who had been watching with wide eyes, let out a low, involuntary moan. The adults looked at him and he brushed his tears away and set his jaw stubbornly.

Two more cockroaches suddenly left the swarm and headed towards the group.

"Eonmor!" barked Ashar.

He knelt beside her and levitated the oncoming insects.

"Hmm..." he said, bonking them against each other in a distracted fashion. Another four cockroaches headed towards them.

"Ashar, I need you to hold them on your own. Tell me I can leave you it with you for a moment."

"Eonmor! This isn't my area of expertise," she snapped, letting the first two cockroaches drop to the floor and then blocking all six of them with an invisible wall.

"You're doing fine. What's the matter with you?" said Eonmor, allowing his two to drop behind her wall.

"I don't like insects."

The wizard patted her shoulder sympathetically. "In this situation that is a virtue." He stood and began to back away. "Anyway, I'm sorry, but I have an idea."

"Eonmor! Can I try burning them? I want to burn them!"

"No! Don't harm them. It could have consequences." Another eight left the swarm.

"How long is a moment, old man?"

"Hush now," he said from the entrance to the passage. "Let me show you," and he turned and walked out of sight around the corner.

Ashar, still facing towards the door of the inner sanctum, sensed his departure.

"Old man? Old man!"

A ring portal suddenly appeared in the corridor and Eonmor stepped through from a dark room carrying a large, spherical glass container. The portal shrank behind him and he plucked it from the air and popped it into the pouch on his belt.

"I'm back," he said.

"Huh," said Ashar, sullenly. "That was too long."

Eonmor shushed her softly and set the glass container carefully on the floor beside Clemen and Ben. The boy climbed down and peered at it.

"Flo!" called the wizard. The swarming figure stiffened. "Take your finger from the keyhole. Let them through. Go ahead, do it now."

Ben looked towards Flo expectantly but felt Eonmor's hand on his arm.

"Don't look that way. Look in here."

Ben and Clemen leaned over the glass sphere. As the activity of the cockroach swarm faltered momentarily, and those insects that had detached from the main body suddenly turned from Ashar's force field and fled back to join the others, Ben observed a miniature scene taking place inside the container: a flood of tiny cockroaches pouring through a very small ring portal that was floating in the centre. Once through the portal the little creatures swirled around, dark brown leaves caught on a wind. Looking across at Flo, Ben saw that the density of the swarm was thinning and parts of her body were becoming visible as the cockroaches streamed through the keyhole.

"You see what I've done?" Eonmor asked the boy. Ben stared and touched the glass.

"Yes," he breathed. "You went to the other side of the door...you must have gone in through a portal. Then you put a little portal across the keyhole. It leads into here."

"Very good."

Clemen looked back and forth from the old man to the boy, fascinated.

"But why are they so small?" asked Ben.

"They're just further away than they look."

"But hold on," mumbled Clemen. "How did you have enough time to do all that? You were barely gone for a second."

The old man and the boy smiled at each other.

"Oh, I can move fast enough when I need to," said the wizard. He looked over at Flo. "Flo! You can move slowly away from the door now."

Her face was clear once more, along with her left arm and the lower portions of her legs. She stepped gingerly away from the door and began to brush the monstrous beetles from her body. They fell away easily

enough, creating a dry, rustling, rushing sound as they landed on top of each other and scuttled over each other towards the keyhole.

Ashar, palms still pointed out towards them, not taking her eyes from them, angled her head back as best she could towards the wizard.

"There won't be much chance of you interviewing them once you've got them vacuum packed."

"I don't agree. We'll have as much time as we need to work that out."

"How *did* you manage to do all that so fast?" asked Clemen.

The wizard gave him a small, smug glance and didn't answer.

Flo suddenly caught everybody's attention with a frenetic little dance. With a vibrant shimmy of her wide hips a shower of cockroaches fell from under her skirt and immediately scuttled towards the door.

"Sorry about this," she said stiffly. Not wishing to make eye contact with anybody, she began to rummage in her cleavage. Ashar shuddered and groaned.

"You'd better make sure you get all of them, Flo," said Clemen. She gave him an indefinable look.

"Are you offering to come and help me?" she asked innocently.

Clemen huffed uncomfortably and almost blushed. Then, deciding bashfulness didn't sit well with him, he made a display of rolling up his sleeves and rose to his feet. Flo's demeanour changed immediately.

"Bless you, kind sir!" she laughed, pointing her palms at him like he was a monster cockroach and she a wizard. "I think I'm clear now."

"You don't sound certain," he said, grinning wolfishly and threatening to lunge at her.

"I'm certain!" she squealed. "They're all gone! They're gone!"

Ashar and Ben both giggled gleefully. Sternum hid a little smile behind his hand.

A sudden bellow from Eonmor caused them all to jump in alarm.

"Hold, you idiots!" The old man was staring at the cockroaches, his face taught, his eyes bulging. "Look, they've stopped."

There were only about a dozen of them remaining, but now they seemed reluctant to enter the keyhole, merely moving up close to it and twitching their long antennae uncertainly. From inside a cockroach head poked out, looking at its comrades.

"Shit!" exclaimed the wizard vehemently, raising several eyebrows amongst the group. He came forward, firmly pushing Ben back a step so that the boy was further from the door than the adults. "I was afraid of this! Ashar, see if you can push the rest through."

Ashar hesitated.

"Are you sure you want me to do it? I think you would have more skill," she said in a quick, business-like delivery.

"I want you to do it. If they try to come back out I will immediately close the portal, cutting the swarm in two."

Still she hesitated.

"That sounds dangerous."

He put a hand on her shoulder.

"Yes. So let's avoid it if we can? Come on."

Ashar sighed unhappily and shifted her position.

"I'll use a contracting bubble," she said, her mouth set in a thin line. "If they try to burst back through it may contain them and limit their numbers temporarily."

"Good girl," whispered Eonmor.

"What will happen," asked Clemen, "if you close the portal on it?"

The remaining group of cockroaches was now slowly being compressed into a circle by Ashar's force bubble. They scuttled over each other in sudden agitation, all intent on avoiding the keyhole at the centre of the bubble.

"The cockroach swarm is most likely a demon," said the wizard. "If we cut the swarm in two then we cut the demon in two. Were it to survive such an action we should not expect it to be in a good mood."

Clemen backed away from the door.

"Shit," he said.

A hush fell over the group. As the diameter of Ashar's force bubble gradually shrank the depth of the swarm thickened, delineating the shape of the invisible hemisphere containing them. Behind the group of adults Ben knelt by the glass container and gazed in. The distant cockroaches at the centre of the sphere had formed into a large writhing mass, touching the tiny portal ring on one side. The swarm seemed to move as one entity, like a flock of birds but denser.

"They're going to come through!" he shouted.

"How can you tell?" asked Eonmor, not moving his gaze from the cluster of roaches at the keyhole, but Ben didn't get the chance to answer for at that moment the cloud of cockroaches in the glass sphere suddenly bunched like a muscle. A number of the creatures immediately shot through the keyhole into the passage, instantly filling Ashar's force bubble to capacity. It happened in a second and Eonmor, tensed and ready, closed the portal on a reflex. The fingers of his right hand twitched minutely, a mental circuit closed, the demon was cut in two, Ashar's force bubble exploded, unable to contain the pain of the sundered entity.

From Ben's point of view something big and dark and barbed expanded up the passageway in the flicker of a moment, morphing in a hundred subliminal flashes into a hundred tortured shapes, each monstrous and insectile, sending the members of the group flying back, or pinning them against the walls. It was thrashing wildly, its rear portion still caught in the keyhole, and the corridor filled with a screaming like the doors of hell had opened. Something hard and fast crashed into Ben and he was knocked away down the corridor, rolling over and over, winded and half senseless.

A swarm no more, the form of the thrashing demon was all giant insect legs and mandibles and pincers, cramped in the confines of the passage, scrambling to be free of the excruciating snare that had caught it. Yet its scream was horrifically human.

All was chaos for a while, all the participants stunned, disorientated, frightened and in pain. The quickest to recover and make sense of their surroundings were the inhumans, Sternum and Flo, who instinctively went to their master's aid, positioning themselves as best they could between the struggling creature and the wizard, trying, and largely succeeding, to protect him from its buffetings. Ashar had been hit hard and thrown far. She lay now in a heap near the entrance to the passage, close to Ben, a gash across her face. Her eyes were closed and her hands twitching. Clemen was crushed low down against the left wall and was taking a heavy battering as various insectoid appendages scabbled blindly at him in their efforts to escape their torment. Weathering the storm as best he could, partly through instinct, partly through having little choice, he bent his will on the goal of drawing his long sword from its scabbard. Through the gradual re-

positioning of his limbs he made steps towards this aim in small increments.

The monster itself was largely senseless, at least to begin with, wholly occupied with its own agony, its own unforgiving plight, which showed no sign of ending or even lessening. At some point it became aware of the exertions of the two inhumans and decided, somewhere in the pain-skewered welter of its sentience, that they should share in its torment. Gripping Sternum decisively in a pair of mantis-like arms it began to gnaw into his neck, intent on separating his head from his body. But the head servant proved to be a surprisingly tough meal that resisted decapitation staunchly. While Flo prized its grip on him loose in a display of superhuman strength, Eonmor managed to recover enough of his senses to thrust the tip of his staff into the creature's face and let loose a blinding flare of heat. The monster's scream, which had been muffled slightly as it tried to bite Sternum's head off, now returned in its full extremity as the insect beast released him and smashed against the ceiling three times in its consternation. Clemen suddenly succeeded in drawing his sword and he plunged it into the writhing body of the monstrosity. Somehow its screeching managed to raise in pitch. After a thrash to the right and a thrash to the left it curled back in on itself and homed in on the perpetrator of this latest assault. In the tight confines of the corridor Clemen was unable to withdraw his long sword and he flailed helplessly as the cockroach demon grabbed him, screamed its fury into his face and snipped his left arm off above the elbow with a pincer. Clemen's scream harmonised with that of the beast. As Eonmor and his two servants attacked the thing with a sudden ferocity that took it by surprise the Rhondran clansman slid down the wall, consciousness fading, blood spouting.

Ben backed away from the melee on his hands and heels. He saw Ashar come to life. Crouching low, tensing, waiting for the moment, she suddenly sprinted down the passage, passing through a space in the battle to arrive at Clemen's side. There she knelt over him and began to tend to his arm as though she were not in imminent danger of being crushed by the maelstrom raging around her. When a huge, hooked leg did jab at her it bounced away off another of her force bubbles.

Ben backed further away from the whole mess, helplessly horrified, until he felt his left shoulder bump into something large and smooth and round. Looking into the glass sphere he could see the twisting and squirming of the demon's other half, trapped in some dislocated quadrant of space. The throes of its agony were repulsively mesmerising and he wondered what might happen if he were to cast the sphere over the iron rail of the landing to shatter on the tiled floor of the entrance hall. He suspected it wouldn't be anything nice.

Just then the tips of two long antennae touched the surface of the glass globe. Looking up with a start the boy found the head of the cockroach demon resting on the floor near his ankle. It was gazing at the sphere but its screaming had ended and its energy seemed spent. The writhing inside the container had stopped now, the only movement to be seen: the occasional random twitch, echoed by the spasmodic lifting of the antennae. Then the wizard drove the flaming tip of his staff into its head and the monster was still.

With Ashar and Flo tending to Clemen, Eonmor took Sternum and Ben to find Cloé, the third servant.

"Is Clemen going to be alright?" asked Ben, quietly. Eonmor was carrying him. His face darkened at the boy's question.

"Will he live? Yes. Will he be alright? I don't know the answer to that." He stopped walking and bowed his head, pinching the top of his nose. "I don't even want to think about it right now," he said wearily. Then he just stood a while in silence, and neither Ben nor Sternum were inclined to break it.

The second entrance to the inner sanctum was not actually an entrance at all, but a hidden exit that opened into the back of a broom cupboard. The wizard paused at the doors and addressed his two companions.

"I sense the house is clean now, but we shouldn't take any chances. You should stand well back. Ben, I want you to stand behind Sternum."

Ben stood obediently behind the inhuman servant and watched as Eonmor pulled the two narrow doors to the broom cupboard open with a flourish. The young woman sitting in the bottom of the cupboard gave a start and brandished a mop in readiness for resistance.

"Oh, Master," she said, and a falling toilet roll bounced off her head. "You're back."

"Cloé," said Eonmor, his features softening into a smile. "Yes, I'm back. Have you had a terrible time in there?"

"I tried to be brave," she confessed, "but it was quite terrible. Can I come out now?"

"Yes, please do." He took her hand but before she could climb out of the cupboard her eyes fell on Ben and she gave a little gasp.

"Oh, is this your little boy? Why, he looks lovely?"

Ben's eyes were wide and so was his mouth. And though he heard the perfect sound of her voice, and the perfectly charming things she said with it, he didn't hear anything else for quite some time, and was incapable of speech for even longer.

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"Here," said Clemen, "I want you to take this." He was sitting in the big wicker armchair in the garden at Solfar, his face pale and beaded with sweat, his eyes narrowed with pain. He was wrapped in a large, checked woollen blanket from which he now produced a small doll made from twigs and bits of cloth.

"What is it?" asked the boy, accepting it cautiously.

"It protects against witches," said the Rhondran, his head drooping.

"But we want Mab to help us...and Mab *is* a witch."

"You think I don't get that? That's why I'm giving it to you. When would you need protection from a witch more...than when you're sauntering off to meet one?"

Ben screwed his face up, unconvinced, but Clemen's face was screwed up even tighter and the boy didn't want to upset him.

"Thank you."

"Just take care, will you?" Clemen's face jerked up so that he glared at the sky through his pain. A tear ran down past his gritted teeth and he gestured roughly for the boy to leave. "Go on! Go on!"

Ben looked up at Cloé and they turned and walked out of the garden and into the late summer wood. As they passed into the shade of the huge

chestnut that stood on the trail leading down the slope to the Urrwell she touched him lightly behind his ear and smiled down at him.

"Have you ever met a witch before?" he asked her.

"No," she said, widening her eyes in such a pretty way he felt his throat contract. "I've met a necromancer, and a fetish priest and a couple of alchemists."

"But never a proper witch?"

"No. Never."

"Are you scared?"

"Very," she assured him.

"I won't let her hurt you."

"Do you promise?"

"Yes, I do."

"If she gobbles me up, I'll blame you."

"Well, I'll do my best to stop her."

"Do your best? I'm trusting you'll succeed!"

"If she's really hungry I might not be able to."

Cloé looked at him agog and this made her so pretty his head nearly fell off.

All along the river they searched, and in the Witch's Hollow. Midday turned to afternoon and they picnicked in the branches of a giant elm that stood by the Oldsley Edge, not needing to climb it, only stepping from a rocky outcrop directly onto a broad bough. Below lay the ruins of an old mill, all overgrown and stooping forward into the foxgloves, but they could see no sign of the stream that must have once served it.

"Mab!" called the boy in all of her usual haunts and everywhere in between. "Mab, we need you!" But the witch didn't answer or appear.

The shadows were long when they arrived on top of Silence Hill, and Ben tried to feel bad for Clemen, whose phantom limb had grown progressively more painful in each of the four days since Nazaride, and for Eonmor and Ashar, whose efforts to restore the Rhondran's arm had only brought him dashed hopes and more pain. He tried to feel bad for them, but the sun was a hazy orange disc over the Urrwell Valley, and he and Cloé were chasing each other through the standing stones, and all he wanted was for nothing to change ever again.

On the way back home he held her hand and didn't call for the witch any more, but listed all of the most amazing sights that Eonmor had shown him in the Sovereign Galaxies, and tried to help her understand how, because of the way his mind had expanded, he was no longer like other seven-year-old boys.

They were almost home, they could see the lights of the house and the sky was lit only by after glow, when they spotted Mab sitting in a ditch by the side of the track.

"Mab!" he called, and her head nodded and looked this way and that but not up at him. They climbed down into the ditch and squatted before her. She was crooning and dribbling, a faraway look in her eye. "Mab, what is it?"

"Mumsy wumsy, pudding and pie," she said sadly.

Ben looked at Cloé, his face round and shocked, and she shrugged and mugged incomprehension. He looked back at the witch.

"Mab," he whispered, "what is it? Come on, Mab, we need you."

She saw him then, with a startled look, and gripped onto him.

"Hello, my boy. What have you got here?" and she pulled from his jerkin the little Rhondran doll. "Oh, my goodness," she said. "Look at that. That's no good. That's no good at all."

"Mab, we need your help," said Ben in a pleading whine, but she was busy fiddling with the doll, holding something to it and winding twine around it. "Mab, please. Pleease!"

"There, that's better." She held up the doll and Ben took it. There was a piece of purple heather tied to it.

The witch gave a sudden gasp as she noticed Cloé.

"Oh! It's pretty, pretty!" she sighed, reaching out her gnarled old hands to touch the girl's cheeks ever so lightly. Her eyes flickered to the boy and back again. "Oh, look at that...it's just like the real thing," she laughed. Then she looked horrified, then became quite sober. Then her eyes flitted slyly to the boy again. "Oh, she'll be butter on the moon for you, and honeyed milk before too soon, just for you." Then she began to cry, silently, big, slow drops of water, her bottom lip trembling pitifully. Her nose began to run.

They helped her out of the ditch and walked her towards the house.

"Leave me alone, you horrible slut," she sobbed, trying to tug her arm from Cloé's grip, but not hard enough to succeed.

"Come on, Mab" said Ben patiently. "Stop crying." But Mab didn't want to.

At the house Sternum opened the door.

"You're not real," said the witch sulkily, walking past him.

In the kitchen the fire was lit. Eonmor and Ashar quickly rose from the two armchairs there, Ashar looking even more anxious than the wizard.

"I'll, er, go and get Clemen," she stuttered, then sidled around the Mab and out of the room. The witch allowed herself to be put into a chair and she cried to herself while Eonmor made her a cup of tea.

Ashar returned with Clemen who was looking wan and exhausted. She showed him to the chair opposite Mab's. He eyed the witch from his pain but didn't speak. Everybody else stood around in an uncomfortable silence until Eonmor brought her tea and knelt before her.

"Mab," he said softly. "We were hoping you might help us with Clemen. He's in a lot of pain."

Even in the firelight Mab looked ashen, like a November sky. Her eyes were hooded and diminished.

"We have his arm. I've kept it fresh. I believe you could reattach it...if you were willing..."

She lifted her gaze just enough to look at the Rhondran.

"There's a cost," she muttered.

Eonmor winced and closed his eyes. The room ached and Clemen grimaced uncertainly.

"Come and sit by Granny Mab," she said, beckoning to Clemen with her old hands. "Let me take a look at you."

He turned to Eonmor. The wizard returned his gaze but offered no encouragement or cautions. Rising stiffly from his chair Clemen left his blanket behind, revealing the stump of his left arm, bandaged up to the shoulder and across the far side of his neck. The bandage was immaculate, free from the smallest drop of blood, but his ribs trembled continuously at the pain in his missing arm. Kneeling before the witch he leaned back from her unwholesome visage.

"Don't worry," she soothed. "Granny Mab won't hurt you. Listen and learn: I'll take away your ghost limb for free."

She reached out a hand to his stump, and though he flinched and was unable to keep from whimpering, he allowed her to touch him there. Like the legs of a spider finding its way in the dark her fingertips padded lightly around the area of his wound. "Oh, yes," she crooned, "oh, yes. There are spirit limbs, cast adrift from their bodies, always looking for somebody to share their pain with. Fly away spirit limb, fly away...your master long moved on."

From her clothes she took a small living bird. It was docile in her hands. Cooing to it, stroking it, she stretched out its left wing, massaged it lightly where it met the body, then ripped it off. As the bird shrieked in her clawed fingers Clemen gasped a lungful of air and slumped forward in relief, the disembodied pain that he could not touch curling away into nothingness.

With a negligent flick of her wrist Mab cast the hysterical bird to one side where it fluttered frantically by Ashar's feet, spattering the floor with blood until Eonmor discreetly touched it with his staff and it was dead. She kept the wing and added it to the various trophies hanging around her neck.

Clemen was shaking, sobbing almost, with relief.

"Thank you," he said in a small voice. "Thank you."

Mab smiled and cupped his face. "That's alright dear." She picked up her tea and slurped it. "Ah! That's better. Now, child: I took the ghost limb for free. If you want your own arm back there's a price to be paid, though not by you."

She turned pointedly and looked up at Eonmor, leering hungrily and trying to suppress some evil glee. Clemen observed this anxiously.

"But it's my arm. Surely, I should be the one to pay the price?"

"No, no, no, little one. You don't know a thing, do you? You were in a wizard's house and on a wizard's errand when you lost your arm, weren't you, my soldier boy? And it's against him that you've been feeding your resentment ever since, isn't it?" She clucked happily as Clemen ducked his gaze. "Granny Mab knows all," she cackled. And then she stopped and looked sidelong at Eonmor. "So the wizard will pay," she said. Then she sniffed and cocked her head. "Or not pay." She folded her arms in theatrical indifference.

All eyes turned to Eonmor.

"Mab's right, Clem," he said. "It was my negligence that lost you your arm. I'm glad for an opportunity to pay my debt."

Clemen shook his head, looking like his old self again, almost.

"I'd check the price before I was glad if I were you. If it's too steep...I'm just happy the pain has gone."

"Ha!" barked the wizard humourlessly. "Your advising me not to agree to offers recklessly is a reckless offer, Clemen. I don't see you being content to remain half a swordsman. But you're right, you're right. Let's hear the price. Then I will decide. Mab?"

The witch clapped, delighted, and the onlookers all leaned slightly forward.

"I want the pretty, pretty," she declared, and she pointed a long, bony finger at Cloé.

There was a pause of incomprehension, and then the room clenched in horror and mouths fell open.

"What do you mean 'you want her'?" asked Clemen, aghast.

"I want her," simpered the witch. "I want to take her away with me and keep her forever and ever and ever. "She hugged herself to keep herself from bursting with pleasure. "Or maybe I'll just bury her in a box. I bet she'd be good for that."

The Rhondran shook his head in disbelief.

"You're cracked," he said. He turned to Eonmor. "Well, that's a 'no', that is."

Ben nodded vigorously.

"Yes," he agreed, "that's a 'no'."

All eyes were on Eonmor once again. He looked about the room at the expectant faces, finally letting his gaze rest on Cloé. They smiled at each other. They were small smiles, quiet smiles, but smiles resonating with understandings and shared memories.

"I agree to the price," he said.

Mab let out a long cackling laugh.

"No!" declared Clemen.

"No!" yelled Ben.

But the witch held out a hand and Clemen's bandages began to drip with fresh blood.

"No!" shouted the boy. "No! No! No!" And he began to kick the wizard furiously.

But Eonmor had already opened a small portal and was lifting out Clemen's lost arm, which was dripping blood as fresh as the day it was severed.

Italics section...Flo speaks of her experience of being an inhuman and of their origins. This should include the information that Eonmor had more than 3 glods...

I don't remember a childhood for the simple truth that I didn't have one. My master created me to be an adult from the first moment of my life.

"Hello, Flo," he said to me, the first time ever I opened my eyes.

"Hello, Master," said I, as if I'd known him always. Something like love expanded in my lungs at the sight of him, at the sound of his voice.

I say something 'like' love, as though I know what I'm talking about. But how should I know, really? I have heard real people say that if you're not sure if you are in love then you are not. But I feel suspicious of that. I can only doubt, because I know I am something inhuman that has been shaped into a mimicry of humanity. Whatever I feel about the matter, I have no reliable way to confirm that what seems like love to me is an accurate match for real human love. Perhaps it is just as good. Perhaps it is even greater than the human experience! Few consider that possibility but I see no reason it could not be so.

In truth I do not believe one human can tell if what they call love is a match for another human's. How could they tell? As far as I can see nobody really understands it. Real people profess love all the time and what does it amount to? They hurt the ones they claim to love far more keenly, eagerly and passionately than they do complete strangers. Love seems as much like self pity half the time as anything else.

All I know is that my eyes opened, filled with the sight of my master, and my ears received my master's words, that resonated throughout my entire being, and immediately I wished for nothing more than for him to be healthy and happy, and fulfilled unto himself. That is all I know, all I can know, and that will have to serve as love for me.

That was over a thousand years ago now.

Go on to give examples of some of the things that Flo has witnessed and experienced and how she feels about it. This should include intriguing references to Eonmor's history.

4

Ben awoke in a strange bedroom, unearthed from a dream of a girl holding a golden ball by an equally dreamlike cry of gulls. It was a small, pretty room, with plain wooden furniture and cream and red bedclothes. The window was open and the place outside smelt fresh, but not like Solfar.

Climbing out of bed, looking out of the window and seeing wide open sky and a grassy cliff top overlooking a shipless sea, his first truly cohesive thought was that Eonmor had given him away, perhaps as punishment for kicking him, or perhaps because, in his own shame at giving Cloé away, he couldn't bear for the boy to see him again.

Cloé.

He hadn't had the chance to say goodbye.

He had kicked, and he had screamed himself into a tantrum that made him feel sick, while Mab's awful magic filled the air, until Eonmor had looked at him sadly and placed his hand over the boy's eyes, making him sleep.

Now the fear that he might have lost them all throbbed in the brightness of the room.

He took a moment, lifted his knees so that he could sit in the window on the sill. He was wearing a nightshirt that wasn't his. It was white, with pale blue stripes, well worn but starchy. Below the window was a well-tended flower garden.

He hasn't given me away. Stop being childish.

The thought took him by surprise.

Some days he woke up as an apprentice and had to remember he was a child, some days he woke as a child and had to remember that he wasn't any more.

You know when you go through into the next room he'll be there waiting for you.

Yes. Of course he would be.

Almost reluctantly he breathed out, releasing the melodramatic thoughts of abandonment.

But what about Cloé?

Water welled in his eyes. How was he supposed to release such melodrama as that?

There's something missing here. The old man would never do something like that. There's a piece I don't know about.

He dried his eyes, but stayed awhile in the window, until his breathing was steady and he fully knew that he was a child, but a child of the Sovereign Galaxies. Then he got down and went through into the next room, where Eonmor was waiting for him.

"Yes, there is a missing piece you don't know about," said the wizard.

They were sitting in the broad bay window of Eonmor's rooms at the Yew Man in Penmor, still picking at their breakfast. The old man placed an object on the table amongst the plates. It looked like a fir cone, but smaller and roughly made from iron that was fresh and smooth where its surfaces were raised, and black and pitted in its recesses. "Hold it in your hand, close your eyes, say her name, and you can have Cloé back."

The boy didn't look sure.

"Will it be the real Cloé?"

Eonmor leant forward in his chair, his elbows on his knees.

"Good," he nodded. "That is the question, isn't it? Will it be the real Cloé? And this is the missing piece: do you know that the Cloé that you made friends with is not the real Cloé?"

Ben looked at him dumbly but he didn't seem to mind. He picked up the iron fir cone.

"A master alchemist created this. She was called Gallemadon. There is one just like it inside Sternum, and there is one inside Flo."

"And there is one inside Cloé," said Ben, "the Cloé you gave to Mab."

The wizard watched him for a moment.

"Yes," he said. He waited but the boy didn't respond except to lower his head. "These are called glods. There are very few of them, for Gallemadon is long gone. But they're quite remarkable. You hold the glod in your hand and you hold the idea of a person in your mind, and the idea is imprinted onto the glod. The glod will embody your idea until its energy runs out. You can invent a person completely out of your imagination, or you can think of a person you know, or a person you have known."

The wizard stopped and waited.

"So the Cloé who is my friend is gone now."

The boy tried to say it without recrimination. He tried to report it as a simple knowledge, free of emotional association, but the sadness sat behind his eyes. To his surprise the wizard laughed at him. "What?" asked Ben, also failing to keep the indignation out of his voice.

"Look at you. You're so determined to hold onto your loss you haven't even picked up on the bigger, richer implications that are now spread out, neatly arranged before you. It's your own business of course: whether you distract yourself from life with suffering, or distract yourself from suffering with life. I shouldn't laugh really."

The boy squinted in confusion then grimaced belligerently.

"She was just my friend!" he shouted – self consciously, for he wasn't used to shouting at the old man. "I know you understand what I mean."

The wizard laughed some more, but gently.

"I do understand, Ben. But no, she is not your friend. She is a toy, a thing. She is a copy, a facsimile of a friend, and a poor facsimile at that.

"But this is not the real issue anyway. Why don't you ask me who she was: the woman that I thought of when I created Cloé?"

Ben shrugged sullenly.

"Because I don't care. I know who my friend is."

The wizard's eyes gleamed.

"I like that. I do. But I suspect you may be afraid too. What do you think? Perhaps you are afraid that the woman I copied Cloé from wouldn't

really want to be your friend, or maybe that she's dead and long gone..." Eonmor paused dramatically. "...or are you afraid that perhaps she's already your friend?"

Silence swelled in the room and time passed until Ben suddenly yawned silent astonishment.

"Mab?"

"Yes. Of course. Of course Mab."

"But...she's so old...and horrible...she rips the wings off birds!"

The wizard huffed in bitter humour. "Yes, well...she does worse things than that, believe me."

Ben was still having trouble keeping his mouth closed.

"Is that what she was like when she was younger...like Cloé?"

The wizard shook his head and seemed to be looking at something that wasn't there, something wonderful that wasn't there.

"Cloé is a dull impersonation of what Mab *is* like when she goes forth in her aspect as a young maid. If I'm not mistaken, you will see for yourself one day, and you will love her as I love her. Then you will see that I only created Cloé to remind me of the real maiden."

Ben sat back flabbergasted.

Picking the glod up from the table Eonmor rose to his feet. He held it up between forefinger and thumb. "Look," he said, "it's a lump of metal."

He held it out at arm's length, gripped in his fist, and he closed his eyes.

"Sally," he said.

The girl that formed around his hand looked exactly like Cloé. His hand was embedded in her ribs as though he were holding her heart. Her eyes were closed. He opened his and looked at the boy.

"It's a lump of metal," he said. "It's the idea of a woman. It's a lump of metal thinking about the idea of a woman. Do you see?"

The boy nodded, his eyes wide.

Eonmor withdrew his hand and the girl was whole. She opened her eyes and looked glad to see them.

"She can look after my houses with Sternum and Flo. And when I am lonely she can hug me and remind me of Mab."

Sally put her arms around the old man and kissed him lightly but lovingly on the cheek.

"It's rather sad, really," said the old man. But then he smiled warmly, not looking sad or lonely at all.

He opened a full-sized portal into the house in Nazaride. "Now, my dear Sally," he said, "you should go and put some clothes on."

"Yes, Master," she said happily. With a small wave at Ben she ran through the portal and disappeared down a corridor.

"Good! Now! Are we done here?" asked the wizard. "Can we get on with our mission, do you think?"

The boy stared at the corridor with big round eyes and nodded.

φ

As it was, the mission could not start straight away for the pyre of Jansy and Tonna, which had been held back for the return of Clemen, needed to be attended.

Ben was pleased to see the others. Ashar's face lit up at the sight of him. The scar² that had so disrupted and accentuated her beauty was gone, mangled away by Mab, and she kissed him hard on the cheek.

Clemen looked almost freakish to the boy, sporting two arms again, as though something unnatural had been grafted onto him. He showed a special interest in Ben's state of mind and said he hoped the boy didn't mind him being a whole swordsman again. Ben traced the strange dovetailed scar that encircled his arm above the elbow and showed him the Rhondran doll with its enhancement of witch's heather.

"Look at that," said Clemen in subdued astonishment. Then he looked at Ben with his piercing blue eyes. "You know, you're an odd little witchy wizard boy." He shook Ben's shoulder roughly and the boy had to conclude he had been complimented.

Clemen went walking around Penmor in a sleeveless vest so he could show off the scar, telling the tale of it with quiet enthusiasm, respectful of the feeling of the day but open in his pride. His kinfolk responded warmly, glad to hear an account of a successful resistance against intrusion, and spirits that had started the day shrunken and suppressed gradually lifted and became expansive.

The comings and goings of the villagers captivated the boy: at once foreign enough to seem exotic, with their strange accents and kilted warriors, yet familiar enough to ignite flashes of memory from his own beginnings – ordinary people engaged in the day to day concerns of scraping a living off the landscape. Yet while the village represented an entire aspect of his master that he was unfamiliar with, and even as he felt caught up in the excitement of being on a mission, and part of a team, he noted the presence of something pulling at his insides, a piece of twine tied around an unnamed organ, tugging, wanting him to come away.

"Will we be here a long time?" he asked Eonmor as they sat down to the communal feast at midday.

"Why? Don't you like it?"

"It's very nice. I just want to go and see Mab and Cloé."

"Oh. Well, it may be two or three days yet. The trail of the creature that ransacked my rooms is cold, but we're still hoping we might pick it up. Riders have gone out to the surrounding villages."

"Two or three days," said Ben to himself.

The wizard began to pay more attention.

"Is there something on your mind?"

"Not really." Ben wrinkled his nose. "It's more in my heart."

Eonmor sat up straighter.

"That's something we shouldn't ignore. We'll make sure we get back at the first opportunity."

This seemed a reasonable response but the tugging sensation continued. And though it mostly lay forgotten beneath the events of the day, it would quickly come to the fore of his awareness during quieter moments.

Eonmor, Clemen and Ashar had many appointments amongst the little cottages of the clan, to pay their respects to the bereaved, offer what assistance they could to those that had been wounded, and to interview the witnesses of the intrusion. During the morning Ben had gone along with them, intrigued by the split personality of this place, which was at once

² Mention of this should be made earlier – in the aftermath of the cockroach battle, perhaps when Ashar and Eonmor are sitting by the fire.

quaint crofting village, with its little thatched homes, and hardy warrior nation of round shields and armed watches. But the people were quietly friendly and the slopes of the surrounding hills gentle and grassy. Altogether it seemed a place more picturesque than passionate.

The children of Penmor eyed the strange wizard boy with an unfaltering interest as he accompanied the adults. Once the feast was well under way they gravitated towards him, wanting to know what he could do, what he had seen, what the life of an apprentice was all about.

"It's not very exciting," he lied, remembering the primary tenet of the wizard's way of presenting oneself as other than one is: it is easier to pretend to be less than to pretend to be more. So he made up stories of long, tedious hours of study and meditation, endless days kept indoors cultivating the inhuman discipline of a wizard, and meals of stale bread, repugnant gruel and warm water. In this way he won their sympathy while impressing them with the resilience of his spirit. There and then they vowed collectively to help him enjoy himself while he had the chance.

In the afternoon the adults were left to their business so that he could spend time with people his own height, listening enthusiastically to their wild stories of improbable encounters with the monster races, running with them about the grassy cliff tops creating new legends, ignored by the wild ponies and the roaming cattle, until the sky was bleeding colours and the torches were being lit for Jansy and Tonna.

The gathering of the village was a ragged, informal affair with more of an air of celebration than Ben had expected. No official words were spoken, no eulogies given. Jansy and Tonna were carried, each wrapped in thick, tar-soaked cloths and carried on a heavy palette mounted on four stout posts so that it was raised well above the heads of the bearers. These men were covered in heavy, fire resistant cloaks of hide, which was well, for a good deal of flaming tar began to drip from the palettes once they were lit. The entire gathering set off about the village, taking Jansy and Tonna for one last tour of the houses of Penmor. At preordained locations the bearers would pause while appointed members of the procession threw wood up onto the palettes and poured on oil to replenish the fury of their burning. At these moments, as the fire flared, the leader would shout, "Journey well to...!" and the crowd would cry, "Heranow!" which was their god.

And now Ben began to see the passion in the people. At the top of the tallest hill in the village the palettes on their poles were set side by side and, one after another the bearers cast loads of oil up into the flames, causing vibrant explosions so bright the villagers had to close their eyes as they roared, "Heranow! Heranow! Heranow!" Each explosion became a pillar of fire that rose into the night sky, higher and more ferocious than the one before. And as the crowd waited for the next bucket of oil dancing vortexes of flame circled the remains of the two men like livid demons. "Heranow!" shouted the friends and family of the fallen warriors, their faces lit in flickering yellow energy, their eyes reflecting the primal force of the inferno, the blinding combustion of divine radiance. And sometimes Ben felt their voices were jubilant, exultant, and sometimes he heard a raw and savage fury, a promise of blood and fire.

Heranow! Heranow! Heranow!

And he shouted with them, feeling the heat in his own blood, feeling an answering call within himself to the spectacle before him of light and heat

consuming matter. On a deep and visceral level he recognised the release, the catharsis, in the purging of leaden flesh from existence by the irresistible, burning energy of spirit.

"Heranow!" he shouted, not knowing what he was shouting, but agreeing with it all the same. "Heranow, Heranow, Heranow!"

In the shadows the wizard felt hot and stifled. He called forth a magical rain, a fine drizzle that nobody else could be aware of, and an equally fine breeze, cooling himself in his natural elements of air and water. Not joining in with the shouting he watched the fire in his apprentice's eyes, the glare of the flames on his face.

Feeling a shudder of premonition the old man smiled anyway.

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The next morning dawned silver white and a returning rider brought news, galloping in from the East Road. He was a fledgling warrior with a handsome, expressive face who gave a lively account of a farming couple out towards Carmaggan who had encountered a monster in their fields. After the group had heard his report, and Eonmor had released him to go and rest, the wizard opened a portal that opened onto a place five leagues down the coast, where the trail of Jansy and Tonna's killer had come alive again.

It was a solitary house, out of sight of the nearby farms. It looked small in the landscape, gazing out over Brisingsea Bay from a long stretch of hillside not far from the edge of the Great Forest.

Emin Down and her husband, Jolof, showed them up to the top field and pointed out the place by the stone wall, that ran beneath the boughs of the forest, where Emin had seen the creature. A collection of large, clean bones were scattered about the area, and the man and wife refused to venture too close.

"He was halfway through eating one of our longhorns." Emin delivered the information with the kind of crinkled brow that might have accompanied the prediction of wet weather. "I've never seen such a monster. Powerful he was. There was nothing to have stopped him had he decided to come down after me. But he just looked up at me and carried on eating. My legs nearly disappeared beneath me but I somehow managed to back away and get down to the house."

Jolof had been all for going up the hill with a pitchfork but she had managed to discourage him by way of a brandished frying pan. By morning the longhorn had been wholly devoured and the beast was gone, presumably into the forest. "But if I ever see him around here again," said Emin, "he's welcome to as much cattle as he can stomach. We won't be complaining." She put her arm through her husband's and he nodded stoically. "But then, those that linger in the Great Forest for long enough, they lose the will to leave. I don't know if it's the same for monsters as it is for men, but that forest is deeper than it should be. I'll be surprised to see it return this way."

Eonmor thanked them and the group stepped up to the wall, inspected the bones and peered into the trees. As they discussed their options the high mist, that had made the sky white, began to burn away. The day grew bright and the forest put on its colours, receding up the hillside as though it carried the promise of paradise.

Ashar eyed it pensively.

"How long can one walk the Great Forest without being lost to it?"

The old man exchanged glances with Clemen.

"Oh, I don't think it's so much a matter of how long one spends in there so much as the attitude one takes with them. Those who are absorbed by the Great Forest are those who go there to hide, those who shun the rest of the world, those who intend to stay there for an indefinite period. Clemen?"

The swordsman shrugged irritably.

"If you say that's how it works I'll trust you know what you're talking about. A Rhondran will venture in a short way, for mushrooms and hunting, but none of us will let the sun go down on us there."

The wizard nodded and shrugged reasonably.

"There's no reason for us to stay in there after dark. If we don't find the creature before nightfall we can come away, then pick up where we left off the next day."

Clemen's face twisted and looked away down the hill.

They headed into the forest, and despite its beauty being set aglow by the newly unveiled sun, Ashar and Clemen both carried the air of those who walk forth into a dark place through the strength of faith alone. Sternum and Sally, while not impervious to atmosphere, were free from the effects of foreboding. They kept close to Ben, on a tirelessly alert bodyguard duty. The boy himself stepped in amongst the trees with enough sensitivity to quickly realise that here was a place with an active sentience peculiar to itself. Though the trees were not of the giant variety found in Solfar, still there was a greater sense of scale here somehow. Clearings became sunlit temples, holding their breath as only places of great antiquity can. A knowing stillness held the air, beneath the breezes, behind the eyes, that encompassed times long since passed, the present moment and whatever unseen days were to come, as though there were no perceptible separation between any of them, that all existed at one and the same time.

"We talk of enchanted forests," said Eonmor in a quiet but unexpected voice. For the group had been following Clemen in silence for some time as he tracked a trail of broken branches and scratched bark a couple of fathoms above head height, the tell-tale signs of their quarry's passage through the treetops. Out of respect for the Rhondran's concentration, and also the all-pervading stillness of the forest itself, the group had fallen into an unspoken agreement to remain silent, their travail through the trees becoming a collective reverie of passing glades, leaves catching sunlight, stalks of grass filtering shadows. At the sound of his master's voice Ben shook his head and stretched his eyes, as though rousing himself from a daydream that had been pulling him away from the world. He felt the old wizard's hand on the back of his neck for a moment, bringing him back into the now. "But of course every forest, every corner of every wood is enchanted in some respect. The nature and vitality of each enchantment varies from one place to another, and each person's susceptibility to any given place varies greatly, according to their own nature and vitality."

Eonmor walked off to one side to a spot where the trunk of a long dead tree stood, denuded of branches but covered in climbing ivy. Pushing back creepers to either side he made a window through to the wood, which was revealed to be a carved totem. The inhuman face that looked out seemed to represent some mixing of goblin and bear. It peered through and beyond them to another time, its expression restrained and inscrutable.

"This forest," continued the wizard, "the Great Forest of Laan, is a dreaming forest. It is a great forest because its belief in itself rivals the belief of man in himself. For many who travel through it, the journey becomes like a dream. This is because the forest itself believes that those who pass through it are but its own dreams."

Clemen made an ambivalent grunt. Unstoppering his water flask he swigged and offered it around.

"They say," he said, "that is, the elders say, around the fire at night, that those who have been lost amongst the leaves of the Great Forest live on here still, repeating the same days, over and over again."

Eonmor's face creased, not quite satisfied.

"The thoughts of the people who linger here have become more treelike than human. While the mind of the forest itself has become more human - more human than any gathering of trees anywhere in Piscea has ever been. Identities have merged. Much that kept animal distinct from plant has been lost, yet something new has taken its place."

He traced a line from the corner of the carving's eye down along the side of its nose, where a teardrop might have fallen.

"It may be, as we continue on, that you happen to see somebody, off at a distance, through the branches and the trunks, a person, or several people even. They might seem to be aware of you, or perhaps be caught up in some activity of their own. Regardless, I suggest, in such a circumstance, that you leave them be, to dream the forest's dream."

The rest of the group exchanged glances.

"What is it?" asked Ben, nodding at the overgrown totem. The old man shook his head blandly.

"I don't know." He turned to Ashar. "Can you tell? Can you sense anything?"

Ashar raised her eyebrows and didn't seem all that keen, but pushing the hesitation to one side she took a breath and stepped forward, reached out a hand to the carving. When Eonmor made to step back, to give her space, she grabbed onto him with her free hand and held his arm, like he was a handrail on a precipice. Obediently he maintained his position, made himself solid for her.

Closing her eyes she traced the rough texture of the wooden face and began to breath deep and steady. Ben felt somebody step up close behind him, place a hand on his shoulder, and when he looked up he saw Clemen, watching the female wizard with fascination.

After a time she sighed. Eyes still closed she spoke.

"It was carved by a people who came from a far land. They were brought here...by others...by...slavers of some kind. Here and there individuals escaped...they found each other...came together. They hadn't known each other before. In their own lands they were from rival clans...but now their enmities were put aside. The Great Forest was the only place their captors would not follow. They wished to return to their own country, but their need to avoid their kidnappers was most pressing. They hid here...and their memory of home became a dream to them. They carved this to remind themselves...of the dream of a past life."

She stayed there awhile, one hand on the old carving, one hand on the old man, her eyes closed, head bobbing slightly, breath deepening, until the wizard reached out and gently broke her connection with the totem.

The group moved on through the morning. Ben saw a white stag, pursued through the trees by a feral child. Ashar glimpsed a gathering, away at the bottom of a deep gorge, of old men in battered armour anointing each other in the river. Clemen caught sight from time to time of a maiden wearing a dress of blue, green and silver, watching him through the leaves, and a gaping emptiness opened up inside him. Eonmor saw an entire forest city, bedecked with flying pennants, sparkling on some eternal holiday, a thousand flying machines traveling back and forth between the tall buildings. Sally and Sternum saw human versions of themselves standing on an outcrop, holding hands and watching silently as the group passed by. Markings from many languages and symbolic systems were seen everywhere, carved into the trunks and rocks, daubed in blood, paint and tar, denoting the passing of ongoing adventures and legends. Moss covered standing stones waited in the shade for the completion of certain rituals, the pulsing quiet of their vigils accentuated and deepened by the sound of a girl's laughter from somewhere just out of sight.

The group moved on, no longer discussing the sighting of things that could not be returned to the world outside, only communicating with silent looks and tending to their own adventure. At midday the trail was lost on a rocky hilltop that overlooked the roof of the forest and it was time for a decision.

"We can see the route it took to get up here," said Clemen, referring to the broken branches and clawed bark caused by a heavy creature that had sprung from one tree to another. "But there's so much rock up here...it must have jumped from one to another." He looked out over a steep edge at the canopy below. "I get the feeling it leapt from one of these outcrops, but it could have landed anywhere."

The wizard pivoted where he stood, casting his eye over the uneven series of rocky promontories that radiated out from their hilltop, leaning over the surrounding sea of leaves. A fresh wind caught at his beard. The sun was shining from a blue, cloud scattered sky. He nodded approvingly.

"We'll meet it here. This is the place. Come, let's sit and draw up our plan."

The group gathered around him, sitting on rocks or in the thick grass.

"You're going to summon it?" asked Ashar, her eyes creasing sceptically.

"No. Of course not. I don't even know who it is. No. I will take us back five days and we will be here waiting when the monster arrives."

Clemen made an incomprehensible exclamation. Ashar's eyes grew wide and thoughts shifted behind them.

"Aaahh!" she sighed, as though some suspicion she had never dared admit to was now confirmed. Eonmor somehow managed to not make eye contact with her.

Ben, noting their reactions, began to re-evaluate his place in the group.

After more exclamations that gradually became more coherent Clemen wanted to know if they could go back further than five days and prevent the creature from killing Jansy and Tonna in the first place. To Ben's surprise Eonmor asked him to explain the facts of time travel to Clemen. Faced by the Rhondran's expectant gaze he suddenly felt the weight of time pressing down on him.

"We can't save them, Clem," he said. "If we already know they die, and that we were not there to save them, there's no point in us trying to go

there, because something would happen to stop us or make us change our minds. Travelling through time is like trying to get through a labyrinth: if you know that one way leads to a dead end you just don't bother going down it. You choose a way that you already know goes to the right place, or one that you don't know at all, and then you hope it will work out in your favour."

Clemen looked at the wizard, who nodded.

"He's right," said Eonmor. "We know that the creature will arrive at this hilltop five days ago. As we don't know what becomes of it after that we can *hope* a meeting will go in our favour."

Clemen smiled sadly and shrugged.

"As it is," he mumbled, eyes down. Ashar stepped over to where he was sitting in the grass and she sat down behind him, leaned into him, pressing a hand over his heart, which, after a moment's hesitation, he covered with his own.

Eonmor looked at the boy.

"Ben," he said, "I'm not going to take you along. It's too dangerous."

Ben nodded solemnly.

"I'm glad," he said. "I don't want to go. I don't think I'm ready for monsters yet." The wizard's face crinkled with pleasure. "But I wish I could do some magic. Just a few things, so I could join in."

The old man nodded sympathetically.

"I'm very proud of you," he said.

Nobody spoke then for a little while. The wind picked up and fell again, and the shadows of the stones turned across the grass.

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After a long discussion on tactics, mainly consisting of Ashar and Eonmor debating in endlessly technical terms (that Ben only partially understood and Clemen understood not at all) the most appropriate magical preparations they could make for their meeting with the monster, they had a picnic.

Ben dozed in the grass, sheltered from the wind by a table of rock, Sally sitting by his head, Sternum sitting by his feet. The two servants maintained their inhuman vigil over his safety while continuing to look like the most unassuming and ordinary people one could hope to meet, notwithstanding the girl's startling beauty. Sternum's brow was perpetually crinkled, not with worry but his unceasing attention to detail. This gave his face an expression of sincere humility and made it so his presence was frequently overlooked by humans.

Clemen chewed a stalk of grass, watched the wizard and Ashar discussing magic once again. He contemplated following the boy's example and taking a nap, then he contemplated Ashar's age. She looked about right for him. But magical types, he knew, tended to number longevity in well preserved centuries rather than years. She could well be old enough to be a distant ancestor. Still, he mused, she'd probably have learnt a few bedroom tricks in that time. Then he realised he needed to go behind a rock and squat.

After a few minutes of foraging for some suitable leaves he found a discreet spot with a nice view over the forest below. Flattening a small patch of grass he dropped his trousers and hunkered down to business. As usual, when Clemen found himself shitting in a place of scenic beauty, while on a

mission that might well result in his death, he began to appreciate the vividness of the colours, textures, scents of nature, and he grew philosophical about his existence. A late bee droned by, searching for, but not finding, suitable blooms. A bug he didn't recognise climbed a blade of grass before him. He noted the brightness of the green of the grass in the sunlight and how it contrasted with the dark green of the forest top beyond and below. He smelt honeysuckle and passed into a light meditative state that was familiar to him, his gaze resting on the branch of a tall silver birch. The pale bark of the tree stood out against the dark shades of the wood. The branch was broken at the trunk and was leaning down at a steep angle. Images became meaningless, just random assortments of colours, shapes, tones. And the more chaotic and meaningless the scene became to him, the more strongly he could feel the pulse and presence of nature in the surrounds, in the plants, on the breeze, in the dispassionate acceptance of the clouds. All was suddenly life...mindless, thoughtless, throbbing, aware, at once immediate and indifferent.

The need to wipe brought him back to the surface of his reverie. Folding each leaf neatly after use he tossed them over the edge. Pulling his trousers up as he rose he made to leave, took two steps, halted.

Almost without knowing why he turned back and looked down at the silver birch with its broken branch.

Its broken branch.

The monster had left the hilltop. It had climbed to the summit, paused probably, to look out across the view, and then it had continued on, the birch, with its broken branch, acting as its re-entry point into the forest.

Clemen bit his bottom lip to work it out.

If we go back we may intercept it, but we won't prevent it from leaving the hill, because it has already left the hill.

If what Eonmor and the boy had said was true there was now no purpose in going back. Indeed, if they set out to keep the creature from leaving the hilltop something would happen to prevent them or change their minds. Perhaps the beast would simply kill them and continue on its way.

He walked slowly back to the others, trying to confirm to himself that his understanding had been calculated correctly. Ashar and the old man were still occupied with refining their tactics, both sitting in the grass now, cross-legged. They were enjoying themselves, having quiet revelations about whatever magic it was they were discussing. Beyond them the boy still slept in the shade of the table of rock, his two sentries still on duty, their backs to the stone, looking calm and relaxed, but actually, Clemen knew well, exceptionally alert to signs of danger. Yet despite their unfaltering attention to the boy's safety they had not discerned the presence of the monster that was now crouching on the table of rock and was reaching down to the boy.

The Rhondran took in the details of the quiet scene in an instant. The impact of those details hit his body an instant later with a powerful jolt. The creature was beautiful and terrifying, a great horned man, its skin black as coal, clean, unblemished, perfect. It was naked but for the thick, richly carved gold bands at its ankles and wrists that were fitted too snugly to ever be removed. Its physique was a perfection of sculpted but supple muscle, but the scale was wrong, for this entity was much bigger than any man had ever been. Its head, its entire body, was hairless and its glossy, red amber horns were ribbed and curled around the creature's temples as

though protecting its only place of weakness. The hands and feet were human in form but the nails were hard black talons.

Taking no more time for the processing of thoughts Clemen dropped smoothly to one knee while simultaneously drawing his long sword from the scabbard slung across his back. The sword he sent spinning across the hill top towards the beast, catching the sunlight as it went and attracting the attention of the others. The action and its execution were soundless and the monster's head was down but with an almost leisurely negligence it took the arriving weapon from the air, then lifted its head to look at the now unarmed clansman.

All rose to their feet, the creature, the Rhondran, the two wizards. The inhumans promptly jumped up. Dragged the boy away from the rock and positioned themselves between him and the intruder. The boy himself squawked with surprise and sat up in the grass, groggily alarmed.

Eonmor sidled to the centre and took a position between the two inhumans. Ashar remained on the right and Clemen moved around to the left.

Ben took in the scene and backed away through the grass, just as he had backed away from the cockroach monster. His friends were spread out before him and were, he knew, a powerful group of special and deadly people. Yet the monster looked magnificent.

The wizard had drawn forth his staff. He now drew the sword Berringsstrom from his robes and both sword and staff lit up with a fierce, cold blue white blaze.

"Beware creature," he said, "of reckoning us lightly." And, indeed, his presence seemed to expand, as though his physical size, or his internal density had increased to rival that of the monster's. The air around him resonated at the will of his voice.

The monster cocked his head and was the only one there to hold an easy stance. He looked at Clemen.

"What about this one?" he asked in a voice that while wielded lightly was yet deep and rumbling like distant thunder. As he spoke the words he pointed at Clemen casually with the Rhondran's own sword. "He doesn't even have his sword. What will he do? Tickle me to oblivion?"

Both Clemen and the wizard found themselves stuck for a response other than to grimace in indecision. The creature sat down on the rock and regarded them comfortably. Suddenly, seeming to notice it was still holding the long sword, it cast the weapon lightly to one side so that it fell to the grass in front of the clansman's feet. Then it waited for them to do something.

"Who are you?" asked Eonmor, his voice not quite so imperious now, though still throbbing in the air.

The beast leaned forward and smiled fiercely, a smile full of sharp, white teeth. His eyes were yellow and without irises. The pupils were round and black and fluctuated in size according, it seemed, to his mood. Now they became pinpricks.

"My name is Sesse Ræma," he said.

The wizard looked at Ashar, a question in his face. She shook her head.

"I don't know the name," she said, addressing the horned man. "But you look like somebody I do know of."

"Mmm," said Sesse Ræma. He looked Ashar up and down with undisguised interest, his pupils expanding alarmingly. "Yes?"

Ashar kept her face neutral.

"Yes. You look like the god, Nonamason."

Sesse Ræma smiled again, this time without baring his teeth. "Yes," he said. "I seem to have borrowed his body somewhat."

The two wizards exchanged curious glances.

"Borrowed his body?" asked Eonmor.

"Yes, after a fashion. Would you like me to tell you all about it?"

The old man let Berringstrom lower slightly and the light of his weapons dimmed.

"I don't know," he said. "But I do have some questions I would like you to answer."

"Good," said Sesse Ræma. "Good."

"Why good?"

"Because there is something I want from you. We can strike a deal."

Clemen stooped, carefully keeping his eyes on the monster, and picked up his sword.

"What is it that you want?" asked the wizard.

The monster smiled inwardly, amused by something he saw there, then he pointed at Ben.

"I'd like to take a look at this little one."

The group tightened its formation and Eonmor's staff and sword blazed brightly again.

"No," said the wizard. "There is no deal."

Sesse Ræma chuckled.

"My goodness," he said, "you'd almost suspect you didn't trust me." Then he laughed. It was an easy, good natured sound, although it seemed powerful enough to crack rocks, were such a thing to be called for. "Me!" He laughed some more. The group before him didn't appear inclined to lower their guard, yet their expressions betrayed their confusion at the behaviour of this strange adversary. "Never mind. I'll heal, given time, I dare say. How about this...a revision: I'll answer your questions anyway and perhaps, by the time you have heard my answers, and got to know me a little, you may be willing to consider the merest possibility of maybe letting me take a look at that precious little child of yours?"

The wizard let his weapons dim again.

"You're some kind of demon, aren't you?"

Sesse Ræma pointed at him.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes," he said.

"Why do you want to look at the boy?"

"Ah!" said the creature, and he shifted where he sat in agitation or excitement or some combination of the two. "The boy has something with him that terrifies me. I can feel it. I felt it from deep in the forest. That is what brought me here. I just want to take a look, make sure it's not a threat. We can be civilised about this."

There was a pause. Clemen and Ashar cast glances back at Ben. The boy's hand moved to his chest where something was nestled inside his jerkin. Eonmor kept his eyes on the demon.

"And what will you do if we don't wish to let you look at the boy?"

Sesse Ræma winced.

"It's a dilemma. This is sure. I don't want to rip you all limb from limb, because I'm afraid. I'm not afraid of you, gentle wizard. I can see your power. Yes, you could probably burn me, but not thoroughly enough, not quickly enough. No, I'm afraid of the boy's talisman and whoever it is that

made it. I'm so afraid of it that I don't think I will be able to let you leave until I've inspected it. But killing you while you are under the protection of that thing would probably be a bad end for all of us, especially me, if you see? I'd much rather have a cosy chat, a little look and then be on my way. Doesn't that sound nicer?"

After a short discussion the group decided that it did.

φ

"Little one," said Sesse Ræma, "do you know why translating demons are forever being trapped and caught and bargained with?"

They were sitting in a circle around the fire that Eonmor had created in the centre of the hilltop, waiting for the monster's story. They had been careful to keep the boy on the opposite side of the fire from the *demon in the body of a god* and Sternum and Sally kept him set back from the fire slightly so they could keep themselves before him.

At the monster's question the boy shook his head, feeling shy.

"No," he said quietly.

"It's a sad thing, really," said the creature, "but translating demons are forever being caught and bargained with, simply because we are unable to break our promises."

Ashar let out a hollow bark of a laugh.

"You're a translating demon?"

He looked at her and once again his pupils dilated until almost all of the yellow of his eyes was gone.

"You know, you're so scrummy I could eat you on toast," he said, and he licked his lips. "Yes, I am a translating demon. A humble, undervalued, pot bellied little translating demon, minus his pot belly, plus one or two...enhancements. Well, just the one enhancement actually: the body of a god. But surely that counts as more than one..." he tilted his head and leaned towards her with an intimate smile and his cock grew erect between them, "...don't you think?"

Ashar kept her expression flat and didn't deign to answer. Sesse Ræma made a noise of reproachful disappointment.

"Ah well," he said, philosophical, and he returned his attention to the whole group, his erection sinking back. "The full story is long and goes far into the past and I won't bore you with it all. May it suffice to say that the god, Nonamason, of the Ankaransi, had two sisters even more powerful and beautiful than he. Not only were they powerful and magnificent but they were a pair of vindictive bitches too. He did something or other to upset them, it involved copious amounts of sex with a whole litter of mortal princesses in the city of Ejura. Anyway, they were not happy about it. So they set a trap for him, and when he once again manifested as his avatar in the palace of Ejura they worked an amazing and wholly vindictive miracle: they swapped his body with mine.

Of course I had to make some promises beforehand, and with me being a translating demon they knew they could trust me to keep them.

"So, somewhere out there Nonamason, god of the Ankaransi, exists still, in my old body, a pot belly with a face, and not even able to translate, unless he's learned a few more languages since those times."

"Nonamason has not been worshipped for four thousand years," said Ashar, "and his avatar has not been seen during that time."

The demon nodded, unsmiling.

"Yes. It's a long time, isn't it?"

"So, where have you been?"

Sesse Ræma looked off beyond the edge of the hill top.

"Life as a translating demon was always a frustration to me in my old body. A demon, any demon at all, is both blessed and cursed. A demon's blood is forever boiling with passion, yet we are bound strictly by the rules that govern us. Finding myself inhabiting the body of a god...that's quite something - a shifting in the order of things one would never even think of dreaming about...it would be a pointless indulgence."

He gave a disbelieving laugh and his gaze grew dreamy for a moment or two. Then he laughed again and shook his head.

"Following the acquisition of my new body I was kept busy keeping the promises I had made to the goddesses: carrying out some petty acts of vengeance on the princesses of Ejura, enjoying my new body, and all that it was capable of. I thought I was untouchable, unstoppable. I thought my future would be...quite something." He chuckled, unable it seemed to suppress the steady bubbling of laughter from some well spring within. "Well, the king managed to find a witch, Endameli, who said she could rid them of me. And so she did. I have been trapped in an hourglass for the past four thousand years."

The demon cocked his head and smiled ruefully, as though such a thing were simply an inconvenience sent by life to test him.

"And how, then, did you come to be ransacking my rooms in Penmor?"

"So they *were* your rooms! I thought so. Well, it's the usual story of course: somebody found me, trapped in my hourglass. They had somehow heard my legend and searched me out and woke me up. They said they would free me if I promised to serve them throughout the rest of time. I told you, people love a helpless translating demon. I said, No thanks. I'm enjoying my rest. They lowered the length of service to a thousand years, then a hundred. I said, Look, I'll do one task for you and it won't last longer than a day. If that's not long enough you can leave me here. After four thousand years I'm quite comfortable now, thank you. They were not too pleased, but having my services for a day is still quite good value for simply breaking an hourglass."

"Who was it that freed you?"

"They made me promise not to say, I'm afraid."

"What were you looking for?"

"That too, I cannot say. You will not get any information from me on who they were or what they asked me to do. You can't even trick it out of me. The rules that govern me prevent me from breaking a promise, even by accident."

"I bet killing Jansy and Tonna wasn't part of your instructions," said Clemen in a low, slow voice.

Sesse Ræma looked at him coolly.

"Friends of yours?"

Clemen didn't answer. Sesse Ræma looked into nowhere with narrowed eyes then returned his attention to the clansman.

"I generally kill humans who come at me with their swords. It's sort of a rule of my own. I made an exception for you though, because you're with the boy, but please, don't feel the need to thank me."

The Rhondran glared at him but didn't speak.

"So now you are free," said Eonmor, "of hourglasses and promises. What will you do?"

"I will take a look at this little one with his talisman, if you please."

The wizard, the demon, Ashar and Clemen all turned to look at Ben.

"Ben," said Eonmor, "it is up to you. If you don't want to show it to him you don't have to."

The boy peered at the huge, horned man.

"Come on," said the demon, gesturing encouragingly. "I won't bite you."

"Do you promise?" asked the boy.

The demon let out a long, rumbling laugh.

"I promise," he said.

When Ben rose to his feet Sternum and Sally rose with him, flanking him perfectly as he walked around the fire. The other adults stood also, positioning themselves close to Sesse Ræma who remained half sat, half crouched on the ground, but leaned forward eagerly as the boy approached. Ben took the Rhondran doll from his jerkin and held it out.

"Do you want to hold it?" he asked.

"No, no, no," said the monster softly, reaching out a taloned hand but not quite touching the doll. "Ah, look at this." His finger caressed the air in front of the piece of purple heather that had been bound to the doll. "What a frightful piece of work. I'm so glad I didn't kill you. So she's a friend of yours, is she, this witch?"

"Yes," said Ben.

"Well, better a friend than an enemy, I suppose. But better avoided altogether if you ask me. I've never had much luck with witches myself. Will you look at that." The demon shuddered. "Alright, that's enough. You can put it away. Thank you."

Ben returned the doll to its home inside his jerkin. The demon seemed to gaze at it still, through the fabric of his clothing, then he shook his head and let out a deep, held breath. He looked to Eonmor. "Very well. I believe our business is concluded."

The wizard's face took on a mild, slightly surprised look of agreement.

"It seems so," he said. "What *will* you do now?"

The demon rose to his feet and brushed the grass from his buttocks.

"I will live in this forest," he said, "and avoid witches."

"The forest will absorb you," said Ashar.

Sesse Ræma smiled a most human smile at her.

"Perhaps. I'm not so sure, but you may be right. Yet I have a feeling I will not be lost here, no. Amongst these trees I will be found. I will hunt the deer, drink from the waters, swim in the passing of the days. I will be less than a god and more than a demon, and I will grow a legend of my own. Sesse Ræma is now to be found in the Great Forest of Laan, and will make no more promises."

He looked down at Ashar.

"Would you like to come with me and be my bride?"

Ashar's mouth plopped open. It took her a while to compose a response.

"I'm, uh, a little busy at the moment," she mumbled.

Sesse Ræma's chuckle made its way across the tops of the surrounding trees, spreading out in all directions and receding, losing itself, becoming

absorbed by the expanse of the forest. When it was gone he somehow looked smaller.

"Well, if you ever get less busy, and begin to wonder...you know where you can find me."

The great black figure walked away then, to where the rock jutted out over the steep hillside. With a tremendous leap he rose, and then fell, beyond the edge and out of sight, and no sound came of his landing, only a whispering through the trees.

Italics section...The story of Nonamason and how his sisters betrayed him. Let it be told in the language of some classic folktale.

5

Eonmor sent Ashar and Clemen back to Solfar but, despite Ben's anxiety about Mab, he insisted on taking the boy on a detour.

"We will not be losing time, Ben. We will arrive back at the house an instant after our friends. But I'm worried about you. I feel I need to do something to help you strengthen and protect yourself. And there's something I wish to talk about also."

He opened a portal to Enorae, in Imurran, far down in the lower hemisphere. It was so far south that the planet's tropical and desert regions were bypassed entirely and they emerged in temperate climes once again, though late summer was exchanged for a late, snowless winter. The long nights had been laying down hard frosts, one atop the other, for the daylight hours were not thawing them. The forest was silvered and crystalline, a timeless wintry cousin to the Great Forest of Laan's sun shafted glades.

From the forest a natural tower of rock, of a type unknown in all the rest of Piscea, rose inexplicably into the air. Puncturing the canopy its sheer sides lifted for a thousand feet more before ending in a flat top, jealously guarded by the giant eagles and useful for nothing more than looking out at the mountains of the Usk border and the rolling swathes of the forest roof that sloped down into Imurran.

From an icy grotto at the foot of the mountains they viewed the towering landmark, standing apart from the surrounding, taller peaks as though in self exile.

"That is The Stor," said Eonmor. "It is known by the locals as the Devil's Finger. It is my seat of power. Come."

He opened a portal that led out onto the top of The Stor. As they stepped through the ring Ben saw that the old wizard's clothes and hair and beard were caught and lifted by a wind that he did not feel himself. The white, winter light seemed to be drawn to the old man, gathering around him as though magnetized, creating a soft white aura that was flecked with pinpoints of brightness like reflections on snow. The boy began to feel dull by comparison.

"This is my seat of power," he said again. "This is the place that loves me as much as I love it. This is where my twin natures of air and water combine to bathe me in wind and rain. Here is where my vision is clearest. Here is where I am free from all possible harm."

"At some point you will discover your seat of power, and you will know your own twin natures, and you will have a physical, geographical place that you can go to, whenever you feel cut off from your inner seat."

Ben looked out to the distant, encompassing horizon, and it was pale and shining, loosing itself seamlessly between the earth and her brother sky.

"Ben," said the wizard, "I am over three thousand years old."

The boy knew.

"There is something you need to know about, so that you can be prepared for it. I've been meaning to talk about it, and putting it off, but it can't be avoided really." He looked into a middle distance, crinkling the skin at the corners of his eyes while he found the words. "Wizards live for a long time. Once we reach a certain age we begin to have occasional lapses of lucidity, short spells of time where we seem to be sleepwalking. These spells can pass quickly, in a day or two, or they can go on for quite some time. It is nothing to be afraid of, but it may happen sometime while I am with you in Solfar, and you need to know what to do."

"You mean your funny times," said the boy.

"What?"

"Your funny times...when you walk around looking funny, dribbling and bumping into things."

"I've done it already? In front of you?"

"Quite a few times."

"Oh," said the wizard, his face pursing unhappily. "Piss."

"I thought you knew."

"No. No. That's the thing really, I can be as clear as a bell, especially when I'm here, but the places I take myself to during those phases must remain a mystery to my lucid self. Were you alright?"

"I was a bit scared the first time. It was a few years ago now. You went all day without eating, then I tried to feed you and I made a big mess. I was just going to leave you sitting in your big chair but Mab came by."

"Mab!" The old man jumped and looked about himself as though she might be lurking on top of the Devil's Finger with a black dagger, then he seemed to remember he was in his seat of power and he settled down.

"She washed you and put you to bed."

"Tt," said Eonmor. "I wish she didn't." He picked at a loose thread on his robe, muttering. "Any excuse to get my clothes off."

"She gave me advice, showed me how to look after you, when you... you know."

"Ah."

"Yes."

"And I've been like that several times since then?"

"Yes."

The man looked at the boy and he sighed and looked out across the world. Ben raised his eyebrows, crinkling his little brow.

"Will it happen to me one day?" he asked.

Eonmor pondered this with his bottom lip sticking out.

"Only if you live long enough, my lad. Only if you live long enough. Hey! Hang on a moment, have I had this conversation with you before?"

"Well, yes, sort of."

"But that's not right...I should have remembered..."

"Well, I think you were half in and half out of one of your funny times."

"What? Oh, this is ridiculous!" The wizard stomped around his seat of power unhappily. "Ah, well, whatever – it's not worth bothering about. Ben! Come. Will you leap from the edge with me?"

The boy stared vacantly at him, then he tried to pretend to himself that he had misheard, but he knew he hadn't.

"Leap?" he said, in the smallest of voices.

"The eagles will catch us on their backs. You will see as the eagle sees."

Ben didn't want to. To his disappointment the old man shrugged and said he didn't have to if he didn't want to. This was a trick of the old man's, he knew: to bring him to a place of wonder that reflected his own inner greatness and then give him the opportunity to do something terrifying. The boy's desire to be deserving made the idea of not jumping suddenly unbearable.

"Won't you at least try to persuade me?" he asked.

"You want to be persuaded?"

"Yes. You could get me excited about it."

"Get you all worked up, you mean? I see. Well, let's see, how about this...pretty please?"

"Oh!"

Ben ran towards the edge of the rock, catching the wizard off guard.

"Hey! Wait for me, you little tyke!"

They ran hard, while their nerve held, only allowing their minds to know what was happening after the edge of the tower was behind them and it was too late. He saw the river Saph sketching its way through the forest far below, glistening like a broken spider's thread. The broad shoulders of the eagle that slid beneath him matched Ben's velocity then lifted him out of his breath, taking him out across the forested roots of the mountains, showing him the world the eagles see, and it was just as he'd always known it would be.

φ

His mood felt like it should soar for the rest of his days, but on arriving back at summered Solfar he knew immediately that Mab was gone, for the wildflowers throughout the house were all dead. More than that he felt her absence emanating from the furniture and the very walls of the house, just as his moods had warned him. Yet despite being prepared by his premonition its confirmation stirred a great anxiety inside him, tears filmed his eyes and the last vestiges of his euphoria flapped away into another dimension. The old man noted this sympathetically and peered through a window and out into the wood as if he expected to catch a glimpse of her disappearing over a hill.

"She comes and goes, Ben. It's just her nature."

"I feel like she's gone really far away," said the boy.

"Perhaps she has, but she's fine, really. She's gnarly as an old root and ten times as tough. We might worry about the elves but the last thing you need to do is worry about her."

"Maybe she'd like having someone to worry about her."

The wizard gave him a searching look.

"Careful, boy," he said softly, but he didn't say any more.

While Eonmor talked to Ashar and Clemen in the kitchen Ben went from room to room gathering the flowers, which had all grown brittle and shadowy like memories of strength. Burning them at the side of the house he watched the black smoke wind its way up through the branches above the roof and seemed to see the departing spirit of a flock of crows.

The following day he worked his first piece of magic.

φ

Ashar was in the study looking through the window. From the garden came the clacking of wooden swords and the occasional bark of complaint from Clemen.

"Aha!" said Eonmor from the door. Ashar looked up.

"You're boy is struggling," she said. The wizard came in and leaned beside her to share her view of the Rhondran giving Ben his first lesson in the sword.

"Is he really?" said the old man, not sounding in the least concerned.

"Yes," she asserted carefully. "Do you really think he's up to all that much? As far as I've been able to tell he's sweet and brave, but I haven't noticed any great flare in him."

"Ah, flare." Eonmor smiled to himself. "You think he's lacking? I find him utterly remarkable. But then, I must admit, I find everybody and everything utterly remarkable these days, so there may be something in what you say."

"Hmm," said the woman, not happy somehow. But the wizard sat down and his cheeks bunched into a tight little grin.

"So it's the boy you're looking at, is it?"

She turned to him pointedly, a half smile emerging involuntarily.

"Are you saying something, old man?"

There was a light in his eyes that was one part mischief, one part affection, one part something else.

"Yes," he said, tilting his head.

"Well, would you speak more plainly, you ridiculous pest?"

"If I must, then I suppose I will: I believe Clemen is going to make a very happy bed mate."

Ashar's eyes slid sideways and upwards.

"Well, one wouldn't want to be presumptuous," she smiled, "but your powers as an oracle may be strong today."

The wizard huffed in good humour.

"A shame we didn't get the chance to leave you alone with Sesse Ræma yesterday."

Her eyes and mouth grew circular in agreement.

"Ah, he would have been stupendous, don't you think?" The old man mirrored her expression. "I had my hand between my legs all last night just thinking about it," she sighed.

"Me too," he said. Ashar burst out laughing, delighted, then quieted down at the sight of his erection growing beneath his robes.

"Oh," she said. "So that's how it is, is it?"

He cast an innocent glance down.

"It appears to be," he agreed.

With a look from the woman the door closed itself and she began to peel her leggings down. The old man lifted the skirt of his robes, letting the furrowed material rest against his proud, upstanding cock, which was beginning to give of magical spangles, and he sat back. She came towards him, naked from the waist down.

"You're ready already?" he inquired politely.

"How ready do you want me to be?"

He crinkled his nose.

"Just a little."

"Well that's good then," she said primly.

She mounted him, lifted and lowered herself a few times, finding her position and then began to peel the rest of her clothes off as she rode him. Their faces became heavy with need and they glared at each other as they fucked. And sometimes their frowns would break, involuntary smiles washing them away. And as their unnumbered senses opened up to each other, one by one, they would let out startled little laughs between the grunts and the moaning, the laughter of well-worn friends. His cock shone inside her, pure love and lust, radiating thrills of ecstatic hunger for her pleasure that penetrated to the marrow of her skeleton. Her wizard's cunt held him like a mouth, drawing more of him into her than was strictly possible. She rode him wantonly and fiercely, biting her bottom lip, snarling at him needily, then throwing her head back and laughing at the ceiling, tears springing to her eyes for the love of him. As their senses opened they fed each other's pleasure directly into each other's minds, bodies and spirits. When they were ready to cum it was by mutual consent and that was when the experience really opened out. Their orgasm took off, and so did they, locking onto each other with their hands, staring vividly into each other's eyes as they floated up into the air. The wizard came into her, and though the ejaculation was soon spent the energy continued to flow and he kept his eyes open wide as it pumped into her in pulse after pulse of knowledge, peace, bliss, savagery and sadness. As she felt this torrent within her she was both receiving it and seated inside him giving it forth at the same time. And as she looked into his eyes during that extended moment of timelessness she was also looking into her own. Flashes of lives flickered through their inner landscapes then, their own, each others', other people's, it was all the same, memories of the past, future and present, moments of being: painful, pleasurable, happy, sad, but all glittering with fullness, all aching with uniqueness. The room was a held breath of silence and they floated there long, not needing to move any more, the cascading orgasm rushing tirelessly through their shared inner world, their haloes joined, their auras intermingled, their astral bodies soundlessly shuddering.

When the cries came from the garden, of Clemen's pain and distress, splitting the air and working its way into their moment, they gradually brought themselves back, touched back down to earth, parted without regret.

"If he's still alive by the time you get to him," said Eonmor, "he'll be a happy bed mate indeed."

A dishevelled Ashar smiled, put a hand on his chest and didn't speak.

φ

They took Clemen's shirt off in the kitchen. Ashar's fingers moved lightly about his ribcage, which trembled at their touch. Sally was carefully and gently washing the scrape across his left temple.

"There's nothing broken here," said Ashar, "and the arm's in one piece too. But you'll be sporting some garish bruises for a time, once they come through."

"Bruises? Ha!" snapped Clemen in a bitter tone. "Just tell me when that boy comes to his senses. The only thing that will make me feel better is giving him a sound beating."

Ben was standing at the back door, unwilling to come in any further. He was wearing a startled expression.

"I'm sorry, Clem," he mumbled sadly.

"Good! Whatever! Be sorry or not! But drop this rock skin rubbish and take your beating like a man!"

"Will one of you just tell me what happened?" said Eonmor.

"What happened is he nearly killed me, is what happened!" bellowed Clemen, and Ben began to cry.

"He kept hitting me with his stick," bawled the boy and then he promptly turned and ran away into the garden.

The wizards and inhumans looked at Clemen crossly.

"What?" he barked. "You're taking his side? Look at the state of me! Protim's Box! Oh, forget it."

Outside Eonmor caught up with Ben and sat with him beneath the big chestnut. Producing a clean white handkerchief from a portal ring he helped him to clean his face up.

"Tell me what happened," said the old man. The boy's tears were fading but he was struggling to catch his breath. The wizard put a hand on his shoulder. "That's alright. You've cried enough now. You'll feel calmer if you tell me what happened. Come on."

The boy nodded and gulped.

"I did some magic," he said. "Clemen's stick kept hitting my hand because I wasn't parrying right, and Clemen kept shouting at me, and I got really angry and I attacked him, and his wooden sword couldn't hurt me any more. My skin has gone as hard as rock. Look."

He picked up a stone from the ground and tapped it against his arm, *bok, bok, bok*. It sounded just as though he were tapping the stone against a larger rock. Eonmor leaned forward with interest. Taking the stone from Ben he tapped it here and there, on the boy's arm, his leg, his head, his hand, getting the same result each time.

"Flex your fingers for me," he muttered.

The apprentice did so and the wizard tapped away at his digits as they curled and uncurled. "That's an interesting effect. See how your skin remains supple in relation to itself, allowing you to move as normal, yet it is hard and unyielding to any external object?"

"Oh yes," said the boy, becoming equally fascinated.

The wizard sat back, dropping the stone back and forth from one hand to another as he considered.

"So, tell me, how did you manage this, do you think?"

Ben sat and watched the flexing of his own fingers.

"When I was trying to make an apple float in the air you told me I needed to know what it would feel like to float it. Then, after I knew what it would feel like, I would be able to do it. I tried and I tried but I couldn't work out what it would feel like to make an apple float. When Clemen kept hitting me with the stick, and shouting at me, I remembered seeing you attacking the monster in Antura with your sword, how you just ran at it with all of your anger shining out, and even when it bit you and scratched you, you didn't care. It was easy to know what you were feeling like then, and I started to feel like that about Clemen, and I ran at him and started smashing my sword against him, and I didn't care any more about him hitting me. So I didn't do any parrying at all. Clemen saw that it didn't hurt me when he hit me, no matter how hard he did it, and then his sword broke on my head, but I didn't feel it. I just kept on attacking him until he grabbed hold of me. And now he's really angry at me."

"Uh huh," said Eonmor. "So, describe the feeling to me. What does rock skin feel like?"

"It feels like anger...and gladness."

"You need to pay attention to that. Pay attention to the feeling, memorise it, so that you can recall it when you need to."

For the next hour the wizard coached Ben in recalling to himself the feelings of having rock skin and of not having rock skin, until he could activate and release the effect at will. They discovered that gripping and releasing the hilt of a sword were excellent triggers the boy could use to control his new skill.

"You really like wielding a sword, don't you?" noted Eonmor.

"It makes me feel magical," said the boy, and the wizard saw a pulsing of rose pink in his aura.

After a little more practise he decided they could stop.

"You must be so pleased. Your first piece of magic, my boy. Well done!"

Ben squirmed uncomfortably.

"I am. But what about Clemen? I think he hates me now."

"Oh, that. Well, let's go and see him."

"Shouldn't we be bothered if Clemen's upset?"

"Bothered? There's no harm in caring about it, being aware of it, but really: what upsets another person is their own business. I wouldn't want to make it my purpose in life to go about the place tending to other people's feelings. You didn't like being hit with a stick, you did something about it. You tended to your own feelings. That is enough...more than most people do."

They went to see Clemen and he was still aggrieved.

"I'll accept your apology when you drop the rock skin and take your beating," he said with calm dignity. Ben considered this proposal fully.

"Not likely," he said, and started to laugh.

Clemen began to get worked up again then but Ashar took control, insisting on taking him off to a bedroom to administer some treatment she thought might calm his bruising.

"I hope it won't take more than two hours," called Eonmor as she herded the Rhondran out of the door. "We have an appointment at Monnhill."

Ashar's head popped back into the room.

"Make it three?"

When next the boy saw the clansman he seemed to be in a much better mood and told Ben he reminded him of himself at that age. In a private report to Eonmor on the boy's progress with the sword he said, "He doesn't look like much. And I wasn't disposed favourably to him at first, on account of the funny looks he kept giving me. But man that boy is ferocious with a blade. He has no style whatsoever...but he scares the shit out of me."

This was the best report Eonmor had ever heard him give on anybody.

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They gathered in the kitchen for their departure to Monnhill.

"We're allowed one guest each," explained Eonmor, "so Ben shall go as mine and Clemen shall be Ashar's."

Clemen and Ashar didn't look at each other, just nodded casually.

"But what about Sally and Sternum?" asked Ben.

"We have no space left on our guest list for them, but that doesn't matter: we have no need of bodyguards at Monnhill. It's unthinkable that we would face an enemy there."

"Hmph," said Clemen.

"Clemen?"

"It was unthinkable that the security of your rooms there should be breached."

The wizard's hand went to his beard and tugged lightly three times.

"That's right," he said with an uneven grimace. "I still don't know how to think about that." His eyes lost focus and he stood there tugging his beard while the others waited. Eventually he came back. "But there's no room on our guest list, so the decision makes itself. Let's just stay alert, though the very idea of being on my guard at Monnhill shocks me."

He opened a portal. The forest they entered seemed further on in the year from Solfar, for here and there stood a tree with golden leaves. Conifers were mingled in amongst the broadleaves, and heather blanketed the ground, which was rippled into soft, rounded hummocks in all directions that reached, in some cases, to twenty feet in height. Save for some bird-song the place was quiet. Ben was struck by the stillness of the trees, the undisturbed clarity of the air. Immediately the sense of peace hanging in the spaces between the trunks and branches filtered through his skin and calmed what unnoticed tensions he had been holding onto.

They walked only a little way before arriving at their destination. The forest went right the way up to the walls of the main building, and its great arched entrance reared over them unexpectedly. The stonework was ancient and deep, designed it seemed to keep the combined armies of the universe at bay, but the gate, a thirty foot series of solid portcullises housed in a smooth, bare stone passage, stood wide open. The passage was angled downwards, its ceiling layered with rows of overhead defences that could facilitate the firing of missiles and pouring of incandescent liquids, but the distant archway at the far end opened onto the lawn of a sunlit courtyard and was unguarded. People could be seen there walking this way and that, all unhurried, all as calm as the forest and the stone. As the small group descended into the cool and shade of the gate, headed at a leisurely pace towards the gold and green scene that lay beyond, a breeze came to greet them. It was scented strongly with a flower that Ben didn't know, and his heart suddenly gladdened inside him, lifting him to a point of excitement and anticipation.

As they drew nearer to the courtyard the view onto the patch of lawn opened out. The inner courtyard was big enough to cause the far side of the main building to appear hazy through the air of the late summer day. A single great tree stood at the centre of the lawn, its branches spreading far and wide from a mighty trunk. Despite the approach of autumn there were white blossoms in full bloom amidst the rich, dark green leaves.

They cut across the lawn on a diagonal, heading for the central entrance on their right, their arrival uncommented upon by the residents, although the occasional curious glance was cast Eonmor's way. Ben and Clemen looked about at the people of Monnhill, who seemed an oddly varied assortment. A wide age range of both sexes was represented (though no children) and there was no discernable dress code to make clear who was master and who was pupil. Many cultures, creeds and disciplines were present, and one person seemed to have little in common with the next, yet the gen-

eral air of intelligence, tempered by something warmer, seemed to be shared in common, and this seemed remarkable to the boy. It was an atmosphere he had not encountered before in Piscea, despite his wide travels through the Sovereign Galaxy portals.

As they climbed the wide stone stairway inside the west side entrance he saw a small group of scholars in conversation with a tall, spindly creature that had a pale, alien face that didn't correspond with any being he had encountered before. Though startling, Ben discerned a strong aura of age, dignity and magic furling and unfurling in the air around it. As their group passed the scholars and the creature it turned and looked at the boy in some wonder.

They were walking down a wide, long corridor on the first floor, all windows down the right hand side and lecture halls on the left³, when he tugged on the wizard's sleeve and quizzed him about the creature.

"The melindrax? Well, yes," chuckled Eonmor, "They're quite strange and rare. Almost as rare in Monnhill as seven year old boys."

The corridor ended in a plain, square wall with one large set of doors of dark, knotted wood inlaid with small square tiles of jade, topaz and mother of pearl. Eonmor tapped softly on one of the doors with a knuckle. It was hardly loud enough for Ben to hear, yet almost instantly both doors swung inward and a small, compact man, who reminded the boy distinctly of Sternum, stepped out with a smile.

"Here you are," he said in a voice made small with suppressed energy, treating both Eonmor and Ashar to a fiercely affectionate gaze. The three embraced.

"This is Clemen and Ben," said the man definitively once the embrace had been disengaged and they had squeezed each other's shoulders. He held out a hand to the Rhondran and then Ben. "I am Marfu, the West Wind of Monnhill. Be welcome."

Ben shook his hand and he called for refreshments to help them be comfortable while he took Eonmor and Ashar into his rooms. "Forgive me for leaving you out in the cold, my friends. If there's one thing I hate it's secretive wizards, but needs must." The boy and the Rhondran found seats in a cluster of large, red leather sofas by the nearest window and they looked at each other.

"Looks like our essential skills won't be needed," said Clemen sniffily.

The boy sat further back on his sofa, bouncing slightly to feel its quality.

"It's nice out here though," he said happily.

The Rhondran shook his head.

"A big red sofa and you're happy, is it?" Ben nodded. "Yes, I remember those days. You're lucky. Enjoy it while it lasts, my boy. Enjoy it while you can."

"Alright," agreed the boy.

A tall, bald man wearing a sober charcoal grey suit came by and deposited the tray of refreshments. The clansman waited for him to leave and then cast a critical eye over them.

"They're not bad actually," he admitted. "Hey, did you notice how the West Wind looks like Sternum?"

"Yes. I think Eonmor must have been thinking about him when he made Sternum."

"That's a bit creepy, don't you think?"

³ Clumsy description

"No, not really. He must have qualities that Eonmor likes."

"Are you sure you're only seven years old? Sometimes I get the feeling you're a little old man in disguise."

The boy shrugged.

"I don't mean to be strange. I can't help it. I've had a strange life."

Clemen burst out laughing.

"That's alright. Being a vicious little monster with a sword just about makes up for it."

The boy grinned proudly.

Directly opposite their window a large set of doors opened and a lecture hall began to empty. Ben watched with interest, noticing that the students were all ages, noting the gentle buzz of conversation, the way they formed into small groups to discuss their reactions to the lecture. Several glances were directed towards Clemen and the boy, though most appeared too wrapped up in their thoughts and discussions to pay much mind to a couple of unusual characters in a building full of unusual characters. The groups mostly walked away, heading for the stairs while some claimed vacant sofas.

"So Eonmor is a big deal around here then?" said Clemen.

"I'm not sure," said the boy. "I know he only does one lecture here each year, but they let him have his rooms all year long."

Clemen's expression seemed to suggest an equitable deal.

"They must think he's something, then."

"I suppose so. But it's difficult to tell with wizards, because they're always hiding everything from each other. They like to praise everybody else and put themselves down."

"Oh yes? Have you mixed with a lot of them?"

"Only Eonmor so far."

"Hah. Well, I haven't noticed that behaviour in him so much."

"No, he's different."

"So how do you know all this about the behaviour of wizards if you've never met any?"

"Eonmor told me."

"Mmm."

"Don't you think I should believe him? Don't you like him? I thought you were good friends with him."

"Of course you should believe him. There's no question of that. And of course I like him – he's a ridiculous old man who can be almost as vicious as you when he's wound up enough. And yes, he is my good friend. I was pissed off at him when I lost my arm, it's true, but to me he feels like a brother, and brothers can be pissed off with each other. Brothers can question each other. He likes to have people around who question him."

"So, yes, you should believe him. But you're young and inexperienced. You should only believe him until you find out for yourself."

Ben nodded.

"That's what he says, too."

"Then that's good."

"Yes."

Clemen gave him a suspicious look then smiled to himself and shook his head. He looked around again at the high ceiling, the venerable stonework, the seated groups of chatting people.

"It's some place. What time of the year does he do his lecture?"

"October the nineteenth."

"Ah, not that long before his next one, then."

Ben glanced carefully from side to side and leaned forward to speak in a hush.

"Actually he's done it already."

"Huh?"

"He's done it in advance...using his magic. He's done all of his lecture's for the next hundred years so he doesn't have to worry about them any more and can get on with more important things."

Clemen received this information with a mild, slightly dazed acceptance as though he'd become inured to real surprise. Then he laughed, softly but gleefully.

"That's nice, I like that. Crazy old man."

The boy watched the swordsman's expressive features crinkling with pleasure, saw how he sat at ease in the bloated red sofa, at ease amidst surroundings that were foreign to him, and in that moment he somehow saw a man who was willing to like himself, despite some unvoiced reservations. A warmth grew inside the boy and he laughed also.

"I expect you'll be coming to this place?" said Clemen after a time.

"No. Eonmor doesn't want me to learn the traditional way. He says they spend all their time here measuring and analysing life and magic because they don't understand what life and magic is."

Clemen raised his eyebrows, amused.

"Well, that old guy's not perfect," he confided in a low voice, "but then, it's nice to know when everybody else is even less perfect."

Ben narrowed his eyes.

"But everything *is* perfect," he said.

This caught Clemen's attention and he shook his head to wake himself up. Then he seesawed it from one side to the other, putting his elbows on his knees as he leaned forward with interest.

"Everything's perfect. Sure, sure: I've heard that said by philosophers, wizards and cultists. Everything is as it should be. Everything is as it must be. It sounds impressive, but does it have any real, practical use? Pain still hurts, whether it's perfect or not. Suffering still isn't much fun, even if you do think it has some meaning. Saying everything is perfect is just that: it's just talk. It doesn't really help you when you're in trouble."

The boy was sitting cross-legged on his sofa. He straightened up, activated by something in what the clansman had said.

"If you ask a drunkard," he said, "what he thinks would count as real practical help, he would say: anything that helps him to get drunk. What you think of as useful and practical and real depends on..."

"Excuse me," said a voice. The Rhondran looked up and Ben turned to look behind him. A man was gesturing to them over the back of a nearby sofa. "Please, forgive me: I have no excuses, it's blatant, idle curiosity, but may I ask who you are and what brings you to Monnhill?" His accent was thick: Cabarandian⁴. A pair of lively green eyes countered the aging effect of his bushy, brown beard, and a heavy set of shoulders belied the lightness of his voice. Two young women were sitting with him.

Ben looked at Clemen, who now leaned back and regarded the man coolly.

⁴ Work out some speech patterns unique to Cabarandians speaking in the common tongue.

"And what if we answer your question only to find out later that you're not somebody we would want to give that information to?"

The man's eyes widened in surprise.

"Yeees," he said with the look of solving an equation but not trusting the obvious result, "I see your point. Please, forgive me."

He turned back to his companions looking chastened.

"Hey, that's not the answer," called the Rhondran.

The man turned back, a little nervously it seemed.

"I'm sorry?"

Clemen sighed and softened his approach.

"You tell us who you are first and then we decide if we want to talk to you."

"Ah! I see! I'm an imbecile!"

"It's standard practise in many places."

"In Cabarand, too. I'm just a poor ambassador for my people. But please: my name is Volta, from Barada. I've been here three years. This is Ruta from Akenning, in Teledac. She's been here five years. And this is Echan from Masq, in Myddea. She's in her seventh year." Ruta was small and pale, her face intensely pretty and framed by a tangle of black hair. She nodded and held up a hand. Echan was a tall and striking black woman with a very straight nose and large leonine eyes.

"Please forgive Volta," she said in a smooth, regal voice. "He is, as he says, an imbecile."

Volta agreed silently.

Clemen looked at Ben.

"What do you think? Should we trust them with our names?"

Ben wanted to.

"I'm Clemen of Penmor, in Laan. This is Ben from...where you from, Ben?"

"Solfar," said the boy, "in Enlan."

Eyebrows raised.

"That has to be the most atrocious of lies," said Volta, but it came across as an intrigued enquiry.

Ben stiffened, his face reddening, and he didn't know what to say. Clemen looked back and forth between the two and his eyes widened in surprise at the sudden thickening of tension in the air.

"Volta," said Echan in sharp reproach. The big man twitched uncomfortably and he held his palms up.

"Ack!" he said. "Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me! I still haven't learned the manners of this place. Be welcome, Ben of Solfar in Enlan, and please forgive my rudeness. I'll never make a wizard."

Ben pulled a rather spectacular face that didn't seem to know what it wanted to express, and he rubbed the top of his head.

"That's alright," he said. "I don't think I will, either."

Volta laughed disproportionately.

"So, we have a young apprentice here? But now I am wary of asking questions in case I embarrass myself again."

"That may be as much wisdom as you're destined to achieve," said Echan, her eyelids imperiously heavy. Volta nodded sheepishly at the boy.

"Maybe I could ask a question of you folk?" said Clemen, and Ben felt a cooling relief that the attention might be diverted from him and silently thanked the clansman. The three students made agreeable sounds, inviting

the question. "When I knew I was going to be a guest at Monnhill today I thought I might get the chance to ask somebody for a demonstration of magic, but I've since learned that you people spend all your time pretending you can't do any. So, does this mean that on my one and only visit nobody will be willing to show me, or tell me about, what they can do?"

"Look at that," said Volta, "the man carries a great big sword about with him but I fancy he could show me a thing or two about diplomacy."

"That's not saying much," said Echan.

"Quite. Quite." Volta turned squarely to Clemen. "Already, my friend, you know too much about the way of the wizard. Of course, we are willing to talk about our magic, perhaps even give a little demonstration, but to what end? For the thing is that no matter what we say and do, you can't, and shouldn't, be certain that we are being truthful or showing the truth. You can't afford to presume that we are really doing what we seem to be doing, or that we can't do what we say we can't. Sometimes we will even fake doing things that we really can do, if we believe the situation is subtle enough to call for such a tactic. For this reason you can never be really sure you have gauged your opponent's strength, skill, knowledge, etc, and for this reason it's generally thought to be pointless to even try."

Clemen had been following this with a look of keen interest.

"How can you people be happy when you're lying to each other all the time?"

Volta gave another disproportionate laugh.

"So much for the diplomacy, eh? But, my friend, we're not lying. We're playing a bluffing game. Don't you ever play them? Don't you enjoy them?"

"Sure. But there are times I want to know I can believe what a friend is saying."

"I assure you, we have those times. Really...it's just a cultural matter, a cultural difference. A swordsman finds his beauty in the simplicity of things: a straight, sharp blade, a known friend, a known enemy. A wizard finds his beauty in the subtlety of things: order arising from chaos, and then returning, the almost indecipherable interplay of energy and power between two states, two forces, two opponents. One experience of beauty is no better than another. Be at peace, dear swordsman."

Clemen considered. His long sword was leaning against his thigh and he looked down at the pommel now, traced its contours with fingertips, then looked up.

"Fair enough," he said.

"Excellent!" boomed the Cabarandian. "Anyway, by the looks of you I'd say you've already seen works of magic beyond what meagre offerings I could produce." His gaze fell, with a certain inevitability, towards Ben. "Perhaps even this one has stunned you with his sorcery, eh?"

Clemen touched the bruise on his temple but didn't say anything. Ben shifted in his seat.

"I'm just a beginner," he mumbled.

"Indeed," said Volta with an arched eyebrow. "I will refrain from calling you an atrocious liar this time. You see: I am capable of learning. It comes slowly, but it does happen. But may I ask, for I'm unaccountably burning with curiosity, who is your master?"

Ben looked at Clemen uncertainly. The Rhondran shrugged.

"You don't have to tell him if you don't want to."

"Indeed," said Echan. "Don't let this oaf bully you, Ben."

Ruta, who had yet to speak, smiled at him.

"Bully him?" declared Volta. "Am I being overbearing?"

"Yes," said Echan.

Clemen shrugged.

"Ah, maybe it's so, but I can only apologise so many times a day and I've fulfilled my quota for this one. Come, master Ben, let me bully you. Tell me who your master is before I turn you into an armchair and leave you here to be sat on."

Ben giggled.

"Ha!" said Volta happily. "Look, he's going to tell me. I knew my charm would pay off one day."

"Alright, I'll tell you. My master is Eonmor."

All three of the students allowed their astonishment to show and the boy immediately stiffened again.

"So he *does* have an apprentice," whispered Ruta, speaking at last, though barely loudly enough to hear.

"Protim's Box," hissed Volta, "you must be quite some character."

Ben frowned and his jaw jutted forward.

"No. I'm just like everybody."

"Please, my boy," said Volta in soothing tones, "don't be upset by us. We're just interested. Your master is one of those characters who everybody likes to wonder about, mostly because those who do know him are notoriously tight-lipped. I suppose you'll be the same yourself. But please, won't you at least tell us something about his teaching methods? Which knowledge aids does he use: the Brot Equations? The elven meditations? Or does he go more for those Zoestrosan trance techniques?"

Ben squinted.

"No, we don't use any of those. I just ask questions and he answers them."

Volta's face contracted as though he'd just felt an unpleasant sensation. He half turned to his two companions.

"Something subliminal, perhaps," he muttered. Echan nodded. Ruta didn't react, just looked at Ben with interest.

"No," said Ben. "Nothing like that."

Volta put a hand over his mouth and seemed to consider the boy carefully.

"If you maintain that position," he said, removing his hand, "we will, of course, accept it. But there is clearly more about you than an unaided child would account for, even an especially bright one. Won't you offer any hint?"

The boy considered, and though his eyes were narrowed he was beginning to look more at ease now.

"I'm not going to say too much about it, but I think you are getting confused by focusing on *how* I learn rather than *what* I learn."

The three students displayed various levels of perplexity.

"What a wicked little piece of confabulation that is," murmured Volta. He held his hands out at his sides. "So tell us then: what have you learned?"

Ben smiled and shrugged and seemed to be starting to enjoy himself.

"Oh, just some basics. I'm only seven."

"Ha hah. Indeed. But you imply that the knowledge itself has something inherent within it that enhances your apprehension?"

"Well, of course." The boy's cheeks swelled smugly. "That's what knowledge does."

"Certainly. Yes, yes. Goodness, you're feisty. But there's knowledge and there's knowledge, no? There is missing knowledge, for example: those hidden answers we have discerned are there but have yet to extrapolate. Are you saying that you have this missing knowledge?"

"I have all knowledge and I have no knowledge," said the boy.

Volta sat back looking stumped. He gaped a few times, on the verge of saying things but then changing his mind. He turned to Echan and Ruta.

"I'm out of my depth," he said.

"Out of your depth is the place where you live and breath," said Echan. "Sit back and rest your poor head." She leaned forward and smiled at the boy. "Ben, would you tell us what magic is, according to your understanding?"

"Are you sure? It isn't anything that you won't already know."

"I assure you, Ben, every scholar here has a different answer to that question. I'd love to hear yours."

"Well, it's true that there are many misunderstandings about magic," he said reasonably. "But this is because magic is nothing more and nothing less than the substance of life, and there are many misunderstandings about life. To understand and work with magic one must understand and work with life. Simply to live requires no understanding, for life lives itself, naturally and spontaneously. But to live life consciously requires active understanding, and that is an altogether different matter. So, every living being works magic quite naturally and spontaneously, but to work magic consciously is to be a wizard or a witch.

"A key point that proves elusive for many students of life is this: Life is not about oneness, nor is it about noneness, the ultimate goal of certain spiritual disciplines, religious orders and metaphysical teachings. Nor is it about multiplicity, the 'actuality' that many anti-spiritual belief systems cling to. No. Life is about the *movement* of multiplicity to oneness and then back again. This natural truth is echoed in all that is natural, all that is life, all that is magic, which is everything that exists everywhere and everywhen. This is why we breath in *and* out. This is why we have day *and* night. This is why we have the pulse and the pause before the pulse. When we are in oneness, all directions lead away from it. When we are outside of oneness all directions lead to it."

Ben paused, aware that the three students were gaping at him.

"Don't you agree with me?" he asked.

Echan shook her head slowly, as though it were filled with water.

"I...don't know. I'll need to think about it. But please, don't stop. Go on, say more. This is very interesting."

The boy shared a glance with Clemen who was also listening with interest, then he continued.

"Magic can be talked *about* but the real truth of magic, the heart of magic, cannot be put into words, just as life can be talked *about*, but the word 'life' is not life, it is just a word. The magical tendency of people to fall when they jump off a cliff, rather than float in the air, is described by the primitive sciences as a force. The effects of this so-called force have been measured by scientists and alchemists but the actual *mechanics* of the phe-

nomenon have not been described in words. Words are a product of magic, not a source of it. They are preceded by magic, and the description of magic is, therefore, beyond their grasp. You cannot build something more complex than yourself."

Ben paused to check on the reactions of the students. Each of them was wearing a frown of concentration. Ruta had started taking notes.

"I don't believe this..." began Volta, but Echan held a pre-emptive hand up and shushed him.

"Ben, this is all extremely fascinating. But it's quite abstract too. What about the practical applications of magic? Can you tell us about those?"

"Are you sure? I can't tell if you're really enjoying it."

"In truth, Ben, what you're saying is something of a surprise. But we are scholars – we're used to hearing all of the different view points on a subject."

"Alright." A slight pause and then he continued. "The work of the wizard is primarily to get out of his own way," he said. "When he understands that there is no distinction between the substance of his inner world, over which he is master, and the substance of the outer world, to which he appears to be subject, the tables turn and he knows that he *can* determine his outer experience, if, that is, his inner self, his inner belief system, will allow it. So it is he who is a slave to his inner world that cannot experience freedom in his outer realm of existence. This applies to most people from primitive societies such as those prevalent in Piscea right now.

"New practitioners of magic will employ various methods to help themselves *believe* that their work will have the desired effect. When the methods are effective in influencing the belief then the magic works as desired, for it is the belief that is at the cause of the effect, not the method itself. Incantations, spells, rituals, potions, planetary alignments...these are all symbols associated to belief. The stronger the association the more effective they will be.

"The magic of new practitioners will tend to be hit and miss, subject to variance because belief inherently incorporates doubt. Belief cannot exist without uncertainty.

"The master wizard has no doubt, therefore, he has no belief. He does not believe his magic will work, he *knows* it will work. The master wizard may employ the use of symbolic methods, out of habit or affection or simply style, but he does not need them.

"In time, and with practise, ignorance and self doubt turn to belief. In more time, and with more experience, belief will become unshakeable knowledge. Easy to say, a different matter in the day-to-day life of somebody who has been taught common beliefs from birth. Even the greatest masters of Piscean history have only achieved mastery in certain areas, certain specialisations – as far as we know. A master seer, for example, will predict future events with ease, but to turn himself into a cat, or a crow, or a wolf, as the Mab can, would be beyond him. He would need to learn that from scratch, or use a magical object created by a master of transformation.

"Another thing that will effect the belief of the novice and the wilful knowledge of the master is the counter-belief or counter will of others. Even the strongest master will find his enthusiasm dampened and his magical will subdued when he is surrounded by the large collective consciousness of a people who do not believe in magic. Likewise, two evenly matched opponents may cancel out each other's magical will and have to

resort to the sword or the fist to prevail. This is why it is essential that wizards keep to themselves the details of their abilities and why all wizards tend to learn lots of useful little 'tricks' from other disciplines rather than be wholly dependent on the predictable skills of their main specialisation. The element of surprise will always have its uses, regardless of how much raw willpower your opponent can muster.

"The true ultimate goal of a master wizard would be to achieve mastery, not just in one skill, but in all. This would effectively make him a god. Whether anybody has ever achieved this in Piscea is unknown. There are certainly old gods existing here and there, but whether they were once human or they simply coalesced around the beliefs of their worshippers is difficult, and probably dangerous to try to determine. Gods have their own motivations and their own kinds of business to attend to.

"Anyway, wizardry is an option that any person might take; it is not something reserved for 'special chosen ones', or anything like that. But, how successful a person becomes as a witch or wizard will depend on how well they are able to influence and cultivate their own beliefs. How well can they get out of their own way?"

He stopped talking and indicated with a shrug that he was finished. Volta and Echan looked at each other with straight, curiously expressionless faces. Ruta continued writing notes.

"Thank you, Ben," said Volta. "That was very interesting." He didn't seem to have any more to add.

"Yes, thank you, Ben," said Echan.

"But you know all of this already, don't you?" said the boy.

Volta and Echan again exchanged stiff glances.

"Well..." drawled the big man, "we follow slightly different disciplines I think. When you are older you may find your master leads you into other areas of understanding. I expect your current...knowledge...may be a preparation, meant to help you understand something quite different when he deems it timely."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I probably shouldn't say. I'm sure he knows what he's doing."

Ben stared at Volta and something hard entered his gaze.

"No. You're wrong. That's not how it is at all. What do you think magic is?"

"Never mind, it doesn't matter."

"Hey!" said Clemen, coming to life suddenly and startling everybody, "that's not fair. He's answered your questions. You should answer his. What's the matter with you?"

"No, please, you misunderstand...I just don't want to disrupt whatever Eonmor is trying to achieve by...by...preparing the boy in this fashion. No offence is intended. As usual I have sent my curiosity on ahead of my good sense and I have made a clumsy mess of things in the process."

"So you think what the boy said is rubbish then?"

Volta cast about at his companions as if looking for rescue.

"That's not what I said. I just believe that Eonmor has an unconventional teaching strategy. He's a respected figure and I'm sure all will make sense in the end when seen in its true light...we three are students of the West Wind, our outlook is more...classical. We have had many advantages that, while helping us to appreciate the higher truths, sometimes cause us

to forget that not everybody else has been so privileged. I really am not intending to give insult."

The doors to the West Wind's chambers opened outwards then and the West Wind himself stood between them, a hand on each, supporting himself lest he fall for he looked pale and ill. Noticing his students he stumbled forward, seeming to offer his wrists to them.

"Ruta...Echan...Volta...Eonmor is possessed. Delay him so that I can bring help." He stumbled on past their sofas, heading for the far end of the corridor. Through the large open doorway Eonmor could be seen floating down from near the high ceiling, arms outstretched, hair and beard drifting in the air. His staff was in one hand, gleaming with a hard light, the sword Berringstrom was in the other, blazing whitely as he homed in on the door, clearly coming for the West Wind. "Do not hesitate or falter, my dears...the need is dire..." Marfu continued on down the corridor, grimacing with some discomfort. The three students reluctantly began to climb to their feet while exchanging uneasy glances.

Ashar appeared in the door. She was also wielding her staff.

"Marfu! Halt you fool! Where do you expect to go? Don't make me bring you down!"

"Stop her, my friends," croaked the West Wind, all his attention bent on the distant stairway.

"Gah!" exclaimed Ashar and she raised her staff, which emitted an accelerating build up of rainbow spangles. Yet before it could discharge she was struck by a pulse of compressed air that came from the direction of Ruta. Thrown back against the doorframe Ashar cracked her head and fell to the ground, dropping her staff, which released its charge in all directions. Ben felt a fuzz of energy pass through him but it was too dispersed to have any harmful effect. With a bellow, and a movement almost too fast to follow, Clemen had his sword point at Ruta's throat and a warning hand aimed at her companions.

"Not one of you will act quickly enough to save your life, so don't act at all!"

The three students froze. Eonmor arrived in the doorway, his feet still not touching the floor, his aspect shining with a terrible fierceness.

"Marfu," he said, but the voice was not his. It was thick and deep and rolled out of the air from all directions like thunder, its bass vibration causing the viscera to tremble. "Stop right there."

The shuffling figure of the West Wind jerked to a halt, looked small and bent and alone. Then he turned, slowly, fearfully, his pale face puffy and waxen, his eyes wide, his cheek twitching, his hands clenched together. Eonmor paused then, catching sight of Ashar, noticing she had not moved yet. As he stooped down to look at her Marfu, the West Wind of Monnhill, parted his hands. From the gap between them sprang a spangle of azure light surrounded by a sphere of rainbow hues. It slid soundlessly through the air towards Eonmor, quick enough so that it was almost upon him immediately. Clemen shouted, but seeing in an instant that the wizard would not have the time to both see his peril and react he threw himself in front of the oncoming sphere. Eonmor lifted his head and saw the Rhondran fall into the sphere, and then the two of them disappeared in a noiseless inversion of light and space.

"Marfu," he whispered, but still his voice pummelled the eardrums from the lower frequencies. Echan and Volta both stepped forward, each

clearly in the process of activating some aggressive or defensive spell. Ruta stayed where she was, looking at the fallen Ashar, seemingly sapped of the will to make any more strikes. With a gesture, not looking their way, the wizard brushed all three of them away to the side so that they tumbled through the air and were crushed up against the base of the nearest window, their spells swept into nothingness. "What have you done, Marfu?"

Eonmor rose and descended, traversing the gap between himself and the West Wind like a bird of prey targeting a field mouse, his arms held out wide, his weapons shining with a shared light. The West Wind crumpled at his feet with a drawn out warble of terror, then his body seemed to be crushed inwards by the invisible forces emanating from the wizard's staff and sword. His terrified cry briefly became a howl of pain before the increasing pressure suddenly snuffed it out. His flesh, and every drop of moisture it contained, compacted inwards, growing smaller and denser, his features quickly losing their cohesion until he was a ball of pink matter no bigger than a grapefruit. And it shrank further still, the flesh now giving way, sizzling back, to reveal a fist of black metal within. And then, with a final hiss, the last trace of meat was gone and all that was left was a dark, misshapen object that might have been a crude glod, rocking back and forth on the floor.

Eonmor lowered his arms. His hair and beard dropped to hang naturally once more, and a breeze passed along the wide corridor, taking with it the electricity on the air. He knelt, opened a small portal by the chunk of metal and tapped it through with the tip of his staff. Closing the ring he put it away, put Berringstrom away, and then looked over at Ben. Shifting from his kneeling position he sat on the floor, held his staff in front of him, planted on the ground like a sapling, and he closed his eyes and leant his forehead against it.

He remained like that as the traumatised students began to gather themselves up, as people came running from other parts of the building. Ben tried to wake Ashar but wasn't able to. He put her into a better position and then went to the wizard's side, tugged on his sleeve.

"Master," he whispered. "I can't wake Ashar."

Eonmor opened his eyes and turned his face to the boy.

"I know," he said quietly.

"Won't you help?"

The old man stole himself.

"She's dead, Ben."

The boy felt himself falling, though he remained upright. Down and down he fell, though externally nothing changed, he continued to stand there looking at the wizard.

"Where's Clemen?" he asked, still falling.

The old man made as if to speak, but no words came. His eyes looked here and there, but they didn't know where Clemen was. Ben kept falling, and knew there was no bottom.

φ

Assuring the gathering group of senior masters that he would return and help them to make sense of these unprecedented events once he had taken the boy home, Eonmor took Ben back to Solfar. Now, of course, the wizard had no need to make an immediate return, for he could use a ring portal, whenever he felt up to the task of providing explanations for the

deaths of Ashar and Marfu, to take him back to the moment they had just left. So he slumped into his chair in the kitchen, and while Ben built the fire his eyes lost their focus, his lips became flacid and his hands began to tremble. By the time the fire was blazing he was comprehensively senile.

"Shall I make you something to eat?" asked the boy, touching his sleeve. His master looked at him through eyes gone slack with dementia and whether he saw anything he recognised at all Ben had no way of knowing.

The boy managed to make a vegetable stew that could be spooned into the old man's mouth. As he fed his master in this way images flashed unbidden in his mind's eye, silent explosions of colour lighting up the murk of his stunned state: Ashar, her face freshly cleared of scarring, beaming a smile, glad to see him, kissing his cheek hard...Clemen, reclining on a red leather sofa, his expressive features transforming from one emotion to another to another in quick succession...Eonmor, descending from on high like a hawk, weapons ablaze, crackling energy filling the air, his voice almost a physical entity in its own right.

Vegetable stew had dribbled into the old man's beard and Ben realised that he should have done what he could to prevent it when he had the chance because he wouldn't be able to get it out now. There was only so much the boy could cope with when he got like this. When the bowl was half empty he took a break and sat back, trying to reconcile the pictures in his mind with what sat before him.

The boy took out the Rhondran doll with the witch's heather and he held it.

"Mab," he whispered. "Mab, where are you? Please come." He turned it into a chant for a while, but the evening slid away and his only company remained the cracking of the fire and the abstract staring of the old man.

φ

Three dismal days went by until some lucidity returned to Eonmor's gaze, though he was clearly uncertain about certain things, such as what year it was and if there was anything in particular he was supposed to be doing. Looking grey and depressed he took himself off through a portal, returning instantly, freshly invigorated and once again up to date on current events. The boy didn't want to know where he had been or how his spirits had been rejuvenated. But he breathed a sigh of relief, relaxed somewhat and immediately caught a cold that kept him in bed for four days.

φ

Autumn came, cradled Ben's grief, and then left him also. And, as though determined to acquaint him with the inherent sense of loss that is the lot of a long-lived wizard, the Mab didn't return, her old haunts now grown empty and ordinary. Days pulsed and faded, light and cold under white featureless skies, making little impression in their passing. He retreated from questions for a while, unconcerned with matters of life. And when monsters came for him once more he was unafraid.

He was unafraid.

Winter was on the woods, and something had changed. In a moment it had shifted, while he was out walking on his own. He noted it almost immediately, an unfamiliar presence tainting the air. It was colder than the temperature. It was bright somehow, but casting sharp black shadows that

lengthened like knives amongst the leaf-lorn branches at the corners of his vision. He wasn't going to get home, not without meeting it face to face, whatever it was.

But he was unafraid.

These woods were his woods, Mab or no Mab, and he came and went as he pleased. If something strange had come to the forest, something that fed on fear, it would find only a slight boy with no fear to give. He walked amongst his familiar friends, the trees, and he heeded the way they seemed like strangers now, in the altered light. He heeded it conscientiously, not taking it lightly, but he found it difficult to feel this presence's desire to intimidate him and not analyse it as an abstract phenomenon. Perhaps it was his mourning, perhaps his travels through the Sovereign Galaxies that had wrought this unconcern in him. He had the energy to notice it, but not to care. He told himself distantly that this mental state could lead him to complacency, and he determined to watch for that, but still he could feel no fear, only a vague curiosity, and a tingle of anticipation that made him glad he had no sword with him.

He was unafraid.

It was following him through the trees, waiting for him to bolt and run, to become disorientated in his panic, to get lost in his mounting fears and stumble and fall, crying out at last in terror and dismay. But he did not run. And he did not stroll either, feigning a casual stride, but walked carefully and calmly, exactly as he wanted to walk, denying nothing.

The track he walked brought him to a hollow dip. As he arrived at the edge and looked down into it he knew this was the place. He could turn and circumvent it, but saw no purpose in delaying the inevitable. He walked down into the hollow.

They detached themselves from the shadows as he reached the bottom and he stopped there so he could get a good look at them. There were three, lithe and slim as saplings in the summer, sharp and dark as winter twigs. Only their faces and hands were pale, blending with the snow as well as their clothes matched the black gloom in the branches. They were tall as men, though their bodies and faces looked younger, and the mirror in their eyes looked older. Their weapons were slung loosely across their backs. They moved with inhuman grace, as though the wood belonged to them. They surrounded him in a triangle as pointed as their ears, and in high, haughty voices that cut the air they spoke in the common tongue for his benefit.

"It walks through the woods as though it belongs here."

"What is it?"

"It looks like a human...but it isn't snivelling."

"Perhaps it's just too stupid to snivel."

"No. That's not it. Look: you can see it thinking. It's thinking things to itself."

"Yes, you're right. It is thinking. Why would such a thing be thinking things?"

"Perhaps it wants to be like us."

"That would explain why it walks in our wood as though it belongs here."

"Like it's a real person."

"I don't like it. Why isn't it crying yet?"

"Surely, it must be stupid."

"No, I tell you, that's not it. I fancy it thinks it has a trick or two."

"You mean...it thinks it will get to go home?"

"Maybe it will. Maybe we should be careful."

"You're not being serious."

"Oh, quite serious. When was the last time you saw one of these things in our lands that wasn't surrounded by an entire army of protectors? And here is this little one, walking merrily along all on its own."

"It thinks it's protected by the witch, nothing more. Now come, I'm growing bored. It clearly isn't going to cry. Shall we kill it or take it?"

"It wouldn't be much use as a slave, thinking its deformed little thoughts to itself all the time. But it might serve some purpose as a gift."

"A gift? Why, who do you despise so much that you would give them this and call it a gift?"

"I think its head on a stick outside the old man's hovel would show the proper amount of respect."

"Yes, yes, yes."

"Then it's agreed."

"Very well."

"Look at it, it isn't even going to beg. It's too much. Hurt it, brother."

"For you, my brother."

They moved then, in ways that no man had ever moved, criss-crossing each others paths, darting, black flinted mirages, across and behind his vision, their triangle contracting in towards him. Had he tried to keep track of their positions he would have spun himself in confusion and he was glad that he didn't try, but stood and looked out in the direction of the track.

Eonmor would come. He would sense something and he would come.

Then came a brief sound, that of a metal edge drawn across stone, and immediately the elves stopped moving and simply stood there, very close to him.

"Look, he won't be cut."

"It won't be cut, brother."

"It has blunted my knife."

"I told you."

"You did. But it's a poor sort of trick. Try your magical blade on it. I'm sure that once this thing cries it will cry the loudest of all."

"Yes."

The elf directly before Ben whipped out a small sword with a slender blade and drove it through one of his kidneys.

"Ah, there it is," he said with satisfaction, releasing the weapon so they could admire his handiwork.

Ben looked down at the sword piercing his side. There was no blood flowing yet but he could feel it draining out of his face. And he felt the need to recline before he fainted but when he fell backwards an elf prevented him from collapsing.

"But why doesn't it cry yet?"

"It's just stunned. It will get used to it shortly. Do something else."

"Make it cry for me."

"For you, my brother."

The sword was pulled out of his side and its point dragged across his chest. The scream that ensued was tightly pitched, but came from far away, a woodland creature being taken by the talons of the hawk. He didn't feel it was his scream at all. His fear, as they allowed him to fall back onto the

ground, was not a panicked thing, but a reaction of his body objecting to the sudden lack of love, and the idea of the world preparing to depart.

They stood around him, looking down at him strangely, cooks confronted with an alien beast, unsure where the best cuts were to be found.

"I don't like the way he screams."

"It screams, my brother. It screams."

Ben's hands pawed at the wound across his chest. He felt distantly upset that his clothes had been slashed, and the Rhondran doll with the sprig of heather had been cut in two.

"He or it, that scream didn't come from the right place."

"I think we should finish this quickly."

They leaned in and his mind congealed around the levitation spell, the only thing he could think of that might keep them off him, the only thing he had left.

But he never got to find out if it would have worked or not for the air around them suddenly cracked with cold, a new, deeper cold that descended on the hollow like a slap, and the brightness of the day fled.

The elves stopped and turned. She was standing a few paces away, no footprints in the snow to say from which direction she had come.

She looked different. Her face was gaunt and grey, her eyes barely open. She breathed and that sound was the only sound in the hollow, deep and rasping and animal.

The elves didn't speak or move, just curled and uncurled their long fingers, waiting. And the breathing continued, deepening, building somehow in its intensity. But nothing more happened and the day wore on, brittle as the first thin sheen of ice. She stood there, a shell almost, empty but breathing, waiting for the moment that would recall some functioning vestige of sentience to her.

One of the elves moved a foot slowly to one side, making no sound, but compressing a few snowflakes.

"What have you done to my boy?" said Mab, her voice like the north wind.

The elves looked at each other, knowledge in their eyes. Quicker than the human eye could follow one of them darted away, up and out of the hollow. The witch's head bobbed absently as she somehow charted his progress from where she stood. Then she reached out her right hand and stiffened it into a claw. There was a distant shriek, followed by more. She pulled her clawed hand slowly in to her body and the elf was dragged back into the hollow, entangled in the excruciating grip of an invisible hawthorn, both of his eyes poked in.

"You are the one that will live," she told him, and she closed her fist, and blood sprang from a hundred tears and punctures in his skin.

Ben tried not to see, and he tried not to hear.

One of the elves quickly slashed his own throat with a knife, only to find that she would not let him die, only slash and stab himself, over and over.

With a cry of anguish Ben forced himself to his feet for the sole purpose of causing himself to faint. As he crumpled to the ground, descending into darkness, the witch's hollow was crawling with madness, seeping with fury, silent with agony, screaming in terror.

In a world boasting monsters in a hierarchy of shapes and sizes unreckoned we were the true monster race, monstrous in our beauty, maintaining our nation like a perfect, jewelled, sleepless machine, the sweat, tears and blood of our human slaves its oil, until even our own great memories grew vague and all that we knew was that we had always been the masters.

We had always been the monsters.

And then came the Monster Zane, rising from the teeming millions of the slave races to thwart elven kind, to cast down our splendid minarets, drag a barbed flail through the guts of our decadence, to topple our shining, cold blooded nation, washing it in hot blood.

The workings of history are forever veiled, even during the times in which they occur, for each historian writes with a biased hand and each mighty mover of great events who believes he shapes history's clay is subject to forces, forces blind even to themselves, forces subject to forces. Out of ages of blue, untroubled skies the dwarves attacked, on many fronts at once, claiming some obscure slight that we may or may not have given them, intentionally or unintentionally. Since time out of mind our rivalry with the dwarves, the magic haters, had kept the houses of the elves united, and we had loved them for that, even as we belittled their lack of speed, their dullness, even as we were surprised again and again by the malicious inventiveness that the terrible strength of their grudges inspired. We had loved them, and it was a delicious, condescending kind of love. But now the blind forces of history were shifting.

Was it planned? It seems too much to believe that a monster such as Zane should just happen to be in place at the very moment the elf and dwarf nations distracted themselves utterly in the first war to be known outside of legend. For only when the strength of the elves was so preoccupied with such unprecedented events would it have been possible for one such as Zane to raise his armies from the very slaves that made us what we were and eat our nation alive from within its borders.

So was it planned? Or was it fated? Or was it simply a historical inevitability that once our backs were turned for the first time some spirit of rebellion would arise in one form or another from amongst those we thought of as domestic animals?

The answer cannot be known. It does not exist. For if life is but a dream then history is a dream dreamed by a dream.

By the time the dwarves realised that the armies of emancipated humans, which were causing their enemies so many difficulties, might actually prove to be a threat to them it was far too late for a hasty alliance with their erstwhile opponents to save them. And now rebellion broke out amongst the slaves of the dwarves. Was this simply the inevitable spreading of a disease from one infected body to another, or were there deeper machinations in operation?

The answer, if there ever was one, is of little import to the elder races now, for we are dead races. Yes, a vestige lives on in our distant corner of Piscea, separated from our old feuding partners by long leagues of men, like lovers kept apart by exile, yet our tiny countries are but the last remaining morsels of the apple, and the worm that became the Monster Zane has not finished eating.

6

Ben couldn't align a portal ring to the time and place of his choosing. He couldn't shift its alignment at all. And he couldn't stretch or shrink a portal ring. He could levitate them, for what that was worth, and he could wear them on his fingers, and that was about all. When he tried to bring his attention to bear on a ring, to 'listen' to it as Eonmor did, it *did* grow bigger in his awareness, circling his mind in magnified detail, his own distorted reflection stretching around it's glossy surface, and this was, he felt, a promising sign. But when he tried to get enough of a 'grip' on that tightly rolled circular tube of nothingness in order to turn it inwards towards the future, or outwards towards the past, his mental hold would go slip sliding away, every time.

"I'm glad to see you practising," said Eonmor. Ben was in the sitting room, cross-legged on the floor, holding a portal ring close to his face, sometimes closing his eyes and seeing it with his inner eye. "But are you practising the right thing?"

A twitch of irritation crossed the boy's face.

"I'm trying to get a grip on the surface so I can roll it," he muttered.

"Uh huh. Because you want to align the portal to some other time frame, yes?"

"Yes."

"That is not what you should be practising."

"No?"

"What you should be practising is *not minding* whether you succeed in manipulating the ring or not."

"But I do mind. I like minding. I want to mind."

"Exactly. And so you perpetuate the conditions in which you can continue to mind." The boy played this statement back to himself a few times.

"Too much thinking, you see, and not enough releasing."

"I don't know how to stop wanting something that I know I want."

"Yes, yes, I know. It seems perplexing. Why don't you just take a break from wanting it? It's not actually that much fun after all, is it? Take a break from wanting success, in the comfortable knowledge that you can go right back to lusting after it at any time you please. How does that sound?"

Ben's features shifted.

"Mm. That doesn't sound so bad."

"Excellent. Go ahead, give it a try."

Ben held up the ring, ready to hold it lightly in his fingertips, lightly in his mind. Through the centre of the ring he could see Eonmor observing eagerly. He lowered the ring.

"Er, would you mind going and getting on with something of your own?"

"What?"

"Well, it's a bit difficult to feel like I don't mind when you're sitting there looking excited, waiting for your apprentice to succeed."

"Huh," said Eonmor. He clambered to his feet. "The novice becomes the master."

He left the room and Ben could hear him moving about in the kitchen.

"Right. I do not care about accessing the Sovereign Galaxies."

He lifted the ring and studied it casually, not as a means to an end but as an object in itself.

The door burst open and a remarkably altered Eonmor strode in.

"I'm back, Ben! I'm back!" he roared ecstatically.

He was wearing robes Ben had never seen before, all travel worn leather and richly coloured geometric embroideries, subdued beneath a layer of yellow dust. His hair and beard were shorter, his skin deeply tanned and sporting two new scars, one stretching up his neck from his collarbone, one reaching up the side of his face. A necklace of bones rattled on his chest. Across his shoulder was strung a sack-like bag that looked empty.

On seeing Ben sitting cross-legged on the floor his face lit up and he knelt before the boy and embraced him.

"Ben!" And his voice dropped, becoming quiet and intimate. "It's so good to see you, my boy. I've missed you."

Ben understood immediately.

"You opened a portal in the kitchen?"

"Yes, yes. It seems so long ago, now."

"How long have you been away?"

"Five years."

"What!"

"Such an adventure I've had." He pulled his sack open and began to rummage in it. "I've so much to tell you." From the seemingly empty bag he produced the skull of some monstrous animal, an over-sized hourglass, a gauntlet that crackled with black light as he dropped it carelessly to the floor, a pair of sandals and a roast chicken, but none of these things seemed to be what he was looking for. "Ah, Ben, I've had some trials and tribulations. But there were moments I thought of you...such moments! There was one time – you would have been beside yourself – I was helping Princess Taba Adjua return to her palace. She and her entire loyal retinue had been transformed by the court magician into a fat Imurranian man (with perpetual chronic wind) and a travelling menagerie. It all went pear-shaped as we were passing through a bazaar on the way back to Karmenaksis when the princess and her retinue were suddenly, and unexpectedly, restored to their proper forms. One moment I was riding a mule disguised as a zebra, the next I was bouncing about on a panicking elephant painted in black and white stripes while all hell broke loose! Your hair would have stood on end with the shock and then you would have wet yourself laughing."

"An elephant painted as a zebra?" said the boy, eyes incredulous, grin crooked.

"Oh, that was the least of it. I have things to show you."

The wizard began rummaging in his sack again, producing a jewelled turban and a jar of pickled sheep balls. Ben sat there breathless, but then collected himself and reached out a restraining hand.

"Actually, Master, would you mind showing me later?"

"What?"

"I'm a bit busy."

"You're a bit busy? I haven't seen you in five years, Ben!"

"I know, but *I* saw you one minute ago."

"Ah! Of course, that's right, isn't it? But still...five years, Ben. Can't you show a little forbearance to an old man?"

"No. Why should I? You won't let me come on these adventures."

The wizard held up placatory hands.

"Hey, come now. It won't be that long."

"Maybe not, I don't know. But if I succeed with what I'm trying then you won't be able to stop me."

"No? Why, what are you doing?"

"I'm practising not minding that I'm unable to use a portal ring."

"By Protim's Box! That's a good idea!"

"But I'd like to hear your stories later."

Eonmor took a moment to sit back on his heels and regard his student with a quiet, affection-filled face.

"Of course, of course. I've a few things I'd like to be getting on with. Continue with your studies."

He quickly threw the scattered items back into his bag and went to the door. Pausing in the doorway he looked back at his apprentice.

"It's good to see you again, my friend," he said quietly, his eyes glistening, then, before Ben could respond, he was gone. The boy sat for a moment, wondering at his life with a small, dazed smile. Then, shaking his head to clear it, he raised the portal ring and looked at it.

A tremendous crash and a bellow came from the kitchen and he jumped, the ring flying up into the air and then falling to the floor. Running into the kitchen he found a horribly wounded Eonmor lying in a pool of his own blood, his face and beard plastered in the blood of something else, something inhuman for it was thicker and blacker than the wizard's. Behind him a full-sized portal hung in the air, but it was aligned with the here and now: Ben could see the other side of the kitchen through it. The old man had managed to close it before he had collapsed to the floor.

Rushing to the wizard's side Ben was unable to work out which of his wounds were supplying the pool of blood for there didn't seem to be one part of his body that had gone unscathed.

"Master! Are you alive?"

Eonmor coughed into the blood his face was lying in and Ben turned him onto his side. "Master, I can't fix this. I'll have to get Mab."

The wizard's eyes opened wide, clear bright whites standing out against red, and they flitted here and there as though he expected to find the hag leering at him from a corner.

"No, boy," he croaked. "No time. Help me back to the portal. Fast!" His voice had become barely a whisper.

Covered in his master's blood the boy lifted him with the utmost combination of speed and care he could reconcile.

"Oh, Master! What happened?"

"Hush, Ben," breathed the wizard. "Get me by the portal."

"But where will you go?"

"To Ayre. The elgs," said Eonmor through gritted teeth. He was propped on the boy, his legs folding beneath him. As he was brought beside the portal he touched it lightly with a fingertip and closed his eyes. The view through the ring twisted and became the surface of a lake with a distant grassy bank supporting an emerald forest. The water of the lake

was perfectly still and clear. Where the reflections on the surface allowed he could see the lakebed. An enormous fish swam by.

"Drop me through," groaned Eonmor.

"Master, I don't know if I'll be able to keep us afloat. You're so weak, but you're heavy."

"You can't come with me. Just drop me through."

"But you'll drown!"

"I've no time now to give you a lesson in doing as you're told in dire situations. If the next thing you do isn't dropping me through the ring I'll have to make you."

Ben dropped him through the ring. He crashed into the surface of the lake, sending up a spray of water that covered the boy, causing him to raise his arms and close his eyes. In the brief moment it took him to lower his arms and open his eyes the portal vanished. In its place stood a new Eonmor, shining in pale robes of white and grey and silver, and free from all signs of injury, new or old, and from all signs of tanning. All of his scars were gone. His brow was smooth, untroubled, his eyes shining.

"Master?"

"Ben."

"What...happened?"

"The elgs restored me."

His voice was like a bell. Ben felt an urge to lower himself to his knees and bow his head.

"What was it that wounded you?"

"A dolodrene: an inner demon given flesh. An old acquaintance of mine invoked it."

"Is this something to do with your five year adventure?"

Eonmor's smile radiated love.

"Yes, Ben, of course. Everything is to do with everything."

"Who are the elgs?"

"In time, my friend, in time. But I have one more thing to attend to, and you are practising the art of not minding. Go to your studies. We will talk afterwards."

"You're going through the Sovereign Galaxies again?"

"Yes."

"Can't I go with you?"

Eonmor looked like he could never see anything so delightful in all the Sovereign Galaxies as Ben.

"No. Not yet," he said kindly. "Now go. I'll be back in a blink."

This new, transcendent Eonmor was not the type Ben wished to complain to so, obediently, he returned to the sitting room. Yet now he minded more than ever that he achieve success with the portal ring.

After fifteen minutes of mental struggle he decided the best way for him to show the ring he didn't mind about it was to put it away. He did so, and sat for a few minutes more, feeling blank, thinking of the wizard without knowing what to think.

Then he noticed how quiet the house was.

Reminded of his first morning there, when Mab and Eonmor had disappeared from that very room and the house had seemed to watch him in its silence, he made his way into the kitchen. A portal ring hung in the air there, looking into a dark room with a floor of stone slabs and a wall of unfinished rock. There was no sign of the wizard.

This wasn't right. Ben knew it. It wasn't right on several levels. Eonmor seldom needed to leave portals open, and when he did (if he suspected he might have to make a hasty retreat from his mission) he would open the portal in the concealed space behind the house. And even when he did that he would generally find the time to 'roll back' the time before returning through the portal so that he emerged but an instant after he had entered. In this way he safe-guarded the portals against detection by the rest of the world. If he had opened a portal in the middle of the kitchen he would definitely have intended to roll back the time, meaning even a mission that inadvertently lasted five years would not leave an exposed portal for longer than an instant (although the other side of the portal would need to be somewhere extremely discreet). There might be all kinds of reasons for this slip in protocol but Ben knew that none of them were likely to be good. The most likely of all was that he was simply dead. If Eonmor was alive but in trouble there would be little Ben could do about it: anything able to cause trouble to that old man would be a thing he would not like to even hear about, let alone confront.

Yet the portal hung there open, and if the wizard was not able to return by his own means then only an added quantity would shift the metaphysical equation and allow change. What quantity could he throw through the ring? For a moment he considered seeking out Mab but immediately an image of Eonmor's horrified face filled his head.

Of course, he would get his sword and his pack and he would go through the portal himself. It was a ridiculous notion. It was also the only possible course of action. The wizard, he knew, would be appalled by such a decision, while simultaneously understanding it completely.

So be it. My pack and my sword.

Like Eonmor, the boy was always packed and ready to go, able to carry everything he could conceivably need on his back without the need to waste a second. Walking through into the small hallway that ran by the side of the stairs and led to the front door, doing what he could to ignore the hammering of his heart, he stopped immediately, halted as though by an invisible wall, as he was confronted by something completely unthinkable: the front door was wide open and a stranger was standing in the doorway, his fist still closed on the handle.

They stared at each other and the world contracted around them.

The man was tall, lean, bald, hawk-faced and old, dressed in old white robes. Coming to terms with the boy quicker than the boy came to terms with him he arched an eyebrow.

"Who are you?" he wanted to know.

In that moment Ben was too shocked to know. How was it possible that a stranger could come to the house? How could it be that he walked in without knocking? And how was it that he could stand there and ask 'Who are you?'

The boy was bereft of words, and the last thing he wanted to do was tell this stranger his name, and yet he felt the word coming out anyway.

"Ben."

"Hmph. Now I feel enlightened," said the man haughtily. But then, with a sigh he relaxed somewhat, seeming too weary to maintain his disdain. He flapped a negligent hand at the boy. "Tell your master I'm here."

The words queued up behind Ben's tongue, 'He's not here,' but he managed to stop them with a stutter.

"He...cuh, can't come right now. He's busy. You'll have to come back."

The man appraised the boy, his eyebrow arching once again.

"Hah!" he declared mirthlessly. "How good of you: to tell me what I will have to do. How did I ever survive this long without you? But I have an other idea. You will show me where I can sit and wait and then you will bring me a cup of tea."

Ben thought frantically.

"You can't wait. He's going to be a long time. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

"Hmm. You're not overwhelmingly bright, are you? When I praised you for telling me what I will have to do I was actually being sarcastic. You know, it's tedious to have to explain this. Now let me be plain, so that even you can understand: I am here and I am not leaving, and the sooner you make me a cup of tea the more assuredly you will avoid being turned into a toad, although it appears that that transformation is already well under way. Now where can I sit?"

Ben stood and stared helplessly, his limbs becoming heavy to him. That somebody should walk so easily into the house was shocking; that they should do it while Eonmor wasn't there was disturbing; that they should do it while an unprotected portal hung wide open in the kitchen was...no word suggested itself – he didn't know one bad enough.

"Erm, you can wait in here," he said in a defeated voice, indicating the door to the sitting room.

"Huh," said the man. "Milk and sugar in my tea," and he went through into the sitting room.

In the kitchen Ben's hands shook as he prepared tea, cursing his own weakness and slow wittedness, all the while watched by the large, gaping eye of the portal.

I will serve him tea. While he drinks and waits I will go through the portal, find Eonmor, bring him back. He can adjust the time frame so it happens in a blink. The tea will still be hot. He will know what to do about the man. Maybe he really is just here to see Eonmor on business.

This last thought was clearly deceitful and he shook his head petulantly. Being ill-mannered and unexpected was excusable, perhaps, but not knocking on the door was a dead giveaway.

Carrying the tea tray through he felt a squirming of fear and paranoia in the pit of his belly, that the man would somehow force him to sit and wait with him. Arriving in the sitting room the thought immediately evaporated but the fear and paranoia squirmed tighter. The man wasn't there.

The tea tray tumbled from his hands producing an almighty crash that seemed to make the silent building vibrate. A queasiness churned inside him and began to rise but was suddenly surpassed by a steely bright anger.

Back out in the hall Ben shed his hesitance and made the clipped decision that if he was destined to die today then he would do it without stuttering or mumbling. And this time he would be holding a sword.

Taking his pack from the cupboard beneath the stairs he opened it and thrust his arm in to the shoulder. Like Eonmor's pack (and his robes also) it had been enhanced with the inclusion of small portal rings that led to hidden storage spaces. In this way he could pull out objects that were clearly too big to fit in there. Now Ben brought forth his sword, wishing for the hundredth time that Eonmor felt he was ready to wield Berringstrom, rather than Mirnggald, the handsome but unenchanted blade that had once

belonged to Clemen and had been given to him by the Rhondran's family. But it wasn't likely to make much difference. If this man had actually caused the delay or disappearance of Eonmor prior to arriving at the house then he was obviously more powerful than the boy could hope to handle. Casting a wistful thought over the parables of Monnhill in which the powerful mage is defeated by a clever but magic-free trick, he squeezed Mirnggald's hilt and hardened his resolve. He would move forward and face his fate, simply and honestly. This was the strategy his master advocated time and time again. Honesty with others was optional and relative, honesty with oneself, however, was a prerequisite of every endeavour.

Ben quickly stalked through the rest of the ground floor rooms checking for signs of the stranger. At the back door he closed the bolts in case the man had decided to walk around the outside of the building. But an intuition told him where he would find the intruder. Gathering in what he could of his courage he crept as quietly as he could up the stairs.

At the end of the first landing was the magic door, identical to all the other doors in the house save for the fact that it was unopenable. The man was standing before it, his back to the boy, tracing his fingertips along the thin gap between door and doorjamb. Ben stalked forward.

"You would do well to turn around and go back downstairs," said the man without turning. "But, if you insist, I'll kill you now. Just as you please."

But Ben knew what he was doing now, had already accepted it wasn't likely to succeed. So he stalked further forward. The enemy turned around and looked at the boy. His smile was a twist of satisfaction.

"And just how old are you, exactly?" he sneered. "Seven? Eight?"

"Eleven," said Ben, not caring.

"Oh ho! You're a big boy, then? And do you know what happens to big boys?"

Ben rushed at the man, sword raised, teeth clenched, ready to die, ready to kill.

"Ho!" shouted the stranger in alarm, dropping to his knees and pushing out his palms. Ben waded into a field of invisible force which slowed him, dramatically, but not completely. "Hold, my boy! Hold! I'm just asking you a question! Is this anyway to treat a guest? Hear me out before you cut me down, won't you?"

Ben regarded him with a wild-eyed hesitation as he sprinted in slow motion towards him. Surely he couldn't be so easily cowed? Yet at his current speed the boy would not be able to strike a blow that could not be avoided. Partly intrigued, completely wary, he brought his charge to an end, but kept his sword pointed forward with his shoulder behind it.

"My, my!" said the stranger, climbing shakily to his feet but keeping his palms faced out at the boy. "You're feisty! You felt bad about hesitating downstairs, didn't you?" Ben glared balefully, refusing to be drawn. "But you've gotten over that. There isn't a chance of you lowering this...no? You don't want to? No. Anyway, where was I?" Ben heard a cracking sound behind him. "Oh yes, that was it: what happens to big boys." A stutter of cracking sounds, *chak, chak, chak, chak*.

He turned in time to see the window at the top of the stairs smash inwards, each shard arrowing towards him. Even as they were striking him and breaking into smaller fragments against his rock-skin he was turning

back to his opponent. There was a tinkling sound, a small, localised shower of glass pieces at the boy's feet as he faced the stranger.

"Aha," said the man. "It seems I need a different approach. How about..." but Ben had already stuck his sword through the stranger's belly. The man looked down and then looked back up.

"You nasty little bastard," he said.

Ben frowned. Something wasn't right. He had felt no resistance to his thrust. He swung the blade from left to right and back again. It swished back and forth quite easily, passing through the man without harming him.

"You're not here," said the boy.

"Ha!" said the man, his sneer returning. "You're like an inbred who's proudly worked out where snot comes from. That's right, you misbegotten mongrel, I'm a projection. There's nothing, therefore, you can do to impede me, so if you'd kindly shut up while I explore your master's regretful excuse for a base you might keep whatever passes for a brain in that malformed skull of yours from exploding."

Ben swiped him with the sword through the chest.

"Are you really as imbecilic as you seem? I've met some cretins in my time, but..."

Ben swiped him again, this time through the head, and he disappeared. Two halves of a long dead magpie fell to the floor. The boy poked them cautiously with the toe of his boot. They were quite inert. He allowed himself a moment for a thought or two and then hurried downstairs. Grabbing his backpack he slung it onto his shoulders, entered the kitchen and faced the portal, sword still in hand.

Silence, but for the *doom, doom, doom* of his heart.

He shrugged and stepped through.

φ

From the kitchen of the house in Solfar the view of the stone room through the portal had revealed very little: a bit of floor, a bit of wall. Having crossed through Ben found himself in an out of the way corner of a long chamber, perhaps a cellar, that was being used as some kind of store room. But after an initial glance the details of the room suddenly became of secondary importance as, with a jarring horror, he saw that the portal through which he had just stepped was now gone. Before him, where there should have been a circular view into the kitchen at Solfar, there was nothing but a large stone pillar, square and plain.

Doom, doom, doom, doom...

His breathing became quick and shallow. Legs rapidly weakening he took several involuntary steps backwards until the rough hewn stone of the wall pressed against his shoulders.

He couldn't get back.

Wherever he was it was a place of cold stone and shadow, and he couldn't get back.

Lifting his left hand he saw that it was shaking. Hearing himself mewl he bent his knees, lowering himself to sit on the slab beneath him, his back against the wall. Mirnggald became too heavy for him and he let her rest on the ground, his head leaning first to one side and then to the other, burdened under its own weight. Fighting with his breath, struggling not to sob aloud, he sought to recall to himself the bitter determination that had

animated him just a few short moments ago, but instead a tear stretched down his face over his right cheek, followed shortly after by a silent echo down the left. The sobs that came were silent and shook his narrow shoulders for some time, reminding him that he was, after all, just a child.

φ

Time passed in the dark and he allowed himself to curl up on his side for a while, to pretend nothing was happening, but when he drifted sleepwards he sensed a presence nearby, shivering with madness, crooning and snickering to him in the shadows, possibly held in check by the glyphs of containment carved into the wooden frame of a cart, but waiting for its time to come, as they both knew it would. He forced himself to be awake, and eventually couldn't bear to remain in that place any longer.

Taking hold of Mirnggald's hilt once more he climbed slowly to his feet, sniffing wetly, and shuffled out from behind the pillar to explore his surroundings, a forlorn figure, walking in the lull of a nightmare.

The room was tall and narrow and long, stretching away to a high, doorless arch: the only source of light, which was a dim, silvery ambience that did not illuminate, only cast the shapes in the room in an indistinct monotone. The space between the pillars running away from him on the left side had been put to use as a dry food store. Crates, barrels, jars and sacks were all stacked in mounds and on shelves to unlikely heights. The gaps between the pillars on the right were serving as a wine cellar and ale store.

He walked forward slowly, his footsteps quiet but still managing to echo. The dark open space through which he walked seemed to cloak and expose him simultaneously. Pausing in the archway he saw that it led to a much bigger open space, lit by moonlight or starlight so it seemed, though he couldn't see any sky from where he was. All was silence and polished stone and cool night and emptiness. There was nobody about, only the presence of the architecture, which was too tall and aloof to pay him any mind. He crept forth, finding it harder and harder to believe he wasn't in a dream. On either side of his arch ran several more identical chambers, possibly used as storerooms also, but he didn't care to enter their dark maws. The enormous passage he was now in led to the end of these chambers where it suddenly and dramatically opened out into a vast, vaulted place. One great wall, that which had been opposite his food store, continued on, straight and smooth, into the distance ahead and the heights above. But to the right, across a startling expanse of polished floor, another wall rose, and it sloped in a graceful curve that took it to meet the top of the first wall, far, far above. It also curved on the horizontal plain, presumably meeting the other wall somewhere off in the dark of the distance. Three arched windows bigger than cathedrals had been cut with meticulous precision out of the curving wall in rock that looked to be fifty feet thick. The supporting stonework between these arches tapered outwards in intricate receding layers of carved patterns that hinted at mathematical secrets. Beyond the glassless windows was a night sky, moonless and smeared with strands of cloud, but speckled generously with silver constellations and half a dozen bright planets. Only sky was visible through the windows and this gave him the impression that he was high up in the roof of the world. He wondered if he was still in Piscea.

As a space it was austere, spectacular, breathtaking and cold. Yet listening to the emotions of the polished stone and the empty heights Ben sensed little but an aching, airy melancholy, a spacious sadness that looked out over long lonely ages, behind and ahead. With a great and lofty purpose this place had been built, a purpose that had never been met.

The dried tears felt tight on the skin of his face and he rubbed them away with his sleeve. This place was far too big to explore slowly. With a little resolve slowly creeping back into him Ben removed his boots, strung them together and put them into his pack. Then, sword still in hand, he began to jog across the expanse, his socked feet making barely a sound.

The distance from this side of the chamber to the shadows opposite was great, and it was long minutes before he reached and entered them. Taking a lamp from his pack he arranged its shutters to give him a beam of light projecting ahead. Before him stood a colossal pillar with a stone staircase spiralling around it. The first step was broad – so broad in fact that it stretched away into the dark and out of sight. But looking up he got the impression that each step became progressively shorter so the staircase grew gradually narrower as it ascended.

He climbed for a little while until he came to a circular balcony that jutted out into the cold air of the night sky. From here he could see the sloping wall of the great chamber from the outside and was intrigued to find it was the side of a mountain. More interesting still was that there was no sign at all of the three giant windows, only starlit rock and shadow. A spiny ridge of peaks snaked away into a cloud streaked distance. Directly below lay a large, broad valley which eventually sank beneath the trees of a forest that spread towards an unseen horizon. The forest was black in the night.

All was still and lonely.

Rather than continue up the stairs to more confined spaces Ben went back down to the great chamber to discover what other exits there might be. Jogging once more, until he was back where he had started, he directed his light tentatively into each of the supposed storerooms to find that they were all identical, in size and shape if not content. One room seemed devoted to weapons, one to art, one to books, one to jars of powders and potions, one to carpets and wall hangings, and so on. All were dead ends. Beyond the row of storerooms the large, square passage led to another giant spiral staircase, but this one led downwards into a pure deep black. And now Ben knew as much as he could about this landscape without going further, for there were no more doorways, no more arches. He could go up or he could go down. Or he could remain between the two, waiting and passive.

Returning to the great chamber, where the starlight lit three long strips of the polished floor, he put out his lamp and hid himself in one of the shadows between, sitting down to think.

He should take the staircase leading down, he knew. If Eonmor had been taken captive it was easier to imagine him kept low in a dungeon than high in his enemy's sanctum. Also, if Ben were to encounter an enemy coming up the stairs as he was going down he would have the high ground. So, he should take the stair leading down, it was clear.

But a chill tremor of fear unsettled the pit of his stomach at the idea of leaving the airy spaces and the sky behind to descend into darkness. Time wore on as he searched for a justifiable reason to take the other stair. But there wasn't one. Even his intuition urged him to descend. The decision

was made. Yet still he waited, for courage or for some subtle change in the air. Time wore on and no change came.

And then it did.

Footsteps and voices, approaching from the downward spiral. Ben realised he had left it too long, for there was nowhere to go. If he ran to the storerooms he would be seen clearly. The upward spiral was too distant and could not be reached without crossing the starlit portions of the floor. All that remained was the wide open space of the great chamber itself, with not a pillar or stick of furniture to crouch behind, just a shadow held between two pools of silver light.

...doom, dooM, doOM, dOOM, DOOM...

He hadn't understood just how far from being ready he was. In the safety of the house in Solfar, in the familiarity of the woods that watched over him, and the witch that protected him, he had thought it might not be so long before he could venture out alone. Now he understood as clearly as he could ever have wished, only it was too late. All Eonmor had told him had been for nought.

This thought pulled him up short. *What has Eonmor told me?*

The voices fell silent as the conversation lulled, but the footsteps continued to draw closer.

The emotion of being nondescript. The emotion of going unnoticed. What does that feel like? They had discussed it at length and he had practised in a variety of situations with mixed success.

He sat now with his legs crossed, his back straight, his sword across his lap, his pack slung on his shoulders. The invisible do not go unnoticed because they are trying to go unnoticed. They go unnoticed because they are longing to be seen, longing to be heard, yet believe fundamentally that they are not worthy of being noticed.

Please see me, said Ben as two figures emerged from beyond the corner of the final storeroom, walking by the smooth straight wall in the direction of the upper spiral.

...please hear me...please see me...please hear me...

He knew the emotion well, though he hadn't felt it fully for a long time, at least, not outside of his dreams.

...please see me...please hear me...for you are wonderful and free...I love you...and long to be seen by you...won't you see me?...won't you rescue me?...

One of the figures was tall and lean in long robes. He was wearing a misshapen hat...or perhaps was holding something to his head. The other figure was altogether bizarre: nothing but a sphere with a bumpy surface that possessed a pair of spindly arms and a pair of spindly legs. It was a small creature, no more than three feet tall. It gripped a short length of chain in one hand, one end of which was attached to a manacle encircling one of its ankles.

...please see me...please hear me...

They had been silent for quite some paces now but the creature spoke again in a low, relaxed mutter.

...please see me...

"It might not seem like much consolation but it may be better this way."

Its voice had a rich, sonorous tone and it spoke in a smooth, cultivated accent that belied its outlandish shape. It waited for a response and eventually got one.

...please hear me...

"Go on," said the tall figure in a voice that Ben recognised as that of the intruder, though it was bereft of its arrogant edge now.

...please see me...

"It will last longer this way. This has been a long time in coming. It would be a shame to kill him quickly without having the time to properly savour it, just because we were over excited."

"Yes," said the stranger softly. "I suppose so."

"It will do him good to stew until morning."

...please hear me...

"Uh huh."

"Hey, you're not feeling sentimental, are you?"

"No."

"I mean, it's alright if you are. You are allowed, you know."

...please see me...

The stranger stopped suddenly. Ben's heart leapt painfully in his chest.

"Azzafa..." said the man.

"Yes?"

He took down the misshapen thing from his head and sighed.

"My ice pack has melted."

The creature took hold of his hand.

"Come on, we'll get you a new one," and he led him away, neither of them speaking again.

...please see me...please hear me...I love you...I love you...

Ben chanted for long minutes after the sound of their footsteps had faded.

φ

Eonmor hung naked and motionless from the wooden x-frame, his head bowed forward. Though his tattoos had been burned from his body, and the iron circlet around his head kept the copper pins that had been injected through his skull firmly in place, he still felt there was a vague chance he might be able to seal off the essential part of his psyche before the next session started if only he could learn to use a certain part of his brain that was normally reserved for involuntary functions.

Through strands of hair made sweaty and matted through the exertions of his body during the torture (which he understood was merely a preliminary procedure designed to render him vulnerable: physically, mentally and magically for the real thing that was yet to come) he could see, when his eyelids flickered open, the monzimorca standing in front of him.

The creature was roughly man-shaped, advanced enough to wield weapons and form independent combat strategies that could be used to override its instincts on the rare occasions they weren't enough. Monzimorcas were strong, very fast, interested only in producing the death of... well, whoever and whatever they set their eyes on, unless they were compelled by magical means to be selective. As a cruel twist the creator of this particular monster race had 'gifted' it with a very sensitive nervous system combined with an inability to die. Hypersensitivity to pain combined with bloodlust combined with indefinite longevity resulted in demented killing frenzies that could continue for extended durations. It was not a happy breed. Eonmor wondered briefly and involuntarily, with an isolated fragment of his mind, what it was thinking. This part of him toyed with the

idea of sympathy for the monster, while in another cell of his psyche his own howling threatened to topple him into madness.

Beyond the monzimorca he could see his robes lying in a pile on the ground. His belt, his pack, his stone charm, his pouch of rings, had all been carried off by Aggraban's demon for closer inspection. But these details were of no import now. All that mattered was whether he would be able to send his mind away: out onto the astral plain, inwards to some realm of his own devising, either direction would do. But he couldn't keep splitting sideways. Somewhere his own face was shouting instructions to him, but the sound was blocked by the position of a copper pin, the ability to read lips blocked by another. A third pin was skewering his ability to view the barb infested torrents of sensory input as abstraction, locking him into identifying with his body; but abstraction squirmed inevitably around the edges of it all, beckoning him to an insanity he could be philosophical about accepting if only he could reach it.

The monzimorca turned periodically to leer up into his face knowingly, spasmodically, and he recognised a kindred spirit.

Don't think of it as suffering, he wanted to tell it, but all of his directed thoughts were falling apart. What coherency he could manage to preserve was that which he allowed to happen without actively directing it. Only by seeing it by looking the other way could he influence it to strengthen. He practised this dubious art by seeing if he could start to control the random opening and closing of his eyelids. At first frustration began to surface, but by actively trying to be frustrated he caused this to dissipate. After that a strange effect set in, where the monzimorca's over-the-shoulder leers began to synchronise with the opening of his eyes. The effect of this was extremely disturbing yet he occupied himself with trying to know whether it was an hallucination or some psychic connection between him and his kindred monster spirit. He next noticed that his piled robes began to move away across the floor, a few inches every time the monster turned to leer up at him. A rhythm set in that he found maddening in its unceasing regularity, for it felt like he was trapped in an ever repeating time loop, the same leering moment, over and over. But he wasn't experiencing the same moment (or hallucination) over and over, he reasoned, because his robes really were getting further and further away, until they were out of sight of his bowed gaze altogether. The monzimorca didn't seem to have noticed, or simply wasn't programmed to care about wayward clothes. Eonmor began to blink rapidly and had the impression that both he and the glancing creature would be swallowed by madness together, but then it seemed to wrench with its own will and managed to tear itself away from looking at him. His eyes closed in relief, his knotted shoulders relaxed and he found that he could control his eyelids once more. After a few minutes he began to be able to lift his head. The monzimorca was shivering with distress but refusing to look at him. Some faraway part of him felt a pang of rejection. Lifting his head higher, screaming silently with a thousand shards of pain, while simultaneously floating lucidly in a magnetic bubble at some disembodied centre pointed towards by copper pins, he saw his robes again. They were a long way off now, floating steadily towards a bulky piece of torture furniture. This meant something.

This means something. I don't need to know. I don't wish to know.

The robes disappeared behind the apparatus and he knew suddenly what it meant. His face mouthed something to him. He heard no sound but this time he could read the lips.

How do you feel about that?

Somewhere he shrugged and sighed.

It's all just stuff, isn't it?

He watched from his cross as the boy ran out from behind the rack, bearing Berringstrom, running pell-mell at the monzimorca. The creature screeched in surprise, then in rage, then it bunched its muscles, ready to spring forward, a sequence of actions painfully slow for a monzimorca, but it clearly wasn't feeling like itself at this moment. Its spring came to late for the boy was upon it already, hacking it into pieces while it screamed, its frenzied retaliations scritch harmlessly off his rock-like skin. Its agony was profound and its deathless state quickly began to distress the boy who chopped it desperately into smaller and smaller pieces, only wanting to end its screaming. And even when he found its voice box and the torture chamber fell silent but for his own panting and murmuring, he could still see its eye staring in perpetual, mute horror from a portion of its face.

From where he hung on the x-frame Eonmor felt his head bobbing slowly on wave after wave of sympathy for the monsters.

φ

To Ben, Berringstrom was the father of all swords, not because of the purity of its metal, the craftsmanship in its making or the nobility of its lineage, but because it was brutish, primitive and inelegant, old as death almost and impervious to change. The enchantments on the blade were crude and sturdy: the edge remained ever keen, of course, regardless of use and misuse, and the blade could not be broken – these were a given. But there was more. In the hand the giant sword weighed a tenth of what it should have, allowing it to be wielded one handedly, even by eleven-year-old boys. But conversely, it fell upon its targets with ten times the weight such a blade should have carried.

It was a monster of a sword.

There were other, more obscure enchantments on it, Ben knew, but he did not doubt that, whatever they were, they were equally primal, equally old, equally sturdy.

Preparing to receive Eonmor's weight onto his left shoulder the boy swiped Berringstrom deftly so it sheared through the thick ropes at the wizard's wrists. The old man's burnt body flopped forward and Ben lowered him as gently as he could to the ground, then fetched his robe.

"Can you stand, Master?" whispered Ben, awed by the marks of the old man's ordeal.

"I...dropped the kettle," rasped the wizard through gritted teeth as the pain of returning circulation seared him. "There's...no tea left."

Ben swore and cast about himself, expecting enemies. The old man's drooping head shook from side to side.

"My knees don't understand...she said she'd come back," he murmured.

Ben's fingers reached toward the iron circlet around his head, stopping short of touching it.

"Master..." but he knew there was no point in trying to talk him back to lucidity.

"I said I would never let it go..."

"I don't know the way, Master."

"Down..." said Eonmor. "...down the lane...she kissed me..." Ben helped him to his feet.

"Alright, we'll go down."

The old man's face turned and looked into his.

"Are you alright?"

"Me? Am I alright?"

"We need to get you out of this cart." The wizard patted him on the chest and mouthed some soundless yet stubborn intention.

The boy shrugged helplessly and blinked tears.

"Yes," he said. "Come on."

Ducking his head under the wizard's arm, grunting and grappling, the boy helped him to his feet and they began to make their way painfully towards the door at the far end of the chamber, the boy keeping his gaze carefully averted from the eye of the monzimorca that screamed at him silently still.

The old wizard shambled hopelessly at first, though he was present enough to use the boy as a crutch beneath his left arm and Berringstrom as a crutch beneath his right. Yet each clumsy shuffle contributed to the further rewiring of the relationship between his brain and his mind, and by the time they reached the spiral stairs he was beginning to hobble quite effectively. Ben took out his lantern again. Shadows lurched freakishly as they descended the spiraling steps with a reckless and clumsy haste that was much like falling. The journey down was long and hallucinogenic, but the hollow mountain was not occupied, save for the intruder and his demonic companion, neither of which showed any signs of pursuing. By the time the boy and his master reached the final step of the spiral Eonmor was no longer making random declarations.

"Sit me down," he rasped into Ben's ear. The boy breathed a sigh of relief and helped the old man to the floor where he sat, stooped and cross-legged and not talking for a long time. Pulling the old man's robes from his pack Ben wrestled him into them, lifting slender arms that shouldn't have been heavy yet seemed dense with undirected will. The old man continued to sit there, slumped forward, as long minutes ticked by. The boy rubbed his back, squeezed the muscles between neck and shoulder, encouraging the wizard to remember his vitality while casting repeated glances back up the stairwell.

An hour went by and Ben began to think his master would never be fit to walk on when suddenly, unbidden, he lifted himself to his feet and was altogether ready. Drawing his staff from a portal ring embedded in his robes he put forth a bright light so that his apprentice could see the extent of the grand underground hall they were now in, with its vaulted ceiling and its pillars lined up like the trunks of an orchard.

"Aggraban found himself a pretty place to stay, eh?" he said, sounding relaxed and strolling out into the hall, sweeping the point of Berringstrom about like a tour guide indicating an item of moderate interest.

"How does your head feel?" asked the boy.

Eonmor gingerly touched the circle of copper pins that sat at his temples like thorns.

"It's fine...it's using different ways to do what it normally does, but it's fine. We'll need some help to get this thing off though."

"Can you open a portal?"

"No. It may be some time before I can manage something that subtle."

"You look like you're fully recovered."

"Far from it. My motor, speech and cognitive functions are running smoothly again, which is nice – I had to see to them first – but my brain is still behaving strangely. I need time."

"How do we get out?"

The wizard flapped his lips, took a deep breath and gazed around. The boy could almost see him, standing on a hilltop surrounded by pleasing countryside. He turned and looked at the boy with bright, untroubled eyes.

"You're eager to leave?"

Ben's face was pale and drawn.

"Yes. Could we?"

"I don't know the way."

"You don't? I thought maybe you knew it was down."

"No. But it might be. We needed to get some distance between us and Aggraban. But even if we could leave right now I'd encourage you to linger."

"But I'm scared."

"Exactly. The reasons for staying a while are long and lengthening. Look: this is a spectacular, historical place, and you would gladly run right through it without glancing in order to pay full respect to your fear – fear of pain, fear of death, fear of suffering. And this is a student who knows full well that it is the fear itself that manifests the object of the fear. This is the student who has been begging to come with me on my adventures. Now he is on one he wants to leave at the earliest opportunity." The old man smiled ruefully. "We need to stay here awhile, because I need time, because you and I need to talk, but mostly because you believe you need to leave."

Ben's face seemed to crumble.

"I'm sorry, Master. I feel like I'm failing you."

"Oh, shut up – you just saved my life, you ridiculous boy!" His laughter was rich and full-bodied. "Remember when I saved you from Wargrin?"

Ben remembered well, though he didn't like to.

"I didn't do that requiring payment. But today you have repaid me all the same – stubborn child." He put a hand to the boy's face and laughed gently. Ben threw his arms around the wizard and buried his face in his robes. "Ooh, my burns!" yelped the old man, but when his apprentice tried to release him he gave him a returning hug that was even more fervent.

"Yes, a hug is good. A hug is a good thing," he said, stroking the boy's hair. "Now, won't you walk with me awhile, and talk with me, and suffer this great adventure to last a little longer?"

The boy's head nodded and sniffled.

"Yes, Master," he said wetly. "I'd love to," and they both burst out laughing at the same time at how ridiculous he sounded.

φ

Through halls and rooms, down labyrinthine passages they walked, the wizard constantly stuffing various items of interest into Ben's bottomless backpack as they went. Eonmor told him the background story of Cenn Lochorae, the Hollow Mountain, the one and only collaboration ever undertaken between dwarven delving and elven magic, how the two races had

created it together, but then could not bring themselves to live side-by-side in it, closing it up and shutting it off as a beautiful, glorious folly never to be repeated. Such had been the ways of the proud elder races.

They came to a place deep down, where polished stone ended and raw rock began. The floor finished in a crescent of smooth hard tiles where a clear pool of water waited that stretched away out of sight beneath a low cave roof. In places the stalagmites and stalactites had met and thickened through the eons, forming pillars that connected rock with water with air. The raw walls of the cave had been left unmined and the crystals drank in the light of Eonmor's staff and returned it in an even more rarefied form. A magical hush pervaded the atmosphere and the wizard was speechless for a time. Then, removing his robes, he lowered himself into water that was cold enough, clear enough, still enough, to burn all of his wounds away. The pool accepted him without a ripple and Ben watched as the wizard hung there below the surface in water as clear as air, his hair and beard spreading out around him, waving languidly. The boy was reminded of a time when he had seen him like this before, although he had been radiating beams of wrath that time, rather than waves of serenity. Suddenly he saw the iron circlet split into two halves that fell slowly away from Eonmor's head, a broken crown, taking its copper thorns to the bottom of the pool. The wizard flinched visibly as the cold water rushed into the holes in his skull and directly into his wounded brain, but then his limbs unclenched and his eyes opened and beams of silver light shone from them for a while. Then he returned to the surface and rested his arms on the edge of the pool, looking up at the boy with deeply human eyes.

"Would you like to come in?"

The boy tilted his head to look at the water sideways.

"It looks cold. It looks like it hurts. Does it hurt?"

"Yes."

"Hmm," said the boy. "I don't think I'm as good as you are at ignoring pain. How do you do it? Those burns you had!"

"I'm over three thousand years old. When you are young it doesn't serve you to ignore pain. When you are old it doesn't serve you to pay it too much attention."

Ben nodded and seemed content to stay where he was.

"I can create a portal now. Would you like me to? Shall we go home?"

"No, let's stay a little longer."

"Very well."

"Who's Aggraban?"

"He's an old necromancer, an old friend."

"A friend!"

"Of course. We're all old friends. All of us."

"I don't want him to be my friend."

"That's not very friendly."

"Good."

"He has chosen to see things in fearful ways: life, the world, himself. And so he has filled with fear and hatred, self loathing – all of which he projects onto others, for he can't bear to see himself as the creator of his own fate. It's a common enough tale. He's just carried it to something of an extreme."

"He was trying to get inside the magic door."

"Yes? Oh well, never mind. But tell me, what did you do to him?"

"I tried to stab him, but he wasn't really there. I realised he was projecting his image but he was also creating physical effects, so I knew he must have an anchor..."

"Excellent pupil."

"Yes. So I swiped him with Mirnggald a few times. He had a dead magpie in his head. It got cut in two."

"Ahh! You really did save me."

"What do you mean?"

"After he caught me poking around in one of his rooms, and disabled me, he wanted to return the favour and poke about in one of my homes. He had picked up a rumour somewhere that I have been spending a lot of time at the house in Solfar. He promised me a long and painstaking interrogation when he got back, but when he did return it was with a tremendous, splitting headache...thanks to you it seems. So he took himself off to bed with an icepack."

"You helped yourself there, Ben. You wouldn't have been able to best him as you did the monzimorca."

"He didn't seem all that much."

"His *projection* didn't seem all that much. Aggraban in the flesh would have flayed the skin from your body and then poured on vinegar – Berringstrom or no Berringstrom."

"Oh."

"Indeed."

"I became nondescript and both him and his little creature walked past me."

"Hey! Well done, my boy!"

"What is that thing, anyway?"

"Oh, that's Azzafa, his translating demon. They're unusually close. Even a man like Aggraban needs company."

"A translating demon? Is that what Sesse Ræma will have looked like?"

"Yes."

"Hey, you don't think that is Nonamason, in Sesse Ræma's old body, do you?"

"Mm, no, not really."

"Oh."

"Well, I suppose it might be. I don't know really."

"Do you think I'll be able to come on some missions now?"

"Sometimes, perhaps, if they're not too dangerous. But hear me, Ben: hacking people and creature's with a sword should be the final strategy you consider using to solve a problem...not the only one. Do you see that you need to expand your options if you want to be truly useful?"

"Yes, Master."

"Then that is good. You know you are an excellent boy, don't you?"

"Yes, Master."

"I hope so."

"The monzimorca still lives, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"And it's in terrible pain."

"Yes."

"I didn't know how to get you back by any other way."

"Relax, Ben. I don't think you *could* have got me back any other way. That you even came looking for me in the first place is something that

makes me breathless when I think about it. And it wasn't you that created a creature that could suffer so. Come on, you know all of this."

"Yes."

"You know, you will be at your most useful to me if you remain of a cheerful and optimistic outlook. If you can be optimistic you will be an 'optimal mystic,' yes?"

"Sometimes I don't feel that optimistic."

"Of course. Of course. And that is allowed."

"I'm just afraid of all the darkness, Master. I can't help it. And I can't see the need for it: Wargrin, Aggraban, what happened to Ashar and Clemen, and the terrible things that Mab did...why did she have to do that?"

"Ah, yes...that. How are you feeling about Mab these days?"

"I just think she's insane...or there's a bit of her that's insane."

"I suppose that's a reasonable response. So you don't detest and fear her?"

"I definitely do fear her. She terrifies me. But I don't detest her. Not yet. Do you think I will do, in the end?"

"No. No. I think that probably, in this mythical, non-existent place you call 'the end', you will most probably love her with all of your heart. And Aggraban too."

"Huh. And what about Wargrin?" The wizard shrugged and wouldn't be drawn. "And what about what happened to Ashar and Clemen?" Still the old man had nothing to say. "Why aren't you answering my questions? Why won't you tell me the need for darkness?"

"I just don't know how to put it into words right now, that's all. That's all. And I take that as a sign I probably shouldn't even try."

Ben sat quietly, then shifted and squinted at the wizard.

"You know I don't believe that you rode a mule disguised as a zebra that turned into an elephant."

"Why ever not?"

"Because it's a silly story that makes no sense that you made up just to make me jealous and teach me a lesson, or something. Old men start to do that when they're over three thousand years old."

"What cheek! And in what respect does it make no sense?"

"If an evil court magician wanted to get rid of a princess it would be much easier to just have her killed or kidnapped. Turning her entire retinue into a traveling menagerie is just too much...and pointless."

"Ah huh. And the fact that being caught committing murder or kidnapping carries a much stiffer punishment in Karmenaksis than merely turning people into things? Would you want to be hung naked in the main square and flogged to death?"

"What's the punishment for turning people into things?"

"It's the same, but you're allowed to keep your clothes on. So, you see now that you are but an ill-informed boy who doesn't know what makes sense. Now you must be levitated above this pool of magical water until you recant."

"No, no, no, no, no!"

Ben found himself floating above the pool, gazing down into its icy clarity.

"You won't recant? Very well. There you shall stay."

"I recant! I recant! You're a very sensible old man who tells very sensi-

ble stories! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

The wizard smiled.

"I'm so glad you understand. Then I will release you."

The boy realised his mistake.

"No, no, no, no, no!"

He plunged into the remarkable, cold water, which accepted him without a ripple, despite the speed with which he entered. The cold struck his skin like a blast of magma, but too quickly to be suffered. It seemed to shoot right through him from all sides and pass out of him again, leaving him at one with the crystal depths, at one with the silence, perfectly lucid, perfectly suspended, all imperfections burned away, the scar across his chest, and the one at his side, burned away. He saw light from the crystals shafting through the water. He saw Eonmor floating before him, like a reflection of his soul.

And the elves and the dwarves just closed the doors and left this place because they couldn't bring themselves to share? he thought.

That's right, thought Eonmor.

I cried with fear when I first arrived, because the portal disappeared.

Ah, Ben, the portal's still there. I just made it invisible. I often do that.

So we didn't need to come down here?

No. But see how it has helped us.

Yes, said Ben, and he floated there a while, thinking unformed thoughts. Hey, don't we need to breath down here?

No.

Oh...well that's all right then.

φ

Back in Solfar it was still daylight. Eonmor positioned their portal in the kitchen and set the time frame just so, so that as Ben emerged from it he saw the back of a younger version of himself, who shrugged bravely and carried Mirnggald through another portal ring and into a room with a floor of stone slabs and a wall of unfinished rock.

The wizard silently closed the portal behind them and stood next to Ben. Together they watched the younger version of the boy, lost now, for he couldn't see his way home, crying in the dark.

Ben looked up at the old man who looked like he was ready to cry himself. Closing the portal the wizard hugged his apprentice.

Italics section...a report on what little is 'known' about the history of Aggraban and some of the conflicting stories told by those who have encountered him.

7

Ben's life had become a wrapped gift, its ultimate form veiled and yet to be understood, covered in endless layers of colourful adventure, one unravelling only to reveal another. The years were packed with event, travels to theoretical realms, haunting meetings with eldritch creatures, answers begetting questions, and humble excursions into the worlds of ordinary folk that seemed quite as exotic as any of the explorations he made with his master to the unceasingly tiered reaches of inner and outer space and time.

Clemen was gone, and remained gone. Ashar was dead and remained dead. Ben had seen nothing of Cloé since she had been given to the witch, and he saw nothing now of the witch either, save for fleeting silhouettes in the woods when the moon was new, and sudden storm flashes of her face lit by lightning in his dreams, catching her in the process of coming for him out of the shadows.

He missed her.

And, despite her standoffishness, the elves kept their distance, unwilling perhaps to take any more chances with their dwindling numbers, leaving him his haven.

He grew into and through his teenage years, but his passage was not like that of other boys, nor indeed that of other apprentices. He did not shed his childhood for adolescence, nor his adolescence for young adulthood, but was encouraged, by his mentor and his fantastical experiences, to wear them each simultaneously, one atop the other, learning to discriminate and calculate without any need to discard or substitute his childlike connection to the magical, nor suppress any of his righteous emotions. Many adventures were had, large and small, whether they were amidst barbarian warriors lost at sea on quests for great redemptions or amongst his peers of teenagerdom in and around the hills of Penmor in Laan, where Clemen's people accepted him as an honorary clansman in exchange for the loss of their swordsman.

The village girls worked hard to seduce him and he worked hard to follow Eonmor's wishes that he wait for a mate who was at least his equal in magic, a mythical female even more sorcerous and alluring than the hill girls of the Rhondran. He resisted hard and waited long and many a close shave was had amongst those grassy slopes where the seasons covered their contours in differing forms of ripeness.

By the age of twenty-four Ben came to believe that being a wizard must be the happiest, saddest thing in the world. He moved through the Sovereign Galaxies, skirted the great dominions of Zoestrosa and delved deep into the kingdoms of Nestorea, effortlessly nondescript now, immersing himself in the wide and varied seas of humanity, witnessing their heartache wherever he went, regardless of how low or how high they were counted. The sea farers of the four great oceans, lost in their pirating and warring,

tangled inextricably in the trade routes strung along the waters between the shining hemispheres, caught helplessly in the to and fro along the seaboard kingdoms and the Zoestrosan coasts were as worldly and frayed a collective as could be found in Piscea, yet they were cut off from the levels of creation that Ben walked daily, as surely as were the longest serving dungeon bound and palace locked lubbers. The great magicians, trapped in the alien worlds of their mutually exclusive disciplines, the magical races, flitting between the ephemeral veils separating the realms of consciousness, all caught up in the concerns of their own peculiar densities, were unable to appreciate each others identical plights. One wizard could not understand his neighbour, one species of the faery could scarcely interpret the motivations of the next, their shared madness masked behind disparate languages and incompatible vibrations.

The world was crying, weighed down with the heaviness of its own incompleteness, its own fragmentation, and he didn't know how to help it. Each being was lost and alone, seeing only inexplicable chaos and unbreachable separation in all directions, in all the surrounding eyes, in every mirror they looked into. The endlessly flowing beauty, the ever shifting interplay of living, magical energies that danced and swirled and fizzed back and forth through every heartbeat, every interaction, every perception, every thought and smile, every touch and the note of every song, so little of it was seen, so much of it was lost. There it was, all the time, in every place: the lack of love, the longing for love, the presence of love, hugging itself eternally behind every movement, behind each intention, twisting in on its own ache, becoming itself over and over again, endlessly escaping the attention of the lost and the floundering. The pathos of existence wound itself around and through every stone cannon pointed at the sky over the daisy spotted fields of Urst, enfolded itself amongst the languishing machineries of the scattered, lost nations of Infraedown. Its poignancy fell like dust on the slumbering gods in the broken cities of Solmnarensia, even as it charged their dreams, fuelled their legends, collapsed, burned and reinvented their atoms. The starscapes turned and wheeled about the solar lunar intersections, generating the ebb and flow of their divinity, yet none were lucid enough to see it.

And, as surely as Ben observed the inability of even the greatest of Piscea's mages to see what he saw, let alone the numberless legions of soldiers, farmers, dishwashers and fishwives cast across the continent, he perceived a level beyond his own where beings of transcendent thought, emotion and pastimes helplessly yearned for him to join them. The pattern on the surface of a rock standing alone in a desert could make his heart strain painfully at the glorious magnitude of the ineffable, while the sight of something like the great waterfall at the Wake of Zaeunama plunging into the Diamond Sea threatened to sweep him away to an apotheosis he feared would snuff him out forever. It was all too much for him.

And yet...

He was twenty-four. He had yet to have sex. His magical abilities were limited, stunted almost. And while the visions and experiences that had been gifted to him were, he knew, only a measure of his own inner greatness, he could not escape seeing them also as simple gifts from another, gifts that he couldn't have given himself, gifts that accentuated his impotence rather than transporting him to his seat of self empowerment.

And the old man himself...he was growing increasingly senile.

But we sleep, Ben. For most of the time. Ha! By necessity we sleep, because we live so long. By our own choice we go off wandering in dreams of other realities, and one is no less real than the other.

Eonmor's non-lucid stretches were becoming more and more frequent, more and more sustained, while Aggraban's intrusion into their world, their little house in Solfar, had also intensified. It was as though the necromancer knew his enemy was failing at last.

"What do you think is going on?" Eonmor had asked after Ben had once again found Aggraban's astral body standing before the magic door, humming to himself, stroking the gap between door and doorjamb absently as though he had always been there. Ben had begun to think of him as a ghost haunting the landing, unable to move on from his attempts to penetrate Eonmor's secrets. But if he was a ghost he was a deadly one. Ben had struggled mightily to find and break his anchor this time, which was much smaller (a dead fly), yet also much stronger than its precedents. And the dark sorcerer had developed a knack for showing up whenever Eonmor was absent, either away on a mission or away with the faeries, lost in one of his funny turns. The necromancer was turning his attempts on the door into a personal duel between himself and the boy, a thing that Ben had, he could admit to himself, begun to relish.

"He's playing a game," said Ben, and the old man nodded encouragingly. "He's trying to trick me."

"Good, good. And what is the trick?"

"I don't know, and it would be foolish of me to suspect I do. But I'll tell you my best intuition..."

"Excellent," smiled the wizard, seeming to enjoy the sport, unconcerned as ever by whatever peril might be looming, whatever loss might be at risk. "Tell me, please."

"He's finding stronger and stronger ways of projecting his image here, forcing me to concentrate on what defences I can find for that type of threat...and it's getting increasingly hard for me to cope with it, but I'm just about managing, getting stronger and stronger myself. Each time we face each other I get quicker and more confident, which of course is not in his interests. But also, each time we face each other he learns more about me. I think there will come a point when he decides he has my full measure. When that moment comes he will raise the stakes of the game beyond what I can cope with. He will finish the matter decisively."

"Oh yes? And how will he do this?"

"He will show up in the flesh."

Eonmor grew still and his eyes gleamed.

"Aha," he said.

"I will be expecting another astral body and, knowing him, he will take some pleasure in allowing me to believe that this is indeed the case, for a while. He'll let me make some moves, let me think I'm fighting the usual fight, let me think I'm about to win, as usual, and then he will reveal that he is there in his full strength. He'll paralyse me, tell me in great detail the awful spell he has prepared just for my own personal torment, as a reward for defying him all these times. And then he will execute his sorcery and there will be little I can do to stop him." Ben showed his empty palms. "If I'm lucky I'll be dead. But somehow I expect he'll want to leave me alive and wishing that I was dead."

Eonmor nodded.

"Excellent. I think you're probably right. And I'm impressed. Very impressed."

"Thank you."

"Not at all."

They regarded each other silently for a time.

"And how do you feel about it?" asked the old man.

"I'm afraid."

"Good. That's good. And what are you going to do about it?"

Ben scratched his head looking uncomfortable.

"I'm still working on that. I'm not too concerned with trying to best him. If I can avoid confronting him at all then I'll do it. You don't seem particularly bothered about what might happen if he breached the door so I think I'll just let him get on with it." The wizard nodded approvingly. "But he holds a grudge against me now. I don't think he'll be content to let me be. I think he'll come after me, and my intuition says I should focus on getting away, rather than trying to square up against him."

"You're being prudent. Well done."

"I was wondering about ways to make myself disappear, but I'd need a magical object. I'm not up to executing that kind of magic by myself yet and I can't manipulate portals – and I'm guessing you haven't got any magical objects lying about that would enable me to teleport, seeing as you don't need anything like that yourself?"

"Oh, goodness, I might have. We could rummage through the store. We might strike it lucky; there's one of everything in there, almost. But it could take time and we might not find what is there, even if it is there. I'd take further measures to safeguard yourself in the meantime."

"Yes. I was playing with the idea of turning the tables on him."

"Oh? Yes?"

"I thought it might be fun if I actually showed up as a projection myself for a change. He'd be there in the flesh, all-powerful and nasty, and then, when he cast his master spell on me, I wouldn't even be there. I could be in Nazaride, safe and sound."

The wizard sat back with a wide-eyed look.

"That's super. I love it."

"You don't think it's too obvious?"

"Well, there's no way of knowing what's going through your opponent's mind, of course, but it has a nice irony about it. And it's within your means, too. Is it? How's your image projection these days?"

"I need some help with it. Would you do some work with me on it?"

"Yes, definitely. I'd be delighted to. I think it's a wonderful idea."

Ben puffed out his cheeks.

"I'm scared."

Eonmor nodded.

"Me too. Me too. But, you know, it might help matters if you went ahead and solved the question of what's behind the door."

"Oh, that, well...perhaps. I'm sure I know what's behind it, anyway."

"Uh huh? Then why be so insufferable? What exactly are you waiting for?"

"I don't think it's time for me to go to the next stage of my apprenticeship."

"So *you* are waiting until *you* think you're ready?"

"Yes, exactly. Well done."

"You know it doesn't work like that."

"I'm not complaining."

"You're impeding your own progress."⁵

This gave Ben pause.

"Am I? Really?"

"Of course you are."

"I thought that I'd progress to the next stage automatically, as soon as I was ready, regardless in a way, of what I actually do or think about it."

"That is absolutely right, but that doesn't mean you can't purposefully delay your own readiness."

"Oh. I thought it did."

"Are you insane?"

"Oops."

"So, tell me, what do you think lies behind the door?"

Ben chewed his lips and his eyes looked from side to side.

"Can I just have a few more days?"

Eonmor held up his hands, then closed his eyes and took up his meditation position, which was something he always did on those rare occasions he actually felt he might be bothered by something.⁶

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After lunch they took a portal to the inner sanctum of the townhouse in Nazaride. From there Eonmor opened a portal into the real library at Monida, the library of which the inner sanctums at Nazaride and Zaneb were only copies. Monida – one of the moons of Murnasta⁷ in the Dendroid nebula. The library was housed in its core. There were no shafts from the library to the surface, eleven hundred miles above. The only ways to access it were by portal ring, teleportation, astral projection, phasing physically through the rock or, if one were to be rather flamboyant, tunneling with some marvelous mechanical boring machine; and only a person who knew there happened to be a great store of magical knowledge and artifacts in the centre of an obscure and unremarkable ball of rock floating in a mysterious and avoided part of the galaxy would ever, in a million eternities, think to take a peek inside. After explaining all of this to Ben the old wizard went on to maintain that really it would be of little consequence were his stash of magical paraphernalia to be discovered by some enemy, such as Aggraban.

"Why not?"

"Because all consequences to which our illusory existences are subject are, inherently, illusory consequences. Pain, death, torment, suffering, losing at cards, yes, they seem impressive at the time, but they also pass in the due course of time, which is itself an illusion. For divine beings that are one with the everlasting moment, which is the only kind of being there is, there are no such things as consequences."

⁵ An important conversation, but very sparsely written. Very little setting, very little context. Needs revisiting. They should be *doing* something while having this conversation – preparing a magical exercise perhaps? This probably applies to all of their major conversations!

⁶ Emotion and setting, in this scene and the next. Let Ben's emotions respond to the atmosphere coming off the settings. Let's feel what he is feeling! Love?

⁷ A sentient planet (apparently there are quite a lot in the Dendroid nebula).

"Then why such extreme security?" asked the boy reasonably.

"Ah, well, I had to put it somewhere. It seemed like a fun idea at the time."

The library was large and multileveled, containing not just the magical knowledge collected from a hundred thousand alien worlds, but also the literature: classic, pulp and children's, along with all the highest quality comics and graphic novels Eonmor had been able to purloin. And there were sciences, histories, geographies, encyclopedias, miniaturized databases in magnetic, crystalline and molecular formats, recorded songs, music, dramas, comedies, images. There was enough here to satisfy the greediest burglar with the most eclectic of tastes, and yet still there were secret chambers reached through the opening of shifting bookcases and sliding panels. And the air was infused with the scent of phemarase, the mineral that permeated the rock of Monida throughout, and which bit sharply yet distantly at the back of the nose, often evoking a sense of a long forgotten moment, lingering close but beyond recall. On his first visit Ben had been awestruck, lost and captivated. He was still these things, yet in addition, these days, he found it difficult not to shake his head and laugh every time at the childish whims of his aging master.

A hefty frieze depicting a Go archivist having sex, perhaps consensual, perhaps not, with three Nanolan warriors moved to one side revealing Eonmor's store of magical objects. They spent a few hours rooting through the contents in search of something that might enable Ben to teleport at will but invariably found themselves distracting each other with this remarkable artifact and that, and eventually Eonmor decided they should practise some astral projection instead.

They sat facing each other, each perched cross-legged on a levitating cushion from the palace of Abarr. Ben called his chattering, meandering levels of awareness to him like a teacher gathering his pupils in at the end of a visit to a museum, until all were present and correct in the here and now, all sharing their oneness, all focused on his breath. He felt his body relax and loosen around him, then, exhaling gently, lifted his inner self up and into the air. From that vantage he could see both his and Eonmor's bodies floating below on their cushions.

Now, said Eonmor's voice in his mind. *To be adept at astral and image projection you must be able to go where you wish, when you wish, and you must be in full control of what, if any, image you desire to reveal to onlookers. Let's start with going somewhere – somewhere you haven't been before. Then, when we get there, we can focus on projecting an image. It doesn't do, after all, to let your astral body be visible to others while you are travelling from one place to another.*

A bit indiscreet, is it? asked Ben.

Exactly. So...where would you like to go?

Oh, I don't know, somewhere I've never even heard of, I think.

No. We can't go there.

Why not?

Because you don't know it exists. There is nothing for your mind to key into. This library, for example, is only safe from intrusion by others because nobody actually knows it exists. Aggraban, for instance, could make his way here instantly if he knew there was a here to make his way to. You must pick somewhere, or even some person, that you know of, even though you don't know exactly where they might be found. If you have something for your mind to key into it will act as a locator and your astral body will be drawn to the right place. So, be specific, if you

please.

Mmm, very well. Let's take a look at Zane – see where he is.

Ha! Eonmor's mental bark was sharply amused, with a hint of self-satisfaction or cynicism or something.

Yes? enquired Ben, irritated.

What?

Is there a problem with that?

Of course not. The Emperor Zane it is. Let's be off.

If he had been in his body the boy might have felt a fluttering of his heart, or a tremor in his stomach. As it was he perceived a kaleidoscoping at the back his thought patterns that suggested a tighter, brighter, more scintillating configuration.

One of the old man's bluffs? He wondered.

Let's find out, said the old man.

Oops!

They flew their astral presences back through the library, through the portal and into the inner sanctum at Nazaride.

Why have we come here? Couldn't we have travelled by projection from Monida?

We could, relatively easily, but Monida is far, far away. For beginners that kind of interstellar travel can be distracting, confusing, down right frightening. I think going to see Zane is enough of those things already.

Are we really going to see him?

That is up to you. Let's find out, shall we? Still your mind and then focus on his name. We'll see where it takes us.

Ben envisaged Zane's name in monolithic stone letters, as seemed appropriate for envisaging the name of the emperor, and immediately he felt a tug of gravity pulling the name, and his astral presence with it, towards the distant location of the man himself. The disembodied apprentice and his invisible master slipped through the walls of the inner sanctum, passed through the rooms of the townhouse, catching a brief glimpse of Sternum polishing a mirror, and out above the street, curling into the sky over Nazaride. Ben was unsurprised to see they were heading northeast.

Zelenium, he said, the thought tinged by a hue of wonder.

Most probably.

Wow.

Below them they could see the confluences of the four great rivers, the Tove, the Semb, the Jasp and the Suressa. The surface of the water was silver, beneath a blue white morning sky. As they rose they saw how the flat stretches of farmland coming in from the horizon gave way to the outlying towns. Then, where the landscape became wrinkled as it neared the meeting of the rivers, Nazaride suddenly bristled and sprawled atop its elevation, its bridges springing from hill to hill. Directly below them now the fortifications of Nimaryne were laid out clearly along the top of the furrow between the Semb and the Jasp. Inside, the wide, manicured sweep of the palatial grounds looked serene and pristine, held safe in the embrace of the rivers and their hills, the broad open spaces of its lawns contrasting pointedly with the clustered streets, buildings and bridges of the city beyond its walls. They paused at the summit of the Waking Spire, the only part of the palace to rise above its fortifications, dominating the skyline and reminding the city where its centre lay. Below, Nazaride looked pretty, with its colourful roofs and rooftop gardens, its markets and quays and the busy traffic of

merchant ships, clippers and barges, military vessels, private yachts, and cruisers flying the standards of the noble and royal houses that speckled the surface of the rivers and caught at the morning light. It looked everything the jewel of Teledac should look, for it was the finest city the kingdoms of Nestorea had to offer as a rival to Zelenium of Zoestrosa.

They moved on, rising further, now spying the distant fall line that reached along the horizon and was shared by the four rivers (all far apart from each other at that point), where their waters dropped through rapids and down waterfalls long before they arrived in the capital. The fall line was far inland and the biggest of ships could sail upstream for many leagues to riverside cities big enough to shame the capitals of most kingdoms. Thus had Nazaride looked out over a Teledac well served by reliable supply routes that had been robustly protected for centuries and centuries of prosperity. The neighbouring kingdoms of Urst and Pygarra, though vast, strong, and proud, could only look on at Teledac's wealth and dream.

Picking up speed, flying above and along the ranging border between those two countries Ben and Eonmor swooped low enough to spot the giant stone cannons of Urst, long dormant now, but forever towering above the meadows, leaning into the pale sky, pointing empirewards, ready to keep the beast at bay, though only having enough range to bombard the neighbouring kingdoms.

They make poignant monuments, said Ben.

Yes, murmured the old wizard's mind. Why is it, I wonder, that man's follies should often hold such a strange beauty?

Perhaps that's just the nature of folly, manmade or otherwise?

Ha. Thank you, Ben. Thank you for that thought.

They were fired in your lifetime, weren't they?

Fired? They were built within my lifetime. I was born while the elves and dwarves were still trying to maintain their belated alliance, while they were still clinging to the ragged remains of their countries. It was over two hundred years after they lost the centre of Piscea, and the nations of the elders were cut off from each other, that the stone cannons were constructed, strictly for local concerns between the kingdoms of men.

Ben sensed the wizard lapsing into reverie.

I sometimes wonder how things might have been if Zane had arisen amidst the dwarf nations rather than the elves, inheriting industrial technology rather than magic gone dark. But then, what is the difference between magic put to black uses and machineries built in shadow?

Ben's mind stilled for some time as the gentle hills of the borderlands rolled by beneath them, small farming and mining towns nestled in the shadows of the great weapons as though gargantuan sun dials were counting the time left to them.

I forget the times you have seen, he said.

Ah, yes...so do I. The wizard paused and Ben detected an absolute stillness, a complete absence of thought. Then the old man spoke again. *In fact, he said, it is only occasionally that I remember.* The border was vast, rolling on for league after league. Ben found his belief growing poverty stricken, that such soul-numbing, relentless building as must have been required for the giant guns should have been carried out by ordinary little humans. Entire generations had been born and dreamed, had been lost under the silhouette of their construction. What might one of those lives have been like, wondered the apprentice: devoted to the making of a weapon on

such a scale it ceased to have meaning. More like building a temple, he mused, a temple for the gods of atheism.

Indeed, my boy, continued the old man, still wandering. From time to time a memory will surface, a memory of something or other I have long since ceased to suspect should ever have existed: a place, a voice, a scent, a touch...a sentence spoken...an army fallen and shattered. They may as well all be dreams.

But they're all just games, aren't they? That's what you always say.

Yes, I do say that, don't I? Another one of my games. Ben would have shook his head in confusion had it not been back in Nazaride, but then Eonmor seemed to rouse himself suddenly. Look: here comes Calciga. How has this place kept its borders intact, do you think?

What do you mean...about games? I thought...

It's a fierce nation, of course. Every nation in Piscea is, by definition, fierce. But to survive on the border of Zoestrosa? That takes something special, I think, don't you?

I...don't know. I get the feeling you're playing with me somehow. Either that or you're ready for one of your funny times.

Really? No, no, I don't think so. Am I? I don't mean to. I'm just feeling nostalgic. Come, why do you think Calciga has survived so well?

The country below was lush and green, the villages hidden amongst the foliage. The cities were large and low and scarcely more visible; there were temples tucked away into the winding cliffs, their entrances screened by creepers and guarded by camouflaged carvings.

You think Calciga has a pact with Zoestrosa? Asked Ben.

I don't know. But Qabar has its magic, Imurran has its geography. Calciga must have something...unless of course, it doesn't.

You're becoming increasingly cryptic.

Well, what would it mean if Calciga had no defense against Zane?

It would mean, I suppose, that Zane was merely waiting until the most opportune timing presented itself before he moved on it.

You're not thinking.

Well, I haven't got my politics head on. I thought we were just going for a jolly romp to Zoestrosa.

So, stop and think.

Ben stopped and thought.

You think Calciga already belongs to Zoestrosa?

The wizard remained quiet for a spell. Ben could feel the shifting of the old man's mind. Then, reluctantly almost, the old man responded.

I don't know. But it's a thought. Don't you think? Imagine that.

They flew on in silence, skimming the southern, green regions of Qabar and approaching the savannas of Anzeer that marked the approach to Sylica. At some point an invisible line across the globe was crossed.

We are now in Zoestrosa, said the old man. The land below was a hot sea of grass, stretching uniformly to the horizon, foreshadowing the Stone Sea, the great, salty lake they would find at Sylica.

What will happen with Zane, Master?

With Zane? How do you mean?

Will he continue to expand, will he diminish, will things stay as they are? I'm sure you've seen it through a portal.

You know, you might be surprised at just how uncurious I am about the future.

Yes? You must have seen something. You've travelled far and wide in all directions.

Yes, yes. I've seen some things. But seriously, Ben, I have chosen to remain a man of my own time. And this is an important matter, so please hear me on this. The choice to live in one's Now, the Now that is given to you, is the choice for sanity. Lusting after tomorrows, retreating into yesteryears, that is to become lost to oneself. So yes, I have seen things incidentally, but I have not made a concerted effort to see beyond what concerns a simple human being holds within his scope.

A simple human being, is it? I detect some bull manure.

No. You do not.

We're unlimited in all respects. This is only what you tell me yourself.

Indeed. And I stand by that. But to respect nature, and to respect your own nature, is to unfold your unlimited self in a natural way that preserves and bolsters your sanity, and your sanity is a measure of how closely to your centre you sit. If you wish to be off centre and wildly out of balance then, by all means, cast aside your respect for the wisdom of nature.

Ben gave a mental sigh.

So what have you seen incidentally, then? Does Zane take over the world?

For the briefest of moments he felt a surge of anger in the mind of his master, but then it evaporated and disappeared as though it had never been.

Zoestrosa consumes the kingdoms of Nestorea, said the wizard, each and every one. Perhaps it is completed under the rule of Zane, perhaps it is some successor of his, I have not seen. But the kingdoms are lost.

Ben's trajectory over Piscea wobbled and he felt he should be standing with jaw agape but instead his vision of the landscape below brightened, and blurred at the edges. Sylica, by the shores of the Stone Seas, was far behind already now and they were out over the water. The globe beneath them was curved and shining and enigmatic, spread out like an inscrutable masterwork of art, created and left behind as an indecipherable sign to mortal minds by some monster god. He tried to stay silent, tried to absorb the colossal thunderbolt of information with the equanimity appropriate to the student of a great wizard, but the thought slipped out despite itself.

But...what are we to do?

Beyond the far coast came the beginnings of desert. The land was grained and striated with dark and pale sands and the ground wore, what looked from this altitude, meandering empty runnels that had once, perhaps, played host to mighty rivers. The creases of the continent caused the yearning plain to look like a leather hide staked out beneath the sun to dry and pull taught, clinging to the contours of the silent bones beneath.

What are we to do? What are we ever to do? Said Eonmor. We are to live... and to be. Nothing more. The kingdoms were not always here; why should we expect them to remain? The Empire too will one day be gone, as will this entire planet. What difference should it make to such as we? The Here and Now brings us many delights, many horrors, until we recognise all as being one. To discover the theory seems a revelation to the average man. But to live it consciously is no more real than to swim in blessed ignorance. It is all beauty, be it under a king or an emperor. Be at peace.

I can't believe he wins, breathed Ben's mind.

No, Ben? Have you not looked at a map? Half of Piscea is under the rule of a single man, the other half is divided between well over a dozen royal families, each of which would be content to simply survive and remain as they are, if fate were to allow such happy endings. It is not a complicated calculation. And even if the entirety of Nestorea united today (ho, ho,) it would merely even the equation – the

end result would remain in doubt. As things are, with the kingdoms divided, the future is all too easy to foretell. It doesn't require a portal through the Sovereign Galaxies.

The desert changed beneath them as the rumpled mountain ranges of Zantium fell away behind them and the ocean of dunes that was the Arzanta began.

I thought, perhaps, at some point, he would be assassinated.

Well, that's a thought. But by whom?

I don't know. Some powerful wizard, I suppose.

Oh, I see...one of them. The thought glimmered with mirth.

Is that really such a silly idea? Is Zane to be thought of as completely invincible, so that nobody ever dares to stand against him?

That is a reasonable question. But look, you have seen the difficulties a sorcerer as powerful even as Aggraban can have, when faced with as little as an eleven-year-old apprentice not yet able to levitate a cup of tea without spilling half of it. You have seen. To truly challenge Zane one would need to face him in the flesh. But look at this desert. Do you know how hot it is down there? Do you know how far this stretches? A would be assassin from the kingdoms would have to make his way to Zane discreetly, through or around one or more of the great deserts, or by ocean voyage, weaving a way through all of his naval defences. This couldn't be done with an accompanying army – it could only be done covertly...alone, or as good as alone.

It could be flown, decided Ben. That's if the assassin didn't have access to something like a portal ring.

Very well, yes, it could be flown (I'll ignore the portal ring comment, for now). It could be flown. But the terrible distances between Nestorea and Zelenium are the least, the absolute least of Zane's defences. Look at this expanse below us.

There was little to see. The dunes reached to the horizon in all directions, uniform and seemingly unending. What you have seen so far is but a tiny fraction of the territory Zane commands. How do you think he maintains control over such an inconceivably vast area?

Ben gave a mental shrug.

Oh, the usual ways, I would imagine – fear, loyalty, excellent administration... I don't know.

His entire land is bound to him magically. The enchantments are elven in origin. They are manifold and they are intertwined, renewed and strengthened year on year. Those who are loyal to Zane will prosper here. Those who fear him will be tolerated, quite happily, so long as they do their work without complaint. But those who actively plot against him, even in the privacy of their own minds, find they cannot go undiscovered. They will be visited, long before the seeds of their rebellion can be sown. The last thing he wants is for somebody to arise from amongst his slaves as he arose from the slaves of the elves. Even a flying mage would be hard pressed to get to his destination undetected and in one piece. His intent would be like a magical beacon declaring his approach.

Oh. Then, what about us?

What about us? We are not here, nor are we plotting against him. Are we? Ah, look! The Diamond Sea.

They had left Piscea's noon far behind and now approached the fabled Diamond Sea, meeting the late part of the day coming the other way.

Rare indeed is the Nestorean who has laid his real eyes on these waters. Even rarer the one who has returned to describe such a sight.

It just looks like a sea to me.

Yes, well, astral projection has many virtues, but the physical senses are replicated with a degree of selectivity by the soul, those that are replicated at all. To appreciate the Diamond Sea, its beauty, its perils and its mysteries, one must travel there for real. For every journeyman who arrives at its shores it stands at the end of a great adventure and the beginning of a greater. You have to smell it, feel it, fall into it, lose yourself in its waters, be led by the beckoning of its promises. And it is different for each person, of course; but all who have beheld it and tasted it share a connection that will abide on some secret level while they continue to breathe and beyond that words will not measure.

You've been here in the flesh.

Long before I learned to walk the Galaxies.

You're in a sentimental mood today.

It's just nostalgia, something in the air reminding me of routes I took once before.

It feels painful.

Yes. Of course. But life without nostalgia would be a plain and brittle thing.

They flew across the Diamond Sea and came to the sheer, indomitable cliffs of Corundum, at the base of the Manzar Peninsular that juts out for almost two hundred leagues across the gateway to the Eastern Ocean. The Dominion of Corundum, named for the stone of its mighty cliffs, scrolled by under a sky beginning to blush rose pink. The cities and townships were wide, clean and ordered, laid out immaculately amidst perpetually ripe and unruly gardens that wove their way between the broad streets and avenues as though the surrounding jungle of fruit and flowers had been tamed and was reaching its tendrils into the world of Zane so that it might offer its obeisance. The architecture was consistently clean and graceful, even in the villages, the skyline punctuated everywhere with slender minarets, domes, and towers topped with cupolas shaped like cornered hemispheres, meniscus seeds and closed blooms. The stonework was carved sparingly yet precisely, predominantly left in its natural white colouring but accentuated here and there with subdued shades of turquoise, pale carmine, malachite, faded indigo. Fountains abounded, alongside tiled pools of all sizes, their clean waters covering mesmeric mosaics.

Here comes the League Tower, whispered Eonmor's mind. Back in Monida's core Ben's body suddenly held its breath.

Though the city of Zelenium was vast and sprawling, and the League Tower stood on the far, seaboard side, it was the tip of the great tower that appeared over the edge of the horizon long before the edge of its outlying districts came into sight. Fat and round, tapered to a perfect point a full three-mile league from the ground, spanning a diameter a mile and a half across its circular base, the League Tower made a mockery of the Waking Spire of Nazaride and its pretensions at power. It made a mockery of the mountains, it made a mockery of the clouds; perhaps it made a mockery of the sky itself. Whether it made a mockery of the human slaves that had built it over the course of a millennium, or exalted them by the very preposterousness of its magnificence was open to debate – though not in Zoestrosa. The League Tower, pale with distance yet brightened by a more direct receipt of sunlight than the land falling into dusk beneath it, rose slowly and remorselessly over the horizon, seeming to remain perpetually distant as all other, reasonably sized, landmarks drew close and fell behind as they were meant to.

The approach to the outlying suburbs of Zelenium was clear of jungle for half a league, where an encircling band of cultivated fields gave an unimpeded, sweeping view of the wall surrounding the city. The wall encompassed all of Zelenium: the tower, the core city and all of its districts, including the outermost dwellings of the lower castes. The wall was enormous, yet ostensibly ornamental, refined in its aesthetics yet, like the tower, ostentatious in the mere fact of its existence for the city and its precincts covered an area over twelve leagues across and the wall had to be 40 leagues long to reach all the way around. The wall served no justifiable practical purpose (its arches were many and gateless, keeping nobody out or in), not even as a walkway, for none were permitted to scale it, not civilian, soldier or acolyte – and indeed, though the base of the wall was half as thick as the structure was tall, the outer and inner sides were curved like the sides of the tower so the wall tapered to a peak that only a tightrope walker might have strolled along. But despite its apparent lack of purpose it symbolized many conceptual and abstract ideals dear to the Emperor's will, and those who lived within its bounds were influenced by its existence on deep, unconscious levels.

The wizard and his apprentice flew on, beyond the wall, beholding Zelenium in a way few of its residents ever could. Even in the lower caste areas of the outer quarters⁸ it was a wholly beautiful and enchanting place, its winding cobbled streets, overhung by jungle trees, insistently, sinuously redolent with echoes of laughter from other times. Those who had the opportunity to walk these streets (or fly over them) would see the moving of shadows beyond corners, hear the sounds of footfalls and heartbeats and sighs belonging to the ones who still remembered and called to them, though they themselves had long moved on into forgetfulness. No two directions offered a similar view, yet no view was less than captivating. Long, wide streets rose and fell, dappled in shade, white marbled stairways curved in and out of foliage that seemed ever on the verge of releasing panthers and primitives. Balconies peered out from hollowed cliffs and terraces where climbing vines reached up from below and creepers hung in fringes from above. Fountains in sunken, manmade groves reached for the light with their watery plumes, their walkways leading off, sinking deeper into shadow, or curling up and away, overhung by giant ferns and fronds and nodding lotus blossoms to out of sight destinations that beckoned tantalisingly somehow with promises of bewitching fulfillments. Each path pointed to a hazy, picturesque scene, be it the corner of a distant little street of white stone tucked away from the eyes of the unintended or a tree lined promenade arcing decisively to a golden park of lawns, lakes and pavilions.

The lower caste areas were this beautiful. As Ben and the old man travelled further in towards the Tower it was only the scale of things that increased. The architecture was bigger, no less beautiful, but no more so either. The hills became taller, the expanses wider, the carved and inhabited cliffs more imposing. The Arzanassis snaked wide and slow through the centre of the city, refulgent between its verdant banks, passing the great merchant houses, grand amphitheatres, arenas, museums and art galleries, and the temples of Zane, constructed abstractly to the glory of the idea of the god become man become god, available to all, achieved by none. Not yet.

⁸ What is the caste system? How many castes are there and what are they called? Research caste systems of Earth.

And everywhere the people of Zelenium were out walking or sailing or sitting, or riding on their horses or in their carriages, all tall, beautiful, richly yet tastefully clothed, eyes bright and hollow. There was little to distinguish a slave from a merchant from an acolyte from a regulator, all being fit and well fed, all walking with poise, though the symbols that marked their position in Zoestrosan society were plain enough to see for those that knew them. There were slaves, male and female, bred exclusively for sex, or for working in the sewers, who could walk amongst Zelenium's parks and gardens amidst the highest-ranking citizens of the uppermost tiers without marring the perfection of Zane's world. The collars on their throats and ankles and wrists, which marked them out as younger, 'animal', souls taking human form for the first, or fifth, or hundredth time, were as shining and precise as the most lovingly and skillfully crafted ornaments adorning the 'older' souls who had, it was understood, manifested their privileged positions through the heightened evolution of their inner selves. All seemed at peace. All seemed to understand their place in the great and esoteric machine Zane had built, all consoled by the promise that they too would one day, at some point in their journey along the fluted halls of eternity, become a god unto themselves.

And now the boy and the wizard arrived at the grounds surrounding the League Tower, home to the man who, it was held, was closer than any member of any race known throughout Piscea's history to achieving godhood. The surrounding grounds were entirely flat, and that flatness was unbroken, uninterrupted, unimpeded by any plant or wall or fence or fountain. Only the purest flatness, the purest lowness, could accentuate the perfect height of the tower perfectly. The surrounding grounds consisted of one colossal circular mosaic formed from precision slivers of pure stone of different types and appropriate colours, all three foot long and positioned on their ends, side by side, fitting together without flaw so that the tiny flat surfaces of their tips came together, making up the grain of the resultant image, a masterpiece of mystical geometry that formed the very ground that those who approached the mighty Zane should walk on. Each stone stood perfectly and inescapably in place, each sacrificing its freedom for the greater goal of Zane's design. From their high vantage the old man and the boy had an especially good view of it.

Glimpse it, said Eonmor with a hard emphasis running through the thought like a blade edge, but don't allow your inner eye to linger on it for prolonged moments. Its designs are not conducive to the expression of free will.

The boy obeyed carefully, looking and then looking quickly away, but not before catching a sight of the fractal swirling in the design that promised to suck him down out of the air and away into tubes leading circuitously to the centre of the world.

And here now was the base of the tower, consisting of a ring of twelve great arches, each one an echo of the silhouette of the tower itself. From outside there was nothing to see through each arch but the continuance of the mosaic and the faraway arches of the opposite side. On passing through an arch there was little more to see, just a vast flat ceiling, way above and a mile and a half across, no columns to keep its great weight from sliding down, no stairways to take one up to it and no trap doors to allow one access even if one could reach it. For those that walked the mosaic beyond the arches it was clear that they were so close to the League Tower that it seemed they should be inside it, yet still it remained utterly in-

accessible, mercilessly distant, unremittingly closed to them, for they were only beneath it. There was nothing to stop any person from approaching the tower, walking unmolested through any one of the arches. Indeed, the mosaic was speckled with people now from every caste, wandering at will, chatting in groups, following the spirals in solitary meditations, sinking deeper. The combined armies of Nestorea could have arrived, for there was no Zoestrosan military presence to suggest otherwise, and they might only have gathered beneath the unyielding stone of the tower and wondered what to do next.

Hold, Ben, said Eonmor as the boy began to ascend, following a spiral path along the outside of the tower. *Before we go any further, follow me.*

Though Ben could not see him he knew intuitively where the wizard's astral centre was. The knowledge came to him much as inexplicable knowing comes to a dreamer within a dream sometimes, sourceless yet certain, and he knew it stemmed from the simple confidence the two souls had that they cared nothing for hiding from each other. Releasing, for the time being, the thought of Zane Ben swerved from his course, following the old man to a place a third way up the tower where a gigantic semi-circular window seemed to have been sliced from the polished surface of the stone. Without balcony or glass to protect anybody within from falling out, without carvings or steps or ledges to mitigate the severity of its geometry, the window led into and through the tower, creating a room that was really a passage over a mile long, containing an indoor garden and a deep tiled pool. Despite the size of the windows at either end of the room the inner stretch should have been dark and forbidding but for a variety of large natural crystals that floated in the air here and there throughout, some cracked and cloudy, some still encrusted with rock, catching the colours of the setting sun through the far window and the darkening sky above the Eastern Ocean through the near. Each crystal emitted its own light, a light it had snared earlier in the day, or the year, or the eon. The place looked like nothing Ben had ever seen, and yet he felt he would know his way amongst the palms and the flowers and the leaves were he to walk in amongst them.

There was nobody here. The boy experienced a powerful pulse of déjà vu as the wizard suddenly appeared as a projection of his usual self flying down and alighting on a floor that had the same polished appearance as the outside of the tower. The old man looked about himself, looked down at his body and patted it, seemed satisfied, then looked at Ben.

"Very good. So, now, lets have a look at you."

An anxiety he had not known was there suddenly twisted on itself, making itself felt. He noted it, paid attention to its mixed flavour of fear and excitement, and wondered if it was premonition or memory. Or was it perhaps this place that was aware of, and remembering, him? He decided to pay special attention to the moment even as he focussed on his lesson.

The key to image projection, as with everything else, was belief. Partially putting to one side his wonder at being in a mysterious room in the League Tower at sunset Ben relaxed his mind and allowed himself the belief that he could be seen, standing there in his usual form. He didn't trouble himself with any details, only recalled to himself the normal feeling of visibility he experienced most every moment of his life. The wizard cooed appreciatively.

"That's good. That's good. Look at that."

Ben looked down and saw his arms and body, or a good facsimile of

them, all seeming to be in good working order. He touched his belly and felt the texture of the cloth of his shirt, saw it move beneath his fingers. He looked about himself, nervous suddenly at being visible in this cavernous space.

"Master, what if we should be seen here?"

Eonmor shrugged carelessly, mugging disdain, but he too cast a glance about them and the boy fancied he saw a hint of fear, or of something, in his eyes.

"Come," said the wizard, "we've had this kind of conversation before. Let us attend to business."

"Alright," said Ben cautiously.

Then, having a sudden idea, he allowed himself to believe he was wearing Berringstrom, scabbarded at his waist. He moved his hand to his hip and, sure enough, felt the pommel of the great sword waiting there. Unsheathing the battle blade he held it up for Eonmor to admire.

"Uh huh," said the wizard. "Running before walking, is it? Look at you, you're blurring around the edges."

Looking closely at the arm wielding Berringstrom Ben saw a soft, pale light surrounding him. It was like a miniature aura.

"Oh, yes. Why's that happening?"

"It's because you're off dreaming already. Come on, put that sword away and focus a little. If you really want Aggraban to be convinced then every pore of your skin, every shadow must be right...the way the light plays across your face and your clothes, the way it alters as you move through it. If you do not believe in these things then your belief in a sword will be for nothing."

Ben lowered the sword but did not sheath it yet. Instead he rubbed the side of his face with his free hand and tugged on his hair with a baffled smile.

"It's difficult not to believe I am dreaming," admitted the boy. "I feel strange here. You've shown me so many places and things that are light-years beyond Piscea, in both distance and splendour, but there's something about coming here, there's something about today..." He looked about himself at the constellations of crystals that were glowing brighter with their stolen light now as the sky in the east darkened to a deep blue green, then he looked out through the great arced window and across the ocean, even as a sea breeze came to him and ran its fingers through his hair. "Even here as a projection...this place gets inside me somehow. I don't know what it would be like for me if I was here with my physical senses, but I suspect I might just collapse, be overwhelmed by it all."

To Ben's surprise a tear ran down Eonmor's cheek and this made the wizard smile crookedly.

"Master?"

The old man walked past him, nudging him with an elbow and encouraging Ben with a skewed nod to follow him to the lip of the window where he sat down, his feet dangling over the edge, his heels tapping at the sheer side of the tower. The lights of Zelenium were beginning to delineate the streets below. The boy sat down beside him, untouched by the vertigo that most would have felt, more tempted to leap out than step back.

"We will not be going to see Zane," said the wizard. "It's too dangerous."

He gave the boy a sideways look that was measured and perhaps a little

sheepish.

"Really? Then why did we come? Why did you let me believe we were going to see him?"

"By coming here you are getting a glimpse of him. Only a glimpse, but more of one than if you simply sneaked a peek at him sitting down to supper or whatever it is he's doing right now. I can show you what he looks like, what he walks like, what he talks like...an average sized man with a young countenance." As Eonmor spoke his astral image and voice changed and he took on the form of a man who looked little older than Ben, a little taller, not so stocky. He had short black hair, feathered forward around the contours of his face, quiet blue eyes, finely carved eyes and mouth. His clothes were simple and comfortable. For a Zoestrosan he was actually quite short. "This is Zane," said the image indicating itself. "You might see me in a tavern or on a street. But would you really have seen me? To come here, to see my beautiful and terrible tower, to see the perfection of Zelenium stretched out below us, pinned down like a butterfly, this may give you a better sense of who I am. Witness my deeds and see into my soul. You've no need to be distracted by the features I've chosen to wear. They're arbitrary things – to an extent at least – mere clothing. If you wish to really see me, then gaze upon my tower, empty almost of people, yet bought with enough lives to fill it to overflowing. If you wish to really see me, gaze upon a map of the world, compare it to what was once there. I was a slave of the elder races, and now those races are almost extinct, at my hand, and soon they will be entirely dead and gone. And the kingdoms of man, they served my aims for a time, much as a mould facilitates the work of art within, but when the time comes for the work of art to be revealed the mould must be broken. What is no longer needed must be discarded, whether it be a mould, a kingdom, a race, a dead body, an enemy, a friend. Beauty is born out of ugliness, mercy out of cruelty, order out of chaos, perfection out of the deeply flawed. These are the faces of Zane. Are they faces you would recognise?"

Ben returned the emperor's questioning gaze.

"Isn't there any human side to you?"

"Human side? Why, I'm all human – all too human in fact. I only want to be a god." His voice was self-mocking but then it softened. "No, of course there is a human side to me. I keep it safe, where it can't be hurt. And I have lived long enough and grown hard enough to keep it that way: safe from you, safe from my enemies, safe from my lovers. Like Eonmor's secret library, my human side is hidden where nobody would think to look, and the location could not even be tricked out of me for I can't remember myself where I put it."

"You must be a very cold and lonely man."

"We are all of us lonely, Ben," said the emperor, and at those words the boy felt a shiver. "As for being cold, it is only the heat within me that has raged to such a fury it has taken on the virtues of its opposite. Do you really think I could have achieved the things I have achieved without passion?" With a sweeping gesture Zane indicated Zelenium far below. "Can you not see my love? You think I exalt myself at the cost of others but you are wrong. I show my brothers and my sisters that the lowest can become the highest, and that there is no limit. I show them what they too can and will become, and I do it out of love. Those who are not yet ready for my message need not listen today. There will come a time, with or without me,

for each and every soul. If I have little time for the views and talk of others it is only because I have yet to meet somebody who does not believe that they themselves are ultimately worthless. If I am alone I am alone in seeing the magnificence of each and every one of us. I will allow no one to blind me to that vision for it is the path I have chosen. If I should lose sight of that light then humanity might stumble on in the dark for countless eons more before it awakens to itself. And so my task is a solitary one – for the most part – but my resolve will not falter, for my love will never falter.”

Ben waited for the correct question to come. The horizon had disappeared now, the colour of the ocean merging with the colour of the sky. Along the coast to the right he could see Zelenium’s merchant harbour, with its quays, warehouses, eating houses and pleasure houses, all lit up and sparkling with warmth. Along the coast to the left was the naval harbour, lit by cold pinpoints, full of dark looming shapes only vaguely outlined.

“Are we really not going to do anything, Master,” the boy said, “to help the world?”

Before him the emperor became the wizard once again.

“I’m sure we will do many things, my boy. What those things will be I do not know. But it is in simple being that we help the world, simply being our very selves, not an endless round of doing such as Zane has caught himself up in. A flower doesn’t need an agenda to enhance a meadow. It just gets on with being a flower...until it isn’t any more.” Ben winced unhappily. “You find this frustrating.”

“Yes. I do. Why bother being wizards in the first place if we’re not to have an agenda, if we’re not to use our magic to create something good and amazing? Why be a wizard and then simply stand and watch as countries burn and people die, all for one man?”

Eonmor leaned forward and knocked on Ben’s forehead.

“Did you not listen, Ben? Did you not hear? Zane himself believes he is doing something good and amazing. He is fixing the world. He is fixing humanity. And he talks of what else must be broken before the final fixing can be accomplished. So let me ask you, my dear friend...since when did you know how to fix the world? When did you learn what the world’s perfection would look like?”

The boy leaned back on the heels of his hands, sighed, exasperated.

“I understand. I really do. It’s just...I can’t stop myself from wondering what we’re doing here.”

“Yes,” said the Emperor Zane from behind them, “that is a good question.”

He was sitting cross-legged on the floor. He was alone. Eonmor sat bolt upright and then froze. At the sound of Zane’s voice Ben stiffened also. At the sight of him he reeled slightly, went momentarily cross-eyed, then, after shaking his head and looking again, his guts seemed to turn inside out.

The man looked just as Eonmor’s representation had done, even down to the clothing. He was young, handsome, lithe. Yet there was a difference, a difference that was curious in the first instant and became more and more startling the longer Ben was exposed to it. As he looked at Zane he noticed that the background around the emperor was distorted slightly: sharper but skewed, as though the light was being bent around his very presence. Ben had a sense that he could see beyond and behind the emperor, as though his own eyes were further apart than usual. The man was sitting within an

extraordinary magical density that was palpable to some of Ben's extra senses. He felt its tug on his heart like gravity, causing him to lean forwards. It was a beguiling sensation, and yet a desire to vomit rose out of the boy's anxiety, swelled and passed, promising to return. He felt his skin contracting around him and beads of sweat squeezed from his pores. His hair stood slightly and he fell into a squeezing, hurtful, bullying love, while a distanced part of his mind gibbered to him frantic whisperings: the entity before him was an appalling thing, an abomination too perverse to quantify. He felt his heart swell inside his chest, wanting to explode but foiled in the impulse to suicide by the restraint of traitorous ribs. He couldn't breathe. His gaze slid slowly from the emperor to the old man whose face was white with distress.

"Zane," croaked the old man, his voice disintegrating like dried old paper.

"Eonmor," said Zane. "Whatever's the matter? You look dreadful."

The old man's eyes widened and he took a deep, resolve-gathering breath.

"We're leaving," he said, and he looked at the boy imperatively. "Ben. Go. Now."

Ben made as if to rise, ready to leap from the window's edge and flee across Zelenium's horizon, forgetting momentarily that such actions were not necessary when absent from the body, but Zane held up a compelling hand.

"Hold still," he snapped, "my friend." Ben held, fixing his eyes on his master, waiting for a countermand, as though he was now but a puppet, his strings divided between the two men. "I haven't said you can leave yet."

The wizard rose to his feet.

"We *are* leaving. There will be no discussion. Ben!"

Ben climbed to his feet. He bent his knees, ready to leap...only his knees remained unbent as though they had disassociated themselves from him. Zane turned his back on the wizard and the boy and walked in, away from the window.

"Stay awhile and chat," he said.

Eonmor cast a disbelieving look on Ben.

"Can you move?"

Ben lifted his hands, took a step backwards.

"Yes."

"Then flee, I tell you."

Ben just stood there, for all the world intending to fly, but somehow not doing so.

"I'm...trying. I..."

He shook his head, unable to offer an explanation. Eonmor seemed at a loss for a moment. He cast a frayed glance at Zane then looked longingly out the window. Frowning deeply he turned his attention back to the boy.

"Listen to me," he said in a low voice. "You are not here, not in body. There is nothing material for him to restrain. He cannot keep you here; he can only suggest to you that he can. But you *know* where you are. You know where your body is. Close your eyes here and open them there."

Ben's eyes remained open, save for an occasional, fleeting blink. After a few moments a tear slid down his right cheek.

Zane was now fifteen feet away. He had turned and was observing them.

"This is your apprentice, Eonmor," he said.

The wizard didn't allow his attention to be diverted but kept it fixed on the boy.

"I don't know how he's doing this, but he won't be able to maintain it. You wouldn't be able to remain out of your body for long, even if you wanted to. That's just how it is. Zane is as subject to truth as anyone. Simply focus on returning to your body, let that be your one thought, the one and only impulse of your will. It will come...sooner or later, it will come. Be patient. In the meantime do not let him draw you in conversation. Do not answer his questions. Do not even listen to them. Do not be afraid. You'll be home soon enough."

Ben gave a minute nod.

"That's good advice," said Zane in Ben's ear, his voice warm and intimate. He was now standing right next to them again. "The astral body knows its home. And the astral body knows no master but its own will, for the astral body is literally free spirit. For this reason no man...or woman... can ever be truly kept captive. We are free to roam eternity and infinity as we please, for eternity and infinity are only words for self, and we are free to roam our self as we please. We are one with forever." He turned to Eonmor and his voice became conversational. "What are you afraid of, old friend? It's good to see you, by the way."

Eonmor scowled irritably, but the irritation seemed to be directed at himself, or the situation, for when he spoke to the emperor his voice was soft and reasonable.

"Let him go, Zane. Just let him go."

Zane's face softened slightly. His eyes gleamed with recognition.

"No. I won't. As you say, he'll wriggle free eventually. I'd like to meet him properly first, before he goes. Eonmor's very own apprentice! I'm excited. But what are you worried I'll do with him, anyway? What kind of a monster do you take me for?"

"Zane."

"What? What is it? You're positively twitching with fear. I don't think I've ever seen you like this. When did I become such a source of calamity? What's going on here?"

The wizard shifted, grumpily and uncomfortably, reluctant, it seemed, to answer. But after studying the floor and the interior of the room and the view outside the window he lifted his face to the emperor's.

"I feel protective of him, that's all. I feel responsible. And I don't know what you're capable of."

"You've never known what I'm capable of."

"I know. I know. And when I'm only responsible for myself that doesn't matter."

"Because you have a tremendous faith in your own ability to cope with whatever life throws up at you."

"Of course."

"You are fearless, because you know it's all nonsense anyway."

"That is so."

"Well, you know, he may be your apprentice but you're not responsible for him. He's as free a being as any. He can take care of his own experiences."

"Don't lecture me."

"Why shouldn't I? You're a hypocrite."

"Just shut up and let him go." He said it in a tired, resigned sigh. "There's no history between the two of you. Just let him be. Please."

Zane gazed at the wizard lovingly.

"That was a pretty portrait you painted of me for this young man, here in my own home. It's only fair that I have the chance to give him my side of my own story."

Eonmor's face clouded with anger.

"No! It's of no consequence. You know well my opinions of your world view...you know well how little they affect your existence. Leave him be!"

"Or what, old friend? Are you going to challenge me? You're not even here in the flesh. Or are you going to do one of your appearing, disappearing tricks? Are you going to teach me to make ring portals? Better rush back home to your body, then."

"How close to godhead can you be if you go getting so emotional about the views of others?"

Zane raised his eyebrows pleasantly.

"You're the one spluttering with emotion. And besides, you will come, in time, to understand that a god is not barren of emotion. A god has access, and gives expression, to all emotions. I am not afraid of them. I will talk with your apprentice. You may leave, if you wish."

"Please, Zane!" shouted Eonmor. "Just for once, in the entirety of your misguided existence, let your will go unanswered! See what that feels like for a change."

The skin at the corners of Zane's eyes creased.

"Oh, I remember what that feels like well enough. It may have been a long time, but the memory visits me every day. I think this boy should have a chance to know that before he swallows the judgements that you've chewed, digested and regurgitated for him, clever gannet that you are."

"No, Zane!"

"I think you should definitely leave."

"NO! I'm warning you, Zane!"

Eonmor's hair and beard and clothes began to flap wildly in a wind unfelt by the emperor and the boy. The wizard reached out his hands and electrical energies began to play in the air about him, mounting in size and intensity, but he was leaning forward, straining against a force that was pushing him back, out of the window and into the air outside the tower.

"You're warning me, gannet? What are you warning me?"

"Zane!"

The wizard rose a few feet, the interplay of energy arcs flashing brighter, sparking more ferociously, building towards some cataclysmic release. And then, suddenly, his demeanor changed. The mounting electricity was released undirected, whip cracking away into the twilight. The wind died, his features drooped and he lowered his hands.

"Don't, Zane," he said, his voice a feather on the air.

Ben felt Zane's hand on his shoulder and realised that it was only the emperor's astral body that was there with them.

"Silly gannet," said Zane. "Your apprentice will be returned, and he'll be a great improvement on the ignorant child you have cosseted thus far." Eonmor's mouth opened wide but before it could vent the window disappeared, replaced by the remorseless polished stone of the tower. The wizard was shut outside.

"Don't listen to him!" screamed Eonmor, but his words bounced back

from the cold, dark surface of the tower to be swallowed by the cold, dark depths of the sky around him. An unsympathetic wind howled through his astral form, snaking its way up the tower to meet other invisible forces at the summit where they entwined, vortexing in an unseen stream into the heights.

Eonmor shifted the imaginary calling point of his center of gravity from the planet's core to the place he had last seen the boy and he set his feet down on the wall of the tower as though it were the ground, crouching to touch it lightly with his fingertips. It was as hard and unyielding as if he were there in his course body. Such a thing was not possible, not even in the world of unlimited possibilities that was the life of the unfettered soul, yet there it was.

Unless...

Immediately, involuntarily almost, he began to hypothesise a feasible explanation. There *was* a naturally occurring situation in which the movement of astral bodies was restricted...then he stopped himself. After three thousand years of adventure he trusted his instincts to prioritise courses of action in tight, or even desperate, spots. He appraised the current situation via a calculation that was cold enough, which involved facts as hard as the surface of the tower. Ben was on his own now. All the old man could do was tend to the foreseeable consequences that would result from the boy's being broken.

He paused in silence for one moment's worth of sentiment, his gift to himself, in which he crouched there on the tower wall, his head bowed, the sky brooding unpleasantly around him. Then he stood, crystallized his resolve and disappeared.

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Within the tower Zane was speaking and Ben was trying not to hear, endeavoring instead to recall his master's voice.

It is far easier to defend than to attack. This becomes especially pertinent when facing an opponent who is stronger than you are. The limpet resists the might of the ocean, not by pushing against it but by remaining where it is, remaining itself.

Ben called up the wizard's words of advice using a memory technique based on association and pattern recognition. His fear felt overwhelming. It tightened the back of his throat as though a shrinking circle of fishing line was trying to seal it. It made his head grow light, yet wobble uncertainly as if on a precipice. It was the fear of a heedless power that will not be resisted, nor reasoned with. Reflexively engaging the memory technique, letting the physical sensations of his fear blossom into an image, Ben came to the limpet besieged by the ocean and his master's words. In turn this metaphor unfolded like a paper puzzle revealing a small associated list of suggested defenses designed to protect against overwhelming power. They were categorised into force types. There amongst the list he identified the defence most likely to be effective against an aggressor who is vastly more long lived and has, therefore, a greatly superior store of will.

The room with the floating crystals was darker now, the two exits taken away. The light of the crystal constellations was subdued, supplemented by the glimmering from the illuminated pool Ben's astral presence was now sitting next to. He didn't know how he had come to be sitting there. The Emperor Zane was sitting facing him, his face under-lit and animated in the dimness, his shadowed eyes catching highlights from the wavering of the

webbed light on the water. Zane spoke and certain parts of Ben's mind heard the words. He felt the tang of the defensive magic he had selected and it tasted of fear and loneliness, for the biggest part of his psyche was at sea, below the surface, exposed to and swimming in the full scrutiny of Zane's personality, locked out from the security of his own limpet shell in which he had sealed his centre, yet unable to drift away from it. The shell was small enough, and camouflaged enough with the seabed, to go unnoticed, but could be expanded in need to incorporate and accommodate anything Ben might discover he wished to protect. For now it served him to hang there in the water and avert his gaze from it, let it remain unnoticed. The job of his first level awareness was to stay outside the shell, outside and alone, to distract the emperor, to resist his words by letting them flow through and out of him, ignore his persuasions, focus on getting back home, endure whatever needed to be endured, let the limpet be secret. What part of him was under the shell had no job but to remain there and keep quiet.

"Won't you speak with me?" asked Zane kindly. "Won't you simply talk with me, as one man to another, as one free being to another?"

I am back in my body...I am back in my body...

Ben had given up trying to close his astral eyelids. Forced to see Zane before him he did his best not to focus, did what he could to interpret the light and shadow of the emperor's face as an arbitrary pattern, the rise and fall of his voice as meaningless noise. On one or more levels he was succeeding, at least some of the time. On at least one level he saw, heard and understood everything with absolute clarity.

...I am back in my body...I am back in my body...

"You're not going to, are you?" Zane said this as a simple, reasonable acknowledgment, no irritation, accusation or regret present. "I understand."

...I am back in my body...I am back in my body...

The next words the emperor spoke were right inside Ben's mind. They came directly from the ocean surrounding him.

Just where is your body, anyway?

An image of the library flashed in Ben's mind, but before he could mentally articulate the name of its location he expanded the shell of his limpet, taking it inside, cutting off the knowledge from his outer awareness.

Ah, there is a pearl within you, said Zane. A pearl of knowledge where all your secrets lie. It's cold and hard and hidden, and you feel lonely and afraid, locked outside, locked outside from your true self. The voice sighed with knowing sadness. I know what that feels like.

...I am back in my body...I am back in my body...

But then, his face smiled warmly in the dark, it's a fair summation of the human condition. Don't you think?

...I am back in my body...I am back in my body...

The emperor's face studied him for a moment with an open, calmly alert expression. The optical effect created by the density of his magical will that so churned Ben's senses was mitigated by the darkness. He looked almost human.

You'll be back home soon enough, Ben. Don't worry. And please be assured: my intention was never to work any mischief on you. You could have come out from inside your limpet shell and you would have been quite safe. You know, in the scheme of things you do not register all that significantly in my world. You may

think I like to spend my time bringing all my great resources to bear on cracking the shells of unwilling and innocent victims but, believe it or not, I wanted only to share my story with a fellow grain of creation. I know loneliness and injustice as well as the lowliest that dwells within my dominions. And, just like that lonely individual, whoever he may be, I long only to be seen and to be understood. Yes, I aspire to godhood, but as a soul journeys along that route he does not become less human but more. You will find that out for yourself one day.

The emperor seemed almost to be talking to himself, half lost in reverie, accepting that he was, once again, to be kept at a distance, feared and misunderstood. There was a grim sadness there, but it did not seem to be self-pity, rather a recognition of prices to be paid in full knowing for growing ancient and powerful in the pursuit of grand endeavours.

The grip of Ben's shell softened and the warm waters of the ocean that was Zane flowed inside.

Where do you go for the truth on who a man is, what he has done, what he has become? To the man himself? Am I supposed to know myself whether I am righteous, evil or insane? Such distinctions are clearly relative. One only ever attributes evil, for example, to another, relative to one's own righteousness. But we are all of us righteous, in truth and in irony. We are righteous, not for our perfection but because we long for perfection. And our righteousness should be a cause of gladness for those of us who are infatuated with the idea of our own sin and imperfection, those of us who have put those items on like coats only to find that they weighed our souls down until they could barely crawl, let alone fly. Some people may believe themselves weak. Some readily believe they are insane or guilty or bad or useless. But just as nobody believes he is worthy enough to be counted as truly good (they may say to themselves and others that they are but in their heart of hearts they don't believe it), nobody believes he is worthy enough to be counted as evil. That would require another kind of perfection they are unwilling to claim. Those perceived by others as being evil are, when glimpsed through their own eyes, but prey to their own weaknesses – either that or righteous, but never evil.

But I am no self-despiser. Self-pity is not the only option for the earth-bound. When I look into the mirror I see no victim. Nor do I see a persecutor. I don't even see an emperor. I am only Zane. This measuring of the goodness or the evil of a man is for those who are still young, still listening to nursery tales about monsters rather than seeing with their own eyes what goes on before and inside them each and every day. For those that have the will to continue seeing the miraculous, even as they age, each day amazes, each day brings extraordinary discoveries. And everybody is equal to their experience. So, I am Zane – nothing more, nothing less. And I need nothing more. And I could be nothing less.

I was born in Zelenium, the spiretop dream of the elven realm, a slave, but a privileged slave. Some would say that made me lucky, some would argue the reverse. As I say, all distinctions are relative. And life is a terror for those who believe in luck. It was forty, zero and ninety-seven, almost four thousand years ago. What a time to be born into. The Age of Descent had been thickening like treacle for fifteen hundred years. The elven dream was painted as pristinely as ever, but the stench of what lay beneath had grown so pronounced the whole world could barely breathe for it. The least gifted of idiots could tell it couldn't continue much longer. As the machines of the dwarves discovered darker and darker depths beneath the world's skin in their attempt to hollow out the planet the elves delved deeper still into their own shadows, hollowing out their own souls in the pursuit of the darkest, most fermented of pleasures. Their enslavement in dark magic had inevitably grown from their unwavering belief in the idea that mortals could wield power, one over another. Year on year their self-made trap tightened its hold on the last vestiges of a nation's sanity. Such a brutish destiny for a people that had once been so beautiful. They had been a race on the cusp of ascension, but somehow, somewhere, fear had crept in. They had leapt greedily when they should have paused to help those below them. They had fallen.

But I should be careful of my oversimplifications. There was much in them that was still worth cherishing, even at that late stage. There were those amongst them that were not wholly lost, those who would not willingly see their own people descend further. Thanks to elves of that ilk I spent my childhood in slavery without really understanding what slavery was.

To be a privileged slave in a privileged house is a curious and contradictory thing. It was what I was born into and, therefore, the only thing I could have ex-

pected. Normality to a child is whatever they first encounter. So I spent my childhood in slavery and even now consider that I have never in all my life been so free as I was then.

I, my mother and my father were owned by Jansaraz Ilsimrae of the House of Zanteasan. Jansaraz was an elf rare to those times. While his brethren plummeted to the depths he climbed, stoically, ploddingly, reaching up and back to loftier times, entranced by the fine magical lore of previous ages. While his contemporaries puffed themselves up and scrabbled one over the other for the slightest tatters of status within their grasp he wilfully sought to be quiet and go as unnoticed as could be. He did not lie or conceal his work, but he made light of it, encouraging his peers and the outer reaches of his family to see him as an odd but harmless anomaly within their society: a quiet, studious elf with curiously warm blood. In a people ready, willing and able to indulge any and all of their whims, from the slightest to the most extreme, what was one eccentric individual? It was considered good taste, after all, to be openly selfish. This was honesty. This was integrity. If Jansaraz liked to lock himself up with his books pining after archaic magics that were painstakingly slow and ineffective then it was only right that he should indulge such perversion.

Thanks to the so-called eccentricity of Jansaraz I had as little idea, as a child, of my misfortune at being a slave as I had of my fortune at not being beaten daily as a matter of due course. It was only later I discovered that it was considered in those days an important rite of passage in the raising of a human slave from birth (at somewhere between five and eight years of age, depending on the child's development) to force him or her to witness the torture of their parents. Thus was the psychology of the slave kept strong and keen, handed down as a family debt. Since I brought down the elder races it has been speculated that I must have been treated most terribly by the elves, to have summoned so much passion and determination, to have risen as I did and strike them such a blow. But it was not the receipt of their cruelty that made me different from the millions that went before me – how could it be? – but the uncommon kindness of one elf and his immediate family, sparing me from the full excesses of their kind and allowing me to believe I was as valid a being as any one of them.

This belief abided in me long enough, grew strong enough, so that when the time came for me to become worldly, to learn how things really were beyond my owner's walls, it was able to survive that shock. By the time the love bloomed between myself and Jaeteahza, Jansaraz's youngest daughter, I was old enough to know that the rest of elfkind saw little more, when they looked at me, than a trained beast.

Jaeteahza had been away for some years. After protectively schooling her at home until she was twelve Jansaraz had sent her to some distant and sympathetic friends who lived on an obscure island in the southern ocean so she might be kept from the worst ravages of elven society during her most vulnerable years. She was younger than me. When she left it was as my adoring childhood friend, my mascot almost, who I had initially missed yet promptly forgotten. When she returned it was as a sweetly innocent, disarmingly knowing elven goddess. She was at once a girl and a woman, delighting in her own beauty, the beauty of the world, the beauty of those she held dear. The darkness, of the world and of her own people, was not unknown to her, but she shone through it. I cannot say she was untouched by it, for the angels of existence cannot be as they are by cloaking themselves in denial, by being untouched. No, she knew the world's torment and she knew her own, but she was open enough to life that its darkness could flow right through her without leaving a trace. It was when she was faced with the very deepest of shad-

ows that her smile would emerge at its brightest, her knowledge of love would be most strongly affirmed. Sometimes to look upon her, simply to think on her, was to feel as though a sledgehammer had been taken to my heart.

I too had changed during the years of her absence. Compared to an elf I was still slow and clumsy, my features heavy and unrefined, but I had been given little awareness of this and tended to walk unselfconsciously, with my head as high as my owner's. Jaeteahza saw my lack of vanity, my inevitable unconcern for status. She saw the simplicity of my soul. I had assisted Jansaraz in his studies and experiments and I had come to be a mirror for him, reflecting the higher virtues he mourned the loss of in the elves. I helped him with his growing proficiency in the use of light magic, my attention entirely held. Sometimes I was the subject upon whom he practised; sometimes I was even able to help him see his errors. I learned things no elf had practised for millennia.

In her absence Jaeteahza had also been studying the higher aspects of ancient elven magical lore, but from the female perspective. In private we shared what we had learned, combined the two strands of wisdom and knowledge, took flights through inner landscapes created by our joined imaginations, exploring each others' psyches together, each emboldening the other to travel further and face more than we would have alone. I swam with her in the pool at the centre of her heart, where an oak tree grows on the bank, a tree house hidden in its boughs. Swallows dissected the blue sky and an old woman dwelt in the woods, never seen but often heard making a strange and haunting music. Jaeteahza touched the flower of my childhood that grows on a mountainside inside me overlooking a land of valleys, forests and rivers, where villages, towns, cities and countries of many different designs are laid out and easily visible, and planets of all sizes and colours can be seen in the daytime sky. We walked together on a mysterious shore, whose location and meaning was unknown to us, and the rolling of the waves whispered something in a language we didn't understand. We lost each other in a labyrinthine marketplace where each stall sold identical goods and the traders kept their faces hidden behind striped cloths. Though we couldn't see each other we could still hear each other, but the landmarks we identified for the purpose of re-meeting appeared in identical pairs that led us further and further apart, and it was only when we stopped speaking altogether and closed our eyes and wandered aimlessly that we finally felt the touch of each others' fingertips and we were back together. We faced many terrors together, knowing fully they were but reflections of what we feared in the material realm, which in turn were but reflections of what we feared in ourselves.

We understood well enough that were the world to find out about our love it would mean an agonising death for me, and perhaps for her too. Instinctively we kept it from our families. Though they loved us and would never harm us, it was not conceivable that they would allow the relationship to continue. Simple common sense could not countenance the idea. Though in elven society humans might have been coolly deemed useful for the practise of all manner of sexual deviancies – for as commodities we were wholly at the disposal of our owners – the thought of actual love flowing between the two species was beyond taboo; it was an abomination. To continue, we knew, was pure folly.

But then, what is not folly? And where love weakens us in some respects it makes us strong in others, where it blinds us and renders us foolish it also galvanises and makes us resourceful. Thus are we transformed by love in the face of fear and made fit to ascend beyond our beginnings. Through acts of skill, passion and ingenuity that dazzle me to this day we managed to keep our love affair alive and undiscovered for three years.

As far as the outside world was concerned our discretion was impeccable. In public Jaeteahza treated me with the most studied, contemptuous condescension that indicated she had a particular attachment to possessing and tormenting me. This was good psychology for, by the ornate etiquettes of the day, she was claiming me as her own private pet. It would be disrespectful for other elves to interfere with this twisted pleasure of hers by tormenting me themselves. Thus did she protect me. Our families suspected, of course, but the bonds within Jansaraz's walls were strong enough to cope with most misdemeanours if they were not openly flaunted. Who could complain, after all, when the head of the house himself was perpetrating acts designed to utterly overthrow the current society? And indeed, it was Jansaraz's own indiscretion, not ours, that proved the undoing of the entire family.

It is difficult to account for and I have only my best guesses to guide me, but I was young and didn't see all of it. It seemed to me at the time that a madness descended on him, for when his activities finally came under serious scrutiny he did the most foolish of all things: he acted guilty. Jansaraz knew better than this. The obvious course of action was to be completely open about everything he had done and only keep his intent to himself. Throwing a little scornful enquiry at those who were so interested in the private lives of others would have been the standard way to misdirect attention in such a situation. But instead he tried to cover up what he had been doing while, simultaneously, continuing with his experiments covertly. Perhaps he had fallen in love with his work just as I had fallen in love with his daughter, and his fear of losing it impaired his judgement. Perhaps the work itself had unbalanced him. Many of the magics required self-knowledge at a deep level for the light frequencies to be tuned correctly, and there was nobody experienced who could guide him. My strongest suspicion is that he was planning something even more radical than I or the rest of us who shared his private thoughts knew of, something far reaching and profound, something that would save the world from the elves and the elves from themselves.

But I don't know. To this day I don't know.

Whatever the mysterious causes of his actions were, the consequences were plain enough for all to see. There was nothing particularly unlawful in what he was doing, but when an elf of long established wealth and resources showed signs of weakness it was a simple given that rivals would move in to show their own vitality and put the wretch out of his misery. The vultures began to circle and Zelenium society watched with interest to see who would claim the lion's share of Jansaraz's family riches once he discovered the good grace to be crushed.

For a time it looked as though he might survive to continue his work by jettisoning lands and properties voluntarily, diminishing his wealth and standing but keeping his family intact. It was a manner of resignation the elves found particularly distasteful, but it would take a scandal on a significant scale to grant his enemies enough free rein to challenge him with 'eloem symarene', a state of such disgrace that the entirety of ones possessions, and indeed the dependent members of ones family, could be claimed as trophies by anyone who could show they were more fit to have them. It was a challenge rarely employed for it could backfire severely, but on those occasions it was executed it was relished with utmost glee by the jaded palettes of elven society. When symarene challenges were successful the challenger would be granted possession of whatever of the loser's belongings they desired. What was left became available on a first come first served basis to any and all members of whichever caste the disgraced had previously belonged to. The protocols regulating the procedure were elaborate and time consuming – not to ensure that justice was served and dignity maintained but rather that the sport could

be prolonged and properly savoured. On the final day of the dispersion of property the disgraced was allowed to reclaim a sword of their choice and was put out onto the street. Many classics of elven literature had dealt in the subject of the betrayed victim of symarene who had fought his way back from disgrace to reclaim what was his and inflict a just fate on his challenger. Such a romantic and heroic feat had yet to be witnessed in reality.

Two years passed by and things seemed to have quieted down. We were all now living in a much humbler dwelling, but Jansaraz had managed to keep his foot on the lowest rung of his caste⁹. He had lost the pretence of many friendships and avoided fostering any new ones so that he might pursue his work without having to explain himself to others. He had as little to do with elf society as possible, just about managing to remain on speaking terms with the neighbours. After a year of harmonious work, cocooned in a peace that was welcome, though it felt artificial, a held breath in which we all dreamed of a time and place where we could openly be ourselves, Jansaraz was suddenly and unexpectedly visited by one of our neighbours who was, disturbingly, accompanied by a representative of the Kingstate's Inspectorate. There could be no happy reason for this.

The neighbour, an elf called Alraezol, had shown himself to be a helpful if unimaginative individual when we had arrived in the area. This was a set of qualities Jansaraz had been glad to be met by at a time when friends were in short supply while the market for curiosity in his affairs was bloated. The official was called Molinzast. He was a grey-looking individual, stamped with the look of the bureaucrat, one of those rare elves that had allowed himself to become flabby. As a pair they were distinctly underwhelming, yet any servant of the Kingstate could prove to be a harbinger of catastrophe and my guts had churned with anxiety accordingly.

Alraezol declared he had a matter of utmost importance to discuss and that it was important that the entire household was present. Jaeteahza and I girded ourselves magically, sensing each others unease from different parts of the building. In the reception chamber where Alraezol and Molinzast were waiting to impart their business I kept to the back of the gathering, close to the door, ready to flee at the first sign that our secret was out.

We had long prepared for such an occasion and maintained two well-provisioned boats that could simultaneously hide us and embody the initial stage of an escape at a moment's need. The location of one was known only to Jaeteahza, the location of the other to me. In this way we had even protected ourselves from each other in the event of only one of us being caught. We had the means with which to disguise ourselves, magical and mundane. We knew psycho-magi effects that would facilitate our slipping by the awareness of the most ardent of pursuers. We had contingency plans to cover the occasion of our separation, places we could meet, ways in which we could leave messages for each other. And we had devised all manner of measures we might take, individually or together, as a response to being taken captive.

Our precautions were far from melodramatic. Elves are arrogant, but with good reason. Even at the height (or should that be the nadir?) of their decadence, they remained an atrociously dangerous people, even on an individual basis, who feared little in the world save each other. This internal caution kept the elf nation honed, even when there was nothing else to threaten them. So there could be no room for complacency on our part. Avoiding apprehension at all costs could be the only primary goal. If this failed there should be no underestimating those forces that had been sent to detain us. We would employ the most decisive of actions

⁹ What caste was he in?

within our means to clear our way to freedom and we would do so without hesitation. Whether it was an army, an elite squad or a single champion, the assumption would be that we must use full force, and at the soonest possible moment.

Despite all our preparation, when I saw that Alraezol was only accompanied by one out of condition bureaucrat, and that they were paying neither myself or Jaeteahza the slightest attention, I did relax by a degree, guessing Jansaraz had incurred some legal process through another act of his eccentricity. My feeling was that some serious revelation was at hand that would have far-reaching and probably dire consequences for the family, but not one that would require immediate fight or flight. I had feared complacency so much, guarded against it so diligently, that I had inevitably written its invitation in my own hand.

Molinzast informed the gathering that Alraezol, acting as a representative of Zymogen of the House of Zardia (Zymogen had led the inspection against Jansaraz from the beginning and evidently still felt compelled to finish what he had started), was officially challenging Jansaraz with eloem symarene. Should Jansaraz fail the challenge his properties, his wife and all his daughters would be claimed.

An awful stillness drowned the room and I felt Jaeteahza's mind touching mine, prompting me to brace myself for action. Despite the ways in which I had disciplined myself through the practise of elven light magic I was no elf and fear gaped inside me like a gorge. When Jansaraz finally managed to ask in a wisp of a voice what the grounds of the challenge were Alraezol stepped forward and pointed at Jaeteahza, then at me.

My fear reached a crescendo, rising and engulfing me. It was everything, my entire existence, and yet, at the same time, it was nothing for I leapt into the air without pause, propelled by the automatic imperatives I had magically branded into my own third level awareness, and I hung there, incandescent, a heated wire. All of my learning turned within my inner eye, a tremendous luminescent organicism of clockwork, each interconnecting cog a magical understanding, each movement of the mechanism triggering sequences and consequences, unravelling fate. I cast a beam of radiance at the neighbour and the bureaucrat that was drawn directly from the seventh level. In my estimation this was overkill – no unprepared, dark-hearted creature would be able to function in the presence of those frequencies, indeed were they dark-hearted enough they would wither and die. But what would that matter? Symarene had been declared. The elf nation had done with us, the entire family. It was time to look to our very survival.

Alraezol, who had spied on us for pay, lit up, burning from the inside out with white and green flames that emerged from his skin like feathers. He couldn't scream for his vocal chords had been seared away. He stared and gaped and the conflagration illuminated his mouth and eye sockets. Then his outer form evaporated with a hiss. The colours of his spirit spiralled amidst a shower of sparks and were gone. Molinzast observed this with an arched brow but did not himself deign to burn. Instead an indigo aura had become visible around him, beyond which could be glimpsed the ghost of a jewel-bedizened cave. It seemed utterly impossible, but he was protected.

The room suddenly filled with a dark, cold blue green night water that only Jansaraz, Jaeteahza and I could see. I watched as my owner and my lover, each submerged, gasped and crumpled to the floor. The energies they had been silently gathering over the last few seconds, as a backup should my attack fail, worked against them, taking their consciousness with it as it was snuffed out by the biting cold. As the water reached my feet I cast my inner eye over the offensive and defensive options I had fitted together so intricately, quickly following causes and effects to the proper countermeasure, and there in the shining, moving, multidimen-

sional schematic I had built inside me, for the protection of all I held dear, I arrived at the proper place only to find a gap. And there was Molinzast's dark emerald and sapphire water bubbling up through it. The cold passed through and beyond me as though my very purpose was to conduct it and I fell into freezing darkness, more owned than I had ever been.

What to say of the days that followed immediately from that meeting? Only as little as possible. All that Jansaraz had owned or cared for now came into the possession of Zymogen: his house, his wife, his daughters, my Jaeteahza. We were all his playthings, save for Jansaraz himself who, in time-honoured fashion, would be put out onto the street, a single sword his only possession. But, before this could happen it was decided in due process that, because of our 'weakness for archaic sorceries that maligned the elf nation' Jansaraz, Jaeteahza and myself should have our eyes put out and our tongues removed. It was for the public good and was carried out with all urgency. In addition to this, Molinzast was ordered to implement whatever precautions he deemed necessary to ensure our magical abilities were irretrievably crippled. By the end of that process we were barely alive and various apothecaries and healers were brought from the torture gardens of the king state itself, appointed the charge of rendering us healthy enough to endure our ordeal in its fullness.

On the closing day of the proceedings, after all of Jansaraz's belongings had been accounted for and claimed, Zymogen celebrated by way of providing a spectacle for the enjoyment of Zelenium. On a sharp spring day when the blossoms of the snowlace were caught on the beams of the morning sun Jaeteahza was manacled to a post in front of the Zardian Pavilion in Azaere Park so that she might hear me tortured to death while the crowd offered ingenious suggestions as to what might make me most vocal. As my pain and anguish was thrown into sharp relief by the nearness of my love and the proximity of my death, along with the knowledge that one would separate me from the other, a tiny, lost fraction of my being simultaneously wandered through the sunlit rooms of a large, unknown, empty house by the sea. Even as my body twisted in spasms and thrashed against its bonds, even as my incoherent howls incited moments of hushed appreciation from the crowd, a speck of my awareness walked untouched from room to room, knowing nothing of identity, knowing nothing of time or place, knowing only daylight and stillness and a deep, resonating peace that was all but complete, disturbed only slightly by an elusive curiosity, a longing for something it could not identify.

It was true that, because of the skilful measures that Molinzast had employed to ensure our magical abilities had been completely shredded, neither I nor Jaeteahza could meet any more in our shared inner landscape. And yet, just as my defences against Molinzast had been cursed by a gap in my understanding that had allowed his spite and malice to pour through, so too was Molinzast's appreciation of our craft deficient. He believed our light was no match for the density of his power. He believed our warmth was simple weakness in comparison to the conviction of his coldness. What he did not know, and could not have understood, was that there was a single grain of my soul that was also a grain of Jaeteahza's¹⁰.

It was a strange thing, a thing we had not expected to find, had not looked for, had not even dreamed of. It was not a thing we had created ourselves, consciously, deliberately or accidentally. It was not that we had intended this shared atom of being: our souls were our souls; they could only be as they had ever been. It was not

¹⁰ Awesome concept! Leave this idea to be reprised in Children of Mab when Aggraban has his after life experience – use the scale of the cosmos to represent the scale of the soul, a single atom being to the universes what a grain of the soul is to the soul. Wow!

that we had taken a grain each and merged them together; it was not a promise or a bond of love. It was only something we had discovered in our long days of soul searching together – a tiny, barely perceptible miracle in an existence that was nothing but miracle, a thing that had always been there, since the dawn of dawns. The mystery of it had occupied us constantly since we had encountered it, and we had made many conjectures on its meaning, but there had been no one to enlighten us.

Now, as the life bled from my body on an oaken x-frame in the sunlight, the last vestige of my soul to remain in contact with the material world wandered through the anonymous rooms of the sunlit house, unconcerned, and it finally understood where it was. Molinzast had done an excellent job of ensuring that Jaeteahza and I would not be able to achieve any communion on the inner planes. We would not be able to connect with each other in the worlds we had discovered together, and even if we did, we would not be able to communicate. I touched the walls of the sunlit house by the sea and suddenly knew that the house itself was Jaeteahza, the fragment of her that was also me. And I knew that from where she hung on her post, sobbing for my suffering and for the loss of me, there was a distant fraction of her that stood on a beach, motionless, at peace, looking out across the sea, feeling an invisible presence move within her, walking from room to room, touching her walls.

My body was taken to the gardens at the back of the pavilion, thrown onto a compost heap and left to rot. Jansaraz was given his sword and wandered through the park, blind, mute and all but broken, the crowds bowing to him as he passed and calling out to him, telling him that they were bowing. He was found dead on a street the next morning, a knife wound passing through his temples, his sword gone. Jaeteahza was taken by Zymogen, back to his house, to be kept as a trinket, to be enjoyed, toyed with, to be used for bitter pleasures, to be a cup of suffering that he might sip from at his leisure.

So why is it that we come here? Why is it we come into the material realm, the illusion of separation, if the first thing we wish to do upon hearing of our eternal, divine nature is leave at the soonest opportunity? So many enlightenment seekers: running around, seeking to escape the wheel of return, desperate to ascend themselves off the planet – not for the glory of awakening in itself but as a base means of escape! Oh, beautiful children of light!

It is a reflex, that is all. The closer one comes to escape the more clearly one sees there is no prison but the one we would take with us anyway. The closer one comes to heaven the more easily one realises they were there all along – they always had been. For there is no other place, except in dreams and fictions. The language of life, with its happenings and accidents, its pains and torments, is a language we invent ourselves for the soul purpose of telling ourselves stories.

In the tale I had written to myself my body waited patiently behind the Zardian Pavilion for the final part of my soul to leave so it might decompose in peace. But I was happy in my house by the sea, and had no intention of leaving it. Days and nights passed by, and it was not until the sky and the sea outside blackened, and great fissures opened up, gulping the sands and the ocean down, and the entire world outside Jaeteahza's windows broke up and fell away into space and we were cast adrift in the cosmos, that I understood I must return to save her. It was not hate that brought me back to life, but love. Dragging a reluctant spirit back into this world I reclaimed my shattered body and began to breathe once more. Somehow or other I would return to Jaeteahza and free her, though, for the time being,

there was nothing I could do beyond lying in the filth and sighing weakly at a thousand agonies.

8

Ben's face cried from time to time, but other than that his body remained unchanged, continuing to sit, cross-legged and unmoving, on its cushion from the palace of Abarr in the centre of the moon orbiting Murnasta. Eonmor completed his contingency plans with a moan of released exertion and lowered himself to his knees on the stone floor. Then he allowed himself to fall forward across his own cushion, which was no longer levitating. The old man's limbs trembled. A sweat slicked his brow. His eyes were hooded with heavy lids, though he kept them cracked open and directed towards the boy while he waited for ten minutes to recover a regular breathing pattern. Muscles and joints complaining, he mustered the energy to lift and reposition himself so that he was facing Ben properly while he reclined on the cushion.

Still the boy did not return to his body.

"Huh," said the wizard in a small tone of disbelief. Another twenty minutes passed by and he fell asleep.

When he awoke it was with a start and the certain knowledge that something was wrong. And it was. Forty minutes had passed by and still Ben's body was sitting there, unmoved and unoccupied. This was absurdly impossible and, on his second level awareness, Eonmor began to piece together the beginnings of several hypotheses that might begin to point him in the direction of understanding how Zane was detaining the boy's soul. On his first level awareness he shifted uncomfortably and tried not to gaze directly at these unformed pan-dimensional musings and their attendant implications that seemed to gather around, wrapt with curiosity, whispering to and hushing each other. On his first level awareness he did what he could to restrict himself to decision making on a practical level, and this meant little more now than ensuring he was present and alert when his apprentice eventually opened his eyes, and taking things from there.

Another hour passed. The wizard sat there and waited. When his thoughts became too disturbed he reached into a portal hole and took a book from one of the shelves in Solfar, an old favourite of his about a soldier caught up in a war in which he did not want to fight. When he grew hungry he produced a snack of egg noodles with pork in a sauce he had discovered in the Lost Kingdoms. But mostly he just sat there, noting and releasing his impatience, noting and releasing, and watching the occasional tears of the boy that glistened like slug trails.

As they were situated inside the core of a moon there was no natural light to turn the shadows and mark the passing of time, but Eonmor's internal clock was precise and he knew that three hours and thirty-four minutes had passed since Ben had left his body when the boy's eyes finally opened.

The wizard stiffened ever so slightly, then told his body to relax. The apprentice yawned and stretched his arms. As he did this he looked at his master with a curiously still expression, then looked up and around at the stone chamber.

"Where is everything?" he said.

The chamber was empty but for himself, the wizard, their cushions, Eonmor's book and four floating lanterns: one in each corner. And on the floor, one on either side of Eonmor, his staff and Berringstrom lay, each within reach. Bereft of the miscellany of magical artefacts, the stacks of packing cases, chests and barrels, the deep shelves holding sacks, jars and loose items of startling vintage and origin, the chamber seemed cavernous and sad, echoing with loss and thicker than ever with the scent of nostalgia. Angling his head to look beyond Eonmor the boy spied the entrance and the library beyond. The contents of the library were no longer there, at least not in the portion visible to him. The books, the very bookcases, were gone. Only bare structure remained.

"You've emptied the library."

He said it with the mildest of surprise, as though the wizard had redecorated while he'd been away and chosen a colour scheme only slightly unusual.

"Yes," said Eonmor.

"How come?"

The wizard cocked his head and narrowed his eyes, studying the boy for signs of something. It was a few moments before he responded.

"It's a precaution against Zane acting through you."

Ben received this with little perceptible emotion, not coldly but with the equanimity of somebody who has just surfaced from a long, involved dream and has yet to invest wholeheartedly in the waking world. The wizard's voice rumbled in the chamber as he murmured, "I'm sorry, Ben."

His apprentice's brow was smooth and untroubled. He seemed to the old man like somebody whose breathing is relaxed but whose heart is beating rapidly. His pupils were dilated, yet when he looked at Eonmor part of his gaze was turned inward. He was processing some line of thought and seemed in no need to rush it. Eventually he spoke.

"You're sorry?" Eonmor didn't move or answer. "What are you sorry for?"

The scene froze for a time with not an eyelid between them blinked, and then the old man let a breath out into a sigh.

"I'm sorry I didn't take better care of you. I'm sorry I didn't protect you from Zane. I'm sorry you are here now and I'm filled with dread at what might have been done to you. I'm sorry that I am afraid of what he may do through you." The old man's features softened into a wistful smile. "It's a lot to be sorry for, and, as you know, I like to pride myself on avoiding sorrow at all times. 'Sorry' – yuk! Such a miserable thing to be. Yet here I am."

He lifted his staff from the floor beside him and held it lightly, absently following its knots and gnarls with his fingertips.

"Let me ask you, my friend, and please forgive the question: I'm assuming Zane has corrupted you in some way. Are you able and willing to tell me about it?"

As he finished the questions his hands became still on the staff and his eyes became fixed on his apprentice. Ben's eyebrows climbed his brow, but

gently. Still he had the air of one who has just emerged from deep meditation and is largely invisible to negative thinking.

"Corrupted? I don't think so...I...it was an intense experience. I don't feel corrupted. I feel...changed..."

"Ah."

"But it's not what you think...I don't think."

"No?"

"No." There was a hesitant crack in the boy's voice. "I mean...I suppose I could have been fooled. I suppose it's possible. But it doesn't feel like that."

"What does it feel like?"

"It feels like..." Ben searched for a way to articulate it. He cut his sentence off and started again. "He *has* tried to influence me. Yes. He has tried...and he *has* succeeded. But it wasn't by sorcery, at least, not exactly... unless he did something I'm not aware of..." His face crumpled into confusion. "I suppose if he did plant triggers somewhere in my lower awareness I wouldn't remember it anyway, would I?"

"No," said the wizard. "Why don't you tell me what happened? We'll see what we can do about checking you for infection after that. But tell me, what do you remember? How did he treat you?"

Ben took a deep breath.

"He showed me his life." As he recalled it the boy looked more self-contained than the wizard had seen him. He looked and sounded matured. "His voice was inside me...only, that's not quite right. No, he took *me* inside *him*. That's it. He showed me his memories and I experienced them as though they were my own experiences. I was there when he fell in love with Jaeteahza, but it seemed like it was me falling in love with her. I learned about ancient elven light practises with Jansaraz. I killed the neighbour, Alraezol, who brought Molinzast to the house. I was tortured until they thought I was dead. And I came back. I came back. Physically I was weak, a wreck, but my magical will had grown hard and keen and all but indomitable. Though I had no eyes I could see with my inner sight. Though I had no tongue I could make my inner voice heard. I sought out one of Zymogen's enemies, Anmaezer, and persuaded him I could be of service. If he would take me in, restore me physically, I would help him to bring down Zymogen. All I wished for was my Jaeteahza, freed from her torment.

"I remember the cell beneath Anmaezer's house where his wife nursed me back to health. Each of the key members of the household came to me in private, each seeking to influence me and secure my assistance in their private plots against each other. I remember my own plotting and scheming, all of the plans I drew up to get me closer and closer to my aim of rescuing Jaeteahza.

"I remember my trip across the Diamond Sea under the guise of an elf noble to find Enast, the elf witch, who would help me grow a new pair of eyes and a tongue.

"I remember looking out over the plains of Ileum, all of Anzaryn on fire behind me, my comrades celebrating their new warrior hero.

"I remember the siege of the Zelenium Palace, how Zymogen had fled there for sanctuary, clinging to Jaeteahza as though to a talisman that would spare him his fate. He would never have been spared, but the elves could have been. They could have lived. But King Zol decided not.

"I remember standing and watching as they dragged Jaeteahza out onto the palace wall and began to peel her skin off in front of me and my army. They didn't even try to negotiate. They had resigned to losing and, in the noble fashion of the elves, had chosen suicide...suicide with spite. My comrades tried to drag me away but I would never have abandoned her. She felt my presence as I felt every one of her pains...

"I remember..." but Ben's voice trailed off and new tears dripped from his eyelashes and his shoulders shook silently. After searching the fabric creased at his knees for some solace he lifted his gaze to the ceiling, his eyes seeing four thousand year old memories he had not known the day before. Then he returned his attention to the old man.

"Do you really think he has tricked and used me? Because I feel like I love him."

The wizard thought awhile, looking as still and self possessed as the boy had when he had returned.

"It's important that I acknowledge that Zane's abilities have gone far beyond my understanding and my fears. I can no longer consider myself qualified to guess at what he is capable of or what he is motivated by. I once thought I might be qualified. I'm not."

He let the admission hang in the air, bowing his head slightly beneath it, closing his eyes, eventually smiling softly.

"What will we do?" asked Ben, when the old man lifted his head once more.

"What will we do? Well, what do we always do? What do I always say when you ask me that question?"

Ben looked from side to side, wide eyed, to show he didn't know.

"Come," said Eonmor. "You can't tell me you've come this far to forget such rudiments. I know it's not true."

Suddenly it came back to the boy.

"We be ourselves," he said.

The wizard nodded.

"We be ourselves. No matter what fears may prompt us to do otherwise. Now tell me: did Zane show you his life in its entirety, or just parts of it?"

"It felt like an entire lifetime...but it didn't feel like four thousand years. I think it must have been just parts."

"Let's be precise. You said you remember Zane learning elven light magic under Jansaraz. Can you recall any of it now?"

"I don't remember the research and the experiments, but I remember some of the schematics Zane put together...at least, I remember parts of them."

"Then you were not shown his entire life..." Eonmor paused, a thought occurring. "...or at least you can only remember being shown what Zane has selected that you to remember. Mmm."

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I am paranoid, and that may be a good thing and it may not be. I am filled with self-doubt. He has done something to you that serves him. How malign a thing it is escapes me utterly. How tangible or subtle a thing it is is beyond me. All guesswork leads to second-guessing which leads to further self-doubt. It may be that he has imprinted so much of his own memory onto your awareness that, at a given trigger, you might

be persuaded to believe that you are him, at least for a time. Certainly you feel more sympathetic to him already, don't you?"

"He's been through so much. All he ever wanted was to be free to love."

"Uh huh. Indeed." Eonmor took up Berringstrom and rose to his feet. "We will be ourselves. It will be enough or it won't. Ultimately it will be enough. Ultimately. Stand up, Ben."

Ben's cushion sank to the floor and he climbed cautiously to his feet. The wizard held the sword and the staff in a state of readiness.

"Ben, I've been busy while you were gone. The first thing I did, before I emptied the library and destroyed the inner sanctums at Nazaride and Zaneb..."

"You destroyed the inner sanctums!"

"Yes. Of course. What would be the point in removing the original if the copies remained?"

"I suppose so..."

"Before I got rid of the libraries I first encased you in a spectral cage." The boy looked about him as if expecting to see signs of it. "It's not there now. That was just a hasty first measure to guard against your sudden return. Once I had you caged I got on with the removal of the libraries. After that was completed and you, remarkably, were still not back, I set something up around you a little more elaborate." Again the boy looked around him but there was still no sign of any magical enclosure. "Having heard your story I fear that whatever precautions I put in place will be insufficient." The old man gasped, exasperated. "I cannot worry about it any further."

"What *have* you put in place?" asked Ben.

"It's a ninth level frequency knot. I've attuned it, as best I could, to your vibration. In a moment I will ask you to walk towards me. When you cross the threshold anything accompanying you that is not a genuine part of your vibration should become entangled in the knot. In this way I had hoped to satisfy myself that you were uncorrupted."

"You 'had hoped?'"

"Yes. Now I'm not so sure. In fact I'm not sure at all...but nothing I have can make me certain."

A dark, damp fist clamped Ben's insides.

"So...even if I pass through the knot, you'll still doubt me?"

Reluctantly the wizard nodded.

To Ben it seemed as though a cloud passed in front of the sun. Though there was no window in the chamber the space seemed to grow dark and grey and hopeless.

"Master?"

"Ben..." said Eonmor, "...now you know why I am so sorry."

The boy stood there, his arms limp at his sides.

"So, what will make you sure?" His voice was shrill and needy. Eonmor shook his head and tried not to look away.

"Nothing. There is nothing."

The boy's eyes filmed over, his head moved erratically.

"It's my fault, my boy. It's my fault."

Ben started to walk towards Eonmor, his palms turning towards his master.

"Wait, Ben! If there is anything foreign inside you it will cause you tremendous pain as it gets caught in the knot!"

But the boy had already blundered right up to the old man, untouched by any magical snare, and was now throwing his arms around him, burying his head in his chest and sobbing disconsolately. Eonmor stood stunned for a moment, wanting to return the embrace yet unwilling to let go of his weapons. Eventually his face creased and bowed and he released his breath. Letting the staff and the sword fall to the floor, where they clanged and rattled like monuments toppling, he wrapped his arms around the boy who had been his apprentice.

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Every little corner of the house, every little stretch of path winding through the woods of Solfar, every glade, every length of river bank, every tree and every stone seemed redolent with a hundred layered memories as Ben took his last walk around them. The world shone beautiful, mocking and accentuating the granite ball of grief that was rolling inexorably into his own depths, crushing things as it went.

He came to his favourite elm tree and sat beneath it. The scene before him, the gap in the trees through which could be spied the rocky side of the Urwell Gorge on the far side of the river, shimmered in his mind's eye as though through a heat haze, the numberless other times he had seen that place, dressed in all the different cloaks of the turning seasons, wavering, one atop the other. He remembered the old man standing here on a spring day and talking, inspired by the blossoms somehow, about his research into the elgs, an interest he dismissed as a mere hobby but which caused his eyes to shine as he spoke of it. At the time Ben had barely been able to bring himself to believe in the existence of such quaint beings, the inhabitants of a hundred bedtime stories, or perhaps it had been the thought of such a powerful and noble wizard being so captivated by the idea of them that had seemed so incongruous and charming.

"Will you take me to see them?" he had asked his master.

"Of course, of course. I can't wait to do so."

"Then let's go now!"

Eonmor had sighed dreamily.

"When the time is right, my boy. When the time is right. It would do no good to take you to see them now, for you would not actually see them."

Ben had refused to ask the question, something he liked to do when he knew the wizard's own enthusiasm would not allow him to remain silent on a subject. This approach of Ben's always tickled his master and, because of that, it tickled him too.

"No, Ben, only when your soul bubbles through you as carefree and joyful as a mountain spring in the spring will you be able to visit with the elgs."

Ben had thought on this carefully.

"Aren't I at all carefree?" he had asked and the old man had knelt down and put a hand on his head and the skin had crinkled at the side if his eyes and his voice had been soft and warm.

"Don't worry about it. Many children are burdened with heaviness and shadow from the beginning of their lives and we are wont to call it a shame and a tragedy. But I was a child like you once, a child who had seen great darkness, and I had to become a man before I could rediscover the child-

hood within me. Now that childhood bubbles out of me gladly, every day, and I understand at last the reason for the shadow.”

When he had asked his master what the reason for shadow was Eonmor had just shrugged and said that he couldn’t really put it into words.

“Don’t worry, you’re fine. And you’ll get there in due course, just like a bubbling spring gets there.”

Only now, of course, Ben realised he never would get to see the elgs with his master, and as light-filled as the wood before him was, he felt only the sensation of endless, silent falling, into places beyond the reach of sun, star or moon.

The day faded.

Back at the house Eonmor was still in the kitchen, packing Ben’s rucksack with every useful thing he could think of that might be crammed through the portal rings sewn into its pockets. Wanting only to go in and spend what final time he could with his master Ben found an unhappy impulse overrode him and his legs carried him upstairs to his room.

Sitting on his bed he tried to discern what he was.

Through the branches of the trees outside his window he saw the sky was indigo green with the final vestiges of the sunset’s afterglow. Sporadically concealed and revealed by the leaves, the light of Vaezea the Elven Star, that was really a planet, sparkled brightly, winking at him, singing silently to him a song of the cosmos, of great distances, of light and dark and colours and cold and fire, of age upon age of nighttime skies unrolling around the womb of man. A breeze brought the smell of the forest indoors, triggering more memories of times past, summer nights, a childhood spent and gone, of innumerable worlds seen through the windows of unnumbered portals, and he weighed them against his new memories of times more distant in which events were not so sharply focussed but were carried out on a far greater scale. He cast his inner eye over the schematic of knowledge Eonmor had helped him begin to construct. It was small, the slightest foreshadowing of a lifetime’s work, and it was faint: etched out in turquoise lines, symbols and pictograms that wavered as though suspended under blue green waters, waiting to catch a shaft of sunlight from above in order to be seen clearly. When he looked at his memory of Zane’s inner schematic, a conglomerate of the ones he had put together during the different phases of his life – slave, rebel leader, emperor – Ben saw something that seemed to span and light up the cosmos itself like it was the mother of all galaxies. And though it was rife with gaps, inconsistencies, incompatibilities and indecipherable elements, yet the turning of its parts was a glory to behold, the depths of its interconnections a dream to be inspired by, the fractal correlations of its endlessly arrayed tiers a vision to be mesmerised by and lost to.

Have I become lost to another man’s vision?

The Emperor saw his empire as a metaphor for the soul’s journey from oneness to separation to slavery to emancipation to awakening and beyond. Eonmor saw the Emperor as a soul wandering the cliff tops of insanity while dragging the world with him to the edge. Ben saw only love in both men. *Does it matter if I have been taken over? If I am myself enthralled aren’t I still myself? If I am tricked into love or come to love naturally, is the love therefore changed? If I am wearing a slave collar am I any less myself?*

Ben imagined projecting himself to the Zelenium Tower once more, sitting by the illuminated pool and talking with Zane, unresisting this time.

Perhaps the Emperor would see in Ben a person with the insight and experience, the delicacy of touch, to help him repair the gaps in his design.

You sound like a child. Have you really been taken over?

He shrugged haplessly. Was it wrong to have an experience and feel changed by it? Had Zane sown seeds of doubt in his mind for malevolent reasons or was he as he claimed: a grain of creation reaching out to another grain?

A quieter part of Ben observed that it needn't actually matter. He could name Zane good or bad, sane or insane, and it would remain his own judgement. To become fixated on Zane was to lose his balance, just as to become fixated on recovering his apprenticeship would be to discard all he had learned so far. If Eonmor would teach him no longer there was nobody left to prove his integrity to but himself. The only authentic option was to become his own man now. Perhaps one day the old wizard would discover his former apprentice was nothing more or less than Ben, maybe even take him back. Or perhaps one day Ben would discover that he had been manipulated, that he was enthralled by another man's vision. To fear it was to give it strength. To acknowledge the possibility and then walk out to meet it of his own volition was to walk in his own strength.

He would leave, but he would not go to Zane.

Why are you sitting here in the dark when you could be downstairs with Eonmor? If you're going to feel sorry for yourself you may as well do it with your friend...while you can.

Rubbing at his face he got up and shuffled out of the room. Downstairs Eonmor just happened to be putting the last item into the backpack.

"Master." Ben's voice was broken and dry. "I'll never get to see the elgs with you."

Eonmor looked at him in some surprise.

"Ha," he said mildly. "That's wonderful."

Ben frowned and checked his memory to see if he himself had said what he thought he had.

"Is it?"

"You mention the elgs and I was just thinking about them."

"Oh," said Ben, feeling quite depressed. "I see."

"No, you don't." Eonmor sat down, side on to the kitchen table. "I was just thinking that perhaps there is a slim chance that you may be able, eventually, to return to your apprenticeship, and it involves the elgs."

Ben's face lit up and the old man held up a pre-emptive hand.

"It is a very slim chance indeed. Atrociously slim, *really*. But I find it encouraging that just as I thought of it you walked in and mentioned them."

Ben quickly sat at the table.

"What do we have to do?"

"Hasty, hasty, hasty," muttered the old man woefully.

"Yes, yes," said Ben. "But what do we have to do?"

"Listen to me, my friend, and listen well: it is not what *we* must do. Only you can do it, and it could take you years, it could take you the rest of your life. You might struggle hard and never achieve it. So, please: sober up some; it hurts me to see all of that hope in your face."

Ben tried to do as he was told.

"A thimbleful of hope?" he suggested, but the wizard shook his head.

"Half a thimbleful at most, and that's a generous portion."

"Half a thimbleful it is then." The boy sat up straight. "So what do I have to do?"

Eonmor scratched his beard pensively.

"The elgs will be able to tell what Zane has done to you, whether it can be undone, whether it even needs to be undone. All you have to do is go and see them."

Ben lifted his chin cautiously.

"I see. And I can do that when my joy bubbles from me like a mountain spring?"

"Yes." The wizard didn't say it in a way that sounded like good news.

"But that's alright, isn't it? You were expecting me to reach that point sooner or later, weren't you?"

"Yes...but not any time soon. And I was intending to help you reach that stage myself."

"How long did it take you?"

"Several hundred years."

"Oh. And I'm not going to live that long, am I?"

"No. Not if you aren't working magic."

"But you've got a trick that will help me, haven't you?"

"It's less than half a thimbleful, really, Ben."

"What is it?"

"There is a semi-precious stone, tirsigate. It is very common – you can find it on riverbeds, in family heirlooms, stuffed in the back of countless drawers. Yet despite that it is very difficult to find, because it is very difficult to recognise. Most of the time, to most people, it just looks like any old kind of stone."

"And it will help me see the elgs?"

"Certainly. If you have some in your pocket, or strung around your neck, you will be able to see them and speak to them."

"So why are you looking so serious?"

"There are certain magical precepts woven into the basic structure of the stone. It cannot be seen as tirsigate, and therefore it cannot be used as tirsigate, by anybody who seeks it for selfish purposes."

Ben mulled on this.

"So that is my quest?"

"Yes."

"And you don't think it's likely I'll succeed?"

"You may. You may. But I don't think we'll be seeing each other for a long time."

Ben felt his face turn grey.

"Look, we've got the rest of the night to sit up and talk. I've packed your bag for you, everything's in order. I was wondering if you might enjoy one last trip through the Sovereign Galaxies with me? There's something I'd like to show you...by way of a parting gift."

A tear rolled down Ben's face, but he was nodding.

Eonmor produce a talking spoon that tried to cheer him up.

"Hey, come on, little fellow..." it began.

"I'm twenty-four!" yelled Ben.

"Shall I put it in your bag?"

"Yes, please."

They stepped through the portal and into a desert, dry and hot beneath a blue sky. Beside them ran a tall wall, its pale yellow stones worn by centuries of sandy winds. Ben tugged at the fake beard Eonmor had made him wear. It was itching dreadfully.

"Why can't we make ourselves nondescript...or project a disguise? This thing smells of something!"

"Sometimes, my friend," said Eonmor from beneath his own disguise, "there's no substitute for a good camelhair wig. Do you trust me, or not?"

Ben scratched at his jilaabah, which was also itchy and smelt of something.

I trusted you when you took me to see Zane.

"I trust you," he muttered.

The wizard paused to look at him for a barely perceptible beat, then slapped his shoulder.

"Good. Come on."

The wall was long. Around its corner it continued in much the same fashion, but they found a large entrance exactly halfway down it. A small collection of stalls were clustered there, intent on being the first to sell to those just arriving, and the last to sell to those just leaving. Eonmor employed an interesting non-magical technique to bypass the fervent persuasions of the stallholders, which was to laugh uproariously as they approached and pat them heartily on their shoulders. Laughing and nodding continuously, sometimes pointing at random locations above and behind them, his pace never faltered. Following in the safety of his wake Ben soon found they were through the sandstorm gates and amidst the sun-bleached colours and spiced aromas of a market town.

"Come on," said Eonmor, striding purposefully through the desert people and stalls, pausing only to buy them each a serving of plantain fried in red palm oil which they ate with their fingers from a wrapping of palm leaves, and a flask of some tangy yellow liquid that he called spiced ginko.

"Where are we?" asked Ben, studiously avoiding eye contact with a trader brandishing a brace of spider monkeys.

"This is Mampon. We're in the Kwortz Desert."

Ben's ears pricked up.

"Really?" He looked around at the people. When he looked suddenly into the face of the monkey seller he gave the man such an intense and searching gaze that the trader hastily identified an alternative potential customer and jostled his way through the crowds. "You mean all of these people are stuck here?"

Eonmor paused and turned to Ben.

"Most of them, yes. There are one or two individuals who have found ways to come and go. But they don't share such knowledge – not for free, anyway."

"They all look so ordinary, just normal people going about their business. They don't look trapped at all."

"Most of them don't consider that they are. The Kwortz is their entire world, and who needs more than a world to live in?" Eonmor glanced around at the people nearest to them. "In truth, they all have a trapped look to my eyes. But then, most people on this planet do, and it has nothing to do with their geographical constraints. Nothing at all."

The central square, where the densest proliferation of stalls was to be found, was a wide, simmering suntrap sided by four long, generic build-

ings, all more or less identical. The ground floor rooms were warehouses that opened out onto the market with great doors bedecked with produce, and awnings that unfolded to an impressive span in order to provide shade for the customers. Above the warehouse level three balconied floors provided premises for the sellers of all manner of goods and services. Clients and merchants alike leaned out over the balconies, sipping ginko and palm wine, eating fried fish imported from the inland seas, talking business and gossiping, catcalling their competitors and seamlessly practising prepared street theatres intended to influence their standing in the bazaar.

Eonmor took Ben up to a second floor balcony and they looked out over the tops of the stalls. He waited for his master – his ex-master, he reminded himself – to reveal his intent, but the old man only stood and watched the people below. The ex-apprentice thought of prompting him and then decided against it. To prolong standing there by Eonmor's side was a better choice by far than the satisfying of curiosity.

The bazaar was like many he had seen, full of the kinds of colourful, incidental little moments and details that can render settings of relative poverty beautiful in the eyes of those passing through. He wondered what the natives saw. Hunger, temptation, hard work, danger, salvation, boredom, a thousand different things...nothing at all. There were six shadowy assassin types wrapped up in cloaks of nondescriptness. They were scattered evenly throughout the square, probably working as a team – they had a similar vibration.

Beginning to pay more attention Ben noticed a further five characters striving to go unnoticed: a beggar, a seller of roasted nuts and seeds, a nomad and his slave wife, a big, old man making sketches in a notebook. The beggar was following the nomad. The slave wife was actually acting as her owner's bodyguard. The seed seller was orchestrating the assassins somehow. The sketcher was waiting for something. Ben leaned forward further over the balcony, unable to see the true forms of any of these people, if people they were, only seeing that they were cloaked in nondescription. There was a child playing with a string puppet by the door of one of the ginko houses who was most definitely not a child, or was more than a child, or was at least a child that was more than human. On a balcony of the building to the right of Ben and Eonmor, at the same level, a whore was talking with a female acolyte of Parnazaril but neither of them were what they seemed. Their gazes flickered to Ben and then away again. A parrot flew from the shoulder of a shadowy figure in the far corner of the square on the third floor balcony. Arcing slowly above the market, passing in front of and below Ben as it sank towards street level, it turned inwards suddenly and steeply, arrowing towards a young girl carrying bundles of richly patterned cloths on her head. A rangy white dog leaped up at the last moment, snapping its jaws and letting out a single but definitive bark, and the bird was forced to veer away. Ben noticed thirteen individuals who kept themselves from looking over. He turned to Eonmor to find the wizard watching him sideways on.

"How many have you spotted?" asked the old man.

"Er...about twenty three."

Eonmor nodded reasonably.

"That was quite quick."

"There are more, aren't there?"

"I count fifty seven...there are probably more than that."

"Fifty seven!" Ben looked out again. There was a blind man talking to a goat, a rat scuttling from one stall to the next on a complicated errand, a pair of soldiers talking to a fat woman. Goose bumps suddenly crawled up the back of Ben's head and he lifted his gaze to the top floor of the building opposite. A white man with a stubbled face and travel worn clothes was looking directly at him. At the man's side stood a girl wearing a jilaabah and a camelhair beard. The man smiled, held his gaze for a few moments and then turned his attention to the market, leaning against his balcony, much as Ben and Eonmor were leaning against theirs. The girl was paying close attention to a huge barbarian warrior who was dressed as a nomad and was buying kose from a seller near the soldiers. Casting his eye across the four sets of balconies Ben spotted a number of nondescripts, all spectating, all waiting for something.

"What's going on?" he asked Eonmor, remembering with a wince that he had intended not to ask questions.

"Ah, a number of things: a few intrigues, a few adventures intersecting. This moment is like a power point. You know...if it were a hill somebody would have placed a standing stone here. But this is a power point in time, rather than one in the physical landscape. All kinds of characters have gathered here, some knowing why, like me, some not knowing why, like you."

Ben looked back at the bazaar. The entire scene was crawling with nondescripts. It was not that he could see anything that marked them out visually. They looked to him as ordinary as the rest of the market people they were standing alongside. But the emotion that each one triggered in him did not correspond to whatever outward image they were presenting. For each one the emotion was different, as was to be expected in a gathering of individuals, and the quality of the discrepancy was unique. He saw a malnourished child sitting on a cart, watching the crowd with a covert intensity and he felt a shudder of apprehension that didn't tally. He saw a tall, handsome young man with a broad, white-toothed smile haggling over a small, ornate chest, and he felt a suffocating claustrophobia tighten around him. The disquiet created by the discrepancy between outward appearance and inner essence could be subtle and easy to miss. Ben noted he was picking up on them much more easily than usual and he wondered if it was because he had never seen such a concentration of magical types all trying to go unnoticed in the same place at the same time before.

"I'm beginning to understand why we brought the beards."

"Indeed," nodded the wizard.

"Won't you tell me what we're here for?"

"Just to witness what takes place, that's all."

There was a thin bearded man in a soiled turban and loincloth sitting in the far corner of the square playing a pipe. Three rodents of a type Ben didn't recognise were dancing for him. A gaggle of urchins crowded round, half of them entranced, half of them whispering child-sized intrigues to each other, using their apparent interest in the little show as a cover for some secret operation. Ben suspected it might involve a stall in the centre of the square that dealt in spiced sweetbreads. Below his own balcony, away to the left, a handful of blood cult members were drumming. They looked conspicuously sinister with their black rags, expressionless stares and the red markings around their eyes, and they seemed to have little purpose there amongst the traders, not speaking to anyone or trying

to sell anything. But the rhythms palpitating off their corpse skin drums were relentless and morbidly compelling. An occasional passer by would find themselves moving momentarily back and forth to the beat, and then the squad leader's empty gaze would alight on them, bland yet unfaltering, remaining there until they passed on. A waft of smoke from a brazier brought the scent of charred sandfish and aniseed to Ben's nostrils and he knew if he ever smelt it again he would think of this time and place.

Ben sighed, unintentionally catching Eonmor's attention.

"What is it?"

"What?"

"What are you thinking?"

Ben had to take a moment to focus before he could say.

"I was thinking how you say that our only purpose is to help the universe to awaken to itself."

"Oh, yes?"

"Everybody here seems so wrapped up in their own little worlds."

"Yes. Certainly. What else could they be?"

"Yes, I know. I was wondering if following that purpose consciously is any better than being caught up in it unconsciously."

The old man's eyes gleamed.

"Mmm, that's a good one to ponder on."

They looked at each other. The noise, colours and fumes of the market fizzed in the background, a random colliding of colours, sounds and odours combining, reacting and counter-reacting incessantly. Faceted beads spangled the sunlight, and the thoughts of those who looked upon them. Fingers ran through mounds of grain, sifting for quality, producing hissing streams. The emotions of the nondescripts mingled with the outlooks of the ordinaries, setting the day at an angle to the sun, vivifying it, making it into a weird and captivating highlight that would be memorable, in one way or another, for every soul there. The perspectives of the crowd meshed and entangled, knotting their oddly flavoured holospheres into a whole that couldn't be fully apprehended, only sensed obliquely. The drumming of the blood cult intensified and the shrill piping of the rodent charmer kept pace with it. The babble of the crowd rushed like an endless wave along an endless shore.

"You know," said the wizard, "you've been a truly wonderful apprentice."

Ben didn't know what to say to this at first and just stood there, letting the scene imprint itself on his life story. Then a suitable response occurred to him.

"Thank you," he said.

Eonmor put his hands on Ben's shoulders and squeezed.

"I mean it. With all my heart."

Ben felt dizzy and blinked.

"Thank you," he said again.

The old man's head turned to the scene below.

"Aha!" He looked back at Ben. "The main event is about to start." His head was nodding sideways at the square and Ben looked down.

A small caravan of Imurranian tinkers was entering, emerging from the street corner on the far right, nudging its way through a crowd too dense to accommodate it. It was led by a fat man riding a zebra who discouraged his attendant halo of flies with the repetitive, no longer conscious flicking of

a horsetail flail, first to one shoulder, then the next. Behind him two moth-eaten old carthorses pulled a large, partitioned cage mounted on a wagon. In the rear half of the cage a pack of red dogs watched the fizzing of the market with fascination, thirteen pairs of eyes keeping all directions covered. On the other side of the partition five potbellied pigs lounged, indifferent to prices, languorous as sultans. Atop the cage, close to the driver, a huge male baboon picked at the rope that connected its collar to the bars. Most of the family trailed behind the wagon on foot, accompanied by a magpie, a cockatoo, a parrot and a white-bellied crow, which sat on shoulders and hopped from head to head. The family had sharp faces with heavy black brows. Their eyes shared a common point of resentment, except for the six girls, each about twelve years old, each marked with a disconcerting beauty peculiar to herself. At the rear of the company a man with a bushy red beard rode a second zebra. His robes were all travel worn leather and richly coloured geometric embroideries. A scar reached up the side of his face and a necklace of bones rattled on his chest. Across his shoulder was strung a sack-like bag that looked all but empty.

Ben gripped the balcony and leaned forward and began to understand.

"No!" He pointed and gesticulated. "The fat Imurranian man...Princess Taba...daba..."

"Princess Taba Adjua," hissed the wizard. "And keep your voice down!"

Ben drew his arms in and tried to contain his body language, but heard a bray of laughter from the balcony opposite that made him feel exposed.

"The zebras are mules!"

"No. They are elephants, transformed into mules by the Court magician of Karmenaksis, Fafacocogia, and disguised as zebras by us to aid our return."

"The animals are the princess's loyal retinue!"

"Not just the animals. You see the six pretty girls? Taba Adjua's eunuch bodyguard."

"No!"

"Yes, yes..." Eonmor leaned forward, pointing with his nose. "...and the white bellied crow is her physician, Prinsep...quite a character."

Ben gaped, then tried to stop himself but found it required too much concentration.

"The baboon," continued the wizard, "is trouble – the princess's head maid. Keep your eye on the baboon. The rest of the Imurranians are Taba Adjua's pet monkeys, ten of them."

"The red dogs?"

"All handmaids."

"And what about the pigs?"

"Peacocks."

"Huh." Ben turned his attention to the man on the second zebra. "And you! You look quite tough."

"Mm, yes, I do rather, don't I?"

"You're wearing the same beard you've got on now!"

"Hee, hee, hee."

"Are they all going to transform back into their natural states?"

"Watch the baboon – it's all the baboon's fault."

"Why so?"

"The head maid had a difficult time adjusting. Whereas the eunuchs accepted being transformed into girls with relative equanimity, and the monkeys were prepared to be Imurranians with a begrudged dignity, the poor old head maid just couldn't cope any longer as a baboon. She's just been waiting for her chance to break the spell."

"How is the spell broken?"

"Look at the princess's belt."

Ben looked up and down the caravan for the princess before remembering she was the fat man at the front.

"Do you see the vial filled with clear liquid?"

"Uh huh."

"Crocodile tears."

"Crocodile tears?"

"Indeed. How we got those is a tale for another time. Suffice it to say that when those particular tears are poured from a palm leaf into a fire the spell will be broken. And look, there are palm leaves and small fires all through this market. The baboon's moment has come."

"So, you'll tell me the tale?"

"What?"

"How you got the tears of the crocodile...you said it was a tale for another time?"

"Yes, of course, of course. Why are you looking at me like that? What is it?"

"So, you think I'll find the tirsigate. You think I'll see the elgs, and they'll fix me. You think everything will be alright."

The old man's face showed the dawning of understanding.

"Ben..." he said in a kindly tone, "I really don't know if any of that will happen. But even if it doesn't, our paths will cross, our adventures will intersect. We will meet, perhaps even as enemies some time..."

Ben's face dropped with unvoiced shock and Eonmor quickly gripped his shoulder.

"*Perhaps!* Perhaps not. It matters not – truly – for we will always be the greatest of friends. Always."

The boy was ready to cry again and forced his eyes upwards but Eonmor, his firm grip still on Ben's shoulders, swivelled him to face the square below.

"The baboon!"

A number of faces, belonging to a number of species, turned inwards then towards the centre of the market as the rope knotted to the baboon's collar broke and the great monkey leaped from the top of the cage and onto the hindquarters of the fat Imurranian's mule-disguised-as-a-zebra. The fat man squawked in a surprisingly high-pitched voice and the zebra heehawed and bucked in alarm, but the baboon already had its fist gripped around the vial of liquid. With a decisive yank it tore the bottle from the belt and leaped once again, high over the heads of the nomad and his slave wife, to land by the stall of the nuts and seed seller who was leading the assassins. While the fat Imurranian was shouting for somebody, anybody, to stop the baboon the seed seller was already preparing to lunge for it. Without realising how he saw it, Ben was aware of the boy with the string puppet, who was outside the ginko house over in a corner of the market and quite out of the line of sight of the nut and seed stall, tugging suddenly on the strings of his puppet so that it jerked to one side. The leader of the

assassins leaped at the baboon yet, inexplicably, his body flew to one side even as it was stretched out in the air, and he tumbled into the stacked earthenware pots of the neighbouring stall. Ben saw both events simultaneously, and sensed the sharp pull of magic between them, though they were too far apart to both be in his field of vision at the same time. The rat that had been running beneath the stalls leaped at the boy with the puppet and, even as the large man making sketches deftly sheared it in half with the swipe of a suddenly appearing scimitar, the boy dropped his puppet and a three legged dog snatched it up in its jaws and bolted away through the legs of the people.

And now it seemed that every man, woman, child and animal in the market, disguised or undisguised, ordinary or magical, seemed to have a vested interest in the baboon, whether they wished to aid, impede or flee it, openly or covertly. Several of the assassins pointed blowpipes towards it and a discreet volley of glistening darts hissed from four directions through the riot of the marketplace, passing through the aroma filled vapours of food carts and the coils of smoke from coloured incenses, catching sunlight as they went, whispering in ears as they passed. A single purple drop of poison shone at the tip of each dart. Ben saw this clearly, though he didn't understand how. The baboon squawked with an intuitive alarm, but three of the darts simply fell out of the air at a twitching of the nomad's eyebrows. Another three miraculously struck three figs that just happened to have spilled from their bowl atop the head of a gangly young man who was feigning clumsiness. The final dart was picked delicately from the air by a lemur sitting on the shoulder of a gloriously beautiful belly dancer. Magnificently oblivious to, or bored by, all adventures she remained intent on the coloured fabrics she was inspecting while her lemur used the dart to scratch a glyph into the surface of a papaya.

Too much was happening all at one time for any single person to keep track of, but Ben found that he took in a great deal of it. There was more music playing somewhere, a group of sitars and pipes with some kind of harp. The melody was unpredictable, almost conscious, and achingly haunting, keeping pace with the drumming of the blood cult but subverting it away from its hypnotic intention, matching the pitch of the rodent charmer's enthralling piping yet deftly turning it down a plaintive avenue. There was a beckoning promise of fields in there, and green gardens, and the ocean seen through branches bearing leaves. Ben almost heard gulls cry, smelt the seaweed on the wind.

Four pairs of hands reached for the baboon as it snatched a palm leaf from a woman frying plantains. Leaping directly upwards so that it was looking into the barbarian's eyes it kicked against his chest, sent itself somersaulting backwards onto the awning of a stall. A number of birds swooped at it, a magpie, a cockatoo, two parrots, a white-bellied crow, a silky pale barn owl, all aiming talons and beaks at the vial held in its fist. The baboon pivoted, twisted, pirouetted, swatted and snarled, dodging all of these attacks, but for the owl who sunk its talons into his hand and held on dauntlessly as the outraged monkey screamed and batted it against the base of a flagpole. Using two feet and one free hand to climb the flagpole the enraged baboon bit into the back of the owl's head and tore the bird free, sending it hurtling over the heads of the crowd in a blur of feathers, talons and eyes. The two soldiers and the fat woman ducked out of the way as though the bird were on fire or carrying some dreaded contagion.

At the last moment before it struck the ground a withered crone with a puckered smile opened the mouth of a sack and then closed it again. She disappeared amongst the buyers and sellers, and Ben couldn't tell if she had reclaimed the bird or kidnapped it, but he saw three urchins cautiously follow her.

Three assassins turned reloaded blowpipes in the direction of the ba-boon, who was now at the summit of the flagpole and reviewing its options while the crowd below bellowed. One blowpipe was knocked off target by the elbow of an elf warrior, while a turban snatched from the head of a carpet merchant covered the end of another. The third blowpipe was rudely yanked from the lips of its assassin by the giant fist of the barbarian who used his remaining fist to punch the marksman in the face, probably knocking him unconscious for a week. Two more assassins instantly leapt from nowhere and fell upon the hulking warrior who produced a broadsword as though it were a light dagger, parrying two blows in flowing succession but tipping backwards beneath the onslaught nonetheless. Disappearing beneath the fall of his dark clad and nimble handed opponents the brute's death seemed imminent, but the crowd flexed and a flurry of bystanders turned where they stood, transforming themselves into new attackers and counter attackers. The tempo of exchange raised by several notches throughout the bazaar and a fully-fledged brawl broke out, involving many broken pots and gap-toothed grimaces. Weapons glinted and clashed, projectiles flew and flashed, magical sparks spun and hissed, a thousand hidden actions and transformations set off chain reactions that collided and entwined with each other.

"Fafacogia is a lady man!" exulted a man's voice from some place, and uproar was everywhere.

A canon boomed from the ginko house. A canon! Eonmor, mounted on his striped mule, thrust his hands forward, his eyes bulging in alarm.

"B'en astis!" he yelled, already engulfed by the sudden and rapid expansion of a yellow, smoky cloud, product of a cannonball turned to powder mid-flight. An assassin leapt at him and the camel-bearded wizard showed the man his palm, causing him to hang there above the melee, his posture frozen, his body turning in the air like a mobile in a child's nursery. His eyes darted helplessly this way and that from a fixed expression.

The disguised Eonmor pulled out his staff but then sat there amidst the chaos, soothing his anxious mule with the stroking of a distracted hand while he looked about himself. He wore an expression of resigned bafflement, tempted occasionally towards amusement. But then somebody's head span up into the air nearby, spattering blood like a twirling firework. He raised his eyebrows and sat up straight, narrowed his eyes in thought. In front of him the pack of handmaids turned red dogs were barking and leaping frenziedly in their cage, desperate to join the brawl. With an innocent look from side to side the wizard tapped the lock of the cage discreetly with the butt of his staff and the door sprang open.

Ben watched from his balcony, his heart aching, as he saw the sunlight glitter off the colours of the pandemonium. The square writhed and shimmied in a glad abandon. A grubby urchin, face alight with glee, ducked between the clutching grasps of two heavyset men with scimitars in their belts and they smacked into each other, butting heads. Climbing onto a fruit cart, jumping onto the side of a stack of barrels and climbing, monkey-like to the top, the urchin stood at the summit proudly, surveyed her world,

the wild splendour that had been released, and she began to laugh. The laughter trickled through the cacophony of the tumultuous bazaar like a dancing chime through the clashing of a battlefield, and people glanced sideways from their hand to hand combats, lifted their gazes from their headlocks, to see what merry angel was amongst them. She held aloft a red amulet, in thin hands streaked with grime and dried blood, and brandished it over her head, laughing and laughing and laughing. Ben saw tears sparkle in her eyes. Across the square a boy and a bedraggled old woman were cheering jubilantly.

Suddenly, and definitively, an arrow shot across the bazaar and pierced the girl through her belly. She gasped, wide-eyed, and looked down at it. Half of the people in the square moaned with dismay. Humans that were once animals muttered oaths and curses beneath their breath; animals that were once human stopped what they were doing and cast about themselves, as though sensing the onset of a natural disaster. But the girl cocked her head as she went limp, and a dreamy, blissful smile stretched across her face. Her knees gave way beneath her. Legs folding, she released the amulet, her hands turning out in a graceful gesture of acceptance. The amulet dropped down, its chain looping over her head. Even as her eyes were closing, the air around her frayed apart and the light of a faery kingdom unfurled silently from her crown chakra, mesmerising those who saw it: a many petalled flower of constellations emerged, come to reclaim her and take her home. She began to laugh again, even as she fell, disappearing into the shining gardens of a place not usually visible to mortal minds. Her physical essence evaporated with a silent sigh. The greater light withdrew, but her laughter hung in the air for a time, spiralling over the market, along with a handful of glowing, swirling snowflakes.

The brawl had come almost to a standstill. Even the drumming of the blood cult and the piping of the rodent charmer had stopped. Adversaries looked at each other guardedly, unsure whether they should resume their fighting. People looked from face to face and an osmosis occurred in which one gaze was followed to another until they all found themselves locating the baboon, who was now sitting on the roof of the sweetbreads stall. The great monkey, glancing periodically from beneath its heavy brow, keeping a check on the current sense of peace preoccupying the crowd, had unstoppered the vial and now poured its crocodile tears into the palm leaf.

A hundred mouths made oh-shapes. A hundred hands stretched forth in slow motion. "No", said a hundred muted voices. Those closest lurched forward, jumping, climbing, scrabbling. But the baboon's plan was simple enough, and sufficient enough, that it could ignore all on comers and tend to its heart's desire. Leaning forward, only slightly, it tipped the palm leaf. The small pool of clear liquid poured down in a thin and glittering line, separating as it fell, back into individual tears, which landed one after the other in the brazier of the woman frying plantains.

Ben held his breath, seeing more than he would normally see. Each crocodile tear was conscious, in its own way, in its own perfection – not of the air through which it fell, or the fire it fell towards, not of crowded bazaars, colliding adventures and frustrated baboons, but conscious of its own nature, conscious of its own longing. The tears had been gathered by the daughters of dark skinned witches along the banks of the Pang River, where the Kwortz Desert Kingdoms are eaten at the seams by the jungles of Myddea, not far from the tip of the White Sea. Up and down the ages the

contents of this small vial had been harvested by the daughters of daughters from victorious, feasting crocodiles, some great, some small, but all held mesmerised by the shaking fetishes of a witch honouring her mother's mothers. Beneath auspicious star patterns, during hot seasons, the witch priests had performed the ceremonies, using moonlight cracked into earth lodges to heighten the connection between the tears and their symbolic resonance which was one at its source with the universal archetype: the grief of the lost soul, the yearning of the spirit trapped in an alien form, the living ghost mired in matter, weeping for what it had become. On the hill-sides of Mount Jerilim, Papa Zou had been found and petitioned in the correct manner, paid in stories and dreams, until he offered the tears to the fetishes and matched the vibrational frequency of each to the spirit of one of the members of the transformed Imurranian menagerie. As the tear whose soul was matched with the spirit of Eonmor's mule-disguised-as-a-zebra fell into the flames, and evaporated, its awareness of its own nature breathed a sigh of relief. Releasing its molecules to the heat, it gladly bid farewell to the dream that it had been a teardrop, that it could ever have been contained. Within the mule the water molecules flexed and sighed and stretched, as though awakening from a dream, and the elephant within remembered itself at last.

An excited heehawing became a triumphant trumpeting. The mule reared, elongated in all directions to become a pachyderm with gold tipped tusks, a richly caparisoned nettipattam and blurred zebra stripes. Eonmor clung on fiercely to the elephant's trappings as it tottered on its hind legs unable to find somewhere to bring its forefeet down without crushing somebody. A red dog, mawling the forearm of one of the soldiers, became a handmaid. She sat back on her haunches, dazed, blood dripping from her mouth, and looked up into the face of the startled man she had been biting and they instantly fell in love. Taba Adjua's physician, Prinsep, was soaring over the square as a white-bellied crow when he suddenly remembered the practise of medicine yet forgot how to fly. Landing with a holler and a crash he broke his right arm and killed two of the rodent charmer's rodents, causing the gaunt musician to bite down on his pipe. At the opposite corner of the square a slaver was making away with two of the Imurranian girls. During the spectacle of the baboon chase he had plucked them from the excited and distracted crowd, throwing one over each shoulder. Now, as he discovered he was actually kidnapping two giant eunuch bodyguards he suddenly felt weighed down by it all. Falling forward he decided in an instant he would change professions, but this proved to be poor timing for he was crushed and killed.

The Imurranian family were now monkeys again, who quickly dispersed through the market, stealing food so fast that they had to throw half of it away so that they might steal some more. The carthorses became cooks and threw off their bridles. In the second partition of the cage the five pot-bellied pigs had become peacocks, making little impact on events, except to inspire the young poet who witnessed their transformation, to the discovery of a profound metaphor.

The Princess Taba Adjua was a fat and flatulent man no more. All things considered, she found it difficult not to feel philosophical about her premature return to royal and feminine status. It was true that she might never make it back inside her palace alive now, that the long and arduous quest to Mount Jerilim had probably all been for nothing, all because her ri-

diculous head maid couldn't cope with being a baboon, but her elephant was disguised as a zebra, and somehow this seemed to help. An assassin appeared at her side but had to pause, to correct his balance on the back of her panicking mount, and the princess had time to put a knife through his eye.

The market square was in a tumult. Many found it difficult to remain focused on their aims. Some abandoned their personal adventures entirely, so caught up were they in the immediacy of the current, chaotic moment. Some intrigues became entangled with other quests, spawning huge and complicated adventures that few could understand and that would probably never be resolved to anybody's satisfaction. From his vantage on the balcony Ben witnessed the madness and the magic of the scene with his heightened senses. In amongst the random heaving of chain reactions he became aware that he could discern a thing no human should have been able to see, an unfolding of connections and consequences that transcended any magic he knew of in their perfect but unpremeditated design. Beneath the thick cloak of 'ordinary life' there was the world of magic, as perceived by the magic users. Now, beneath that world, he saw something new: a pattern, a breathing, a force, a will. It was there, and it wasn't there. It was everything, and it was nothing at all: the reason...for this moment to be... just so. The fall of a seed, the tilting of an eyebrow, the thought of a child... nothing was so small that it could not mesmerise the mind for all eternity. Ben leaned forward, ready to fall over the parapet of the balcony and be swallowed by it all, but then Eonmor, wearing his camelhair beard, riding his striped elephant that was still walking on its hind legs, appeared before him and addressed his older self.

"So this is what I like to do when I'm older, is it? Come and spectate at ridiculous moments in my life?"

The Eonmor beside Ben shrugged and seemed at a loss.

"I can't remember what I'm supposed to say."

Eonmor on the elephant huffed.

"Probably that, I expect."

"Probably," agreed his older self.

Eonmor on an elephant looked at Ben.

"Hello, you. I've been missing you. Have you worked out how to not mind things yet?"

Ben suddenly felt too shy to speak. He smiled painfully and shook his head.

Eonmor's elephant couldn't stand it any longer and put its feet down, crushing a lamp stall and a basket seller. The wizard winced.

"No, me neither. Look, I'd better catch up to the princess. You two should stop hanging around here and go and have an adventure of your own." He tugged on the elephant's left ear. "Come on, Tantor, let's go! Left! Left, you fool!"

"Goodbye," said Ben softly, giving a little wave.

Eonmor on an elephant caught his eye one more time as Tantor began to carry him away.

"I'll see you both later," smiled the wizard. Kicking with his heels, as though he were riding a horse, the old man coaxed some urgency out of his ride, who began to trot gamely after the princess and her loyal but traumatised retinue. "Ah yes! You're glad to be an elephant now, aren't you!"

Ben blinked, watching his former master draw away. Simultaneously he felt the same wizard's hand rest on his shoulder, give him a squeeze.

"Wait for me!" It was a plaintive voice, calling from the scene below. Down amongst the crowd, which had now lost its focus and was largely preoccupied with looting and squabbling, the head maid of the Princess chased after Eonmor's elephant, hands raised, hair dishevelled, clothes smeared with stains. "I'm sorry! It wasn't me! It was the monkey made me! Don't leave me!"

By the ginko house a little girl found a papaya lying on the ground with a purple glyph scratched into its skin. Picking it up, holding it protectively against her belly and looking warily around, she scuttled away. Ben turned to Eonmor. As he did so a flake of light curled down from the sky, touched his head and disappeared. He swayed on his feet. From somewhere out of sight he heard a group of sitars and pipes begin to play, but the tune wasn't right. The sky had become white and sunless and the shadows had disappeared.

"That's all," said the wizard. His voice sounded dull, though his face was delineated clearly enough; the air of Mampon had become, without any discernible transition, flat and empty. The pulse of the day had slowed to a weak, imperceptible state as though it suddenly needed to convalesce from too intense a bout of joy. When Ben glanced down into the square he saw only detritus, and listless people pawing at scraps of nothing.

"That's all?"

The wizard nodded.

The young man was aglow with the dense, multi-hued street party of fractalised insights that paraded still, up and down the convoluted avenues of his mind, promising to continue on through till dawn. But the external world had retracted from such intensity. He felt the presence of a hundred things to say gather in his throat, but the will to say them escaped him and he could only pay attention to his need to breathe.

"Come on," said Eonmor. "Let's go."

They turned and walked. A wind began to rise, picking up discarded husks and forgotten pieces of paper, lifting the sand, the grit and the ash for the thankless task of scouring what colour remained from the day.

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Back in Solfar they entered the kitchen through the back door. Ben sat in one of the big chairs by the hearth and was ready at last to have the farewell conversation. He added two logs to the fire, which had been burning unattended for the scant moments they had been gone, took a poker from the rack and nudged the arrangement, paying attention suddenly to the way the surface of the wood could appear so black, even while cosseted on all sides by flames.

"You look awake," observed Eonmor, checking the contents of the kettle then hanging it over the fire. Ben sat blankly for a moment, then had to breathe deeply before he could know what to say.

"I can't take it all in. I can understand it...and I can't. There's just too much of it. I feel like you taught me as much in those few minutes as I've learned in all the time I've spent with you, only...I can't tell what it is that I've learned."

The old man pouted in a non-committal manner.

"I don't know what Zane has done to you," he murmured. He lowered

himself carefully into his own seat, allowing himself to look tired. "It may be nothing at all. It really might be. And it may be everything. I just don't know. But that was my parting gift to you, my most excellent apprentice, my faithful friend. I hope it helps you, in whatever lies ahead."

"I think it will always stay with me."

The wizard shrugged.

"You know, it really doesn't matter. It's there – whether we remember it's there or not. It's there whether you are in a crowded marketplace, full of magic and incident, or whether you are alone in a rocky landscape beneath a blank and dreary sky. It's as much there when you are miserable and lonely, and refusing to believe it's there, as at any other time. You know, you could leave here and completely forget about magic. You could go to be drunk if it took your fancy. Every single moment of your life would still scintillate with the miraculous."

"Yes, but I wouldn't be aware of it. Not so often, anyway."

The old man scrunched his nose and nodded.

"Yes, yes," he conceded. "That is true."

They sat back in their chairs and a companionable silence extended into time. The fire cracked gently. Eternity revolved on its frictionless axis and the water came to the boil. The old wizard nodded sleepily, then lifted his face sharply.

"There's somebody here," he said.

After a moment of emptiness Ben sat up and listened to the quiet. Nothing at first, just the peace of the night, the bubbling of hot water over a fire. But the old man rose to his feet and then froze, looked to Ben for confirmation. Still nothing, nothing but stillness, and then, yes, there it was: it was in the stillness. The house was holding itself painfully still, not wanting to be stung by something that was crawling on it – or in it.

"Aggraban?" murmured Ben.

Eonmor frowned unhappily.

"It's curious timing," he said in a hushed voice, "suspiciously curious. Another few hours and you would be gone from here for good. Is he so intent on completing his feud with you? I wonder...I wonder if you shouldn't leave, right now."

The sudden idea of walking out into the night, striding off into the black woods and not turning back, caught in Ben's throat, a swollen ball of dismay and fear.

"I don't want to," he said, his face tightening at the sides.

Eonmor winced, caught in indecision, and Ben's anxiety saw a window.

"He's never faced me when you've been here in your full strength. Maybe this is a chance to see him off for good?"

The wizard considered this but then his eyes became slits. He smiled a crooked smile and shook his head.

"No, that's not it, tempting as it may sound. You're right, he has never appeared here except when I have been absent, either physically or mentally. But that he shows up now can only be a sign that he feels he is strong enough, or well prepared enough...or that he's plain desperate. And I don't fancy the prospect of any of those. I think we should both flee, together."

After a moment's absorption Ben's face broke into a tentative grin.

"Could we?"

The wizard's stance relaxed a little, and a smile tugged at the corners of

his mouth.

"Ah," he said. "A final little adventure together, is that what you fancy?"

Ben shrugged and smiled. The wizard looked up at the ceiling, gauging, it seemed, the location of the enemy and the severity of the threat he presented. He pulled his staff from his robes, withdrew Berringstrom from one of his portalled pockets and looked at Ben. A decision had been made; there was no hesitation in his movements now.

"But an adventure of flight. We do not fight."

"I don't have a problem with that. Only...the magical door¹¹: are you meaning to leave it for him to break into?"

In the unnatural quiet of the house their hushed voices still sounded too loud to their ears, and they managed to lower them to barely audible levels.

"Yes, yes, certainly, why not?"

"But, it's your magical door."

"Yes, well, one shouldn't place too much importance on these things, as I've explained many times."

"It just seems a shame."

"It really doesn't matter. But now you bring it up, this is as good a time as any for you to tell me what you think is behind it."

"I don't want to."

"Why ever not?"

"Because one day you might take me back as your apprentice."

"Ben..."

"Look, shouldn't we be fleeing?"

Eonmor flapped his lips in exasperation and then flinched at the **noisy sound**.

"You know, you're really quite insufferable sometimes!"

Ben picked up his backpack from the kitchen table. With that action he now possessed everything he needed to leave the house forever. Mirnggald was scabbarded at his belt through a discreetly placed portal ring so that only the hilt of the sword protruded into this level of reality. He drew her forth now.

"Which way shall we go?"

With a shake of his head and a half smile Eonmor strode towards the back door.

"Come on," he hissed. His hands were occupied with carrying his weapons so he gestured at the door with his staff and it sprang open. Aggraban was standing there, head cocked, staff touching the ground, leaning at a casual angle. Letting out an incoherent gargle Eonmor stepped back, reversing into Ben, raising his staff automatically to a defensive position. At the sight of the necromancer's posture he allowed his shoulders to droop and let out a heavy breath.

"Oh, it's you."

Aggraban smiled in sly satisfaction at the ungainly display of Eonmor's alarm.

"Eonmor," he nodded smoothly, by way of a greeting.

The wizard growled.

"Oh, what do *you* want? I'm not interested in any of your nonsense

¹¹ What's behind the magical door revised: Eonmor's socks. Ben has worked this out by simple observation. One day Yanto will open it. In one of the pairs of rolled up socks (a red pair) he finds the object that allows Eonmor to visit the elgs.

tonight, Aggraban. Go away, won't you?"

Aggraban looked him up and down, eyes refocusing. From observing with a cold and glittering amusement they now attuned to seeing only fire. When he spoke his features twisted like they wanted to kill each other.

"You fucking piece of shit," he said.

"I see," said Eonmor gravely. He lowered his centre of gravity. "It's going to be like that, is..."

Without respect for further pleasantries Aggraban spun his staff. A scythe blade of energy arced upwards from the lower tip, exploded into a crackling ball of ectoplasmic steam as it seared into Eonmor and then furiously reconfigured itself beyond him, as though the memory of its momentum would not be denied. From there it continued on, ripping through the walls and ceiling, up through the roof of the building and into the sky, where it swam away towards the cosmos as tails of livid energy returning home. The house was split in two.

"Give me my fucking sword back!"

Ben found himself lying on his back, still alive somehow. He could see the starry night sky through the gap in the sundered roof, way up beyond the trembling branches of the overhanging wych elm. He could see the edge of the galaxy, painted in blurred curls of blue and white light, dividing the heavens. It had never looked so beautiful, so willfully intended to hurt his heart.

Eonmor was still on his feet. Smoke rose from his shoulders.

"Ouch," he rasped through gritted teeth.

Aggraban's eyes widened in undisguised disbelief.

"Oh, come on!" griped the necromancer, shrill and petulant. "That must have...you weren't even ready!"

"Aggraban..." Eonmor forced the word out painfully, and under the pain was a great weariness. "...I'm really not in the mood for this, and that really hurt. Won't you please go home?"

"Home?" The dark sorcerer mouthed the word as though he didn't believe it should qualify for inclusion in the language. "I'll never go home." He grew still and the spite sank below the surface of his face, and was lost from his voice, so that he suddenly looked and sounded quite plain and ordinary. An ordinary man in a magician's robes. "I never will, Eonmor. Don't you know that?"

The two adversaries stood there and stared at each other, and to Ben, sitting on the ground watching, he seemed to see two people that wanted nothing more than to spend some time together, but had no idea how.

"No, I don't," said Eonmor after a time, in a voice made grumpy through tiredness. "I don't know that. In fact I..."

"Spare me!" interjected Aggraban sharply. "Give me the sword. Do it now. Do it now and I'll let your whelp live. That's my best offer. I've had enough of your shit."

Eonmor uncurled the fingers of his right hand, which was holding his staff, and a fuzzy transitional sphere expanded into existence. It floated towards Aggraban, expanding continuously as it went. The sphere's aura was a merry, rotating nursery song of candy colours and ebullience, an organic, whirring clockwork of ideas sprung from a child's mind. Through the overjoyed activity of these dancing colours lay a sunlit meadow beneath cotton wool clouds.

"Ah, you fucker!" spat the necromancer, trying to ward the thing off

with his staff while simultaneously not wanting the two to come into contact. This goal was unattainable – at least it was at sudden notice – and the growing sphere caught up to him as he retreated, attaching onto the end of his staff to create a giant momentary lollypop that sang wordlessly to whatever joy might be flowing from, or hiding within, the soul it was sent to embrace. Aggraban shook his staff, quailing back from the phenomenon yet unwilling to release his weapon. A childlike laughter that made no sound caused the immediate surroundings to shimmer. Ben stood up, wanting to dive head first through the transition and into the land beyond, captivated by the turning colours, the giggling light, the clockwork, toy-like playfulness. Eonmor held him back while Aggraban let out a frustrated yelp.

“You pathetic old bastard...” he snapped, retreating further, casting distracted glances towards Berringstrom. As the magic sphere absorbed his hand he clenched his teeth and strained against whatever sensations it was inflicting on him. Reaching out with his free hand towards Berringstrom his face became fraught with alarm, hate and desperation. The happy clockwork bubble expanded to his shoulder, its auric colours lighting up one side of his face.

“No!” he determined. “Nooooooooo!”

His free hand became a claw, a black and gnarled thing that grew in a flash, shooting forward on a monstrous, distorting arm. The claw closed on Eonmor’s hand, his right hand, which gripped the hilt of Berringstrom. Both magicians cried out then, each caught in an extremity he hadn’t bargained for. A marvelous pop! gleefully swallowed Aggraban and he could be seen for a moment, almost entirely contained within the clockwork bubble but for the monster arm that extended towards Eonmor. The bubble hit the floor and bounced. It bounced in a most amazing way and Eonmor, yanked into the air with it, called out a complicated word that Ben never remembered in the rest of his waking life. There was a wet hiss and the old man drifted to the ground, stumbled to his knees, as the bounce of the sphere did its remarkable thing, telescoping through thought and perspective, taking Aggraban high above and then behind the horizon and out of sight, it’s chuckling, invulnerable music lingering like a glow on the retina of the mind.

Eonmor’s staff clattered at his side and he keeled over onto his back, holding his right hand protectively away from his body. Rushing to the wizard’s side Ben saw that the hand was black and blistering, bubbles rising beneath the skin even as he watched and bursting, spraying hot liquid. Berringstrom was gone.

“Master!” he cried, not able to address the old man in any other way.

Through a mask of pain Eonmor regarded the stricken hand and held it away from himself in abject disgust.

“Gaah...!”

“Master...”

“Wait!”

Though the old man was scorched terribly from his enemy’s first attack, and clearly in great pain from the wound to his hand, his voice was clear and commanding. He clambered awkwardly back onto his knees, using his left hand to hold out his right arm. All of his limbs were trembling pathetically with shock but his burnt face was made stern by a firm purpose. With the tips of his left thumb and index finger he traced a circle around his right forearm at a place below the elbow and above the area that had become

blackened and wasted. Where the thumb and finger tips traced across the skin a silver light shone. When the circle around the arm was closed, and the silver lines met each other, the hand and the lower part of the forearm came cleanly away and fell to the ground. It landed with a heavy squelch and a hiss. The stump of the arm was a disc of red gore centred with a circle of white bone, but no blood spouted. The old wizard laid himself back on the grass for a moment and hyperventilated.

Ben swore.

"I'll grow it back," groaned the old man. "Don't worry."

Ben shook his head in wonder.

"Look at the state of you. And you're trying to comfort me?"

A smile broke through the wizard's stricken face, despite his troubles, and he sat up with a grimace.

"Yes, well...I'm something of an old softy, aren't I? Will you help me get up?"

Ben did so and the wizard leaned heavily against him for a few moments, closing his eyes and breathing deeply.

"What was that thing you did to him?" asked Ben. "Where did you send him?"

"Ah, that was a daydream pocket. They're delightful, aren't they? The elgs showed me how to make them. It's taken him home."

"Home?"

"Yes. But he's in no mood to stay there. We should get away from here. Let me get a few things from the house and we'll take a portal somewhere safe, get me patched up."

Ben was ready to support the old wizard but Eonmor squeezed his shoulder and held him away.

"It's alright, thank you, I can walk."

To Ben's surprise he could, and with little sign of stiffness. They went, side by side at a gentle pace, heading for the wrecked house, Ben carrying his former master's staff.

"He got Berringstrom," said Ben.

"Yes...that's bad news. It's very bad. I'll have to do what I can to rectify it at the soonest opportunity."

Ben looked at the house as they drew near.

"Everything seems to be falling apart."

"Yes..." agreed the old man, "...it's quite exciting, isn't it?"

"It's quite depressing is what it is."

"Oh, nonsense! It's just timing, nothing more. Look!" He nodded upwards as they entered the kitchen at the gap running through the shattered house, gaping at the universe. "Your nest has been destroyed. Don't you see it's time for you to spread your wings?"

Ben looked and was forced to admit the symbol was not a difficult one to read.

"Never mind, my boy. It's only change. Nothing to be feared."

"Master, how do I search for tirpsigate?"

"I am prepared to give you that information, but you are not my apprentice any more and must pay for it."

"Uh huh?" said Ben warily.

"Yes. You must tell me what you think is behind my magical door."

Ben sighed, looked up at the heavens and sighed again.

"It's your socks, of course," he said, releasing his hopes.

The old man laughed and patted his shoulder.

"Ah, you little devil! And how do you know it's my socks?"

Ben couldn't stop himself from grinning.

"Because you don't keep them anywhere else."

The smile that spread across Eonmor's face was beatific. He put a hand to Ben's face.

"That is the correct answer," he said in a deep contentment. "And this means that I can tell you one more thing..."

A noise from outside caught his attention. It was an odd sound, like a number of pressure jars closing, one after the other. Aggraban walked through the door, his robes plastered with blood, his face plastered with rage, Berringstrom in his hand. Looking back on it afterwards, Ben would be surprised at the speed of his own response. Hardening his skin in an instant, he twirled, Mirnggald's blade flashing in the light of the fire that still burned in the hearth. The blow was well aimed, well executed, faster than any blow he had ever struck. He had given himself over to his purest instinct. But Aggraban didn't seem to care, barely even appeared to notice. Not looking at him, only pointing a careless hand in his direction, an invisible glob of force pushed Ben back across the broken room, lifted him into the air, pressed him against the wall over the fireplace and kept him there.

"Aggraban..." said Eonmor. He seemed mildly surprised, as though the necromancer were an expected guest arriving a little earlier than arranged. But without breaking stride Aggraban gripped him by the throat, pressed him back against the wall and sawed into his forehead with the edge of Berringstrom's blade.

"Die you fucker!" he insisted.

The wizard pawed at him ineffectively with a hand and a stump, not seeming to understand or believe in what was going on. The sword let out a scalding cry of steam. Aggraban sawed faster and the blade advanced with sudden ease. The top of Eonmor's skull came away, along with a sizeable portion of his brain. What was left of the contents of his head fizzed and bubbled away to nothing.

From his vantage above the hearth Ben was unable to cry out, for his mouth, his throat, every muscle of his body was held fast. Mirnggald was still in his hand, but could do him no good. His eyes were locked open, unable even to refocus, and so he couldn't turn away, couldn't unsee what he had seen, couldn't block out what he was continuing to see. His mind immediately split itself into familiar compartments, some of which were prepared to know they were witnessing only illusion, while some were prepared to know it was really happening. The overarching result was that emotions were slow to bubble forth, though bubble they did, under some surface somewhere, and Ben suspected he was trapped in a dream.

Aggraban released his hold on his enemy's neck. Eonmor looked at him dully, not quite dead yet, despite the absence of a brain. Some essence of life still lingered, unsure of how to leave after such a long time. But the expression was senile. He slid down the wall into a sitting position, mouthing unformed words. He leaned forward, showing the cup of his skull to his enemy, and at last became a corpse.

"Look at that," said his murderer, quietly amazed by his own success. "His brain evaporated clean away!" He looked back over his shoulder and up at Ben, the only witness to his remarkable feat. His eyebrows were raised, his eyes lit by a childlike surprise, as though he expected his captor

to share in his wonder.

But he received no praise or encouragement from the young man who was pinned to the wall above the fireplace, staring down like a sentient cadaver, and he turned back to marvel at his handiwork to the extent he felt it deserved. For Ben the scene crawled back and forth across his senses: the gentle cracking of the fire, the silent flickering of the flames on the walls, the obscenely gaping skull of what was once his dear friend but was now become an alien object whose presence was such a blatant abomination it could only be a form of madness. But it was a persistent madness for, try as he might to disassociate himself from it, the peaceful nightmare continued, refusing to fade, and he was aware of his own emotions laughing at him deliriously from beyond an invisible wall of shock, anticipating their time, which would surely come.

When the monster turned again, ready finally to lavish its full attention on its new pet object of torment, Ben knew it was only more madness. The gaunt and ghoulish figure in white, blood spattered robes pulled up the kitchen table and climbed onto it so that it could put its gurning, mocking face close to Ben's. It was closer now than Ben's field of focus allowed for; its features blurred and swam beneath a surface of clear but agitated poison.

"So, my friend," sang the monster, so pleased, like an old returning friend filled to the eyes with liquid malice. "Here we are at last. It's so nice to meet you in the flesh. And what do we have, you and I, when all is said and done? What do we have between us? Let me see. Well, you have your armoured skin, and I...well, I have Berringsstrom. Maybe that makes us even, what do you think? Maybe that means we should share our gifts with each other. Yes? No? Shouldn't we do that? If I share my blade with you, will you share your skin with me?"

Ben wanted to reel back from the pure hate. The monster stroked his face.

"We have all the time in the world. What newly met young lovers could ever say as much?" The monster chuckled, then hummed and hahhed theatrically. "I think we should relieve you of your nipples to begin with. You won't be needing them where I'm sending you. Does that meet with your approval? Yes? You're positively eager? I was nervous you might think me hasty, but...very well, let's begin, shall we?"

The monster moved its hands to Ben's jerkin. Terror burst forth in him now and had nowhere to go. It could not scream, it could not thrash, it could not plead or cry; it could only pound and ache and swirl and magnify within his body, finding nothing but itself to feed on. The atmosphere in the shattered kitchen clenched like a fist on a pumping heart. The reflections of the flames on the walls grew brighter and the shadows grew darker until even the monster seemed to notice and looked about itself.

"What," said a voice, strident with an aeon's worth of emphasis, "do you think you are doing?"

Aggraban's face ducked back to Ben, its expansive leering pinched out, replaced by a new expression that was small and stiff.

"Shit!" he said minutely.

Mab was standing in the doorway, slightly indistinct for being in the periphery of Ben's right eye, but in sharper focus than Aggraban. Her gaze suddenly fell on Eonmor's corpse and she gasped as though from a blow to the stomach.

"You...!" she said.

Aggraban stood up straight, turned and hopped down from the table.

"What do you want, Mab? I'm busy."

Tears collected along the sagging rims of her eyes and began to trickle down.

"What have you done?" she rasped, the words barely sustained on her breath.

Aggraban mugged confusion then cast a glance at the dead wizard.

"What? Oh, him? Ah, yes, he's another one you had a soft spot for, isn't he? I mean, *wasn't* he?"

Mab was breathing too heavily but, in a confused and haltering way, she suddenly seemed to become aware of the disparity between her own state and Aggraban's and she fixed her wounded eyes on him, holding them there until something inside her toughened. Her crooked back stiffened a little and her head lifted.

"Would you like me to congratulate you?" she asked in a complicated tone.

"Piss off, you old cunt."

Nothing about her moved, except for the pupils of her eyes, which dilated alarmingly.

"You'd better go now, boy," she said. "You've had an eventful night. You'll be tired and wake up in a temper."

"I've told you, I'm busy. Pay your respects to the old bastard, if you must, and then get out. I'm going to be here some time."

Mab's dilated pupils looked up at Ben, who wasn't able to return her stare, and then back at Aggraban.

"You can't kill him," she said.

"Fuck off."

"There are only twelve of us now."

"What? You mean this whelp?"

"Surely. Do you think you could have conquered Eonmor before his replacement was ready?"

"Yes. Of course. This 'no less than twelve, no more than thirteen' business is nonsense."

"You know better than that."

"No, Mab. No I don't. Perhaps you do, but I, most assuredly, do not and will not. Anyway, I stopped counting long ago." He held his head at a haughty angle, looking at the hag from the corner of one eye. Then his head turned and he peeped at Ben slyly.

"Still...I suppose there could be something to be said for taking the whelp as my own apprentice. A certain poetic license. Mmm, yes, yes, yes."

Mab took a step towards Aggraban and he took a step back, stiffening.

"I think not," said the crone.

"Don't step towards me, woman. This is one of your business. If I choose to make amends to the boy in this way it is my affair and you'd do well not to meddle."

The woman chuckled a low, half demented chuckle.

"Make amends, is it? That's so sweet and rich I could just gobble it up. But I wouldn't be meddling, my dear, so much as peeling the mottled skin from your rancid meat."

Aggraban appraised her with an arched eyebrow.

"Oh. You're in that kind of mood. Have a care, Mab. You think I haven't prepared for today? I have a certain fondness for you, but you know I wouldn't hesitate."

"You're so unbiased, Aggraban, in the contempt you donate to others. Am I really so idiotic in your eyes?"

"I'd ask you to explain yourself, madam, but I know you're going to."

"If I suspect you may be too powerful for me to handle now, then I can guarantee you will become too powerful for me if you take the boy. So I think I will just step forward, and...we'll see who hesitates."

Mab took another step forward. Aggraban remained as he was, not stepping back, but not raising the sword either. Silence reigned supreme between them. A crow cawed outside.

"You're hesitating," said Mab.

Aggraban looked down on the witch from a cold height but when he spoke he sounded human again.

"Your affection for that fool never suited you."

Mab let her gaze turn to, and dwell on, Eonmor's corpse. Her left eye glistened wetly. When she spoke it was with the voice of a young woman, soft and heavy as a summer's twilight.

"Oh ... yes it did. It suited me well. It suited me very well." Her focus shifted, to another realm, and it rested there for a time. Then, slowly, it returned. "I think you had better leave now, Aggraban, while my affection for *you* holds out."

A shadow of hesitation crossed the necromancer's face, but then he jutted his chin out.

"And leave the whelp to you, you suppose?"

Mab laughed. It was a careless, hollow sound.

"Ah, you look like a schoolboy. How beautiful. A brave schoolboy. Well, my sweetheart, you have no choice in the matter, because I'm giving you none. But if it's any consolation I have no use for slaves. I leave that kind of nonsense to cracked despots and necrotic old illusionists like you. When I use a man I use a real man, a whole man, and that means a free man. The boy shall have his chance. You, on the other hand, have used all of the chances this day had reserved for you." She raised a bony finger. "Speak not another word or your tongue goes into my next pot. Now be gone."

The finger drew a line under the matter.

The sorcerer stood there a moment, endless, dark machineries turning behind his eyes, and then, whether by some power of his own or by hers (it was impossible to tell), a wind picked up, swirled around him, and blew his atoms up through the rift in the house, carrying them in a fine pale sand through the treetops and into the south.

The aftermath of his departure throbbed with emptiness and the hag seemed to shrink back and grow more bent. Turning, slowly and reluctantly, she shuffled to Eonmor's body, her thin old voice crooning mindlessly, and she sat beside him, cupping his dead face in her gnarled hands.

"What have they done to you, my boy? My sweet one! Look at the mess you're in."

Her hands reached tentatively to the bony ridge of his open, empty skull, but flinched away. Quickly she rummaged in her clothes and found a woolen black hat that had leaves and feathers caught in it, which she set on his head as best she could. "That's it, there you go. We don't want you get-

ting a cold, do we? How does that feel, my love?"

She closed her eyes and cradled the corpse in her arms, blessed it with her old woman's tears, unaware it seemed of the hat slipping immediately to the floor. "My love," she cried. "My sweet one! What have they done to you? What have they done?" And there she remained through the long hours of darkness, the flooding of her grief witnessed only by the boy, who was held fast in a state so complete that not a single of his own tears could fall.

Italics section...?

9

She took him down from the wall. But it took her a long time. The force holding him in place was not a thing that would be dispelled easily, despite her muttering and pondering to herself, despite her curses and fragments of bone with bits of hair still attached, her feathers and twigs, and broths made from black witch's butter. For as fearsome and unfathomable a phenomenon as she was, she still found it insufferably difficult to comprehend and counter the techniques and mechanisms employed by men.

From his prison of physical stasis, of shocked but unsleeping consciousness, Ben's mental activity began to associate itself more with her, the most purposeful thing in the room, than with himself, as though his mind had become a facet of her split personality, a facet she shunned and kept at a distance while she got on with her work. He offered silent suggestions to help achieve the dispel, but she ignored most of them, and didn't acknowledge his aid even when she did appear to use it. When she climbed onto the table and looked into his eyes and encouraged him to take heart it was as though she were still just talking to herself, taking pity on an inner longing she knew she was prone to neglect, never give expression to.

For the most part she was calm, maintaining a professional bedside manner, and what few frustrated outbursts she did indulge she directed at inanimate objects, so the furniture ended up deformed into tormented postures. When, after an especially fervid sequence of failed attempts, she sat for over an hour in sulky contemplation before climbing to her feet with a thoughtful humf and walking out, he gradually began to forget her, and associate himself with the void she had left behind instead.

He was Ben no more. He became inanimate in thought as well as in deed. He was the moving of sunlight and shadow through a room. He was the sound of birdsong at a remove. He was the inside of a broken building, his furniture scattered and distorted. He was broken plates, a discarded teapot, a cracked sink, a cold hearth. He was the shape of a sitting man draped with a tablecloth. He was a breeze that could be heard and seen but not felt. He was a hollow, clanging peace.

Time achieved its natural state, which is to have no meaning at all.

But even within timelessness itself, nothing can stay the same; transformation is always at work, even for those who seem doomed and unaware.

She came back – but to the side of the house. She was carrying a hammer and a chisel. She sang, in the weak and wistful notes that old women enjoy, as she chipped away the mortar and removed the stone bricks, patient again, making a negative sculpture in the wall, shaped like a man holding a sword.

She pulled him backwards through it, midwife to a strange reverse birth in which he toppled, rigid as bone, to bounce on the soft grass, and rock a few times like a fallen hat stand coming to rest. Looping rope under his

arms and around his chest she had Cloé drag him away through the forest. And so, thereafter, for a period of timelessness, he was only the sky, and the branches and leaves of trees passing before it in a jerkily undulating stream of sunlight. And how long a time that lasted had no meaning.

When they arrived at her cottage in the woods Mab remembered to put a crow's wing over his face. Still lying on the ground, face up, his body finally softened and his eyelids finally fell. The darkness of sleep opened around him like a hole in the world and he burrowed down through it, retreating far and deep, and when he did eventually dream they were only dreams that the sky would dream, and the branches, and the leaves of trees, and the streaming of sunlight.

φ

Ben had once known, for he had learned it during his apprenticeship, that much occurs when one is asleep, much more than just dreaming. On a series of portal journeys when he was nine, which were part of an extended exploration of the nature of consciousness and reality, his master had shown him that consciousness is not a product of the material world, not a result of brain activity. It is the other way around, of course. Consciousness is the source, and the substance, of everything, is the only thing that exists: consciousness of what one perceives, what one believes, what one doubts, what one is. Take any describable phenomenon – perceptual, abstract, emotional, physical – remove the consciousness of it from the meta-physical equation and the thing itself must disappear. When one discovers that no two beings perceive any single thing in exactly the same way, the immateriality of the material becomes apparent.

At first this concept seemed counter intuitive to the apprentice. The outer world clearly seemed to persist more ardently than consciousness, which disappeared completely every night when he went to sleep. But in the Sovereign Galaxies he saw that his own consciousness of self was but a single cell of a larger consciousness, that was itself but a single cell of something greater, and so on. Looking within he saw the infinite array of levels of awareness that each individual consciousness may attune to, all of them available within its very own self. These levels of awareness are distinct from each other only in that their range of vibrational resonances differ in their location along a spiralling spectrum. One perceives the levels of awareness at which one is vibrating. From any given current location all but the closest neighbouring frequency ranges are invisible. So what experiences one has in range x cannot register on one's level z awareness, not even as memory. When an individual alters the vibration of their consciousness from one level of awareness to another (when they are moving from deep sleep to a waking state, for example) the experiences they had in the former level of awareness seem to be left behind. Those experiences simply don't exist at a frequency that can register in the current level of awareness. A great deal is experienced in deep sleep, but, apart from rare anomalies, it can't be recalled, the metaphysics simply won't allow it, and so it seems there is just an empty space of none-ness, between one waking day and the next.

There is some overlap of course, where frequency ranges meet. Sometimes we will remember our dreams. But although, while in our dream state, it may be possible to remember experiences from waking life *and* ex-

periences from deep sleep, in waking life we cannot remember what we experienced in deep sleep. The vibrational gap is too wide.

On that first day in Mab's cottage, while his body lay on a cot, Ben lingered long in certain levels of awareness that are available during deep sleep. It was two days before his activities on that level strengthened him sufficiently so that he might face the prospect of returning to wakefulness, and walking in forgetfulness once again.

Though he had no recollection of how he had come there, he accepted waking up in the witch's cottage with a nurturing lack of curiosity. When broth was placed in his hands, and he was encouraged to eat, he ate. When he was led outside and told to chop wood he chopped wood. When Cloé sat beside his cot and read to him a bedtime story he listened to it. His mind was still – a monk's dream of a mind – and dwelt only on what was presented immediately before it. A dark and smoky room. A hag in the shadows. Dried plants hanging from beams. Pots and jars. Cloudy liquids half concealing their contents. Cloé's slim, smooth arms. The dim light finding her cleavage. Her lips smiling tenderly. Her hair falling in front of her face. Her eyes glinting.

The hours passed, slow as infinity, as though he were a child with a fever. And it was not long before he was weakened and needed to sleep again, to be healed of that soul wearying attrition that wakefulness inflicts. But then, it never was long, even when he was at his strongest – no longer than anybody else. Only a day.

φ

The cottage had only one, cave like, room. Each time he went outside, squinting at the light, gasping at the clean air rasping through the branches of his lungs, he felt he was being born. After the darkness of the interior the surrounding, closely-knit woods were startlingly complex and beautiful. They were also sentient and alarming, whispering in abstracted voices of places within him. Each time he went back into the cottage he felt he was retreating from too much life to the safety of non-existence. The crone would peer at him then from the shadows, croon snatches of uncooked songs, veer unexpectedly from one personality to the next, chuckling, weeping, muttering, knowing.

The days took on a certain rhythm and nothing of any account happened at all. Ben didn't speak, only followed instructions, sat up, lay down, moved here, moved there, ate this, sipped that. His dreams became crowded with giant gnawing insects, but he didn't scream or thrash, just observed listlessly. The witch's activities involved nothing more arcane than knitting, making broths, brewing tea, placing wild flowers just so. Cloé spoke softly and perfectly, untouched by any thought for self, because she didn't have one, tending tirelessly to the care of the old woman and the young man. As a walking, talking symbol she represented different things to the delirium troubled witch and the barely conscious man boy, except where they both saw in her a remaining vestige of still functioning artistry left behind by somebody they both had known. While her centre was empty of soul, densely filled by a core of unfeeling iron, her surface glowed with heart, the heart of a daydreaming old man. Both Mab and Ben found her presence a distraction, and that was her power.

Later on Ben would decide that the gift Mab had given him was not to lead him out of his grief, but to lead him into it and then leave him there.

He never knew how she had done it, for she only seemed to knit and make broths and scold Cloé over the housework, but his trust in the witch was akin to his trust in nature, which is essentially mysterious, and never apologises for its inhumane wisdom. It was pointless to ask if she might have guided him out of his grief if things had gone differently.

As the days and weeks passed he gradually began to function once again. No demands were made on him, beyond the carrying out of simple, practical tasks, but with the shedding of each hour the absence of the old man became a greater and more intrusive presence, haunting those moments when it seemed the boy might be about to recapture some of the joy and magic of being alive. The wizard's voice danced in and out of Ben's mind at odd and unpredictable times, reproaching him for being distracted from living by an attachment to mere memories. A hundred portal rings expanded, one after the other, each leading to adventure and wonder...only they all lead to past lives now, past lives that had been lived, in their rightful and allotted time, and were, therefore, as dead and done now as his master. It had all been a dream. The most beautiful dream of being alive. Now he had awoken, and waking life seemed like death to him.

φ

They were sitting outside the cottage with Cloé, all three of them knitting, their chairs against the west wall.

"What will you do?" asked Mab, when she thought he could hear such a question. "Where will you go?"

He shrugged blandly.

"I won't do anything. I won't go anywhere."

She shook her head.

"No, my boy, you can't stay here forever."

He looked at her.

"Why not?"

"Because you're not invited."

His expression flinched, stung, but she just watched him, and he became flummoxed.

"It doesn't feel like I've been here any length of time at all."

"The passing of time must speed up for us," said Mab. "Wizards and witches live long, and if the rest of it moved at the same pace as childhood we would all despair and do ourselves in."

"And you're not my apprentice," she said, whining a little. "I don't like to spend so much time around the boys when I'm looking like this."

"You're beautiful, Mab."

"Oh, stop it."

"I'd rather be your friend like this. I know you're renowned for your prettiness, when you're the maiden of spring, that no man can resist your seduction, but I like you this way."

"You say darling things. But, have a caution, my love. Don't assume friendship too hastily. This old face you see has other sides to it besides maid and mother. You might not feel you want to be a friend to them all."

"I've seen," he said, screwing up his eyes. "A little, anyway."

This gave her pause and she looked at him with slack features.

"Have you? Have you, dear?"

She said it with the utmost sympathy. He nodded, tried to shrug it off, and she leaned forward and squeezed his knee.

"You're a brave lad. A fine lad."

This didn't seem to console him.

"But I'm not one of the thirteen or the twelve, am I?"

"Well, no..."

"You told Aggraban you thought I was."

"I was just playing with his mind, dear."

"Oh."

"But you could be, one day, if that sort of thing is important to you."

He looked away unhappily into the shadows under the trees.

"I don't know how," he said, chin jutting forward.

"Ah, your master was right," she said, taking up her knitting again, "You do like to feel sorry for yourself."

His ears pricked up.

"He talked to you about me?"

"To me? Oh, I think so. I seem to remember."

"What did he say?"

"That you like to feel sorry for yourself¹²."

He scowled at the witch, and growled, and she tutted irritably.

"Oh, what do you think he said?" she said. "You know better than I how much he loves you."

Ben gazed into his knitting. It was painstakingly slow, a meditation, but contained no dropped stitches, unlike Mab's.

"I don't understand," said the boy, "...you and him. What were you to each other?"

"What were we? What *weren't* we, you might as well ask. We were friends, lovers, enemies, this, that. Oh, you know, the same old same old." She cackled fondly, then sighed dreamily and looked away. "Ah, me, oh my." Then she grew distracted for a while. "You shouldn't worry about the thirteen and the twelve, you know. What are they? They're nothing. In your world you are all powerful. Indeed, you're far from inconsequential in mine. Be at peace, you silly boy. And leave! Leave tomorrow."

Ben grimaced and dropped his first stitch. Then he grew furtive, and the old woman pretended not to notice until he gathered courage enough to voice what was on his mind.

"There's something...I've been...I mean, I...I wanted to ask your...er..."

"Goodness, child, spit it out before you choke," she laughed.

"I want to have sex with Cloé...before I go."

She leaned back from him with widened eyes. "Oh," she said, "wash your mouth out."

"Mab, don't make fun of me! I need to have sex! I talked about it with Cloé already and she said she doesn't mind...only I have to ask you first."

Cloé watched them both prettily.

"She *doesn't mind*? Bless you my boy, what plans the two of you have been cooking up! Of course she doesn't mind. She's a little slut!"

Cloé's face glowed primly.

"Mab..."

Mab howled with laughter, although it seemed to Ben she was forcing it somewhat. "She doesn't mind!" she coughed, and then went into a choking fit.

When she turned her crooked spine to him and started pointing at it, in-

¹² Can it be arranged that Yanto has that conversation with Mab, at a time that makes sense chronologically?

dicating the need of a good slap on the back, he folded his arms and gave her a dark look.

Recovering in an instant, she turned back and put a hand on his arm.

"My sweet one, listen to Granny Mab. If there is one thing I would bid you do it is this: make love to a real woman before you go acting out hollow, sticky travesties with mindless effigies. There'll be plenty of time for that nonsense when you're a wizened old man who can't tell the difference any more."

Ben gargled with frustration, much to her amusement.

"Mab...he kept telling me to wait. He said when I came into my power the right woman would appear. So I've waited and put it off, all this time! And now he's gone, and I'll never come into my power."

"Oh dear, you are in a sorry state, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"My precious sweet thing, heed me now, if my knowledge means anything at all to you: the world turns. And while man chases after his baubles, the world continues to turn, unnoticed beneath his feet. What a woman cannot escape, a man isn't even aware of. A man truly in his power, ah, that is a rare and beautiful thing. And yes, woman will sigh for him. You may be a wizard, or a hero, and never come close to it. If it is at all important to you then pay attention to your life. Your life speaks to you every day, every moment, showing you the way back to yourself. But if this is not important to you, then here: take this bauble..." she flicked a handful of bony and dismissive fingers at Cloé beside her, "...take it inside and squander what energy and sap you have. The world will be turning, regardless."

Ben's features crumpled up close to each other with dismay. Looking at his knitting as though it were an abomination he cast it to one side, stood up and wandered away moaning into the woods. From time to time the witch and the young woman would hear the cracking of thick branches and his angry cursing. Mab cackled lightly but when she saw Cloé's sympathetic pout she sighed and hummed, reflecting on her own knitting with sudden compassion.

When he returned, ruddy faced, and returned to his seat she let him be for a while before she spoke again.

"So, my boy, what are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

"I don't know. I should probably look for tirpsigate. I'm just not convinced there's any need."

"Tirpsigate? Who's that?"

"It's not a who, it's a what, a magical stone. I was hoping you'd be able to tell me how I should go about looking for it."

The old woman chewed her gums absently.

"Never heard of it, dear."

"Oh. He said it was a common thing."

"To male magicians it probably is. They involve themselves in all sorts of boyish approaches that seem to be full of meaning to them but which I just can't be bothered with. Give me the wind, a twig, a root, a drop of moonlight – all of life's transformations are held inside."

Ben felt himself sag, yet detected a hint of relief in his apparent disappointment.

"Well, in any case, I haven't got anywhere to go. And I can't do anything."

"Really?" she said, unimpressed.

"It's true. Not like real wizards. Just a few tricks, really."

"You were with him for almost twenty years, and you think that is the best answer you can give me? Is this how you honour him?"

"You don't understand. It all fell apart at the end. He said I couldn't be his apprentice any more."

"He said that? Oh." The old witch chewed on this as though trying to extract the gristle from it. "Well, I'm sure it was only because he felt it was time for you to be your own master."

"No, it was because Zane got inside my head."

She stared at him then, as though he were an utterly incomprehensible thing.

"What!" Her voice was shrill with shock, sending the crows from the trees. He suddenly had the feeling there was no air to breath and was ready to suck his words back into his mouth, take them into his lungs. "What did you say?" she demanded.

"Zane...he held my astral body prisoner for a while." Her jaw hung slack. "He got into my mind...showed me the story of his life."

Her mouth opened and closed ineffectually, not knowing what words it was supposed to be uttering, until finally the information came through.

"And I let you into my house!"

"Mab?"

"This is no good! This is no good at all! You'll have to leave. You must go. Immediately!"

"Mab, don't! I'm not ready."

"Ready! What is your readiness to me? You come here and spy on me for Zane...in my very own house!"

He recognised the state she was sinking into.

"I might be alright," he said plaintively. "I don't know. I don't know what happened."

"You don't know! Eonmor disowned you for it, and now he's dead! And you don't know! Aggraban has Berringstrom...and you don't know! Do the ten foot deeds written in blood before your very eyes not help you to know!"

"Mab...!"

She reached out a claw, grabbed a handful of his shirt and tossed him across the cottage's clearing towards a tall willow. He hardened his skin and bounced off the trunk with a force that would have broken his back. Making her hand into a claw once more she dragged him back through the air towards her and put her hands around his neck.

"You killed him!" she wailed with a sudden and fervent conviction, as though the world's most evil truth had at last been made plain, as though she knew now the horror of existence. Her bony, old hands tightened around his neck with the strength of tree roots, with a might he didn't allow himself to feel. "You...murdering...filth! What have you done! What have you done!"

She was gone now, far away, replaced by the dark shadow that lived on her lungs, the twisted entity that was forever lying in wait, impatient for opportunities to feed on its own billowing outrage.

"Mab...don't."

Her face twitched and reappraised him.

"Why aren't you choking...you little...murdering...beast?" She lifted a hand, curled it into a talon, and swiped it across his face experimentally.

Her nails broke against it, pinging from her fingertips and making her bite down on the pain. "Oh, you bastard son of a bastard!" She looked at her bloodied fingertips, aghast. "Look what you've done now! You think you can do that to me? You think you can get away with what you want, do you? I've got news for you, my boy!" She began to walk around to the front of the house, dragging him easily, one hand fastened on his neck. "You think you can survive me? You think you're man enough, do you? You think I can't get through that precious skin of yours? Oh, my boy, you've come to the wrong place!"

"Mab! Don't! Please, Mab! Please!"

Primal memories roared in his head making a whirlpool of his vision. At the front of the cottage she held him down in the grass, and its long blades curved over the edges of his sight, turning the sky into a howling maw. She held up her wounded hand and new talons grew from the bloody remains of the previous ones, like thorns growing from the sky.

"You snuck into my own home!" she choked. Holding out her repaired hand to the cottage the door sprang open and a dagger with a twisted blade span through the air, planted its hilt in her grip. "You men are all the same! All swine! And you never know when you've bitten off more than you can chew! Do you!"

His tears were flowing freely.

"Granny Mab...please..."

She raised the dagger into the broken clouds, and then brought it down.

Cloé was only just in time, throwing herself across him, grabbing the witch's wrist in both hands. The dagger stabbed into the ground at the side of his head.

"Granny," said Cloé in a voice as still as the earth, "don't."

Mab's eyes ballooned.

"I knew it!" she hissed. "You little strumpet!" Releasing Ben's throat she delved with both of her claws into Cloé, ripping handfuls of flesh away. "I always knew you'd turn on me! You think I haven't been waiting for this day!"

Cloé winced at the pain, but didn't complain.

"You're upsetting yourself," she said gently, but the witch began to claw her guts from her. Wriggling out from beneath them, Ben found himself lying on the grass, his face close to Cloé's head, which was flopping back and forth as though she were having sex. Her luminous, sorrowful eyes looked into his.

"Run," she whispered. Then Mab swiped her across the face and one of the eyes was gone.

"Slut! Whore! Strumpet! Traitorous harlot!" screamed the hag, ripping at whatever unblemished flesh she could find, venting what rage she could in order, it seemed, to keep her own desolation at bay.

Ben backed himself away from them and onto his feet. Staring in horror at the scene before him he was unable, for a moment, to turn away. The witch looked up then and caught his eye in hers and it seemed that a great goblin crow was perched on a pile of carrion, looking out at him from within its own eternal moment of hell. Fire writhed in her trembling irises. The day clenched itself around the cottage in a cold fury and he knew that he was a dead man now. But then she turned back to the splattered remains of Cloé as though wondering what they were. Scooping up a pair of organs she began to gibber and sing and gasp and wail.

Backing away into the clanging woods Ben turned and fled woodenly, wanting only to rid himself of the dreadful sight. But the scene went with him, flashing in his mind's eye as he passed through the branches and the leaves and the shadows and the screaming sunlight.

ϕ

He was barefoot and lost. All he had in the world now was a pair of breeches, a jerkin, and a belt from which poked the hilt of a sword, but not the blade. The dark woods noticed him and tried to communicate with him (or about him), but their thoughts were at once clamouring and hushed, willfully inconsistent, carried on an alien language of mood and motion, shifting scents and the changing of temperatures he couldn't feel, glimmers of light, and signs spelled out in moss covered stones and fallen birds, life feasting on decay, rustling, corner of the eye glimpsing, imagined laughter and weeping. Parts of the woods beckoned cloyingly, promising him sweet respite, a lover's tender mercies, if only he would linger a while and lay his head down. Other corners seemed only to offer giant insect limbs, coiled just out of sight amongst the cluttered twigs and the dank smell of loam, ready to spring and catch. Certain boulders wished to hold him down, sink him into fathoms of earth, which waited incessantly to claim him as their own and gnaw on him forever more.

He ran into the night and blundered through it, breaking branches and thudding into trunks, slowing down eventually to a purposeful walk but never stopping, feeling that it was only his motion that kept him distinct from the nighttime trees. The world was black, its intentions kept from him, its spirit set against him. There was no place for him here. He walked on, reckless and sullen, presenting his rock skin to whatever invisible things might wish to try a bite.

The gory scene he had left behind continued to light up his inner eye, Cloé butchered so that he might be spared. He knew she was only a made up thing, a mere object, and yet...he had longed for her all the same, regardless of both Eonmor's and Mab's insistence that she was soulless and not deserving of infatuation. Did her beauty and care truly count for nothing, just because it had been manufactured? Her loyalty was tangible. Was he supposed to deem it unworthy because she couldn't control it? Well, he wouldn't do it. He would value it forever, no matter what. And yet what reward had it gained her? Butchery. He knew she would probably regenerate, given time, unless the witch decided to throw her onto a fire hot enough to melt the glod in her heart, but even so, she had willingly taken on all of that pain, just so that he might not. What did it matter to him if she had a soul or didn't? The wise might consider her to be less than him, yet she gave altogether more than he had ever given¹³.

And atop the vision of Cloé's ruptured body, howling from features rendered slack by horror, madness and hate, Mab's eyes, all traces of recognition gone, all traces of friendship burned away. She was as afraid of what Zane had done to him as Eonmor had been, afraid of what attack might be directed towards her under the guise of love. The power and subtlety of the emperor was beyond both witch and wizard. How could that be? Eon-

¹³ This theme of loving something that isn't sentient (especially as it relates to Cloé and Sally) should be referred back to in *Children of Mab* by Yanto, using the Destiny Discussion piece on childhood in Salford.

mor was good, a truly good and noble man, a true master. And Mab was one with the natural world, a very part of its transformative cycles. How could it be that they would fear being outmanoeuvred by such a man as believed in the malnourished concepts of empire and slavery, no matter how much base power he had accrued? It didn't make sense to him, but their fear was bright and well honed, beyond denial. Had Ben really been tricked so profoundly? Was he doing nothing now but going from place to place carrying out Zane's will? Was his every action an unthinking contribution to the fall of Nestorea to Zoestrosa? He envisaged a destiny in which all of the Kingdoms' staunchest defenders were killed or rendered impotent by exactly whichever courses of action he chose to take, no matter how well intentioned he conceived them to be. It was a preposterous notion, he knew, crawling with paranoia and egotism, yet Mab and Eonmor had both embraced it as the prime concern. As mighty and beautiful as they were, they feared the emperor's abilities and intent with an urgency born of necessity. And Ben knew without a flicker of doubt that their powers of apprehension were further beyond his own than he himself could begin to imagine.

The obvious conclusion ran against every feeling in every hair of his head, and yet it remained utterly inescapable.

I helped bring about the death of my own master. In ways I do not see I served that end. Aggraban was the weapon. Zane wielded the weapon. But I was used to make the weapon keen, and the aim of the blow true. I was the scabbard that sharpens the blade as it is inserted, and as it is drawn; I was the distraction that held my master's attention from the final strike. And now I am blundering about, acting from weakness and ignorance, serving a nation slayer, still hopelessly in love with him.

I still love him.

I killed my master at his bidding.

Now, in the all-encompassing blackness, the woods talked to him of captivity, slavery and loss. They talked to him of despair, of freedom from hope. They talked to him of being lost, lost in all ways possible. They asked him what it was that his master had taught him – the power of each individual to create their own reality? What kind of a sickness must be eating away at his heart that he would choose to create this? Was he really so unwholesome? Had the expectation of becoming a great master really been so terrible a burden as to warrant the death and disappearance and alienation of those he held most dear? Did he really pride himself on being that much of a disappointment?

These dark probings burrowed deep. In the drained and bottomless well of night he cried out, heard his own voice as though it were another's, a ghoulish distraught by self-knowledge, standing close by in the dark, bent on accompanying him. He could only harden himself further and trudge on.

It was not until he reached the furthest point between sunset and dawn, when he heard his master's voice, concerned and loving, reaching from the back of his mind, *It's nothing but a game, Ben...all of it*, that he finally knelt before a black tree trunk and bowed his head against it and sobbed as though the world would break. What kind of a bleak game was no fun to play? What kind of a game was made out of despair? But his master didn't answer and the trees didn't seem to hear. After a time, when the ground didn't open and swallow him down, when he realised that he would just go

on living, as though he hated himself that much, he climbed to his feet and trudged on, baffled.

Marching into the early hours some fundamental flame of despair suddenly burnt out. His paranoia began to subside, flowing away downhill from him, and the wooded night began to accept his presence. But he continued to walk, not ready to stop and lie down until some light seeped into the sky and enough of the colour and form of the forest emerged for him to recognise it as a natural place. Clambering about on the rocky side of a steep gorge he found a shelf, low down, that sank back into a niche. With the stone behind and around him, and a compact and powerful river before him, Ben lay himself down. Before he slept he stared out at the brightening day, ready for it to produce an enemy to hate and attack him for whatever reason, or for a boulder to fall and crush him. The roaring of the river seemed to him like the constant presence of loss. And although he was numb to it now that didn't stop it from wearing away at his soul.

φ

He didn't know where he was. He wondered who he was.

The sword was a good sword, but not the best, and no use for hunting or trapping. But keeping himself in his rock-like state, in order to spare his feet during the day, and protect himself from the unknown at night, Ben found he felt neither thorn nor cold nor hunger. He could walk forever in the sprawling, secret depths of the forest, unfeeling and undying, and possibly, in time, become some kind of monster, to be feared, desired, sung about and misunderstood. The pathos of this thought appealed to him and he smiled to himself minutely. And though it was a small smile it was his first in a long time, and he noticed that.

He roamed the woods and found he was free at last.

"What shall I be?" he asked his master. "Shall I become a shade amongst the trees?"

His master blew through the branches and Ben fancied he saw the old man's smile in a cloud way up through the leaves.

"Shall I become a real man? What is one of those, anyway?"

His master shrugged and wouldn't say.

Ben dove from a rock and swam to the bottom of a pool and found he didn't need to come up for air. The colours of the pebbles on the riverbed were dark and rich.

Perhaps I could journey to the Great Forest of Laan, seek out Sesse Ræma and become his apprentice.

His master wavered in a play of light on ripples but kept his thoughts to himself.

It's up to me, isn't it? said the boy.

The forest was beautiful, but not like the one in Solfar. Though the trees were watchful they were also small, ordinary sized. The land was steep and cluttered, full of gullies and ravines, streams and rivers and waterfalls, darkened pools and glimpses of faraway sky. The wood bore the aspect of the witch, but faintly now. He had left her cottage a good way behind, and she had not been resident in these parts so long. Her presence grew fainter as he continued each day to walk away from the sun. A morning came when no trace remained of her in the air or the shadows, and no unseasonal hollyhocks were to be seen along the trails. He entered a clearing and two

elves were waiting for him, a male and a female¹⁴.

"You're right!" laughed the male. "It is a man!"

They stood in Ben's path. Not feeling inclined to alter his course to avoid them he walked on, until he was in danger of colliding with them, and then he stopped.

"Look at that," said the female in some wonder. "He walks right up to us."

"Yes," said the male beginning to frown. "And now I'm not so sure we should have let him see us."

"No, there is something strange about him," she agreed.

Ben found himself sneering. This shocked them both.

"Look at that!" sighed the male. Then, after a moment's stunned speechlessness, he addressed Ben. "Hey, you there. What kind of a man are you? What power bids you to walk abroad in such a way, blundering and crashing through the forest and sneering at people? Are you possessed? Are you some black sorcerer in disguise? Why aren't you afraid? Your sword doesn't even have a blade. Are you mad?"

The sneer faded from Ben's mouth, but something remained in his eyes, lighting them from within.

"I've met your kind before," he said dreamily. "I think it's funny, that you only, finally deign to speak to me directly when you see me sneer. It's only then, isn't it, that you recognise something in me that you might be able to understand, and communicate with? Don't you mark that? Don't you find it speaks a great deal to what kind of creatures you elves are?"

They reappraised him with some awe, then looked at each other, shared a moment of marvel, looked back at him.

"We have encountered something rare and wondrous in the woods today," murmured the female. "I feared we might have to kill you. Now I fear we might not be able to. May I ask where you are going, and what your business is?"

"I'm walking away from the sun. I have no business. None at all."

The elves shared an inarticulate telepathy in which they felt each other's heartbeats, the stirrings of each other's viscera. Ben could see it. Finally the male sighed.

"I'm in no mood for fighting." He seemed to say it to himself as much as to anyone. "If we are to court tragedy with so much passion it would seem churlish to draw our blades every time we perceive the merest possibility of its approach. I won't live like that."

The female's eyes gleamed proudly.

"No. Nor I," she said.

Now Ben noticed for the first time the hints of aristocratic raiment beneath their relatively ordinary travelling clothes. He had walked into their adventure. He could taste it on the air. They were a striking and enigmatic pair, and they wore it like a cloak of charisma. He found the female painfully beautiful.

"What are your names?" he asked, but the male suddenly seemed to lose interest in him, turning pointedly and stepping away towards the trees.

"I shouldn't presume too much, redoubtable walker from the sun," said the female, with a faint smile. "She backed gracefully off the boar track Ben had been following, inviting him to continue on his way."

He felt a pang of resentment glow inside at this rejection. And then he

¹⁴ This is Panomè and Logauer, before their affair has been discovered, before the fall of Selafræ.

wondered at his own behaviour. He wanted to hurt them, he realised. And he wanted to be with them. Walking on, nursing a sense of anticlimax, he again wondered who he had become.

"Enjoy the north," called the female. "It is a good direction."

He looked back but they were gone and he didn't see them again for a long time after that.

φ

He was as lost in the forest as he was lost to himself. He knew not what he was, nor what he was supposed to do.

It is the purpose of a wizard to help the universe wake up. That is the purpose of every living thing.

The words wound through his mind and had no meaning whatsoever.

What do we always do? We be ourselves, that is all.

He shrugged hopelessly and walked on, and the forest revealed itself each day to be endless.

φ

One afternoon he rounded the trunk of an uncommonly large chestnut tree and he paused at the sight that lay before him. A large house of timber and brick stood beneath a giant wych elm. The structure was rent in two, as though the hand of a god had struck it, scorching its seams. There was a hole in the side of the ground floor wall, shaped like a man holding a sword. Inside, in the kitchen, a hundred flies were buzzing. A decaying corpse sat slumped beneath a tablecloth giving off a terrible stench. In the corner, covered in dust and blown leaves, Ben found a discarded backpack. It looked empty, but he picked it up and traced its stitching with a fingertip. A plain wooden staff lay on the floor by the sundered wall. He took it in his hand and pressed it against his right temple. Climbing the stairs he stood before a magical door, but it was locked and he couldn't get to the socks on the other side.

Taking his recovered backpack and his inherited staff down to the river he bathed and dressed in clean clothes, put a good pair of boots on.

Back in the kitchen he sat down beside the figure under the tablecloth, and he looked at his hands.

"Master," he said, in a voice unused to speaking. "I can't see the love any more."

The flies buzzed and landed on him. Shadow and light moved across the room. Time turned on its frictionless axis, turned and wouldn't stop.

φ

He set the house on fire. As he stood and watched it disturbed him that he couldn't feel the heat of the flames on his face. Allowing his rock skin to soften he immediately buckled to his knees, a grasping hunger opening up in the pit of his belly, sweat springing from his pale skin. With shaking hands he took food and a flask from the backpack. The food was as fresh as the moment it had been packed, for the portal through which he lifted it opened onto that very moment. He realised as he ate that he had only just missed brushing his master's fingertips by the flutter of a heartbeat. Smoke got in his eyes and his teardrops fell like spells from a crocodile.

Italics section...?

Notes on this chapter:

The second half (from Ben running into the woods) needs extensively adding to. What is going on *inside* him (emotions and thought process), and how is that reflected by his external journeying?

10

The seemingly empty, gratuitously unlovely looking backpack that Eonmor had prepared for Ben's exile from apprenticeship was full of wonders. Through the portals sewn into the openings to each compartment Ben could access more food than he would ever eat, more clothes than he would ever wear, more weapons than he would ever wield, more gold than he would ever spend, more useful items (ordinary and magical) than he would ever find uses for. The largest of the rings, which hung down in the main body of the bag and could be pulled up and crawled into, led to the top of The Stor – a handy escape route for times of dire peril. A permanent haze of nondescriptness hung around the backpack, not rendering it invisible to potential thieves, just extremely uninteresting.

There was a large pouch of portal rings¹⁵. They were useless things. Ben couldn't manipulate them in any way. Probably nobody in the world could, not even Zane. Eonmor had known this. And yet he had packed them for his former pupil. Ben dipped his hand inside, let the small, frictionless hoops run through his fingers. They made tiny zinging sounds when they touched each other, like faery rain falling.

He still thought I might learn to master them.

He was sitting at the base of the giant elm at Oldsley Edge, the tree by the ruined mill, where he had sat in the branches with Cloé years earlier when they had searched for Mab so that she might help Clemen. Now he sat on the ground, hidden in the shadows and long grass, the backpack lying flaccid before him, the pouch of rings in his hands. With his few magical skills and the bag of tricks left him he was now more powerful and wealthy than any ordinary mortal in Piscea. A teardrop rolled down his face.

He still thought I might learn to master them.

The thought cut him sweetly, like a blade of grass. Above he heard the wind rush through the treetops, but it barely touched him where he sat. The weight of the moment turned the world, the entire cosmos around him and he knew he must decide what he was to be.

Find some tirpsigate. Visit the elgs. It's the only option that makes any sense.

He withdrew his hand from the pouch, pulled the drawstring to seal it.

And if Zane intends that I do just that? If Zane wishes the elgs destroyed at my hand? He pictured himself walking away from such a scene.

Then that would be the end of me.

He knew it. The knowledge sat in his chest like a cannonball. To have sent Eonmor onto his next life, when there was still so much he could have achieved here, that was one thing. To knowingly harm the elgs, that his

¹⁵ Every last one is set to the same spatial setting (Earth). The only way to emerge in a specified location on Earth will be to open a portal at the equivalent location in Piscea. The timing of emergence tends to be completely random.

master had cherished so dearly? No. The very notion was utterly revolting. It could not be risked.

But then, not seeking out the elgs was also something that could not be risked. If they were the only ones that could put his mind at rest, assure him of his own integrity, keep his life from becoming a drawn out limbo of doubt...

The problem could not be solved. All actions, even inaction, were suspect. Whatever thought process he might employ could be corrupt.

But then, suddenly, a thought did come through, and it shone with mathematical purity. He sat there in a hushed awe and let it turn over in his mind's eye. It was a gold coin of a thought, a gold coin that could be tossed in the air. It was simple and elegant, and he would abide by it.

Rummaging quickly in his backpack he found the item he was looking for and clutched it as though it were a rope and he were falling into the void. Jumping to his feet he stepped out from beneath the shelter of the broad branches so that nothing but clear sky lay above his head, and beyond that the cosmos. He braced himself, took in a deep breath and was ready.

Heads, I seek out a piece of tirpsigate; tails, I steer well clear of the elgs.

The fickle favours of random selection would set him free from self doubt.

He tossed the gold coin high and straight into the air where it span and glittered like magic. Half the height of the tree it travelled, and it was a tall tree. When it returned to earth it came back straight and true and Ben had to step to one side to avoid it. He took a moment, before parting the grass, to commit himself to the coin's decision, whatever it might be. He took a moment to wonder whether he would be setting out on a quest for tirpsigate in a few moments time, or not, for the matter was out of his hands now. Satisfied that his course had been set for him he parted the grass and looked down at the coin.

He looked. And then he looked again.

And then he wondered how one might possibly go about calculating the odds of a spun coin embedding itself in the soft earth so that it was standing perfectly on its edge.

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He continued to walk away from the sun.

And now he wrapped nondescription around himself as thickly as he could, to become as invisible as possible, extended his senses as wide as he could, to see as much as possible. He whispered along the trails, a rumour, circumventing signs of sentience. As far as the world of man was concerned the forests of Enlan belonged to the elves, and to the woodland creatures that the elves considered below their notice, and to those mysterious and magical beings that considered the elves below their notice. Three weeks passed by and in that time he slipped by the awareness of most of those sentries, inhabitants, wanderers and indigent entities that he came upon. Sometimes he simply grew still, stepped off the trail and let them pass by, ignorant of his presence, only feeling an inexplicable shudder perhaps, if they were sensitive enough. Sometimes he became aware that he was approaching the domain of something more mysterious than himself and was in time to avoid it, for there was much in the world, especially in old, deep-rooted forests, that was peculiar and awake and wayward.

On occasion he could not escape detection. One afternoon he came in sight of a bright river winding under the protection of broad boughs¹⁶. A hush of magic held the air in stasis and an ancient presence floated there, wearing an alien form sculpted from running water. He guessed it was some kind of elemental but could not be sure. It was already watching him and there seemed little for him to do but pause, kneel and bow respectfully. After a time he sensed a lightening of the atmosphere. Voices gurgled amongst the sounds of the river, seeming to enjoy his humility. When he rose and carefully moved on there were stepping stones ready to take him to the far bank. The being moved its face close to his as he slowly crossed. It spoke in a peculiar, nonhuman language, its voice sounding like a gathering of wooden people, all glad to see each other. He had no idea what its chuckling sounds were meant to convey, but suspected a blessing.

Another day saw him enter a shady grove where he suddenly became aware of a dark and angry congregation surrounding him. They sidestepped, clockwise and anticlockwise, indistinct in the murk, phasing back and forth between the material realm and some other place. Their long, accusing faces bore heavy, stylized features as though they had been carved, like totems. Their limbs too were long, and blurred: slender tree trunks moved by a wind. They wore green and yellow markings at their joints and under their eyes, mumbled bitterly to him in a forgotten language of man, and they were going to keep him there in the grove, the price for ever having come there in the first place. When kneeling and bowing his head didn't appease them he managed to fumble from his bag various trinkets and charms. But the circle of spirits contracted around him, aggrieved by some grudge they held dear, and to which they felt he could be held accountable. Visions invaded his mind's eye of human bones feeding the soil there through the long millennia, their souls being drunk into the land and treasured, made to dream long, muffled nightmares run through with tubers and worms. He hardened his skin and gripped Mirnggald's pommel but a clear instinct warned him against unsheathing her. On the verge of crawling into his backpack to The Stor, knowing he would be abandoning his bag of riches and stranding himself half a world away, he looked to the final piece of physical magic in his woefully limited repertoire: levitation. To his surprise he found the angry beings were earth-bound, perhaps held fast by the weight of their resentment, and all they could do, as he rose into a gap of sky amidst the trees, was stretch forth their long limbs and moan with dismay. Sorrow mixed with his relief as he watched them drop slowly away. Whatever they were, they were trapped in a doom of half-light by a curse cast long ago, transformed from creatures that had once been free. He left them behind with regret, wondering if their story was still told somewhere. He entertained a fleeting fantasy that he would discover it one day, along with the means to release them, and then he would return and find them again.

In the meantime he journeyed on, and most days came and went without him encountering a soul. At times his traveling seemed like a sleepwalk to him, along the broad and narrow byways of the woods, harried by nothing more than the breeze, called to by naught else but birdsong echoing off the sky. Yet he did not doubt that he was observed in those moments of peace, by the unobserved, those hidden beings that have no need of commerce with humankind, and which dwell in the closer neighbouring

¹⁶ What species of tree?

dimensions in all parts where growing things have been long established.

During those initial few weeks of dreamy travail Ben's first level awareness, his immediate mind, became relatively inactive, purposefully accepting that quiet time as a gift in which it could scab over, and heal, forming tender new scars. Thinking was not conducive to this process. The transformations taking place within him arranged and rearranged themselves blindly beneath his human mind, like the cellular soup within the chrysalis of an unnamed insect. On a subconscious level he supposed that whatever was to emerge would be better equipped to inhabit his newly adjusted vision of the world. To a large extent he felt unable to care about it. There was a voice somewhere that wondered if he would recognise the resultant creature at all, but he mostly avoided this thought and walked. The forest opened up before him and fell away behind with a serenity he was thankful for. And those portions of the woods that did harbour darkness and spite provoked little fear or resentment in him, as though he had become inured to nightmares.

And then, three weeks after leaving the burning house in Solfar, Ben encountered his first human, and the time to start thinking again had returned, as he had known it would.

The trail he was on was a pretty one, winding through a region that favoured straight and slender trees. The trunks stood all around, receding into the distance in ranks, masts of a thousand sunken ships both landlocked and submerged. It was a still day, and overcast, but the greens of the forest were bright and healthy. Ben didn't see the man until he was almost past him. He was standing a few steps off the trail amongst a conspiracy of old birches that had once been silver but whose bark had split along the years, the dark hue of age surrounding and engulfing the formerly youthful skin. The slender tips of drooping branches played with the rims of the man's ears and brushed his temples with pale green lichens bushy enough to compete with his beard. He was wearing two thick cloaks: one a tough, forest-stained fabric, the other a spell of nondescription, woven into a skillful suggestion that he had always stood in that spot and represented no more of a cause for concern, or source of interest, than one of the trees. He was watching Ben, waiting for him to pass by, but their eyes met and simultaneously they realised they could both see that the other saw.

"Ah!" said the man, slightly embarrassed, as though he'd been caught pissing in the bushes. "Hello."

His accent was thick: Cabarandian, and he kept his voice low. Lively green eyes countered the aging effect of his big, brown beard. His heavy shoulders belied the lightness of his voice. Outwardly he had changed little since Ben had first met him at Monnhill the day Ashar had died and Clemen was lost, but he had learned a quieter manner. His eyes, while bright enough, had seen sights that would haunt a mortal mind. This man had suffered pains of rare texture, visited extremities of unlikely kinds.

Wizards live long, but they mellow quickly.

Ben had stopped in front of him.

"Hello," he said.

After looking at each other, each awaiting some reaction from the other, each prepared to protect themselves, a certain tipping point was left unreached and the tension between them relaxed by a degree, and then another. Volta's features softened subtly and he gave a tiny nod of acknowledgment. Ben returned it. Neither knew what to say now. The exchanging

of words between wizards (or even half wizards) was inevitably a delicate matter, especially at chance meetings. So Ben took two careful steps backwards, nodded again, turned and began to walk on. But Volta stepped onto the track and called after him softly.

"Stranger! Have you seen the beast?"

The question halted the boy where he stood. Almost against his will he found himself turning around.

"The beast?" he heard his voice say.

"Aye." Volta grimaced as though savouring a rotten egg. "I avoided it twice yesterday but it seems to be heading in the same direction as me."

"I...don't know. I've seen many strange things in the woods."

The bearded man bobbed his head in acknowledgment but then his grimace drew tightly across his face.

"Undoubtedly. But I can tell you haven't seen it, for if you had you would know what I speak of."

Ben studied him, unable to discern any motivations at work beyond the surface intention.

"It's an unpleasant thing then, is it, this beast?"

Volta looked away into the trees, seemingly in search of the most appropriate response. When he found it it turned out to be nothing more than to look back at Ben with very still eyes and speak in a small, plain voice.

"Yes."

Ben suddenly felt impressed.

"Maybe you should head in a different direction?" he suggested.

Volta's expressive head wobbled in reasonable consideration.

"Yes. That would probably be the prudent way. But I can't have my direction dictated to me too much, even by fearsome horrors. And now I have met you I suddenly wonder. Maybe I am being guided to travel in company for a stretch?" He made this last suggestion with eyebrows humbly raised. "Strangers on the road don't meet idly: each always bears a gift for the other. It could be that together we would present so much of a meal that even monsters would wish to avoid us, out of fear of indigestion?"

Ben found the words persuasive. And he noticed that he instinctively warmed to the bearded man. Yet his memories of him were not comfortable ones.

"Which way are you headed?"

"North," said Volta, nodding along the trail in the same direction that Ben had been walking.

Ben winced gently.

"North. It's a good direction. But I'm not looking for company today."

The big man froze glumly and looked to Ben suddenly like an oversized toddler denied a toy. Half expecting him to throw a makeshift tantrum or go into a sulk he prepared himself to be emphatic, but after a moment's frustration the older man mustered a small, unwilling smile.

"Perhaps we have exchanged our gifts already," he said, in a quiet and dignified resignation. Again Ben felt impressed.

"Thank you for the warning."

"You are welcome. Travel well."

Ben nodded once more and turned back to his trail. As he walked on he heard the words of the big wizard follow him.

"Be wary of any covered cart that crosses your path. It's a cumbersome

thing but it can somehow pass through the densest of forests. And beware the driver. He doesn't seem like much but he's well protected by the beast he keeps."

Ben's legs slowed involuntarily. The overcast sky suddenly seemed to come for him through the treetops. His breath deserting him, he stumbled to his knees, not thinking coherently, knowing only that the world wished to turn upside down beneath him. Sitting back on his haunches he found his arms had become limp as rags, empty as unoccupied eggshells. Conversely his head became stone and weighed him down so that he bowed steeply to the woods, begging their forbearance and protection. Wind blown leaves buzzed in his ears, hissing angry declarations or urgent warnings, he couldn't tell which. Amidst the frightful rushing he dimly discerned the hurried approach of Volta's footsteps behind him, felt big hands grip his shoulders, preventing him from slumping forward altogether onto his face.

"Easy there, my friend! What is it? Are you sick?"

Ben couldn't say, for he could not speak, but he looked out at the surrounding woods, saw the brightness between the trees, and felt certain the monster would burst forth at any second and reclaim him at long last, as ecstatic to see him as a hungry lover kept away by war.

Did you really think you could be spared me?

A thousand half-forgotten nightmares thrashed free from beneath the boulders weighing them down, surged up through sludge to the surface, driven into a wriggling frenzy by the promise of their parent's proximity. Acting as an unholy aphrodisiac the scent of his fear stimulated in them the demented strength of the starved. His nightmares were real again, and more than ready to feast on him in the listless light of day now his protectors had been left behind.

He curled into a ball and Volta allowed him to fall gently to one side, to lie in the dirt. The man tried to comfort him, but found his skin was as hard as rock, and his eyes stared blindly ahead, seeing nothing but horrors.

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Ben felt the surface tension of his personality give way (finally and thankfully). It evaporated with a succulent pop. He experienced the fizz of transition as his memory of 'Ben' melted away, the last remnants of molten slag giving themselves up to the white-hot depths of his terror. All that was left was impersonal sensation. Searing, chemical reactions, colours shifting and mixing down timeless twists, sounds entwining with five-dimensional scents, teasing and scouring, hurting painlessly, a cacophony of nerve endings set alight, all searching for a self to call their home, all witnessed without judgement by the silent observer within.

A voice labelled 'Eonmor' swam by, redolent with sunlight and melody, fireside warmth and crinkled humour, painted toys and flashing weapons. A vista labelled 'Zane' flickered endlessly in a whirl of images: burnished love and sex amidst the petals of an elven garden, desert battles set ablaze, Jaeteahza dancing naked beneath the surface of a blue pool, her pale body suspended by wavering webs of light and shade.

Who do you want to be, Ben? asked a voice, which he thought he might recognise, if he could just see the faces it belonged to.

Surrounded by the variegated densities of awareness that stratified in all possible directions from his centremost point, each a realm of reality

unto itself, he could choose any destination. Yet, having no knowledge of preference, no will to make a choice, he could only surrender to the current. And that current took him downwards, back the way he had come, through the grasping branches of a screaming white sky, and landed him with a jolt, on his back in the grass.

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"I wonder what it is that you are," said Volta absently, preoccupied it seemed with working out the perfect place to position his staff.

They were a quarter-league from where they had met, part way up a steep hillside and tucked behind a mossy gathering of rocks. The green flames of Volta's fire burned smokelessly, and he had placed painted pebbles at strategic points around their camp that would offer some form of protection should anything try to surprise them, though what form that protection would take Ben couldn't guess.

For his part the boy huddled in his cloak feeling cold and hunted. When Volta handed him a small wooden bowl containing a scant quantity of stew he found it to be almost breathtakingly good. It was rich, seamed with dark ale and his body reacted instantly, his blood seeming to expand along his veins, restoring weight to his limbs. He had no idea how the man had produced it, for there was no pot over the fire, but he could feel a giddy kind of goodness spreading out from his torso and the shadow behind his eyes retreated somewhat. He managed to lift the bowl and nod at it in mute praise. Fishing a spoon from his backpack he ate slowly, not wanting the stew to be finished.

"Why do I have to be something?" he muttered obliquely.

Satisfied with the condition of his camp and the position of his staff, which was leaning against the hillside at a seemingly careless angle, Volta stopped pottering about and sat down on the other side of the fire. Leaning back against a rock with his own bowl of stew he sighed, at ease.

"There's just something about you," he murmured. "You look fragile... vulnerable. You shouldn't be out here on your own, and yet..." his eyes crinkled around a smile, "...I don't think I would like to take you on."

Ben didn't rush to answer, determined not to say anything with haste around this man.

"I don't think I'd give you too much trouble. You could have taken me on a few minutes ago easily enough."

"Oh, yes, sure! All I needed to do was pierce your skin and you would have been at my mercy."

Ben shrugged unhelpfully and looked at his stew. Volta sobered, self-conscious, it seemed, of his own restrained volubility, and he hummed and hah-ed softly to himself for a moment.

"Anyway," he began again, "what should I call you, my friend?"

Ben started slightly.

"Call me?"

He silently cursed his own clumsiness but Volta nodded, innocently enough.

"You can call me Braga. What can I call you?"

Volta looked upwards and made a show of taking his time.

"How about Volkmar?" he said.

"Pleased to know you, Volkmar."

Volta inclined his head politely. They shared a little silence as they ate,

but inevitably the Cabarandian leaned in towards conversation.

"So you have met the beast before," he said. There was no question in his tone. The boy wondered if he had made a sensitive guess or had seen it more clearly through the use of a magical discipline. Either way Ben saw the need to deliberate before answering.

"Yes...if it's the creature I'm thinking of. When I was small."

"When you were small!" Volta mulled on this carefully. "An inauspicious meeting for anyone...but a child! I take it, from your reaction back there, that you're in no hurry to meet it again."

This time Ben didn't hesitate.

"I'd like to kill it."

The big man's eyes bulged a little.

"You think you could?"

The boy stared at him fiercely, felt an urge to kick the fire in his face and leave. The muscles of his jaw rippled, but the mood couldn't sustain itself and sank back.

"No," he admitted, slumping slightly. "Nowhere near."

"Then perhaps it would be best if you didn't meet it again."

"Probably." Ben shrugged, as though the subject was an irritant. "Do you know where it is now?"

"That depends. The cart was camped just a league west of here. If the driver didn't notice me they might still be there. I assume they're hiding out on this side of the border for a while, lying low. I can't imagine they could exist indefinitely over here – the elves wouldn't tolerate it. And there are other things that wouldn't either. What can you tell me about it?"

Despite his efforts to make it last Ben had finished his stew. He gazed down into the bottom of the dark wooden bowl.

"Not much, Volkmar. Its name is Wargrin. Have you heard that name before?"

The bearded man half closed his eyes and consulted whatever memory system he used. He shook his head, dissatisfied.

"No."

"Well, I don't know its history. But it likes to eat children best. It eats children and it won't be killed. And you don't ever want to be at its mercy. That's about as much as I can tell you."

Volta's skull seemed to grow heavier at his brow and he brooded wordlessly for several minutes. The day skulked, grey and wan, beyond their little zone of protection.

"Well, its keeper will be hard pressed to find it food over here. I'd say that the sooner we're on the other side of the wall the better."

"The wall?" Ben had put the border between Enlan and Scorrage from his mind, though it was inevitable that he would reach it sooner or later. "Is it far?"

"Not at all. Less than three leagues. And we'll feel a good deal lighter when we're across it."

A half burnt stick was protruding from the fire. Ben picked it up and used it to poke about in the embers. As he did so his hands began to shake. He sighed, but it was a shallow, breathless thing.

"If the monster is still there I'll have to check something before I can go on."

Volta started visibly and cast a daunted look to the west.

"What? You mean you want to go and take a look at that thing?"

Ben kept his eyes on the flames.

"The beast likes to eat every day, if...feed is available. The driver collects as many children as he can in one go, keeps them alive in baskets and barrels on the cart."

Volta didn't react at first, other than to blink three times. The day held its breath, waited for him. No bird sang, no insect buzzed, no breeze blew, all too intent on watching him. He began to pale then, the inescapable conclusion hunting him down even as he sought to avoid it. Ben saw the moment when the truth clamped its jaws on the man's neck and fastened him down, for all the muscles of his face went slack and the big man shrank down beneath the sky.

"Oh fuck," breathed the Cabarandian softly. "Oh fucking shit, bastard, fuck."

Ben nodded, glad he understood.

"We should get going," said the boy.

"What! Now!"

Volta looked around as if for support but there was nobody there.

"How can we wait?" asked Ben. "It could be preparing to feed right now."

"But...surely...we need to make a plan of some kind!"

Ben saw Eonmor charging the beast, Berringstrom glittering in its shadows. He heard the terrible squealing of its pain.

"No. We need to act. Anything else will be hesitation, and that won't do."

Volta squirmed visibly where he sat.

"If you're coming, that is?"

Time stopped for a second and then, with a jerk, the man suddenly began to repack his bag with shaking hands.

"This is the gift," he hissed to himself. "This is the gift." Ben watched, seeing a man sprawled in the path of his own oncoming doom, trying like a demented alchemist to reconcile himself at short notice. He couldn't help the Cabarandian to collect his warding pebbles, couldn't help him to turn his panic into courage. Stuffing the wooden bowl into the top of his new companion's bag he wiped his spoon off on his robe and pulled his own backpack towards him. But before he could put it away the spoon spoke in a soft but clear voice that caused him to pause and Volta to turn and stare.

"The human mind is good for only one thing," said the spoon. "Do you mark me? The human mind has only one function, one purpose. The only thing it does is dream – when it is asleep, when it is awake, it matters not. Dreaming is the only thing it *can* do."

Ben held the spoon up and looked into his own concave reflection.

"I don't suppose you have some advice on how we might control this dream?"

"There can be no advice," said the spoon sympathetically. "Lucid dreamers may believe that they control their dreams, but to believe such a thing is to believe that such a thing as 'you' actually exists. There is no control. There is no you. The most appropriate response to a dream is simply to recognise it as a dream. That is enough."

Ben felt himself smile despite himself.

"Thank you, spoon," he said, and placed it in his pack. He looked up. Volta was staring at him.

"Well, Volkmar? Spit it out."

"Spit it out? Spit what out? Either you speak to spoons or I imagine you do. Whichever way it is, one of us is mad!"

Volta's face puffed into an aspect of affronted surmise, which it held, helpless it seemed, until it became unsustainable and he let it go with a flapping of lips. Ben was watching him with something like wonder.

"I wouldn't mind so much," said the bearded man, subdued now and collecting a pebble, "but it was a singularly unhelpful spoon."

He circled the camp and pocketed three more stones.

"Come on," he said. "We should get going."

Grabbing up his staff he began to make his way down the steep and ferny hillside. Ben scrambled to his feet and fell in behind him.

"I'm sorry, Volkmar. If you've got some wiser cutlery than mine I'd be more than willing to listen to it."

The big man snorted and grinned involuntarily, but as they progressed down the slope the smile fell away and his eyes began to flit here and there. A fuzz of nondescription thickened around him then to such an extent that Ben almost lost him amongst the foliage.

"Friend Braga," he said as they reached relatively level ground and Ben was able to walk alongside him. "I should warn you, I'm not much of a fighter."

The boy cast him a sidelong glance.

"No?"

"I'm slow. I get clumsy when I'm caught up in battle."

Ben wondered what to say. Long minutes passed. He could see the older man was giving him important tactical information, hoping for leadership, despite the apparent differences in their age. But this made sense Ben realised. If Volta had graduated from Monnhill it could only have been for a matter of some short years. The boy knew this because he recognised the man. But Volta didn't recognise him. When the Cabarandian looked at Ben he saw only an unfamiliar magic user abroad in the woods under some guise that suited him for whatever reason. For all Volta knew he was in the presence of a seasoned wizard.

"I'm not too bad at fighting, myself," Ben muttered at last. "But, if they are still there, fighting is probably the last thing we should do."

Volta nodded.

"I'm glad to hear that. So the question begs: what should we do?"

The boy activated his own spell of nondescription, eager for his self-doubt to be less conspicuous.

"I don't have the slightest idea. All I know is I can't do nothing."

The big man sucked his teeth.

"I'm used to being more prepared than this."

Ben sympathized, but it couldn't be helped. If he could manipulate portal rings he could have taken the Cabarandian on a five year quest to gain the knowledge, weapons and comrades to grant them confidence. But he couldn't.

"We'll just be ourselves," he said.

Volta sucked his teeth again, good and hard.

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They took up a shady vantage on the rim of the hollow at its lowest, shallowest point.

The cart¹⁷ and horses looked exactly as Ben remembered. It had been almost twenty years but they hadn't changed at all. Still shabby and worn, and generic enough to be considered nondescript in most places in the world, they stood amongst a gathering of birches and pines, half outlined in the shade. The paintwork was well flaked, a map of fictional continents and undiscovered archipelagoes. Looking closely Ben felt he remembered every inconsequential island clearly, and was convinced that not one more flake had fallen since he was five years old, as though the horses, the cart and that which dwelt inside the cart did not just constitute a horror, but the eternal, indelible idealization of a horror, a horror as much of the mind and the soul as of the physical world.

Ben braced himself, ready for his insides to roil in protest, for the sweat to break from his skin. He was ready, almost, to lie down in the grass, press the side of his face against the earth and cower helplessly, unable to go forward or retreat. But nothing happened except that he perceived an unlooked for stillness within himself. Both the animals and the wagon looked normal enough in all respects, even to him, but for the fact they were standing in a steep-sided hollow they could not possibly have been driven down into.

Why aren't I afraid?

But no, they looked far too innocuous to instill fear. It would surely take a master of Eonmor's percipience to detect anything untoward here, especially if one wasn't especially on the watch for it.

Ben's skin hardened in a sudden reflex and he turned to Volta, eyes tightening with suspicion.

"How is it," he said, in the faintest of whispers, "that you find them so easily? And how can you tell there is something rotten in the cart? I don't sense anything."

Volta didn't seem to pick up on the newly budded mistrust.

"The first time I saw them," he whispered, "I stumbled on them by chance. Well, that's how it seemed. It was early in the morning, yesterday. I found it strange that a cart and team should be standing in such an impossible spot – it was tucked in a wedge of land between two parallel rivers, even more inaccessible than this place. It was clearly a magical phenomenon, but this is an old forest; you see strange things here, it's a given. I wasn't feeling curious. I have my own mission, my own concerns. I circumvented it and walked on. It wasn't until late in the day that I stumbled on them a second time, right here.

"Now, as you suggest, they are well hidden. There's no reason for me to go stumbling on them constantly. The thought did occur to me that I was being singled out for some reason. To what end I couldn't tell, but I didn't especially imagine it would be to my benefit. So I extended my senses.

"Friend Braga, I am not much of a fighter, but in the more sensitive arts I have a modest skill or two that serves me on occasion. I saw clearly enough that the cart has quite a system of charms operating in and around it. They are ancient, primitive, but surprisingly supple. The cart wishes to go unnoticed in crowds. It does not wish to be seen by people traveling in company. But, at the same time, it does act as a lure to those traveling alone. It beckons enticingly, to whatever sense of fatalism one holds buried in one's

¹⁷ Cart details: what kind of details can be idiosyncratic yet nondescript at the same time? Take things that are normal (pots & pans) and show that on closer inspection there is something a bit 'off' about each item.

heart. Thus it had called to me, without my realising it. All of this became plain as I studied its aura. Then, tentatively, I extended my senses further, wishing to discern the contents. What I sensed inside was...an abomination – the creature you seem to know so well.”

Volta opened his palms to show what a simple matter it had been.

“Now I understood the nature of the trap, and my desire to walk into it dissipated. Once again I bypassed it and moved on. And now I am here with you.”

He stopped, and waited to see if the younger man would find all of this satisfactory.

“What about the driver?” asked Ben.

“There was a man inside with the creature. He was sleeping while the beast watched over him.”

“You can see this much?”

“Well, sometimes. It took some concentration, but I don’t imagine it is any more than you would be able to do.”

He gestured towards the cart, inviting Ben to try.

“I’m not that sensitive,” said the boy. “In fact, Volt...Volkmar, I should tell you that I’m not even a full wizard. My apprenticeship was ended.”

Volta stared at him in some surprise.

“You know my name?”

Ben squirmed and gave a sheepish grimace.

“Maybe.”

“We’ve met before?”

“So?”

“Who are you?”

The boy looked here and there, his manner becoming fidgety.

“I don’t know.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I recognise you. That’s all. Can we attend to the business at hand? It’s no light matter.”

“Well...I suppose so. You have me at a disadvantage, but I suppose so.”

“Believe me, *Volta*, I need whatever advantage I can get. As I said, I’m only a half wizard. I had no intention of seeking out monsters when I woke up this morning. This is beyond me.”

Volta let his skepticism show plainly, but seemed willing to live with it.

“Perhaps we won’t have to face the beast,” he said. “If there are no children in there I’ll see it and we can simply withdraw.”

“You didn’t detect any children yesterday?”

“No. But I didn’t focus closely on the containers in there. The beast itself was more than enough. A child might have been in one of them, asleep perhaps. Let me look now.”

Ben signaled his willingness for him to go ahead.

Turning to face the cart Volta took a deep breath, held onto it, let it out, became still. Nothing happened for a while and Ben became even more conscious of his surroundings than he was already. This part of the forest was as sentient as any other, he saw, but subdued, not wishing to pay attention to the presence of the cart, not wishing to dwell on its contents. Ben could sense this desire to be distracted. It was in the trees, the grasses and stones, the earth and the sky, the insects. His claim to insensitivity was a false one, a flat lie from one magic user to another, and perhaps, to somebody as sensitive as Volta, it was transparent. Yet there was an element of

truth that might conceivably strengthen its believability and that was his genuine inability to sense anything wrong about the cart. Despite all of the associations it held for him, he felt no sense of dread when he looked at it, no stirring of foreboding. And this stretched his belief taught. A short while earlier, the mere mention of the beast and its proximity had caused his legs to give way beneath him. And yet here he was, looking directly at the cart he had been held captive in as a child, and he felt nothing.

"The monster is there," said Volta softly, "the man too. It is as it was yesterday: the man is sleeping and the beast watches over him."

Ben didn't believe him.

"By Protim's Box, it's a grotesque thing – squirming with madness!"

Ben rose carefully and quietly to his feet.

"What about children?"

Volta made a show of concentrating, furrowing his brow steeply. Then his face relaxed.

"No. There are no children onboard." He smiled with an easy relief. "It's alright! There is nobody else there." He sat back, rocking his head from side to side as if to loosen his muscles in the manner of somebody whose hard work has reached an end. "The monster is strong and bloated," he explained. "Yes, it hungers, but it has fed well in recent times. It can afford to live off the strength it has gathered." He grinned broadly and shook his head. "But there is nobody in there to rescue!"

Ben backed away, keeping his eyes on Volta, drew Mirnggald and sidestepped over the edge of the bowl and towards the cart.

"What...Braga...where are you going?"

"I just need to check."

"Braga, you fool! You can't take that thing on!"

"I just need to see."

"Seriously, Braga...don't! What are you thinking? I won't come with you. I can't!"

"You're not invited."

Another few side steps and Ben suddenly felt unreal, disassociated from the world of the previous moment. Volta's stunned expression looked realistic enough. *What if it's genuine?* Turning slowly from Volta to face the cart he wondered distantly what he was doing. He walked forward, and though his legs were now stone like, doing all they could to root him to the earth, he wasn't sure if he could stop, even if he tried to. And now the fear began to come at last, growing, throbbing, filling his airways. It was a nasty, indeterminate thing that squeezed his body. He couldn't determine if it was inside him pushing outwards, or outside pushing in, whether it was emanating from the cart, or coming from his own suspicion that the cart was a decoy and the man behind him an enemy. *It looks real. The beast is in there! Why am I giving myself to it?* He pictured his own hand drawing back the canvas, revealing an empty and harmless interior. *Be prepared! The danger comes from behind!* He pictured his hand drawing back the canvas and the monster sitting there expectantly, chuckling delightedly. *Hello, my sweet one. Let us make love.* Perhaps the monster was there and Volta was against him...the baskets might be filled with children. What if Volta was really the driver, trying to keep him away? Did that make sense? *Why can't I see?* Ben saw his own self-doubt then, saw that he would never be able to work out whether it was his own paranoia or a special seed, placed in his mind by Zane. The throbbing of the fear on his muscles and internal organs had

become close to unbearable, the pressure of it outlandish, but the source of it...it could be anywhere...*it could be everywhere.* The cart was close now. The canvas flaps at the back were untied. Tantalizingly, they stirred now and then in a breeze, but never enough to reveal more than a sliver of the interior. A memory came to him of being a boy, on the beach at Penmor. A village girl, Rea with the turquoise eyes, was playing with his hair. A small pear-shaped birthmark blemished her white skin below her ear.

If it's there...I'll just fight. It can't hurt me while my skin is hard.

He arrived at the rear of the cart, resisted the temptation to turn and look at Volta, unwilling to show his back to it. Reaching out his free hand he tasted the quality of the day and found it to be sour: it was off. Even as his fingers curled around the edge of the canvas he knew he was making some kind of a terrible mistake, knew he was acting in a random, reactive, unintuitive way, being untrue to himself somehow. *The coin! You could throw the coin!* But his hand had already committed itself. Even as he pulled the canvas back he tried to work out which result would be the most terrible, for the cart to be occupied or empty, and he realised then that *whatever* he discovered would be the worst thing. He was simply going through the motions of finding out.

There was a figure, curled up and sleeping on a nest of sacking that was padded out with some comfortable stuffing, straw perhaps, or even fleece. At first it could have been anybody, but then it was Jama, that brutal and trapped man who broke the noses of children and delivered them directly into hell.

He looked so peaceful.

It's just as Volta said.

Pulling the flap further to the side he saw the shadow in the far corner, motionless yet crawling. There it was, waiting for him. There were limbs in there, elbows and knees, an unnaturally wide and toothy grin, the dim glimmer of eyes that moved independently of each other. An undulating chuckle bubbled from within, rising and falling in the same suppressed glee, the same bloated, coiling madness that had laced his dreams for almost twenty years. His skin was hard, but still he felt something prickling and writhing beneath the surface. *Fight it! Kill it!* He cast about within himself for the anger that would give him the strength to raise Mirnggald, and he found only the hollowness of his own limbs echoing to the clamour of his fear trying to find a way out. The creature crooned a knowing recognition. For a moment a hush existed between them, a pure and sacred stillness that honoured what they meant to each other. Jama stirred in his sleep, pawed lightly at his cheek and then settled. Unhurriedly, the creature began to untangle itself from its position on the floor of the cart. Volta had been right: though it was long and rangy in terms of its physical form the thing was fat with power. It had been feeding well of late. Ben could see its strength clearly, the confidence bordering on listlessness. In each, luxuriant movement it told him. *Mine is the hunger of the well fed. I will not, I could not, make a quick meal of you. You will be savoured as only the extravagantly glutton can savour: slowly, elaborately, lovingly. Each and every little terror will I allow to ripen in its fullness, and roll across my tongue, lingering, so that the days and nights may grow long, and heavy with our shared and sweltering passion.* The details of the world came to Ben in livid focus through eyes gone glassy with fate. He could move, if only he willed it. He could back away, turn and run. He could raise his sword. He could fly beyond reach. He

could call out for help. He could do all manner of things...save himself, go out into the world, visit the land of the elgs, conquer his own inner demons, graduate, do great deeds, rid the world of need, master the Sovereign Galaxies, lead the great Zane back towards his own humanity. It was all just waiting for him, if only he would take the first step, and then the next.

In his mind's eye he saw a man pause and look at the cart. His beard and hair was of a very ordinary colour and length. Of all of the characters that had lingered outside the inn the boy found he was least inclined to fall in love with this one...and yet there was something about him.

Please see me, said the boy, even as a parade of panes of glass seemed to pass between him and the man, some of which were smeared with grease.

...please see me...please hear me...

But the blur of a man turned away, as all the others had, and moved on.

The monster lifted him gently into the cart and the flaps fell closed.

φ

Ben was well familiar with the idea that each universe cupped within the hands of each here-and-now moment is vast and full of destinations. His master had taught him¹⁸. Even for those who find themselves confined, each moment leads not simply to *the* next moment but to a million chooseable moments. Thus does the human spark of awareness, engaged in its linear travail through time and space, weave its way in and out of the mechanized, predetermined honeycomb of material existence with paradoxically free will, tasting the results of its choices. Thus is one made responsible for ones own experience, despite all dreams of helplessness.

In its desire not to feel, his skin hardened itself. In its desire not to know what was happening, his terrified mind assumed the form of a flickering of memories. *Our thoughts are jewelled. Our Lives...ah! ...architectures, designed by gods...* Yes, there were places, perhaps, that he could go, in such a vast, momentary universe. *By our own choice we go off wandering in dreams of other realities, and one is no less real than the other.* Looking to astral projection he attempted to abandon his body, as if it were a burning house, with a man-shaped hole in the wall. But he found that the will he used to hold his skin like rock was not compatible with the will to drift free of the dense material level.

The beast lay on top of him, leering down into his face, cooing lovingly, tapping his stony surface lightly with the tips of its claws.

You think I can't pick your locks? But you want me to, don't you?

He was back with Zane in the Zelenium Tower, trying to be elsewhere, *I'm back in my body...I'm back in my body...I'm out of my mind...I'm out of my mind*, trying to interpret his own perceptions as abstract, random and meaningless patterns; but parts of him knew, with a perfect, undeniable certainty, that he had been delivered to hell.

His master's voice was there, rich and humane: *I'm sorry, Ben. I'm assuming Zane has corrupted you in some way.*

One of the beast's claws caught in the skin of his thigh, just above the knee.

Are you able and willing to tell me about it?

The claw moved up towards his hip, slicing the rock spell cleanly, drawing a sheer edge of pain through his mental abstraction like a seam of white

¹⁸ Go to the memory of a lesson here, perhaps? Convert the prose to remembered dialogue?

light in the deadness between the stars. It was an abominable pain, like nothing he'd ever experienced, at least, not for any duration of time. With a shuddered gasp, a lungful of fetid air, Ben's rock skin unraveled completely, leaving him as good as naked. The blood poured warmly down his thigh and his mind emerged with a jolt from reverie, brought into the inescapable here and now, brought into the whiteness of pain with a keen clarity. The beast licked his neck as his scream erupted from his cells, snuggled the length of its body along his obscenely, made his sudden and ineffectual writhing work to its own purposes.

His scream sickened and terrified him. He sounded like a girl – a horror stricken girl, being kept alive – but he couldn't stop it. He screamed, and the cohabiting personalities of his psyche were buffeted against each other, as though their barrel had gone over the edge of the waterfall. Some cried out, seeking help or consolation from the others, some endured in their own pocket of dizzy silence, some found each other in the dark and held on with fierce grips, some tried to scream back in rage but were breathless and couldn't be heard. He screamed, and was able to feel ashamed of the sound and the awful weakness it so wantonly displayed to the world, but he was unable to rein it in. He screamed, recognising even as he did so that it represented the final, absolute proof that he had failed, in all his master had taught him. Terror was a choice, and he was now choosing it, giving himself to it wholeheartedly, so that it became his identity. In the universe that was the moment of here and now his entire being consisted of terror; all pathways led to it and from it, via it. He knew what the beast liked to do (the monster wanted its victims to know, actively forcing the knowledge into their minds through the most resistant opening it could find); he had seen that only the strongest could defy it. He would scream and howl, he would struggle and cry and plead, and he would plunge himself deep into insanity at the soonest opportunity, diving and diving until even his shame abandoned him. The beast wriggled against him sinuously, enjoying his hysteria, letting it serve as an appetiser, patiently allowing it to build and fall, feeding and exhausting itself in waves, stimulating their shared anticipation. It would begin soon, just as soon as the blinding lustre of his fear reached its peak, just as soon as it began to dull. Ever so slowly it would begin, whispering sweet nothings in his ear. He screamed, so that his screaming might eclipse awareness of all other things, so that it might be the only sensation he had knowledge of ever again. And he knew it wouldn't work. Banging his head frantically against the wooden floor of the cart, over and over, he worked with what was available to him, sought either to render himself insensate, or at the least to choose his own pains. But he knew this wouldn't work either.

He began to hallucinate. Beyond the beast's leering face the ceiling of soiled canvas and dangling pots, pans and hooks flew apart in a silent, blossoming fire and then began to drift back together again, healing themselves of scorching, returning themselves to their only possible configuration. A new presence entered the back of the cart, a great blurred shadow, and the beast screamed with a passion Ben couldn't categorise. The universe of here and now became a universe of whirling shadows, flying, jangling pots, fiery explosions, distantly illuminated boiling clouds, and claws tearing indiscriminately in flashes of pain that were stunning in their intensity, yet quick and unpredictable – an unlooked for mercy. The monster leaped off him and back onto him, threw him around here and there. He

found himself lying on his side, his body trembling and unable to work out which way was up. He could see Jama lying before him, awake now and wedged along the side of the cart, staring wild eyed at the storm, shouting incoherent incantations. A set of claws embedded itself in Ben's calf and dragged him away, his shrill, girlish screaming accompanying him faithfully, reminding him of what he now was. The confines of the cart, it seemed, had expanded, occupying new dimensions. He felt himself flung, his body turning end over end, limbs flailing, loose jointed as a string of sausages, so that he felt like nothing more than a screaming abortion of meat. The journey seemed to last for long moments, yet when he landed, the gristle inside him crunching, a heaped tangle in a corner, he had no sense that he, nor any part of him, had left the wagon for even an instant.

The storm-like pandemonium continued and this suited him well. If he could only be ripped apart amidst the cataract of his own thrashing and screaming he would count himself lucky and weep with gratitude. All was darkness and fire, the clamour of the maelstrom lit by ripped nerve endings; and he, cast back and forth on the crests of such a magnificent, elemental fury, was nothing, a laughably malformed manikin, crafted with spite from excrement for the sole purpose of being despised, hurt and smeared in himself.

That this soul-raking fate was actually preferable to what he had expected was an atom of awareness all but lost in the tempest. Buried beneath league upon league of shit and horror, its shine was tarnished and only dimly glimpsed; yet in the extremity of his isolation he cherished it like a secret joy.

Italics section – a remembered lesson on life and death, as delivered by Eonmor?

11

Though Volta's wounds and disfigurement were greater it was Ben who came back more slowly. Days passed by before his eyes were willing to crack open, his ears willing to risk hearing the hushed ambient sounds that kept their distance around him. Weeks passed by before his body was able to lift itself, wash itself, feed itself. Months passed by before his mind was willing to pay a vague, half-hearted interest in where he was, who was caring for him, who he had been.

In time he came to know (though he didn't know how he had come to know) that both the farm where he was nursed and the village it belonged to were strongly connected to Volta's order. The form of these connections was never described, and Ben never cared enough to ask. That he was allowed to sit in the gardens when the weather was gentle enough, look into the embers of the fire in his room while hours came and went, this was enough for his scalded awareness.

Volta's recovery seemed quick – before Ben was even able to talk to him he was well enough to go away and come back again, completing two missions – but the apparent speed of the big man's return to activity was a comparative thing. His face was warped with scarring and he walked with a pronounced limp now, using his staff as a walking stick in all earnestness. His mood wandered towards seriousness, silence, introspection. If left undisturbed for any length of time his face would begin to look stricken. Sometimes his hands trembled. When the light of self-knowledge began to dawn once more on Ben and he allowed himself to make the connection between Volta's mutilation and his own actions the shock made his head swim, the urge to vomit roiled in his guts. And while the big wizard seemed to have come to care for the boy, he showed no inclination to alleviate the guilt that surged up from that bottomless sink-hole within.

"You have a fatalism in you I wouldn't want to wrestle with," murmured the man by the main fireside downstairs. "Even knowing what was in that cart you walked right up, offered yourself up like a virgin sacrifice. And for what? There was nobody there to save. No good deed was accomplished. The monster and its keeper still roam free." He gestured at his twisted face, fleetingly as though not really wanting to draw attention to it. "For nothing, see?"

Ben shied away from the thought, the weight of it threatened to break his back. He didn't bother trying to apologise. The very idea was too pathetic.

"How did you get us here, Volta? I thought you were no good at fighting."

In its new configuration Volta's face had become difficult to read, another thing he wasn't inclined to help with.

"How did I do it?" He seemed to be expecting a reply from somewhere

else. When he answered it did seem to come from a different place. "I flew on wings of fear. I summoned fire with the breath of my own terror. I used the strength of my own cowardice. I barged and blundered, letting my panic select my magic for me. There was nothing admirable in any of it..."

"That you did it at all..."

"I just wanted to stop your screaming. I would have cut your head off to make it stop."

Ben's head bowed, unintentionally offering his neck. Inside he felt a coiled suspicion that his screaming had not stopped yet, and he tried not to disturb it. Volta turned his face away.

"Anyway," he said. "Where are you going to go? What are you going to do?"

The questions prompted remembrance.

"I'm...going to Monnhill. There's somebody I want to talk to."

"But your apprenticeship ended."

"Yes."

"So, you have no pass?"

"No."

"Then you won't get in. You won't even be able to find it."

"I know."

Volta waited, refusing to ask. Ben shrugged.

"There's nothing else for me to do."

"No?"

"No."

The big wizard mulled on this.

"I'm due in Monnhill late next year. I could take a message in for you."

"Late next year?"

"Yes."

"I can't wait that long."

"Why?"

"I think I'd be dead by then."

"Oh."

"Yes."

"Well, I guess you had better go then."

"Yes."

The boy looked at his hands gloomily.

"When you are ready, of course," Volta added, hasty suddenly. "You know you're welcome here. You do, don't you? More than welcome."

Ben's smile was part grimace, as though he'd been stung.

"Why should I be so welcome?"

The wizard blinked, seemed to find the question unfathomable, then he shrugged.

"You just are. I don't know why. Who can be bothered to work such things out? Really?"

Somewhere inside the boy a grip was loosened, something let go. Murmuring thanks rendered understated by cramping emotion he went to his room, slept the afternoon away, framed in silence, unvisited by screaming.

φ

The farm was called Ramcassie, the village Drummag, situated north of the Borderwall. Enlan, its elves, its unbroken magical forest had been left behind and Volta declined to explain how he had managed to transport

both Ben and himself to the land of the north men while they had each been mortally wounded.

"I can barely remember myself," was as much as he was willing to mutter on the subject, a small, flat lie Ben had the good grace to leave unchallenged.

The core family at Ramcassie, the Glochcraegs, was big and lively and intelligent, supplemented as a workforce sporadically by foreign visitors. Without anything being explained to him Ben quickly saw that the foreigners came primarily for the unseen business of Volta's unnamed order. Their professed interest in livestock, forest crops and building practices was maintained convincingly enough to keep the outside world satisfied, was even genuine to an extent. But Ben could see that the real work at Ramcassie went on beneath the surface somewhere.

That he could sense this undercurrent so clearly yet remained genuinely more interested in the surface dynamics of farm and family endeared him to the Glochcraegs. Volta began to drop unsubtle hints that there might even be a place for Ben within their ranks should he be willing to open up, shed his secrets, come to them in all humility. The offer was almost tempting, but tinged with an evangelism he found tedious. More enchanting by far were the simple pleasures of eating with the family, working together, laughing with and at each other. The Glochcraegs made him glad to be in the world of men again, and at times he considered his nightmares as things that might be left behind.

By our own choice we go off wandering...

Scorrag reminded him of Laan, or at least Drummag reminded him of Penmor, and for a while he was tempted to dally with Nettle Glochcraeg, the youngest daughter, who came to fancy him. It was a slow burning thing, for she was perpetually braced to resist the interest of the various strange males passing through the farm, and it was only when she realised that Ben's affected disinterest was actually the real thing that she saw she was resisting nothing at all and looked at him a second time.

When the adventures of harvest time came she took him along with her. They were small and bucolic: treasure hunts along the leafy byways of Drummag, encounters in the meadows with elementals, renewing old pacts between the faer races and the Glochcraegs. As adventures went they were slight things, as likely to disappear down a breath of wind as a dandelion's puffball, yet there was a timeless subtlety to them, a resonance peculiar to the forest gardens and the heavily wooded hills, the secretive lanes and hidden stone sites. An aged and wistful magic veined the rhythm of the days here, mineral seams nourishing the rock. The land and the people had struck an accord that was rare in the world. When he helped her to find and exchange the *Rorc à Shyenne*, a fabled natural ruby hidden in a riverbed stone taken from the bottom of the Risand, for the release of the soul of Endreste Glochcraeg, an ancestor only Great Granny Neptis had ever met, from the twilight people of Sonowen Dell, Nettle fell in love with him. It was in that moment when he knelt upon the Whitestone, let the twilight folk take one of his dreams in payment for the right to stand on the borders of their realm. A dozen tiny glowing sylphs had formed a bobbing halo around the crown of his head as they removed the dream from his memory. He had closed his eyes and smiled, relieved that he knew what he wanted to do for once, and Nettle, confused by her inability to predict or interpret him, had fallen.

She gave him all the opportunities she could for him to fall in love with her, and seemed to forgive him when he didn't know how. She was younger than he and yet, despite all his travels through the Sovereign Galaxies, she seemed to know so much more.

"You don't know who you are, do you?" she said. It was some days later. They were sitting in the circle atop Rivertwist to see Harn, the red planet, passing closer than it had in five hundred years, appearing in the sky larger than the moon. As an alignment was made between Harn and Vaezea the landscape outside the circle had wavered in a heat haze and become an alien desert, the moonset changing into a sunset. The last remaining maidens of *Soon* had circled the stone ring, dancing the dance of the Risen Star, while beyond them the last remaining *Soon* warriors had raised their tridents in salute, honouring the bloodlink that was forged in the heart of a dimensional nexus by Ferast, a yet to be born descendent of Nettle, and his Harn counterpart. Three giant skyboats caught the last of the crimson sun's rays as the pipes, drums and voices of the *Ogred Ysseth* lamented the last breath of the cosmos. Yellow smoke passed through the circle, the sweet scent of burnt *seeda* husk catching in their hair.

"You don't know who you are."

She seemed to be admitting it to herself.

He sensed something close by, a connection between a memory of himself and the teasing familiarity of the holosphere of these days spent chasing clues down the convoluted pathways of Drummag's graveyards, hills and leylines. It was a connection that he couldn't quite make and knew that, even if he could, he wouldn't be able to articulate it, so he supposed she was right. He didn't know who he was, and not knowing that, how could he know what anything else was? He wanted to love, but there was an empty space between him and the outer world. And there was an empty space between him and his inner world. All seemed so close and so clear, yet remained unreachable, on the far side of an unsympathetic void, beyond the span of a circle sealed in time.

"I'm going," he said. "To find out."

She let some silent tears fall but didn't complain.

"I will wish you well with that then," she said, smiling bravely, but the alien mirage was shimmering again, the voices and drums fading. The skyships folded away into the air and he left her sitting up on the hill.

Volta didn't take the news of Ben's imminent departure gracefully.

"I'm not altogether sure we should let you leave," he grumped the next night, having taken Ben off to a quiet corner of the dining hall where they faced each other across a table. "We've opened our hearts to you here and in return you've been nothing but closed."

"That's nice, Volta," said Ben. "Really, that's good work. You're emotional blackmail grows subtler every day."

The man scowled from within his beard.

"Won't you offer some token to aid my belief that you are not an enemy of my order? I'm loathe to sport these scars as a signature of your debt... but how do people win one's trust if not by risking all for each other?"

"Does it feel to you that I'm your enemy?"

"No, it does not. And that is why I must confess to feeling more than a little hurt by your standoffishness."

Ben let out a giant, exasperated sigh.

"Ah, you see that, there?" snapped Volta. "You're irritated by me! It

seemed to me that I saved your life while you screamed as though the pits of a thousand hells were consuming your soul, now I sport these beautiful warp marks across my face and I cannot run any more...and yet it is *you* that is irritated by *me*! You say you are only half a wizard, you give every appearance of being lost and vulnerable, yet still I sense my own inferiority. Is friendship really so much to ask of one so great as you?"

Ben spoke quietly.

"Fuck you, Volta." The candlelight flickered in his eyes. "You... wouldn't have thought much of my master, and you wouldn't think much of my magic, believe me. If I'm arrogant it's because my master was the greatest man I could ever conceive of, who showed me more wonders than I can say, and who taught me not to take anything seriously ever, not full wizards like you and most of all not myself. But I've failed him on all accounts. Yes, I've seen enough in my time that you don't impress me all that much, but it's not your magic I find lacking, nor your courage – I couldn't do a fraction of what you can. It's just your neediness I can't stomach. Your weeding, fucking neediness. How can you be so much more accomplished than me yet still feel sorry for yourself?"

Volta stared at him, stunned. Ben took his trembling hands and tucked them beneath the table. He sat back and waited for his breathing to slow down.

"I'm sorry. That was grotesque, wasn't it? But maybe you can begin to see now...just how much I irritate myself? Please, stop asking me about myself, will you?"

Volta gave no reaction, just continued to stare, as though the power of speech had always been a gift that belonged to others.

"Look...I'll pack my things. I'll leave in the morning."

Still no reaction. The wizard didn't seem to be listening almost, when suddenly, to Ben's surprise, the half frown cleared from his brow and his mouth formed an O. He pointed a revelatory finger.

"You're the boy," he said softly. "You're the boy...Eonmor's boy!"

"Oh, shit," said Ben.

"I knew it! I knew I knew you!"

Ben shifted uncomfortably, finding it hard to meet his eye.

"I've thought about you so many times. Ah. Now things begin to make some sense. No wonder I feel so insecure around you."

The big man gazed at him in wonder.

"So it's Eonmor who ended your apprenticeship? Protim's Box, what a blow! I'm sorry, my..." he halted and coughed. "Oops! I was going to say 'my friend'."

Ben lay his face down on the tabletop and closed his eyes.

"You can call me friend," he moaned.

After a moment he felt Volta's fingers tapping his hair ever so lightly.

"Very well...that's good. So you will go and make your meeting at Monnhill, you will complete your mission, whatever it may be. And then you will come back, yes? You will come back to us, and you'll cheer up, yes?"

Ben forced himself to sit back up.

"I can't say. Once I've spoken to the one I need to see I'll know what I can do next. But right now I can't see any further than that. Nothing else exists beyond that."

Volta pouted and then flapped his lips.

"I knew I knew you," he said.

They stayed up late together, getting pissed enough to have to be carried to their rooms. At the top of the stairs Volta bid Jerad and Aron, who were bearing him, to pause a moment.

"Ben! Ben!" he sang out. "Come here will you?"

Stanric, Nettle's grandfather, brought Ben back down the landing, positioned his head near Volta's.

"What? What do you want?"

"I want to say sorry, Ben. I never should have done it."

"What? What did you do?"

"I impugned the quality of your spoon. I didn't mean it. I never did mean it. It's a lovely little spoon. I was only jealous. Forgive me, Ben. Friend Ben."

Ben waved some uncoordinated fists at the bush of beard.

"You keep your hands off my fuckin' spoon, you dirty bastard!" he slurred.

The next day Ben waited until everybody was tucked out of sight in some meeting of the order and then he left, only saying goodbye to Great Granny Neptis, and leaving a gift with her to be passed on to Nettle: a neutral ring portal taken from his pouch and hung on a leather thong to go around her neck.

"Don't worry," Neptis told him, making room in her day for a bright gleam of lucidity. "You're too old and you're too young to appreciate anything." She patted his hand with her own feathery touch. "Make the most of it, my dear. It will pass."

φ

He set off, headed north again, walking much of the time, sometimes catching a ride, unperturbed by slow progress. Scorrage was a small country and he knew he had almost two months to reach Monnhill and be sure of meeting the one who might help him. Still, portal rings turned in his mind's eye. As a child he had quickly taken for granted his master's ability to transport them both anywhere in an instant. Now he began to appreciate the size of the world as it appeared to ordinary people, and the idea of a journey as an end in itself. Though the great elven roads of the past were long gone, their stone pilfered through the centuries for the walls and houses of man, broad dirt roads continued to mark most of the routes they had forged between the cities and main towns, dissecting the forest, winding through the great hills, seeking out the best river crossings. The going was easy, the landscape grand and beautiful, and when he met folk along the way he resisted the temptation to be nondescript and rock-skinned. It was partly from loneliness, partly a recognition that the time had come for him to begin to take an interest in the world of men. Now and then the strangers offered to rob or otherwise molest him. He would show he was not afraid, and explain to them in the spirit of fair warning that he was a powerful warrior wizard. Often this would be enough; they would think twice and let him pass. On the occasions he was forced to draw his sword he took care to only break their weapons, but sometimes he caught himself laughing as he fought.

Each day he would make time to sit and meditate on a portal ring in the attempt to not mind that his mind couldn't secure a grip on its frictionless surface. It wasn't just that the ring seemed as hard and smooth as polished

glass but that the mental 'fingertips' with which he tried to grip it also felt that way. They slipped away helplessly every time, no purchase to be found, the point of contact creating a high pitched tone in the centre of his skull, gaining him the sensation of endlessly sliding down the sheer cliff face he was meant to be surmounting. Each day he seemed to be that much further from the Sovereign Galaxies, that much more of a fighter, a struggler, than a wizard.

Arriving at last in Finann, the closest neighbouring village to Monnhill, after a flurry of minor adventures in which his sword had proved to be his first and last resort, it devastated him to discover he had lost some days in his calculations¹⁹ and was too late to make his meeting. The village streets span around him, their shadows flapping at the sides of his head, emphatic bats trying to wake him to his own calamitous insufficiency. He became lost in a series of narrow side streets that gibbered to him in his own voice. Emerging near a shallow stream he ran recklessly into the woods, cutting into trunks with Mirnggald, cleaving stones, murmuring and gasping to an invisible companion. As the low places beneath the trees darkened into dusk he found himself facing the river, not knowing how he'd come there. Stepping into a swirling side pool, he knelt and became mesmerized by the sunken stones, their flecks of mica catching enough of the fading light to glint like dying stars. Letting his skin harden he lowered his head into a cold he couldn't feel, then lay on his side beneath the surface and waited numbly for rest.

¹⁹ This moment of discovering the date should be shown.

Italics section...?

12

Time passed. Time passed as it always passes: forwards, backwards, up and down, expanding, contracting and spiraling – it flowed in all directions at once.

In a clearing beneath a cliff in the forest in Solfar a house of wood and stone with white rooms had not yet been built. It was morning and it was spring. The glade turned its wild flowers to the sun. Time hung in the air, for there was nobody there to measure it. The moment brimmed over silently, fell without sound or movement, save for the sighing of the leaves and the rippling of the grass.

And then there was someone there, a man, tall in the shade, white robes and beard dappled with sunlight, bearing no staff or weapon, just wide, spatulate hands²⁰.

He waited, and time passed, and he waited, until the glade didn't notice him as a separate being any more. Then he stepped forth from beneath the trees, feeling about invisibly, concentrating with a serious face, eventually coming to some conclusion that produced in him an ache and caused him to close his eyes for a while. After that he looked about himself with a rueful air, sat down in the grass and began to wait again, effortlessly, as the fish swims.

In the afternoon, though the sun still shone, a spring shower watered him. He did not move. After sunset he lit a fire, not for warmth but company, and his thoughts flickered and danced amongst those shadows and lights held in his eyes.

Another day passed, and another night, and then she was there, the Mab, standing beneath the boughs of the nearest tree, face puckered with discontent, as though it was her that had been waiting for him.

Her gaze flitted about the glade, refusing to meet his. Her head bobbed absently. In five seconds her patience was at an end and she turned away, ready to hobble off into the forest.

"Mab, don't go," he said.

The witch halted, her back hunching tighter, and then she turned slowly to show him her hooked profile. Her voice glowed malevolently, each word a glob of magma dripped to the forest floor.

"Who dares to come to my place and tell me what to do!"

Rising from the grass he walked to her, his white robes and hair reflecting the sunshine until he resembled a pillar of light towering over her crooked little frame of black tatters. Then he knelt, brought his face close to hers, looking up at her, remembered a time in his youth. And that youth's voice was carried across three thousand years.

"Don't be angry with me, Mab," he said. "I love you still. I always

²⁰ The wideness of his hands should be referred to much earlier, and perhaps more than once.

have, and I always will."

The Mab frowned, her head twitching, snagged on sudden doubt.

"Who are you? What right have you to come here? I'm...I'm just an old thing."

"I still have my stone," he said.

Reaching into the neckline of his robes he pulled forth the stone with the natural hole that was strung about his neck and held it out on his palm for her to see.

The crone peered at it: suspicion, irritability and curiosity all tangled up into a string ball, fingertips reaching towards it.

"Why, it's just a plain old stone," she hazarded.

Her fingertips brushed it, slid off and found themselves resting on his.

Moving his hand forward, so that the stone was centered between both of their palms, he brought up his free hand and covered the top of hers with a light touch.

"Mab."

The lines of her face shifted. Without changing in any measurable way her eyes began to entertain the notion of clarity.

"Oh," she said, the harshness fallen from her voice like leaves, "it's you."

"Yes, Mab."

The old woman looked around, as though expecting to find a host of old loves thronging the clearing, reappeared to surprise her with a reckoning. But there was no one else there. Her over-sized features wobbled uncertainly, then swiveled back to him.

"Hello," she said.

Eonmor's smile crinkled his face and she patted his temples lightly.

"Oh dear," she said, and her head bowed and she began to cry.

"Come down here," he whispered.

Her legs were half bent to the ground already. Turning, and letting herself tip sideways, she fell with a lumpen thud into his arms, was cradled and rocked, her face against his chest. Between tears she held up the stone and gazed at it mistily.

In time, when her throat would allow it, she spoke again.

"So, what are you doing here?"

"Haven't you seen...at the bottom of some cup of tea?"

"You want a child."

He didn't answer.

"One that you can keep."

"For a little while, yes."

She closed her eyes and pretended she was a young one herself, drowsy in a father's arms.

"Well, as desires go I suppose it's one I can understand."

He stroked her hair.

"I should hope so."

Her voice was young again, though her wrinkles remained deep.

"Tell me."

"Even though you know?"

"Yes. Even though I know."

The wizard put his head to one side, so that his cheek lay on the top of her head.

"I was tidying the desk in my library, and I stumbled across some old

note I wrote to myself, reminding me that I should like a child..."

"You wrote yourself a note?"

"I grow forgetful."

"You forgot you wanted a child?"

"If you carry an ache for long enough you can forget what it's for."

"Mmm, well..." she said, noncommittal. "If you say so."

"I've found that when I work out what an ache is for it's a good idea to write it down quickly."

"Ha! You men. You're so silly. So...a child..."

"Yes."

"One that you can keep."

"Yes. One that I can keep."

"For a little while."

"Yes. For a little while. Yes."

"Even though you love your freedom."

"Yes."

"Even though you love to shirk responsibility."

"Yes, yes, yes."

Mab made a sound that would have been a giggle had it not been so sleepy, and she patted his chest.

"An unshared life becomes a husk," he said.

Her smile faltered and faded away.

"Atop The Stor, in Fé Anadrei, I sat in meditation and dowsed for the right location, for the place I should build my apprentice house. I was prepared to move to any point in space-time."

"It led you here."

"Yes. Here...buried in the last scrap of elvendom. And I quickly noted how it is strangely devoid of the scent of elves, or any trace of them."

"Mmm. A puzzler. What did you do?"

"I extended my senses. I sniffed the air. I listened with cocked ears. I allowed my eyes to drift out of focus."

"What did you perceive?"

"Ah, what a question. What did I perceive? There is so much...silence here, beneath the sounds. So much stillness beneath the nodding stalks. I listened. I waited. I watched. And then...ah! There it was, barely perceptible, but powerful beneath its subtlety: a light shining in the holosphere, but it was a light hidden in a shadow. A thing so much like a broken mirror of what the elves have become that I understood immediately why they would avoid this place at all costs.

"It was the Mab. The Mab was here."

"Oh my goodness," said Mab.

"Indeed."

"So, what happened then?"

Eonmor sighed and breathed, causing the crone's head to rise and fall on waves of air.

"Then my heart gave out an ache, which spread in all directions, passing through all of my awarenesses."

"Oh," said Mab sadly.

"And I sat in the grass to wait for you...letting myself ache."

Her gaze grew still, something rare for her in these days, and she didn't speak, just looked with cleared eyes into days that had gone. After a time she chuckled unexpectedly.

"You had to write yourself a note," she sang.

Then she fell asleep and did not wake until two whole nights had passed. Beneath the wheeling of the stars he held her, and was content not to think of much, save for natural things, until she roused at last.

"You can build your house here," she told him. "But this remains my place. I will come and go as I please."

"Of course. Of course."

She touched his lips and gazed up at him lovingly.

"I'll bring you wild flowers."

He kissed her on the forehead, and held her for two more days, until she'd had enough and left him sleeping in the dawn, ringed by bluebells.

φ

Having secured permission from Mab, something in Eonmor had relaxed. And so, falling into sleep he fell far, visiting several realms that had long awaited him, concluding various outstanding missions, beginning new ones, and consorting with many forgotten entities in such ways that fall beyond the measurement of language. So it goes, sometimes, for old wizards when they relax. When he awoke he knew not where he was nor why he was there, only that he was a new sprung awareness lying in a shining forest wearing the aspect of a strong, old wizard. There was something familiar about the situation, which, although he couldn't put into context, seemed a comfortable enough fit. So, following an instinct, he did what seemed natural to do, and he opened a small portal. From this he drew forth a diary that was mostly free from dates, and he consulted the most recent page.

"You would like a child," said the last entry in a handwriting that he recognized from somewhere.

He gnawed on this rather random seeming string of words, and by and by he smiled and agreed.

Yes, of course. A child.

Lifting himself from the grass he looked around at the clearing with a newly defined focus. So here was the place, revealed in its serenity, redolent already, he now noted, with the future echoes of the days and months and years he would spend here, playing games amongst the trees, telling tales, rediscovering forgotten self-knowledge, sharing his passage through the Sovereign Galaxies with another. Yes, here was love for you, a love even a wizard could enjoy for a spell.

His hands trembled and a few tears were let loose. He let them fall and waited, and when he was ready he shrugged and shook himself and set to work.

A week in Amikade, visiting an architect who owed him a favour, resulted in a design for the house. Returning to the forest he shipped in Sternum, Flo and Cloé for the provision of tireless labour and an inhuman attention to detail. He also shipped in raw materials and tools, purchased from conventional builders merchants with red gold taken from a now nameless city beneath the sands of the Kwortz Desert.

The building of it took two weeks.

On the day of completion he sent the inhumans off back to the town-houses at Nazaride and Zaneb to catch up on their chores there, and he stood in the garden and looked up at the new building. It was evening. The sky was mostly lemon, deepening to green.

All was in readiness.
Now he just needed his apprentice.
Bound to turn up soon enough, he told himself.
Three years passed by.

φ

Eonmor could have most of the things he wanted with relative ease. Consequently there was little he wanted. Good food and drink, travel to exotic places, accoutrements of wealth – these were taken-for-granted that he eschewed as often as he enjoyed, for they had long ceased to have the ability to intoxicate.

If he wanted sex he could call upon Cloé. If he wished for a slightly more challenging companionship he could go and have an anonymous affair easily enough. The taverns and esplanades of the port towns and cities braceleting Nestorea contained many beautiful and cosmopolitan girls. And though he used magic to conceal what he was, he needed none to enchant those girls that took his fancy. In his three thousand years he had learned enough about chemistry to recognize and stir it as easily as a master alchemist. It was not so much a source of pride that he had never resorted to mesmerism, like so many wizards were wont to do, but more an inbuilt and unspoken given: like not spitting on people when he left the house. Occasionally, indeed inevitably, he would have sex with somebody who knew him for what he was. Though he had no peers as such, there were those who were not so far below his level of development that they couldn't surprise him (there were even, though it was rare, encounters with captivating entities above and beyond his level of comprehension who occasionally found some subtle diversion in merging fields with one such as he). But he did what he could to avoid inspiring romantic attachment in those for whom he held a deep affection, for those people had a tendency to die at just the point when he began to allow his love to flow freely.

Yes, he was a master. And no, he wasn't one at all. He knew it. Such things are relative, as is everything within the realm of the manifest. He could travel the Sovereign Galaxies with ease, but he wasn't allowed (was somehow refusing to allow himself) a true life-mate – one that didn't die and abandon him just when he was beginning to need her.

His friendships too, seemed fated for such ephemerality. Those people who he cared for would inevitably be taken, or would leave, or would be changed and lost to him in some manner, if he didn't maintain enough emotional distance. Would it be any different with a child, an apprentice? He had no reason to believe it would. But if this life was set on granting him only the breadcrumbs of love to sustain him down the millennia, then he would accept those crumbs with what grace and gratitude he could summon.

He sometimes wondered if his soul had set up these parameters as a safety precaution, for it often seemed to him that he had so much love for the world that it threatened to one day explode and wipe away everything he had ever known with the strength of its radiance.

When waiting patiently for his apprentice to show up had failed, and searching and dowsing had yielded no result, when nonchalantly ignoring the issue had proven unfruitful in persuading the child to manifest, he showed mercy on himself and took himself away through a ring portal to do a few lectures at Monnhill. He would share his love of the magical life

with an arbitrary selection of students for a few hours and they would be his surrogate children.

So, pulling his diary from a portal, he consulted the section where he kept track of which year's lectures he had already fulfilled in order that he would avoid showing up to the same one twice, thereby embarrassing some earlier version of himself. The next available slot was some considerable number of years in the future. In his love of talking to the young students he had gotten quite ahead of himself.

He went ahead and made three new lectures in three consecutive years. They were all based on the same theme – an enquiry into the implications of the magical nature of nostalgia – but he did feel they developed and improved incrementally. And, although his intention had been to do more, what happened after the third lecture put him off the whole thing for quite a while.

ϕ

He knew that most of the students had come along to see if he would live up to his reputation as an eccentric subversive, and that was fine. It was only a measure of how far off course the four houses of Monnhill had wandered, and wandered still, since the days of their golden age (and that had ended long before Eonmor had been born). He frequently wondered how the heads of the houses would react if they understood just how restrained he kept his talks, how gently he nudged those young minds so as not to cause ripples that would be too disturbing to their conditioning, yet still plant pearls of humour and insight that might one day resurface and guide them in need. But really it was not something he could be bothered getting into a knot about. They were all doing the best they could.

There was a man in attendance at the third lecture, a graduate of the West Wind College he recognized from previous years, despite his sitting at the back, in the shadows, despite his sporting a newly disfigured face. Eonmor had never learned his name but his energy was distinctive enough. The old wizard's second level awareness had noted it as soon as he walked into the packed auditorium, for the man had a different intent, and indeed a different intensity, to the other attendants. It registered like a prickle beneath Eonmor's clothing. The man had come with some kind of business for Eonmor, and it looked to be a heavy sort of affair.

"...and so the nature of tirpsigate is to strip away illusion," said the old man. He had been talking a long time but his audience was still spell-bound, so to speak. "Now I have one last question for you all.

"We have listed a few of the various uses its properties have been put to down the ages: by elves, dwarves, men...others. But we haven't referred to the elemental suitability effect that you will all no doubt remember from the first year of your studies, yes? That effect at work in all naturally occurring systems, the inherent perfect function to which each primary vibration *must* be suited in order for it to exist in the first place. Yes? For there is no separation between the vibration and the function. Remember all of those happy evenings you spent memorizing the natural functions tables? I bet everybody in this room could tell me the natural function of any mineral, plant, chemical that I cared to suggest, no? At a moment's notice? So... tirpsigate? Once truth powders, lucky charms and the like have been recognized as artificial derivatives, what in Piscea could be the *natural* function of tirpsigate? Anybody?"

The audience produced a subdued communal murmur. One student looked at another to find a mirror of emergent surprise. That there was a gap in the natural functions tables was fundamentally shocking enough, that not one of them had seen it, that no master had ever mentioned it, this was a cause for the profoundest conjecture.

Eonmor perched on the edge of his table, allowed the buzz of bafflement to rise to a certain level of urgency and emotion before standing up.

"That's enough. Yes, so...interesting, eh? Life continues to surprise. Please remember, you delicious young wizardlings, that the answer is always staring you in the face, regardless of how energetically you try to look away."

Without looking behind himself he deftly tapped his blackboard with the tip of his staff. A number of glyphs suddenly shone out from the chalked scribbings. Although scrawled in seeming haste and in seemingly random available gaps on the board during the course of his talk the highlighted glyphs were perfectly positioned, as any first year student would have been able to point out, in Optim's Configuration, the standard for depicting energetic relationships – he had written the answer right in front of their noses in the most obvious fashion, but not a one of them had seen it until now. The answer indicated brought forth sounds of hushed and not so hushed revelation that circled the auditorium, punctuated by more than one bark of disbelief. "Should it really be that much of a surprise?" he asked. Then he straightened and nodded.

"That is all from me," said Eonmor, "until next year."

And he turned his back, raising a field of unapproachability and wrapping it around himself. Without haste he began to gather up the various instruments strewn across the tabletop, dismantling and checking them, leaving the students to wrestle with their revelations and pursue connections that most would not make for years to come. The auditorium took a long time to empty, for many were reluctant to leave when they had just been placed on such a knife edge of inquiry, but even the most tenacious pupils were finally unwilling to breach the great master's field and shuffled reluctantly out, blinking into the daylight. The lecture hall doors swung closed and one figure remained, sitting on the back row up in the shadows. Eonmor dropped the field and beckoned him to come down.

Besides the scarring of his face the man had also acquired a limp, which seemed, to Eonmor's finer senses, to be exaggerated right now, encumbered by the burden of his current mission. There was a hint of self-pity in there, just a hint. Most of it was directed outwards, to someone else. There was somebody down beyond the village that this man felt sorry for. Eonmor could feel the colour of the emotion. He frowned inwardly then, as he realized that a portion of this character's sadness had also been reserved for the old man himself.

"I recognize you, but I don't know your name."

"Volta...Master."

Volta had halted before the stage.

"Please, come up."

Volta lumbered up the steps and stood awkwardly by the table, his gaze gratefully distracted by gleaming device parts.

Choosing not to do the younger wizard's mission for him, Eonmor busied himself with detaching an eighth dimensional astrolabe from its tripod and placing it in its padded case. He began to unsnap the clasps of the tele-

scopic legs; bright explosions of sound bounced off the far walls of the auditorium.

"Down beyond the village...Master..." Volta's voice was hoarse with inertia. "...there is a half wizard...a friend of mine...he used to be...he used to be your apprentice."

Eonmor's eyes darted, not to Volta, not to anywhere nearby. His fingers, already committed to the task in hand, clicked down the catches on the tripod case and he caught himself, drawing blood.

"Ahh!"

He sat himself down in the chair that had been placed on the stage for him, but which he hadn't used until now. He sucked the blood from his cut. His insides trembled.

Then he took his finger out of his mouth and inspected it. The cut was a small thing, but bleeding readily enough. Volta leaned forward.

"May I, Master?"

"Huh?"

Volta nodded at the finger.

"Oh! Why, yes...yes, certainly."

Eonmor held out the finger and Volta touched it fleetingly, almost negligently, a blue bubble winking into existence where the contact had been made and then fading immediately, taking the cut with it. The old master sat back and appraised him.

"A wounded healer," he said.

Volta just looked at him, watching for his second reaction, the considered response.

"Thank you," said Eonmor, curling and uncurling the healed finger. He took a deep breath and looked around. Across the stage, in the wings he spied a second chair, reached out to it and it came towards him, sliding and scraping across the floor.

"Please," he said, gesturing. Volta sat down with a nod of thanks.

Silence then, for a few moments.

"You say he's only a half wizard?"

"Yes."

"But he's no longer my apprentice?"

"No. He told me the apprenticeship was ended, but he never volunteered the details. It was only by chance that I realized it was you that was his master. He is closed about everything, of course."

"So why have you come here?"

"He wishes to speak with you. He came a year ago but arrived a day or two too late, missed your lecture. At that point I think he was quite desperate. He has spent the past year living in the woods alone, trying to master some discipline or other. The locals have grown afraid of walking in amongst the trees. They believe there is a fell presence there. He's..."

Volta's twisted face twisted some more, but Eonmor could see the play of emotions behind the warped mask easily enough.

"...he's far away from himself – a lost boy."

Eonmor closed his eyes, sank inwards.

What is this, now? Is it not enough to love and then lose? Must I now know in advance how love will be taken?

Suddenly, finally, after three millennia, he felt the weight of the years pulling down on his bones.

Volta took him out walking, down through the day that was turning to evening, down through the hypnagogic trees that held the slopes of Monn Hill in a half dream, and out onto the lane that led down to Finaan and the sea. There were still folk on the streets, but they averted their gazes from the two nondescript men with practiced ease, content to be occupied solely with matters of farm and fish, for their village was a place that seemed, for whatever enchanted reason, ever distanced from the strifes that beset the rest of the world of man, and they had grown content and passive with it.

Beyond the little village the wizards entered the woods and descended into the gloom. The boy had built a fire near the river. Catching sight of it through the trees Volta halted and nodded for the old man to continue.

Eonmor suddenly felt afraid.

Letting his staff glow white, so that his arrival would be announced, he made his way down to the camp. The boy was sitting on the far side of the fire, his back to the river. He stood as Eonmor emerged from the trees and his jaw hung slack. The old wizard saw the emotions washing back and forth, scraping at the boy's insides. He saw clearly how his head was swimming, how his legs threatened to fold beneath him, how his hands shook and itched, fingers curling and uncurling, not knowing what to grasp at. The emotion filling the boy's eyes was not so easy to classify, for it was too many emotions, all occupying the same space at the same time, trembling and confined, but threatening to shake their prison to pieces.

The hilt of Mirnggald was at the boy's waist, though there was no sign of the blade. A pack sat on the ground. Unusually for an inanimate object it had an aura of its own, the familiar, mirrored tang of ring portals.

The tall, straight, shining old man faced the boy across the flames, bright against the darkness, looking like a conjured archetype. He gazed at the boy, gathering information, and waited.

"Master."

The old man smiled, raised his eyebrows and didn't know what to say.

"You don't know me...do you?"

Eonmor held up his hands, showing his palms to the boy.

"Slowly. We've no need for haste. Tell me your name."

The boy made a visibly heroic effort to pull together some self possession.

"You always called me Ben."

Eonmor knew then that he only had so many [?]. A breath he hadn't known he'd been holding onto escaped him and he looked up at the sky through the branches to where the first stars were showing themselves.

There's still so much I haven't done.

He noticed a passing breeze carrying the smell of wild garlic. He felt the weight of the planet pressing upwards against the soles of his feet, carrying him through the cosmos. He felt the silent laughter of creation echoing through his being. He saw a young version of Mab, smiling slowly in dappled sunlight, beads of river spray on her lips, forget-me-nots caught in her eyes.

When he looked back at the boy the fire seemed brighter. He smiled again, deeply and fully.

"So...Ben. Here we are, here and now. Can you smell the wild garlic?"

The boy nodded and began to cry.

"Yes, Master..."

Eonmor wondered what this boy was like. Then he walked around the

fire to him and embraced him. And they stayed like that for a while, until it was time to sit by the fire together, and speak in quiet voices.

"You told me you had one more thing to tell me...because I worked out what was behind the door."

"The door?"

"The magic door."

"The magic door?"

"In the house in Solfar."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes. But you didn't have time to tell me."

"I see. So you worked out what was behind the door?"

"Yes. I'd known for ages it was just your socks. I just didn't want my apprenticeship to move on."

"I kept my socks behind the magic door?"

"Yes. Didn't you know?"

"Not until just now...no."

"Oh."

"And there was something I was going to tell you, because you worked it out, about the socks?"

"Yes. It was to do with tirpsigate, and how I can find some."

"You need to find some tirpsigate?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I need to go and see the elgs."

"You do?"

"Yes."

Eonmor waited, but Ben didn't want to say any more.

"I'm sorry Ben, but I don't know what it is that I was going to tell you."

The boy's face grew long, like it was being pulled by the gravity of hell.

"Hey, come on, don't be sad. Look what I've got here," and Eonmor produced a talking spoon from his robes.

"Chin up, young fellow," said the spoon.

"I'm twenty five years old," said Ben. "And, I've already got one."

"Oh. Well look, take it anyway. They can keep each other company."

Ben took it.

"So that was the help you have been waiting for? To know what I had been going to say?"

Ben's head bowed. Tears dropped at regular intervals to the ground. He nodded.

"Well...this is a good thing. You have seen me, and now you know that whatever jewel of wisdom it was, it is gone now, so you can release it, get on with your life. Go and live, and see what happens."

"I've been so selfish, Master...you know you're going to die. I didn't get any answer, and now you know that you will die soon. And that means you must have known all the time that you knew me...all the time we were together, you knew."

Eonmor twitched and shrugged and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You're not being much fun, are you? I hope we had a few laughs along the way?" The boy's shoulders shook.

"A couple," he sniffed.

"Hah!" barked Eonmor. "I bet it was more than that. Anyway, I

wouldn't worry about me knowing. I'll probably forget in a day or two."

They both knew it didn't work like that.

The boy's head remained bowed and Eonmor could see, feel, taste, that he was waiting for something, waiting for the wizard to fix something somehow. He had experienced a great deal of pain, pain he didn't believe he was fit to cope with. The old man turned away from him and poked at the fire with a half burnt stick. Long minutes passed by before the boy realised he was being left to sit in his own juices.

"I'm sorry, Master," he croaked. "I know I'm being pathetic...and a bore. I was just so excited about my life...the things it promised. And now all of that just seems so far away. I feel sorry for myself. I know it's disgusting to see...but I can't help it. It's like when I was trapped in Wargrin's cart as a boy..." the old man's eyebrows shot up but the boy didn't see. "...I was looking through the flaps of the canvas at the world outside, and it was like I was glimpsing heaven...from a hell I couldn't escape from. And I know that's just my own perception...but heaven just looks so good from afar."

Ben chanced a glance at Eonmor, then lowered his gaze again. Eonmor realised that he looked like some unforgiving angel to the young man.

"Did I ever tell you about the time the Sisters of Kenlokorai asked for my help?"

Ben's eyes peered blindly upwards as he consulted the memory recall system Eonmor had helped him put in place. His focus returned and he shook his head.

"No."

"Hmm, well...it's not something I have talked about to another before. You can be the first – and last."

The boy's back straightened at last. He was ready to receive whatever crumbs the old man cast his way.

"The Sisters are three witches, the kind who keep themselves tucked away somewhere inaccessible while they study and perfect their art, the kind that everybody else generally has to seek out when they need to know something unknowable. And yet here they were, abroad in the lands of man, come to seek the help of a wizard, all three of them. It was unprecedented."

"What did they want?"

"Ah...no, sorry: client confidentiality. It was something quite bizarre, but that's not important. What was nice, and unexpected, was that I would be the one who got to charge them for my services. It had always been the other way around before. And they had always been heavy chargers. Well, they're worth it."

"So now you got to set the price."

"Indeed."

"But what does a great master like you want that he can't have?"

"Quite. I was stumped myself. I asked them: 'What have you got?' and they said they could give me full recall of one of my other lives."

"Really? I didn't think that was possible."

"Nothing is impossible...sort of. Most things just aren't very probable."

"So you agreed?"

Eonmor's head and voice dipped.

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"You sound so sad. Was it a very sad life they let you remember?"

"Ah, well, you see...I was worried about which life they would choose

for me. Those wily witches have a way of making a payment feel like a price exacted. I told them straight: 'Payment in advance, and it has to be a happy life, a memory I will treasure, not something I'll detest.'

Ben watched the old man, who was now in a mood he had never seen him in before. The wizard poked the fire some more. When he turned his face to Ben his expression held the amazement of a young boy, and this made the creases of his face seem deeper than ever.

"Whether it was a life I have already lived or one that is yet to come...I don't know. It is a memory to me now, so it feels like a life that is past, though its scope and beauty surpasses what I have known in this one."

The boy gaped silently at the idea, for he knew that he himself had seen but a glimpse of a fraction of the glories his old master had been a part of.

"What happened?"

"What happened?" The old man reached into the air and grasped after something. His face took on an expression of profound loss and his hand hung in the air for some moments, forgotten, before he became aware of it and allowed it to fall into his lap. "Let me ask you something. Can you conceive of a highly evolved life that would be worth the living?"

Ben considered, feeling once again like his master's apprentice.

"I'm not sure that I could imagine something that was more highly evolved than myself at all, regardless of whether it was worth the living or not. Surely, to be able to conceive of it in the first place would mean that it was not of a higher order than myself?"

"Yes, yes, that's perfectly valid, but let's put that small item of logic to one side, just for the moment. It's not what I'm getting at. What I'm asking you to consider is: can you imagine, with any conviction, a way of being that would be higher than what you know now and yet - and here's the rub - still be enjoyable?"

"Still be enjoyable?"

"Yes. Enjoyable...as opposed to thoroughly worthy and thoroughly boring. A life challenging enough to be stimulating, yet free of the fear of suffering? You see the question? Would there be any point in living a life that was not bejeweled with all of the strife that is part and parcel of the human lot?"

Their little camp grew quiet while he let the boy consider.

"I suppose there would be different challenges," he said. "Ones that are beyond the capacity of my imagination in its current state."

The old man smiled at him.

"That's quite a statement, Ben. Most people are all too happy to concede that there are higher ways of being than their own. The idea that they are lowly creatures...they don't mind that. They even like it, perhaps. But ah! The number of people who imagine those higher ways as actually being more enjoyable than the delicious, disgusting mess of vices, weaknesses and desires that is the human way..." Eonmor laughed without joy. "...well...it is a small number. Breathtakingly small.

"You might see it as a measure of the amount of hubris inherent in the human mind, or perhaps, if you're feeling more generous, as a mark of the tremendous self belief of the average person, that they believe themselves so close to the heights of evolution that to take one more step would be to take the final step! Ha, ha, hah! You see? People are afraid of evolving further because they are afraid it would mean the end for them! They see enlightenment as a death, a death of all their earthly pleasures and de-

sires and devices. A death of fun, adventure, a death of ego. They believe that whatever part was left of themselves after ascension would surely be a thing so pure and bland that it would be as severe an existence as damnation. For the part of themselves they like the best would be gone. Yes, no doubt they would gladly give up the struggling and suffering that is such a feature of their human lives, they would let go of it in an instant...if only they believed they could still hang onto the attendant gratifications, and the smallness of their identities."

The wizard held out his palms with a shrug.

"But they don't believe such a thing can be possible. And how should they? As you say: how can one conceive of something that is greater than what one is? It doesn't work, does it? To even begin to take such a step would take a tremendous degree of self belief..." His eyes sparkled, "...or hubris, no?"

He touched his own face absently and looked away into a memory, his expression rueful and slightly demonic.

"I am currently one of the most highly evolved humans on this planet. I say it without pride. It is a simple observation. There are other worlds, plenty of them, where my level of awareness would not be considered so high. Indeed, at the moment of my birth in this other life that the Sisters gave me knowledge of - a life that may be ahead of me, or may be a thing of my past, I know not - I was more advanced than I am now. I was, or will be, born laughing, and greeted my mother with the blessings of an old friend who has been away a long time. Even as I entered the world I was as a god, my self knowledge unwavering in the face of the realm presented to me. And yet I was, more or less, an average specimen for that species, a child amongst equals.

"It was in a galaxy far from this one, perhaps further out, near to the edges of the universe, perhaps closer to the centre. I don't know, I can't know, but the vibrations there are of a wholly different order to what we know here. Our minds were completely transparent to each other. The inner life of each friend was a miraculous and magical landscape I could wander in. We were worlds unto ourselves, and each other. Our bodies barely registered in the material realm. Willowy things of blue light we were, but physical enough to enjoy the spectra of the senses. And yes, the challenges we faced...they were indeed different. A human mind can comprehend them perhaps...in part at least, but...putting them into human words..."

The wizard's eyelids fell.

"The work and the play of our people were one and the same thing," he said. "As beings of minimum density, beings that would be invisible to most physical creatures we were engaged consciously in the wakening of the universe. That meant we directed as much of our energy to raising the frequencies of the lower dimensions as we did to ascending ourselves. Indeed, they were one and the same activity. Imagine, if you will, a group of angels in paradise, trying to celebrate their delight in each others' company and their world, but their enjoyment is marred by the muffled but ever present screaming and sobbing of the people in the next realm. Some people can derive a bitter kind of pleasure from dining on delicacies while surrounded by the starving, but nobody can maintain that sort of thing forever.

"So, understand this: there was no work in our society as such, only

the exploration of being, the expansion of joy, the ever unfolding beauty of awakening. There was no expectation placed upon any individual by the collective as a whole. Yet it was inherent in our nature that we look to our neighbours in the lower dimensions, seek communication and communion with them, with a view to helping them raise their own vibrations. Like deep water divers we would descend, and a risky business it was. Descending too far, or for too long, could lead to painful consequences. Yet it was this very risk that spiced our paradise existence and made it a thing to be savoured rather than a bland dish that could not be stomachached for long."

Eonmor gazed intently into the boy's eyes, seeming to look for some sign that his words were being received.

"Most people who dwell in Piscea have difficulty imagining a heaven that could be anything but boring. What pleasure can there be in ceaseless pleasure? But this is because they only really understand one of the two great pleasures."

The old man treated the boy to a dramatic pause that reminded Ben of countless fireside stories.

"The first great pleasure is easy to become captivated by...it is the pleasure of being lifted into the loving embrace of a higher being. So captivating a pleasure can this be that it can become blinding.

"The second great pleasure, the one that so often goes neglected by those who could most savour it, is the pleasure of turning back, and looking down, and lifting to their feet those who lie on the ground behind you."

The wizard grimaced, as though with wind, and cast about irritably, looking for something that didn't materialize. With visible effort he settled himself.

"The stories...the adventures we created..." He flapped an agitated hand. "There's no point in me trying to convey them." Anger flared momentarily beneath his brows, then he softened.

"Each person I met I recognised instantly, knew intimately, even if it was the first time I had encountered them. I couldn't but help sense the connections between us, the shared adventures unique to us, from previous lives perhaps, or alternate parallels, or the future, or some remarkable combination..."

He leaned forward and placed a hand on Ben's arm. The twin highlights of his gaze remained stock still amidst the shifting of his features in the firelight.

"Ben. If you recover from your calamity...if you continue on, and become a full wizard, it's inevitable that you will, at some point, experience that joining of mind, body and spirit that can only happen between awakened beings."

Ben winced and would have looked away.

"But mark me, Ben...sex between wizards and witches and the like, sublime as you would find it to be, pales into the mere memory of an unsatisfied ache when compared to the bliss of being one with an entire, awakened people, a world where every individual is your long lost lover, your brother, your sister, your father and mother, your dearest friend, a cherished part of your very self."

Tears streamed from the old man's eyes and his hold on Ben's arm became a claw.

"It was a bitter gift those witches gave me!"

"But why? It sounds wonderful."

"In this world..." Eonmor spared a glance for their surroundings, "the greatest master is but the demented soul who dribbles the least."

The boy sat up stiffly.

"That's not what you taught me!"

Eonmor nodded and shrugged.

"It is true, Ben, as I have always said: we are ever home, ever complete, ever perfect...and yet, paradox abounds. When we are given glimpses of things we are not yet ready for, we can come to see just how far from home it is possible to be!"

The old man's words were stung with grief. He used a trembling hand to cover his eyes and turn his own head away. The boy sat there, wooden as a totem but devoid of power.

"There are witches and there are witches," muttered the wizard and would give no more gifts.

The boy fell asleep at some point, exhausted on every level. Eonmor touched his left temple lightly, not magically, just to say goodbye, and he walked away into the woods. After a time he opened a portal to Solfar, the Solfar of his own proper timeline, and he went through. Entering the apprentice house he walked upstairs and created a magical door where there was a broom cupboard on the first floor landing. What socks he had he placed inside, rolled in pairs like fluffy eggs.

A sudden inspiration struck him.

By the time he came back downstairs he knew what the thing was that he would have said to the boy, after he had worked out the socks, but he didn't go back and tell him. The moment had passed.

Ben awoke by the ashes of the fire and his master was gone, replaced by Volta who invited him to return to Drummag and join his order. Ben thanked him, squeezed his arm, and declined. Then he walked away into the woods.

For six months Ben worked hard, spending long hours each day meditating on how he didn't mind that he couldn't open a ring portal. When not working on this task he roamed the countryside, just living, and seeing what happened.

In the second six months he spent less time on his desire to be a walker between the worlds, yet continued to drift from place to place, treating with what adventures came his way. Rumours began to spread throughout Scorrage of a lone warrior wizard that could be met in the woods and on the roads of the northern lands, wearing the guise of a grim young man. These newly whispered legends were all contradictory, yet shared enough common traits to coalesce over time into something consistent and altogether misguided.

At the end of this first year Ben found himself back in the woods behind Finaan, wondering if he might be the first to find Monnhill uninvited, and wondering if Eonmor would perhaps choose to walk down from the college after his lecture, for a fireside chat with his old apprentice. Neither of these wonderings came to be and two more years passed by in which he seldom took out a portal ring any more, though Mirngald was unsheathed with increasing frequency.

There came a day in the autumn on the Isle of Skai on the east coast when he stumbled without realising it upon his seat of power. A mist was on the island and he climbed a finger of rock, hoping to rise above it. If anything the mist was thicker at the narrow summit and this gave him a sensation of being removed from the world. He welcomed this feeling, for he was tired of the world, of his wandering, of the ceaseless changing of the day into the night and back again. Lighting a fire he sat and slumped, and when he took out a portal ring, not to attempt an opening but simply to run it through his fingers and think dully of days that had gone, the ring caught in his thoughts and opened.

Too disbelieving to have an emotion about it Ben hung the ring in the air and pulled it wide. He could see a garden at night time on the other side. Curls of Piscean mist flowed through the portal as he watched, across the Sovereign Galaxies to the other world. He had no idea where or when the garden lay. Touching the polished surface of the ring to see if he could roll or unroll it, he chose the old house in Solfar as a destination, but his mind and the ring slid off each other like they were both made of glass.

It was the night time garden or nothing.

His weariness suddenly weighed heavily on him and he knelt down. Was there really any point in going through?

What point is there in staying here? asked his own voice from inside.

He didn't have an answer, but he bowed his head down until it touched the rock, and he closed his eyes for a while, and told himself that he could suffer no more disappointment for he was empty of expectations.

Starting suddenly, he realised he had fallen asleep for a moment, or a minute, or longer.

With a shrug, he climbed to his feet, put his pack on his back and stepped through.