

A Fluttering of Wings

by Paul Worthington

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Book One of *Servants of the Last Falcon*

CAMDEN-1

A story is told of a boy, fully grown but still at least two or three years from Ekjo, the full strength and endurance of his body, who in the dead of winter arrived at the farmhouse of the village of Dume, which lies in the foothills south of the Norgold Mountains, and calmly announced that it was his intention to travel to the Summerlands imagined by dreamers to lie beyond the mountains.

And just how do you intend to do that, the people of Dume asked him, with near-hostile dubiousness. The northern peoples have a saying, known though not often used by those of us from farther south, "They died in the Norgold Mountains," which is used to describe failed undertakings that everyone except those attempting them realized were doomed to failure—as when, for example, Jumpolayo Ruppertz of the town of Yobo (which is about a two-day walk from Dume) tried to make a living by selling icicles. This saying alludes to the many rash, and often brash, attempts that have been made over the years to cross the Norgold Mountains, which have resulted at best in glum returns of hitherto confident adventurers and would-be conquerors expelled by the unforgiving mountain, and at worst in the intrepid fools never being heard from again. That's in the summer or early autumn, or maybe late in the spring: if you were to suggest to those who had lived in the shadow of those mountains their whole lives, respecting their power and mystery, that you were going to cross them in winter, or that such a thing could be done, they would think that you were either joking or insane, or otherwise were insulting their modest spirits, which is rather what the consensus was when the boy, Innikno, made bold his claim.

But when the boy, who had a quiet manner about him, and I daresay a modest spirit, himself, admitted that he had no idea how he was going to do it, and indeed had hoped to find in Dume a knowledgeable mountaineer and winter traveler, and a

willing guide, their spirits warmed to him. They told him with kind sincerity to wait until summer to run his fool's errand, or better yet, not to do it at all. Old Charles Phant, the de facto spokesman for the town, told him, "Enjoy life, it's short enough as it is."

"I can't wait," he told them, "A girl's life is ebbing away, and I must retrieve a molgrehu from the Summerlands." Their spirits warmed to him yet further, then, for it was plain that instead of seeking fame, or glory, his motives were pure; and deceived by the untainted innocence of his heart, he believed the legend of the Summerlands, and more than that, of the molgrehu, the snail of the Summerlands, the slime of which is said to be a panacea.

It is very sad that she is dying, they told him, with much compassion, it is a tragedy when one must die young, but it would be a greater tragedy for *two* to die young. It is a difficult thing to accept, but those mountains have never been traversed in the summer, and of a certainty not in the winter. Go back home and celebrate what life this girl has left to her; you cannot save her.

"That I cannot do," he replied, "I love her: I am her servant and I will never abandon her." Then, they felt a true and deep compassion for him, for it was clear now that his was indeed a noble spirit, and that moreover, he, as a servant, had been commanded to do this and had no choice in the matter. So, while yet urging him to desist from his impossible charge, the villagers helped him in any way they could, short of accompanying him on his trek. The most experienced hunters and trappers told him everything they knew about the mountains and about how to survive in cold weather; the warmhouse cooks supplied him with as much food as he could carry, dried and preserved so that it would last long and provide an optimum of nutrients per unit of weight. The elders of the village gave him all manner of advice, from which trees and berries to look for in the lower regions of the mountainside, to what to do if faced

with an avalanche, to how not to cause an avalanche. Charles Phant told him, in the direct and yet obscure way that northerners often have, “Don’t overthink things. You learn up here in the north that most things are what they seem they are: If you hear a chitter behind you, that’s a snow rabbit; if you hear a snort, that’s a woolly goat, if you hear a rasp, that’s a bobcat; if you hear a roar, that’s an avalanche; if you hear a great beating of wings, well, if you don’t want it to be a dragon, don’t look back.”

When the villagers accompanied him to the edge of town, and on past the final line of spruce trees which sheltered the town from the mountain winds, and watched him heading upwards until he was nothing more than a solitary dark speck in the distance, threading a winding path up the monstrous white hulk of the mountain, more than a few tears were shed for him, the noblest of the many who had disappeared into that whiteness never to return. And never did he return, but he was always remembered.

Who tells this story? The people of Dume tell it during the long cold evenings of Vathgor and Buuchuu and Lhael after the work of the day has been completed and supper eaten, huddled in their abodes in total darkness but for the flicker of a flame and the glow of coals. The people of Dume are a patient people, slow-moving, hardy, lovers of stories, lovers of the voices that arise from silence with subtle inevitability and carry the stories across the darkness and the cold. They rest together in the embrace of the enduring aroma of supper’s meat and grease and salt and smoke, and at some point, into a lingering silence, when commentary and conversation has ceased, someone will say, “A story is told...” and introduce the what or who about which their story will be. A story is always begun this way, so that the persons present can decide whether they want to listen to it, or to remain among their own thoughts. When they have concluded their story, they say, “The story is told,” to indicate that they are now finished speaking and that anyone

else is free to begin a story, and also to mark that the story has been given to the listeners, who are now free to tell it themselves. The story is told.

A story is told of a boy who in the slow awakening of spring came trudging down out of the roughs of the Norgold mountains, into the town of Yobo, near frozen, indeed covered from cap to boot in a fine frost, eyelashes and eyebrows as white as an old man's. The people of Yobo thought he must be a boy from Dume or Ista, Den or Kolk, gone to the lower reaches to hunt game, who had gotten lost; but ignoring their pleas to stay the night at the town's warmhouse before heading home on the morn, he hurried on, southward, taking the still snow-covered Calan Way, east and south. He bought a plate of mutton and steamed chiffow at the town's meathouse before he went, however, and while savoring his small meal, overheard that Ulfon Rognon, the town blacksmith, and a father of seven, was near to death with an infected injury in his thigh. He asked to see this man, and the townsfolk, though thinking it an odd request, were curious (Yobo has a reputation for curiosity), and took him to the man's house, where removing a small vial of translucent yellow gelatin, he rubbed it on the man's blackened, oozing skin. He gave some of the gelatin to the man's wife, Kan Noron, and told her to her rub it on her husband's wounds a couple of times per day.

"Maybe it'll work," he said, with an encouraging smile, and then left the town, a congregation of well-wishers watching him go.

"That's one strange young man," someone commented, and everyone present nodded. But Ulfon's wounds began to improve that night, and within eight or nine days, he was back at his forge. Who tells this story? The people of Yobo, of course, and especially Kan Noron, who still considers the boy to have been a wild messenger of the deity Witoo, who looks after children. The story is told.

A story is told of a human boy moving in the pine and spruce forest of the lower reaches of the Omoa, the white abyss, which is what the snow elves call the Norgold Mountains. He was moving upward when the elves saw him, blundering, they thought at first, like a fool to his death, which humans are wont to do; but watching him in their white and green cloaks from the camouflage of the trees and snow, they noticed that he was possessed of an awe of and respect for the *ryuun*, which is an Elfin word both for world and abode, which they seldom had witnessed in humans. He seemed to know which of the few of the year's remaining plants and leaves were rich in fiber and nutrients; he talked to the woolly goats, they whose sentience humans have always refused to acknowledge; he went fearlessly among the yelgs and longcats, who sensing his fearlessness, avoided him; and he exuded an understanding of the sacredness of the ground upon which he walked; and he went on, upward and out of their domain, a most singular human. Who tells this story? The snow elves do, and from them it has passed southward to the Forest Elves of Roncala and even on down to the Forest Elves of the woods around Clarks Hill. Aye, they know it, they tell it, and of how they, who never show themselves to humans, so that we think they are but legends, revealed themselves to him and showed him how to make an effective temporary snow house. The story is told.

A story is told of a boy coming to the shelterless heights of the Norgold Mountains, where, beyond the domain of trees, the only vegetation are hardy shrubs and weeds that grow on the slopes of rises and hills screened from the brunt of wind and snow. There, he convened with woolly goats, some of whom it is rumored, as with Nokan bulls, have sentience, some ancient northerners believing they are descended from unicorns. He drank melted snow and ate from a pack well-stocked with that staple of the northern traveler's diet, *road sausage*: heavy bars, strips, lumps, or rods of dried berries, beans, oat grain, and meat all compacted together and covered with a skin of sheep. He

traveled all day, and at night, built himself a snow house for shelter in the manner of the snow elves, and slept until dawn, when he rose again to face the endless steep. Sometimes, when the texture of the snow wouldn't allow him to work it, or else he waited until too late in the day to begin making his shelter, he slept with the woolly goats among some shrubs in the shelter of a rise or hill, shivering through the night. He went ever onward and upward, passing on, one timeless white day, from the domain of the goats. Who tells this story? The goats do, in the wordless way that animals remember things, and in the subtly different way that they reacted to the herders when they came up the mountain the following spring with their tame goats. The story is told.

A story is told of a boy cresting the Norgold Mountains, in the middle of winter. There, at the world's highest point, he gazed upon the unending beauty below, of snow and forest and plain and river and sea, and then started downward, moving through snow of varying texture and depth, until coming to a pass where the snow was deep enough and soft enough that even with the excellent snowshoes he had fashioned for himself in a warmer place somewhere, he sank in to his waist and couldn't go another step.

The vast white steep before him, an arduous journey behind him, his pack near empty of food, and the ice of the mountain within his bones, he almost despaired. I must go on, he said to himself, and with great effort was able to move his leg a boot-length forward. I must go on, he said again, but this time was able to move forward only a half-boot length. The feeling in his feet waning away, he reached down for every last bit of strength he had, seeking, seeking within himself for *nuok pon*.

"How can they fly?" he'd asked his mother long ago, "they're too heavy," and she'd told him, "It is *nuok pon*, the 'extra strength.'" He reached, then, with no other recourse, into the core of his being, and *screamed*. His brain screamed, his

body screamed, his being screamed; and at the same time he sent a scream echoing down the mountainside. Then, having forgotten the world, his purpose, his name, and with his blood afire, his body atremble, and tears squeezing out from the corners of his eyes, he took a single, full, step.

“Only 10,000 more,” he laughed, and repeated this effort again, and then again, and then again, moving with ceaseless determination through that white abyss. Who tells this story? We all do, when we face our own abysses, and every day thereafter as we tell our own stories in the paths of our lives, in who we are and what we do. The story is told.

A story is told of a boy who came down out of the Jyasu, the borderlands of the world, as the Frin call the Norgold Mountains, to the scrubland and gray plains below, which stretch to the sea. He surveyed his surroundings, perhaps, to judge from his body language, surprised by what he saw, perhaps disappointed, perhaps surprised *and* disappointed. But not crestfallen; he said, musing, “That’s interesting,” and then, whatever disappointment he felt, he wasted no time stewing in it, but went to work at once, patching a makeshift oago together from fallen timber, and dragging it to the sea. Using a flattish branch of cedar as a paddle, he made boldly northward, fearless of the endless gray sky, and the ice floes and choppy waters of the northern ocean.

He went onward without rest for two days, until his crude oago began taking on water, and even then, he alternated bailing and paddling, until the craft broke apart, at which point the Frin, the water elves, or white elves, as the fishermen they trade with far to the east call them, who had been watching him from their great, loose, chain of rafts with great curiosity, picked him up. Finding to their surprise (for they had assumed him smote with brain poison) that he was not only coherent but could speak a broken dialect of their tongue, they asked him what purpose was behind his actions. When he told them that he was in search of the molgrehu, which he had been informed

dwelt in the Summerlands on the north side of the Norgold Mountains, and asked them if they knew where these snails could be found, they told him, to his chagrin, that they knew of no such animal. “By your eyes and by your bearing, you are sane,” the rower of the raft that had rescued him said, “but what you say makes no sense. We understand the individual words that you speak, they are Frin, but they do not form a whole. They may be coherent in the not-the-world, but they are not coherent in this reality. Nevertheless, while your purpose is obscure to me, I do not think it dark. You may stay with us until the thaw comes, and we come again to shores of men.”

He did stay with them, eating well of fish and seaweed, and to their surprise rowing well, for eleven days, as they drifted into warmer and warmer waters; and in all that time, they wondered at him. He watched the horizon with an unending intensity that they thought must hurt his eyes. He seldom spoke; he had the silence of a Frin, not the garrulity of a human. But perhaps, they thought, he *isn't* human; he had come, after all, from the not-the-world, which is what they referred to anything beyond the Norgold Mountains. Who tells this story? The Frin do, from time to time, with wonder in their grey-green faces, to each other and to the eastern fishermen they trade with, who themselves tell a story that begins something like this: “You won’t believe this, but this Frinian told me a story, yes, a *Frinian* told me a story; and...” The story is told.

A story is told of a small island, a green atoll at the tip of a spade-shaped archipelago of inhospitable, uninhabited sprawling hulks of rock, where among a profusion of unusual animal and plant species, the molgrehu dwelt. The boy, recovering his strength in the salt spray of the Frin crafts, scanned the horizon every minute of every day for he knew not what—*something*, some clue, some gleam, anything that might light him a new avenue in his quest—and one morning, espying far in the distance a shape, nothing more than a speck, really, of what could be something green, or not, he asked the rower of

the raft what it was, and that solemn Frin told him, "Islands; nothing; rock."

The boy was curious, though, or perhaps desperate or thorough, and asked how long it would take them to row to it. A half-day, the Frin told him, and seeing that his young passenger's soul would not be easy if he didn't see for himself that those islands were nothing but rock, disengaged from the Frin raft-chain, and took him to the island, where, wading ashore, the boy rejoiced to see the green abundance. Within hours he had discovered, among a plethora of lizard species, flightless birds, and tiny, friendly, goats, a large population of striated snails, the slime of which, testing upon a couple of scratches on his fingers, he found possessed healing properties.

He took from his pack the vial that had crossed the mountains with him, and filled it with the slime of hundreds of these snails. One, two, three at a time, he would hold them in his hand while they crawled to and fro leaving slime in their wakes; then, after putting them back where he had found them, murmuring "There you go, thanks, thanks a lot," he would scrape the residue of their zigzagging paths into the vial. This process he repeated until at last the vial was full.

Then he turned homeward with the painful knowledge that he now had to make the same journey he'd just made, in reverse. Waving to the Frin pilot, who was fishing offshore, he said to himself, "Well, I did it once, I can do it again," and wading into the ocean, headed home. Who tells this story? Innikno did once, in his quiet, modest way, for his mother, the girl's mother, and the girl's uncle, when the little girl was well again. The girl's mother, a keenly intelligent woman who understood the hearts of men, said to him, "I think you will never tell that story again," and he replied only, "The story is told." The story is told.

ROWAN-1

“Mind, is my name Rowan?” I asked.

“Why would it not be, Rowan?” Mind replied, using the Jaji pronunciation of the name, which was strange since I hadn’t mentioned it to him until now and had pronounced it using the Leniman phonemes my tongue was accustomed to.

I hadn’t mentioned my new name to Mind because I hadn’t spoken with him since Romulus had named me, a thing which was strange in itself, since in all the time I’d known him he’d never found it necessary to call me by a name.

“Well,” I informed him, “Dr. Mulgar calls me Romulus and so does Dr. Bowusuvi.”

“Is that not the name of your friend in the back room?”

“Uhhh...” That was a difficult question to answer. A few days before, while doing some fractions that Dr. Mulgar had assigned me, I had, in the course of preoccupying myself with various fraction-oriented curiosities unrelated to the assignment, such as determining what fraction of the digits on my hands were thumbs, decided to figure out what fraction of my life I had known Romulus (or more precisely, the entity I was soon to come to know as Romulus), *namely*, my friend in the back room.

To answer this question, I needed two numbers: my own age, and the length of time that I’d known him. I knew my own age, because Dr. Mulgar had informed me of it several days before: He had burst into my room and announced that it was my birthday and that I was now six years old. To be sure, he had added, “Well, five years and a quarter by the usual reckoning, but who’s counting, we’ll call you six!” which was a somewhat mysterious caveat but which, I decided, didn’t alter the pertinent bit of information within his statement, which was that I was six. Mind was ever admonishing me that most statements which seemed complex at first could be simplified by identifying the most pertinent information within them.

The other number I needed for my calculation, that is, the length of time I'd known Romulus, was more problematic to assess. I could only dimly remember a time when he hadn't lived in his cage in the back room, or the gray room, as I thought of it, so we'd known each other for quite a while, a few months at the very minimum. We'd been conversing long enough, at any rate, to have taught each other our respective languages well enough to communicate without much confusion or need to repeat or clarify ourselves in either of them, or the pidgin of the two that we often used. I had decided that I had known him about one year.

But he had never been "Romulus." We had never called each other by name—by any names. It seems strange, now, that we knew each other for that many months before we learned one another's names, or even thought to address one another by some kind of designation; but the strangeness of it never occurred to me at the time, nor did it ever occur to me to ask him his name. He was just *him*, to me. I didn't think of him as "the Jaji" or "the Forest Elf," which is what the Grail called Jajis—"those denizens rural of folklore, the Forest Elves," to quote directly—or "the Walnuthead," which is what the Fathead guys called him, or "the person in the back room" or "the person in the cage." He was just *him*.

One day, by chance, Dr. Mulgar and I happened to be conversing in the hallway that led to that back, gray, room that served as Romulus' domicile. I can't remember why we were there (usually, we had our lessons in the main room or in my bedroom), but as we talked, Dr. Mulgar saw fit several times to call me Romulus, which was the name he and Dr. Bowusuvi had for me.

Keen-eared Romulus (or, again, the entity who was soon to tell me that he was Romulus, and who I would come to know as Romulus) overheard us, and after Dr. Mulgar departed, told me he couldn't call me Romulus because that was *his* name, and it would be too confusing for both of us to be Romulus. Since

we had gone months without knowing each other's names, this seemed like a non-problem to me, but he was insistent that we couldn't have the same name, and he wasn't insistent about many things, so I allowed that *he* could be Romulus.

He asked me what, then, he should call me—that's just how he said it, in the stilted way in which he spoke Leniman, "What, then, shall I call you?" I gave him to know that howsoever his taste guided him would be fine with me, to which he responded that he would call me Rowan. As a point of fact, it's not "Rowan;" that's my Lenima-zation of it: The word—the name—he pronounced sounded to my ears a lot like the name of a rare tree I'd seen on the Grail (and I'd spent a fair bit of time perusing pictures of trees, so taken was I by their subtle but endless variety of leaf shape and crown shape and by the interesting combination of qualities they exhibited, of prodigious size and delicate intricacy) and thereafter I pronounced the name he had given me as I pronounced the name of the tree. The initial sound of the Jaji word is quite different from the initial sound of "Rowan," but I couldn't pronounce it; it's not a phoneme that occurs in Leniman. The other sounds in the word are subtly different from those in the Leniman word, "Rowan," as well. But, I liked the sound of it, both as he pronounced it and as I did, and I told him as much, and thereafter he called me Rowan, or more precisely the Jaji word that sounds sort of like "Rowan," which I found out later, means, roughly, "servant."

I didn't question that his name was Romulus, the very name that Dr. Mulgar and Dr. Bowusuvi had always called me, or even consciously consider that it couldn't be Romulus—if he wanted to be Romulus, that was fine with me—but it seemed *off*, somehow. I think that already having a rudimentary knowledge of the Jaji language, I realized at some level that "Romulus" couldn't be a Jaji word, or name. The initial sound, the same as that at the beginning of my Lenima-zation of the name he gave me, never appears in Jaji, and moreover, Jaji words seldom end with a voiceless sibilant.

So, “Uhhh,” was the best I could do in answer to Mind’s question of whether Romulus was not the name of “my friend in the back room.”

“You were saying?” Mind prompted when my “uhhh” drifted into silence.

“Yes,” I admitted, “he said he was Romulus. But, uh, we can’t both be Romulus?”

“That is what he declared, is it not?”

“Hmmm,” I mused, as I often did in response to Mind’s questions.

Mind waited, as patient as an iguana on a rock.

“So, Dr. Mulgar is wrong then?” I asked. If somebody had been watching me, I would have looked as if I were mumbling to myself, with recurrent changes of expression and an occasional gesticulation. It wasn’t until midsummer of that year that my communications with Mind began to be camouflaged by silent reverie.

“Perhaps from Dr. Mulgar’s point of view, Dr. Mulgar is correct, Rowan.”

I pondered this, and got nowhere. It seemed to me that my name was either Romulus, which Dr. Mulgar and Dr. Bowusuvi called me, or Rowan, which Romulus called me, and which Mind was now calling me, even though he’d called me Romulus heretofore. Both couldn’t be correct; one had to be right, the other wrong.

At length, I said, “But from *our* point of view, he’s wrong?”

“From my point of view,” Mind said, in his usual mild, carefree tone, “he is neither correct nor incorrect. Whether he is correct or incorrect from your point of view is something that you will decide for yourself.”

“Hmmm,” I mused once again, trying to think of how to induce him into giving me the information I sought. As usual, he was, to use a phrase I learned much later, acting the mule, refusing to do what I wanted him to do for no reason beyond

caprice. A simple yes, your name is Rowan, or no, your name is not Rowan was all that was needed, but no, he had to complicate things.

“Well, you’re calling me Rowan, Mind, so that’s good enough for me, I’m Rowan.”

“Excellent,” Mind said, and after a pause just long enough and short enough to impress the most accomplished of jesters, added, “Romulus.”

“Mind!”

“Yes?”

“You just called me Romulus!”

“Does that bother you?”

Ah, I had an opening. “That depends on whether my name is Rowan or Romulus.”

“So you’re saying it would offend you if I called you by a name different from what you considered your name to be?”

“No,” I said at once. I didn’t like the sound of “offend.” During a recent examination, Dr. Bowusuvi had asked me, “Do my ministrations offend you?” when I had flinched away from a sharp instrument, and asked with such disapproval and warning that I knew to be offended by something was a very bad thing.

“No,” I said again, “but, but...” But what? My name was not of particular importance to me; I had asked Mind if it was Rowan out of simple curiosity, but since he’d refused, and was continuing to refuse to answer me, now I was determined to find out whether it was Rowan, or not.

Stymied, I sat in silence upon the brown couch in the middle room, the sitting room, or the main room, as I variously thought of it, staring in turns at the long green carpet, the blue ceilings, and the barred and boarded windows, as I waited for an idea of how to trick Mind into telling me my name to come to me.

And one did come, a good one.

“Mind,” I said, with as much childlike innocence as I could muster.

“Yes, Rowan?”

“Could you show me somebody talking to me, exactly one year from now? Not Romulus or the Fatheads or Dr. Bowusuvi or Dr. Mulgar. And while this person is talking to me, he calls me by my name.”

“Of course, Rowan,” he said, and with that I found myself walking the bright road. I followed it into a golden meadow at the edge of a tall forest, where I beheld a little boy and a dark-skinned woman with long black hair sitting together on a large flat rock, the woman talking to the boy as she rubbed some green-white jelly onto his outstretched legs, which appeared to be afflicted with a painful rash. The boy had darker skin than I did, but upon inspection I discerned the familiar features I’d seen reflected in the face of the Grail. I wondered why I was so dark, but the woman was talking, so I gave my attention to her.

“That better, Rowan?” she asked, and the boy nodded. She pronounced “Rowan” as I did, with Leniman phonemes, rather than with the Jaji phonemes that Romulus used.

Excited, I returned to the Main room, exclaiming, “Hah, I’m Rowan, Mind!”

“That’s good to know, Rowan; how did you reach that determination?”

I explained my methodology to him, but he was unimpressed. He said, “Some would argue that it would be impossible for you to make that determination in such a way.”

“But I did!”

“They would say that it was a time paradox.”

“Huh?”

“In other words, you’re using things from the future to determine things in the past which themselves determined the things in the future.”

“You just don’t want to admit that you told me my name!”

Mind didn't respond. I thought he might be deliberating an appropriate comeback, but a couple of minutes passed with no response, which made me think that maybe he was upset that I'd tricked him.

"Mind?" I said, tentative.

"Yes, Rowan?" he replied, with nothing beyond his usual carefree mildness in his tone, no trace of anger or agitation

"You're not mad?"

"Why would I be mad, Rowan?"

Relieved, I went off to tell Romulus the news, that I was officially Rowan.

He didn't call me Rowan very often after that—for the most part, we continued to interact as we always had, without names—but often enough to remind me that *he* was Romulus and I was Rowan. I called him Romulus thereafter, as he requested, and as I have said, came to think of him as "Romulus," even as Dr. Mulgar and Dr. Bowusuvi continued to call *me* Romulus.

YAAN-1

“Come on back here, you!” These words resounded in Farmer Green’s muddy little cowyard, harshened and amplified by the cold, still, air of Lhael that Nanatoi had yet to chase away.

The speaker of these words was Tolan Blabb, a tall thickboned farmhand wearing a heavy brown wool jacket and large mud-caked boots.

They were spoken to Estobbias, who regarded Tolan with one eye but continued to munch on the little tornleaf bush in the corner of the little cowyard.

“You hear me, you dumb goat? Right now, I’m warning you! You’re gonna get it!” He made a mad rush at him.

“Tolan’ll never catch Estobbias,” I said to Rook, who was sitting beside me on the rickety wooden post-and-pole fence of the cowyard, watching Wonseeba, Ukots, Froob, Dallyappi, Yubian, and the rest. This was an activity we often undertook together, especially when Farmer Green was grazing them in the little cowyard instead of the big one.

“Estobbias?” Rook arched one of his dark eyebrows while tilting his head just enough to regard me.

I pointed at Estobbias, as he nimbly avoided Tolan’s assault, navigating the muddy ground with short, sure steps as he maneuvered around the tornleaf bush.

Tolan arrived at the place where Estobbias had been but wasn’t now at a velocity that on the muddy ground was too great for him to divert his considerable bulk from its trajectory. He continued on past the place where Estobbias had been, clutching in vain at the tornleaf bush as he went by, and slip-sliding across the mud until he slammed into the fence beyond, which groaned and shuddered under the force of the impact, but held to.

Jake, who was by the cow barn slinging heaping shovel-fuls of old manure from a humongous pile onto a flatbed wagon, watched this duel, or chase, with a sparkle in his eye

and a twitch of his lip, but refrained for now from making one of his famous comments. He was attired in a coat that differed from the one Tolan was wearing in the sole quality that it had a hood, which, however, was pulled back, so that the delight on his rough unshaven face, revealed in that subtle sparkle of his eye and twitch of his lip, was unmistakable even from a distance of fifty or sixty paces.

“Everybody seems to call him Billy,” Rook remarked, as Estobbias trotted to a different tornleaf bush. The cows watched him dispassionately as they nibbled at patches of brown-green grass and from the haystack in the center of the cowyard.

“He told me his name was Estobbias.”

That wasn’t quite true. The pattern lines of his entity, translated as best as I could translate them into the words of our language (a several-step process, still difficult for me at nine years old), came out of my mouth as “Estobbias;” but Mom had forbidden me from talking about the patterns of existence with anyone except her, and so I had to do yet another translation, from an authentic explanation of how I had come to know him as Estobbias, into nine-year old child speak, i.e., “He told me his name was Estobbias.”

Rook nodded, but said nothing. Had I made such a claim to any of the other human inhabitants of the farms surrounding The Corner, which was the name by which Mom and I referred to our home since it was at the corner of four farms, I would have been indulged, or condescended to. My listener would in all likelihood have *pretended* to believe that I conversed with the animal inhabitants of the four farms, and indeed, might well have given me an encouraging smile and asked, “And what else did Estobbias say to you?” or some other question of a similar bent. But Rook wasn’t one to discount the statements even of the young, or ignorant. He heard my words, and considered them, neither accepting them, nor doubting them, just allowing them to exist alongside the reality he perceived, and waiting with patient unconcern to see whether they would prove to

mesh with that reality, or perhaps alter his perception of it, or not.

Unlike Jake and Tolan, he wasn't wearing winter clothes, just his customary short-sleeved cotton shirt, light blue today, along with long grey pants of a thin knit. And as usual, he seemed as comfortable as a woolly goat. *I* was wearing a quilted wool jacket, along with gloves and a wool-lined hat that fastened under my chin, and still I could feel the chill; but he, in his autumn garb, was unfazed—"immune from the elements," as Rushlight Fox described him—and this despite his body being smooth and hairless (not counting the thick mass of black on top), instead of all rough and hairy like most of the other farmhands.

"Rook?"

Without looking at me—he could have been watching the cows eating at the hayhack, or Tolan chasing Estobbias, or Jake shoveling piles into his wagon—he said, "Lady Yaan?"

Splap. That was the sound of a Jake shovel-full of manure landing at the peak of the growing hill on the flatbed. I always noticed sounds like that when I was talking with Rook. He was a Silent One: Not quiet—he was sociable, and not un-talkative—but silent. His spirit was silent: he was always at ease, always devoid of anxiety. Never was there any indication of tension or even concern, about anything, in his bearing, his voice, or his mood.

When he and Jake had been hired, and this was before my memory, the other farmhands wanted to dislike him (this I heard from Mom). Here, as Mom described it, was a greenhorn who was younger than any of them, taller, thinner, who to look at him, with his smooth olive skin, long uncalloused hands, and fine features, had never done a hard day's toil in his life—they wanted to dislike him, but they couldn't. They teased him at first (and Jake's sharp tongue was noticeably absent from his defense, Mom said), they snickered behind his back, they assigned him the jobs nobody else wanted to do.

They expected him to chafe at their jibes, to defend himself, and in time to lose his temper and initiate a physical altercation, which they would answer with strong-armed finality. It was a baiting strategy, Mom told me, employed upon many a young “cock,” as they were known by the grizzled fieldhands on farms in the area. But Rook took their early jibes and slights in such stride, and was so willing to do the worst of tasks without complaint, in fact with the same ease and unbothered relaxedness with which he did everything; and moreover, belying the slightness of his frame, he was such a strong and tireless worker (he could drive a plow as long as the oxen would go, for example, and push a wheelbarrow through six inches of mud, loaded with such weight that anyone else would have trouble moving it on dry land) that they couldn’t dislike him. They liked him *from the beginning*.

“Why aren’t you cold?” I asked him. I had often wondered about his uncanny resistance to the elements, but I’d never remembered to question him about it.

“It’s Nanatoi, is it not?”

“That has nothing to do with the temperature.”

“Really? Yon Exeter,” he nodded at Jake, “was just reciting to me some numbers the other day, and if I recall, the average temperature during Nanatoi is quite a bit higher than the average temperature during Lhael.”

“That’s a clever evasion,” I told him, “but it doesn’t alter the fact that everyone else out here is dressed in winter clothes, and you’re not and yet you’re not cold, or even chilly.”

He shot me a sidelong glance, a silent smile of appreciation on his face, and then said, “Point taken. But still you have to admit that even though everything’s still brown and gray out here...” He paused for a moment, his eyes taking in, first, the cowyard, which was bare and brown except for a few tornleaf bushes and an irregular patchwork of soggy grass, and then sweeping over the barren fields beyond the cowyard and the craggy forestline in the distance. Then, he reiterated, “Even

though everything's still brown and gray, the land is, the land is..." He raised his voice, and called to Jake, "Hey Exeter, what was that you were saying this morning, about the land?"

Taking up another heaping shovelful of manure, Jake, raising his own voice, said, "You'll have to be more specific."

"About the gleam. I said there was a gleam, and you..."

"Oh," Jake stopped his shoveling for a long moment during which his pile of manure seemed to settle with a slurping sigh; then, turning towards us, he said, "In a moment of ridiculousness, I said that though still gray and brown the land is alight with that certain early sparkle that heralds the blossom. Why are you bringing up that garbage again?"

"Yeah, that's it!" Rook said to me, smiling, and then lapsed into a silence that lasted some while as we watched the world exist.

"Rook?" I said, when I judged that our wordlessness was about to usher my question into the realm of the forgotten.

He looked at me with his dark eyes, and said, with a gravity and seriousness he seldom evinced, "Actually, it's not Rook, per se. We've known each other for awhile, Lady Yaan, I believe I am bound by friendship to come clean."

"Huh?"

"Rook is just something yon Exeter started calling me as a youth, because of my rook-like appearance." Once again, he nodded at Jake, who had resumed shoveling piles onto his flatbed while yet keeping an eye on Tolan and Estobbias.

I waited, examining the beautiful lines of his entity pattern in a concentrated effort to translate them into his language-name.

I wasn't fast enough: "I'm properly Shamodrin III. I'm a prince; and it's quite possible a king, depending on whether or not my father is still alive. But you can continue to call me Rook, if you prefer."

I'd heard him tell people that he was from a place called Shamokin, but I'd assumed it was a city in Lenima somewhere. "You mean Shamokin is another place—another country?"

"Actually, it's another planet." The unaccustomed seriousness of his demeanor persisted.

"Planet?"

"Out there," he said, indicating the heavens with a sweeping gesture, "beyond the sky."

HAYNTA-1

Part One: The first ten years of my life passed uneventfully.

Part Two: The eleventh through fifteenth years of my life, I passed in a state somewhere between misery and angriness, leaning towards misery. I was a vagabond. A misfit, a ne'er-do-well, an oddball, a clown, an idler, an ingrate, a bum, an underachiever, a weirdo, an outsider, a bumbler, a bungler, a fatso. You name it, I was it. Part of me was proud of being such a vagabond, if I may condense all of these lovely designations into one marvelous word, but mainly I felt bad about it— isolated, unaccepted, guilty, ashamed.

Part Three: Near the end of my fifteenth year, I was sent to Clarks Hill Institute. The next two years I spent in a state somewhere between angriness and misery, tending as time went on towards misery after an initial surge of angriness. There was a brief interlude of giddy excitement during the latter half of my second year, but it was marked by such anxiety that it could almost be called misery, itself—a different sort of misery, but misery nevertheless. During that same period of time, there was also the palliative of my Reading, Writing, and Language class; but being no more than an hour or so per day, and not even every day, at that, its effect on me, while not inconsequential, wasn't enough to nudge me over the line from miserable to not miserable.

Part Four: Things changed, oh, about the tenth day of my third and final year as a student at Clarks Hill. That's when my awareness that I was going to have to be my new room-mate's guardian and protector materialized, or I should say, reached full consciousness. I had been *half*-aware from the moment I'd met her that she needed somebody to look after her, and that I was going to have to be the one to take that mantle from her

quite obviously loving, indulgent, and over-protective parents, but this consciousness, as I say, of my duty hadn't yet crystallized in my mind into something that I could put into words. It hadn't become an imperative. It had remained a raw, unformed conception, or not even a conception, truly, but a flicker. A quantum fluctuation, as Jumpere might say. (*New word: trystirris: a fluctuation within the mind which guides an entity even before it is conceptualized, and once conceptualized becomes a directive that is consciously pursued. Plural: trystirri.*)

But on that tenth day, we, that is, my new roommate and I, were sitting on the lawn in front of the Offices/Library building, which was a popular post-supper student gathering place during the cool humid evenings of Oliaza and Valakial, among a group of boys and girls who were gabbling on and on *and on* about the most banal drivel one could imagine. I won't insult your intelligence by cataloguing any of that gabble here—if you've ever been in the proximity of a mixed male-and-female group of fifteen-to-seventeen-year olds, you know the gist of it—other than to say that at some point somebody said to somebody else, “Well, you're as mean as a mudman!” in response, I quite imagine, to a flirtatious rather than insulting remark. By mudman, in case you're not from around here (as the saying goes) that is, not from a part of Lenima where the myth, or superstition, or folk-tale, whatever you want to call it, of the mudman is “everyday knowledge,” the speaker was referring to the large lumbering humanoid creatures said to roam the northern forests of Lenima stealing children and wreaking havoc on crops and livestock.

Little Bolo, as I called my new room-mate, spoke up then. She said, “I think you mean Nilfnin.” I called her Little Bolo in honor of Ruogg and Toli, a couple of imaginative boys who'd lived in my hometown of Tindop when I was a little girl. These boys were fond of creating words to describe concepts for which our language has no succinct encapsulation, and among these were a set of terms, *zombo*, *zondigo*, and *bolo* I can

recall, and there may have been others, that referred to a wild, random, kinetic, make-it-up-as-you-go kind of energy, each with a different slant to it, and *bolo* having a certain fairy-esque quality about it that was manifest in Little Bolo's personality.

Confused eyes turned towards her, and she added, "They're Nilfnin. That's what they call themselves. And they're quite friendly. All the ones I know anyway. We just think they're going to be mean when we first see them because their appearance doesn't match the set of features that we associate with friendliness."

A girl who was pretty in a stereotypical way but too fox-faced for my tastes, asked, "And just how many mudmen—or, what was it, Nufnen—do you know?" To my ear, she was attempting a suave, sophisticated sarcasm that was far beyond her ability to effect and which as such came off as juvenile in the extreme; and yet a couple of her companions seemed well-satisfied with her remark.

I whispered into Little Bolo's ear, "Bolo, you should probably just, you know..." I could see that the direction of this conversation would lead to disaster and yet I didn't want to say to her, "They're going to be mean to you," when she was unaware that they were going to be, and was, frankly, unaware of meanness, period, so I was somewhat at a loss as to how to get her to desist from the flight of fancy she was now sharing with these near-strangers.

Counting her fingers in thoughtful remembrance she said, with due innocence, "Well, there's Wimdachuchuh, Yoo-gaistrifuchgghuy, Oonlashchichoodchych—he calls himself Boris among humans, though—and..." Mumbling, she counted the others out on her fingers, and concluded, "Okay, just seven; but they've all been nice. Kind. Kind as a white-robe. Yoo—that's what I call Yoo-gaistrifuchgghuy—gets a little grumpy, sometimes, but even then he's friendly."

Nobody seemed to know how to react. She was so earnest, and seemed so young—she was a first-year student who,

small and freckly, looked younger than her age—that, I assumed, they didn't know whether to react to her as they would to a child, or to laugh at her or mock her. There were a couple of giggles from a couple of boys, and then one of them, a humdrum sort, asked, "Do you know any Forest Elves?"

"The Jaji? Oh, yeah, lots and lots," she said with absolute earnestness, "They're pretty shy, though, by human standards, even Towon, who's probably the most sociable Jaji I know. Some people would think they're standoffish, but they're just quiet. They're *private*, and a little distrustful of humans since we've chopped down so much of their forests. Waween's the only one I know all that well, though. How about you?"

A few more astounded giggles arose in response to these claims, and someone else asked, "What about pixies? Do you know any pixies?"

This was getting perilously close to segueing into full-out mockery. I tugged at her arm; but seeming not to notice, she asked, "Pixies?"

"Oh come! You must know some pixies!"

She frowned. "No, I don't think so; what, um...?"

"You know, wee high, wings..."

"Oh, you mean the Kee!" she clapped in sheer delight, "Of course, out in the meadows! I was confused because I've never heard them called 'pixies.' 'Fairies,' sometimes, but not 'pixies.' Yeah, ha ha! The Nokans hate them because they're always playing tricks. They're hard to know, don't you agree?" Getting no immediate response, she went on, tacitly accepting that nobody else knew any Kee, "They don't trust humans *at all*, so they're not very straightforward when they talk to you. Anything they say is liable to be a lie—well, I shouldn't say that; let's just say, open to interpretation."

Full-out laughter. "The Nokans?"

"Yeah, you know, some people call them cows; but they're not cows, really. The Nokans; yeah, I guess most people

don't realize that they're sentient. They're just as intelligent as humans, but in a different...”

Someone interrupted, “Now, how did you learn a word like ‘sentient?’” and I thought, “Uh oh, here it comes,” but then a janitor dropped a sack of bricks from the roof of the Offices/Library. The bricks, a square load of dark orange ones, shattered with an ear-splitting crash on the walkway in front of the building's double-doors, by the sheerest of luck not hitting any students, this commotion diverting the group's attention long enough for me to draw Little Bolo away by brute force. So, no harm done; but her need for protection and guardianship now clear in my mind.

I met her the *first* day of my third year at Clarks Hill. Not only that, it was my leap day—my 17th. And to get the full effect of the story of how I met her, you should realize that Clarks Hill was awful. An awful school. It had been awful my first year, it had been awful my second year, and 69 days of break, for Sporch, Mowta-Wan, and Hobwan, had done nothing to improve its awfulness.

My first year there, especially my first half-year, I had, as I said, tended towards anger. I was angry at life for being so miserable, and on top of that, I was angry at my father for sending me to Clarks Hill, even though, paradoxically, I didn't in a thousand years want to stay home with him and my brothers.

I was angry at my teachers for turning what could have been interesting subjects into mindless borefests, and then making us do ridiculous assignments and acting as if we were ne'er-do-wells if we didn't want to do them. And I was angry at my fellow students, first of all for going along with all of this teacherly nonsense with no more resistance, or demand for freedom, than to delay *beginning* their assignments until hours before their teachers had instructed them to have them *completed* and then to brag about how they'd finished them just in the nick of time; secondly, for acting like sex-crazed idiots

pretty much every second of every day from dawn until dusk, and probably in-between too, the boys and girls alike fawning and drooling over each other like preenbills, and spending their lives with trying to impress one another as the primary of any activity, and the activity itself the secondary; and I was angry at them, thirdly, for not liking me.

But pretty soon, my combined state of angriness-misery, my *misang*, pendulumed away from angriness, towards misery. At some point, I realized, hey, I don't have any friends. I'd had no friends back home—that was one of the primary reasons I'd put up as little fight as I had about coming to Clarks Hill—and I figured moving away from home could be a new start, with no baggage, and no expectations about who you are based on who you've been. There'd be nice, interesting people to meet and to get to know, and we'd help each other with our ridiculous schoolwork, have comical adventures together, and fall into bed at night tired and happy.

But somehow, it hadn't happened. Nobody liked me. Of course, to be fair, I didn't really like anybody, either; but at the time, I didn't think of that. Nobody actually *disliked* me, they just didn't *like* me, which in a way was worse. To *dislike* somebody, you have to notice them; to be disliked you have to be worthy of notice.

Back home, everyone disliked me. Well, they didn't respect me, they didn't understand me, and they disapproved of me, all of which sort of meshed into something that very much resembled dislike. Which meant that they noticed me. If I didn't come home for a couple of days, they'd come looking for me, and berate me when they found me. If I didn't do what I was told to do, or what was otherwise expected of me, they'd lecture me about how lazy, maladjusted, or ungrateful I was. If I made a piquant observation about the stupidity of someone or the silliness of our society, they'd tell me I had a lot of learning to do, or something similarly condescending.

At Clarks Hill, nobody noticed if I was gone. If I didn't show up at class, or didn't do my assignment, the teacher would just give me a zero for the day. If I made what I considered a humorous statement about someone's behavior or the state of the universe, nobody was likely to hear me, and even if they did, they would ignore me. (I must admit, I seldom make my comments at a commanding volume—I'm shy, and sort of a quiet talker—so the chance of my voice being heard above the din of the busy-ness of the lives of ambitious students and harried teachers was pretty negligible, notwithstanding my personal unnoticeable-ness. But still...)

I was just the weird fatso perhaps to be mentioned in an offhand remark made by one person to impress another person, but without any malice directed specifically at me. Nobody nursed an active dislike of me other than in perhaps the vague repulsion many feel for people who just don't quite fit in.

My first-year roommate Pindy Jorse hadn't disliked me. She might have thought me "just weird" (which was a phrase she used among her friends, to describe anything from a boy's behavior to a difficult class assignment), or she and her friends might have sniggered amongst themselves at some viewpoint I happened to share with them while they were yapping in Pindy's half of our room (the *other* half) about themselves or about boys or some rival for the affection of some boy; but she didn't dislike me. She didn't think about me at all, I don't think, except when I was present *in the flesh*, and in close proximity to her personal space (as was unavoidable, in the tiny rooms they provided for us at Clarks Hill). She didn't perceive me as a part of reality except as a physical presence, and after awhile I think she stopped perceiving me even as that: She and her friends would gather on her side of the room and gabble until the cows came home, incognizant of me, whether I was idling or studying, awake or sleeping.

My second-year room-mate (Pindy had, of course, paired up after our first year with one of the many friends she'd

made), Turta Pirto, who I think was from a well-to-do family of House Armadillo, or maybe it was Porcupine, didn't dislike me, either. She ignored me right from the beginning, not out of malice, or because she'd heard from Pindy and the gang that I didn't exist, but because she was too wrapped up in her own world of studies and boys and friends that she'd already made to notice anything that didn't have a direct bearing on that world.

The bottom line, though, was that I'd blown it, this new chance I'd had at this new place. I was dimly aware that the reason why nobody liked me, students and teachers alike (being *different* or unusual, while perhaps limiting your number of friends, wouldn't keep you from having *any*), was partly because I made no overtures to them, and partly because, sullen and angry, I no doubt seemed unapproachable; but the better portion of my awareness just didn't get it. There was no reason for it; I was a nice person, an interesting person, a funny person, and I hated everyone for not liking me, and hated the world for being a place where nobody liked me.

But at the same time, I thought there must be something wrong with me, some essential component within me that was flawed or missing, which people must sense, and which must make it impossible for me to be liked, or loved, or for people to be able to relate to me at all.

So, my anger waxed and waned, my misery waxed and waned, gradually deepening, my *misang* swung back and forth, tending more and more towards misery, for a year and a half, with the promise of night and a potential sweet dreamland romp my only solace. (More often than not, my dreams would turn into distorted and teeth-grinding re-enactments of the more stressful events of the day, but not always: sleep offered *hope*—of happiness, of a romp, of an enjoyable sojourn of *some* sort, alone in most cases, but, if I were lucky, accompanied by likable and like-minded companions who liked me.) I would look forward to going home just to get away from Clarks Hill, and once home, would look forward to coming back to Clarks

Hill just to get away from home, only of course to be disappointed when I returned to either place. Before my second year had reached its midpoint, I was about to *just quit*: to stop doing *anything*—stop doing my assignments, stop going to classes, stop making my under-the-breath comments about the ridiculousness of the world, stop *existing*. This was only in part a conscious decision: my body, indeed my *being*, was beginning to resist being told to do anything if it wasn't going to be rewarded with any sort of joy; and even when I wanted to do an assignment, I found myself just sort of staring at the pages in front of me, unable to commence. Two things happened which staved off, as I saw it, my inevitable fall from existence, however: Mrs. Camden took over the teaching of my Reading, Writing, and Language class, and Nolk joined the janitorial staff.

ROWAN-2

“One hundred eighty degrees.” That was the flat voice of Dr. Bowusuvi. My back was to him, so turning as he instructed, I faced him.

“Raise your arm,” he commanded, his eyes, little more than black beads, dissecting me with unrelenting exactitude. I did as he bid, and with one of his metal instruments, a long one with a triangular head, he prodded the underside of my arm.

“Pump your arms thirty seconds, please,” he said now, his final word, “please,” ostensibly a de-intensifier of his command, instead, with ironic power, intensifying the degree from what I thought of as Level One, Standard, all the way to Level Three, Foreboding, bypassing Level Two, Urgent, altogether.

“That was fifteen seconds,” he stated when I stopped moving, with an expressionlessness that somehow suggested dissatisfaction, “Another twenty seconds, please.”

I complied, and as I caught my breath, he placed the instrument I thought of as a metal cookie under my sternum, and examined it as it lay cold against my skin.

“The filthy walnuthead!” Now I sat on the brown couch in the main room, as the Fatheads came up the hall from the gray room, one of them voicing the epithet that one or the other of them always felt the need to repeat after they had scuffled with Romulus.

“What a little devil!” another of them agreed, nursing a hand with self-righteous disgust, “What’s the old bastard want with that thing, anyway?”

The third one, the one who sat with me after they cleaned Romulus’ cage while the other two collected laundry and trash from the baskets in my room, said to me, “What do you think, Kiddo?” I just stared at him.

“Ahhh!” That was me, now in the gray room, racing for the door, as with unfailing accuracy, Romulus threw a little wooden black tile at me from within his cage, the very same black tile, in fact, that moments before I had thrown at him, missing, as I sped around his cage like a satellite. The tile greased my arm as I dove for the door, and I fell, laughing in disappointment and delight, at this, another loss in the game of hit and run we played when we tired of the sedentary battle of wits for which the tiles were designed.

“Did you have any dreams last night?” Now I was with Dr. Mulgar.

My chest tightened, but I knew he’d know if I lied, so I shook my head.

“Speak, Romulus.” This was a frequent prompt of his. He had a distaste for nonverbal communication.

I spoke: “No.”

“None that you can remember.” It could have been a question or a statement.

“Yes...no.” By that, with my precision of expression hindered by a lack of vocabulary and a deteriorating presence of mind, I meant yes, the statement is accurate, no, I can’t remember any dreams.

“Have you had any notable daydreams, or unexplained thoughts?”

I shook my head, and then hastened to add, “No.” I wasn’t sure what he meant by “unexplained thoughts,” but I was pretty sure I hadn’t had any, and if I had, I knew I wouldn’t be able to explain them to him with the alacrity and concreteness he would demand.

He was disappointed, I could tell; but with an admirable display of good cheer, he said, “That’s okay, don’t worry about it, Romulus,” and patted me on the head. After little more than a perfunctory pause, he went on, “Okay Romulus, ask yourself what’s going to happen tomorrow. Just relax, blank your mind,

empty your mind of everything except that one question, 'What is going to happen tomorrow?' Relax, Romulus, relax."

My chest constricted further...

I woke; I was alone, sitting at the head of my bed. The wall-lantern still burned, casting shadowy light. For a slow blink of my eyes, like that of a tortoise, I was disoriented, but then I remembered that I had been about to begin my bedtime ritual. I had felt drowsy; I must have drifted off to sleep as I sat there preparing myself. Sometimes when night arrived, I wasn't tired at all, but sometimes I got very drowsy over the course of the day, and there was no predicting whether I would or wouldn't; I did pretty much the same things one day as the next. There was also no predicting whether or not I would dream and if I did dream, what I would dream about.

Some glorious nights, I went on a brief dreamland adventure or romp, but for the most part my dreams, like tonight, were snippets of things that I had experienced at some point during my life, usually within the past couple of days. Romulus' dreams were almost always adventures, in vivid settings—the forests where he'd grown up, of course, but also mountains and plains and swamps, places he'd never been. He had related to me the events of many of his dreams, and for him, exciting, funny things always happened. He would, for example, climb a tree that extended up to the clouds, and then, noticing that it wasn't just one tree that was so tall, but a whole forest of them, would leap from the tip of one tree to the tip of the next, far far above the earth. Sometimes he even flew in his dreams, or "went flying," as he worded it after investigating Leniman syntax.

At first, when he told me about his dreams, I told him about mine, too, but he wasn't impressed by my experiences. "The two worlds are the same for you," he told me, not with disapprobation, but with a sort of grave, puzzled concern that seemed a lot like disappointment. So I stopped telling him about

mine, except on the rare night that I did happen to go on a little adventure. Adventures delighted him. I wished I had more to tell him about; I liked it when he was delighted.

“Mind?” I asked, “Are dreams real?”

Mind said—unhelpfully—“Why would you consider them not to be real, Rowan?”

“I mean, are they really happening?”

“Why would you consider them not to be happening, Rowan?”

“Well, when I wake up, whatever has happened to me during my dream hasn’t happened to me here—in real, you know.”

“Are you certain of that, Rowan?”

“Yeah, like there was one time I got a scratch, a pretty bad one, and I didn’t have it when I woke up. It was gone.”

“Could the wound not have healed?”

“No, it was pretty bad, and then I woke up and it was gone. Like one second later. Another time I think I died, my head got chopped off, I think, or it was about to be chopped off when I woke up; but when I woke up I was alive.”

“Could it be that in the reality you call dream, your perception of time is different from what it is in the reality you call waking?”

I had no answer for that, so I said, “Also, the me in my dreams knows all about the me here, in real, but I—the me here, in real—I don’t know all about the me in my dreams.”

“Are you sure that is so, Rowan?” he asked in his sure, amenable voice that made it seem as if everything and nothing was true.

I thought about it. It was hard to say: my memory of what I—the dream I—knew or had experienced was always fuzzy within minutes, or even seconds, of waking up.

Suddenly I thought of something: “Mind, are you showing me stuff when I dream? Stuff that I didn’t ask for?” As I asked, I doubted that he was: the flavor of the images he

showed me was different from that of dream images, although sometimes it seemed as if there was overlap between the two.

“Does it seem so to you, Rowan?”

“No, I guess not.”

I felt a powerful drowsiness dropping upon me again.

“Well, good night, Mind.”

“Good night, Rowan.”

I was alone. My feet dangled between my bed and a little black cabinet beside the bed. Silence reigned in what could only be called a miasma. Today was one of the rare days when the Fatheads had not paid their respects, so the near-permanent redolence of Romulus' cage had permeated the house, and having, now, an element of fetid staleness to it as well, hung in the air like an invisible and yet somehow soupy fog.

Studying was complete for the day, supper had been eaten, and the dishes washed; I had washed myself, as well. Nothing remained to do except go to bed, which is why I was sitting where I was: to do my pre-sleeptime ritual, after which I *could* go to bed. Romulus had somehow fallen asleep in the heart of the awfulness, which had surprised me; but upon retreating to the other end of the house, to my room, shutting the door to lessen the stink, and taking my usual pre-sleeptime seat on my bed, I, too, had fallen asleep.

With an unknowing love of irony, I smiled to myself, caught in what Vonnae would call “the throes of appreciation,” and now at last began my pre-sleeptime ritual. I looked around, at the colors of the room. The bed was white, the little cabinet and the two rectangular mechanisms upon it black. Another little stand, or cabinet, on the other side of the bed was black, the wall-lantern above it was white. The walls were white, the ceiling black, the floor black *and* white, tile. The door was white, as was the door to the closet, the doorknobs of both black. The wastebasket was white, a chest of drawers white as well, the curtains over the room's one window, which was on the wall behind me, were black. The black-and-whiteness of the

room was pleasing to me—pleasing in a different way than, say, a solid bright color, or a profusion or complex intermixture of different colors, not as dazzling, not as eye-caressing, I suppose, but somehow magnetic in its duality. Romulus' room, of course, was unbroken gray: cage, walls, ceilings, floor, all; my wash-room was a dazzle of white; the main room and the kitchen were colorful, with blue ceilings and green carpets and a bark-brown couch in the main room and a bark brown round table surrounded by orange chairs in the kitchen; but none of these rooms were quite as pleasing to me in a physically-resonant way as was my black and white bedroom.

One of the black mechanisms upon the black cabinet beside the bed was a big box capitalized with an important-looking array of levers and buttons, and adorned with, or strangled by, a plethora of wires issuing from it on all sides that gave the impression, somehow, of the wild hair of a robotic madman. The other, smaller, black box was what I thought of as the talking machine. It had eyes: It had buttons, too, a much smaller enumeration of them than did the big box, but its prime characteristic was its eyes, which, as I perceived, forever stared at me with a Dr. Bowusuvi-esque dispassionate penetration, this, as it seemed, perfect emotionless scientific fidelity contributing to my feeling that it just sat there insistently all day, waiting for me to make it talk. To *let* it talk: whenever I went into my room during the day, it seemed to me to be waiting for the night, waiting for the eerie light of the wall-lantern to enable it to come to life.

Anyway, after looking around at the room's black-and-whiteness, I pushed a button on the talking machine, the third button from what I considered its left side. Its eyes began to spin, and did so for an immeasurable length of time, infinite and brief. When its eyes had stopped spinning, I pressed the second button from what I considered its left side, whereupon its eyes started spinning again, but much slower than before, and in the opposite direction. Then, the talking machine began to talk.

In an expressionless voice that was just enough slithery or demon-like in timbre, and just enough deep and resonant, to seem knowledgeable of the deepest darkest most remote and unknowable corners of existence, the machine said, "Our death is written in the very moment of our birth; and since our death is the doorway to nameless voiceless nothingness, so too is our life. We are nothing more than specks of dust falling upon the ocean. We are meaningless. We do not, we will not, accomplish anything in our lives because even as we act in the present, which is immediately the past, we have died in the future, which is one with the past and therefore the present. We have *ended*; and then the world has ended, the sun has died, the universe has contracted to the size of a fist, and we have never even existed. Even as we strive, thus, even as we triumph, we have failed. Love is less than nothing. We never truly know our fellow humans because before we know one another, even as we reach out to one another across the chasm of ignorance that divides us all, we have died. We never know triumph or joy or even sadness and defeat because they, too, are fading, have faded, into infinite time even as we experience them. This is the One Truth: All is loss, and loss is all we ever know."

As the machine talked, I opened the drawer of the cabinet, withdrawing a syringe and a small vial. The vial, though I had emptied it the night before, was, as always, filled to the brim with a roiling purple-black substance that burned my eyes to behold. I had always assumed that Dr. Bowusuvi, Dr. Mulgar or one of the Fatheads refilled it when they visited, but today none of them could have, since none of them had been here.

Puzzled, I twisted the cap of the vial until it came off, noting the hollow scraping sound that it made as it came loose, and noting, too, as I often did, that even though the stuff was tumbling and rolling about like smoke or steam inside the vial when the cap was on, it didn't rise up out of it when I removed the cap.

I placed both the cap and the vial upon the cabinet and picked up the syringe, letting the calm solidity of its heft extend to the muscles of my hand and fingers. Thus steady, I inserted the point of the syringe into the vial, and as I had been instructed, held the vial about half-way along the shaft with one hand, pulling on its small handle with the other. I watched the purple-black substance go into and slowly fill the syringe as a liquid, as it issued from the vial as smoke, noting with wonder and puzzlement (as I often did) that even though the vial was larger than the syringe, and had seemed full, all of its contents fit into the syringe.

I then fished a bottle of disinfectant, a small square of Special Cloth, and a bandage from the drawer of the cabinet, and after moistening the cloth with the disinfectant, and then dabbing the most prominent vein in my forearm with that moist cloth, I pushed, with utmost care, the point of the needle of the syringe into the vein, and pressing the top of the syringe, emptied its contents into my bloodstream.

The syringe empty, I covered the vein with a bandage, and sat there unmoving for a count of sixty, before putting away the materials of my ritual. I then finished my pre-sleeptime routine by untangling the bigger machine's wires, taping the little circular pads that were at the ends of its wires to various parts of my body, pushing the specific button on the big black box that Dr. Bowusuvi had instructed me to push, dousing the wall-lantern, and lying down on my back to go to sleep as the talking machine repeated its endless mantra, "All is loss, and loss is all..." I sank, then, into slumber, the same way I had every night in my memory.

YAAN-2

Days later, after Rook had assured me that he had absolutely no qualms about my mother's discretion, I disclosed to Mom that he had said he was from a planet. Thinking that she might not know what a planet was, I told her, "A planet is a world beyond the sky."

She conveyed no surprise, either that there might be worlds beyond the sky, or that Rook might be from one of them. She didn't even offer me her customary bland "Is that so?" look, instead continuing to give her attention to the beans and Lhaelweed sprouts that were heating in bowl-pans on the grill above our fire pit, filling my nostrils with as agreeable an expectation of the coming meal as the sight of the crushed red winterberries in the white bowls on the dinner table. She went about her business for a few more moments, before half-turning to me, and saying, "Well," as if expecting me to elucidate.

"Well?" Mom wasn't one to expect a barrage of words; when communicating with her, I used them sparingly.

She said, "Is he a liar?"

Harshness striped her voice, and as she spoke a couple of the hundreds of strands of her entity pattern that were intertwined with many if not most of the strands of my entity pattern disengaged, and swatted the strands to which they'd been connected. It stung me; Mom could sting me like no one else could. I turned my back to her, and didn't answer.

Placing her bowl-pans of beans and sprouts on the flat brick partition of the fire pit, she came up behind me. Right behind me; I could feel the fabric of her shirt touching the fabric of mine; I could smell the bean and sprout smoke on her, mingling with her unique "mom-smell." She said, "Well," again, as if expecting me to address her question, which I had assumed was rhetorical.

"No" I said, "Not like me." This was a reference to the fact that because she wouldn't let me talk to Rook or Jake about

the patterns of existence, I was forever hiding myself, my true self, from them.

She waited, and I sniffed, “He could *think* it was true and it not *be* true.”

“That’s true,” she acknowledged, and I could hear regret in the altered timbre of her voice, and feel it in the altered thrum of her entity pattern.

Another moment passed; the beans and sprouts whispered as they cooled; Mom, close to my ear, murmured, “People will speak to you harshly now and then during your life, Yaan.”

“But not you! You don’t have to.” I felt the tears on my cheeks; I couldn’t stop them from forming. It was silly, I knew; she’d done nothing but raise her voice in mild disapprobation; but she was wise, she was strong, she was gentle and patient and kind, and it cut me to the bone whenever she rebuked me—whenever, as it seemed to me, she became what she was not, became just another of the people she had mentioned who would speak to me harshly during my life.

Her sorrow weighed heavy upon me; I had caused her to feel sad, just as she had caused me to feel sad. I was about to blubber “Sorry,” or “I didn’t mean it,” or something in that vein, when she whispered, “No, not me;” and as the pattern strands of her being that had disengaged from me re-interlaced with my pattern, I felt her cheek against my cheek. I swiveled around in her arms and squeezed her as hard as I could, noting, as I did, the many strands of her pattern that reached out in all directions to people and places far away, or gone. I had seen them reach out so many times before, but this time, the sight of them sang in my tears.

Mom and I lived far away from anywhere, in a three-room hut of dusty logs which bulged, almost unnoticeable, like a mole or a small wart, from a square of scrubby untilled land that was more or less at the intersection of four farms.

South and west of our hut was the Dallidoes’ farm, a checkerboard of cornfields and bean fields splashed with a

couple of hayfields and a pigyard, which I seldom saw but often smelled. A whole bunch of chickens ran around everywhere, it seemed like, on the Dallidoe farm, though they always disappeared at night—into their coops, I presumed. The Dallidoes kept to themselves. Not that they were ever unfriendly to Mom or me, just aloof, private. Hector Dallidoe, “a nondescript farmer,” in the words of Jake, was good friends with Farmer Green, however; it wasn’t unusual for me to see him when I was roaming about on Farmer Green’s property.

South and east of us was the Gerbils’ farm, which was more or less one big cowyard. They had hundreds of cattle, spread across various big and little cowyards that were partitioned by a random collection of wooden and wire fences. They had a few cornfields, too, but these were like unto afterthoughts to the cowyards; and the cows sometimes wandered around in the them, too, particularly after the autumn harvest, as if making sure that these mere crop fields knew they were secondary. The Gerbils were even more aloof than the Dallidoes. I never saw Ma or Pa Gerbil; and the fieldworkers, who according to Tameedah Green were without exception Ma and Pa’s sons and daughters, never took any notice of me, even to say hello. They never chased me off their land, however, when I was wandering around on it, which I considered evidence of inward amiability. And Golden Gerbil, one of Ma and Pa’s sons, filled Lohu’s trough with water if we went a few days without rain, and left spare corn in a corner of his field if we had a heavy snow, or if vegetation had otherwise become scarce due to a prolonged drought or freeze.

North and west of us was Farmer Green’s, which was by far the largest of the properties, acres upon acres of hay-, corn-, and beanfields, cow-, horse-, and goatyards, barns, coops, and grain and silage storehouses, that I romped across and explored daily, not only because it was the largest and most varied and interesting of the farms, but because it was the most welcoming,

Farmer and Tameedah Green both being quite fond of Mom and me. Also, Rook and Jake worked there.

North and east of us *had been* another farm, a small one, but the owners had departed, according to Tameedah Green, at about the time Mom and I had moved in (which was before my memory). They had left Lohu behind because, in the words of Farmer Green, he was old and gray and worthless; and they had never returned. The fields of this farm had in recent years yielded to weed and scrub. It was my understanding, erroneous as it turned out, that our home had been a part of this property.

Beyond these four farms to the north and east lay forestland, mostly oak, and to the south and west a scrubland of oak and brush which gave way to forest as well, of oak, beech, souse, goldtip, and even some giant tildoyas, sloping in gentle undulations to the upland valley of Lake Twell.

You could say we lived on a plain, considering that flat fields extended in every direction, and that the nearest trees (other than a shade elm here and there) were most of a half hour's walk away. Yet, living on this plain we had forest surrounding us, always visible in all directions, which lent our home a sense of isolation, of being hidden away from the rest of the world, which the windiness of the plain—blustery and portentous in the autumn, gray and bitter and white with snow in the winter, wet and raw in the spring (as on that morning Rook and I sat on the fence of the little cowyard and he told me he was from another world), and in the summer filled with smells of hay and wheat and dust and delight—accentuated, by drowning out any outside sounds that might drift from the other side of the forest into our little world.

Many a morning, especially in the gray raw autumns we had there, mist from Lake Twell would roll in over the fields, bringing with it the calls of the loons, and as winter approached, the suggestion—maybe in the ancient echo of the loons' calls—of a skimming crackling cry as of rock sliding across ice and a giant invisible bird, or dragon, ripping the wind with its talons:

a heart-rending, infinite sound, I thought, yet made beautiful by the gentle hum of the surrounding woods, grand, with its thumping silence—that is, as Mom would say, there was in its silence a quality that made the heart thump, or gave it the sense, or feel, of thumping even when it was at a resting rate.

I explored all of these farms, and the surrounding woods almost every day, immersed in and part of the beauty of each of their patterns, as well as the larger pattern of the *whole* that consisted of all the farms and the surrounding woods and all the people, animals, plants, and other things that comprised each of them, the connections between patterns, between entities, so myriad that one could say *everything* was connected to *everything*.

Although Jake's and Rook's connections to the greater pattern of the area were less intrinsic than were those of most everyone else on the four farms, and, as well, the few connections they did have being, as was obvious to me, temporary ones, I'd never considered that either of them could actually be from another world; but maybe, I thought, I should have.

Not long after I asked Mom whether she believed that Rook was from another world, I asked Jake, "Is Rook from beyond the sky?"

Unsurprised by my question, he said, "That's what he says."

"You've got nothing more to add?"

He smiled, as he always did when I was sarcastic to him. I'd noticed that he seemed to appreciate it when Mom needed him, so I tried to sometimes, too, although I wasn't very good at it. He said, "Well, he was five or six when I found him, and he told me then that he was from Shamokin."

"And you believe him?"

"Sure. Well, why not; remember that obloid thing; it was probably from out there—you know, space," (this he said nodding at the sky), "so why can't Rook be, too?"

By “obloid thing,” he was referring to the object, about half the size of a cow, that I had stumbled upon two years before while exploring the woods east of Farmer Green’s fields. It was half-buried in the loam when I came upon it, and appeared to be made of a shiny copper-gold-purple metal. It scared me because unlike every tree, plant, rock, and animal in the forest, the patterns of which were all linked to other parts of the forest, it wasn’t interconnected with anything—not one single thing. Its pattern, though *within* the forest, was utterly isolated from it, as when, for example, a fence is first built at the edge of a roughland—*except* that over time, as grass and weeds and animals adapt to the presence of the fence, it becomes a part of the pattern of the life of the roughland. This sphere, which, muddy, leaf-covered, and half-buried, seemed to have been there for quite some time, remained unconnected to anything. Rattled, I had rounded up Mom, Jake, and Rook, and brought them out to see it.

None of them had known what it was. After they had examined it, Rook had asked, “Another piece of the iron god?” which was a reference to the similar spheroids, found many years before in the forests of Roncala, that had been theorized, Jake told me, to be the testicles of the Iron God. “I imagine it was postulated as a joke,” he explained, “but some moron in an influential position took it as a serious argument—and most people in influential positions *are* morons—and it became widespread belief.”

Jake shrugged (in response to Rook’s question about the spheroids being another piece of the Iron God) and then asked Mom, “What do you think, Itty?” He was the only person on the four farms who dared call Mom by a nickname. He often called her “Itty,” because of her small stature.

Ignoring him, she glanced at me with a subtly questioning twitch of her eyebrows. I shook my head, telling her, no, it doesn’t fit, its pattern doesn’t mesh with the pattern of the surrounding woods.

“It doesn’t fit,” she said, and Jake and Rook both agreed with her without wondering about her choice of words.

House of Leopard came for it a couple of days later. A few young men wearing black and yellow uniforms loaded it onto a large shiny black covered wagon, and with the majority of the denizens of the four farms watching them in wonderment, carried it away. None of the four of us had mentioned the sphere to anybody else; but a young fieldhand named Rorgan Jooness had stumbled upon it a few mornings after we had investigated it, and word had spread about it like seeds from a kelpbush thereafter, across the four farms and beyond.

“So, in essence,” I told Jake, “you’re saying that either he is from another world or he isn’t from another world.”

Jake laughed, and said, “Yeah, I think that about sums it up.”

I knew, within, that neither Mom nor Jake would confirm or dismiss Rook’s revelation that he came from beyond the sky. Mom had an annoying tendency to withhold her opinions about things even when she had a definite viewpoint because she wanted me to decide for myself what I believed; and beyond that, she was very careful about reaching conclusions. And so was Jake. Like Rook himself, neither of them ever confirmed anything without direct evidence that it was true, or dismissed it without compelling evidence that it was not true. If a claim was made, a fact posited, they would just let it lay there, let it exist, as a *possibility* (although Jake would often *pretend* that he believed or disbelieved things).

I knew, within, that nothing either of them would say would alter the new light in which I saw Rook. And sitting with him on the fence in the moments after he told me he was from among the stars, I did look at him in a new light. The thickness of the jet-black hair upon his head, the hairlessness of the rest of his body, his great strength that belied his comparatively thin build, the olive-like color of his skin, darker than some of the farmhands, lighter than others, but unique in the exact shade of

the color, his resistance to the cold; all of this *did* speak to an inhuman-ness. Yet, while his entity pattern was a unique blend of dark blue and light blue and purple and green and teal loops and arcs, and an undulating diaphanous ribbon of music, it was to my senses a human one.

“But how... is that why...”

My question was interrupted by the appearance of a very large man. Actually, he wasn't a man, for unlike Rook's, his entity pattern was to my eyes *not* human, though to my physical eyes he looked like a man—a very very tall man, at least a head taller than Tolan Blabb, who was the tallest of Farmer Green's fieldhands; a very very thick man, at least one and a half times the girth of Jake, who was considered stout; and a very very dirty man, so dirty, in fact, one could have said he was made of mud. He was rumbling at a slow but steady pace across the field that was north and east of the little cowyard—the *big* cowyard, as I considered it.

Rook watched this man of mud go with some curiosity, and Jake, stopping and watching him as well, stroked his chin in wonderment.

Tolan didn't notice him, so intent was he upon Estobbias, but somebody else did. From the northern fields beyond the barn beside which Jake worked came a cry of warning, which was soon echoed behind us, from Farmer Green's house.

The man of mud, reaching the western border of the big cowyard, climbed over the wooden fence there with surprising difficulty, it being no larger than the one upon which Rook and I sat, quite a pitiful barrier for someone of his stature. Once over it, he re-commenced his lumber, across a still-barren cornfield, beyond which, to the south, was Lohu's field, and beyond that the border/corner of Farmer Green's farm, where Mom's and my hut was, The Corner.

HAYNTA-2

Although Mrs. Camden excelled, in my illustrious opinion, in every facet of teaching, I think of her as a storyteller. Actually not so much a storyteller as a story-be-er; but that's another story. For now, let's just say she was a storyteller. I loved her stories. They were a cool drink in the desert, a cure-all for the dreariness and boredom of Clarks Hill.

It may seem an exaggeration to say that a few stories could offset an abiding misery, but I maintain that for awhile, they did. This panacea-ness, if you will, of her stories, started with the very first one she told me, which was on her fourth day as our teacher. Well, let's say she told it to "us," meaning her class, rather than "me," since I wasn't the sole beneficiary of her eloquence. But since "me" *is* part of "us," she did, as a point of literal truth, tell it to me. Just saying.

The Reading, Writing, and Language class at Clarks Hill, or RWL as the students referred to it, consisted of four categories of study, or *sections*, as they were creatively called, the concentration of which rotated over the course of four days. Day one was Language and Grammar, day two was Reciting, day three was Reading and Analyzing (with the assignment of what to read given on day two, Reciting), and day four was Storytelling.

By chance, the day Mrs. Camden took over as our teacher was a Language and Grammar day, which meant that her fourth day as our teacher was a Storytelling day; and that day, she started the class by prompting us, "I was walking into town this morning, and you know what I saw?"

We all stared at her, waiting for her to tell us what she'd seen, but she just returned our gazes impassively, until at last Frumey Badger asked, "What was it, Mrs. Camden, what did you see?"

“It was a glass bottle, thank you for asking, Frumey,” she said, eyeing the rest of us in a way that inquired, “And why didn’t any of you ask?”

Once again, everyone just stared at her, waiting for her to tell us why seeing a glass bottle was worthy of remark. This time, she didn’t wait for anybody to prompt her, but added, “It was atop a fencepost,” in a way that suggested that the matter should now be thoroughly elucidated.

Observing the puzzled looks that we gave her, she continued, “I was passing by the same farm I always do on the way in, and there it was, right on that fencepost, catching those sideways morning sun rays, and shining there like a beacon, or more like, a, I don’t know, something else that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Well, I couldn’t take my eyes off of it. It had never been there before; I’d passed that farm, I’d passed that fencepost, several times, and it had never been there. What was it doing there now? That’s what I was thinking.”

She paused, eyed us, and then went on, “Pondering the presence of this beautiful bottle, I halted on the road, and as I stood there thus entranced, I saw a rock wedged under a tuft of yellow grass a step or two into the roughage beside the road. A nice round rock. About the size of a fresh walnut.”

She paused again, with exaggerated dramatic emphasis, before continuing, “I picked up this rock, and looking at it there in my hand, and then looking at the bottle again, then the rock again, then the bottle again, then the rock, then the bottle, rock, bottle, rock, bottle, I knew what it was that, before, I hadn’t quite been able to conceptualize. The bottle wasn’t shining in the dawn like a *beacon*, but like an *invitation*!”

She paused yet again, then elucidated, “That rock and that bottle were destined for each other, they were part of a...a pattern. The rock arcing through the air and colliding with the bottle was written eternally into the story of Creation. That is, the inevitable shape of Creation, extant in the *idea* of Creation before the world came into existence, included that collision.

That was what the bottle was telling me. So naturally, I had to throw that rock at that bottle. It was my place—my destiny—in the grand scheme of Creation, in that moment, to do so.”

Giggles ensued. It was funny to think of dowdy, goofy, old Mrs. Camden throwing anything at anything, and several students tittered at the thought of it. She was an aging if not *actually* old woman, her hair, oh, about fifty percent gray, and dry and flaky. Her complexion gave the impression of being naturally dark but was pale-ish and powdery, from, despite her insistence that she walked to school every morning, an obvious lack of exposure to the sun. Sharp, angular, perhaps once upon a time striking, facial features were rendered indistinct by this chalkiness of her complexion, as well as by her spectacles, which, as the center piece of her appearance, drew attention away from other features.

Her spectacles dominated her appearance because their lenses were so thick that they crossed and magnified her eyes to, for many of her students, hilarious dimensions—an effect which she, herself, exacerbated by doing such things as holding a textbook up to the light after reading a passage from it, squinting at it as if having difficulty seeing the little words on the page, and saying something like, “Can that be true? Am I seeing that right?” or otherwise looking at things, or students, under or over or to the side of her spectacles with an assortment of odd head-tilts and neck-cranes.

These spectacles she adjusted with unceasing regularity, either by pushing them up her nose or by grabbing one or another of the eye circles between thumb and forefinger, or, occasionally, and to the delight of the students, when somebody said something that was both piquant and controversial about a topic of study, jerking them off with an expression on her face somewhere between injured propriety and understated delight. (It was a matter of some smug satisfaction to me that because making a remark adroit enough to elicit this “spectacle jerk” required a thorough understanding of the topic about which one

was remarking, some of her students, as was obvious by the very adroitness of their remarks, began studying the assigned material with a diligent studiousness that they would never have admitted to, such an embrace of intellectual pursuit being inappropriate to their high and mighty, fashionable selves.)

Without fail, Mrs. Camden wore a bulky knitted gray-white sweater that gave her a shapeless appearance, along with a similarly colored knit skirt that hung to well below her knees, where gray woolen socks took over the coverage of her legs. This attire didn't provide her students the ongoing entertainment that her spectacles did, because it wasn't, in fact, much more conservative than the attire of the typical teacher at Clarks Hill, but it did elicit an occasional comment about what an old maid she was, or about just *how* dowdy she was. In the panegyric words of Ubanne Tang: "It's unbelievable!"

She had an absentminded clumsiness about her that made it hard to imagine her doing something so deft as rifling a rock at a bottle: that is, while not clumsy per se, not heavy-footed, or uncoordinated or otherwise awkward, she seemed at times to forget where she was, and, for example, bump into her desk or walk into the door before opening it, or simply drop something, the object that she dropped—a book, or paper, or pencil, most often—falling out of her hand not because her fingers weren't dexterous, but because she seemed to forget she was holding anything.

She had an archaic way of speaking that appealed to the funny bones of everyone, as well: not formal—I would say that she was less formal in her interactions with her students than any other teacher at Clarks Hill—but somehow stilted, or just *different*, as if she was from a different time or place, and not quite in touch with the ways and ideas of the here and now. She used words that weren't used much anymore, such as *widder-shins* or *loggerheads* or *jackanapes* (as in "Just a moment, Keeny, we will have to delay this learning opportunity until yon jackanapes have learned something of a different stripe," which

she said once as she grabbed the leather whip that she always kept in a corner of the room but never used, when Keeny Springbok was trying to ask a question and Wimblow Wild Turkey and Poldo Pirto were laughing and snorting on the outskirts of the class circle). Her vocabulary, itself, however, only contributed to, or enhanced, the feeling you got when she was talking that she was endearingly out of touch, a feeling that was further accentuated by her habit of getting lost in thought. While explaining things, it was not unusual for her to become distracted by something within her own mind; at such times, she would stare without expression at the wall or into a hypothetical distance and mumble incoherently a moment or three, until, abruptly regaining focus, she would look up and say something like, “Ah, where were we,” and continue on with the lesson (to, of course, the great entertainment of everyone present).

I had an immediate affection for Mrs. Camden. I would have liked her even if she'd been as boring as the rest of my teachers insisted on being, for no other reason than that everybody sniggered at her, and having been on the receiving end of so many sniggers in my life, I felt a kinship with her. But she wasn't boring, her class was fun, and she was as kind as a person could be—and in an understated, unobtrusive, non-look-at-me-I'm-nice kind of way. Which is rare: most people, if they're nice to you, want you to be aware of it.

As time went by, many, if not most, of my fellow students came to enjoy her class in and of itself, but at first, they liked her class, or liked *going to* her class, only because it was an opportunity to elbow each other in the ribs and snigger at her like unseasoned conspirators, or in other words, to show off, impress each other with their shared knowledge of the snigger-worthiness of her appearance, her clothes, her bearing, and her mannerisms. They came to class with eager faces, but that eagerness wasn't to learn, but to see what entertaining thing their teacher would do next, or to revel with each other in her oddness. I, however, if I may pat myself on the back, found the

class very appealing *from the beginning*, because of what she taught and how she taught it, and probably most of all for no other reason than that I liked her, I, whose heart so needed somebody to like.

We *did* go over grammar rules one out of every four days, and there was nothing she could do to make that part of the class not boring, but when it came to reciting, and reading and examining stories, and writing and telling stories, things got good.

She was a *magnificent* reader, an *extraordinary* reciter. To listen to her read or recite, after being subjected for a year and a half to the monotonous whining drones of the rest of the teachers at Clarks Hill, was like entering a lush green glade after crossing a swamp of feces. Reciting, her voice, rich as an old man's and sweet as a young woman's, rose and fell, rose and fell, like a rolling river, the rhymes lapping against the shore like the laughter of water spirits, the lines and verses of the recitation disappearing into the beauty of the cadence, so that the images and action of the poem came alive in my mind without me actively processing its words.

Reading, she was every bit as entertaining as a traveling troubadour (other than the fact that the troubadours have everything memorized). She effected a different and unique voice for every character in every story she read, capable, it seemed, of a near infinite number of similar but different inflections, accents, and timbres. She was a master of the dramatic pause, and just all in all read with such gusto that everyone paid attention to her, and I, for one, looked forward to listening to her, and enjoyed whatever story she chose even when its setting, plot, and characters didn't catch my fancy.

She was, as I perceived it, so skilled at reading and reciting that when it came time for her students to take their turns, it would have been quite understandable if they had been inhibited by their comparative lack of skill; but this was not the case. In fact, just the opposite was true: They were much less

inhibited than they would have been had she not set the example. I think that many of them, so accustomed to having to restrain themselves in class, secretly *wanted* to read with gusto, to have fun, to give some kind of expansive, dramatic expression to undefined and unknown inner impulses; and given reign by Mrs. Camden's admittedly grandiose delivery to do so, and further released by whatever silly reading they might do that might be expected to invite the snigger of one of their friends having the backfall of being an imitation or lampoon of Mrs. Camden, they immersed themselves into their performance with open hearts. And it was amazing how entertaining, even inspired, were the reading and recitation of many a student, such as Poldo Pirto or my old roommate Pindy Jorse, who I had considered dimwitted and uncreative beforehand.

I loved Mrs. Camden's explications of stories, as well, because, well, she never provided any. She would begin every Explanation/Analysis discussion by asking simple questions about whatever story we'd been assigned to read, and when, especially in the early days of her appointment to our class, very few students had any response, she'd cajole us with a bevy of put-upon and good-naturedly exasperated expressions until finally *somebody* would say *something*. She would then either paraphrase or elucidate or expand or clarify what that person had said and ask what we all thought about his or her statement. Most days, it didn't take long for a second person to respond to the first person, which often opened the floodgates of discussion, with several students, if not *most* of the class, getting involved in the discussion. (This had an added effect as time went on of inducing a greater and greater percentage of the students in the class to read the assigned story, since everyone wanted to be a part of the high-spirited, humorous discussion.) It was quite enjoyable to watch her draw this analysis out of us, like an expert technician, an artist. Sometimes it was more effective than other times, but we always came up with a reading of the story—sometimes a ridiculous one, but a reading nevertheless.

And we felt *we* had figured it out, with Mrs. Camden a mere facilitator.

All of this reading, recitation, and story analysis was enjoyable enough for me, particularly in comparison with what I was used to, but the fourth ingredient of the class, the storytelling part, was my favorite. And while in the same self-deprecating way, or more to the point, the same *self-open* way, rare in adults, that she had of being willing, for example, to look silly, that she used in the reciting and the analysis portions of the class to alleviate the tension and self-consciousness of her students, Mrs. Camden induced everybody, in the storytelling section of her class, to tell a story or to read a story they'd written, it was the examples, that is, her stories, that made that part of the class magical for me. I have no doubt that some self-appointed story experts would dismiss hers as having no plots or surprise endings or interesting bad guys, and would say that her heroes were *too* good, her view of existence laden with naïve and childlike optimism; but her tales were magical to me; and it all began with the one about throwing a rock at a bottle. Of course, *I* consider good guys, especially the ones that are *too* good, to be a lot more interesting than bad guys.

In response to the students' laughter when she said she had decided she was going to throw the rock at the bottle, she gave us a look, a not uncommon one for her, that was about half way between *What are-you laughing at?* and *I know what you're laughing at and it's ridiculous for you to be laughing at such a thing*, and went on, "As, clutching the rock in my palm, I came closer to the post and the bottle, I decided that I should only get one throw, that would be only fair, and it should be at a distance of at least thirty or forty paces." She went on to describe the farmhouse that was silhouetted in the distance, a fortress of silence in the misty stillness of the morning that, she said, "a crashing of glass would surely disturb." She crept along the road, the cows and horses watching her, as the big silent rolls of hay in the field, "avatars of eternity," she called them,

waited for her to act. She finished by saying, “And I knew that if I did hit it, I would have to be ready to run.” This was greeted by another giggle: The thought of Mrs. Camden running was just as funny as the thought of her throwing a rock, as was the supposition that she would have to be ready to run away for no more reason than breaking a bottle, because it fit with the being-book-smart-but-not-quite-comprehending-real-life quality that Mrs. Camden possessed. Everybody knew that nobody would care if a bottle was broken, or that the silence of the morning was broken for a moment, *except* Mrs. Camden.

At this point, all of her students, including me, I’m not afraid to admit, just *had* to know (even though none of us were sure whether she was making up the story, or not) whether she had hit that bottle with that rock or not, and what had happened if she had.

“But I digress,” she said, pulling her white story text from under a number of other books (including the brown reading text and yellow language text) that were stacked on the small sousewood desk-table behind which she was sitting, at the head of the messy half-circle we the students had formed of smaller desks, “Open your texts to page eleven, if you would.”

A groan escaped the class.

Mrs. Camden feigned puzzlement. “Is something the matter?”

“Mrs. Camden!” Keeny Springbok protested.

“What is it, Keeny?” she asked, and then with a look of mock outrage that was a fairly common one in her arsenal of expressions, and which while it didn’t capture the imaginations of the students quite so much as the look of injured propriety and understated delight that they so strove to elicit with controversial explanations of stories, was quite entertaining in its own right, “And why is nobody opening their books?”

“What happened?” Keeny demanded, her query echoed by the nods and eager looks of many of the other students.

“With the bottle!” someone clarified, “Did you hit it?”

“Well!” Mrs. Camden said, “If you must,” and with demure pizzazz, opened the little drawer of her table and produced from within a clear shard of glass.

ROWAN-3

I was nervous. Afternoon had arrived, and for the third straight day, neither Dr. Mulgar or Dr. Bowusuvi, nor the Fatheads had come. It hadn't occurred to me that they might not come back *at all*; the source of my unease was that I thought one or the other of them *had to* show up pretty soon, and, well, Romulus was absorbed with the Grail, and even though he had proven time and time again that his keen senses and remarkable powers of observation were unaffected by even an intense scrutiny of the Grail, it still seemed to me that with his attention divided he *had to be* unlikely to hear someone approaching the house—and if any of them, particularly Dr. Bowusuvi, were to see him perusing the Grail, well, I didn't want to find out would happen.

Dr. Bowusuvi was an old man, or at least he seemed so to me. He was all wrinkles, like a birch-bark colored raisin, his face sunken, his hair gray and thinning, his eyes little black beads. An aura of grayness emanated from him: He wore a lab coat always—I never saw him not wearing a lab coat—which was white, but which seemed gray on him, not a vibrant slate- or silver- or flint gray either, but gray more in a seeming dirty colorlessness. He may not in fact have been all that old. Many years later, he looked the same age. It's possible he was one of those soul-less individuals who never possess the vitality of being to seem young, but who never care about anybody, and so never age. His voice was deep, or at least so flat as to seem deep, and cold; but he seldom spoke to me except to tell me to stand up, turn around, stick my arm out, do this, or do that. He didn't call me Romulus, as Dr. Mulgar did, except in the presence of Dr. Mulgar; alone with me, he referred to me as "Number Six," if anything.

He came to the house every day or two—that he'd come yesterday wasn't evidence that he wouldn't come today, and yet if he hadn't come yesterday, he might not come today, either—and any day that he came, the time of day of his arrival was

unpredictable as well, it could be morning, afternoon, evening, or any time in between. While at the house, he would examine the talking machine and the wire machine, and then, or sometimes before he examined the machines, he'd examine *me*, poking and prodding various parts of my body with an assortment of instruments that he produced from the depths of his coat pockets silently and with an astoundingly trivial amount of muscular movement, as if he were conjuring them, or commanding them to his vein-blue hands with delicate, almost unnoticeable twitches or flexions of his fingers. Sometimes he instructed me to swallow pills (which he produced as magically from his pockets as he did his plethora of instruments), other times he had me jump up and down, flap my arms about, or execute some other physical task, after which he would poke and prod me again.

If my response to any of his commands was slow or hesitant, he touched me under my right eye with a small cylindrical metal object that when he placed there felt as if he had hammered a long, spiked, rotating, vibrating needle into my head with a mallet. I could feel it, or imagined that I could feel it, entering under my eye, rotating in my brain with a strafing buzz, and sticking out of my skull somewhere on the left half of the back of my head. This "obedience encouragement," as he called it, usually only lasted a second or two, though sometimes he would lengthen the application: Slow reactions to his commands got a mere second or two, a smile or a laugh got two or three seconds, a smart remark got me four or five, and anything that could be construed as disobedience seven or eight.

A second or two woke me up, if you will, but wasn't much worse than getting poked with a tack or needle; but when it lasted more than a couple of seconds, this "eye thing," as I thought of it, was more painful than anything I've experienced since, including being burned and being tortured. But the pain didn't linger long. For an application of three or four seconds,

I'd feel for a few minutes as if I were going to die, that I *had* to die, but then I'd be fine.

Once before, Dr. Bowusuvi had arrived while Romulus and I were looking at the Grail together, in a profound perusal of trees it was, Romulus informing me of the Jaji words for many of them, and sharing information about them—where they grew, what other trees and plants thrived in their vicinity, the taste of the fruit they bore, whether their leaves changed color in Oliaza, Valakial, or Thronku, and what color they most often turned—that he had gleaned from living in the forest, and that wasn't always, or even often, provided by the Grail.

When after looking for and not finding me in the main room or in my bedroom, Dr. Bowusuvi walked into the gray room and found me reaching into Romulus' cage to point at something on the Grail, he, as Romulus later put it, “did not react in a manner consistent with personhood.” (I should mention that it was Romulus' habit to call his own people, the Jaji, “humans” and to group Jaji and humans together as “people” or “persons.”)

We stopped talking right before Dr. Bowusuvi entered, in anticipation of his arrival—not because we feared reprisal, but just because he was an adult and we were kids, and that's what kids do when adults enter the room, they stop talking. It was my habit, as well, to be silent in Dr. Bowusuvi's presence unless he asked me to speak.

He didn't look surprised at what, to him, had to be a surprising state of affairs, what with this naked befouled being he considered an animal bent forward in the posture of a scholar studying some abstract text; but he paused for a long second, as if collecting himself, then looked impassively at Romulus studying the Grail, and said to me in a tone that might have had a tinge of disgust in it, “Retrieve your learning device from your pet.”

I was unsure whether or not he realized we had been talking. Based on his reaction, I thought not; if he considered

Romulus my pet, which I knew from the Grail was an animal kept for pleasure or companionship, then there was no way he could believe that we had been communicating, because animals couldn't talk. Yet, it seemed to me that what we'd been doing had to have been quite obvious, and that he *had* to know. Of course, since I *knew* what we'd been doing, and knew that we could communicate, my perception wasn't hindered by a belief that what had happened couldn't happen—but I wasn't thinking of that, then, I was trying to determine in a sort of frantic, wordless, visceral way, what the disgust in his voice meant, why it was there, and how how much he knew might affect the actualization of his disgust.

Romulus, sensing trouble, handed the device to me without question, dispute, or delay. Ominously, the old man departed without putting me through any kind of test or exercise. I loitered in the main room, sensing from the break in routine that there was going to be more to this episode; and indeed Dr. Bowusuvi returned perhaps forty-five minutes later and without a word administered the eye thing on me for about fifteen seconds. Laughably, as it was happening, I remember thinking that at least there would be no probing or prodding today. I was wrong about that.

I was fairly certain that time that I was going to die: after the application, I was so dizzy that I couldn't stand up without leaning against the wall, and was so nauseated that I had to squeeze my eyes shut and press my cheek against the cool plaster of the wall to keep from losing consciousness. My legs felt heavy and weak, my eyes were on fire, and my head felt as if it had a hole in it from under the eye through the brain, and out the parietal bone. I managed somehow to get to my bed, though, and after lying there with my head in my arms for thirty or forty minutes, maybe an hour, the pain and nausea subsided enough for me to fall asleep, and after sleeping a couple of hours, while a sort of wobble still pervaded my body, I was alive enough.

Thereafter, however, I was always fidgety when Romulus studied the Grail, tense, on the alert for any sound of approach, which of course I couldn't hear, and which I was dependent upon Romulus to perceive, he who seemed too preoccupied to perceive anything—and this anxiety became more pronounced when it had been awhile since anyone, especially Dr. Bowusuvi, had visited.

And today, it had been *two* days since *anyone* had come, so I was beside myself with nervousness. Romulus was unconcerned, however, as always. He told me not to worry, that if anyone approached the house, he'd hear them and would then return the "device" to me with the "utmost alacrity." (He was ever putting together combinations of synonyms he found in the Grail dictionary; in the following hours, he found moments to say that if need arose he would return the device with the "greatest promptness," "unlimited eagerness," and "complete zeal.") My nervousness was unassuaged however, and all morning I couldn't focus on anything; I did nothing except pace back and forth in the foul miasma of the gray room, or sit near Romulus' cage, fidgeting, as he, either with obliviousness to or unconcern about my feelings, studied on, undeterred.

I had asked Mind early in the morning when Dr. Mulgar's and Dr. Bowusuvi's next visits were going to be, and in fact had had him show me what those gentlemen, as Mind was wont to call them, had been doing yesterday; and while this sleuthing had been, arguably, of some little help in determining when to expect them, the precision of the questions I would have to ask Mind to narrow down if, and if so, exactly when, they were going to come *today* daunted me. I had an innate sense that nervousness eradicates patience, and that asking Mind either, "Show me this room in one minute," "Show me this room in two minutes," etc., or "Show me Dr. Bowusuvi in one minute," "Show me Dr. Bowusuvi in two minutes," etc., until I knew exactly how many minutes it was going to be until he showed up would simply frustrate me further.

Early in the afternoon, as I sat on the ground near Romulus' cage, wiping my lunch bowl of gruel clean, and sucking the last bits of flavor from my fingers, my tension was at last relieved. Romulus indicated (by saying, "Someone is approaching") that someone was coming, and returned the device to me through the bars of his cage with, indeed, the utmost alacrity, whereupon I ran with it into the main room, sat down on the brown couch pretending to study, and had twenty seconds still to wait before the sounds of the unlatching of the front door began, some moments after which Dr. Bowusuvi entered in all his grimness.

The distinctions of the expressions of his emotion were pretty subtle. His anger was the dripping of ice from his colorless eyes, for instance, not a curse, or even a gritting of his teeth; his satisfaction was the slightest raise of his eyebrows, his dissatisfaction the slightest narrowing of his eyes. So, when on his way across the main room, from the front door to the couch, where I sat waiting in perfect obedience for him to put me through the usual paces, his thin nostrils dilated as if in shocked response to the horrible pervasion of Romulus' foulness, and he turned an eye on the passageway to the gray room, I knew he was disgusted. His look, no more than a glance, really, was expressionless, but the mere turn of his head was an indication of his revulsion.

His disgust, of course, wasn't in this case directed at me, but it made me nervous nevertheless. He would be, I thought, less patient with me, more prone to become dissatisfied with the promptness or accuracy of my responses to his commands. If Dr. Mulgar had asked me to do the same things as Dr. Bowusuvi asked, which amounted, essentially, to putting my arm out, turning my head, looking up, looking down, bending over, sitting down, pumping my arms, squatting, or standing still while he attached any of several instruments to my body, I would have executed what he asked of me without the slightest bit of difficulty, but with Dr. Bowusuvi, I was always tense. No

matter how many times he came, the dread shade of his actual presence far outweighed the memory of it, and as such I felt stiff, uncoordinated, and jittery whenever he was there, which of course made a smooth execution of his commands more difficult. And today, with him already disgusted, I was doubly nervous: his beady, demonic eyes seemed to me to be ready to catch me in any moment of even slight disobedience.

Yet, he seemed satisfied with me as I responded to him with, I thought, clumsy imprecision; and while we were doing our little call-and-respond, the Fatheads arrived. This was a new thing: Dr. Bowusuvi and the Fatheads had never been there at the same time. Dr. Mulgar and the Fatheads had arrived at the same time once, on which occasion Dr. Mulgar had treated them with an authoritarian friendliness; and Dr. Mulgar's and Dr. Bowusuvi's visits overlapped from time to time, on which occasions the two men talked together about me in a manner that seemed both stilted and formal. But the visits of Dr. Bowusuvi and the Fatheads had never overlapped. He now favored them with a slow inclination of his head and sliding of his eye, but said nothing. The third one, the newest of the bunch, nodded at him (a salutation that he ignored) but the other two didn't even look at him as they headed straight for Romulus' room carrying their usual buckets and bags.

Within moments I could hear the usual commotion. I knew what was going on: The Fatheads were the fellas who came in every day, or almost every day, to clean up. They scrubbed Romulus' cage and emptied the trashcans in the kitchen and my bedroom, and every now and then re-stocked the kitchen cabinets with more boxes of gruel, or else changed the sheets on my bed or took away my dirty shirts and pants and returned the clothes, now clean, that they'd taken a few days before. That's pretty much all they did, though they acted as if they were being driven like Narian slaves to the brink of physical collapse. It was *my* job to sweep the floors, wash any cups,

plates, forks, or spoons that I used, and wipe down anything else in the house that got dusty or grimy.

At first, there were just two Fatheads, but to clean Romulus' cage, they had to open it, and when they opened it, Romulus would try to dash out. The two of them would wrestle him to the ground, and it was the job of one of them to hold him down while the other one cleaned the cage. They were big-shouldered, big-torso'd guys, about twice the size of Romulus, but he would thrash and wriggle and bite and scratch with such desperate, indefatigable gusto that the guy cleaning the cage often had either to help, or spell, the guy holding him down. The two of them, thus, had to spend an inordinate amount of time cleaning the cage, and both of them almost always walked away with a few bruises, scrapes, or scratches. And at some point, a third guy, big-torso'd and big-shouldered like the original duo, and like them, always dressed in white, started coming along with the others, and it was his sole job to help hold Romulus down.

I imagined that Dr. Bowusuvi must have really let them have it, in his quiet, staring way, when they told him they needed help handling the little Jaji, and this in all likelihood contributed to their hatred of him (of Romulus). And they did hate him, or so it seemed to me. After they had cleansed his cage and forced him back into it, they often came out of his room cursing and shaking their heads, and referring to him as an animal or a "filthy walnuthead!" as I have recounted.

"Fatheads" was a term Romulus applied to them, perhaps in response to their calling him a "walnuthead," and which I started using because it satisfied a certain impetus I had to strike out at them. It was in reference to the fact that they were young, muscular guys, strong and fit, yet with fleshy faces, a little puffy even, which made their heads seem big and fat. This characteristic wasn't something that I noticed—I hadn't seen enough people in my life to realize that it was unusual—but

since I hated them, and “fathead” seemed derogatory, I gladly habituated myself to the designation.

And I did hate them just as much as they hated Romulus. I don’t know why. After the three of them had completed their business with Romulus, the third guy often sat beside me on the brown couch while the other two worked. He’d call me “Kiddo,” ask me questions such as “How’s it goin’?” or “How’s it hangin’?” and try to persuade me to do arithmetical calculations because he was amazed at how fast I could do them. It seemed to me that he was mocking me in some way. He might have been or might not, I don’t know, but it seemed to me, then, that he was. Other than this arguable, and small, antagonism all three of them pretty much ignored me. Yet I found them repugnant. I feared Dr. Bowusuvi because of the eye thing, but also just because he was a fearsome individual to a child; and I felt a certain tension with Dr. Mulgar because he expected so much from me, but I didn’t hate either of them. I hated the Fatheads, though, them and their fat heads.

Romulus didn’t hate them. He called them Fatheads in playful jest and would often smile to himself when he heard them arriving, as if looking forward to the coming duel. Then, when they actually entered his room, he’d smile at *them*, like a Zandolosian warrior confronting Narian invaders; but he never gave them a thought beyond when they were there. He never looked at them with the cold hatred with which he regarded Dr. Mulgar and Dr. Bowusuvi. He fought them only because he wanted to be free.

Anyway, as the sounds of commotion continued, Dr. Bowusuvi favored the passageway to Romulus’ room with a *third* turn of the head. This terrified me: as his mood deteriorated, I thought, the eye thing became a much greater possibility; but instead of becoming more exacting in his commands and unforgiving about my responses to them, he ushered me, with a subtle pointing gesture, to my bedroom, where he concluded his examinations with an occasional “Satisfactory,” be-

fore inspecting the machines, and removing from inside the big wire one some thin, clear cloth, which he examined, squinting.

At some point during the bedroom part of Dr. Bowusuvi's examination of me, one of the Fathead guys came in with some clean shirts and pants, which he stuffed into the black chest of drawers, pretending as he performed his task not to notice Dr. Bowusuvi and me. Dr. Bowusuvi favored him with a fourth turn of his head, and although as he took the dirty clothes from the corner behind the room's open door, he continued not to notice us, he seemed to feel the glare of his boss (it was my perception, at least, that Dr. Bowusuvi was his boss), and his pace increased to a near-hurry. His exit was sheepish, which greatly satisfied me, and in fact made me sort of like Dr. Bowusuvi for a moment or two. Still, as Dr. Bowusuvi's look of dissatisfaction followed him like a black demonbird, I became more apprehensive that the old man's ire would fall upon me; but I had naught to fear: the good doctor left soon thereafter.

Within minutes, it seemed like, of Dr. Bowusuvi leaving, which in due course was followed by the departure of the Fatheads, Dr. Mulgar arrived.

YAAN-3

“He won’t hurt Lohu, will he?” I asked Rook, as the man of mud progressed towards Lohu’s field.

“Lohu?”

“The next field. You know, he lives there.”

Rook frowned, but asked no further question, instead letting the mystery of the moment reveal itself to him, if it would; then, remembering a past conversation he and I had had, he said, “Oh, yes, the white horse.”

I nodded. “He’s my friend.”

Rook watched the man of mud lumber a few more steps, and then said, “He looks like an herbivore to me.”

Jake nodded at the growing pile of manure upon his flatbed, and Rook, taking the cue, slid from his perch atop the fence, and began rounding the little cowyard towards Jake. I followed, sinking so far into the mud on every step that it was somewhat difficult to make any forward progress at all, though of course Rook had no difficulty.

“I guess it’s true,” Jake said as Rook, and then I, came abreast of him. His voice, because it has something of a growl in it, seems upon first hearing it to be deeper than Rook’s, but if you listen only to the sound of it and not to his tone, it’s a little bit higher, without the velvet resonance of Rook’s; and perhaps because of this, it sort of died that day, flat, in the dead cold air, and seemed vaguely distant, while Rook’s carried a vibrancy even in the cold, and in fact had a sort of warming quality to it—“mittens on the eardrums,” Mom once said.

“Evidently.” That was Rook.

Handing the shovel to Rook, Jake said, “I’m going to go have a look,” and without any more ado than that, began trudging in the direction the man of mud had gone. Others were heading in that direction as well, from various locations around the farm, armed with rakes and shovels and other tools—hooded figures of brown and gray crawling across barren,

parceled, and partitioned land, converging behind the slow, hoodless figure of Jake.

With an air of unconcern, Rook commenced to transfer shovelfuls of manure from the huge pile beside the barn to the flatbed beside the pile (as Jake had been doing), to all appearances having forgotten all about the apparition that was causing all the fuss.

I watched him work. I liked watching him work. I often jaunted out from home just to find him working, and when I found him, would sit and watch him. The loops of his exotic entity pattern flowed and danced with mesmerizing beauty; and at the same time, his muscles helped one another, which was a joy to watch as well. He wasn't as brutally strong as he seemed, or that everyone thought him, that is, his individual muscles weren't significantly more capable of exerting force than those of any of the other farmhands; but they worked in such smooth concert with one another that the output of his physical exertion exceeded, by far, that of anybody else, even Jake. My eye couldn't catch the precise nature of how some of his muscles accentuated the efforts of others, yet it was a thing of beauty to behold. I would watch him, mesmerized, contemplating both his body and his entity pattern, enjoying the elegance of both and at the same time attempting to discern any relationship between his pattern and his physical prowess.

Accentuating the enjoyment of watching him was the stillness of his spirit: he didn't feel as if he had to talk to me, to entertain me, or to keep me company, and therefore my presence wasn't a burden to him. He would work away in silence as I watched him, sometimes oblivious to my presence, always unbothered by it, and out of this easy silence would come words, true words, not forced ones. He would say interesting things, and tell me, as he worked, stories about his and Jake's adventures, which I thought, so many were they, and so funny, could fill a book, and that book be quite entertaining.

I watched him, now, scoop up heaps of manure so copious that I thought they must tip over and fall off when he lifted his shovel up to toss his bounty onto the wagon, but, no, his muscles, helping each other, performed the action with smooth flawlessness, and with each toss the perfect mound of manure that Jake had created, its peak now as high as Rook's head, would grow yet higher.

"Rook?" I said, after watching him execute this procedure several times.

"Lady Yaan?" he replied, without diverting his attention from his labor. "Lady Yaan" was his unique appellation for me. Almost everyone on the four farms with whom I had any dealings had a pet name for me. Farmer Green called me Little Bitty; Tameedah Green called me Yaany, or sometimes Dear Child; Golden Gerbil called me Acorn; Hector Dallidoe called me Chipmunk. Mom and Jake were the only ones to call me, simply, Yaan.

"Do you and Rushlight ever make love?"

There was a momentary hesitation in the elastic strength of his locomotion, and a momentary wandering-ness, or confusion, in a couple of the loops of his entity pattern, before he continued on with his work. Whether this tiny hiccup was caused by the mere mention of Rushlight, or by the revelation that I knew about his relationship with her, I couldn't tell. I knew by the multiple, and ever-more-multiple strands of interconnectedness between their entity patterns that they had become quite close; but even though they weren't keeping the fact of their relationship hidden, nobody else had perceived it.

Jake had brought them together. His matchmaking was unknowing and inadvertent, of course, but the results of his actions were obvious, the action of his entity pattern unmistakable. Jake would never bring a man and a woman together of his own volition—I had heard him tell young farmhands that any coupling would be a mistake and that to go

so far as marriage would be to reveal yourself a great fool—but he had done it for Rook.

At first glance, Jake looked a lot more like the other fieldhands than Rook did. He was stout, shorter than Rook by half a head at least, with strong hairy arms, thick hands adorned with thick fingers, legs like entryposts, a ruddy sun-deepened complexion, and short brown-gray hair (along with grey-brown face whiskers most of the time, too). On second look, though, he was as different from them as Rook was, if not more so (I'd heard Hector Dallidoe say to his assistant once, "Neither one of those fellas strikes you at all as a farmhand—what is Farmer Green up to?"). Though he seldom smiled outright, he had a mouth that often smiled secretly to itself. That is, something about the formation of the lines about his mouth (and eyes, too), belying the gruffness of his countenance, told the story of many joyful laughs; and often, when he heard something, particularly something Rook said to me or I said to Rook, or saw something such as Tolan having trouble with Estobbias or one of the other farmhands getting aggravated with one of the other animals, his eye would sparkle and a corner of his mouth would twitch once or twice, as if his face were about to break out into one of the expressions of mirth those lines suggested.

Sometimes, he'd be sitting with a number of field hands at lunch, and that twitch would appear, and for example, he'd say to Tolan, without expression, "That wig is unbecoming on you," fully aware that Tolan didn't wear a wig. When on that occasion Tolan responded (while everyone else laughed) that he didn't wear a wig, Jake said, still without expression, as if musing to himself, "No it isn't, it can't be, nobody would wear their hair like that." He then waited to see if anybody would point out the logical flaw in his insult, that if nobody would wear their hair like that, it would *have* to be real hair because there wouldn't be any wigs for sale in that style. I pointed out this logical flaw to him later, and he *did* smile, then, and patting me on the head, said, "Yes, that's what was funny about the

comment, right? That's not why they were laughing was it, though?"

Another time, when Tameedah was scolding him about coming onto her porch wearing muddy boots, he regarded her with an intractable blankness for a second as if waiting for the twitch and sparkle to come, at which time it did he looked her right in the eye and appearing for all the world as if he'd just noticed something that he was surprised he'd never noticed before, said, "Wow, you're the ugliest woman I believe I've ever seen."

Farmer Green, a large and somewhat intimidating man, who commanded and demanded respect from his workers, was his favorite target: "Nincompoop" was the tip of the iceberg. "I didn't realize you were a boxer," he might say, and in response to Farmer Green's quizzical look, add, with exaggerated innocence, "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to pry," and under his breath say to someone else (but loud enough for Farmer Green to hear), "It was Mrs. Green." He called him "Lump" as a matter of course, and often said such things as, "Why don't you make yourself useful, Lump, and go get me some nails," or "You know, if you were to retire, I think this farm might turn a profit. Just sayin', you know, just throwin' things out there."

As sarcastic, caustic, and just downright rude as he was to just about everybody, he was as gentle as a mother stork with me. He never said a cross word, or directed a single remark at me that could be interpreted as an insult or even as sarcastic. He might say something insulting or sarcastic *to me about* someone else, but I was never his target. Interacting with me, his smile appeared often, and was warm, as we spoke of books and history and philosophy, of art and science, as well as mundane things such as the best way to make butter cookies—anything two adults might talk about.

He was gentle and patient with the farm's animals as well; when they didn't obey him, he just let them be. He never yelled at them, never whipped them, never complained about

them, either. When he was driving the plow, he could often be heard talking to the oxen in a conversational tone, as if he and they were old friends, souls that had known each other for many lives, happy to have time to commune alone together in the field.

Nobody truly minded his jibes or insults; after a time, in fact, it became an honor of sorts to be the target of his ridicule. *Essentially*, at least: at one level, his victims were annoyed by his antics, and if you'd have asked them what they thought of him, they'd have said they thought him a lout; yet at the same time their entity patterns glowed, basked almost, in the aura of his insults.

Rook, though supremely popular with everybody, delighted just as much in the tweaking of noses as Jake did, he just delighted in it in a way that was subtle enough not to draw notice: he was the nice guy to the not in actuality mean, but unrepentantly blunt and insulting Jake, and with the attention focused on Jake, Rook could enjoy the fallout of his friend's antics, and even add to the entropy they caused, without anybody assigning any blame to him.

When, for example, somebody stepped in a bucket or on a rake, or had trouble with a goat, while Jake laughed with unabashed glee, or cheered for the goat (he loved goats because they never followed orders), Rook would watch the goings-on with impassive curiosity, perhaps a quiet half-smile on his face, enjoying the scene just as much as Jake was, but not attracting attention to himself.

It was not unusual at lunchtime, when many of the farmhands were sitting around, for Jake to tell a story. And he was a good storyteller: He would build a tale methodically, sparing no detail but telling it in such an engaging way, with red herrings, misdirection, suspense, and careful, entertaining characterization, that he could hold your attention even if you thought the tale wasn't going to go anywhere or you just weren't in the right mood to listen to a story. Sometimes it

would be a short tale, other times he would take the whole of lunch to tell it; and it always ended with some slight of somebody. For instance, he once held everybody spellbound with a story about the Blues, so called because everybody in their town wore blue, the Greens, so called because everybody in their town wore green, and the Stupids, so called because everybody in their town was stupid. There was a treasure that was found on land triangulated between the three towns, so that each had an equal claim on it. The mayors of the three towns went to the divine oracle of the valley to decide who would get this treasure, or how it would be divided. All three made their arguments—and Jake of course provided details of the individuals, and the towns and the oracle and all that, that added spice to the story—and the oracle decided that the Stupids would squander the treasure if it was awarded to them, and that therefore it would be awarded to either the Greens or Blues. The oracle said he would deliberate upon the matter and in six days would provide his decision. In the meantime, the Greens sent a thief into the valley to steal the treasure; but he was apprehended there by some of the oracle's men. The oracle then decreed that the treasure would be awarded to the Blues (his strategy, all along, in fact, had been to award the treasure to whoever didn't try to steal it), and as punishment for their attempted treachery, Greens, for nine generations, would only be allowed to marry Stupids. "And that is why," Jake concluded, "our illustrious Farmer Green" (who was, of course, present), "is so generous. The greed of Greens has been tempered over the generations by their stupidity."

All through this, and other, stories, Rook would punctuate the narrative with knowing nods and sincere eyebrow raises, saying, "Correct," when Jake said, "Isn't that right, Shamodes?" or "Right," when Jake said, "Correct, Shamodes?" clearly, to my eyes, delighting in his participation in the game, though others thought him just sort of amusing Jake by going along with his charades.

One day when Jake and Furwood Gurr were baling hay, Jake made a huge deal about how ill Furwood looked. He kept making remarks such as, “I can handle this, Furwood, you need to go lie down,” or “Furwood, you’re jaundiced, I think your liver is shutting down, or maybe your kidneys, I don’t know, what am I, a doctor—either way, you better go to bed, I can handle this, I’m serious,” in an overly serious tone, Furwood brushing him off without much ado for awhile, until at last, fed up (after Jake’s tenth comment or so), saying, “I’m fine Exeter, shut up about it.”

Jake held up his hands, almost apologetically, and said, “Okay, okay, suit yourself, but don’t say I didn’t warn you when you’re on your deathbed. I mean it’s probably something that’ll clear up if you rest, but if you overwork yourself, well, I don’t know, I’m just saying don’t try to be too tough, man, nobody will hold it against you, you’re obviously unwell,” this uncharacteristic gesture of conciliation casting the tiniest doubt into Furwood’s mind as to whether something might indeed be wrong with him, just the tiniest doubt, but a doubt nevertheless.

Rook, who had witnessed the exchange between the two men, came along an hour or two later, and asked Furwood, “Need help?” Annoyed, Furwood responded, “Since when do I need help with this?” to which Rook replied, “Just looked like you were tired, that’s all,” and then went on, leaving Furwood beginning to be concerned about his health.

One day, Jake happened to be passing by Farmer Green’s house with some buckets of water, and had stopped to rest on the steps of the porch, when Tameedah and Rushlight Fox, the daughter of a now-deceased childhood friend of Tameedah’s, came out of the house to have some tea in the bright summer air. Rushlight, a frequent guest of Tameedah’s, was considered “well-to-do” by the farmhands, which was their way of saying she was probably a bit uppity, an assumption they made, I believe, not because of how she behaved but because of how she looked: She possessed an undeniable physical attrac-

tiveness, or maybe just fineness of feature, accentuated by the bright colors she often wore that emphasized her physical traits, that made her seem to them to be different from them—above them, they thought, in the eyes of the world.

Seeing Jake, Tameedah introduced Rushlight to him with great reluctance. She didn't want to subject Rushlight, who she was quite fond of, to any of Jake's droll vituperation; but her sense of etiquette wouldn't allow her to slight anybody on her property, even Jake. "Rushlight," she said, "this is one of our helpers, Mr. Exeter; Jakob, this is Miss Rushlight Fox."

Rushlight said something about how it was nice to meet him, and Jake, rising, started to say something that I thought wasn't going to be derogatory. He was just going to say, "Hello," or something of that sort, and then move on with his water, but that moment, that possibility, was lost in the recognizable twitch at the corner of his mouth. His face brightened, and he said, brightly, "Well, congratulations, ma'am."

Rushlight looked a bit confused, and Tameedah, sensing that something was coming, tried to steer her away from Jake to their chairs on the porch, but Rushlight said, "I am at a loss, sir, as to what you are referring," to which Jake said, "Your pregnancy. I would have thought you too old for such a thing, but you can't fool the piper, as they say."

Well, Rushlight colored a bit, nothing more, but Tameedah got angry, and sputtered, "She's not pregnant, you, you..." but Jake interrupted her and said, "Are you sure about that?" and turning to Rushlight, added, "Tell her."

Rushlight had to say, "No, I'm afraid I haven't yet been honored with a child," to which Jake shrugged and said, "Well, if you say so," and went on.

Some while later, Rook came along, and after being introduced to Rushlight as well, said, "I honor thee, and your child." (He often said, "I honor thee," upon first meeting someone.) Tameedah, growing agitated again, but not angry (nobody ever actually got angry at Rook), said, "Rook!"

Rook, feigning ignorance, said, “Yes, Madame Tameedah?” to which she gave him a meaningful look and said, “She’s *not* pregnant!”

Rook said, “Oh,” with a slight doubting raise of an eyebrow, but Rushlight, now clearly onto the game, said, “You guys must get bored on a farm like this, doing all this repetitive drudgery, creative individuals like yourselves.”

“Selves? I am but one, Mademoiselle.”

“Yes, you and your cohort; but don’t worry, I honor thee as well, and him. Won’t you join us for some tea?”

Rook smiled.

And now, at the mention of her name, the pattern of his entity responded.

He gathered a few more piles in thoughtful silence before saying, without another hitch in the fluidity of his work, “What do you mean by make love?”

“You know, you’re together, and you’re naked, and you’re all smushed together, your faces and your bodies; and I think your penis goes into her.”

An eyebrow went up—his left one, though, instead of his right, which indicated possible surprise. “Yeah, I guess we do that on occasion.”

“Can I watch sometime?”

He gathered another pile, then straightened, regarding me. “Why would you want to do that?”

I was stumped, again. I wanted to see how their patterns interacted while they were making love, how and how many of their strands intertwined, and what kind of an overall pattern, formed of their two patterns, emerged during the activity; but, held by Mom’s command not to discuss the patterns of existence with anybody but her, I couldn’t tell him that.

I said, somewhat lamely, “Oh, you know, it’d be interesting.”

He nodded. “Nah, it’s not very interesting, just basic stuff you know. It’s considered a private thing, anyway.”

“I figured that, but I thought...”

“You thought?”

I thought that *if* I could explain about the patterns of entity, and how the design their coupling would produce would undoubtedly be a thing of exquisite beauty, then their need for privacy might be superseded by a willingness to share such beauty; but again, I was constrained by Mom’s command. Her rules were killing me!

It was then that what appeared to my eye to be a large and rather ungainly dark bird came hurtling across the sky. I say “hurtling,” because the trajectory of its passage wasn’t consistent with the usual flight of a bird, but seemed more like that of a heavy object, a half-full sack of potatoes, perhaps, thrown from a great distance.

With a rowdy swoosh, it passed above us like a catapult shot, a glop of gray-black, stark and somehow beautiful, against the gray-white of the sky, and crashed into a cluster of tornleaf bushes just beyond the fence of the little cowyard (and therefore, in the big cowyard), thirty or forty paces, in a diagonal line across the little cowyard, from Rook and me. I thought I heard the muffled words, “Oh crap!” as it passed above us, and “Geez!” some moments after the crash.

Rook, who had watched all of this with mild surprise, said, “Was that a chicken?”

I shrugged, wide-eyed.

Shrugging himself, and to all appearances immediately forgetting about the bird (as he had immediately forgotten about the man of mud), he said, as with another *splash* he tossed another load of manure onto the shit wagon, “Could you wheel that barrow over here?” With a slight nod of his head, he indicated a nearby wheelbarrow that was filled to well above its rim with manure.

I scampered over to it, and grabbing its handles, said, “Here I come!” but I might as well have tried to move a tree.

Smiling, Rook ambled over to the wheelbarrow, and laying his shovel on its arms, he took it by the handles and with evident ease pushed it up next to the flatbed; and as *splap*, *sloop*, *spluph*, he emptied the manure from it onto the flatbed, I heard something: a sibilance—a sound, or a voice, I wasn't sure which.

“Psst.”

I stopped. It, this sibilance, had come, I thought, from the cluster of tornleaf bushes into which the object, or chicken, that had hurdled over the cowyard had crashed. I examined, or tried to examine, those bushes, but even squinting, I couldn't see into them with any clarity. The fence blocked my view.

It would have been as easy to round the cowyard as to take the diagonal path across it to the tornleaf bushes—to chop off its head, as Jake might say—but I liked to climb things, so I clambered over the fence, landed, *splatoof*, in the mud, and began tromping towards the cluster of tornleaf bushes from which the sibilance had seemed to come, looking, as I walked, as deep into them as I could.

No further sound came from them however, and I could discern no further movement within them, so deciding that I had only thought I had heard something coming from them because I had seen the bird or whatever it had been go into them, I abandoned my investigation. With my hands and feet getting numb by this time, and me eager to warm them inside by a fire or stove, I lacked the investigative tenacity I might have had, had I been more comfortable. After one more glance at the tornleaf bush, I turned to trot, or galumph, back to Rook.

But then, the sound, the voice, came again, with increasing urgency. “Psst!”

Peering between the boards of the fence, I caught sight of what appeared to be a tiny black, red, and iron-gray dragon motioning to me with one arm. I approached him, trying to get a better look at him, and as I got to the fence, I beheld an entity pattern more complex than that of any animal entity pattern, in-

deed than that of any human entity pattern, I'd ever seen, comprised of thousands upon thousands of intertwined and intertwining filigrees of green and red and purple and orange.

"Are you a dragon," I asked, as, facing him, I sat down cross-legged across the fence-line from him.

He regarded me with liquid obsidian, yet somehow humane and intelligent eyes, and said, in a voice that would have seemed natural coming from an effeminate man, "Fajee, I am Ragahootoo, Eyes of the Son, it is my honor to make your acquaintance; however, we will have to dispense with pleasantries for now. The friends of the Mother are in trouble."

"I thought dragons were big," I said, with tact.

"Indeed, they are infinite, Fajee," he said in a way that suggested grandiloquent pontification, "but in the sense of which I believe you speak, only the Mothers and the Sons inhabit the dimensions you expect of us. The Fathers and the Daughters are..." He seemed on the verge of commencing a long exposition, but, shaking his head as if expelling a foreign substance from his brain, he said, "but that's not important, right now; friends of the Mother are in trouble!"

"The mother?"

"Over there!" He pointed, pointedly, with a webbed arm, in the direction that earlier the man of mud, and then Jake, had gone. "You need to save them, Fajee!"

By this time, Rook had noticed that I was no longer hovering about in his vicinity, and, having hopped the fence, was striding through the mud of the little cowedard towards me, presumably to see what I was doing. I ran up to him as the little dragon scurried into the shadow of the tornleaf bushes.

"Was that a miniature dragon?"

"Yes, and I'm pretty sure Mom and Jake are in trouble!"

Without a moment of question, Rook scooped me up, and setting me on his shoulders, was skirting the little cowedard at a jog, pinning my legs, flat-handed, against his chest. Arriv-

ing at the fence of the big cowyard, he set me atop it, vaulted it, and putting me back on his shoulders, was off to The Corner.

HAYNTA-3

All of the stories Mrs. Camden told had a shining sweetness to them that soothed the ever-present anger within me. Not a cloying sweetness, or insipid sentimentality, but a warming, tingling, liqueur that stayed with me, gladdening my heart for hours or days after hearing them. Her characters were noble, her plots were simple, and best of all, her stories didn't have a point, a message, or a moral.

One of my favorites was the one about Queen Fiona and the scullery maid. It went a little something like this (though of course Mrs. Camden told it with much more flair and in much greater detail): The king of Osbondia, Tulpo the Great, died before he was old, leaving the kingdom in the hands of his daughter Fiona, who at the time was quite young. This worried some of his erstwhile advisers—his loyal ones—because they thought that she was *too* young. She wasn't ready, they feared, to be queen; she would be out of her depth, and the kingdom would suffer because of this. Others—his not-so-loyal advisers—looked forward to her reign. She would be easy to manipulate, they thought. They could become her puppet masters, or, if and when she proved incapable of ruling, they could seize power without an outcry from the populace. To the respective surprise and disappointment of all, however, she proved quite a capable leader, and the kingdom thrummed along just fine and thank you very much.

One of the qualities that made her a good leader was that she could make a quick and accurate assessment of a situation; so she had, of course, known about both camps of her father's advisers, the doubters and the plotters; and perhaps in part because of this, she felt a little alone in her own palace, and the natural proclivity she had displayed as a child to a quiet reservedness that could often be taken as sullen aloofness, became more pronounced when she was queen.

She refused to cloister herself in the royal chambers, however. She found comfort and pleasure in the bright open spaces of the palace and grounds—the gardens, the terraces, the great tapestried halls—and she wasn't particularly fond of sitting around. Early in her reign, she took to taking walks, all about the palace and the palace grounds, and sometimes, to the great discomfiture of her advisers, even into the city proper. Though she would hear petitions from citizens and meet with visiting dignitaries and foreign diplomats in the palace state-room, she would often have "walking meetings" with her advisers. She would ramble here, there, anywhere, nowhere, and everywhere—wherever her mood led her—while they, the advisers, less accustomed to invigoration than she was, "indeed, with more the disposition to huddle over their workdesks," to quote Mrs. Camden, huffed and puffed along behind her, briefing her "about whatever things advisers brief queens about." The activity, she said, sharpened her mind.

Walking as often as she did, it was not uncommon for her to cross paths with, or at least to walk past, the vast majority of the servants and employed workers of the castle; and because of the aloofness of her bearing, along with the predictable accompanying fact that she wasn't one to give away many friendly smiles, most if not all of these workers were afraid of her. She seemed, they thought, to be looking about and *at them* with general disapprobation. To allay any anger or disapproval she might be about to give vent to, and just because it was the kind of behavior expected of servants in the presence of queens, they were all sure to bow or take a knee, or both, or give some alternative sign of fealty whenever she went by. The kitchen workers, the gardeners, and the stablemen all had one worker on staff whose sole job was to keep an eye out for her, so that when she came by, they wouldn't be caught off guard. They didn't want to find out what might happen to them if they didn't offer her the proper homage.

The scullery maid, one Ehonne, a durable and strong, but, as Mrs. Camden put it, very diminutive worker, having been honed of all excess by years of being the lowest of the servants and therefore the one with the most to do, was not taken to notice when the queen or anyone else happened by, for the simple reason that she was working too hard to look up from what she was doing. If she had thought about the matter, she would have said “in a voice uncouth and yet matter-of-fact, as those of scullery workers are wont to be,” as Mrs. Camden put it, “It don’t make no sense to stop and curtsey or what have you. I’m workin’ *for her*, and if I’m gonna always be stoppin’, I’m not gonna get any work done *for her*. That’s just plum dumb.” But she was too busy doing her work even to think about it.

Most of the time, Ehonne’s ignorance of etiquette, or, if you prefer, diligent service to the royal house, offered itself up for no repercussions, because she was likely to be back in the scullery slaving away unseen when the queen came by. However, one day she happened to be scrubbing the floor of the corridor that connected the back of the kitchen to a stairway that led to the royal wing, when the queen and a couple of her advisers came down the stairway deep in conversation. While the other members of the kitchen staff gave their homage on bended knees with bowed heads, Ehonne kept scrubbing away. The queen and her advisers waited some moments for her to move, one of the advisers even making bold to clear his throat a time or two as they waited, but Ehonne took no notice of them, and at length they had to sidle past her.

A couple of days later, the queen came through the kitchen area again, this time accompanied by just one of her advisers, an ambitious and sour fellow who had been among the group who had hoped to take advantage of Fiona’s predicted incompetence but who now offered grudging admittance that she was ruling well. All of the workers, of course, took a knee and bowed their heads, but Fiona appeared dissatisfied. She asked one of the workers, a cook, “Where is that scullery maid

who was scrubbing the floor the other day?” The cook, scared witless, tied herself in knots with various bows and curtsies and “your majesties,” and looked with nervous propriety at the adviser, who told the queen that she had been put out for her insolence.

“Put out?” The queen said, “What do you mean by that?”

“Expelled from the palace,” the advisor revealed, with just the right combination of righteousness, smugness, and obsequiousness.

It happened at this point to be the middle of the winter, and a very nasty winter at that, and Fiona said nothing, just stared at the adviser in disapprobation, or what the cook later would describe as such to her co-workers, and then departed. Nobody saw her leave the palace, but a stableman later claimed to have seen her saddling her charger, Grimgrim; whether he saw her or not, it was true that she *did* saddle Grimgrim that icy night and then rode out into the town searching for Ehone, whom she found just before dawn huddled in a culvert, freezing and near death. Fiona managed to get her up on Grimgrim, and supporting her there herself, carried her back to the castle, where after a couple days of recovery, she was returned to her duties as scullery maid.

And that was all there was to it: if somebody else had been telling the story, Fiona would have been a haughty young princess who learned humility from her dealings with her childhood friend, Ehone, or something like that. Even as it was, the class was expecting Ehone to get revenge on the adviser, or at least for him to get his comeuppance in some humiliating fashion, perhaps for the queen and the scullery maid to become friends, or at the very least for Ehone to become a member of the court. But Ehone returning to her duties as scullery maid was the end of the story: and I loved it for that.

My favorite of Mrs. Camden’s stories, however, was the one about the boy who crossed the Norgold Mountains in

winter, to bring the fabled molgrehu snail, the slime of which is a panacea, back from the Islands of Summer to save a dying child.

The northerners have a saying, “to die in the Norgold Mountains,” to describe a noble undertaking that has no chance of success. It’s a saying because crossing the Norgold Mountains is a near-impossible undertaking. It has, reportedly, been done a handful of times, but thousands have tried, and failed—during the summer. Anybody from north of Star City listening to a story about daring the Norgold Mountains would know that to attempt a crossing in the winter would be suicide and that to suggest that it could be done would be pure nonsense. So when Mrs. Camden told the story of this boy, Innikno, heading up into the mountains, a solitary dark speck, as she described him, if you were to see him from a distance, threading a winding path up a monstrous white hulk, an impossible vastness, in the dead of winter, you almost had to know he *was* going to make it. I mean, if he were going to die, you wouldn’t have to add in the part about it being winter; adding that changes things. It makes it so that if he doesn’t make it, it wouldn’t fit.

But, as she told the story, and it came alive in the rolling cadence of her wonderful voice, as calm and sparkling as a summer river, and I could see this boy in vivid clarity as he trudged through the unending snow, sleeping now and again with woolly goats, devouring twigs, bark, and scraps of sparse vegetation, and battling ever and ever onward, his eyes determined, and hopeful, compassionate, and lonely, I wasn’t sure if he *would* make it. It was so vivid, so *real*, I wasn’t sure what might happen; stories you can predict, real life you can’t.

I was rooting for him; I wanted him to make it, I didn’t want him to die in the Norgold Mountains, I willed him with all my strength to come to the Islands of Summer on the far side of the mountain, find the molgrehu, and bring it back to save the little girl; but as Mrs. Camden told the story, I was afraid he wasn’t going to. I hung on her every word, my heart beating for

this noble boy, and found when she had finished the story that I was relieved he had survived.

Mrs. Camden's class was an oasis, for me. It gave me something to look forward to, even if it was just a couple of hours every couple of days. It was something to enjoy, *something* to give savor to life besides going to sleep in the hopes of an exciting dream.

And I wanted to say something to her. I wanted to thank her for being such a great teacher, or something like that (I couldn't decide, or maybe even articulate, exactly what I wanted to say); and I started staying in my seat after class until the rest of the students had filed out, with a plan to speak to her alone. But every time, once everybody had gone and she and I were alone in the silent classroom, I would get shy and follow everybody else out, embarrassed, hoping that it seemed to Mrs. Camden as if I'd just been slow gathering up my books.

After quite a number of these false attempts, however, I worked up the nerve to approach her: One day, after a memorable day-four class that had left me giddy with the liqueur of stories—it was, in fact, the day she told the tale of the boy who crossed the Norgold Mountains in winter, which had initiated a string of solid student stories—I stood up with the rest of the class when Mrs. Camden dismissed us, but this time instead of taking me to the door in the vortex flow of the class's mass departure, my feet carried me up to Mrs. Camden's desk, where I waited, heart pounding, hands like clubs, in all my awkward glory.

All of the classrooms at Clarks Hill had high, beamed, ceilings, along with windows that were too far from the ground to provide a view of the outside world (other than squares of sky), but which because they were on two sides of the rooms, and because the walls slanted inward near the ceiling, lighted the rooms with surprising effectiveness morning, mid-day, and evening with dusty crisscrossing light; and now, as I stood before Mrs. Camden, ready to bolt should she display the

slightest displeasure, early evening sun slid in slants from high windows, drawing out, or enhancing, the smell of the old wood of the beams, floor, desks, and door.

She noticed me at once, and pulled off her spectacles to regard me, which was a little disconcerting because while she looked silly and harmless wearing those glasses that magnified and crossed her eyes so, without them she seemed shrewder (though still friendly, and kind), and not quite so old and dowdy.

She waited for me to speak, though not in an impatient or put-out way—not as if I was imposing on her or holding her up or anything like that.

“I love your class,” I blurted, with no voice control because of my nervousness. “Thanks for being such a good teacher.” I was almost yelling.

I don’t think I expected her to mock me. In fact, I knew she wouldn’t; I knew she would be nice and pleasant. I was suddenly afraid she would be distantly polite, though, which, I thought, would somehow be worse. Standing there, I felt awkward and ridiculous, and I blushed crimson. Or so it felt: I could feel my ears and even my neck and cheeks burning red, and I was about to rush out of the room. I waited just a tick, though, watching her, perhaps something in her demeanor holding me in place, and I was rewarded by the expression that spread across her face.

My eldest brother, Doppin, fourteen years my senior, was my mother’s favorite. The two of them had a special bond. It wasn’t as if she was always complimenting him at the expense of his siblings, or giving him preferential treatment, or that she *avored* him in any *overt* way; nor did he go around saying, “My mother is the best,” or anything like that. I’m sure that outsiders, that is, non-family members, had no idea that he was her favorite; but if you lived in the house with the two of them, you knew. My other siblings and I, knew. I can’t even say how exactly we knew; I couldn’t have pointed out any specific

actions that revealed their closeness, such as exchanges of glances, or inward smiles, even; it was a thing too subtle to be apprehended with conscious observation. The knowledge of it crept into our consciousness unnoticed until it was there—we just *knew*.

When Doppin came into his manhood, he moved away and lived by himself outside of town in a little cabin at the foot of Rafayaf Hill, where he made a living tending potatoes and mending fences. For a long time, he lived alone, in no hurry to take the wife he was expected by custom to have. He seemed quite content to me and to my father and siblings, but it was different for my mother. To say that she thought him sad or lonely, and that she was sad because of this would be an oversimplification; but it was something in the neighborhood of that, or at least it seemed so to me.

When at long last he brought a bride, or future bride, home to visit us, I in the incompleteness of my understanding of the relationship between my mother and my brother, thought my mother would either regard the young woman with suspicion and judgment—as some complicated amalgamation of rival and person who could hurt her beloved boy—or that she would be shy with her, as oftentimes two individuals who don't know each other but are both close to a third are when they meet. Instead, upon first setting eyes on Doppin's bride, my mother looked at her with an indescribable expression, not of love as for a daughter or even a close friend, but something in the same category of feeling, but unique, a shared-ness of some sort, for sure.

Something akin to this look came into Mrs. Camden's face when I blurted out my generous assessment of her teaching skills. It wasn't exactly the same, but it was similar enough that the one reminded me of the other. Seeing the look on Mrs. Camden's face, I remembered the look (and hug) my mother had given my brother's bride. It made me feel as if I'd given Mrs. Camden something—something magnificent, not just a

little compliment—and this was a wonderful feeling: My nose got hot, and my bowels felt like they were filled with light.

“Thank you, Haynta.”

“I liked the Norgold Mountains one.”

She smiled. It was just a regular ol’ smile this time, but it was unique. It was unique *because* it was just a regular ol’ smile. It wasn’t patronizing or indulging at all, as a superior, or anyone who thought themselves superior, or more mature, than you would give you, or as any of the other teachers at Clarks Hill would have given me. It was just the smile one soul gives another. “I like that one, too.”

ROWAN-4

Having been warned of Dr. Mulgar's approach by Romulus, I was sitting on the brown couch studying the Grail with eager diligence, or rather what I was eager to appear to be diligence, when the door swung inward and he proceeded forth.

Earlier that day, not long after waking up, in lieu of the complicated task that my uneasy spirit didn't want to tackle, of determining the precise times that Dr. Mulgar, Dr. Bowusuvi and the Fatheads, respectively, would arrive, I had asked Mind a related question: "Mind, why did Dr. Mulgar and Dr. Bowusuvi not come yesterday, or the Fatheads either?"

I asked as I dressed myself—in brown trousers, today, as every day, and a loose shirt that buttoned in front and tucked neatly into my pants, red, like all of my shirts, this one more bright than dark.

"Perhaps they were busy with other duties, Rowan," Mind observed, with his usual good-natured acuteness.

"But they come almost every day! All of them!" I lacked the vocabulary, and the understanding of statistics, to enumerate to him the high odds against three events (the separate visitations of Dr. Mulgar, Dr. Bowusuvi, and the Fatheads) that each had a strong probability of happening on any given day, all *not* happening on the *same* day; but I knew, or sensed, that such a confluence was very very unlikely—likely so unlikely that chance couldn't explain it.

Mind didn't respond. I waited, with a pre-verbalized expectancy, but still he didn't respond. He seemed either not to be sensible of the extraordinary nature of my regular visitors' coinciding absences, or to be unimpressed by it.

"That means," I expostulated, losing patience, "that there must be a reason they didn't come! None of them, the same day!" Realizing that something was wrong with the syntax of my explanation, I clarified, "All of them didn't come, and on the same day!" Sensing that something was still off, I said,

“Each one of them was gone the same day...you know what I mean, Mind!”

“Are you suggesting, Rowan, that they were spending time together?”

“That’s what I was asking you!” I had been about to head to the kitchen to make my breakfast gruel, but instead sat down on my bed. I often held conversations with Mind while going about my daily tasks, but I sensed that to find out what I wanted to know I was going to have to walk the bright road, which would require my full attention.

Ignoring my protestations, Mind asked me, “If Thront, Hojum, and the gentlemen you refer to as ‘Fatheads’ were all to do something together, Rowan, what do you think it would be?”

I thought about this. I found I couldn’t imagine any of them doing anything with any of the others. Dr. Mulgar and Dr. Bowusuvi visited together on occasion, and when they did they spoke to each other, about me for the most part, in what I termed Otherspeak, that is, using Leniman words but in such a way that I had trouble following their conversation. Their interaction seemed, well I didn’t know what it seemed, but I couldn’t imagine them ever speaking to one another in any other setting, or about any topic except me, let alone spending any leisure time together. And the Fatheads, I thought, were their underlings, their *servants*: the Fatheads might spend time with each other and with others of their Fathead ilk, but with Dr. Mulgar or Dr. Bowusuvi? No. The doctors wouldn’t deign.

“Show me Dr. Mulgar yesterday,” I requested, and then, to intercept his inevitable, “At what point of the day yesterday would you like to see him, Rowan?” I hastened to add, “the middle of the day. The *exact* middle of the day.”

I walked the bright road, then: I felt a pleasant breeze and smelled dry leaves (I didn’t know this odor was of dry leaves at the time, only that it was strange and yet somehow familiar, and pleasant), and I was strolling, partly as if in a dream in which I was aware of where I was and in complete,

conscious control of my own actions; and partly as if *remembering* strolling so, but with much more vividness and detail than a memory usually supplies.

I was strolling in a comfort neither of warmth or coolness, under an archway of orange and red leaves which clung in clusters to the branches of trees that reached out to each other from both sides of a wide path. Orange and red leaves, along with a few yellows and browns, covered this path as I walked it, as overhead the leaves still on the trees whispered, whispered, and laughed, and whispered stories about me and a million million others walking this path of fire, this bright road.

I walked forward, and at some unperceived moment (no matter how hard I tried, I never succeeded in perceiving the transition from the bright road to my destination), I was no longer on the path, but inside an immense circular room.

Whiteness flooded into my eyes from all directions. I was in a house, no, I decided, it wasn't a house. It was too big to be a house, way too big, and it was circular. It was an edifice of some sort, and the floor, the walls, and the ceiling, or more accurately, the dome, were all white—clean, sterile, white. An odor similar to that of the soaps with which I was supposed to clean my bowls, spoons, sinks, and waste pot permeated the air. Dr. Mulgar stood, bright and tan, in a crowd of men wearing black and orange uniforms, in the center of the edifice, or, more accurately, as I was about to learn, in the center of this central chamber of the edifice. He and the other men were gathered beside, or in the theoretical shadow of, a plant which reached such a height it could have been a tree except that it didn't have a trunk or branches, or leaves, just blades, like those of grass, but prickly and as wide as a man's armspan, several of these blades, which were twined together, reaching to the white top of the dome. It was a rare plant called a swords-of-danzili, as I would learn many years later.

Many other people, too many to count, most of them garbed in the same black and orange uniforms as the men with

Dr. Mulgar, and which, he, too, I now noticed, wore, were milling around everywhere, some of them crossing back and forth in the space between Dr. Mulgar and me, thereby blocking him from my view for short bursts of time. A babble of intermingled voices ebbed and flowed in the expansive whiteness above the people's heads.

After exchanging words with one of the uniformed men among the crowd of which he was a part, Dr. Mulgar disengaged himself from the group and commenced a brisk walk in a direction that would take him farther away from me. I followed him.

It looked as if he would walk right into the white wall on the far side of the room, and, puzzled by this I had in fact slowed the pace of my pursuit, when my eyes sorted out that there was a rounded rectangular opening in the wall, an egress that I hadn't noticed before because it was as white as the wall. Well, the walls of the chamber into which the egress led were as white as the walls of the circular chamber, making the opening itself seem white; the opening itself, of course, had no color, as per the nature of openings.

Seeing that Dr. Mulgar meant to gain this opening, I ran after him, dodging people as I went. I knew they couldn't see me, and I knew I would run right through them if I happened to collide with them, and that neither they nor I would feel a thing, and yet I couldn't bring myself to run into them. I might have saved myself a few steps with a direct route, but even as it was I reached the aperture, which I found wasn't a chamber after all, but a long corridor, in time to see Dr. Mulgar open a door—a non-white door, chestnut, to be exact—about halfway down the corridor, and disappear behind it.

This corridor was higher-ceilinged than the rooms I was used to, namely, my bedroom, the kitchen, the main room, and Romulus' room, but seemed nevertheless dark and confining entering into it from the circular chamber's chasmic whiteness. The walls, here, though white, weren't so bright up close as

those in the circular room; and, as well, a parade of black doors (and one chestnut) on both sides of the corridor broke up the whiteness which in the circular room was so overweening, making it, the whiteness, less *big* here, less endless.

At a dead run in an effort to reach the chestnut door before it closed, I was unable to come all the way to a stop when I saw I wasn't going to make it, and I ran right into it—and through it, into another white room. Three men, attired in various outfits of black and orange, sat at a large black table on large, cushioned black chairs. Dr. Mulgar sat down at the table with the others, and the four of them began discussing something. They talked for some while, in a gibberish similar to Otherspeak, about nothing that I could keep in my mind so senseless was it, or beyond me, maybe. I waited for something to happen, but they just sat around the table jabbering. After awhile—a long while, it seemed to me—Dr. Mulgar left that room and went to a different room and talked to some different people.

“Okay, Mind, that's good,” I said, and in the blink of a wink I was back in my room, seated on the smooth whites of my bed.

A bit disappointed, I said, “That didn't do any good.”

“Are you sure, Rowan?”

“He does that stuff all the time!” The incomprehensible boringness of Dr. Mulgar's life had always struck me. It made me fonder of him, in a way, because he was always so cold, formal, and hard when interacting with all of the other Orange-and-Blacks, as I called them, whereas with me he was friendly and encouraging, smiling and laughing often.

“And that reveals nothing about what you want to know?”

“No,” I said at once to forestall a meandering back-and-forth with Mind in which he led me on a circuitous route to an answer he could have given me when I asked the question, “Now show me Dr. Bowusuvi yesterday exactly half-way

through the day, too.” I asked Mind to show me the Fatheads, as well, and neither they, nor Dr. Bowusuvi were doing anything that I hadn’t at some other time observed them doing at the end of the bright road.

By the time I had finished watching Dr. Bowusuvi and the Fatheads, I had wandered down the hall to the kitchen, and was now making breakfast. I found the appropriate bowls in the bowl cabinet, the white breakfast bowls (as opposed to the brown lunch and supper bowls), and then, opening the gruel cabinet, debated between cans of dry gruel: Should it be yellow today, or white, brown, yellow-white, or yellow-brown? Gruel was what we ate for every breakfast, lunch, and supper, except on the rare day Dr. Mulgar brought us some delicacy, such as roast chicken and nuts. Brought *me* some delicacy, anyway, which I shared with Romulus later. Roast chicken was probably my favorite treat, because it provided a second course of enjoyment: the bone war that Romulus and I would have after we were finished eating, which was not unlike the black-and-white tile wars we had but with the extra, rewarding, element of being *different* from the usual.

I decided, today, on brown gruel for me and white for Romulus, then emptied the dry gruel into the bowls, filled the bowls with water from the kitchen pump and watched the dry gruel become wet gruel while filling a glass of water for both Romulus and me. Then I went down to Romulus’ room to spend my nervous morning which culminated in the arrival of Dr. Bowusuvi and the Fatheads, and now, Dr. Mulgar.

Dr. Mulgar was, in appearance and behavior, almost the exact opposite of Dr. Bowusuvi. He was tall, his face was tan, bordering on sun-burnt, he had long dark hair, serious gray eyes, and a ready, exaggerated and yet somehow friendly and compassionate white smile that shined like a crown above the colorful red or blue or striped sweaters he often wore. He was vigorous, vibrant, youthful (if not in fact young), and garrulous, with a high degree of personal magnetism. One was drawn to

him, and drawn to like him. He did everything with zeal, a bounce in his step, an infectious energy.

His defining characteristic, though, was his ferventness. He was an intense man, driven. Everything he said was said with ferventness, as if he were burning from the inside, or as if, perhaps, he'd been given a holy duty from some deity, and every moment of his life had to be dedicated to fulfilling this duty. He brimmed over with intensity, and *seriousness*. Even when he laughed or joked, he was serious. When he laughed you could see in his eyes that his mind was elsewhere, addressing some more important matter even as his mouth curved upward and his white teeth flashed his appreciation of the jocularity of the present.

When he communicated with you—with me, in particular, but also the few other people with whom I saw him interact—a grasping eagerness emanated from him, as if he needed you for something, as if you were a possible helper in the fulfillment of his duty to his god. He was never relaxed, but filled always with an anxiety that one felt kinetically. Factoring in his personal magnetism and the strength of his presence, I can well imagine that this anxiety must have spread to almost anybody with whom he interacted. It did for me: I liked him, I looked forward to his visits, but I was tired when he left, and anxious, and filled with a need to learn everything he had instructed me to learn from the Grail, and more importantly, to learn how to see the things he wanted me to see, and more than that, to *do something*, take up some flaming sword for him, perhaps, and march with him to glorious battle. Something like that.

And he came every day. He was my teacher; we rendezvoused, whenever he showed up, in the main room, usually on the brown couch, and there he showed me what he wanted me to study on the Grail, and quizzed me about what he'd asked me to study yesterday. When I provided correct answers to his questions, which I invariably did, he told me that

I was doing well, that I was a good boy, that I was intelligent, precocious, or amazing, often giving me a proud pat on the head. I lived for those pats; I wanted to please him, and he was always pleased with my work on the Grail.

However, the Grail stuff was always just a preliminary to the real reason he had come. He wanted something else from me, something that would help him achieve whatever great thing he was trying to achieve; and though I wanted to help him, I didn't know how, and I knew he was frustrated by my inability to supply him with what he needed; and this caused me great anxiety (which I suspect is in part why I was so flawless with the Grail stuff: I was trying to atone for my failure in what was more important to him).

After dispensing with the Grail, he'd grow intense—even more intense than he already was—earnest, serious, and while he wouldn't actually say, "Okay, that other stuff was meaningless, this is all that's important," I would have known by his attitude that that was the gist of the situation had I been younger even than I was.

He would ask, "Did you have any dreams last night?" More often than not I'd had none that I could remember, so I'd say, "no," or shake my head, to which he'd just nod or say, "That's okay," with restrained disappointment. I did remember a dream every now and then, and when I did, I would excitedly begin telling him about it (especially if it was one of the rare ones in which I did something, or saw something interesting), hoping that he'd be happy that I'd had one, but he would always stop me before I was finished, smile sadly, and say something like, "That was a nice dream, Romulus." I'd know, then, that it wasn't the dream he wanted me to have.

Then he would ask me whether I'd had any strange *day*-dreams or unexplained thoughts, and finally after my responses to those questions proved fruitless (as they inevitably did), growing yet more intense, more eager, he would urge me to concentrate, and would say something like, "Okay Romulus,

ask yourself what's going to happen tomorrow. Just relax, blank your mind, empty your mind of everything except that one question, "What is going to happen tomorrow?" And on and on, in similar exhortations. Relaxing was difficult under the powerful insistence of his non-relaxation, but I would try: I would blank my mind, or do whatever else he asked me to do (sometimes he'd say, "Imagine a whiteness, and into that whiteness let tomorrow come," or "Imagine a fire, let it burn away today and yesterday and every day except tomorrow, and see what is in your mind," or any number of other image-guided attempts to get me to "see tomorrow"), and nothing would happen. Random images would come into my head, and I would report these to him, but he recognized them as what they were immediately, and would re-exhort me to try again, to blank my mind, and to refuse to allow my own mind to send me any images, to allow only images that came from *outside*, from "somewhere else."

I didn't know what to do. Nothing but random images which I was pretty sure were coming from my own mind were all that I could summon no matter how hard I tried. And boy did I try hard, because he was so anxious for me to "see tomorrow" and so disappointed, and as the days progressed so frustrated with me, for not being able to do so. In retrospect, it's hard to believe that I didn't make the connection between the images Mind showed me and the images he wanted me to see, but I didn't. Despite having to situate each scene that I asked of Mind *in* time, I had very little concept *of* time, existing as I did in a sort of timelessness, separate and apart from the rest of the world. I didn't think of the scenes Mind showed me as the future or the past, but as interesting and/or informative vignettes.

Dr. Mulgar would say, "Don't worry about it, you'll get it, you're special, I know you'll get it, don't worry about it, okay, Romulus?" when I grew upset at my own failures, but I knew he was getting more and more impatient with me. During

one of the rare occasions when he and Dr. Bowusuvi visited at the same time, I heard him say to Dr. Bowusuvi, "What's the hold up? What's taking him so long? You said he'd be exhibiting by now!" To which Dr. Bowusuvi responded in his usual emotionless manner, "I said that based on the average progress of overall brain development, he might be exhibiting by this age. The information we have to go by, however, is quite limited, and it could be inaccurate. Maybe he never will."

Once, I tried to make him happy by making something up when he asked me for a vision, but just as he recognized the random images for what they were, he recognized that I was lying. Even then, he didn't get angry with me, he just assured me, "No pressure, Romulus. There's no need to lie to me. Just concentrate, don't make things up, there's no pressure, just keep trying, okay?" and gave me a reassuring pat on the head. But the more he said there was no pressure, the more pressure I felt.

Today, when he arrived, Romulus and I were sucking down long gulps of disinfectant-laden air. Well, I was; Romulus, freed from having to contort himself into positions in which the smallest possible amount of the surface area of his body was touching the waste-saturated floor of his cage, was lying flat on his back, as stretched out as he could get, which I understood to be the equivalent for him of me sucking in the air, an expression of relief to be out of the stench that had permeated the house for two days. We were celebrating, as it were, the freshness of existence, and getting ready to settle into our routine of studying the Grail, teaching each other our respective languages, talking or being silent in comfortable comradeship, and/or playing games (I had, with my fear of being caught in a punishable predicament allayed by the arrival and departure of Dr. Bowusuvi, even ventured to bring the black and white blocks down from my bedroom, the possibility of making up a new game knocking about in my mind), when he said, "The demon arrives," and handed me the Grail, which I took, hurrying, to the Main room, where I sat down on the couch pretending to study. The first

time Romulus had called Dr. Mulgar “the demon,” I thought he was referring to Dr. Bowusuvi, who the designation suited, but Dr. Bowusuvi he just called “the old man.”

Dr. Mulgar entered smiling as usual, and we started in with the usual mini-lesson; but this was a false start. Today, he hurried through the Grail stuff with undisguised disinterest, proceeding to questions about dreams and exhortations to see tomorrow without even giving me any Grail assignments for tomorrow. His eagerness was overwhelming, his need palpable, his impatience frightening. And I *was* frightened: I didn’t think, consciously, that if I was unable to do what he needed me to do, he would kill me, or mistreat me, or do the eye thing to me as Dr. Bowusuvi did when I didn’t meet *his* demands; but I think I had reasoned it out, unconsciously, that a) he needed something, and b) I was a possible valuable tool in satisfying this need, hence if I didn’t become a valuable tool in satisfying that need, then I wouldn’t be needed and could be disposed of. So, without knowing exactly why, I felt that I *had* to supply him with the sort of vision he was always asking me for. I felt cornered and desperate, knowing, or believing, that I must tell him *something* but knowing that he would know if I were making something up. Then, and only then, was when I turned to Mind. Like a wild animal fleeing, I looked about, seeking escape, and it occurred to me in an unfocused but heightened flash of awareness that Mind could supply me with a vision of sorts, and that if I described this vision to Dr. Mulgar, I wouldn’t be making it up.

“Mind?” I prompted, tentative, testing to see whether he was with me or not. I may well have mumbled aloud, too full of anxiety to control the movement of my mouth, but if I did, Dr. Mulgar didn’t observe it; at any rate, he didn’t tell me to “Enunciate, Romulus enunciate!” which is what he usually said when I spoke with less than complete clarity.

Mind was present immediately: “Yes, Rowan?”

Desperate, I said, “Show me something! Anything!” I didn’t think he would show me anything without at least mod-

erate questioning. I thought he would probably begin with his usual, “What would you like to see, Rowan?” and then if or when I was able to come up with something or someone I wanted to see, he would ask his usual, “When would you like to see them, Rowan?” and then when I said, for example, “Tomorrow,” he would ask his usual, “What time tomorrow would you like to see them, Rowan?” at which point I would have either to say exactly what hour of the day I wanted to see them, or else mark the time with an event such as “right after lunch,” or “at the same time the Fatheads are going to be here.” This discussion would take several minutes, and throughout it I’d be mumbling right there in front of Dr. Mulgar, who would not only tell me to “Enunciate, Romulus, enunciate!” but would also be getting more and more impatient, and perhaps curious about what I was doing—but, Mind came through this time: I was walking along the bright road before I finished enunciating (to Mind), “anything!”

At the end of the bright road, I came to a cave, or what seemed a cave or underground chamber, spacious and circular, with glowing yellow-white lanterns throwing warm light upon smooth rock floors and uneven striated red and brown walls, the ceiling lost in darkness. In the middle of this chamber was a stack of jars and cans and wallets of food: bread, dried fruit, jellies and jams, I could see for sure, and there was other stuff in the shadows that I couldn’t identify. Several rough and yet comfortable-looking pallets lined the walls, and near one of these a man and a woman sat on the ground facing each other, cross-legged. I could see them clearly in the lantern light. The man, who was dressed in Jaji green (I didn’t know this was the green of the traditional Twoblossoms leaf Jaji winter cloak at the time, of course, Romulus having been clothes-less all the time I’d known him, but I would learn later that it was), was larger than Romulus, but not as large as Dr. Mulgar or Dr. Bowusuvi, not as tall at least—that much I could tell even though he was sitting. He appeared more tightly put-together,

though, compact and strong. Scars crisscrossed his swarthy arms and face, contrasting with and yet somehow accentuating his wondering and sad but joyful green eyes. The woman, or girl, I couldn't decide which one, dressed in a cloak of goldenrod and a long red skirt, was small and almost white, much paler than anyone I knew (which admittedly only included myself, Romulus, the Fatheads, Dr. Bowusuvi, and Dr. Mulgar), with freckles abounding on her face and arms.

The girl leaned forward, her face compassionate, sorrowful, and touched the man's head with infinite tenderness. The man's face took on an aspect of surprise, and he said, in joyous wonder, "Is that you?"

YAAN-4

“I saw a nameless dancer out on Lake Latalla this morning.”

Those were the first words I ever heard Mrs. Camden utter, and as Rook ran across the big cowyard, I knew now, after all these years (for I had been but four or five at the time), it had been he who she had seen.

She came like a nameless dancer herself, emerging from the gray and mist of Lohu’s field one afternoon late in Ellukim as of out of a story, or the idea of a story before it is told, or known, a soundless, nameless place of flame and wild dark: as she came out of the gray and tromped across the fresh padding of snow covering all but the tips of the weeds in our yard, her entity pattern sparkled and undulated in a solemn but joyous dance.

Sitting by the stove whose pleasing warmth, already ornamented by the satisfying aroma of wood and cooking fruit, was accentuated by the sight and memory of the bitterness of outdoors, I gazed out our one window watching her come, seeming, she, *because* this apparition, this nameless dancer, to be a messenger from the *outside*, the unknowable world beyond the mundane solitude of our isolated corner. I watched the beautiful dance of her pattern, and the calm fearless cadence of her stride, as she followed the path of her ribbon flower to our door, and there, removing a brown woolen glove, knocked, a light and almost timid tap, bone and flesh against sousewood.

I watched her as she stood in the doorway amidst the swirling of snowflakes, seeming a stocky frumpy old lady, bundled up in scarves and a thick green coat and boots and bulky baggy pants; and I watched as she and Mom exchanged glances, she smiling shyly as she said, “I saw a nameless dancer out on Lake Latalla this morning,” and Mom closing her eyes and nodding, not at the statement but in greeting, in an expression of joy that I had never seen her evince except with me, and I watched as the tendrils of connection between them, which were multi-

fold, each knot a bright and beautiful node, glowed with yammial mist.

I watched her as she entered our abode, and divesting herself of her winter clothes, which she folded up and, after questioning Mom with a look, laid in the proximity of the stove, revealed herself to be not a stocky old lady, but tall and still young, dark-skinned, with, what I remembered the most because it fit with her pattern, a scar under her left eye.

I say it *fit* with her pattern: it was beautiful; it seemed a material continuation of her entity, a rare physical emanation of the nature of her self. It, this scar, began about the width of a pinky finger under the nadir of the underneath arc of her eye, crossed the eye socket bone vertically, and then curved outward in a gentle arc, a thread of white in the dark of her face, like a vein of quartz in the red clay of the northlands.

It was beautiful: I remember sitting on her lap and following it with my finger, and when I did, she smiled. She didn't draw away, or say to my mother, "She's fascinated by my scar," or something in that vein; the nature of her reaction, and the nature of her expression as I touched her suggested that she thought I was touching her face in the way that any child might touch the face of any adult. She didn't, in other words, act as if she realized she had this blemish. She smiled as I touched her as she smiled at many things I said or did, and it was a smile that had the basic shape of a sad smile but which yet radiated life and joy, the smile of an entity that should have been scarred or damaged, but was so full of life and joy that she was not.

At five, I wasn't conceptualizing these things, I just saw that her smile and her scar mirrored each other, and that both fit with the pattern of her being, which tended to red, but was brilliantly highlighted by every other color imaginable, and very fine, as fine as any pattern I'd ever seen, spider-web thin in many places, delicate like gossamer, but with each thread twined with nibun, and vibrating with a sweet silent music—a pattern of exquisite beauty, and also scarred:

Patterns of being—and I'd seen enough of them even at five to understand this in an unarticulated way—often are damaged, in some way or another: parts twisted or distorted, strands torn asunder, whole sections destroyed. When this happens, sometimes the pattern doesn't heal at all, sometimes, even, the hole or damaged area gets bigger as time goes by, the damage itself doing further injury to the pattern; sometimes, some of the strands heal, grow back together, and the pattern re-forms in an imperfect replica of its former shape; sometimes, the pattern rearranges itself to counterbalance the missing part. In the pattern of Mrs. Camden's being were several areas, not small ones, either, where it was obvious that violent destruction had taken place, strands of entity torn apart, burned away, shattered; and in these areas, none of the usual rearranging or imperfect growing back had occurred, but rather a new and totally different pattern had been woven which yet blended with the whole, the whole pattern now more complex and to my mind more beautiful, even, than what it must have been with only its original strands. Imagine a quilt that has a hole in it, and when you mend it, the new patch accentuates the rest of the quilt even though it's different from the patch that was there before.

So, watching her, which consisted of experiencing her entity pattern at the same time as beholding her physical appearance, I took note of the parallel, the overlap, of the two. As I watched her, she observed me—shyly—and Mom, noticing this, said, "This is Yaan. Yaan, this is Mrs. Camden."

She lifted her hand to about shoulder-level, and opened her fingers in a shy wave. I responded with a similar motion, and then said, "What's Lake Latalla?"

Mom raised an eyebrow. When Rook raised an eyebrow, it could be either the right or the left one, and he might do it for any number of reasons; when Mom did, it was always the right one, and it almost always meant she was restraining me. Not chiding me, just pulling me back, harnessing my ebullience in some way, in this case, telling me to let Mrs. Camden have her

space, let her settle in, relax, don't bombard her with questions yet.

Mrs. Camden, however, responded only with ebullience herself, restrained but unmistakable. "Well, do you know Lake Twell?" She looked right into my eyes, hers, green like a young acorn, seeking connection.

I nodded. It was the upland lake just west of the four farms. From our home, we had but to cross the Gerbils' farm to get there, or more precisely, to get to the Brushknot, as we called it, which was, in my imagination, the welcoming party for Twell: At the western border of the Gerbils' farm, a short stick fence served as a puny but effective partitioner of worlds: on one side of it was farmland, and on the other a rambling underwood of goldtip trees, various herbs and wildflowers, broad swaths of switchgrass, and an array of tall shrubs standing like guardians around an abundance of squat, childlike tornleaf bushes. This underwood sloped upward in gentle undulations from the farm, thickening within a few hundred paces into a crowded but not unwelcoming brush of Fierce trees, eastern redfern, birdgrass, star-round, brell, wild violet, jaymoss, and other briars and brambles, before reaching a crest from which you could look down a slope of violet upon purple-blue Lake Twell, ringed but for the slope of violet by spindly trees, hanging willows, swirls of knee-high lakegrass, and a few clusters of reeds where cormorants and baga birds dawdled and dove.

Seeing memory and fondness in my nod, Mrs. Camden asked, "Have you ever been up past Twell—on west? Into the deeps?"

I shook my head. I loved weaving through the twackle of the leafy places beyond the farms, and that thickening of wood, the deeps, as Mrs. Camden called it, upslope from Lake Twell, promised a splendid overture of sound and color, but the far shore of Twell was the border of my world. Mom and I never went any farther than that: we might spend an afternoon in and

around Twell convening with the cormorants under an infinite sky, but whether we did that, or we just rounded the lake once and headed home, saying hello, as it were, to the vale's thousand little denizens, yeomen, Calib would say, according to Mom, of leaf and wing and blossom and claw, we never went on upward into darker wilds beyond. "We'll twell the deep another time," Mom would say when she saw me looking in wonder at the unfamiliar, and inviting, play of pattern in that western growth, but we never did.

I never went any farther than Lake Twell when wandering alone, either. At five, and without Mom to carry me when I got tired, Twell was at the edge of my endurance; and perhaps more importantly, Mom had forbidden me from going beyond it, or I should say beyond "the Sky Field," as we called the whole setting—Twell, the surrounds, the sky, the birds, the bugs—of our afternoon stops because of the multiplicity of crisscrossing patterns that I discerned there. "Don't go past the Sky Field, Yaan," she would say whenever she discerned a particular jubilant adventurousness about me as I set out on a trek. Such an arbitrary and capricious mandate wouldn't necessarily have kept me from continuing on once I had gained our usual stopping point, but added to the fact that I was usually quite fatigued when I got there, it did check me. Mom *might* not figure out that I had disobeyed her, but she had a way of knowing things, and it was possible, quite possible, in fact, that if she did know I had gone on beyond Twell against her wishes, she would level additional unreasonable mandates upon me. She might tell me that I couldn't even go *to* Twell, for example, or she might become more vigilant in her surveillance of me. So, for now, better to enjoy my current degree of freedom than to reach for more and lose what I had.

"Well," Mrs. Camden explained, with a face eager to share knowledge, "if you go around Lake Twell, and keep going for awhile, a few hundred paces, maybe a thousand..." She paused and peered at me, presumably to determine whether I

understood “a thousand,” which I didn’t other than to comprehend from context that it was a considerable but not prohibitive distance, and then continued, “The forest thickens. It gets real thick, like fairy thick, you know, and the land keeps going up and up, and just when you’re starting to think you’re going to walk up to the sky, it levels out, and you’re on a cliff overlooking Lake Latalla. A thick wood of tildoyas and oaks surrounds it, except on the north side. It’s much sparser, there. There’s trees there, and they’re real real tall, but there’s not that many of them, and then it thins out into a plain. The lake was frozen today, and there was a dancer out in the middle of it.

“Are they there?”

“Are they there...who do you mean?” Mrs. Camden looked puzzled, though not confused or lost—that is, she didn’t know what I meant but was expecting me to say something she hadn’t considered, and was eager and ready for whatever I might say.

“The fairies. Did you see any?” Of everything that she had said, what had most caught hold of my heartstrings was her description of the deepening woods above Lake Twell as “fairy thick.”

“No,” she said, with a smile of disappointment, “They were probably avoiding me. I am human, after all.” After a pause, she added, “I expected that; but I was hoping to see some Nokans down on the plain, like I did last time. But I didn’t; that was a little disappointing.”

“Nokans?” It was my turn to be puzzled, and to wait for an unexpected and delightful response.

By this time, Mom had retrieved the berries and apples and claycups of milk that had been warming on the stove, and dragged our makeshift couch, which consisted of a wool duvet stuffed with straw, hay, sawdust, feathers, and callaweed leaves spread over a willow frame that Mom had crafted, a little closer to the stove; and the three of us now huddled together under the extra blankets that in winter-time were always draped on the

arms of the couch ready for use, warm fruit in hand; and stayed, thus, as my beautiful Tahain would say, in a pocket of gold at the center of life, as Mrs. Camden and I talked and Mom sat there listening in quiet joy.

“You might have heard of the Nokan bulls?” I hadn’t, but I didn’t want to hinder Mrs. Camden’s narrative, so I made no indication as to whether I’d heard of them or not, and she continued, “If you travel around Lenima very far, you’re sure to hear someone gush about seeing a herd of white bulls out on the central plains. The Nokan Plain, if I understand my history, is way out west beyond the Mantle, but the Nokans have migrated, and in fact I’ve heard that they’ve been sighted as far east as Port Small. They’re celebrated far and wide, admired for their beauty and the beauty of their herds. It *is* quite breathtaking to see them, but I call them ‘Nokans,’ rather than ‘Nokan bulls,’ because there are just as many cows in those herds as there are bulls, probably more, and they’re just as beautiful as the bulls. ‘Nokans’ is a more inclusive word. Anyway, I was hoping to see them like I did last time, down on the plain, grazing among the giant tildoyas. It was quite a sight; there were thousands of them, and they seemed so bright white among the green. Of course, with the land dead and frozen and a little white with snow like today, the sight might not have been as impressive, but I was hoping to see them even so. I always think I might see a unicorn among them. I think they might be descended from unicorns, or the white stag. I’ve never seen a unicorn—or the white stag.”

Seeing my question, “What are unicorns?” in my eyes, she said, “Your mom hasn’t told you about unicorns?” Giving Mom the slightest of disapproving looks, she continued, “Unicorns are part horse, part goat, and all magic. I think they probably wander into our world through folds and creases in a dimensional fabric of some sort. Or,” she added with an at-once ironic and loving twinkle in her eye, “Maybe they’re created

when the repulsion strong magic has to strong magic is overcome by the bonding power of pure love.”

As I was considering the complex pattern her words suggested, she went on, “I think I did see a winged one, today, though.”

My ears perked up at this, because by “winged one,” I thought she meant dragon. Excited, I asked, “A dragon?” I had often scanned the sky for dragons; I wanted to see one. I don’t know why, or how, but I sensed that in addition to the beautiful magic of their flight and the beautiful strength of their winged forms, that their bodies would be their entity patterns, and their entity patterns would be their bodies; and this I wanted to see.

“No, it wasn’t one of those vagabond souls, the dragons; it was a human-shaped flyer, way up there, golden like the sun, Sunbright Ramblers I call them, or Creatures of the Sun—it depends on my mood—I see them every now and then. Most often, it’s a sunny day, but today I’m pretty sure I saw one up there among the clouds.”

“It was music?” In the subtle change of her tone when she spoke of this being, I heard, and saw the pattern of a delicate, empyreal chanson of mirth.

Mrs. Camden’s pattern glowed and her acorn-green eyes lit up with the joy of mutual insight. “Yes! You can barely hear it, maybe you can’t actually hear it, but can only sense it; but there’s a definite music about them—maybe, like, like, a comet tail, and the music, like dust, falls to the earth and echoes soundlessly wherever it lands.”

“Mom makes music.” Mrs. Camden’s mention of music brought to my mind the beautiful memory of Mom strumming her mandolin. She often had played it when I was quite little.

My earliest memory, in fact, is of listening to Mom playing the mandolin and singing to me. She’s a pretty good mandolin player, if you judge her not so much by the complexity or accuracy of what she can play, but in the sensitivity of it; and I was always absorbed by the physical texture of the sound

of plucked strings (notwithstanding the skill of the player), so I loved listening to her play. She didn't have what would be considered a good singing voice, not a strong one, a little husky, without a rich timbre; but it was beautiful, utterly beautiful, to me. It was a golden-brown color, splashed with flecks of purest yellow. It would tumble like smoke into all the angles and corners of our little house, weaving an ever-changing picture, intermingling with the red-and-blue streaked currents and swaths of the mandolin's notes, the voice and the strings together caressing my eyes, tickling my ears, inter-mingling with my mother's and my own strands of entity and the many strands of connection between the two of us, and soaking into me, soaking into the old walls, the fire pit, the meal table, and the old raggy couch, and seeming to make those old inhabitants of the home happy.

If we happened to be outside when she decided to weave her spell of song—and she did sing outside many a warm day, especially in Autumn—with me either sitting on her lap or beside her, or playing in the grass with a little trinket of some sort, the golden-brown of her voice and the red-blue of the mandolin would spin together into the leaves of the trees, dance with the sunlight there, weave a sky-tapestry with the patterns of the wind, wrap our little stone house in multi-colored ribbons, and touch the cows in the nearby hayfield, as well as any fieldworkers there, or passing entity, just kiss against them, shading them with gold and red.

Once, as I was basking in the interplay of sound and color produced by her song, just sitting there existing in the endless tiny space of my body and being, watching the beautiful intricate play of the strand and thread and tendril of the infinite patterns of existence, she began to play a strand of music that she had played before that I thought of as her memory of my father (whom I had never met). As her voice caressed the sound of the music with a sorrow and longing that nobody but me could have discerned, my eye caught a little spot of black, or

what I describe as black only because our language has no word for it, but is really a color that tears at the eye, erasing sight, or that ends existence and seems to erase sight because beholding it you're seeing non-existence. It was just a tiny little sphere of this black, or non-color, about the size of the head of a pin, in the midst of all the brilliant color around me, but I focused on it, because it was unusual, and as I looked at it, it grew, or I should say it took up a larger share of my vision, as if it were coming towards me, or I going towards it. It kept growing, soon becoming a discernible spheroid, and as it did, I became aware of the sensation that I was floating, which made me pretty sure I was going towards it, not it towards me. Soon, it had consumed almost all of my vision, and additionally, was overwhelming my senses. It had a forceful, not malevolent but insistent, unavoidable, dominating vibration that affected hearing and touch and smell and balance and even the senses of time and space, stunning them, as I thought a prolongation of thunder might.

As the now-huge sphere swallowed me, I thought I might cease to exist, but instead everything became clear. I floated in a crystalline bubble above a vast city where thousands of entities lived, many of them screaming, some in rage some in agony, many doing unspeakable things to one another. I watched these entities as they lived, and as my focus became sharper, their screaming became deafening, drowning out and finally extinguishing my mother's music. For a moment, I could see nothing—the screaming filled my eyes with blackness—but then I landed on solid ground, on a beautiful sunny plain of flowing green grass, the screams far behind me, and the sun in front of me. I knew, somehow, that this place was called the Field of Infinite Sky, and it seemed to me that I could either cry or laugh, whichever I chose.

I laughed in delight at the beauty around me, the patterns of the wind. Music arose from within me, different music from what Mom had been playing, music I'd never heard before, music I knew, without considering why, that I'd made myself, and

I started to run. I was still quite little, and could only run with tiny steps, but I moved with ease, and as fast and graceful as Mrs. Camden's white stag. I bounded, and I looked back, expecting many others to be following me, escaping that dark place of screams, but none were. I felt despair that they weren't coming with me. I thought they must somehow be trapped there, but the music moved my legs onward, and the joy of running overcame my despair, and when I looked back again, a boy a few years older than me was following me on the plain, and off to his left another boy, a few years older yet. But their strides were slow and awkward, their faces etched with effort and covered with sweat, and they kept falling down. This puzzled me, because they were older and stronger than I was, I who could go so effortlessly, and again I despaired because I thought something had happened to them in that place of screams that had hurt them forever. I wanted to go back to help them, but I knew I could only look back, I couldn't go back, my place was in the Field, and this made me sad because they were trying so hard. Again, though, the music moved my legs forward, and again joy overwhelmed sadness, and I kept going. When I looked back a third time, others were following the two boys, all of them stumbling and staggering along like drunken wildebeests but nevertheless making some small progress across that Field of Infinite Sky, away from the Place of Screams.

Mom still pulled her mandolin out now and then but not often enough that music wasn't a rare, and missed, treat. She *always* dusted it off at some point during Mrs. Camden's visits, however, and played long and well, which even though I loved Mrs. Camden apart from any effect she had on Mom, was not the least reason why, of the few visitors we got, Mrs. Camden was my favorite.

Mom strumming and singing was a joyous event for me in and of itself, but it signified an overall change in her that occurred during Mrs. Camden's visits. For one thing, as long as Mrs. Camden stayed with us, she didn't make me go to bed

until I was actually sleepy, and when I finally ran out of energy and went to bed of my accord, or just fell asleep, she and Mrs. Camden would stay up, and just talk. Mom wasn't a garrulous individual; sometimes, she'd go days without saying anything that didn't pertain to chores and tasks that had to be done; so it was a treat to listen to her trade words with Mrs. Camden (who, despite her friendliness when she and I first met, wasn't particularly garrulous, either: she loved to tell stories, but once the stories had been told, she was a quiet soul). Mom's small, husky voice and Mrs. Camden's flowing gemwater cadence wove together independent of the words they spoke, these two quiet souls, as I fell through velvet into dreamland, and all the while, and all through the days Mrs. Camden stayed with us, Mom's entity sang.

Once in awhile when Mrs. Camden came, Mom went away, leaving me in her friend's care for a few days, and those were joyous times, even though I missed Mom. Mrs. Camden was shy and reticent with me, though not wary or unaffectionate. She was not at all reluctant or hesitant to play with me, or to hold me—we got along as well as a couple of kittens from the same litter, I would say—it was more as if she were being deferential, somehow. It sometimes seemed as if she were the child and I the favorite aunt or grandmother that she didn't want to annoy by demanding too much attention. If, for example, she sat down beside me while I was playing with some pebbles, her manner would be reticent; and then if I regarded her without a bright smile she would say, "Sorry, I didn't mean to bother you," and make as if to leave me be, until I assured her I wanted her to stay.

Ultimately, she knew she was the adult, though: whenever a knock came at the door, many tendrils of her entity snapped into a taut, smooth, organized formation, and I found that no matter what I did to reach the door before her, I couldn't. Over time, it came to be a challenge to do so, and I employed a bevy of feints, darts, and dashes to get past her, but

somehow she always stayed between me and the door until she knew that the conveyor of the knock meant no harm.

She was a better cook than Mom was, so we ate well when she was there, or at least enjoyably, the casseroles, potages, and stews of fruit, vegetables, beans, and meat that were our regular fare having a more palatable texture to them when she prepared them than when Mom did, along with a more agreeable combination of herbs and spices, and probably most importantly, some sugar added.

She and I played a plethora of games, too, just little activities we—mainly she—made up on the spot, using any of the various little trinkets we had available to us: rocks, sticks, leaves, coins, strings, spools of thread, eating utensils. I think my love of games started during those short vacations with Mrs. Camden. And she'd read to me when I asked her to, particularly at bedtime, since that was the time it was Mom's habit to read to me; and she was a quiet but very expressive reader. I loved listening to her, almost as much as I loved listening to Mom—more so, at times.

The longest stint that Mrs. Camden ever took care of me was during the summer of my ninth year. Mom was away for about ten days during Hobwan, and along about the eighth day of her absence, a knock came at the door, and it was Rook.

I knew it was Rook even before the knock came, because the game Mrs. Camden and I were playing at the time involved observing our old souse door and imagining the smallest possible change of it that would metamorphosize the entire spirit of its appearance; and I saw him approaching. I rushed to the door to open it, or I should say I *tried* to rush to it, because as usual I found that Mrs. Camden had somehow slid unnoticeably between me and it.

“Can I help you?” she said, upon answering it herself, even as I yelled, “It's Rook! It's okay!”

He effected a double-eyebrow raise, which was unusual for him—normally, he preferred one eyebrow or the other—and said, “Hey!”

She studied him but didn’t respond, and he, as if to explain his unaccustomed excitement, said, “I was the kid.”

Mrs. Camden softened then, her pattern de-mobilizing, and she said, not with a smile, but a nod and a look of compassion that suggested a smile, “Oh yes, sorry, you’ve grown. How...” I lost her words as she joined him outside, somehow getting the door shut before I could wedge through the crack. They talked for a few moments in increasingly hushed tones; I could hear their voices but couldn’t decipher their words, and when she came back in, I knew there was a disruption in the pattern of the four farms. Something was amiss.

She told me we were taking a walk out to Lake Twell, which was a thing we did, Mom and I as well as Mrs. Camden and I, but never under orders, from Mom, let alone Mrs. Camden. Always, either of them would ask me if I would care to take a walk—and that only if I didn’t ask them if they wanted to first; and if I said I didn’t want to take one, that would be that. Mrs. Camden was one of those rare individuals whose pattern isn’t affected by fear, so I couldn’t determine whether real danger was at hand, but I thought so. She laced my shoes quickly, which was strange since I could lace them myself by then. The deftness of her fingers was amazing; they were a blur.

With this unusual prologue, we went out into a warm, hazy blue Hobwan day, and headed in quick silence to Lake Twell. The unusualness of the situation evolved at the onset of our journey: instead of heading across the Gerbils’ farm, as we always did when we went to Twell, we went south, through Dallidoe property, right through a cornfield, in fact, the stalks of which reached above my head, and to Mrs. Camden’s shoulder. This route, while not unpleasant—I always liked the silent simple muggy bugginess of a Hobwan cornfield—was strange, and contributed to the feel of danger that Mrs. Camden’s behavior

suggested. Yet, her pattern remained as still as ever as we crossed Dallidoe territory from cornfield to cornfield, until swinging west near the southern border of the farms, we crossed into Gerbil territory where Rook and Jake, grimy and dirty-shirted, were waiting in a hayfield, Rook lounging on a hay roll, and Jake astride Ordvod, the porse, or hony, as some called them, a species native, Jake had once told me, to this area of Lenima, who Farmer Green had caught and tamed many years ago.

Jake greeted Mrs. Camden, “Shamodes told me you had replaced the little captain; nice to see you, you look as slackjawed and glazed-eyed as ever.”

Mrs. Camden responded with a distantly brusque, “Your flattery needs work,” and then swung me up onto Ordvod in front of Jake, in a circle made by his arms and the reins, and then with no more words than, “I’ll go ahead, Rook why don’t you drop back,” she strode ahead, waist-high in the clover-green nattagrasi, her green cloak camouflaging her.

Jake waited until she was some paces ahead of us, then got Ordvod going with a flick of his wrist, Rook fell in another few lengths behind us, and we went, thus, in single file, in silence across the Gerbil hayfields, which I’d not known they had. The last time I’d been down that way, it had all been cornfields and cowyards. Jake smelled like a mixture of man sweat and manure, but I refrained from telling him that he stunk. Even though I knew he’d appreciate such honest bluntness, I could never bring myself to tease him. Not until we had crossed the Gerbils’ hayfields did we head back north along the stick fence that marked the border of their farm, coming at length to the broken part of the fence, which was where we usually left the four farms and headed to Lake Twell, and where we did today, as well.

I loved going places with Mrs. Camden, and I loved going places with Jake and Rook, listening to them talk as my consciousness spread into the patterns of the surrounding world,

and I thought it would be wonderful to listen to the three of them converse, and to see their spirits and entity patterns intermingle, but I could see that wasn't going to happen, so as we made our gradual ascent up the brushknot, picking our way through the shrubs and wildflowers and switchgrass and little goldtip trees there, I settled in to enjoy a quiet trip to Lake Twell. Rocked into a state of sleepy serenity by the calm gait and earthy smell of Ordvod, the reassuring presence (and earthy smell) of Jake, the slobby heat of Hobwan, and the banter of hawks and frogs, I forgot about the possibility of danger that had seemed so close just a while ago, and half-dozed (Mrs. Camden and I had stayed up late playing games the night before), and half-melted into the pattern of my surroundings, as we eased along.

The next time I was fully awake, we had come to the violet-fringed path of long grass, sweet bay, and spindly willow trees that encircled Lake Twell. We were rounding the lake, passing the cluster of reeds where the cormorants frolicked. As, about halfway around, we began to feel the subtle upward slope of the land, I watched the purple-blue ripples for signs of frogs or turtles but refrained from calling out when I saw one, for the silence of the company remained unbroken, not even the ever-irreverent Jake tempted to say anything. I thought we would halt on the high ground on the far side of Twell, where Mrs. Camden and I, or Mom and I, often picnicked, and that Mrs. Camden, who was knowledgeable of all the edible plants and berries of the area, would find some food for us, but when we came to that high slope of lush switchgrass "a flood or two," as Mom described it, above the water, Mrs. Camden just kept going. The vegetation didn't change immediately, but it was within a few steps past Lake Twell that there was a shift in our gait, the upwards-ness becoming more pronounced.

We kept going up, the way difficult enough that Ordvod had to lean into his steps. I leaned with him, and behind me so did Jake, and concentrating on this synchronization, the passing

from the young vibrance of Lake Twell into a much older and more ruggedly forested area of steep, curving ridges was almost imperceptible, to me, at least. I noticed at some point that the flavor of our surroundings had changed, and looked back in my saddle as Ordvod continued on, sure-footed and uncomplaining, and was quite surprised at how high we'd gotten, and as we went on whenever I looked back I was surprised anew. Below us, the leafy *pathish* places where'd we'd walked, flat and relatively devoid of shrubs and groundcover, amidst tangles of brush and briars and occasional drop-offs and near-cliffs, seemed distant both in space, and, somehow, time, as if it had been days since we'd been down there.

The trees became taller as we went along, and more plentiful, ancient oaks abounding along with grand tildoyas, and even a few elephant trees. The underbrush and groundcover became sparser; and the earth ever ascended, so that gazing ahead at eye-level, the leaf-covered loam that rose before us was like unto a canvas, a many-shaded backdrop of brown that accentuated the details of the scene—the tree trunks, the rough ridgelines, and the underbrush of broadleaf plants, briars, and an occasional wildflower, predominately violets. Twitterers and chirpers added their music to the cries of the croakers and piercers that dominated the Lake Twell valley; and the cacophony of the insects increased in volume and intensity, as screamers and yellers joined in with the Twell buzzers. Squirrels skittered about everywhere, and the absolute fresh clarity of the Twell air welcomed in the odor of old leaf and an indefinable effluvium of ancientness.

And suddenly, or what seemed sudden to me, who was lost in the music of the way upward, we stood upon a steep ridge overlooking a long, ovular, lake—Lake Latalla, I knew, for it looked just as Mrs. Camden had described it. Far below us—and I thought, looking at it, that it would take an agile climber indeed to descend to the lake from where we stood—it shimmered, teal, the sun blazing within it, reflected as by a

mirror, with wavering sprays and striations of light dancing out in all directions from both a central circle and a comet tail. Straight across the lake from us, as well as at the “end” of it to our left, a dense wood of big, old, oaks, souse, and hickories, towering wambawams, and majestic tildoyas, descending in layers from, it seemed to me, far far away, crowded almost up to the edge of the lake, while to the north (to our right), shrubs and groundcover giving way to lush grass formed a plain of vibrant, brilliant green sparsely populated with massive tildoyas—the plain where Mrs. Camden had said herds of Nokans grazed. This plain ascended towards the horizon, dividing the forest, widening, ever widening, until at the northern horizon, the world was a plain.

I remembered the story Mrs. Camden had told about Lake Latalla long ago (or what seemed long ago): the nameless dancer, the Nokans, the fairies, the winged ones; so at the same time as absorbing the wonderfulness of the lake and its surroundings; I was looking, among the conglomeration of the patterns of Latalla and their many layers of interconnection, for some sign of that “otherworld” she had described. I didn’t immediately see anything that differed in fundamental structure from the patterns of Twell and its surroundings—they were sisters, Latalla the larger, older, sister of Twell—but something in the shape of shadow in the deeps of the surrounding forest, in an almost imperceptible mist, as subtle as the floating fragrances of leaf and blossom that curled above the lake surface and hung like starlight on the branches of the trees, and in the solemn paths of several great birds, which Mrs. Camden would inform me later were herons, from one side of the lake to another, and even in the flash of sun on the water, brighter than the sun itself, suggested that beings of unbelief, as Mrs. Camden called them because most people didn’t believe they existed, might be near, in the unseen creases and folds of the lake valley.

“The lake seems to be on fire,” Rook commented; he, like me, was taking in the beauty below and around us with not

reverence, or even appreciation precisely, but joyfulness; and was compelled to call attention to it in his non-didactic way.

“Reminds me of the Lake of Names.” That was Jake.

I thought, “Another lake!” Twell had always been such a wonderful one-of-a-kind destination that I had considered lakes rare and exotic; but here was another, Latalla, a short walk beyond Twell, and now Jake was talking about a third one which I imagined must be nearby, as well.

“It does seem to be on fire, Rook,” Mrs. Camden agreed, “Maybe a water phoenix will rise!” The latter part of the statement was directed more at me than at Rook.

“That’s a reasonable expectation,” Jake said, with exaggerated expressionlessness, “appropriate for one your extravagant intellect.”

With thoughtful earnestness, Mrs. Camden said, “‘Extravagant intellect.’ That’s a good one; did you come up with that, or did you hear it in one of those, uh, places, you frequent.”

“Places? Whatever do you mean, Mrs. Camden?”

“Surely you don’t want a lady to say the word, Mr. Exeter.”

“I’m just trying to figure out what you’re referring to. But in any case, no, I actually heard it in a public bathhouse over in Freeport. The fellow who was crapping beside me knew you.”

Mrs. Camden indulged him. “Is that so?”

“Yeah, he revealed as much between grunts and groans. Let’s see if I can replicate what he said, in the manner he said it. It was something like this: ‘Mrs. ahh ohh, Camden, ahh ooh, extrav, ohh, uh, extravagant, ohhh, ahhh, intellect.’ And then he died, right there. I think it was halfway out. He was pretty constipated, I guess.”

Without batting an eye, Mrs. Camden said, “An almost overpoweringly charming story, Mr. Exeter. You’ve outdone yourself!”

As the two of them continued to exchange ribs, their words falling about me, quite, like water from a great bird, I found, as I took in Lake Latalla, that while amidst the myriad interconnecting patterns of the lake's ecosystem, as well as among the many layers of greenery, I was in some sense hoping to see any of the beings Mrs. Camden had mentioned, I was seeking in particular for a dancer, the nameless dancer.

I asked Mrs. Camden, "What did the nameless dancer look like? How did she dance?"

Years lay between her sighting of the nameless dancer and the timeless present, but she needed no clarification; delighted (to judge from the sparkle in her eye and the glow of her entity pattern) that I remembered her words of greeting from the day we met, or more precisely, the day I met her, she paused from her battle of wits with Jake to say, "He was beautiful. I would say, his dance wasn't graceful in the sense that that word is usually used, there wasn't a flowing lightness of foot, and there was a, a goofiness about it, I suppose you could say, a carefree goofiness, but a joy in the movement, and a fluidity born of great strength and balance rather than an attempt at rhythm or flow. The arms and the legs..."

She went on a bit longer, trying to describe the details as well as the spirit of the dance, her words, without doubt, not a perfect portrait of the movements of the nameless dancer; but as she spoke, some of the strands of her entity pattern formed, in miniature, the pattern of the movements that she was attempting to describe; and though I never saw that pattern on the shores of Lake Latalla, today the pattern of Rook's movements as he ran across the big cowyard with me on his shoulders, was nearly identical to it. And that's how I knew it had been he who Mrs. Camden had seen out on Lake Latalla that long-ago morning. Rook was the nameless dancer.

HAYNTA-4

The boy who crossed the Norgold Mountains in winter, I imagined as Nolk, the janitor:

The first thing I noticed when I came to Clarks Hill, and I don't think I was unique in this respect, was the janitors. They were hard to miss: Possessed of solemn, nigh unto righteous, bearings and garbed in orange, hooded robes, they invited attention. As you got used to them, they faded into the background and you *almost* didn't notice them, any more than you'd notice janitors wearing regular work clothing; but when I first arrived they seemed to me to swarming about the place like ants. One got the impression they were everywhere: amidst the subtle greens of the grounds and the faded blocks and stones of the schoolbuildings and its surrounding wall, they stuck out. They were, and I'm sure still are, one of the first things visitors notice when they come to grand old Clarks Hill Institute. I think the administrators have always been happy about that, too: it's a memorable, distinguishing feature of the place.

But why? Why, you ask, do the janitors wear orange robes? I, for one, was most assuredly curious about that when I first saw them. Well, and this I heard from Mr. Chimneylark, the history teacher before Mrs. Catnip came, the Institute commenced its illustrious career as a monastery.

The Monks of the Iron God built the majority of the structures that now comprise Clarks Hill about 250 years ago, at the height of the Monastery fad in the troubled years leading up to the Shark War. The construction took four years, and when the building was at last complete and the grounds seeded with the appropriate vegetation, the good Monks spent their days meditating, worshipping the Iron God, denying themselves the basic necessities of life in the name of piety, and, naturally, wearing orange robes.

They intended these robes to be the color of raw iron, which in the Clarks Hill area is a reddish-gray, but as the story

goes, the dyer botched the order, and the robes ended up a lot nearer to orange than red. Some 120 years later, as the era of the monastery was coming to a close, the Order of the Iron God, one of the last of these religious communities, or “stalwarts of elegance,” as they described themselves, “against a rising flood of banality,” sold the place to the founders of the Institute. It wasn’t their wish to sell it—in their minds, they remained an active order—but their company had dwindled to such a paltry number of monks, and these holdouts of such an advanced average age that despite the zealous dedication of their spirits they could no longer take care of the grounds, or the buildings.

So pious were they, however, that in the contract for the transaction, they stipulated that the by-then signature orange robes be worn by the teachers of the new Institute, their hope being that the robes themselves would transform the teachers into vessels for the spread of the Iron God’s law. The founders of the Institute would not agree to this stipulation, however, and after much wrangling a compromise was reached in which the janitors, or “caretakers of the holy grounds,” as the Institute founders worded it, with delicate tact, would wear the robes.

In time, the Order of the Iron God died out, but by then the wearing of the robes was such a tradition that the agreement, which with no Monks remaining to lodge a protest, could have been ignored without any legal ramifications, was never breached. The only conduct of the Institute that could have been considered a breach, even if the Order *had* still been around to cry foul, was that in successive manufactures, the robes became a much brighter orange than those that the monks had worn.

So, the conclusion in the present day of all of this sky-larking was that as we (that is, the students of Clarks Hill, if I’m to include myself in that company, which seems appropriate in this instance, it being a case of literal experience rather than spiritual accord) went to class and studied, went to the dining hall and ate, and went to our dormitories and goofed around, orange-robed janitors, with their faces shadowed by hoods, spread out

all over the grounds and in the edifices like burglars after a bloody battle, cleaning and maintaining the place. The hoods-up thing wasn't an actual tradition or expectation by which the Monks had lived, but a rule of the boss janitor of the present, as I learned later: He strongly encouraged all of "his janitors" to keep their hoods up at all times. He would have made a very pious abbot.

You could see in the slumping, slouching gaits of most of the janitors, along with their gray beards, glazed eyes, and faces frozen in attitudes of dissipated outrage that their number was dominated by old, spiritless individuals; but there were a few young ones among them, and of these, Nolk was probably the youngest. He wasn't much older than the oldest of the students. He wasn't much older than me.

It's hard to say how long he'd been working at the Institute before he came into my purview. It could have been a day, or it could have been a month. As I've said, the janitors became part of the setting of the place, part of the background, and we, the students, didn't take notice of them. But when my eyes *did* by chance lock onto him for the first time, cleaning a fountain, as I recall, I *always* noticed him thereafter. I couldn't not notice him.

I could identify him even before he had a face, that is, before I saw him with his hood back: Something in the way he moved was beautiful to me and set him apart from the other janitors, a youthful spring, I suppose, but also a care he took in everything he did, from polishing the stone fountains and benches in the Nonagon, to tending the vegetation, to raking leaves, to mopping the floors or dragging bags of waste from the lavatories, a smoothness or grace in his motion, which, however, gave the impression that it wasn't a genetic, or inherited trait, but was born of long practice and a respect for *something*, something intangible. Life itself, maybe.

Needless to say, I loved watching him work. I craved it. I looked forward to going out into the Nonagon to study, so that

I could watch him. The Nonagon was the area within, and surrounded (on nine sides), by the nine buildings of the Institute; it was an area of winding brick walkways, stone fountains and basins, stone and granite statues of people and animals, and hundreds, well, *a* hundred wood and/or stone tables and benches, all richly garnished with an assortment of bushes, decorative grass, small trees, flower arrays, ferns, and other leafy vegetation. It was a plum study area (and indeed, not an insignificant number of plum trees were numbered among its items of vegetation). I seldom went there, myself, because, it being so pleasant, it was very popular, and thus crowded, unless the weather was uncooperative. Even if staying in my room to study was precluded because Turta had a bunch of squawking gabbling visitors, I preferred the library despite the lovely greenery of the Nonagon, because, for one thing, the library was quiet, and more importantly, I could hide in a booth there, where I could do my thing without feeling accosted by the closeness of so many prying, judgmental eyes.

A.N., though (“after Nolk”), the Nonagon became my first choice in study areas. Every day, when I got back from my classes, I would look out the window of my room, scan as far up and down the Nonagon as I could, and if I located him tending the gardens, scrubbing a fountain, or otherwise working on the grounds, I’d go out and sit at the unoccupied table nearest to him. I’d say I located him about 40% to 50% of the time: sometimes he was tending to the grounds or buildings somewhere outside of the Nonagon, and sometimes, I’m sure, I just couldn’t find him. The Nonagon was a large enough area that despite his being easy to distinguish from the other janitors, pinpointing him amongst all the activity there, not to mention the vegetation, wasn’t a sure thing.

So, after a year and a half of never, or rarely, “hittin’ the Nonagon,” which was a common student euphemism for studying, I was a regular. I wasn’t really studying, though. I was *half-studying*, and half watching Nolk, glancing up to look

directly at him as often as I dared, and otherwise letting my eyes wander towards him in their sockets while maintaining a tilt of the head indicative of deep absorption in the books and papers before me. It was strange: I considered myself invisible to every other student, who as a group were unabashedly unobservant anyway, and yet I was fearful that I would get caught watching the janitor. Did I believe I would get ridiculed, or jeered for such an indiscretion? I doubt it, but I didn't under any circumstances want to get caught watching him, and, which was even more important, I didn't want him to catch me watching him. That, I thought, would be appalling! So, I was circumspect in my observations.

Now, as much as I was drawn to him, as much as I liked watching him, as much as I just plain liked *him*, in the sense you can like anybody without ever having interacted with them, I had no intention of ever saying anything to him—that, I knew, would be well beyond the borders of my courage—nor did I have any expectation that he would ever say anything to me; but just as Mrs. Camden's class gave me something to look forward to in the morning, so his presence gave me something to look forward to in the afternoon. And, well, sometimes you talk to people without knowing it.

I talked to myself all the time, as I'm sure most people who don't have any friends do. When I was alone, I talked loudly, or I should say, at a standard two-person conversational volume, which I think would be considered loud by talking-to-yourself standards, which I'm sure somebody wrote out somewhere at some time, probably while he or she was talking to himself or herself. If anybody else was in my vicinity, however, which was more the norm, I muttered. I muttered to myself; in fact, my nickname back home was Miss Mutter. "Afternoons in the Nonagon," which is what I would title this short era of my life, I kept silent when I was watching Nolk; but if in the midst of my observations, he'd happen to finish his work in the Nonagon, and depart, leaving me with only the *half-studying*

part of my half-studying, half-watching Nolk dichotomy of activity, and therefore opening up 50% of my time, a discussion with myself would at some point, sooner than later, commence. It's possible, indeed probable, that I muttered a *little bit* even while I was keeping an eye on him, it was such an ingrained behavior of mine.

In any case, one unseasonably cool day in mid-spring, I had made my usual mid-afternoon nest in the Nonagon, happy that the day was cool, because as on most unfavorable weather days, the Nonagon crowd was thin, the atmosphere of it less *busy* than the norm, and the ambient sound less of a roar, more of a murmur. I was sitting in the vicinity of a lilac bush, whose sweet aroma added to the ebullience of my mood, and had been doing my half-and-half thing for a decent while, casually reading selections from Jumpere's abstruse treatises about alternate realities that were coyly inserted into Chapter Four of my philosophy book, and watching Nolk tend to various plants; when to my disappointment, he departed, his tasks in the Nonagon evidently completed for the moment.

The janitors, Nolk among them, had been working long hours in the Nonagon, planting the spring flowers and freshening the paths with gravel and bark, which was good in that it meant that Nolk was there almost every afternoon but bad in that because of the nature of much of this work, which was more dynamic than for example standing in one spot for hours scrubbing a fountain, it was more difficult to keep track of where he was. Also, he was apt at any time to depart the Nonagon for a bit, to go get another barrow-full of gravel or bark, for example, or to run an errand for one of the other janitors. As he had today, leaving me to study with Jumpere, and, of course, to mutter to myself.

In one voice, I said, "Well, this sucks."

In a higher but more masculine voice, I said, "Oh, I don't know about that. There's some interesting stuff there. It's funny that Joecon called him 'Jumper,' for example."

In the first voice, I said, “And why is that funny?”

In the second voice, I replied, “Because he jumped dimensions, in a way.”

“That’s a bit of a stretch.”

“I don’t think it’s *that* much of a stretch.”

“These dimensions, it seems like just a lot of mumbo jumbo to me. All this about alternate timelines, infinite possibilities. I suppose *you* take it as serious discourse.”

“Sure, I don’t think it’s ‘mumbo jumbo,’ as you so eloquently put it. I think it’s possible that all of those possibilities exist. It’s not impossible that they do, if I may say so.”

“Good one...but doesn’t he mean that for any event, in the past, you know, there *were* infinite possibilities, and that once one thing happened, all those other possibilities became impossibilities? For instance, when I get up from this bench, I could walk away in any of several different directions, and then depending on what direction I walk, my next action could be this or that or this, and then depending on which of those actions I take, my next action would be this-this, this-that, this-this, or that-this, that-that, that-this, or this-this, this-that, this-this, you see what I mean, and so on for the rest of my life, so that the number of exact paths I might take in my life would be, for all practical purposes, infinite. But once I’ve lived my life, the number of these paths would be reduced to one, and every other path would be an impossibility, right?”

“No I think he means that every single one of those paths exists—happened, will happen, is happening, I don’t know—in some dimension or another, an alternate timeline, if you will.”

I said, with as much dramatic flair as I could muster (which wasn’t much, if truth be known), “I was afraid that was what he meant.”

At this point, I happened to glance to my right, where the lilac bush was flanked by a fountain, and who was there, but Nolk, in profile to, but turned at a slight angle towards me,

scrubbing the fountain with a special split-bristle brush that the janitors used for polishing the statues and fountains. How long he'd been there, and how much of my ridiculous conversation he'd heard, there was no way for me to know.

His dark face was shadowed by the orange hood of his robe, but I could see it in vivid detail: the texture of his skin, the gleam and green striations of his eyes, the scars on his cheek, forehead, and chin. It wasn't the first time I'd seen his face—he worked with his hood back on occasion (specifically, I learned later, when the certain janitors who would be liable to tell the boss janitor that he had “unhooded” himself were not around)—but this was the first time I'd seen it so close up, and the beauty I had discerned in the way that he moved was reflected and magnified there. Or so I told myself later: let's just say that my being, which includes my body, my mind, and that thing that as Mrs. Camden would say, cannot be encapsulated by the sum of one's body and mind, let's call it a soul, responded to him, strengthening the visceral draw I already had to him.

And he was smiling in amusement.

I was so startled he was there that it took a beat for my shyness to kick in, and I said, “What's the matter? Don't you ever talk to yourself?”

Without pausing from his work, he said in the quiet, off-hand way I was to learn he had of saying almost everything, “I used to.”

At this point, another janitor, an older one, joined him at the fountain, with the words, “Is there a problem, Brother Nolk?” (Which is when I learned that his name was Nolk.)

“No,” he said, busying himself with renewed vigor, brush to stone.

“Good,” the old janitor said, with, in my humble opinion, an undercurrent of threat in his voice. And that was that, the end of my first conversation with Nolk, a veritable summit meeting it was; but it was the beginning.

DIRK-1

Recording P-002 [Transcriber's Note: Most pauses, mis-speaks, mispronunciations, and occurrences of "uh," "um," and "you know" have been edited out.]

Dirk: So, to review: What's the name of this House?

Rowan: House of Dog.

Dirk: That's right; and the name of the House over there?

Rowan: House of Falcon.

Dirk: And down Falcon River, to the south?

Rowan: [Thinking] House of Porcupine!

Dirk: No, they're to the north, along with Badger and Hedgehog, and I haven't told you this, yet, but House of Fox. A little one—a mini-stronghold—but Fox even so.

Rowan: [Indulgently wide-eyed] Wow!

Dirk: That means a lot to you, eh?

Rowan: [Nods guilelessly]

Dirk: So, to the south?

Rowan: Uhhhh, House of Monkey!

Dirk: [Chuckling] No, it's *not* House of Monkey. House of Whale, remember? And a real small House of Cat branch. A "fragment," they call it.

Rowan: Fragment of Cat?

Dirk: Yes. No; they still call it House of Cat, even though it's a fragment. I suppose, well, I don't know whether it's officially something like Fragment of House of Cat, or just House of Cat. Maybe it *is* Fragment of Cat; I'll have to ask.

Rowan: What's the biggest House?

Dirk: The biggest house? That's a tough question, because, well, it's a tough question for several reasons.

Rowan: [Helpfully] When I ask Mind a tough question, he starts asking *me* questions.

Dirk: Yeah, people don't like to admit they don't know things. Just say, "I don't know," it's no big deal.

Rowan: [Nods and waits]

Dirk: The first reason it's a tough question is because nobody takes a census. Well, they do, but the way they do it, they just ask the Houses how many members they have; so they're relying on the accuracy as well as the honesty of every single House.

Rowan: [Nods uncertainly]

Dirk: And that's not good. As far as accuracy goes, I'm sure that some Houses just don't care what their population, or member count, or whatever you want to call it, is, so never take the time to count it up, and others have incompetent administration, and probably mis-count their numbers. And as far as honesty goes, well, there's not many honest people out there to

begin with, and Houses have motives for misrepresenting their numbers. Like during a drought or something, the higher they say their numbers are, the more aid they'll get from House of Leopard. See what I mean?

Rowan: Yes. No. Yes!

Dirk: Okay. The second reason it's a tough question is that, well, what House is the biggest depends on whether you mean one stronghold of a house, or *all* the strongholds (or fragments) put together; and even then it's unclear.

Rowan: Huh?

Dirk: Take House of Bear. They've only got a couple of places, strongholds, outposts, whatever you want to call them—they call them houses, but that gets confusing because then you don't know whether they're talking about the one place, or the whole House—the house or the House. But anyway, Bear's only got a couple of these, but those two are quite big, possibly among the biggest individual outposts in all of Lenima. Whereas, well, House of Dog, here, this is a little place, but...

Rowan: [Laughing]

Dirk: Why are you laughing?

Rowan: Because you're being funny. This is a big place.

Dirk: [Laughs] No, it's really not. There's 35 people here. Those House of Bear places I was mentioning, they have hundreds.

Rowan: [Laughing, and shaking his head] You're tricking me!

Dirk: No, they really do. I'm serious.

Rowan: Really?

Dirk: Truly.

Rowan: Wow! 35 is a lot, though.

Dirk: It's pretty small compared to those House of Bear places, and across all of Lenima, none of the House of Dog strongholds are very big, certainly nowhere close to as big as those Bear fortresses. But there's a whole bunch of them, of Dog houses. There's a conglomeration out west—there's even a city called Dogtown—and there's a conglomeration down south, and a smattering in between. So, there's more Dog outposts than Bear outposts, but the Bear outposts are bigger, so the total number of Dogs versus Bears might be pretty close. See what I mean.

Rowan: Yes: eight times two is the same as two times eight.

Dirk: Hey, yeah! That's great! There's also the question of whether all of the strongholds of a House actually constitute a House, or not. It depends on the cohesiveness of the organization of the House. House of Dog, for instance, there's no real relationship between us and the guys down south. I suppose if it came to a war between houses, which there won't be because of House of Leopard, but theoretically, if it did, I suppose we'd band together, although I'm not *completely* sure of that, but as far as industry and agriculture goes, there's no sharing of resources or bounty or even information as far as I know. Maybe if one stronghold has a really really tough year or something; but we have very little contact with them. So are all the Dog houses one House? I *guess*, but like with House of Cat or House of Tiger...

Rowan: Tiger? What's that?

Dirk: Uh, I think this is one of those times where I start asking you questions.

Rowan: Okay, go ahead. I'm ready.

Dirk: I meant I don't know. Remember what you said Mind does when he doesn't know something?

Rowan: He knows it, he just won't tell me.

Dirk: I guess a tiger must be an animal. Vonnae said she once came across a reference to a tiger in an ancient book, and it was referenced in the same place as a lion.

Rowan: House of Lion!

Dirk: Yeah, as in House of Lion—but we know what a lion is, it's like a cougar, but bigger. You find them way out west sometimes, not around here. So she thinks a tiger is probably sort of like a lion. Most of the names of the Houses are animals, although there are a few I know of that aren't, House of Bone comes to mind, and House of Rain, so it seems likely that Tiger is an animal of some sort. Same with Crocodile and Yak and Cyborg and a bevy of others that nobody knows what they refer to. I've scoured the library and I can't find any trace of any of those words in any book except in reference to the Houses themselves. Those *are* all minor Houses, except for Tiger. *It's* a great big House.

Rowan: It's the biggest?

Dirk: *One* of the biggest. Yes, to get back to your original question, yes, as I was saying, like Dog, here, the affiliations be-

tween the different Dog houses is pretty loose; but like Cat, down the river, you know, Cat [pointing], they're a tight organization. All the different Cat strongholds, and there's not that many of them, but all of them, they're interconnected pretty intricately.

Rowan: They share stuff?

Dirk: Yeah, revenue and like I was saying, the bounty, the resources, information, everything is divvied out in equal portions, or pretty much so, between all the houses—all the strongholds, even the “fragment” down there. And the same for Tiger, and Tiger has quite a few houses, and most them are big ones, too, so it's a big big House. Maybe it is the biggest, I don't know. From what I hear, in terms of revenue, Jaguar might be bigger, that's another animal I'm not sure about, and Wolf.

Rowan: *I* know what a wolf is.

Dirk: Me too, that's not what I meant. I meant like Jaguar, Wolf might be bigger than Tiger,

Rowan: Is there a House of Yelg Wolf?

Dirk: I don't think so. At least, not that I know of. Who would name their house yelg wolf? Ha! So, to answer your original question, I guess I'll go with, well, there's one more thing I was going to mention, you've also got to consider alliances between Houses. Like the Houses of Squirrel, Rabbit, Chipmunk, and Raccoon have a longstanding alliance—so longstanding in fact, that a lot of the other Houses have a name for the conglomeration of the four, “The Underworld.” I think there are a few other tiny houses in the alliance, too. And any House is likely to form an alliance or an association with any other House, even now,

with Leopard's oversight. But I guess the Underworld isn't a House, per se, so, I'd probably have to go with Wolf for sheer numbers, maybe Tiger for influence—other than Leopard of course. But I don't know, and I might be way off. All the information I've gotten could be inaccurate; adults aren't exactly careful about what they tell kids, you know.

Rowan: I could ask Mind?

Dirk: Would he tell you?

Rowan: No, he'd start asking me questions about what I thought the biggest House was. But maybe I could tell him to show me the biggest House, at the present time, and then I could describe to you what it looked like, and you'd know based on what it looked like which House it was.

Dirk: Hmm, that could work, I suppose, but I've never actually been...

[commotion in the background, long pause]

Dirk: We'll have to resume this later. Adults think you're a lazy bum if you're not doing something that's convenient to them, or producing something that is helpful to them.

Rowan: Okay.

End recording.

ROWAN-5

“Thanks, Mind,” I murmured, as Dr. Mulgar eyed me with voracious curiosity.

Before Vonnae, I often awakened somewhere in the night in a panic. I should say, rather, that *my body* was in a panic, for I never actually felt afraid. If I had been afraid, I could have alleviated my fear without difficulty: I could have verified that I was lying in my bed, the same bed I slept on every night, I could have opened the door to my bedroom to reassure myself that nobody was sneaking around the house in the dark, I could have checked the outside door to make sure that whoever had departed last had pressed the buttons that locked it; but I didn't have to, or feel the need to. I knew that everything was as it always was; all was well, all was calm, there was nothing to fear.

Yet, on such nights, my heart would be beating with a rapidity that exceeded what I considered its capacity. One beat would follow another with increasing frenzy, each one gaining on and catching up with the one before it, so that instead of beating, my heart would seem to be *whirring*, although I knew it had to be beating. Or did it? The Grail said that your heart beat until you died, but maybe the Grail was wrong. According to Romulus, it was often wrong about the details of flora and fauna.

In any case, it would be beating much faster than it did when Dr. Bowusuvi made me do exercises, or even than it did when I raced in and out of Romulus' room during a tile- or bone war. My entire body would be shaking, my breathing uneven, gaspy, and no matter what I would do, I would be unable to subdue the panic within me. I would tell myself that everything was fine, that there was nothing to fear, but my body wouldn't listen to me. No matter what I said to myself, my heart would continue to whirl and my body to quake. And unable to control my body, my mind would inevitably follow it into panic. I

would soon begin to be unable to concentrate on anything or to complete a thought, or even to attempt to go to sleep in the hope that I would feel better when I woke up. It was strange: I wasn't afraid of any specific thing, but my fear was undeniable, overwhelming, primal. I would have a powerful urge to run, to bolt to safety, I suppose like a wild animal, but there was nothing to run from; and I would want to scream but with my body shaking and my heart whirring I could only whine—which I did, clutching at my blankets and tearing at my pillow in an effort to get the fear to go away.

On such nights as these, unable to bear the silence of the dark, I would say to Mind, "Mind, are you awake?" and he would always be there. He would say, "I am here, Rowan," in his mild, careless tone which so often annoyed me when I was trying to impart the importance of a situation to him but which comforted me then; and he would keep me company through the night, answering my questions, asking me questions in response to my questions, and showing me certain people who I asked to see, who'd struck me some other time in some other scene at the end of the bright road, and whose presences help chase away the night's hideous dread: the vagabonds, the girl with the hyacinth eyes, the man with the black sword, the old wizard, and most of all the black-haired woman with the scar under her eye.

It had occurred to me in the clear but wordless way that I saw things at the time that the focus, or basis, of my fear was a dream that I'd had in which it seemed to me that Mind was torn from me. I lay on an angled table of clear glass, several masked doctors gazing down at me with shrewd curiosity as a giant needle descended towards my head. My wrists bound, my fingers locked in a desperate clench, my neck muscles straining against a bond that held my head against the table, I screamed in terror, "Mind! Mind!" but he wasn't there, and I screamed again, "Mind! Mind!" and still he wasn't there.

When I woke up I screamed, “Mind!” in the inside-the-head way that I conversed with him, but also aloud, as I learned later from Romulus, who had heard me from his end of the house.

“Yes, Rowan?” Mind asked in his mild, eternal voice.

My terror subsiding, I asked him, “Was that real?”

“Was what real?”

I described my dream to him and he asked, “Do you think it real, Rowan?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Yes.”

“Why do you think it real?”

“I don’t know. You were the one who said dreams were real.”

“During the conversation you are referencing, Rowan, I asked you why you thought the reality you call dreams did not intersect with the reality you call waking. From that statement, you inferred that I doubted the veracity of your belief that dreams are not real, and from this inference, you further inferred that I believed the opposite of what you believed. However, if you review my words, you’ll see I made no statement of belief.”

This gobbledygook was indecipherable to me, but the flavor of it seemed comforting. He seemed to be saying in his odd, circular way, that there was nothing to worry about, nothing of what I’d seen in my dream was going to happen.

Yet, it, the dream, bothered me, and it bothered me that he wouldn’t just say, “No, that will never happen, Rowan.” It bothered me, and though I’d awakened with the heart whir and body shakes many times before I had that dream, they had been worse since I’d had it. I wondered if I might not have had a similar dream in the days beyond my memory’s shore, and whether this unremembered dream might not be the very reason for my night terror.

This unworded hypothesis, however, while shining a light upon the source, or a possible source, of this terror, didn’t

do what the philosophers say knowledge does to fear; in fact, the frequency of my dark sojourns continued to increase with every passing month.

I guess I believed but wasn't sure that the dream did foreshadow reality. *Wasn't sure* being the key phrase, this slight doubt making it seem that perhaps the reality the dream presented could be circumvented, and this possibility that it could be avoided filling me with a sort of desperation about having to figure out how to avoid it, and a fear that, having no idea how to do so, I would do the wrong thing.

It seemed to me, though, that if nobody knew that Mind was inside my head, nobody would think to take him out; so, when I told Dr. Mulgar about the man and the girl in the cave, I refrained from telling him how I had gotten the vision and in fact was in desperate straits trying to come up with a lie that he would believe if he asked me, "How'd you come up with that one, Romulus?" which was a thing he asked me on occasion.

But he didn't. As I told him my vision, he watched me like a shark, hunger heavy upon him, but when I had completed my tale, he was overjoyed, so overjoyed, I believe, that in the moment he didn't think to ask me about details of my method. After he had departed, and knowing that he would at some point remember to ask me how I had produced the vision, I consulted with Romulus about what to do, and together we decided that if it wasn't a lie, Dr. Mulgar might not perceive it as a lie. If, therefore, I said something like, "My mind told me," which as Romulus pointed out, would be a realistic thing for a child to say, and would be more or less the truth, I might be able to draw his attention away from any possible discernment of Mind's existence.

After I told him about the man and the girl in the cave, Dr. Mulgar cried out, "Yes! Yes!!" not to me but to the air, to the world, in release, it seemed, of long frustration. He strode across the room with long, victorious steps, his fists clenched, his face etched with what I could only describe as rageful joy,

an equal mixture of triumph and angry defiance; then he strode back, and then across the room again, and back.

Beaming, he turned to me. Bursting with excitement, he said, "This is great, Romulus! This is great!" and "I'm proud of you!" and let fly many other such joyful expostulations which, lost in the flurry of his excitement, I didn't hear, or at least didn't digest. I think he even hugged me. He was convinced that this vision was just the sort he was hoping for.

That's when I put it together: whatever Mind showed me, I could tell Dr. Mulgar, and he would be happy!

The next few days—that's all it was, not even a month, or a half-month—were happy, stress-free ones. I would play with Romulus in the morning, and in the afternoon, Dr. Mulgar would come. I would tell him about some random thing that Mind showed me, and he would be happy. He would pat me on the head, and say "You're doing great, Romulus, you're doing great," or "You're a special boy, Romulus," or "Everything's going to be alright," and wouldn't even give me any assignments to do on the Grail. He'd just say, "Just concentrate on having those visions, Romulus, just concentrate on having those visions," which of course I didn't have to concentrate on at all, but simply to ask Mind for one.

When he got around to asking me about how I'd at long last produced the right kind of vision, I told him the little lie, or incomplete-truth, that Romulus and I had come up with and which by then I had practiced telling Romulus a hundred times, at least.

A few glorious days after I shared the vision about the scarred man and the freckled girl with him—and I'd given him a few more nuggets since then—he said, as he was leaving, "How'd you do it, Romulus? After all this time, how'd you do it?"

I said, shrugging, "My mind told me," and he laughed and went on, expressing no doubt of my truthfulness. This surprised me, for it had always seemed to me that he noticed

everything, and that, thus, hiding anything from him would be impossible. I had hoped, but it had been a small hope, that he would accept my half-truth *this* time, but I hadn't expected him to.

Several possibilities of why he had this time presented themselves to me, and the first of these, that I'd actually tricked him with a convincing, practiced delivery of what was, technically, the truth, seemed the least likely. I thought it more likely that his usual piercing discernment of my state of mind was compromised by his focus on and excitement about the visions I was sharing with him; or, most likely of all, he *was* suspicious that I was hiding something from him but was neglecting for the moment, for reasons beyond my ability to comprehend, to confront me about it.

But I knew no matter what he did, I wouldn't tell him about Mind. Mind was my friend, he had always been my friend, my constant companion, a bright road within me; and even though as I have said, I liked Dr. Mulgar, and wanted to please him, and even though I had been sucked into his unknown quest, and willingly, by his strength and intensity, and the vortex of his longing, he was a doctor, and that needle that in my dream had cut Mind away from me was a doctor's instrument. And more than that, I sensed, without any true understanding of it, but sensed nevertheless, the profane-ness of his being, the blackness I injected into my bloodstream every night drawn like a magnet to the blackness within him, and I couldn't, and wouldn't, give him Mind.

YAAN-5

When the owners of the farm north and east of the Corner had departed, they had left behind Lohu, a white-gray horse who now lived alone in the southernmost field of that vacant property, a barren pasture overtaken with scrub and weed.

They had, it seemed to me, abandoned him. I thought he must get lonely, all by himself, and that he must miss his former owners and the other horses who had lived there with him, so I'd go out to his field to talk to him on occasion.

At first, he drew away from me when I approached, but after a couple of visits, the strands of his being began reaching out to me when I came. Sometimes, a few of them would even touch the strands of my being with delicate carefulness, reminiscent of how Jake stroked the hens when he took their eggs. I talked to him or patted him or just stood there with him, most often down in the southwest corner of the field in the shadow of a clump of jagged-leafed Fierce trees which was on the other side of the fence; and his pattern would become still, and he would be content. In time, he began coming to me of his own accord, walking or sometimes even dragging his old body into a trot whenever I climbed over the fence into his field.

We were friends, he enjoyed my presence; yet always when I left him, while he remained a part of me, as with every other soul I knew, I didn't remain a part of him; whenever I said good-bye, his clasp on my pattern relaxed, the trailing tendrils of my being slipping like butter from the unknowing hold of his entity. He was a solitary being. In the misty mornings of late autumn and early winter, or during summer storms, he would stand in the middle of his pasture, facing the wind, unmoving, as if trying to absorb the pierce of silence that this land, in its isolation, held, into his being, in a quest for an unbreakable solitude.

I often imagined he, Estobbias, Ordvod, and Oontopa, a turkey who I had been fond of but who had been eaten, going

on adventures together. They'd travel Lenima and beyond, aiding those in need, rescuing those in trouble, and combating hatred and oppression in all the nooks and crannies and reaches of the world, bantering all the while as I imagined Rook and Jake did on the adventures they'd had that Rook had related to me. Estobbias was the mischievous one, of course, a Jake-like character who was always getting them into scrapes; Ordvod was strong and sensible, the quiet leader of the group; Oontopa was the spokesman, the diplomat; and Lohu the quiet one who claimed not to care about the fate of the world, or the weak, or the oppressed, but the one who most often did the heroic thing to win the day.

Rook and I entered Lohu's field in the same manner we entered the big cowyard, and the same way we entered the untended cornfield between them, Rook setting me on the fence, vaulting the fence, and then lifting me back onto his shoulders.

Lohu was downslope from us, in the southeast corner of the field (south and east from where Rook and I hopped the fence), in silent communion with the Fierce trees beyond the south fence, but was in, for him, a sociable mood; and when I reached out to him, brushing his pattern, he responded, reaching out to me even as he began trotting towards us upslope, navigating puddles and clumps of brown weeds with heavy grace.

When he saw Rook, he hesitated, and then came to a stamping stop, eyeballing him with his head turned to one side, a look of suspicion if ever there was one, as Rook would point out later.

Rook jogged on, smooth, long-legged, and steady.

"Rook, put me down," I said, perceiving that the pattern of Lohu's and my interaction was incomplete, and would remain so until Rook was out of the picture.

He jogged on.

"Put me down," I repeated, "This is taking too long; you need to get there so you can help. Lohu'll take care of me, don't worry."

Glancing to his left, where Lohu stood watching us, his breath billowing around his head, Rook slowed, lifting me from his shoulders as he did, and then setting me feet-first on the soggy ground as he came to a stop. He glanced at Lohu again, raised an eyebrow at me as if to say, “Be sure that he does take care of you,” and then turned and ran, with long and easy and yet, now, fast strides that carried him away from me and towards the distant wooden fence—beyond which was my home, though from where I stood, because the land sloped gently upwards to the fence, I could see only gray sky.

Rook gone, Lohu trotted over to me, a few strands of his pattern reaching out to the offered strands of mine, and intertwining with them as he came. He nuzzled me, which was rare—he was much more often content to do nothing more than stand near me as I talked to him—and then he knelt down, as if encouraging me to ride him. I had been on his back before, though I thought of it much more as him carrying me than me riding him: I had no clear idea how to ride him. I sat atop him as he walked around, clutching his neck and mane, my pattern wrapped in his in hopes that this would lend him a sense of how he needed to move to keep me aboard.

“Oh, Lohu,” I cried, and climbed atop him. After cantering about in a circle, he followed the diminishing figure of Rook at a fast trot. I held on fast, and he balanced his gait to my presence, keeping me, with perhaps a tiny bit of help from myself, upon his back. He didn’t know I wanted to get to the Corner as swiftly as possible, but my pattern was reaching out to it, and with a natural sense of pattern, like a dog that lies beside you when you’re sad, he followed my pattern. He, an old decrepit horse, gained on Rook, the strongest of humans in the prime of his life, with consummate ease, drawing even with him right as we got to the fence. I saw Mom’s and my hut of polished logs as we approached across the scrubby untended land of Lohu’s field; and upon the weedy cobblestone patio in front of it, Jake stood, alone. Mom was nowhere to be seen.

Facing Jake were four farmhands, two of them holding rakes, another a shovel, another a pick-ax, while other workers approached from the west, coming with long eager steps across another cornfield, as yet unplanted this year, and a couple, including Hector Dallidoe, came along from the south. A couple of the four that were already there struck me as Gerbils, and I knew the other two worked for Farmer Green, but I wasn't personally acquainted with any of them.

As Lohu and I drew alongside of Rook, he glanced at us, half-smiling, and then, as we came to the fence, snatched me from Lohu's back, and as I squeezed Lohu pattern to pattern and gave him my thanks within the whisper of release, set me on the fence, vaulted it, and set me on my feet beside him. Then, together, we trotted towards the house, where Jake and the farmhands faced each other.

HAYNTA-5

Over the course of the next couple of months, as Nanatoi became Fildeweeray, which in its turn followed the white stag, as they say, to Runtani in the green plumage that took over the Nonagon, I got to know Nolk. A little bit. The next time he was working within “mutter-distance” of me, I commented on the nearby flirtation that a girl and a boy were devoting themselves to despite neither having any qualities that recommended one to the other besides complementary sexual organs. I named their coquetry the “the dance of the red jomir,” in reference, of course, to the exaggerated mating ritual of jomirs; and again, while keeping his face in the shadow of his hood, he smiled, a smile that reminded me of Mrs. Camden’s in the quiet sparkle of starlight it suggested.

And that is how our communication went for awhile: me making comments, him smiling; but at length I started addressing him directly.

The treatment he received from, or maybe I should say his relationship with, many of the other janitors was puzzling to me, in two ways. First of all, they tormented him. He would be toiling away like a farmer’s extra donkey, when for no apparent reason one of the other janitors, or sometimes two, would approach him and say, “Aren’t you done with that yet, Brother Nolk?” or “Are you ever going to get something done, Brother Nolk?” or, more benignly, “Brother Nolk, I realize that you’re unused to hard labor, but you should be getting a little more durable by now.” Once, when his hood had fallen back while he was straining to move a very heavy potted plant, another janitor said to him, “Brother Nolk, why is your hood down?” to which he responded, as he pulled it back over his head, “Sorry, Brother Hals, I didn’t realize it had come down,” which still wasn’t good enough for this Hals, who said, “Master Osbald will be disappointed that you are ignoring his requests.”

In addition to these constant jibes, his supervisors, which included Hals, were always giving him the most unpleasant jobs to do: scrubbing the fountains and statues, for example, emptying the latrines, or removing wasp and hornet nests from the cracks and corners of the buildings; and then roasting him if he had any difficulty with the assignment: calling him a sissy if he was nursing a sting, for example, or a weakling if he was struggling to drag a large membrane of feces to the shit wagon that came every three days to haul the Institute's waste away to, I don't know, some central waste depository in the city, I suppose. Once, when he slipped on some wet grass as he lugged a statue of a bear from one decorative spot in the Nonagon to another, managing only with what seemed to me an incredible athletic twist of his body to keep the bear from crashing to the cobblestones, Hals, who with another janitor, Ulfus, had been watching him in a conspicuous break from his own work, enjoyed an uproarious belly laugh at him in a rare expression of mirth. Ulfus said something about how hard it was to get good help, to which Hals responded, "That boy doesn't have the sense nature gave a mule," which I thought a rather bizarre statement notwithstanding the ill spirit behind it, since as everyone knows, or as I *thought* everyone knew, mules are very sensible creatures.

This treatment was puzzling to me because Nolk seemed not only a tireless and hard-working servant, but as benign an individual as one could be. The older janitors did belittle the other young ones, too, but not to anywhere near the degree they did Nolk. And the others sometimes defended themselves; Nolk never did. Which was the other thing that was puzzling to me. He took their abuse without complaint, without even flinching, or even a pained or otherwise confused look behind their backs. If they criticized him, he'd just look down—he never met their eyes—and tell them he'd try to do better.

He had crossed the Norgold Mountains in winter! Well, not really, but one could see in the way he moved, and in his

face, which to me held not only the experience of having endured something akin to crossing the Norgold Mountains, some abyss, but also in the smile that came so easy to his lips, and in his sparkling eyes that rollicked and frolicked in the moment of life, an *overcoming* of the darkness that such an experience would cast on the spirit; and yet he crawled before these petty little men, servile-like! The closest I ever saw him come to talking back to any of his tormenters occurred one day when Hals had told him to arrange some new plants in a certain array in the Nonagon, and while he was still in the process of doing that good ol' Hals came by and told him that the latrine in Dorm Three needed emptied. "It's not going to clean itself, you know!" he jibed. Nolk hesitated, and then asked, "Right now, or after this?" to which Hals snapped, "No, finish that first!" and muttered "Moron," as he continued on his way. That's as close as he ever came to talking back to any of those fools: to ask which one of the two tasks he'd been assigned he should do first.

This continual abuse that he endured without complaint was, in fact, the reason why I began to address him directly. Well, it was the trigger: the reason was, obviously, that I *wanted* to. I asked him one day, after he'd suffered another round of sarcastic belittlement from the mouth of a janitor named "Brother" Geln, "Why do they treat you like that?" He smiled in such a way that seemed to dismiss that they even mistreated him, or maybe that just rendered that treatment meaningless, and said, "Most people treat others very similarly to how they are treated."

I've never much cared for platitudes, even from the mouths of boys I'm obsessed with, so I taunted him. "So, when you're an old janitor, you'll be treating the young janitors like 'Brothers' Geln and Hals treat you?"

"I won't be an old janitor." He spoke without rage or rancor, without even raising his voice above his usual murmur,

yet with such a sure intensity that it carried the force of a sharp retort, or even a slap in the face.

Seeing that I was stunned, he added, with what seemed contrition, "I mean, I'm sure I'll be fired long before I'm old." I laughed, rather too loudly, I think, in release of the tension his intensity had generated, and he almost laughed, himself, I think both at himself and in surprise at the loudness of my laugh; but then, as if he'd been hiding in the nearby ferns, Hals appeared and said, "Are you talking to students, Brother Nolk?" and without waiting for Nolk to respond, added, "Master Osbald will be amazed to hear this." Nolk, of course, offered no defense of his behavior, even to say, "Hey, I was just responding to the girl," which would have been the truth. Instead, bending to his task, which in this case was cleaning out the cracks and holes in the brick walkway of the Nonagon, just said, "It won't happen again, sir."

I saw then that if he talked to me, he would get into trouble, but since I'd been talking to him for quite a number of days without any repercussion, and he seemed to enjoy it, or at least not mind it, the next opportunity I found to sit in his proximity while he worked, I told him, "Don't talk," and *I* did the talking. And that was the way of it for the next half-month or so.

At first I tried to be funny, since he seemed to appreciate my witticisms, but while it's easy to be funny for a comment or two, keeping it up for an extended period of time is much more problematic, so I lapsed soon enough into, well, just gabbling, to be honest. I made random observations about our surroundings—"The mulbs [that was my name for the mulberry trees] are vibrant, this year," for example—or described what was going on in the Nonagon, including informing him about which janitors were where, so that he would know how focused on his work he needed to appear. I told him about my classes, and my life, even, and at length just started reading out loud from the texts I'd brought to the Nonagon ostensibly to study. He seldom

responded, but by the subtle tilts of his head, the looks in his hood-shadowed eyes, and the occasional smile that crossed his lips, I flattered myself that he enjoyed my flow of words, or at least didn't mind my presence.

One bright warm day, oh, about mid-spring—there were just a couple of months to go before they sent us home for Sporch, Mowta-wan, and Hobwan—the next era of our relationship was ushered in by another offhand comment I made. As the thrushes booped at one another from various flowering bushes in the Nonagon, I paused the flow of words coming out of my mouth, my “mouthflow,” as I had begun to think of it, to joke that as much as I was reading my assignments out loud to him, I might actually catch up in my classes. Before Mrs. Camden had arrived, I had fallen behind in all my classes, and while caught up in hers now, I was still a bit behind in the others.

After glancing about (with movement only of his eyes, not his head), he asked, in the hoarse rasping whisper of someone whose voice mechanism is rusty from lack of use, “What are you studying?”

I answered, “You mean today, or in general?”

A subtle movement of his orange robe indicated a shrug.

I said, “Well, today in philosophy, it's Infin, which I don't get at all.”

Pulling his hood all the way forward, so that I couldn't see his face at all, and without altering his steady brushwork upon a statue—of a gorilla, no less—he said, in a voice so low I could barely hear him, “Infin Gorilla?”

“Is there another Infin?”

“What don't you get about him?”

“Everything is infinite *because* everything is finite? That doesn't make sense.”

“Those aren't his words; that's the textbook writers trying to be cute. I think what he said was actually closer to everything is infinite because nothing exists.”

“Well, that doesn't make sense, either!”

By the tilt of his head, I thought he smiled. “I think his basic idea was that there is only one thing—in all of existence. All the universe is only one thing, and therefore each separate thing in the universe doesn’t exist in and of itself but only as part of, and inseparable from, the universe. Inseparable from the universe, each separate thing is, thus, as vast as the universe.”

“But the thing itself is still finite!”

“He’s saying, though, that, for example, if you examine something in its entirety, any one thing, examine it thoroughly, everything about it, everything that it impacts, or that impacts it, which of course would include, then, everything that impacted or was impacted by those things, as well, you’d have to examine the whole universe to fully understand that one little thing.”

“Like everything that’s connected to it, and then everything that’s connected to those things, and so on, are all *part* it?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I guess. I mean, I understand the concept. Thanks! But it still doesn’t make sense.”

And thus began the era of my study, or I should say, catching up on my studies. Every day that Nolk was working in the Nonagon and that I could manage to find a seat near him, we’d discuss some class or another. After I arrived, he would note among the other janitors nearby, where the ones such as Hals and Geln that he needed to be most concerned about were, and then pull his hood far enough forward to cloak his entire face, and, speaking in a voice so low that it was a wonder to me that he could enunciate words at that volume, he would either quiz me about some subject or other, or discuss the material I was studying, until soon enough, I was caught up in every class. His storehouse of knowledge was impressive, considering how young he was, and that he was among a class of workers, janitors, who were generally regarded as being somewhat uneducated.

I asked him once, “How do you know all this stuff?”

“The same way you do,” was all he said, “I studied it.”

“You mean you attended Clarks Hill?”

“Other places teach the same things.”

“Well, yeah,” I admitted, “I suppose so; but I’ll have forgotten all of this by next year.”

“You might remember more than you expect.”

ROWAN-6

In the days following my vision of the man and the girl in the cave, things were great.

Then, things changed.

Dr. Mulgar arrived one day, and I, informed by Romulus of his approach, had warned Mind to be ready to show me something at my signal (which were the words, “Now, Mind!”) and had situated myself on the couch in anticipation of his usual interrogation. He was having none of our usual routine, however. Beaming down upon me, he said, “None of that, today, Romulus, we’re going to celebrate your birthday! How’s that sound?”

It had been at least fifteen days by then since he had told me it was my sixth birthday—“Five years and a quarter by the normal reckoning, to be sure, but who’s counting?” he had said—so it seemed to me a little odd to make a big deal about it now, but celebrating a birthday sounded like something good, so I effected a wild-eyed excitement that I flattered myself was almost equal to Dr. Mulgar’s ever-present fervor.

He laughed and told me, in the way adults tell children things that are supposed to impress or excite the children, that we were going somewhere special. He was in an ebullient mood. He blindfolded me—“It’s a surprise, Romulus, it’s a surprise,” he kept saying—and taking my hand, led me out of the house for the first time in my life. The first time in my memory, at least.

I had seen the outside on the Grail, I had *been in* a simulacrum of the outside a few times at the end of the bright road; but even with the blindfold on, I realized that those experiences had been the palest of representations of the real thing. Light came through the blindfold, diffused, I suppose, in such a way that it seemed to be coming from every direction at once, and with such a vibrance, a stirring of life, almost, that it

seemed right off as if I'd stepped into a magical, an unreal, place.

This feeling was accentuated by the fact that the sun warmed me and a breeze touched the skin of my face and arms and neck, moving the hair on my head, rubbing me, *caressing* me, I imagined, though of course I had never been caressed; and when I breathed, air rushed through my nostrils and into my lungs like, I imagined, a thousand tiny elves whirling brooms around, purifying and cleaning and opening, ahh, yes, opening: the lungs opened up like they'd never opened up before, sucking in freshness and what seemed at first like a very pleasant odor but what was really nearer to a fresh odorlessness. At the same time, my ears were catching an incredible array of different sounds—several different species of bugs buzzing or screaming, birds chirping or calling, leaves scraping against one another, the breeze tunneling in a whistling whisper through the creases of my ears. It was overwhelming, even with the blind-fold on.

Dr. Mulgar led me along hard ground, and suddenly the wind and sun and sound were gone, and I was sitting on a soft seat, like the couch, in a warm, windless, dark, enclosed place. Indeed, quite warm: I started to sweat after a minute or two sitting there. Dr. Mulgar was nearby, I heard him breathing and fiddling with stuff, half-talking to himself. Then I had the vague sensation that we were moving, and I thought, oh we're in a horse drawn cart (something I'd seen on the Grail), and yet I heard no horses' hooves, nothing but a dull whirring. Every half-minute or so, Dr. Mulgar would pat me on the head or the knee and say, "We're almost there," or something of the sort, but he never explained what was going on, so I remained in a state of utter confusion, though not so overwhelmed as I had been upon first stepping into the open air of the outside. At some point, I had the vague sensation that we were slowing and then coming to a stop, and then I heard Dr. Mulgar bustling about, followed by the sound of something metal unlatching,

whereupon coolness engulfed me, and again, Dr. Mulgar took my hand, led me once more into the overwhelming magic sun, air, and sound of the outside (accompanied now by a vague roar which seemed the very engine of the world), across a hard floor or ground, extremely lush carpeting, back to hard, now uneven, ground, finally guiding me to a stop.

“Here we are!” he said, and removed my blindfold.

A structure—another house, perhaps, much bigger and more extravagant than the one in which Romulus and I abided—was behind me. I never actually saw it, whatever it was, but I knew it was big. I think I saw the ends of it, its wings, if you will, out of the corners of my eyes, or out of the corners of the corners of my eyes, if you know what I mean: I knew something large and hard and inanimate was behind me, though because we were facing the sun, we weren’t in its shadow. I felt its *presence*. But I never saw it: Dr. Mulgar had situated me in just such a way to behold the scene he wanted me to behold, which did not include this structure; and once I had beheld the scene, I was so boggulated that I never took note of anything else. I suppose it’s possible that I saw the building, noted its appearance in a side chamber of my awareness, and that what I remember as a sensing of something large behind me was actually a seeing of it that I don’t remember. However, I have no mental image of what it looked like, only that it was large. In any case, I was standing near it, but facing away from it when Dr. Mulgar took the blindfold off.

At first, dazzled by the sun, I saw nothing but light. But, my eyes adjusted with the quick physical adaptation of the very young; and had I thought I was overwhelmed by sensation upon first exiting the house, I would have laughed at my naïveté. I had seen a hundred pictures of the outside on the Grail, many portraying areas more grand than this one, but they had not prepared me for the real thing. Some of the grandness of a picture or a painting comes from having been there. Not *there*, in the place the picture reveals, or even somewhere as grand, but *there*

in the sense of somewhere that is of the same *essential material* as that place, so that you have some feel in your being for the place portrayed beyond a cerebral recognition of what or where it is. Never having been out of my little house, I had no feel in my being for what the outside world was like, and therefore pictures of magnificent places were wasted on me to some extent. I had seen the sky in paintings, but even in the hands of gifted artists, without having seen the real sky with my naked eyes, the sky in those paintings was just blue paint, essentially. The scintillating crackling skimming wallop of reality had not yet readied me to appreciate replications of it. (A bonus, then, of going outside was that afterward, perusing paintings on the Grail was more fun, because I could put myself in them. If a painting presented an exotic, remote, or even fictional setting, I now had an anchor, a frame of reference, *something* that would allow my brain to build the place around me.) I had seen the outside at the end of the bright road a few times as well, but it just wasn't the same; those Mind-given visions were more like paintings—three-dimensional paintings in which there was movement and smell, but which had a comparative unrealness to them when laid alongside the real thing.

Stretches and swirls of grass and flower, ferns and tall broad-leafed plants, partitioned by curling paths of red brick, lay before me in an indecipherable design of beauty, ending at a distant, magnificent curved wall of many-colored stone behind which trees thick with green leaves rose, it seemed, to the very sky. The sun capped these trees, like the flame above a candle in a way, but so bright, so all-illuminating, so blazing, that it seemed to me that surely people must live their lives in constant awe that something like it existed.

It didn't seem real. I knew of it, I had read about it, I had seen it, on the Grail, and in my Mind-visions, and I knew that later in the afternoon it would fall behind those trees, but it was so beyond description—a ball of fire lighting the entire world!—that at some level I couldn't accept its existence.

Reading about it, seeing it on the Grail, it was just something to memorize and tell Dr. Mulgar about to prove to him I had read what he had asked me to read. I didn't have to accept it; it was outside of my existence. But here, with it shining down on me, warming me, it *was* part of my existence, and since at some level I couldn't accept the reality of it, my mind reeled. I wasn't thinking to myself, "That ball of fire cannot exist, and therefore since without that ball of fire no life could exist, nothing here can exist, I cannot exist," but such was the wordless direction of my thought, such was my wonder and confusion. Yet even while denying its reality in this near-unconscious way, I accepted it utterly, as well, accepted the impossible because I could see it, I was experiencing it—and accepted, thus, that *nothing* could be impossible, and my body welled with a sun-like blaze that gave way to a full-body tingle that didn't just last a second or two, but remained indefinitely, mystery and magic pervading it from toe-tip to head-top.

The sky itself, above the trees and around the sun, lightest blue and striated with wisps of cloud, was so much grander, more beautiful, more vast and empty (notwithstanding the clouds), than it had seemed on the Grail that I had to blink, and blink again, in a blind attempt to get my eyes to assimilate it, or even to focus on a section of it, to *see* it.

"Come on," Dr. Mulgar instructed, guiding me forward onto one of the curling paths through the yard, or garden, whatever you'd call it—the yard-garden. Dizzy, my body filled, still, with an uncontrollable tingle that vibrated through me almost from head to toe, I stumbled and fell, got up still staring at the sky, and stumbled and fell again.

"Something, eh?" Dr. Mulgar said, steadying me before I could fall a third time. I couldn't gain my balance. I was like an infant. My heart thudded, I saw color and light, I heard insects and leaves and our footsteps, I felt the breeze caressing me, as it had when I'd first stepped, blindfolded, out of the house, I felt the skin of Dr. Mulgar's hand against the skin of

my own hand; but it all was as from a distance, another place. An odd chasm, or veil, had arisen between the reality before me and my senses. The blue endlessness and the full-body tingle were as much as my senses could handle, and everything else became peripheral. I noticed that I was walking only as a background sensation as we traversed grass and stone, came to steps, and went up them. One moment, I was beholding the yard, and the next I was on the far side of it, standing atop the curved wall that surrounded it.

From the other end of the yard, the immense trees had appeared to be right behind the wall, but in fact a span of a hundred or more steps separated the wall from the forest. Occupying that span was a wide river swift as a falcon, roaring softly, the source no doubt of the sound that I had heard and thought of as the engine of the world when we had arrived at this place.

I knew of rivers: Just as the Grail had provided me with the knowledge of the sun and of the sky, it had shown me rivers, and explained what they were, how they were formed, and so forth; yet just as with the sun and the sky, to see one in person was mind-boggling, indeed *unbelievable*. It, this river, completed a triumvirate, you could say, of unimaginable infinities, begun by the sun and sky. It wasn't as overwhelmingly all-pervasive as the sky or the sun, it wasn't *everywhere*, it was contained by the boundaries of shore and shore, wall and forest. Yet, perpetually moving as it was, as it rounded the trees curving out of sight, making an island out of the forest, new water coming in torrents, replacing the old water with an unending supply, and as I stood there gazing down at it (dizzy, still, Dr. Mulgar steadying me with one or both hands at all times) its soft sparkling yet powerful roar, as well as its playful and yet irresistible movement, and its *spirit*, both ancient and new-born, seeming to *be in* everything else—in the sounds of the bugs and birds, in the wind, in *me*—it felt to me every bit as infinite as the sky and sun. Looking at it, the full-body tingle, which had

been subsiding at last, resumed, changed subtly—less dizzying, more lightening. Later, when I was back inside, *my* insides still felt weightless, flooded, my organs and bones replaced with something ethereal, light itself perhaps. My heart seemed to be beating at twice or three times its usual rate, yet at the same time almost not to be beating at all; and I was filled with a peaceful excitement, a tranquil ebullience. My nose and bowels were alive with a cool heat; I felt like breathing in, forever.

Thereafter, I could not be satisfied with the indoors.

YAAN-6

Jake's pattern of entity was shining, coiling, undulating beyond his usual brightness (and his was an unusually bright pattern), with what I thought of as a powder brilliance: that is, a pattern-residue rose from many of the tendrils of his being, spreading outward like mist, or powder, retaining the light of his pattern as it did and as it floated through the air like unto fairy dust, and landed all around him, on the ground, on the wood hut behind him, and even on the farmers facing him, where it shone another moment, and finally evaporated, an echo of it glowing in the grass with a faint effervescence.

I thought for a moment that this new luminescent, exhilarating powder brilliance was an indication that his pattern was going to heal itself. A whole section of his entity pattern was rent asunder, and had been rent asunder as long as I'd known him. In a place where coils and tendrils and multi-colored strands should have interwoven and completed the design of his being in a scintillating punctuation of beauty, there was a hole. When I'd first seen him, years ago, I'd thought him on the verge of pulling apart, and even now I was always worried that he might suddenly unravel; but two solitary threads of nibun, perpendicular to each other, locked the opposing arcs of the hole in his pattern to each other, keeping the damage from growing.

More than that, sensitive, sinuous tendrils of yammial weaving in and out of these nibun threads added a quality of flexibility to the strength of resistance of the nibun, producing strands unique (of anybody I'd yet seen) to Jake that could, I felt sure, judging by their flow and rhythm, laid alongside the flow and rhythm of his pattern as a whole, heal him. I had always thought he would heal himself, but he never did, and because I had no doubt that he could, it seemed to me, even though I knew he couldn't see himself, that he was refusing to, and I wondered when he would. And now, because of the extra

pulse and shine of his pattern, this powder brilliance, I thought the time had come, but it hadn't; he didn't heal himself.

I followed Rook and when he stopped, I stopped; but it wasn't to Jake's side that we came, but to a position diagonal from both Jake and the four farmhands who faced him, as if instead of coming to Jake's aid, we were coming as mediators. I was vaguely aware of how cold it was, and that it seemed to be getting colder, and yet I felt hot. My blood was up, as Mrs. Camden would have said.

It was clear to me that the little dragon, Ragahootoo, had anticipated, rather than seen, or known, what was going to happen, because the little mob couldn't have arrived very long before we did, and despite being armed with their rakes and shovels and pitchforks, they were waiting for the men coming from the east and west to arrive to reinforce their numbers.

Each of the individual patterns of the farmers that constituted this mob were agitated, with large entity strands coiling and roiling about, but these were of no consequence, for they had no direction, or focus. The threat came from a different pattern that had formed around them and in front of them, which was comprised of their individual patterns but was separate from them. It was this pattern that had focus, with large aggressive cobra-like strands that had reared up, arched, and formed a taut, vibrating arrow of menace that was trained on our little log hut. Yet, a few strands of Jake's entity pattern surrounded this group pattern, and with tiny quasi-solid tendrils held it in place—tenuously, I thought. If it got any bigger, any stronger, which it would, it seemed to me, when Hector and the other men arrived, Jake's pattern wouldn't be able to contain it, and the men's physical presences, held in check by the interaction of these patterns, would be released to act.

As the other men, including Hector drew close and joined the group, somebody demanded, "Where is it, Exeter?"

Jake, smiling, and to all appearances at ease (though I knew he wasn't), asked, "Where's what, Knothead?" It was

Magristic Stoat, who Jake always called Knothead, who had asked him the question. He always called Magristic's brother Harrol, "Bonehead."

Magristic bristled, "Aww, you..."

Hector interrupted, "You know what he means, Exeter, the beast."

Leaning back against the logs of the hut, pushing his hands into the pockets of his jacket, and swinging his right boot in front of his left ankle, Jake said, in a tone that matched his posture, "I haven't seen any beasts. I did see a friendly fellow named Drud, though. He's inside with Mrs. Yaan." Mrs. Yaan was the name he used for Mom when he talked to the other farmhands. When he talked to Rook, me, or Mom, he called her "Itty," or "Little Captain."

"Drud?" someone asked, with incredulity.

"That's right," Jake confirmed, with an innocent smile.

"You've got a name for that thing?!" This was said with incredulity as well, and also outrage. The lead aggressor strand of the group pattern reared up as if to strike, but Jake faced them without flinching, just as he faced a much greater foe some months later.

On that occasion, I had been hanging out at home alone for most of the day, waiting for Mrs. Camden to arrive, and had decided mid-afternoon to walk out to Lake Latalla. Mom, who had departed on one of her sporadic trips that morning, had of course admonished me to stay indoors until Mrs. Camden arrived, but, having the outdoor itch that day, I concluded, after a brief internal debate, that in lieu of staying home, a note to Mrs. Camden left on the dinner table telling her I was going out to Lake Latalla, and instructing her to follow me, would be sufficient.

"Come out to Lake Latalla if you want to meet some of my new friends," I wrote, hoping that would entice her if she were on the fence about making the trip. In the time since she,

Jake, Rook, and I had gone out to Lake Latalla, I had made the acquaintance of several fairies and forest elves, or Kee and Jaji as they called themselves, and I was hoping that at least one of them would be bold enough to come out of the shadows and talk to Mrs. Camden. I knew she would be delighted.

Once outside, however, my outdoor fever waned, perhaps the severity of it having been magnified by the act of waiting, which, as Mom was never slow to point out, has a tendency to distort things. Cooped up all day, I had assumed that a trip all the way out to the magnificence of Latalla would be needed to alleviate the dingy lethargy that a prolonged sojourn indoors often induced; but I found that simply being outside in the dry cool splendor of late Sporch, traipsing across green pastures and waist-high fields of corn, did the trick; and I decided that rather than risk aggravating Mrs. Camden by making her tromp all the way out to Latalla after in all likelihood having come a long way today, already, I would go find Rook and/or Jake, and engage them in some kind of philosophical discourse.

This was something I often did, it so delighted me to listen to them banter, notwithstanding the insights both of them provided about things. I'd ask them a question, and then either just sit back and listen to them discuss it, or, if at first they didn't seem to have much to say about the matter, prompt the conversation along myself until they grew more interested. A few days ago, I'd asked them, "If we accept as a given that all life is equally sacred," to which of course Jake had broken in and said, "That's a pretty big given you're pinning us down with, there," which interrupted the shadow thinking that I had to resort to in order to communicate with others, but which after years of practicing I had managed to learn how to hold in my mind even when its flow was obstructed, so that I was able to go on, now, even with the interruption, with only a marginal deterioration in the clarity of my question: "But accepting it for argument's sake, let's say that you found yourself in a situation in which a person, let's say a woman since you guys are men

[this was something I thought Mom would say, and with some pointedness, so I threw it in] needs your help or she will die. If you try to save her, her chance of surviving is still less than fifty percent, and there is, as well, a greater than fifty percent chance that you will die in the effort to save her. If you don't try to save her, she has a zero percent chance of surviving and you have a one hundred percent chance. Accepting the premise that all life is equally sacred, should you try to save her?"

Jake said, "Obviously not. The composite of two sub-fifty percent chances is less than the one hundred percent chance you have of surviving if you do nothing. You might gamble you could save both her and yourself, and maybe you'd win, but your question suggests a bigger picture, a bigger stage, in which many others are faced with the same situation, and on that stage, if each of these others were to try to save the person in need, then at the end of all of that selflessness and bravado and heroism, there would be fewer people still living their equally sacred lives than there would be if all of these heroes saved themselves."

Rook responded, "Exeter's logic is, as always, impeccable, but I feel like I'd try to save the woman, even so," to which Jake said, "Well, that would just be stupid; you'd be undercutting your own belief—misguided though it may be, it is what you believe. I can see making such a disastrous choice if you were unimaginably bad at arithmetic, but realizing that..." to which Rook interrupted, "You're right, of course, but nevertheless, I feel like I would attempt to save the woman, even so," and they went back and forth like that for awhile thereafter, to my great amusement.

Another time, I asked them if they thought the animal denizens of the farm minded being eaten. It had come to my attention that some of the tasty vittles I was accustomed to enjoying in the evening were the cooked remnants of the beings I walked among during the day, and in trying to determine whether or not to continue the practice of eating them, I had

come to the conclusion that if they didn't mind being eaten, I would continue to eat them, but if they did, I wouldn't. I hoped I would find that they didn't mind. I didn't think I would mind being eaten—once I was dead. In fact, I thought it might be an honor to be able to provide nutrition to some hungry entity. However, to be eaten, I would have to die, and I didn't want that, and wouldn't be willing to die to provide food for anybody, no matter how hungry they were. If I happened to die accidentally, then, yes, they could eat me, but otherwise, no. And I had to admit that it wasn't likely that many of the chickens or cows were dying accidentally, so the real question wasn't whether they minded being eaten, but whether they minded being killed. The obvious answer to that question was that, yes, of course they minded being killed, but I thought maybe if I asked enough people, somebody would come up with a convincing line of reasoning that would allow me to continue on with my current diet.

I had started my investigation by asking Mom, “Mom, do the cows and chickens mind being killed so that we can eat them?” and continuing her nine-year string (I was nine at the time) of never answering a question, she said, “Why don't you ask around,” which is just what I did, engaging the ever-taciturn Golden Gerbil in a very brief conversation on the way to Farmer Green's farm, and then stopping by Tameedah's before seeking out the true targets of my inquiry.

When I found Rook with a large brush and a bucket of oil, sealing a cow barn, I dove right in: “Do the cows and chickens mind being killed so that we can eat them?”

Unsurprised by my question, he considered my quandary as he continued to coat the barn. After a few moments, he nodded in the direction of Jake, who was trudging across the cowyard towards us, and said “Yon Exeter would say that cows and chickens not being self-aware, to say they ‘mind’ something would be to ascribe human characteristics to them—that they would by instinct try to avoid being killed, but ‘minding’ it

wouldn't be true. I believe that he would say that if consciousness survived after death, a human would probably resent your having killed him, a cow or chicken probably wouldn't. They might fear you; but they wouldn't be aware that you had made a conscious decision to kill, versus not to kill them, and therefore even under the bold assumption that they could feel resentment, which yon Exeter would say was doubtful, they couldn't hold your decision against you."

"Actually," Jake said, arriving, "Yon Exeter would say, of course they don't mind it, they don't even know it. They're brainless lumps of meat."

Disregarding what to me, considering how he convened with the oxen when he was driving the plow, was an obviously insincere comment, I said, to Rook, "So it's all right to eat them, then?"

Loading his brush with more oil from his can, he said, "Well, I don't know that you can draw that conclusion from the facts presented. I'm not saying it's not okay to eat up the guys," (he often referred to the bulls and roosters as 'the guys'), "but if you thought it wasn't okay, I don't think we've said anything that would convince you it was. Yon Exeter, oh there you are, would say that being unaware of pain or injustice, or of the intent that went into killing you, is a greater suffering than being aware of it. He says that just because you don't know you're a slave doesn't mean you're not one."

Jake looked at me and said, with exaggerated non-expression, "Shamodes likes to attribute his convolutions to me."

I said, "Well, what do *you* think, Rook?"

With an exaggerated non-expression of his own, he said, "Well, Exeter would say that I thought..."

I cut him off with as disapproving a stare as I could muster, and he said, raising an eyebrow, "Well on Shamokin not much meat is eaten. I don't like it myself—yon Exeter," he nodded at Jake, who had moved down the way a little bit and

was, from the top of a ladder, spreading oil on the barn himself, “is more of a potato man, though he does eat his share of meat, too.”

It occurred to me that he’d told me a few weeks earlier that he’d been left on this world as an infant and had no memory or knowledge of his home world, and that, thus, there was no way he could know whether meat was eaten on Shamokin or not, but I decided to overlook that for the time being. “Really? You don’t like meat?”

He surveyed his work, filled in a couple spots he’d missed, and explained, “No, there aren’t any big animals on Shamokin, not many animals of any sort, some rodents. If we ate meat, it would have to be other people. And that’s inconvenient: I mean, if you eat an animal’s brother, he probably won’t even be aware that you did, and even if he is, he’ll just run away from you to avoid getting killed himself; but if you kill a human’s brother, he’ll probably try to kill you. So, it’s a tricky proposition, eating other people—so I think historically, we Shamokinites just avoided that trouble, and ate plants. So we’re more suited to plants. Animals just taste bad to us.”

An element, some would say weakness, of Rook’s easy-going nature was that he seemed unable to sense when an issue or topic was important to you, and was, thus, wont to ramble away from what you wanted him to talk about unless you kept him to task; and now sensing that he was roaming off the topic, I blurted, “Tameedah said I would starve if I stopped eating animals!” Having brought him back to my agenda, I amended, “Well, not *starve*, but that I wouldn’t get the nutrition I needed, and might get weak bones or something.”

Rook glanced at Jake, and getting no help there, said, after another moment’s consideration, “I’m not an anatomist,”—this seemed the wrong word to me, but I let it pass—“but that seems inaccurate. Look at me, I’m big and strong, and I’m pretty sure my bones are in good shape. I fell out of that tree the other day,” he nodded at a nearby shade tree, an elm, “and no

broken bones, not even a bruise. Of course, the way we Shamokinites metabolize food is no doubt a bit different than the way you Lenimans do, so maybe we shouldn't go by me."

"Farmer Green said..."

"You're not taking anything that nincompoop says as anything resembling sense, are you?" Jake had come down off his ladder, and was coming towards us with a dripping brush.

"Well," I said (disregarding his unflattering verdict of Farmer Green's intelligence), "He said 'Circle of life, child, circle of life.' That's what he kept saying to me, and he also said they taste good, you know, cows and chickens, so I should eat them—keep eating them."

Jake looked surprised. "Wow, that's not a bad point, the part about them tasting good. The old bird can surprise you now and then."

"Really?" I frowned. Of all the possible reasons Farmer Green (or anybody else) might have given in support of or against eating "the guys," most of which I would have expected Jake to dismiss or ridicule, he was picking this one to praise?

Jake's sharp blue eyes, which always seemed to catch everything, to lock onto the smallest detail of expression or posture, look at it, study it, and wonder at it, caught the gist of my frown, and twinkled. He slapped Rook on the back, and said, "I'll take over Shamodes." Rook raised an eyebrow, but stepped aside handing Jake his can as he did. Then, he moved down to where Jake had been working, and took over where Jake had left off.

"Yeah," Jake said to me, a shrug in his clear voice that belied the hairy old thick strength of his body, "If you enjoy doing something, shouldn't you do it? You wouldn't rather do something you don't enjoy, would you?"

"No," I said, considering, "I guess not. But what if it's a bad thing? What if what you enjoy hurts somebody—or any entity, you know?"

“Well, what of it? People can use a little hurtin,” he grunted, putting the stuff on much thicker than Rook did.

“Really?”

“No,” he admitted—I knew he wouldn’t have made such an admission to anybody except Rook or me—“but you wouldn’t enjoy anything that hurt anybody else would you?”

I thought about that. “No...not if I...was aware...” I trailed off. I knew I could never eat any of “the guys” again. I was disappointed, but only for a dropping of a star, as the saying goes; many new paths had suddenly appeared around my ribbon flower; and at a level outside of words something else had occurred to me. I groped for it but couldn’t find it.

Jake pondered a moment, and then said, “I think I know what you’re getting at. Because of your nature, you envision a perfect world, where everybody is enlightened and kind and so forth, and everybody always does what is ‘right.’ And I would say, in a perfect society, what’s right must line up with what you like, or what you want to do.”

Rook put in, “That’s how it is on Shamokin.”

I told Jake, “Shouldn’t it be the other way? Shouldn’t what you like to do line up with what’s right?”

“No, because what’s right is never clear. You can never figure out what exactly is ‘right.’ You *can* figure out what you like to do, though.”

Rook warned, “He’s a scholar, don’t argue with him.”

I persisted, however. “But what if you like to hurt people?”

“Ultimately that’s a moot point, because if you like to hurt people, then it’s likely other people like to hurt people too, including you, and likely as not, you don’t like being hurt, so liking to hurt people cannot be a quality in a perfect society, at least defining a perfect society as that in which everybody lives exactly as they want to live, does what they want to do—which is what my definition would be—because it (liking to hurt

people) as a desirable condition leads to a condition (that of people wanting to hurt you) that is undesirable.”

“HmMMMM.”

“Of course,” he went on, “this doesn’t mean that everybody in our imperfect society should be allowed to do exactly as they please—but if you have no harm in your heart, you should just do whatever you want to do. *I do whatever I want to do.*”

“You want to paint this barn?”

Seeming to lose his train of thought, he added, “Of course, there’s probably no such thing as a perfect society. Suffering is, I imagine, inherent, a prime component even, of life, and if you’re...” He noticed me watching him, looking somewhat appalled, and he cut himself off, patted me on the head, and said, “I’m hungry; I think it’s time for a break; anybody for some beef?” and tromped off towards Farmer Green’s house, where I’m sure Tameedah was happy to see him.

“Incidentally,” Rook asked, as we watched Jake go, “What did Golden Gerbil say...about your dilemma? He usually has something interesting to say.”

“Oh, he said that domesticated animals wouldn’t exist if we hadn’t domesticated them, and therefore if we didn’t eat them, they wouldn’t even exist, so for their benefits we should keep domesticating them and eating them. Something like that.”

He frowned (which was rare for him; if he was puzzled by something, usually he just raised an eyebrow). “Hm, that seems like a non-argument to me—a justification, less honest, at least, than just saying, ‘I’m hungry, I need food, and you taste good and will provide me with necessary nutrients, so I’m going to kill you.’ Seems like parents could say the same thing about their babies—their children wouldn’t exist without them, you know. I think yon Exeter would be pretty disgusted by that one. To hold that just because you brought somebody into being that that person should be a slave to you, well, that seems like the height of arrogance to me. They’re still entities.” He finished with conviction, “That’s never done on Shamokin.”

“Yeah,” I murmured, as I wandered away, “Well, we’ll build New Shamokin, someday okay?”

I loved these conversations, and having decided against going out to Latalla, I began formulating a question as I wandered across Farmer Green’s fields hoping to find, preferably, Rook *and* Jake, but at least one of them. Rushlight had told Tameedah recently that a nearby town had instituted a lottery in which the winner had to share his bounty with ten other people of his choosing, and I was going to ask them what they thought of that. But I couldn’t find either of them; I checked their usual places, I stood on the fence of the little cowyard and scanned the farm, but could catch not even a glimpse of either of their patterns.

Well, I shrugged, I guess they’re not around, so I headed out to Latalla after all, recalling, as I scampered across Farmer Green’s fields, the note I had left for Mrs. Camden.

“Oh yeah,” I murmured, “I told her to go out there; she might be there already! And if she went out there and didn’t find me, she’ll be very worried! Poor Mrs. Camden!” I laughed to myself: she was so imperturbable that when she did get excited about something, it was comical, somehow, albeit touchingly so.

One time, many years before, I had spent the afternoon before she arrived building a ramp of snow up to the roof of our hut, and by coincidence, not design, I happened to reach my objective of jumping from the roof into the blanket of soft snow waiting below just as she entered our yard from Lohu’s field. Her entity pattern, unaffected by malice, anger, threat, or even the presence of yelg wolves, was reaching for me in a desperate frenzy as she raced to my side, and her face, always so placid, was etched with horror and concern as she slid to a stop beside me. I laughed at the incongruity of it, and then I cried because I thought I might have hurt her feelings by laughing at her. She thought I was crying because I was hurt, though, and carried me

tenderly inside and after determining that I was okay, told me, “That wasn’t smart,” which was as close to chiding me as she ever came.

It was an easy walk out to Lake Latalla, or, as it turned out, to Lake Twell. Summer was at its height, but dry and cool air had arrived before its welcome in the valley of the four farms and had decided to stay, bringing with it a breath of autumn without affecting the earth-warmth of summer. Outside, one felt cool and refreshed and yet warm to the bone, and as if you could gambol about hours without end. And that’s just what I was doing: gamboling, gaily, zigzagging to Latalla through multitudes of green, soaking in, and dancing in the beauty, and looking forward to introducing Mrs. Camden to at least one of my new friends.

I was rounding Twell, when to my ironic surprise, I caught sight of a familiar pattern, in the field of boulders that lay beyond the quilt of reeds, lakegrass, wildflowers, and spindly willows south of the lake.

“Jake!” I shouted, though I knew he was too far away to hear me. I headed, prancing, towards him through the buggy brush between us, and was perhaps two-thirds of the way to the field of boulders, about to call his name again, when two things happened.

First, I caught sight of Jake—his physical body—and he looked different. That is, he was dressed differently, *a lot* differently, from any way I’d ever seen him dressed, which made him look different to my eyes (though to my truesight, as Jake, himself, would come to call it, he was unchanged). Instead of the sweat- and grime- soaked fine linen shirt and coarse linen pants that he usually wore, a buckled leather suit of what could only be called armor covered him from neck to toe, weather-beaten and scarred; and he carried a strange axe, longer, with a much narrower blade than the ones the farmers used for woodcutting. And blood was on the axe’s blade, and on his face.

Second, an awful shrieking arose in the southwest, not so loud as earsplitting, with a quality of ice and blood and dripping oiliness in it that turned my insides to stone just to hear. And then Rook, dressed in a less weathered version of the same outfit Jake was wearing, appeared at the southwest edge of the boulder field, at full bore, his long strides shortening the distance between him and Jake with impressive alacrity.

“What are you guys...” I started to say, as I entered the boulder field, but two things cut me short.

First, at the same time as a feeling both of unreasoning panic and sluggish heaviness fell upon me, I saw the patterns of the shrieks tackle Jake and Rook. Scaly, hooked, and nearly colorless gray worms that yet gave the impression of being purple-black, attached themselves to their entity patterns, and seemed to suck a certain vital flexibility from them before dissipating, so that while appearing undamaged, their patterns moved stiffly, with hesitance, their vibrant dances of color slowed and rendered non-rhythmic. In particular, the bands that connected their entity patterns to their body patterns were diminished to the point of being almost indiscernible.

Second, Jake saw me, and the look that crossed his face, of blind grief that eradicated the mask of amusement that always hid even the hint of his entity pattern from the world, choked back any words I might have said.

“Yaan! Yaan!” he said, but that’s all he could spit out.

The screams grew nearer, intensifying the effects on his pattern, and on Rook’s, who came abreast of us, his eyes wide with concern. A scabbard was buckled to his belt, and he was holding a sword, which like Jake’s axe, was streaked with blood.

Breathless, he said, “There’s two of them!”

“Rafers?”

Rook nodded.

“Wraiths?”

Rook nodded again. “At least five or six. And a couple more donks.”

Jake murmured, “What the? Why in the? It doesn’t make sense.”

The shrieks drew yet nearer.

Jake hesitated, which would have been strange to me if I hadn’t seen the stifling effect the wraith screams were having on his entity pattern. He almost seemed to be lost in thought; then, as if suddenly remembering what he was supposed to say, he barked, “Get her out of here!” He pointed east and north—homeward.

Rook gazed at me, uncomprehending, for a moment, then for another moment in sheer surprise, as if only now realizing that I was present. I was afraid he might be frozen, the shrieks having completely inactivated the strands connecting his entity pattern to his body pattern; but then he took me by the hand and was, I thought, about to say, “Come, Lady Yaan,” when, as if remembering something he knew he shouldn’t have forgotten, he turned back to Jake and said, “You should take her.”

Jake said, “No!” with naked unthinking force. He wanted to say more, but couldn’t find the words.

Rook protested, “I’ll have a better chance of fending them off.”

I expected Jake to make some sarcastic remark about how Rook was getting pretty big in his britches, but he didn’t. Instead, with clenched teeth, as if it took a lot of effort just to form the words, he gritted, “I know! That’s why,” and jabbed his arm and finger homeward. He looked sort of like he was trying to hold in a bowel movement. His expressive blue eyes, so striking in the unhewn sun-scorched roughness of his face, met Rook’s black ones, and there passed between them something unspoken, something that had always been unspoken and always would be.

With a short nod, Rook now said what I had expected him to say before, “Come, Lady Yaan,” and giving me the gentlest of tugs, started us homeward. I expected him to lift me onto his shoulders and run home—I’d grown a bit since the trip across Lohu’s field, but he was still quite strong enough to carry me—or at least for the two of us to run along together, me scurrying, him loping; but he was hesitant, indecisive. He just walked, and not even very briskly, and kept looking ahead, towards the distant farm which one could make out, or at least sense, beyond the brush that bordered the field of boulders, as if considering, “Should we run or should walk? Is it too far? Is the brush thick enough to hide us?”

I thought it was too far. It may not have been, but the shrieking of the wraiths was affecting me, too. I was finding it hard to focus on anything except the pattering of my heart. I wanted to curl up into a ball, in a nice dark hiding place. As we reached the edge of the boulder field, I heard Jake’s voice, hollering under the wraith shrieks: “Come and get me you liver bellies! I’m right here! Yeah, right here! Come on, let’s see what you’ve got!”

Managing amid the mounting confusion in my brain to catch hold of a thought, I said, “Rook! The Jaji can hide us.” The Jajis with whom I’d made acquaintance in recent months often took me to hidden nooks within the woods that I felt sure would be safe from detection.

This made no impression on him; he continued to ponder the appropriate course of action.

“Really Rook! They can hide us! The Jaji—the Forest Elves.”

Snapping out of his near-reverie, he said, “Forest Elves? Where?”

“Towards Latalla.” I pointed north and west, back towards Twell and upwards, “Not far!” We hurried from the boulder field, into sight of Twell and its willows and reeds and lakegrass, and then took a slanting path upward through redfern

and tangles of wildflower, coming soon to thickening glades of souse and oak. It was much more confusing to discern where I was going than it was when a Jaji led me, but I found the patterns of a couple of the places I knew, and leading Rook, headed to one I thought would be a good hiding place, a tight cluster of small oaks the trunks of which formed a broken ellipse around a large fallen souse.

“Here,” I said, taking a seat on the souse log, “they won’t find us here.” No Jajis were around, but the echo of their presences lent a comfort to the glade, a quietness that the shrieks of the wraiths, though we could still hear them, couldn’t penetrate.

My disorientation lessened. Rook sat down beside me, but remained pensive, which was quite unusual for him, even in tense situations. He laid his blade across his thighs.

Settled, I scanned all directions, picking among the patterns of plant and animal and the overall pattern of the ecosystem for Jake.

“I can see him,” I told Rook when I had found him.

Rook peered into the forest, in the direction from which those unearthly shrieks, now muffled by distance and trees, stabbed at us. His entity pattern was regaining its fluidity in steady increments, but remained far from the pulse and glow of its usual glorious dance.

“Where?”

“That direction.” I pointed at the same cluster of trees and brush that blocked his line of vision to the field of boulders; and as he peered that way again, I added, “You won’t see him. I see his entity pattern—that’s what I call it when I talk to Mom. But it’s *him*, to me. What you see as him, I think of as a façade, a shadow.” Mom would be angry that I was telling him this, but I didn’t care anymore.

Rook nodded, with a slight frown of thought, perhaps suspending disbelief or a need for clarification for the time being in order to focus on the matter at hand. Critters scurried

nearby; a bird or two twittered, but the forest was very very quiet today, perhaps sensing the intrusion, as my Kee friend Uyuyo called it whenever *I* showed up, let alone ravers and wraiths. I noticed that Rook was sweating, which was rare for him even on sultry Mowta-wan days, and very surprising today, it being a cool day for summer. “On Shamokin,” he had told me during an otherwise undistinguished discussion we’d had some time between today and the day he’d informed me he was from beyond the stars, “the temperatures range from so cold that rivers freeze to the bottom, to as hot as a forge—well, as hot as the room where the forge is, you know, if that room were enclosed; so here on Lenima the weather is always comparatively mild and pleasant to me.”

I noticed then that I was sweating, too, in profuse swashes. I was drenched, almost as if by rainfall.

Jake had made his way, as he continued to issue loud challenges, to the western border of the field of stone and blockaded himself between a boulder as large as a provision wagon, and a steep rise of violet and switchgrass that beckoned the way to Lake Latalla and at the top of which was dark forest into which the sun was sinking.

I whispered, “He’s among the boulders. It’s not that far, Rook; go help him!”

I could tell by the action of his pattern and the fact that he said nothing that he wanted to go, but he didn’t budge.

After a moment, he asked in a hoarse whisper, “Where are the wraiths?”

I had no idea what the wraiths looked like, but they were easy to find. The boulders near the western border of the field, where Jake was, were enormous, many as large as the one Jake had stationed himself behind, but east of these enormous ones, there was a band of comparative gravel, with many stones small enough to lift, and eastward from there, the boulders increased in size, with the ones at the eastern border of the field, which came close to the southwest corner of the Gerbils’ farm, nearly

as large as those at the western border. Eight hideously distorted patterns weaved their way through these stones, four of them among the big boulders at the eastern border, but the other four among the big ones at the western border, where Jake was.

“They’re human!” I told Rook.

He raised an eyebrow, which I was happy to see. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. We looked at each other in a moment of astonishment, eye to eye, as our faces dripped with sweat.

The four near Jake wove around each other in an eerie dance, sliding between and around rocks and boulders in diminishing circles towards him, as their shrieks shattered the air. Then their cries ceased. The abrupt silence was uncanny, and scarier even than the screams.

“They’ve found him!”

Rook gripped the hilt of his sword, but he didn’t move.

By the time they came around the rock, Jake had stopped yelling at them, his voice finally silenced by the effect the wraiths’ voices had had on his pattern. He pivoted so that his back was to the boulder, his face to the sun, which was now beginning to drop behind the trees at the top of the rise. He managed, with a growl of rage and will, to lift his axe up in front of him in a posture of defense. It rested like a sledgehammer there, though, heavy and ponderous; I knew he wouldn’t be able to swing it. The wraiths, now as silent as shadows in a snowstorm, glided into a half-circle around him, and then, letting loose their screams once more with heart stopping suddenness, came at him as one.

HAYNTA-6

If my dance, if you will allow such a grandiose term, with Nolk that spring was an exciting interlude in the ongoing misery of my interment at Clark's Hill, then the day the cage wraths came was an exciting interlude in my dance with Nolk.

That dance—yes, I'll continue with grandiosity for consistency's sake—was an interlude that needed an interlude, although I had no conscious awareness of that at the time, and even if I had I *would not* have chosen an encounter with cage wraths for it.

It was an interlude that needed an interlude because it (the primary interlude, the one with Nolk) was anguishing. Let's face it, bewitchment, or maybe I should use the softer phrase "unacknowledged attraction," is anguishing; and I was anguished.

I loved it, being bewitched, that is; and I truly liked Nolk, beyond the unreasoning and overpowering attraction I felt for him. At the time, I would have said that his presence filled me with light. I know now that this wasn't the case, but I think I sensed in the flush of our interaction a flicker, or promise, of a light, or *something* that I longed for; and this was the source of my anguish. I was reaching for this flicker without knowing precisely what I was reaching for. I was desperate for it, unsure of what it was or even that it was real, and afraid that it would always elude me.

If Nolk had said anything to confirm that my attraction to him wasn't reciprocated, I would have been crushed, but at least the spell would have been broken; if he had said anything to indicate that the attraction *was* reciprocated, it would have transformed the spell into something else, and there, too, it would have been broken; if he had flirted with me in any way, or said anything at all suggestive, my liking for him would have been diminished and the spell would have been broken. But he never did. He never acknowledged that I was attracted to him,

or gave any indication that he could possibly be aware that I was. I knew at some level that he had to know—he would have to be dense beyond belief not to realize that a girl following him around like a puppy had to have a flame burning for him, and he wasn't dense at all, he was quite sharp—and I raged inwardly at him for avoiding the obvious, for being, I thought, a coward; but raging doesn't break a spell, it only intensifies it.

So, almost any diversion from this agonizing intoxication with Nolk would have been a welcome relief (even if I didn't realize it as such); and perhaps even the cage wraths' visit was a salve to my agitated psyche. No, I won't go that far. In any case, the evening they came, early evening it was, I was on my way back to my room from the library, where, having not found Nolk in the Nonagon after my classes, I had been grinding through my studies. Having achieved a solid once-over of everything that I was supposed to learn, I had decided to reward myself with a leisurely walk home, and was now circumnavigating the nine buildings of the Institute.

It was a nice walk, I had to admit, especially on a day that heralded the summer with an early burst of warm air. The wall of pinkish-orange brick and stone that surrounded the Institute as if it was a fortress, and which was about the height of, oh, five people, maybe six, lent an air of peaceful isolation to the outer grounds, augmented by the many big calm old oaks, hickories, wambawams, and souses planted in strategic designs to appeal to the aesthetic sense of the average person. The outer grounds: as opposed to the inner grounds, which were so self-satisfactorily called the Nonagon by students, teachers, and administrators alike. There wasn't any clever name for the grounds between the outer wall and the nine buildings that comprised the Institute. It was simply the outer grounds.

You could get to just about anywhere you wanted to go at the Institute by cutting across the Nonagon, but there wasn't a rule that said you couldn't use the outer grounds, and in fact the flower-lined cobblestone walk that circled the nine buildings in

a wayward path from big tree to big tree, with cross walks that led to the doors of every building, seemed to invite you out there, for a meditative ambulation.

Students preferred the shorter routes from place to place that the Nonagon provided, however, so that other than the occasional intrepid wayfarer and of course the omnipresent janitors (who were, nevertheless, not so numerous on the outer grounds as they were in the Nonagon and inside the buildings), you weren't likely to run into more than a person or two if you decided to take a stroll on that cobblestone walkway. Now that I consider it, this may have had more to do with the outer grounds' air of peaceful isolation than the fortress wall and all the big trees did. Not having to deal with people goes a long way towards making something pleasant. There were nightly gatherings on the Offices/Library lawn, but if I chose to take a walk, I could usually get it in before the crowd started to gather.

Usually when I walked, I stayed on the cobblestone path, although if I were willing to risk a disapproving look from a janitor I might jaunt across the lush, feet-caressing lawn. Either way, it was a nice little trip during which I could enjoy some peace and quiet, think about things (most notably Nolk), and just be happy to be away from the sickening gabble of other people.

To be candid, while the *idea* of taking a walk was appealing, I didn't actually take them very often. But when I did, I was always compelled to go all the way around the Institute, sort of saying hello to each of the nine segments that, as I perceived them, comprised the circumnavigation of the nine buildings. Nine buildings, nine segments, yes, you heard, or read, that right. Indeed, while all of the buildings were almost identical—three stories of the same vainglorious salmon-colored brick that the outer wall boasted, striped every twenty or thirty bricks with a layer of white block, and bedecked only with a set of big black doors and a row of small rectangular windows near a flat roof (with the three dormitory buildings

offering a more generous proliferation of windows, along with a preponderance of little brown doors instead of the one big black set)—the area of lawn between each separate building and the outer wall had its own character, or at least its own set pieces, if you will.

The Offices building, of course, oversaw the grand entrance to Clarks Hill: the enormous black iron gate that opened upon an immaculate, treeless, lawn of green cut by a wide path of stone lined on both sides with pots of flowers—orange summertops in the spring, red and yellow marigolds in the autumn, and blue candles in the winter. The Library was the top floor of this building.

Going clockwise, upon the lawn in front of the Cafeteria building was a collection of huge metallic spheroids the purpose or use for which I could never discern, along with a couple of small groves of oak and hickory. Next, the area outside of the first of the Classrooms buildings, though dotted with a number of short thick brushy souse trees, was marked in character, I thought, by two poles of smooth gray rock, taller than the souse trees. One was a flagpole, or it was used so, anyway, one of the janitors raising the Clarks Hill pennant to the top of it every morning and lowering it every evening. At the top of the other was an always-burning oil lamp. Both of these poles seemed to me to be gesticulating aggressively at the sky with a self-aggrandizing bitterness.

A grove of oaks that announced the seasons with the fullness of their foliage and the color of their leaves dominated the grounds outside the second of the Classrooms buildings, while on the lush lawn of the third Classrooms building was spread an assortment of flower bushes planted in concentric circles around a waterless stone fountain. In front of The Gymnasium building statues of muscular people discouraging non-muscular people from entering were arranged in a phalanx that I imagined would have impressed the Shakis himself.

The few bare spots of earth upon the grounds—patches of dirt where it seemed nothing would grow no matter how often the janitors seeded them—dotted the lawn of the First Dormitory building in the shadow of a haphazard collection of oak and wambawam trees. The lawn of the second Dormitory building was home to a number of towering hickories as well as several large piles of brick and wood that seemed to suggest that some new construction was soon to take place, although in all the time I was at Clarks Hill, it never did.

The world outside of the third Dormitory building, which was the one I lived in, was comparatively nondescript, a few clusters of trees near the outer wall the only blemishes in the veil of green that the long splengrass of the lawn presented to any window spectator—except for one thing, which gave the area as much or more character than any other area on the entire grounds: A single tree, small with pinnate leaves, which bore bright orange berries, stood by itself in the grass about a quarter of the way to the wall. Though small, this tree had, to me, an air of ancientness. I fancied that it had always been there, watching the eons go by, enduring generations of human foolishness. The monks may have planted all of the other trees on the grounds, but this one, I imagined, had been there before the monastery was built, long long before. I had never seen another tree that looked like it, or that bore its unique orange fruit, nor had anyone else: the students, the teachers, the janitors, nobody could identify its species, not even Mrs. Camden.

The outer wall of the institute was high enough that when walking around on the grounds, one could see nothing but clouds and sky beyond our little insulated academic world, other than that on the back side of the school (relative to the front gate), where the wall was a bit closer to the buildings, you could see a few ragged leafless treetops peaking over from a scragglebom forest beyond—spying on us like dirty old men, I'd heard it said.

When I first heard the wraths, or maybe I should say when my ears were first accosted by their bitter howls, I was nearing the end of my stroll. I had started at the library, and had not planned well. Afternoon had been beginning to slide into evening at the time, and this transitional hour or so being, for me, the most pleasant time of the day to be out and about, with the wind having recently been at its afternoon apogee and now plunging towards its dusk nadir, this quick lessening of climatic energy creating the effect of a lazy stillness into which all the odors of tree and flower and all the sounds of bug and bird flowed, I found the atmosphere so welcoming when I reached my dormitory building, which was the next building down from the library, that I decided to add a full lap to my after-studies wind-down.

By the time I got back around to the Offices/Library building, where to my consternation the evening congregation was already beginning to form, this extra distance had begun to take its toll. My feet hurt, I felt groggy, and I was getting eager to lie down on my bed and fade into sleep imagining other lands and other people, who understood and loved one another.

I was trying to decide whether to turn around and walk *all the way* back around the school to my dormitory building, or to glue my eyes to the ground and try to sidle past the crowd unnoticed, when the most horrendous noise imaginable obliterated the calm reverie of the evening. Bloodcurdling is a much-overused term, but if anything I've ever heard has been bloodcurdling, this was it: the noise entered my ears with skin-peeling ferocity, and quickly spread through my body, solidifying (it felt like) the blood in my veins and rendering my heart useless.

I knew this horrendous noise was the cry of the Cage Wraths of Ek-Kur, partly because moments after it arose, the bells atop the Offices began ringing out in the pattern that the students had been instructed warned us danger was at hand and that we should go inside, and partly because while never having heard the cage wraths before, I, like most children in Lenima,

had heard horror stories about cage wrath raids, the most memorable aspect of those stories being the unbelievable descriptions of the horror of the monsters' screams, and partly because somebody who must have had much more presence of mind than I did cried out, "cage wraths!"

Screams, indeed: I guess a scream best describes the noise, although I wouldn't necessarily have called it that, or a shriek, howl, or wail, either. There's just no better word for it. Mix together the screeches of a catfight, the wail of a baby, the howl of a lonely yelp wolf, the laughter of a maniacal killer, and the death scream of a giant karakan lizard, and add an ethereal volition to enact evil to it, and that's about as good a description as I can come up with. It seemed as if it came both from beyond the Institute's fortress wall and from right behind me. That is, while not loud per se, there was a force about it, as if someone were screaming in rage right into my ear, which made all other sound difficult to discern.

Whether I was panicked, dumbfounded, or some strange sorcery was at work upon me, I couldn't know. My heart fluttered like the wings of a wounded bird, desperate, non-rhythmical; my knees banged against each other; I wanted to run, most of all, I wanted to hide. Yet, I didn't move; I was oddly lethargic, I was rooted to the spot. I *couldn't* move, or so it seemed. I was only aware of my surroundings as from the fringes of a deep fog of time. Other students—those who had come out to join in the nightly festivities on the lawn—were just as overcome as I was. They stood, or wandered about, aimlessly, mouths agog, eyes staring furtively about them, whether more afraid or confused, it would be impossible to say.

How long everyone would have remained in this stupefied fog, and what would have happened to us, I don't know. Cage wrath raids had been rare for many years, though there had been rumors that they were on the rise; so most of the stories about them were old and sketchy, many of them dating back a hundred, or, most often, two hundred years, to the

troubled time before the Shark War. Some accounts claimed that households, villages, or even whole towns of people were slaughtered and eaten, which as horrible as it might be, I could imagine; others spoke of a “harvest,” or “metastasis,” which I couldn’t imagine. We were ripe for harvest, that’s for sure, just waiting there like baby birds, for whatever fate the wraths chose for us.

Then, Mrs. Camden stepped into the fray.

Where she’d come from I hadn’t seen—suddenly, she was in the crowd of students, directing them into the Offices building. Probably she’d come from one of the Classroom buildings, where she’d been going over student papers, or perhaps reading from one of the many books on the shelves in her classroom, which she often did.

“Come along,” she said, with undaunted cheer, “It’s time to go in.” She tapped a tall dark boy on the cheek. “Come on, Namad, back inside for awhile; yes, that’s it.” Namad obeyed, dumbly following her. Taking another, shorter and stockier, boy by the hand, she said, “Come along, Thromm,” and he, too, followed her with unhesitating obedience, his body and will seemingly activated by her commands. Student by student she went: “This way, Lubin; come along, Keeny, this way Tulla,” speaking with a firm calmness, loud enough to be heard over the shrieks of the cage wraths, but not so loud that she seemed anything but her usual low-key, calm self, until enough students were following her that the rest were drawn along by the crowd, towards the black double-doors of the Offices. She ushered them into the building, and then, after telling a wild-eyed administrator, who was waiting inside, to lock the door, she walked west, towards the Cafeteria building.

And the shrieks of the wraths continued to accost me, if anything with an increased intensity, and I was alone, in the shadow of some souse trees, I was alone, not far from the Cafeteria’s metal spheroids, I was alone, and the shrieks bored into me, filling my head with blood—curdled blood.

“Haynta! Haynta!” Mrs. Camden’s spectacle-magnified eyes were searching mine with some concern, and yet cheerfulness as well, and reassurance. Her hand was touching my cheek; her warm, calloused fingers offered a solidity to hold on to in the rushing darkness of the wrath screams.

She smiled, and that smile offered solidity as well, and reassurance, and encouragement. I felt unreasonably safe, like a small child, scared of the night, now snuggled in the arms of her mother, or father, as if they, mere humans, could truly defend him or her against creatures of the dark.

“Come on,” she said, taking me by the hand; and I found myself following her to the first of the Classroom buildings. Once inside, she locked the doors behind us, let go of my hand, and moved with what I will call an urgent amble along jagged corridors of mottled tile and old wood, the smell of cleanser heavy in the air, an indication that the janitors had been through recently. Nolk, perhaps? No, probably not. The feel of the hard skin of her hand against the soft skin of mine had kept the cries of the wraths at bay; now, to keep from becoming frozen again, I locked my eyes on the fabric of her long gray skirt and thick gray socks, and let the rhythm of her steps draw me forward.

Each of the three Classroom buildings at Clarks Hill had nine classrooms, but because each of the rooms was a nonagon, the corridors were slanted and jagged, which, as I had found out as a first-year student, could make it difficult to find the room you were looking for. I remember thinking that it was a good thing there were only nine rooms, or nobody would ever even get to class! Now, following Mrs. Camden, keeping my eyes fixed on her skirt and her socks, I thought, “Nine buildings, and nine rooms in some of the buildings: nine must have been an important number to the Monks of the Iron God.” And then I thought, “Why is this the first time I’ve thought of this!”

At length, we came to the back door of the building, a single black one that opened into the Nonagon; and going

through it, we beheld what was to me a surprising scene. I suppose I thought that something similar to what had happened in front of the Offices building would be transpiring in the Nonagon as well, that is, that people would be standing around dumb and slackfaced waiting to be slaughtered, only in greater scope; but such was not the case.

Well, it was to some degree; but quite a number of students, along with a few janitors and one or two teachers were making their ways in slow, confused paths, to various buildings. In a second, I saw why: it was Nolk. He didn't seem to have Mrs. Camden's natural shepherding abilities, nor was he possessed of the air of brightness and confidence that she had displayed; but, by ones and twos, he was moving the crowd indoors, while, others, half snapped out of their fogs by his volition and that of the people he was leading, were heading in on their own.

Still, there remained quite a few frightened souls wandering about in a fearful daze, ripe for the taking, and these, after telling me to stay put, Mrs. Camden began shepherding, in the same manner she had rescued the students that had been caught in the stupefying brainhold of the wraths' cries in front of the Offices. The process took a little more time than it had in front, there being quite a few more people here in the ever-popular Nonagon, despite the evening lawn gathering out front, but she herded them all in like an experienced sheepdog—with me still tagging along behind her, having disregarded her command to stay put. I was afraid that if I took my eyes off of her socks and skirt I would again be overwhelmed by the shrieks, which had become deafening, increasing numbers of wrath voices seemingly being added to the inhuman chorus.

When everyone appeared to have been herded inside, Mrs. Camden rendezvoused with Nolk. Nolk's actions had been, to me, more amazing even than Mrs. Camden's, because while she appeared to have some sort of immunity to the wraths' voices, he didn't. He was pale (for him), trembling,

wild-eyed with fear, and sweating as if he'd been carrying sacks of rocks in the hot sun; and yet he'd managed to direct the retreat into the school with an efficiency that while perhaps not rivaling Mrs. Camden's, was, to me, impressive.

His eyes met mine, and he nodded in acknowledgement of my presence, which thrilled me; then, his and Mrs. Camden's eyes locked, and she asked, "Mrs. Catnip?"

He started to speak, choked on the words, and then shook his head.

Mrs. Camden said, "I'll check on her; go make sure the boys are with Mr. Catnip."

He nodded and then trotted away, in the direction of the Cafeteria. As I watched him go, I couldn't help but wonder whether the other janitors, Brothers Hals or Geln, for example, would lambast him for helping the students to safety instead of cleaning the latrines, particularly since his hood had come down during the fuss.

Mrs. Catnip was the new history teacher at Clarks Hill, having replaced Mr. Chimneylark almost a month earlier. She was a small woman with fine features, a coal complexion, a mischievous smile, and cropped and spiky jet-black hair, who seemed even smaller than she was, but whose audacious, true, and jovial spirit filled the air with such lung-filling laughter and appreciation for the "mysterious grand," which was a phrase she would use, for example, upon hearing thunder or music, seeing snow, or simply looking, with the darkest of blue, almost black, eyes, into the sky, that if you were in her presence for long you felt that she, and you, were giants traversing mountain ranges with mighty steps.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should admit that this glowing portrait of her isn't mine, it's Little Bolo's, a paraphrase of one she drew one evening the next year when she and I were talking about Mrs. Catnip. I was too wrapped up with myself and Nolk at the time to have gained much of an impression of her, other than a general sense that she was likable

and a vague realization that history class was becoming more enjoyable.

She seemed so small because she seldom stood up. She taught her class and in fact went about just about everywhere, in a low-seated, wheeled, chair. She *couldn't* stand up other than to wobble about with the aid of crutches. Her legs were damaged in some unknown way. This wheeled chair was an ingenious contraption that she said her husband had contrived to put together. "Oh, he can figure out just about anything," she said, not in a bragging, or even a loving, way, but as if she were stating a fact.

He had, to summarize (I don't remember all the details), taken an ordinary wooden chair, nailed strong squares of wood to the underside of the seat, cut small round holes into these squares of wood, lacquered the holes and stuck a rod through them, fastened small replicas of wagon wheels to these rods, and attached two smaller sets of wheels to diagonal support bases that he had added to the front and back legs. And, voila, she could move herself without undue difficulty simply by pushing on the wheels with her hands, or to turn, by simultaneously yanking on the wheels and throwing her weight around in just the right way. The seat was so low because her husband had had to shorten the legs considerably to keep them from scraping the ground and impeding her mobility.

She had two little sons who sometimes could be seen haunting the halls of Classroom building #2, or to the chagrin of the janitors, running around in the Nonagon, or after the day's classes, mooning about in Mrs. Catnip's classroom while she went over her students' papers. I had never interacted with either of them, but they seemed wild and incorrigible, especially the older of the two, who was probably six or seven, so I had an immediate liking for them. They, I assumed, were the "boys" that Mrs. Camden had ordered Nolk to check on.

Utilizing the limited capacity for thought that I had reclaimed watching Mrs. Camden and Nolk work their magic, I

ascertained that Mrs. Camden was concerned specifically about Mrs. Catnip because she didn't get around very well. Many of the teachers, Mrs. Catnip included, lived in the residential area north of the institute, and walked home some time between when classes ended for the day, and dusk. Mrs. Catnip wheeled herself home, of course, and I thought that because Mrs. Camden had said she was going to check on her, she was meaning to head outward, towards that northern neighborhood, to make sure her colleague hadn't been caught on the roads. But she didn't do that. She went, instead, to Classroom building #2. On the way there, she noticed that I was still with her, or at least chose that time to address that circumstance.

Regarding me with her spectacles-magnified eyes that seemed more those of a Leopard warrior, now, than of my dowdy teacher, she said, "Haynta, well, now," in a gently chiding way, then paused, considering something, and went on, "Well, come along, perhaps you can look after Mrs. Catnip." She locked the door of the building behind us as we went in, moved, still with that urgent amble, along the slanted corridors again, and after opening the doors of a couple of rooms, at last found Mrs. Catnip, where in the dusty crisscrossing light of her classroom's high windows she sat rather pensively at her large desk, several thick books spread out in front her. She looked up at us, in, it seemed to me, a blank fog.

Strolling towards her, Mrs. Camden said, "Mrs. Catnip, I'm glad you're still here. You'll have to stay a little longer, I'm afraid."

"Mrs. Camden, *what* is going on?" Like Nolk, she was pale, trembly, and a little wild-eyed but did, actually, seem to have the greater parts of her wits about her. Inside the buildings, the effect of the wrath screams was dulled, although, and this was amazing to me, you could still hear them clearly, right down to the ugly, feces-smearred slime of their textures.

"A wraith sighting, it seems. Maybe quite a number of them. Haynta's here to keep you company."

Mrs. Catnip nodded, looking me over with her shrewd but genial black eyes. It was obvious to me by the flavor of her observation, as if looking not for the first time at something, but checking whether there is something about it that she hadn't noticed before, that she recognized me from class, although she didn't say so. Whether she considered me worthy company, I couldn't tell, but she said, "Excellent. It'll be gratifying to have some company with these nasties about." She indicated the wraths with a raise of her eyes.

Mrs. Camden bowed with a half-smile, and left without any more ado than that. I saw her remove her spectacles as she departed the room.

So, I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening alone with Mrs. Catnip in a darkening classroom, sitting in a corner behind her desk. Safely indoors, the effect the wrath shrieks had on me was diminished, but I still felt like hiding, and without Mrs. Camden's calming presence, I found that I was trembling again. I had a favorable impression of Mrs. Catnip, but the two of us were, in actuality, almost complete strangers, and with me being a person always uncomfortable, nervous, even scared, in the company of strangers, her presence did nothing to assuage my feelings of unease.

Mrs. Catnip seemed ill at ease at first, as well, but she was a garrulous, sociable, individual who the company even of a comparative stranger comforted; and it wasn't long before she acclimated to the situation.

After we'd stared at each other for a few moments, she declared, "I feel like hiding, don't you?"

I stared at her a moment longer, then swallowed and nodded.

"Hm," she said, surveying the room; then, regarding her big desk, declared, "This looks like something to hide behind. Let's scoot it over to the corner."

There were of course quite a number of corners in a nonagonal room, and I, still dunderheaded, looked from one to the other in jaw-sagging perplexity.

“Over here,” she prompted, nodding towards the nearest of the corners that wasn’t blocked by a bookcase, of which there were several in the room though not so many as in Mrs. Camden’s.

Grabbing one edge of the desk, she began wrestling with it ineffectually, the wheels of her chair sliding back and forth on the wood floor as she pushed and pulled. She did, to my amazement, manage to budge the big buffalo of a thing a finger or two along, and her gallant efforts spurred me to action. I bent to the work, and after some grunting and pushing, pulling, wrenching, shouldering, and just plain cajoling (that is, saying such things as “Come on, you!” and “It can’t be *that* heavy!”) we managed to situate it crosswise at a front corner of the room.

“Excellent,” she exclaimed, “And impressive Haynta; that thing is solid oak! Now...” and, to my great surprise, she tottered out of her chair, pulled herself onto the desk, slid herself across it, and gingerly lowered herself into the triangular space between desk and wall, disappearing behind the desk as she sat down.

“Aren’t you coming?” her voice asked after a few moments.

I clambered across the desk, then, and sat down beside her in our makeshift cubby.

“There, that’s better! They won’t find us here,” she said. And somehow it did feel safer behind the desk, our backs against the solid old-smelling wood of the wall, even though I was sure that if any wraths found their way into the classroom they wouldn’t have any trouble finding us.

My fear of the wraths, or maybe my apprehension of a more primal fear which had been drawn to the surface by the shrieks of the wraths, had decreased from paralyzing to heart-palpitating by coming indoors, these ongoing palpitations nev-

ertheless rendering my muscles shaky and inflexible, my mouth dry, my mind unable to lock onto thoughts and words, and my whole body saturated in tension. However, the ludicrousness not only of hiding behind a desk with my teacher, but hiding in a way that wouldn't decrease our chances of being found actually tickled me enough that I snorted. Mrs. Catnip laughed gaily in response.

I wondered, randomly, how many other people at the Institute who didn't know each other were huddled together hiding in unfamiliar rooms in absurd hiding places—on beds, for instance, or *under* beds, in closets, or behind other makeshift forts.

In an attempt to break the tension I'm sure she sensed in me, and which the ongoing aggression of the shrieks worked to maintain in both of us, Mrs. Catnip made some remarks intended to be humorous, but which I, still quite benumbed, could hardly assimilate, let alone respond to.

“Well, this is quite a pickle jar we're in, eh?”

“Huh?”

“You're supposed to say, ‘Don't you mean a pickle?’”

“Huh? Oh!” I was finally starting to lock onto words, and to form thoughts in response to them. “Don't you mean a pickle?”

“No, I mean a pickle jar. It's so cramped in here, and quite frankly, Haynta you smell a lot like a pickle. We both do, by this time of day.”

It was a body odor joke, I guessed, but I didn't get it. Body odor and pickles smelled nothing alike. I couldn't even fake a laugh.

“Well, you're a tough one. Did you hear the one about the sheep and the goat?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, no.”

“Oh, too bad.”

“What about it?” I asked when she didn't go on. I thought, well, I might as well hear it. When someone starts to

tell a joke, you want to know the end of it even if you're pretty sure it's not going to be funny.

"Oh, I didn't hear it, either; I was hoping you had so that you could tell it to me."

An old one, but tried and true, tired, but mildly humorous. Not enough to warrant a laugh, or even a chuckle, but enough to encourage the mist to begin to lift from my mind. Thoughts started flooding in, then, and it occurred to me that Mrs. Catnip was probably worried about her children. I said, "Mrs. Camden sent Nolk to look in on your sons, I'm sure they're okay."

Mrs. Catnip, beaming just brightly enough to mask her worry, exclaimed, "Well, you are full of surprises, Haynta!" She patted me on the knee—in appreciation, I thought—and added, "I'm quite sure you're right. Mr., uh, Catnip will have rounded them up by now. He's a very capable man." I thought she was going to say more, perhaps something about her boys, but she didn't, instead falling silent for a few moments, before prompting, "Nolk, you say? Mrs. Camden sent Nolk?"

"The janitor. A janitor."

"Ah-ha!" There was recognition, or awareness, in her tone, which was surprising.

"You know him?"

"No, I know no Nolks. I don't believe I've had the honor of talking to *any* of the janitors as of yet, other than to say hello in passing. They seem to avoid eye contact, which seriously discourages conversation. I say hello to them and they say hello, but seem not to want to engage any more than that. And those strange orange robes they wear!" She shook her head, in a way that was reminiscent of an old person disapproving of the younger generation.

"They pick on him. They pick *at* him."

"Who?" She had to be perplexed by what I was talking about, and why, but she responded with an admirable display of interest, giving me her full attention.

“The other janitors. They torment him, mercilessly—Nolk.”

She nodded, studying me, but said nothing, and I went on, “The other janitors. And they’re *nothing*! A bunch of snorks! He’s better than any of them. Than all of them put together! And yet he never gets mad. He grovels, almost, before them!”

Abashed by my outburst, I fell silent.

Mrs. Catnip, sensing by embarrassment, patted me on the knee again, and fell silent, herself, letting the muffled shrieks of the cage wraths fill the empty room.

After awhile, she said, gently, “Perhaps he’s afraid he’ll miss the invitation.”

“What?”

She flashed a smile that was somehow both genuine and sneaky. “Mrs. Camden told your class the story of the boy who crossed the Norgold Mountains, didn’t she?”

My heart leapt (as opposed to quickened, which it very well could *not* have done, still pattering along as it was, in response to the continual, if diminished, effect of the shrieks). I loved the boy in that story—Innikno—as if he were Nolk. When I imagined him crossing those mountains, I thought of Nolk. I mumbled, “Yeah. Yeah, she told it.”

Mrs. Catnip nodded. “I figured she probably had. And she told about the people of Dume, right, from where he commenced his trip?”

“Yeah.”

“And how they trade stories in the cold and the dark?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t that how they invite each other into their worlds, their beings—with stories? They start by saying, ‘A story is told,’ right? And that’s their invitation. They’re really saying, ‘I invite you to share in my existence.’ And you can accept the invitation and go on a little journey with them, or you can demur, if you don’t think the trip will be worthwhile. I for one am

almost always honored to be invited; but I suppose you can't always go; you've got your life to live, after all. And then, when they've finished their story, they say, '*The* story is told,' right? And that means two things: first, they've given the part of themselves represented by that story to you, and by doing so have given you permission to give it to others; and second, they're inviting you to tell your own story, to share your existence, your being, with them. Right?"

Mrs. Catnip's flurry of words dizzied me. "I don't know; I guess. That sounds nice, at least."

"Well," Mrs. Catnip, said, and I could hear that mischievous smile of hers in her voice, "our Mrs. Camden believes that Existence itself does the same thing."

"The same thing...as what?"

"That Existence is always inviting you into its story and at the same time inviting you to write your own verse into the poem of Existence. '*Eternity speaketh* always,' she says."

I thought about this. It sounded a lot like some of the mumbo jumbo we were always studying in Philosophy class, but if Mrs. Camden had said it, it was probably worth noting. I asked, "But what does this have to do with Nolk?"

Mrs. Catnip grinned. "Well, maybe this Nolk believes the same thing that Mrs. Camden does."

"So? That still wouldn't be a reason to let those bumble-ducks bully him around!"

"Wouldn't it? Anger is loud, like fear—every bit as loud as these guys." She waved her dark hand through the air above our heads to indicate the shrieks of the wraths. "It can drown out Existence's invitation. Maybe he feels that if he were to answer anger with anger, he wouldn't be able to hear that invitation."

"But..." First of all, it wasn't anger, as such, that the other janitors directed at Nolk, but an aggressive, mean-spirited dominance, and second, Mrs. Catnip seemed to be implying that you should respond to anger, or aggression for that matter, by

letting yourself get bullied. With the flexibility of my thinking still somewhat compromised by the noise of the wraths, forming my objections into a coherent argument just seemed too difficult, however, so I trailed off.

Mrs. Catnip took the opportunity to really sock it to me. “Do you hear it, Haynta? The ongoing invitation of Existence?”

I wanted to say yes because it seemed like saying no was saying I was a normal person, and I didn’t want to be a normal. But I couldn’t bring myself to lie to her. I said, “No,” and hoped that would be the end of it.

But it wasn’t.

“Well, keep trying,” Mrs. Catnip encouraged, as if she believed I had bought in to everything she’d said and had no doubt that she, or I, or anybody else had the ability to hear Existence speaking to them.

“So,” I asked, “Will Existence be saying, ‘Come on, Haynta, partake! Partake in me?’ Something like that?” It was a lousy joke, sarcastic and a bit disrespectful, I suppose, towards somebody trying to be helpful; but—as was my habit—I reacted with defensive anger towards any attempt to tell me what I should or shouldn’t do. It was a little arrogant and presumptuous, I thought, for her just to assume I would want to learn at her feet about these grandiose and fantastical things.

She didn’t pick up on my sarcasm, however, or chose not to, and answered me as if my question had been an earnest one. “No, it’s more of a shift, I’d say, a shift in your seeing and hearing. It’s subtle: a music, a crackle, a sparkle, a beckoning, into a magic, or into *something*, a fiber of Existence, that seems magical because you don’t understand it. But if it is magic, it’s a magic much deeper and more ancient even than that issuing from the very Fount of Magic at the world’s center. Mr. Catnip has a theory that the Fount of Magic is in essence a net that catches a small percentage of that fiber of Existence. When time blows through that net, droplets come loose and where they land, you get wizards or magic beings.”

“Magic beings?”

“Yes, magic beings. Like...” She trailed off. I waited, and she repeated, “Like...” and I realized she was prompting me to say something.

“Like, uh...” I struggled to come up with something. This was before Little Bolo came to Clarks Hill, so I wasn’t as up on the names of magic beings as I was to become. Finally, I said, “Fairies? Elves? Unicorns?”

Mrs. Catnip flashed her smile of mischievous delight. At least, I imagined that she smiled. Her face was in shadow now, the sun having dipped far enough by then that the beams of sunlight coming through the high windows of the classroom crisscrossed far above us. She murmured, “If you wish; of course, you might find that those well-known beings are just the beginning.”

A few moments later, she added, “But that’s enough blabber about all that, eh?” and somehow that made me like her more than anything else she’d said.

We sat in wet silence for awhile, and then she whispered, “Listen!” The shrieking had stopped; the world was silent: amazingly, magnificently, beautifully, blissfully silent. And with that silence, the details of the world returned: even in the dimness of the classroom, the contours of the walls, the desks, the wood floor, the books upon Mrs. Catnip’s desk, were clear and vivid, and strangely beautiful, the smells of wood and lacquer and even Mrs. Catnip’s and my bodies sharp and pleasant—“like cucumbers,” Mrs. Catnip said, later.

“It’s quiet,” I said, unnecessarily. I couldn’t help myself; I was giddy. I’d been aware that I was scared, indeed terrified, and lethargic and dunderheaded to boot; but I guess I hadn’t realized just how out of sorts I’d been, because with the pressure of the wrath screams lifted, I felt like jumping for joy. But I didn’t; well, I did, but inwardly.

After we had enjoyed the quiet passing of time for a few blissful minutes, near laughter with the sweetness of the silence,

Mrs. Catnip tilted her head, and with a wink in her voice, whispered, "What's that?"

I craned my ears but heard nothing. "It's the ringing in your ears from the shrieks," I told her, "echoes."

She shook her head. "No, I don't think so. It sounds like a scraping of scales." I listened harder, cupping my ears, but the world was as silent as a winter midnight, every person, every animal, every bug still hiding from the hideous noise that had shattered the evening.

"Listen! Isn't that a rush of blood and fire?"

I realized, then, that she was playing a little Mrs. Catnip game, as I would come to think of her sneaky whimsical winks, so to humor her, I listened yet harder; I tried with an inward grind and grit of my teeth (the teeth of my ears) to hear into the creases of the air itself. As I expected, I heard nothing. "It's silent, Mrs. Catnip. There's nothing."

Mrs. Catnip's smiling whisper grazed the silence once more, barely distinguishable from it, as if she hadn't spoken at all but had pulled the words from some crease in the world that you could only see with the eyesight shift of which she had spoken, and from where, too, the sounds she was describing, issued. "And there's a fluttering of great wings! Do you hear it?"

I shook my head.

"Oh my," she said with a smile that could just as likely have been of mischief or delight, "a scraping of scales, followed by a rush of blood and fire, and then a fluttering of wings. It can only mean one thing: a dragon is being born!"

And that's how I found out my history teacher was crazy.

ROWAN-7

A group of travelers rested together in a grove of trees, speckles of sunlight illuminating their faces. I recognized the freckled girl, the scarred man, and the woman with the hyacinth eyes among them; but there were others I didn't know. A big boned man with a heavy brow but a gentle and thoughtful face struck me, as did an older man with laughing but somehow serious blue eyes, big strong arms, and a belly. And there were several others. They had arranged themselves in a rough semi-circle, some sitting cross-legged, some with their legs stretched out in front of them, and some with their backs against the trunks of trees.

This scene I related to Romulus, in paint-dripping detail. Specifically, I said to him, "A bunch of people were sitting in a grove of trees. They liked each other—I think."

He gazed at me with blank incomprehension for a moment or three, waiting for his mind to disengage from what he was doing. Focus came like a floating ghost into his eyes, which were the color of maple bark, but still he was silent, waiting for the words I had said to replace whatever thoughts and considerations had hitherto been foremost in his brain; and finally into his face, which was the color of the cap of an acorn and the texture of the smoother variety of walnut, came the expression of absorption and curiosity, of me, of the moment, of the world, that I knew so well, and loved.

"Why do you think they liked each other?" he asked, over-enunciating the Leniman words, as was his way.

"The way they acted, it reminded me of how we act together—you and me." I spoke in his language—and indeed as our conversation continued, we switched freely between languages, sometimes mid-sentence. A linguist might have been able to pinpoint why we said what in which language, what types of ideas or word formations we expressed in one language and which ones we expressed in the other. I only knew that it

was fun to say one thing in one language and the next in the other and to have Romulus understand me, and respond in the same, two-language way.

“They were children, then?” Romulus spoke using his own language, though for the adverb he used mine.

“No, they were adults.”

Romulus was silent. He stared at the gray bars of his cage, his walnut face as blank as a numberless clock. As usual, twin serpents of urine and feces fought for control of the general miasma of the room, though not with the house-filling ferocity they had the time the Fatheads had neglected to come for two days, but Romulus seemed not to notice this sense-assault, his face marked by no tincture of aversion whatsoever. He was expressionless, motionless even. As I came to know later, Jaji faces seldom betray any emotion or thought. Romulus, himself, told me this once, after he asked me what I thought he was thinking about and I told him that I assumed his mind was completely barren of thought. “Your faces often seem grotesque to Jaji,” he told me, “even though your features are not so different from ours; and it’s because when you’re happy or sad or mad or thoughtful, your faces change so much. No doubt the lack of change seems as strange to you as the changes do to us.” I thought about it, and told him, in simpler terms, that probably because the forest, where Jajis live, is dark, expressions can’t be seen very well, and so what is imparted by humans with facial expressions must be imparted a different way by Jaji. That seemed sensible to me, and he agreed. “Yes,” he admitted, “we do wave our arms and move our fingers about, and wriggle our bodies and so forth much more than you do, and probably such movements are easier to see in the dimness of the woods than facial expressions.”

Finally, after perhaps forty-five seconds of silent, stench-filled reverie, he asked, “What species of tree were they sitting under?”

“Big ones.”

Asking for no elucidation, he nodded, and sank back into thought. Another forty-five or fifty seconds passed as he pondered. Finally, he said, "They must be Vaens."

We'd taught each other a great many words from our respective languages, but this one I didn't know, and I asked him what it meant. He thought in silence for yet another forty-five seconds or so, wiggling his forefinger as if searching through all the words of my language that he had learned from me or on the Grail, for the right one. Finally, he said, "Uh, the free ones, you know, the servants."

Thinking that in his imperfect knowledge of Leniman, he had got himself mixed up, I told him that could not be so, that servants and free ones were antonyms not synonyms, and that therefore these people could not be both.

He said, "Yes, there seems not to be a word," at which he suddenly grabbed the Grail, which he was, as usual, borrowing, ran his fingers over it excitedly this way and that, searching for something, then said, greatly satisfied, "Ah, yes; they're vagabonds."

A man younger than Dr. Mulgar but in no way resembling a youth, with a shrewd but pleasant face and eyes the color of blueberries, spoke to a woman with a face that seemed knowing yet wondering, serious yet laughing, and bright as the clear Sporch sun that shined down upon the two of them. His eyes danced and the edges of his mouth twitched as he asked, "And yet more?"

The two of them were eating across from each other at a table of yellow wood on the patio of an ornate cabin constructed of that same yellow wood. Plates of meat, broccoli, and beans, along with bowls of soup and cups full of an unknown liquid, lay under their noses, separated, one set from the other, by platters of extra servings. It was one of these platters that the man proffered the woman, along with his look of playful affection.

“Well, my dear Mr. Exeter,” the woman said, one side of her mouth smiling as she accepted the platter as well as his smirk, “your daughter needs some, too.” She patted her stomach in, it seemed to me, self-satisfaction. Where their daughter was, I couldn’t see.

“Daughter?”

“That’s right.”

“Hm.”

“Don’t ‘hm’ me, big boy. I can tell.”

Their eyes met, and I could tell that they were better friends even than Romulus and me...

The man, older now, his hair partly gone and half gray, and his face showing the roads of many a hard journey, stood on a green in front of a large green tent, along with a different woman—the woman with the scar under her eye, in fact—facing a group of four hungry-faced men with bulbous noses and brows as dark and glowering as the clouds overhead, each of the four hefting a different variety of club or mace.

“I wish you would go,” the woman said to the four of them in a voice strong but quiet, as the blue-eyed man looked on with mischievous glee, “I have no wish to hurt you, despite your less-than-enlightened views on male-female re...”

“I’ll say it again,” one of the men interrupted, pointing with a thick, gnarled, finger at the tent, “Them’s ours in there!”

“lationships,” the woman continued, “and there being four of you, I may not be able to immobilize you without injuring a couple of you. I will do what I can, but it really would be best if you would just go home.”

One of the men growled something that sound vaguely like, “Get outta the way!” and another added something that sounded like, “This ain’t none of your concern, Woman!” and yet another started to say something similarly aggressive, but the blue-eyed man interrupted him.

“Actually, it is her concern, Chuckles, and mine,” he said, with meaningful non-seriousness, which drew a look from

the woman that could have been disapproving or exasperated, or a caricature of either of those. “They came to us asking for protection from you. They don’t consider themselves to be ‘yours.’ If you’ve gotten the impression that they do, it’s only been because they were afraid of the consequences, and...”

Enough of this!” One of the men bellowed, and the four of them came at the woman and the man in a charge that could have been an attempt to get past them, or a direct attack on them.

I didn’t see the woman pull out a blade. As the attackers swung their weapons, she slid through them in a sort of spinning dance, like a Jaji stepping through a cluster of willows during the Festival of Imbhyran. Only when she stepped away from them did I see her blades, two daggers, which disappeared into pockets or folds in her cloak of crimson and clover, as the four men collapsed as one, at least one of them the victim of one his companion’s weapon rather than the woman’s blades.

A second passed. The four of them lay on the ground groaning or unconscious, one bleeding profusely from his neck, another from his hand.

The woman looked unhappy. She knelt beside one of the fallen men, and offered him a white cloth she pulled from inside her cloak. “Here,” she said gently, “this is narcloth. It will staunch the bleeding.” He accepted it, seeming none too happy but perhaps afraid he would bleed to death if he refused her out of spite. She checked the eyes of the unconscious one. “I really am sorry,” she told a third.

“Well, you warned them,” the blue-eyed man quipped, as she rose with effortless nimbleness. Eyeing his own blade before he sheathed it, he said, “I guess *this* was extraneous.”

As the woman turned to go into the tent, he added, “Aren’t you going to finish them off?”

She looked at him as if he were being absurd.

Perceiving the dubiousness in her expression, he assured her, with a wry smile, "I'm serious. They'll just do it once we leave."

"Do *it*? Do what? These girls are coming with us."

"Do what they do."

The woman sighed. "I suppose. But maybe *one* of them will spend a moment or two reflecting on his behavior."

"Nope."

"You're that sure of it?"

He nodded, and explained, "Quite. Of course, I'm not an idealist, like you."

"I think," she said with a meaningful half-smile, "Our differing attitudes can be explained by you being the idealist, and me the realist."

Disregarding her comment, he said, "So the best thing would be to finish them off. They're wasting space, and air and nutrients. They'd kill you, were your positions reversed."

"Well," she said, with an air of finality, "I'm certainly not going to pattern my behavior after what I think *they* would do. Are you?"

"No," he admitted, "but nevertheless..." He made a chopping motion. "It would be best for the world."

From her boot, the woman pulled a dagger which was different from the ones she'd returned to the unseen confines of her cloak, smaller and straight. It looked so sharp that it seemed to drip blood even clean. She offered it to the man.

They're eyes met, and he started to say something, stopped, and then said only, "Okay," with a smile of admission, and she put the blade back in her boot.

These scenes I reported to Dr. Mulgar, and he was happy, though if I were to judge not nearly so happy as he'd been the day of my "first" vision. He said, in shrewd deliberation, "I'll record what you've seen. It's something that is going to happen, somewhere, some time; what it means, I don't know. It might become apparent later. Good job, Romulus, good job."

In a field of stones, a young man, tall and raven-haired, with, I thought, an odd dark but bright complexion, wielded a sword of his own against two creatures that appeared to be made of stone and clay, and both of which gripped blades that were almost indistinguishable in form and color from their bodies, perhaps, indeed, extensions of their bodies. An incessant chant, low, and expressionless yet oddly insistent, like a creaky wagon wheel, issued from their mouths: “Donk donk donk donk donk donkeyadonkey, donk donk donk donk donk donkeyadonkey...”

Though knowing nothing of swordplay, if I had been asked to judge, I would have said that this raven-haired man lacked the skill with a blade that the woman with the scar under her eye had demonstrated, but he was strong and quick, and held the clay creatures at bay with nifty footwork and a long reach, in fact after a time taking the battle to them.

Swinging the sword back and forth like a brawler with a cudgel, each swing seeming to lend him more energy and more strength, and with this accrual of energy and strength each of his swings cutting through the air with more speed and power, he eventually overcame them, his blade first cutting deeply into the chest of one, who fell, and then taking the head off the other. Strangely, the blood of these clay men was red.

Sheathing his sword, he pulled a small dagger from his belt and with a look of distaste, perhaps unhappiness even, he cut into the head first of one and then the other, and in both cases after digging around in a colorless ooze (the red blood of these creatures evidently restricted to the body, not the head), extracted a serrated circlet of a cloudy whitish-clear substance. These objects he took to some nearby rocks and smashed into powder.

This scene I described to Dr. Mulgar, and he said, “Well, well, Romulus, very good, very good, indeed. You’re discovering some things that, well let’s just say, some greedy

powermongers wouldn't want you to discover. Those things are the product of black magic. They're called donks because of that sound they make, which is a side effect of the magic. They're tracking devices, essentially. They're an unholy amalgam of mineral and alloy and human flesh, held together by magic, and designed to zero in on magic. Usually, they're created to find some magical device and bring it back to the wizard or sorcerer who made them, or to the person whose pay that wizard or sorcerer is in." He added, after some thoughts that he kept to himself, "You're doing great, Romulus. Keep it up. We will need some direction pretty soon, but for now, this is great!"

The girl with hyacinth-tinted eyes chased some boys who were younger than her away from a yet-younger boy they were tormenting. She came charging like a bothered buffalo down a dusty road between ramshackle houses of warped wood; and before this onslaught, the boys scattered like unto the many dogs of this little village greased by cooks in post-supper, dust-peppered, sunshine as they scavenged for leftovers. It wasn't my impression that their aim was actually to torment him, but to bask together in the intoxicating fellowship of laughter.

He had emerged from the dark recesses of a shop wholly engaged in the sublime act (if one were to judge by the apparent spiritual joy he drew from it) of tearing into some licorice strips; and waiting for him in attitudes of agreeable pastime around and upon an empty hitching post, they had begun peppering him with questions that with either the patience of a teacher or the fear of a slave, he forbore without objection.

These questions were designed to demonstrate his ignorance of the world: anybody his age would be expected to know the answers to them, and even I, much younger than he was and without a day of experience in the world, would have had no problem answering them; but they were quite beyond him, which was amusing to the boys, who kept one-upping one

another with easier and easier questions. With each incorrect answer or look of dumbfoundment, fresh peals of laughter shook the boys and echoed up and down the road, which was nearly empty but for ranging dogs and an old couple on the porch of a nearby dwelling who kept glancing in the boys' direction, brows drawn in disapproval.

The boys thought their victim as devoid of emotion as of knowledge and therefore that their interrogation, while providing great entertainment for themselves, wasn't hurting him; but this wasn't the case. He grew, to my eyes, more and more upset with every question put to him, the serene innocence of his face that had been apparent before their questioning began replaced by confusion and a slowly growing awareness of the meanness visited upon him.

After chasing the boys away, the hyacinth-eyed girl sat down on the doorstep of some dusty rag shop, followed by the boy, who, discomfited by the harassment of his tormenters, seemed to need guidance. He stood beside her as she sat, his arms rigid at his sides, until she motioned for him to sit beside her, which he did, as if accustomed to being told what to do and believing that she, because of the command offered by her manner, was somebody who should be obeyed, like a parent or teacher. The command of her manner was an illusion, however; to my eyes, she was quite uncomfortable. She wasn't sure what to do, or to say. She squeezed her fingers, twisted her hands, looked at her feet, glanced at him, who was watching her from the corners of downcast eyes, and finally asked, "Are you all right?"

He nodded his head with enthusiastic vigor, told her he was fine, and then, judging by the inclination of his head and the expectation on his face, waited for her to ask him another question, as if, perhaps, believing that the friendly questions he sensed she would ask would erase the painful memory of the boys' unfriendly ones.

She, perceiving that he wanted her to ask him questions, asked, "What's your name?" and he responded, "Gaorg," and then after hesitating as if unsure whether or not it was okay for him to ask questions, "What's yours?"

She said, "Well, sometimes it's one thing, and sometimes it's another. Well, it was something, but I renamed myself because it, my previous name, that is, was more suitable for a beautiful person, and I wasn't, I'm not, beautiful, and now it's..." Seeing that he was baffled, she smiled and said, "It was Tahain." Her exposition was, to me, opaque, and yet her manner was open and frank.

He said he liked Tahain, by which I didn't know whether he meant the name or the girl herself. She said, "I like Gaorg," and then asked, "So where do you live?" and he pointed down the road. She said, "I live that way," and pointed in the opposite direction; and the two of them kept asking each other questions as the evening dew drew the afternoon dust to the ground in the draining sunlight.

This scene I described to Dr. Mulgar, and he said, "Another good one, Romulus, you're doing great," but I could tell he wasn't interested in the hyacinth-eyed girl or her new friend. His mind was elsewhere, fighting one of his eternal battles.

The white freckled girl I had seen with the scarred man in the cave sat at the end of a pier beside an old, old, wrinkled woman, both of them gazing out across a blue lake, smooth as a polished table, that smelled only faintly of mineral and lake-weed and not at all of fish (odors that I of course couldn't identify at the time, but for the sake of vividness have added to my description). The sun, three-fourths of the way down the sky behind them, cast a golden streak upon the blue water, so that they, their faces shadowed, seemed, from a distance, to be dark beings of dirt and bark gazing into an otherworld of light.

They spoke not a word; the water, as still as the sunset within it, laughed not against the shore; no person, nor creature, stirred on the abandoned dock behind them; silence was complete. To judge from the postures of the two, the way they leaned towards one another, and the expressions on their faces, it was the freckled girl who was old and the wrinkled lady who was young, the freckled girl serene, compassionate, assured, the wrinkled lady scared, unsure.

They sat thus in timeless reverie until, perceiving that the old lady's mien matched her own, the freckled girl arose, and, her fingers brushing her companion's shoulder like a leaf of soft sage, departed, the old lady's dark eyes acknowledging her with a subtle embrace as she went. She walked the thirty or forty paces across the rickety uneven pier to the shore, where she joined the girl with hyacinth eyes cross-legged on the dock. The two sat there together in longskirts and cloaks, the freckled girl's longskirt scarlet and cloak goldenrod, and the hyacinth-eyed girl's longskirt purple, and cloak cobalt, until at length, tilting her head towards the old lady at the end of the pier, the freckled girl said in a voice both childlike and ancient, "She has gone into the Infinite."

This scene I related to Dr. Mulgar, and while not taken with it to the degree he was by my first "real" vision, of the white girl and the scarred man, his intellect was piqued by it.

"That's quite interesting, Romulus," he said, "quite interesting, indeed. You've seen that same girl twice, now. You could quite literally see any of an uncountable number of people, and yet you see the same person twice in the span of a few days." Almost as if to himself, he added, "This could be meaningful—or perhaps it could be explained by subliminal desire: This girl was part of your exciting breakthrough vision and you *want* to recreate the excitement of that first vision." Then, addressing me directly again, he finished, "You *do* have control, Romulus, you see? We've just got to make it a conscious control!"

A large, stern-browed man who I thought at first must surely be as unfriendly as Dr. Bowusuvi sat at a large desk of faded sousewood in a small sweaty-looking windowless room lit by two oil lamps hung on nails in the wall. Roll upon roll of scroll were stacked upon stack on the desk amid mechanisms that reminded me of the black boxes in my bedroom. The man had been writing upon another, open, scroll with a бага bird feather pen, but had paused, lost in, as I perceived it, angry thought.

An adult Jaji came unannounced into the room, and said not in Jaji but in Leniman—clearer Leniman even than Romulus spoke, with almost no mispronunciation or over-pronunciation of syllables—“The Calib-er has discovered that her mother has departed.”

The big man disengaged himself from his thought, and said in a voice that belying his gruff countenance was unassuming and friendly, “All went well?”

The Jaji didn’t address the question directly, but Romulus-style, offered up a related fact that could be interpreted as an answer. “She ran with me. She stayed close.”

The big man’s heavy brow went up in surprise. “Were you going full-speed?”

“Nearly.” The Jaji’s face was unreadable.

“Did that surprise you?”

“She is the Calib-er.”

The big man’s eye was caught by his own writing upon the scroll in front of him. Frowning, he mumbled, “Oh, yeah,” and scribbled something. Then, he looked back up at the Jaji and said, “What was the upshot?”

The Jaji just gazed at him, exuding, as Romulus often did with me, magnanimous forbearance of his obtuseness, and the big man clarified, with a negligent wave of a heavy hand, “What was her reaction to the disappearance of her mother?”

The Jaji thought for a moment and then said, “It was my impression that after initial alarm at her absence, she looked for her, and found her.”

“Found her? What do you mean? Her mother is half a continent away by now.”

“Saw her.”

“I repeat, she’s half a continent away!”

“Saw her in the way she sees things that you and I do not.”

“But that far?”

“She is the Calib-er.”

The big man blew out a long exhalation of air. “Okay. Good. Now the hardest part. We wait.”

The Jaji tilted his head, Romulus-style, in the slightest of sideways nods.

The big man stood up, stretched his back, rotated his neck, crossed his arms in front of his body, and grabbed one ankle and then the other, stretching his legs; then, his deportment changed abruptly from officious to informal.

“Come on, old friend,” he said, slapping the Jaji, who he towered over by half a head, on the back, “Let’s go have some supper. We’re having some blueberry lhaelweed hash. It’s sorta like a Jaji meal, there’s no meat. It’s a mixture of the blueberries Von—uh, Della—brought down from Roncala, and the lhaelweed sprouts so common around here, and some other stuff. It’s pretty good, if you put some pepper on it. You’ll probably like it plain, though.”

They walked out of the room together, the big man moving on to a new topic as they did. “I’ve recorded some music for you, by the way—Vorticon and I, he’s got quite a knack for music.”

“Like the Calib-er?”

“Yeah, sort of. One movement has a Jaji spirit but with Camasacan instruments, and one movement a Camasacan spirit but using Jaji instruments, the ones you gave me. Pretty

interesting; if I get the time and instruments, I'm going to try the same thing with different combinations..."

This scene I kept to myself, because it was evidence that Jajis were as intelligent as humans, and if Dr. Mulgar knew this rather than just suspecting it at a half-conscious level at a dark and unexplored edge of his all-consuming obsession with me, I thought it wouldn't be good for Romulus.

In the dusk of a gray autumn day, four scary creatures surrounded two men in a puddle-strewn alleyway that cut between two crumbling brick houses. The two men, large, rough, bearded, and strong, and dressed in gray-brown laborers' denim, seemed to be unable to move. The naked blades of knives flashed in their hands, but their arms hung limp at their sides. Their backs were against the wall of one of the buildings as if to limit the number of directions the creatures could attack them from, yet they just stood there, undefiant, wide-eyed, mouths part-way opened, as the creatures closed in on them.

The creatures themselves were each about the size of an average human man, as I perceived that to be—broader than Dr. Bowusuvi, not as broad as the Fatheads. About like Dr. Mulgar, I suppose, but a little shorter. They wore torn cloaks black with blood, three of them, to judge by the shapes of their torso, male, and one female. Their skin appeared to be black, though not in the vibrant black-brown sense of some people, but cold obsidian with perhaps a hint of purple in it, with faces that were white, again, not in the pink-white sense of some people, the freckled girl, for instance, but like snow, yet somehow giving off the impression of dirtiness, with black lips, black eyes, black nostrils, and sharp teeth.

Jagged, twisted weapons that looked to me like swords, axes, and maces that had been run through a magical grinding machine hung loosely in clawed hands; these they brandished in slow, mesmerizing circles. They moved in circles, themselves, as well, around each other with an unearthly smoothness, as if

they were floating, though upon close inspection I found that their feet were touching the ground. They circled each other thus in silence for what seemed an obscene and unneeded length of time, and then stopped, hung upon a hypothetical tick of the clock, and letting loose a deafening screech, they rushed upon the men, two to each man.

One of the men they killed: one of the creatures sliced his neck open as the other drove its weapon into his gut, and twisted, opening him up, the withdrawal of the deformed blade yanking out entrails. This man collapsed at the feet of his killers without uttering a sound and without having lifted a hand to defend himself. Once he was dead, the creatures stopped screeching, and fell upon him like hungry wolves.

The other man was luckier, or perhaps unluckier. The two creatures attacking him stopped short of killing him; instead, with their weapons a finger's breadth from opening him up, they stopped, sheathed their blades, ceased their wild screeching, and began observing him like kittens, their faces almost touching his. Like the other man, this man didn't defend himself, but looked at them in mindstolen fear, like a beast hunted to utter exhaustion. If their delay in killing him gave him hope, he didn't show it. They observed him for a few moments, and then one of them took a familiar object from its belt: a syringe, in the cylinder of which was the purple-black substance I knew so well.

As the man stood there, motionless, a little foamy spittle escaping a corner of his mouth and a pitiful gasping whine escaping his throat, the creature jabbed the syringe into the meat under his collarbone, injecting the substance into him. His eyes, already glazed over, crossed, and he went limp, sliding down the wall. Then, the two creatures that had accosted him joined the other two at the dead man's body. It took me a minute to realize they weren't eating him, just decimating his body with their sharp teeth. After awhile, the man who had been injected

got up, gazed impassively upon this industry for a few moments, and then walked away.

This scene I related to Dr. Mulgar, and he said, "Those creatures are called cage wraths, Romulus. Named after a dead city, I believe, Ek-Kur, where they first appeared generations ago. I wouldn't worry about them. You're unlikely ever to run into one, they're rare nowadays; but if you do, avoid them at all costs." He laughed, patted me on the head, and assured me, "Really, you're about as likely to be struck by lightning as to be attacked by a cage wrath; it's not something to spend another moment worrying about," as if he thought I was afraid they were going to break into the house that night and eat me.

Two men and a woman crouched against a rough rock wall in a garden, the woman clutching a dagger and the men clubs in postures of aggression, with faces of fear, in a twilight which under a canopy of decorative trees left the garden so dark that at first I couldn't see the object of their concern.

My eyes adjusting to the dimness, however, I soon saw that facing them about three paces away was what one would have to describe as a half-wolf, half-man being, although in spirit it seemed neither man nor wolf. It stood on two legs, which appeared to be too short for a two-legged creature, while conversely, its torso seemed too long, and thick, front to back, but strangely narrow side to side, and covered with patches of coarse gray-black fur. Its arms were muscular but stringy, ending in gnarled, clawed hands. It didn't have the snout of a wolf, but it had an odd, deformed face, a small nose, and fangs, and eyes neither human nor wolf-like, black, beady, piercing, and malevolent.

As it stood there, it morphed into a long-haired man, bare-chested, wiry, and fine-featured, who scrutinized the men and woman with the same undisguised malevolence that had marked the countenance of the half-and-half thing. This man effected a self-satisfied grin, sucked in gulps of air with both

nose and mouth, and let out a satisfied, “Ahhhhhh!” It wasn’t lilac, which even I knew had a pleasurable aroma, and of which there were many bushes in the garden, that he was enjoying, however. He murmured in a resonant yet slithery voice, “Ah, it tastes so good. Your fear, it’s delicious!”

He became the half and half thing again, then the man again, sucked in some more air, laughed in pleasure, and breathed, “So good, yes, soooo goooood.”

Then, as his three opponents rushed at him in a panic-induced brashness, he transformed not into the half-and-half thing, but into a full-fledged monster. With a roar just barely louder than the crunching and popping of his bones, he became what superficially could be described as a wolf, but which had a number of characteristics that differentiated it from a wolf. It was bigger, for one thing, almost as large as a yelg; its fur was patchy, tufty, long, and gray, streaked with brown and black; its claws were more like razors than claws, its fangs at least the length of a man’s hand; and its face, while shaped like that of a wolf, was bald, highlighting its malevolent eyes, unchanged by its body’s transformation. In a blur of gray, it rushed to meet the men and woman.

The altercation, or, I should say, the slaughter, ended so quickly that it was hard to mark the precise details of what happened. The monster, I would say, bit and clawed more like a cat than a wolf, and with a speed and strength far beyond that of any cat or wolf. Its fangs and claws seemed to be *everywhere*, and within seconds, perhaps less, the three humans lay mangled amid some umbrella ferns, their blood spattered against the wall and throughout the garden, on bushes, ferns, and tree trunks as far as four or five paces away.

The monster became the half and half thing again, threw his head back and growled, shaking his jowls in what seemed to me an expression of exuberant satisfaction. Then he became the human man again, and after a moment’s reverie, he drew in a long, deep, joyful breath, and murmured, “Yes! Yes!”

I related this scene to Dr. Mulgar, as well, and he said, laughing “Enough with the monsters, Romulus! These creatures are obviously peaking your interest unconsciously, and they are of no concern to us.” When I promised him that this would be the last of the monsters, he said, “Oh, all right, those are cay rafers. Nobody’s sure exactly what they are or where they come from, but they’re rare, too, rarer than wraths. You don’t have to worry about running into one. You could live a thousand years and probably never encounter one. If you ever did encounter one, that would be your last experience. The only way, I would say, to fight off a cay rafer, would be to turn into a cay rafer yourself. Ha! Anyways, enough with the monsters, Romulus, okay?” He patted me on the head, shaking his own head.

I looked for Romulus, for I had asked Mind to show me him on the day before he was captured by Dr. Mulgar. The forest was dim, though, illuminated only by a variegation of sunlight. I peered into the depth, at first seeing only a proliferation of trees and tree trunks, plants of all sort, and fallen logs, but no moving thing.

I wasn’t overwhelmed, however. My eyes and ears and nose were assailed with as many sights and sounds and odors, many more in fact, as they had been when Dr. Mulgar had taken me outside—the sensory input was manifold, and not having experienced such a bombardment except that one time, I didn’t automatically filter most of it into the background. Yet, as I have said, being in a Mind vision, or “memory,” as he referred to them, while like being in a three-dimensional representation of the real thing, just didn’t have the same effect as actually being there. In the moment, it was in some sense as if I’d experienced it before, as if I were remembering it. And as my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I noticed, with a sense of calm, that there were some Jajis some ways in front of me. Their bare brown bodies and green leggings and occasional shirt made them almost indistinguishable from the aforementioned trees

and plants and logs. I approached them, expecting to see Romulus among them.

At first, it appeared that there were six or seven of them, only, sitting on the ground in a rough circle, and that Romulus was not among them; but widening and intensifying my view, I perceived that several others were sitting outside of the circle, either on the ground or on logs, and a few more were up in the lower branches of trees; and I caught sight of Romulus: He was part of the circle, I just hadn't recognized him outside of his cage and the artificial light of his room, and wearing clothing, spare and wispy though it was, of that thin green material that without thinking I just assumed was made from grass or leaves.

Several of his companions were wearing similar tunics or skirts of this same material, and several others were naked. They all looked like Romulus in a general sense, though I could tell them all apart without having to mark specific traits of their bodies, clothes, or faces. Most of them were eating, from irregularly shaped whitish brown plates, of whittled and sanded dragonleaf bark as it turned out—eating a white lumpy paste that didn't look very tasty to me but in which they all seemed to be taking great delight. Conversation was scattered, in quiet high voices, but there was much laughing and smiling, and I got the sense watching them that they were all quite happy to be with one another, and just, I guess, to be alive.

As the group as a whole seemed to be coming to the completion of their meal, a woman I perceived as elderly by the number of lines creasing her walnut face came and sat down beside Romulus. Something in her bearing, a subtle but infinite slant in her comportment towards him, made me think that there was something special between them, that they were friends, closer friends than he and I and probably even closer friends than the bright woman and the blue-eyed man—in a different kind of way, though. She said, in a Jaji that I could make out only with eyebrow-creasing concentration (since she didn't

overenunciate or slow down her speech as Romulus did for me), “How is my Innikno?”

This scene I related in part to Romulus. I asked him if his name was Innikno, and he said he thought we had established that it was Romulus.

“But the woman called you Innikno.”

He told me that innikno was not a name but a designation. “When my blood mother died,” he said, “I was very young, and I was taken care of by the woman you saw, Waween, whose children were all grown by then. Therefore, I was her innikno, a child who was not hers by birth, but who she came to care for as much as she could have any child of her blood. You could say I was her son, and that wouldn’t be inaccurate; but the designation ‘innikno’ adds something. It adds an assurance that even though she did not bear me, taking care of me was not a burden or a duty or an act of kindness, but a joy that enriched her life, and needs no gratitude or repayment. It is a great, great honor to be an innikno, or to be a tonokna, which is what Waween is to me.”

“So,” he concluded, “you see I am Romulus. And you are Rowan.”

YAAN-7

I whispered, “There’s somebody else.”

Moments before the wraiths came at Jake, I had seen, at a background layer of seeing—from a corner of your eye, I suppose you could equate it to—another entity coming across the field of boulders. Her steps strong and sure, her pace faster even than Rook’s had been, she ran, her familiar cloak, as red as the boulders of the field and laced with green like the dark switch-grass of the slopes beyond, whipping behind her like the leaves of a bloodwillow.

Focused on Jake and the wraiths, however, my sense of her remained distant, until, as the wraiths made their move, she crested, at a full run, the boulder behind which the slaughter was about to take place.

Her face was slack, utterly relaxed, her eyes green fire, her pattern as still as that of a giant walnut tree. As she leapt from the boulder, still at a near-full run, her left hand shot left, her right hand right, and from each a silver circle flew. They sliced the air with a thin scream, opening into three-pointed stars, atrices, as I learned such weapons are called; the air around them bled with the red light of the falling sun, and both disappeared into the dark throat of a wraith.

This happened as her leap from the boulder reached its summit; as she started downward, a long black sword appeared in her hand; and as she plummeted to the earth, she slashed first to the left, then to the right, altering the course of the second slash to get around the twisted weapon of the wraith, which was raised in defense.

She landed about three paces from the boulder, and rolled forward, tossing her sword aside as she did, crossing her ankles, and, as she came to her feet, pivoting, so that she faced Jake. All four of the wraiths were dead before she hit the ground. They fell together in front of Jake like the poles of a tent.

When she came to her feet, a tildoya bow was in her hand, and as Jake looked on, she ran up the side of the boulder, and from a perch atop it, with the low red sun behind her, pulled an arrow from a quiver on her back, nocked it, and loosed it, all with such swiftness that it seemed one motion; this procedure she followed three more times, felling the remaining wraiths, who alerted by the commotion were coming across the boulder field. Their shrieks gave way to a silence bordering on serenity.

Still whispering, I said, "She killed them."

Rook let out a long, slow breath. "Vonnae?"

Knowing by the shape of his connection with her who he meant by Vonnae, I nodded.

Turning, she regarded Jake, and by the slack blankness of her face, he could have been her next prey. Unabashed by this, but frowning, and with a sincerity he seldom evinced Jake said, "Impressive. But you're supposed to be..."

With the barest shimmer of a smile, she interrupted, "Sorry, you don't get to be a martyr today." Nodding at her blade, which lay, streaked with wraith blood, in the grass, she added, "Take my sword. It'll work better against those donks than that thing." She nodded at his axe.

Then, pulling two needlepoint daggers from her red-brown boots, she ran without any more pleasantries than that down the boulder, and up the slope of violet and switchgrass above it, which was, by then, covered by the evening shadow of the Tweltalla forest, as I called the wood between Twell and Latalla.

It was then that I became aware that another entity had joined us in the glade. Or that I became *fully* aware of him, I should say: I had perceived his arrival, a few moments before, *pre-consciously*. That is, I had at some non-thinking level noted his presence but had yet to incorporate it into my interaction with my surroundings.

He had come up beside us as I watched Jake and the wraiths and relayed the main points of the encounter to Rook;

he had come up beside us without a sound, without even the snapping of a twig or the soft tump and scrape of feet stepping across the loam to announce his arrival, as if materializing from the deepening shadows of the wood. He waited, standing, to my left (Rook was sitting at my right), at the end of the souse log, like a child waiting for his mother to finish a task.

“Romulus!” I exclaimed.

He tilted and half-turned his head in acknowledgement of my greeting, but his expression didn’t change and he said nothing. He blended in with the forest like another tree, or plant, his loose two-blossom leggings similar in color to the ground-cover and his shirtless brown body not far from the color of the bark of the oaks around us. His entity pattern, too, was intertwined with the pattern of the forest with such an intimacy—an intimacy, in fact, that reminded me in some sense of my own connection with Mom—that it would have been easy to mistake him for a child of the wood.

“Rook, it’s Romulus!” I was filled with excitement at the prospect of two people I loved meeting each other.

Meeting Rook’s eyes, Romulus duplicated the tilt of the head he’d given me, and Rook said, “A pleasure,” just as Jake might have said it. I felt sure, in fact, that it was a greeting he’d learned from Jake; but while it would have come across as insincere from Jake’s lips, it seemed genuine, even heartfelt, when Rook said it. If he was surprised by Romulus’ presence and the truth it revealed, that Jaji were real, he didn’t show it, he just accepted what he saw, as he always did, even when it was something unexpected.

I prompted, “Remember that day we went out to Latalla a long time ago?”

“Of course.”

“Well, the next time I went out there, I met Romulus. And we’ve been friends ever since.” Romulus just stood there, as still as the oaks surrounding us. Some days he was more

talkative than others, but today he seemed disinclined to speak. He was never one to find silence uncomfortable.

Rook said, "I see. What did the little captain..."

His words dissolved into a suddenly dark, harsh air; and in any case, I had already ceased to hear him. Both of us had become aware that yet another entity had joined us in the oak grove, and this one not as friendly as Romulus.

The grove was a fat ellipse, or slightly elongated circle, the fallen souse bisecting it, more or less, lengthwise. Relative to the direction we were facing, Rook was sitting just left of center, I was to his left, and Romulus to my left, within arm's length of an oak that was growing a step or so inward of the main arc of the circle. The new arrival was facing us, at the fringe of the oaks, just about on the same X-axis as me. Four or five running steps across the acorn-strewn loam would bring him to me.

Physically, he appeared to me to be more wolf than human, with features of both, but his pattern was human—as hideously distorted as those of the wraiths, but human nevertheless. And distorted in a way that was different from the wraiths: whereas their patterns were discolored, wasted, rotten, and on the verge of disintegration, the pattern of this man-beast was strong, just scrambled. That is, while each strand of his entity was twisted about in a way that seemed both painful, and, to me, unnatural (in the sense that the character of its distortion restricted it from intertwining with surrounding patterns in a manner not intrusive, dominating, or destructive), it retained what I perceived as its original pulse and color

As I, and Rook, regarded this creature, his features began to shift and melt, his hair to recede into his skin; and in no more than the blinking of an eye, he became fully human, naked, regarding us with a shrewd, mocking, wolfish face. His pattern didn't change with the change of his body.

Rook made no discernible move, but I could see his weight, and butt, come forward off the log, so that while

appearing still to sit, he was crouching, his hand loose around the hilt of his sword. Romulus, also, made no immediate move, but I could sense that he was taut, and see, from the corner of my eye, that the coils of his entity had slowed in the central places of his pattern, while thrumming at the edges.

The man who had been a man-wolf spoke, then, his voice at conversational volume, yet seeming a whisper, with the *texture*, somehow, of a whisper: "It's delicious!"

"What are you eating?" I asked, "Berries?" While they were easy to miss if you didn't know what you were looking for, Romulus had shown me a great variety of tasty berries you could find in the briars and low-lying bushes of the forest's fringes, clearings, and creeks: cherries, raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, redberries, porpberries, elderberries, bloodberries, and, tastiest of all, little golden spatchies.

Flashing a humorless mask of a smile, the man said, in a tone of dismissal, as if casting aside what he knew, and knew that I knew, was meaningless drivel, "Your fear, little girl, your fear!" He paused, and then, as he morphed back into the half-man, half-beast thing again, added, "Sooo goooood. Yum, yum!" In half-and-half form, his voice became a growling hiss, the words difficult to discern.

"If you're eating my fear," I argued, "then I should have less of it. But I don't. I have more."

Rook effected the double-eyebrow raise nod that he often did when Jake made a good point.

The creature, in man-form again, throated, "Oh, you'll be feeling none at all, soon. Sooooooon."

Rook waited. Romulus waited.

I became aware of yet another entity who had joined the increasing population of the oak grove: While the creature was taunting us, a boy of eighteen or nineteen, not a Jaji but dressed in Jajian greenpants, dark-skinned and dark-haired but bright-eyed, a compact physique, not so much muscular as sturdy, limber, and most of all, tough-looking, in the sense of a badger

or donkey, had stationed himself at the end of the souse log upon which Rook and I sat—the end opposite from where Romulus stood. He made no acknowledgement of Romulus, Rook, or me. His eyes were for the man-beast.

Then, several things happened at once:

In a rattling of bones, a cry of a tortured hawk, a reverberation of a giant drum, and an icy waft of sweet awfulness, the smell of brown sugar and dead, rotting animals, the beastling changed into a great monster that one might call a wolf but which wasn't an actual wolf, but a horrible exaggeration of one, a mockery of wolf-form, and came at us with a speed I can only call magical, because no living thing could move that fast.

Rook stood, bringing up his sword with the fluid strength that marked everything he did.

Romulus grabbed me with extraordinary quickness, and with the strength and agility of an acrobat, pulled himself, and me, into the lower branches of the nearest oak.

It seemed to me that as fast as he moved, and as strong and fast as Rook was, that their efforts to defend me would have been futile against the monster, such was its strength, ferocity, and speed; but we never found out, because in the instant that the man-wolf became the monster, the boy changed into a similar creature, and met the other halfway across the grove in a clash of claw and fang. They rolled, snarling, biting, scratching, in a blur of fur, claw, and tooth, across the grove and into the dappled shadow of the forest.

With the deftness of a squirrel, Romulus climbed higher into the tree, somehow keeping a hand on my arm at the same time, as if ready to catch me should I lose my footing. Mimicking his movements as best as I could, I followed him. Though obviously lacking Romulus' skill, I was a good climber, having spent a fair amount of time clambering about in the trees of the Brushknot and Farmer Green's land, so it wasn't as if Romulus had to cajole, or carry, me along. We moved in steady

increments along the solid oak branches, and soon got a good vantage point, where amid the smell of mature leaves and young acorns, we watched the goings-on below.

Rook, with a foolhardiness I wouldn't have imagined, followed the two creatures into the forest, rounding them as they fought, watching them, his sword at the ready, as if waiting for an opening to kill one or the other, or both.

Meanwhile, across the boulder field from us, in a clearing of weeds and wildflowers, Jake was engaged in a skirmish of his own. Three creatures that looked like river rock molded into bulky, humanoid forms, harried him, or he harried them, I wasn't sure which. They had body patterns that contained elements of rock and metal, as well as scraps of human, horse, and cow, but which was primarily cloth—plant matter rearranged by a variety of processes—and they had entity patterns, as well, but which were so simplistic that if one were to liken the entity pattern of a human to a masterpiece of art, then these beings would be stick figures, or a few blots of ink from the pen of an infant. They were closer to inanimate objects than to humans, or even animals, and yet they moved of their own volition. They walked, they talked, mouthing the word, “donk,” over and over again, they swung heavy stone swords at Jake in aggressive attacks, which he blunted with the sword that Mrs. Camden had left behind for him. Though moving without the grace, quickness, and sureness of Rook, he had a deftness of foot, a sharpness of eye, and a seeming skill with the sword that allowed him to ward off the things' attacks while yet, busy with this defense, finding no opportunity to attack of his own accord.

The beast that had been the boy was darker of fur than the beast that had talked to me, near-black as opposed to gray-brown, so it was easy to tell them apart from our perch in the tree, though not necessarily to determine who was winning, so fast did they move, in and out of shadow, growling and screaming, clawing and biting, like cats fighting more than wolves or dogs, the sounds of their struggle the only sounds in

the forest. It seemed, though, that while receiving its share of bites and deep scratches, the gray-brown one had gained the advantage. The black one, the boy, had received a claw across the face, and now blood ran into his eyes, impeding his vision, rendering his attacks less sure, less accurate. But then, with an incredible rake across the throat, he seemed to weaken his older opponent.

And just then, at the same moment that Mrs. Camden arrived, I called to Rook, "Jake's against three rock things; go! He's at the other edge of the boulders!"

Rook looked to Mrs. Camden for guidance, she gave him a quick nod of confirmation; and as he hurried away with long, bounding steps, Mrs. Camden took his place in vigil of the fierce battle of the wolf-monsters.

The boy one pursued the advantage he had gained with the blow to the throat, throttling the other one as its movements slowed, finally throwing it with incredible force against the trunk of a huge, rough-barked wambawam tree. Half-conscious, the beaten monster, its fur more red than grey-brown now, snarled in hatred and defiance, and as it stumbled forward, still trying to fight, the boy one, roaring with the voice of the fabled gorlion, reached back to deal, presumably, a death blow; but Mrs. Camden, suicide-like, grabbed his arm.

He spun around roaring in her face, but she ignored him, instead throwing one of her needle daggers at his opponent, and throwing it not just with her arm but with her whole body, as one throws a rock or walnut. Thwump! It disappeared to its hilt in the monster's throat. Without waiting to see if that had finished it off, she threw her other needle dagger, which disappeared into its throat as well. The monster, as far as I could tell, still didn't die immediately, but fell, tried to rise again, and finally lay still at Mrs. Camden's feet. I thought that in death, it might resume its human form, but it didn't.

Meanwhile, as Jake warded off blow after blow from the rock creatures, Rook raced across the boulder field. He began

his swing perhaps two steps from the site of the action, and from behind, in full flight, took the head clean off one of the creatures, his momentum carrying him (as well the creature's head, as it toppled forward) past the other two, to Jake's side, where spinning around, he made it a two-against-two battle instead of one-against-three.

Jake got inside the defense of one of them almost negligently, dispatching it with a hard slice to the thigh, an inconsequential blow, I thought, compared to a beheading, but effective in this case, as, with blood pouring out of the gash, the thing went limp. Its arms dropped to its sides, its head drooped, and it fell in a heap. As Rook engaged the last one, Jake circled behind it, and there stabbed its thigh as well, whereupon it, too, went limp, collapsing, motionless, to the ground.

As, sheathing his sword, and withdrawing a small knife from his belt, Rook began digging around in the skull of one of the creatures, Mrs. Camden, weaponless, now faced the boy-beast, who roared at her again, his fangs brushing against her cheek. I could almost smell his breath from up in the tree. Mrs. Camden didn't recoil, however, just looked at him, holding his gaze, it seemed like. The boy roared again, but not with the same ferocity this time, more of a growl, and then, with audible retraction of bone, his face began to shift.

He had what at first I thought was two entity patterns but which upon further investigation I could see was more a double-pattern, two connected patterns, one superimposed on the other, that by color and size I thought had been identical once, but one, now, as twisted and distorted, and in a similar fashion, as that of the monster, the other beautiful, green and orange, with a music so sweet and loving that it filled my eyes with tears to behold.

There was a strange patternless substance in both his body pattern and that of the monster, that in the case of the monster, flowed through the strands connecting the body pattern to the entity pattern, and into the entity pattern, where it had, as

I perceived it, wreaked havoc, confusing the pattern, and causing strands to tug this way and that until the pattern was a twisted wreck.

In the case of the boy, the same thing had happened to one of his patterns, but the other one was protected by a third pattern, or a portion of one, of shining white and gold. Then, to my surprise, I noticed something else: As my curiosity got the best of me and I began examining all of his patterns more closely, I discerned that the distorted pattern wasn't really his. It was connected to his by a dark tail of the third, white-gold, pattern, but it wasn't a real entity pattern at all, but a sort of faux replica of one; its substance, while very similar to that of an entity pattern, was different, its color the slightest bit duller. It seemed to me, although this was just a hypothesis, that the white-gold pattern had somehow created a duplicate of the boy's pattern, and it was this one that the strange patternless substance had attacked while the white-gold pattern wrapped the original in an impenetrable embrace.

As the boy became a half-and-half thing, I could see how many scrapes and cuts and evulsions decorated his body, and how torn his face was. Still, Mrs. Camden held his gaze, now whispering to him, the words of a mother to a son, I suppose, because I could see by the number and nature of connections between them that they were mother and son.

He tilted his head back and screamed in agony, and in that moment became the dark, bright-eyed boy again. In that moment, also, the white-gold pattern released the faux pattern, and it dissolved.

The boy smiled, as if embarrassed by his own scream, and then, blowing out some air, as of one releasing tension, said, "That was...interesting." Mrs. Camden embraced him, heedless of the blood that got all over her face and clothes.

Pulling a white cloth from her cloak, she began tending his torn face; then, noticing the plethora of wounds upon his torso, said, "You're a mess. Come on, there's some callaweed

over here, and I'm sure some horse-moss." Together, they began walking deeper into the forest.

I watched them with fascination, and I must, in my ardent observation, have departed time for a moment, for Rook and Jake returned sooner, in my mind, than they could have traversed the field of boulders, even at a dead run. And the forest shadows were deeper than I had heretofore marked. And Romulus was gone.

Rook and Jake *did* return at a run, but closer to a jog than a sprint. Jake's hands were loaded with weapons: his own axe, and Mrs. Camden's sword, at-rices, and arrows.

After surveying the area and surmising that all was well, not the least evidence of this the return of a subtle undercurrent of activity, rodents and birds and spiders not so much scuttling about as watching us, creeping in hidden places, keeping eye, ear, and nose on us, that had replaced the grotesque silence that had risen in the presence of the wolf-things.

"Where did your friend go?" Rook asked

I shrugged. "He does that. He doesn't like good-byes."

Jake nodded approbation. "A wise man."

Rook raised both eyebrows. "Indeed."

Rook and I had begun to migrate into the damp ferny shadow of the forest, towards Mrs. Camden and her son, but Jake ordered, "Leave them," and seeing by the play of their patterns that while they would welcome our company, their one-on-one interaction was incomplete, I obeyed—as did Rook.

"Help me with these things," Jake said, indicating his armload of weapons. Using some cloths that Jake got from a pouch on his belt, which we dampened with our saliva, the three of us cleaned the blood from Mrs. Camden's sword, at-rices, and arrows, and made a neat pile of them on the souse log, in the place where Rook and I had been seated before.

By the time we headed home, the forest was smattered with only a few stripes of gray light, Mrs. Camden and her son,

in fact, lost in falling shadow. Even when we crossed into the flat open-ness of Farmer Green's territory, with its familiar aromas of hay, manure, cow, and corn, the diffuse red above the forest, which was now behind us, provided but little light to guide our way.

"Knowledge shall be our guide," Mom often said. Pattern was my guide.

Discerning that Jake and Rook wanted to discuss something but were restraining themselves from doing so, and that this unusual conversational reticence was related to my presence, I ran ahead, pretending to be carefree—far enough that in the high weeds and gathering darkness it would seem as if I were farther away than I was, beyond earshot if I were lucky.

They walked in a silence marked only by the swishing of weeds against their legs, though, and the crunching of dry grass below their feet, until, prompted by the evening's first crickets, Rook asked, "Crisis averted?" his velvet voice curling into the dampening air of nightfall.

"It would seem." Jake's gruff but higher voice seemed harsh, angry, in the emotionless dusk that, it always seemed to me, amplified, or pulled out, the underlying emotions of people's words.

"A long time until the next one, at least."

"Not long enough, if you ask me. Anyway, what am I saying? That's your concern, I have no role in the next one; I wasn't supposed to make it through this one."

"That's true," Rook said, agreeably, "Are you mad at her?"

"At who?"

Rook didn't answer. I could imagine him raising an eyebrow. Then, Jake said, "What, for changing the script? No, that's up to her; one script is as good as another. It may have been the librarian's idea, anyway. Or the poet's."

"No, I think it was hers."

“I’d rather be alive than dead, if it comes to that. But the little captain might be upset with her.”

“Ahhh,” Rook said, with affection, “and where is the little captain?”

“I missed the meeting,” Jake replied, with a subtle, amiable, accepting variety of sarcasm.

Their words bounced off me. I had gone ahead for the distinct reason of eavesdropping on them, but I was listening to them only as background music. My mind was elsewhere, so much so, in fact, that the now-raucous chorus of crickets and cicadas, which usually I so delighted in, was nothing more than a distant background murmur, and certain shade trees, silage bins, sheds, and fence posts, a broken wagon, an upside-down wheelbarrow, that drew the pattern of my path home, I passed without noticing. I led the way home by habit, alone.

Something didn’t fit. I couldn’t put the pattern of it together—and this was consuming my thoughts, my attention. Had it not been, had I been in my usual state of mind, I would have been walking gaily with Rook and Jake, asking them about the armor they were wearing and what they knew about the various monsters we’d encountered.

But I was thinking about Mrs. Camden’s son. Not so much that he’d existed as two patterns at once, or even that a third pattern was protecting his true pattern from the pattern-killer substance that had distorted his faux pattern. These were new things to me, but I had learned from Rook to accept things as they came, and if they didn’t fit in with previous notions of reality, to receive them as an expansion of my knowledge of the world. But in this case, I was having trouble doing that; I couldn’t integrate what I’d seen with what I knew to be true, for the pattern protecting the boy’s pattern was mine.

HAYNTA-7

While to me the janitors' treatment of Nolk was vile, the only indication that *he* felt persecuted was that for lunch, he escaped.

Specifically, he went "outside the wall," to use the phrase common among students for leaving the Institute grounds. The janitors were allowed a short break for their mid-day meal, and at that time, it was Nolk's habit to walk south from the Institute into a little residential area of little stone houses with little square glass windows that seemed to have been plopped down capriciously (and yet artistically) as if by some whimsical cyclopean child, in the figurative middle of square little lawns of wildflower checkered with square little vegetable gardens and square little storage sheds, this residential area, I had learned from some blabbermouths sitting near me at dinner one time, having arisen in the shadow of the great orange wall only in recent years. You can find out a lot of things by being quiet, as I had found out during a lifetime of shyness.

In random areas of this residential area, in the midst of the tiny homesteads, were a number of small groves of trees, mostly maples and walnuts (which was somewhat surprising, both of those species being uncommon in the Clarks Hill area) and a few untended fields of golden-brown weeds dotted by yellowbright and scarlet sage that were frequented by loose swarms of beetles and ladybugs.

Into one of these little wild areas, somebody, perhaps Nolk himself, had dragged a wide wooden bench with a backrest and attached platform, at which, during his break, Nolk sat in silence, nibbling on his food (a small bowl of nuts, most often, along with some cheese or meat), and communing with the ladybugs and of course the squirrels that were forever darting along the branches of the walnut trees.

I found this out one day when by chance, I was taking a little mid-day walk of my own in that nice little neighborhood, which I did maybe once every five or six days. Too shy to

broach the subject, I had never asked teacher, administrator, janitor, or peer whether students were permitted to leave the Institute grounds, but nobody had ever stopped me from slinking away, so I just kept doing it, and had decided I would continue to do it until such time as I was commanded to stop. It was nice to get out of the bustle of the Institute for a little while, once in awhile.

It was my habit to walk towards the farms that lay east of the Institute, where the only gazes you were likely to attract were those of quiet cows, slackmouthed, stupid, and unthreatening; but on the day in question, I was jaunting along the crisscrossing cobbled roads of that nice southern neighborhood, when I saw him sitting in his place—the place I would soon come to think of as his, I should say.

As you can imagine, my heart leapt, both in surprise and eagerness at the sight of him—I had often wished that I could talk to him face to face, instead of in the secret, whispering way that we conversed—but, unprepared for his presence, I found that I was too shy to approach him. Luckily, since his back was to me, he didn't see me. The next day, at approximately the same hour of the day, I checked to see if he had returned to his place, and he had, and the next day, same thing, and the day after that, same thing; but still I didn't approach him. Even though I wanted to talk to him face to face, just the two of us, I'd never actually done so, and the prospect was daunting. I was afraid I'd be tongue-tied, and would make a fool of myself stuttering and stammering in response to the precise, eloquent elocutions that he would be sure to spin out. It had occurred to me, as well, that he might treasure his time of peace alone and consider my presence an intrusion.

After several days of cowardice, however, the desire to talk with him, to be with him, to look straight into his face while conversing (and this desire made more acute by his absence from the Nonagon the past few days, as he worked in one of the dormitories cleaning up a malfunctioning latrine) over-

came my timidity, and with a pattering heart and a roar of blood in my brain and face, I went up to him—almost running, to keep myself from changing my mind—and sat down beside him.

I studied his reaction for any indication that he was bothered by my invasion of his lunch-time solitude. His hood was back; he was enjoying the warm spring air. He looked unsurprised by my arrival, and to my relief, unbothered by my presence, maybe even satisfied by it; but he didn't say anything. He just sat there, regarding me, his dark, scarred face and his sparkling colorful eyes more appealing than ever in what seemed the "free" air of the outside. His short blue-black hair tipped with flecks of silver, as the boys of the now-defunct House of Salamander were described in the history books, added to what I considered his appeal.

I found that I was indeed tongue-tied, so we just sort of stared at each other for awhile, my heart racing, my face hot, my nose, idiotically, seeking (and not finding) the aroma of the nuts and fruits he was eating, until at last he offered his beautiful self-effacing smile and then presented me an algebraic equation, upon which breaking of the ice we fell into our usual routine, he quizzing me about my studies. And that's sort of how we passed lunchtime whenever I joined him out there in his hideaway. I say, "sort of," because in the freer atmosphere of the outside, where we didn't have to conceal our discourse, his questioning was more likely to lead us on to other topics.

Most often, these topics were nothing little things: he had an inquisitive mind, and seemed not only to have a rich understanding of the ideas of all the philosophers we talked about, but to have a great depth to his being—that abyss and sparkle so evident (to me, at least) in his bearing. Yet, it wasn't deep, or complex, topics that he preferred. Little meaningless things seemed to give him the most pleasure. For example, he noted one day after we had observed that a few walnuts were beginning to form on the trees under which we sat, that there were two types of walnuts: one, that after it had ripened, was

very dark brown, almost purplish, and grooved, and another that was much lighter brown, with an undulating smoothness. “Nobody ever seems to distinguish between the two,” he said, “which is strange, because they’re very different.” We talked about walnuts for awhile that day. He loved looking at cloud formations, and birds and squirrels, too, taking delight in the variability of their calls, and the apparent randomness of their behavior.

He also took great pleasure in it when I noted some little thing, such as the “chain of green,” as I called it, in the spring, the weeds turning first, then the bushes, then the trees, which reminded me of Infin Gorilla’s everything is infinite because nothing exists comment. His appreciation of my perception of things, in turn, was pleasurable to me—more than pleasurable, since it was *he* who was doing the appreciating.

He had to know how I felt about him, but he wouldn’t address it. Maybe, I thought, he felt like he couldn’t, because it would be considered inappropriate for a janitor to dally with a student, or maybe he simply felt no attraction towards me whatsoever, and yet enjoyed and appreciated my presence and so didn’t want to just come out and say, “I can see that you’re attracted to me, so I should tell you that I’m *not* attracted to you, just so you know,” in fear that then I would stop keeping him company. If the first of these two possibilities was the case, I wanted to tell him, hey, it’s not as if you’re my teacher, and you’re only two or three years older than me, or so; but I thought the second possibility was most likely closer to the truth, so I said nothing, either, not wanting to know for sure that I was merely an agreeable diversion for him to help him pass the long tedious days of Clarks Hill janitorhood.

Nevertheless, I would at times try to get him to say *something*, to hint at whether or not he might possibly think of me as, well, you know. For instance, one time as we were sitting in relative silence, nibbling on his nuts and berries and cheese (because he always shared his food with me), we saw a

girl and a boy, whom I recognized as Jessup Canary and Tiller Ijor, walking, hand in hand, along the cobbled road that passed between the area where we always sat—the hideaway, or the weedfield, or the walnut grove, as I variously called it—and a cluster of homes west of us. I considered Tiller Ijor a decent fellow—he was one the boys in Mrs. Camden’s class who usually told a good story, or had a good question waiting for Mrs. Camden, and he seemed a thoughtful and amiable person, although I didn’t know him, personally. Conversely, Jessup Canary seemed like a vapid, self-centered preener of girl who had never had an original thought in her life—worse than Turta, by far, worse than Pindy if I had to judge. She was just pretty, beautiful even, but nothing else; and yet he had gone googly-eyes for her, so I said, “Good grief, he’s letting her lead him around by the nose!”

Watching them with, at most, mild curiosity, Nolk asked, “Do you have designs on him, then?”

“No!” I said, blushing, “I’m concerned for him, though.”

He said, “Oh,” but in such a way that it seemed like, “Why?”

“He’s an intelligent guy, you know, he tells a good story, too, and with her? She’s nothing but a pretty face.”

“You’re implying that she’s not very intelligent.”

“Yes! That’s what I’m implying!”

“If he’s as intelligent as he sounds, and she’s not, then what is the draw?”

“She’s beautiful! Look at her.” I said “her” in such a way as to contrast it with “me.” I was, of course, attempting to get him to say, “Oh come now, you’re just as beautiful as her,” but he wouldn’t bite. He never bit.

As he watched them go, he seemed for awhile to forget I’d said anything, in fact to forget that I was even present, or that *he* was present. He was somewhere else, gazing, one could believe, into some Jumpere-postulated alter dimension. Then, coming back, he told a short, Mrs. Camden-esque story, as he

often did in response to some observation I made (which was another quality about him that I liked).

“Two travelers met,” he began, “a man and a woman. He had traveled a long way, she had traveled a short way but had taken a long way getting there. They were resting together on a rocky overlook, looking down on a long lush gulch, full of oak and souse and elephant trees, and darting redbirds and swooping hawks, and a thick and rich and layered underbrush of deep greens and blue-greens, split by a wide sparkling lightning-bolt creek, and punctuated by an occasional crag of speckled red rock. He was tired, and injured; she was tired too, but tended to his wounds before sitting down beside him to behold the beauty before them.

“For that gulch was beautiful—to him, at least. *Unfathomable*. It’s beauty was unfathomable: His mind couldn’t grasp, couldn’t close around, couldn’t fathom the full extent of its beauty. Trying to was like clutching a handful of water. And looking at her, it was the same thing, as she rested there: she was beautiful, so beautiful that he couldn’t believe it, couldn’t believe how beautiful she was, how beautiful existence, wrapped about her, and she about it, was. His mind, frustratingly, couldn’t quite complete the perception, the experience. For her, the experience was similar, but less cerebral. For her, the inability to perceive the totality of the beauty of existence didn’t take the form of an ache of incompleteness but of an emptiness within that she felt and knew and that she let existence surge through. Her name was Tahain.”

My mind reeled; I couldn’t think. I could only deny. “Tahain does sound like the name of a pretty girl, just like Haynta sounds like the name of a plain unattractive fat girl.” Nolk just looked at the table, at his last berries, and then popped them into his mouth, and changed the subject.

I was hurt, frustrated, not *at* him, but because the way he described the girl from the boy’s perspective was how I thought

of him. I couldn't quite fathom his beauty; just looking at him was a constant thrill, a wonderful mystery. Deep down, I knew that this would ultimately cause me great pain, because I knew, or thought I knew, that it wasn't the same for him. He did like me in an intellectual sort of way, which would have been flattering if I'd been able to look at it objectively. He was as lonely as I was, and anything was a relief after how he was treated by the other janitors.

Still, I couldn't keep myself from obsessing about him, and in the final reckoning, my preoccupation with him kept my mind off the misery of Clarks Hill, and got me caught up on my studies.

And, when the school year ended, I missed him—missed seeing him, missed watching him, missed talking with him—for the 70 days of Sporch, Mowta-Wan, and Hobwan that I spent at home listening to the chatter of my idiot siblings and the constant chiding of my father—and looked forward, more and more each day, of coming back to Clarks Hill. The irony of *that*, or whatever it was, maybe it wasn't irony, I could never pin down the meaning of irony, wasn't lost on me.

But now, the first day of my 3rd year at Clarks Hill, and my 17th leap day, I had, first thing after getting checked in and all that crap, scoured the grounds in an anxious search for Nolk. I had searched the Nonagon, I had gone into each separate building, I had circled the grounds inside the wall; and then I had done it all again, and Nolk was nowhere to be found. I spent another hour scanning all the nooks and crannies of the Nonagon and hurrying up and down the halls of the buildings I thought him most likely to be working in, and still not finding him, overcame my shyness and asked another janitor, a young one who I didn't recognize, "Where's Nolk?"

Stressed as I was, my voice came out hoarse and a little frantic, and the janitor just looked at me as if he thought I was afflicted with what the river folk call the brain poison. While

seeking Nolk, I had seen another young janitor I recognized, named Luqno, who was the closest thing to a friend that Nolk had, and now I tracked him down in the cafeteria building, and asked him, "Have you seen Nolk?" Glancing at the nearby older janitor, who I recognized distantly as Hals, he just shook his head with what seemed like a finality. "No, he's gone," he seemed to be telling me.

ROWAN-8

The days of happiness that came after I shared Mind's gift of the freckled girl and the scarred man with Dr. Mulgar were fleeting. Stress, from two separate sources, and of two different natures, leached away the energy of the still-infant peaceful rhythm of my heart.

One of these sources of stress was the need to go outside; the other was the realization that even though Dr. Mulgar knew my visions were of the character he wanted, he still wasn't satisfied.

After my trip into the outer world—my “birthday present,” as Dr. Mulgar had presented it—I was ever eager for a return engagement. I craved the intoxicating tingle of sunlight and sound, water and wind, that had filled my being so unexpectedly out there; plus I had the sense that I had missed things the first time—missed most of everything, in fact, there had been *so much* to experience. I had been so dizzied by the bigness of the world, so overwhelmed by the sheer number of sights, sounds, smells, and sensations available to the senses, that it had all been a blur. I wanted, I *needed*, to go outside again, and this time, to catch, and remember, everything, or at least a lot more than I had the first time.

But, Dr. Mulgar was showing no inclination to take me on another trip; and this was frustrating. Every time he visited, which was, as it had always been, almost every day, I would ask him if we could go outside again and he would say, “Later, Romulus, we will, later,” or something like that, and pat me on the head with an apparent unconcern.

If he had given me a specific day that we would go, such as tomorrow, or in three days, or even six or seven, I would have been satisfied; if had told me, for example, “We'll go in twenty days, Romulus,” or even thirty, I would have been disappointed, and yet, in a way, satisfied, because the stress of not knowing when we would go and thus of thinking that there was

a possibility that we would *never* go, would have been alleviated. I would have counted off the days as they went by, and then been ready and eager to go on the appointed day.

However, not only did he not give an exact day that we would go outside, he seemed barely to acknowledge that going outside was a thing that was done, or that he and I had done. If he had suggested that I was a bad boy for asking to go out or that it was inappropriate for me to bring up the subject, it would actually have given me more hope that we might at some point go; but he seemed so disinterested in the subject and was so offhand in his dismissals of my requests that the possibility seemed remote.

Even if he had told me that I wouldn't be permitted to go outside again until I had a vision that satisfied him, the stress that was overcoming me day by day would have been alleviated somewhat. It would have at least connected the two sources of my unease together, into one big serpent, if you will, that I might be able to kill with one sword. As it was, it was as if I were being attacked from two different enemies, from different directions—smaller, individually, than if they were combined into one, and yet somehow much more difficult to fight. *But*, Dr. Mulgar didn't use my wish to go outside to motivate me into having a vision that would satisfy him. He didn't even say that he was unsatisfied with my visions, I could just tell that he was, or at least that he had become as restless with my new visions as he had been with my lack of visions previously.

Every morning, beginning the day after that wonderful first "victory," as Dr. Mulgar thought of the first Mind vision I'd given him, of the freckled girl and the scarred man in the cave, I would have Mind give me a vision, sometimes two, which I would be ready to describe to Dr. Mulgar when he arrived. And for a number of days he continued to be enthusiastic about my *progress*, as he called it, but within ten days, I would say, at most, I began to sense a crack, an impatience, perhaps, in his happiness. After I had described my

pre-arranged visions to him, he would urge me to have “another” one, and I would try and try and fail to have one, and then, as before, just to give him *something*, would ask Mind for one, which he would give me and that I would report to Dr. Mulgar.

“That’s a nice one, Romulus,” he would say, “But can you try to direct them, see something at a specific time, a specific place, maybe?” I’d tell him that I would try, and he would request a specific time and place for me to see, but I couldn’t generate *any* vision, let alone a specific one; and I couldn’t ask Mind for a specific one because if I did, it would take so long for me to explain to him exactly the what, when, and where I wanted to see, that first of all, Dr. Mulgar would get impatient, and second, he’d see me mumbling and either tell me to stop or else demand that I explain why I was talking to myself.

“You’ll get better, don’t worry about it,” he would assure me when *he* perceived that *I* was frustrated by my visions (which wasn’t exactly true: I was frustrated by his reaction to them); but it was becoming more than apparent to me that the Mind visions, while enough to slake his thirst temporarily, weren’t what he wanted; he wanted, he *needed*, something else, but what that was, I was unable to fathom. He’d been happy about that first Mind vision I’d given him, and I had thought that meant I could offer him up an endless supply from Mind, but apparently not. But what else, I wondered, can I give him? I didn’t know, and I had no idea as to how to begin to figure out what he wanted, which was maddening. I couldn’t generate a vision without Mind’s help.

The frustration I felt about not getting to go back outdoors, I tried to relieve by confiding with Romulus; but he was little, if any, help in ameliorating my eagerness. Usually, when I became preoccupied or worried about something, he would go to lengths to point my mind towards other pursuits, such as engaging me in a black-and-white tile game, or the chicken bone game, or questioning me about something on the Grail, but

when I pined away about my thwarted desire to go outside, he did nothing to distract me from my fixation, but would simply agree, and nodding, say, “Yes, yes, we must leave.”

The frustration I felt about not knowing how to satisfy Dr. Mulgar; this, I discussed with Mind. One morning, I was trying with every inch of energy in my being to have a Mind-but-non-Mind vision, that is, one possessing the same properties that one of Mind’s held but for which I didn’t have to spend time with Mind pinning down details, so that when Dr. Mulgar asked me about a specific time and place, I could give him a prompt answer. I was absolutely grinding it out. I wasn’t quite holding my breath, but my fists were clenched, my face was red, the veins in my neck and head bulging, as if I were trying to squeeze out a brick—squeeze out a vision, I guess. My head and ears felt like they were going to pop, I was beginning to see concentric circles in front of my eyes, when I heard a voice.

“What are you doing, Rowan?” It was Mind.

“I’m trying to see the visions Dr. Mulgar wants me to see.”

“What visions does he want you to see, Rowan?”

“I don’t know. That’s the problem. Not the ones that you give me.”

“How do you know that?”

“I can just tell.”

“What can you tell, Rowan?”

“That he’s not happy.”

“And you believe that the reason he’s not happy about the memories I have shared with you that you’ve been sharing with him is that they’re not the ones he wants?” ‘Memories’ was Mind’s word for the scenes he gave me.

“That’s right.”

“How do you know that?”

“Huh?”

“How do you know that the reason he’s not happy with these memories is that they’re not the ones he wants?” Many of

the Grail's teaching programs that I accessed had voice-overs, that is, as images and words were displayed on the screen, a voice would explain them, or elaborate upon them, or, alternatively, instruct me in what I was supposed to do (for example, "Touch the picture of the horse"). These voices were different from the one I listened to every night as I went through my bedtime ritual. That one seemed to be the actual voice of the machine, these seemed human, either coming from elsewhere, or somehow recorded and stored inside the Grail. There were three main voices, one female and two male; and one of the male ones I liked best: it was less formal than the others, more expressive, and sounded both old and youthful. Mind's voice was like that one, yet still different, a little bigger somehow. He spoke softly but since his voice arose from inside my head, or so it seemed, there was, to me, a greatness to it, a vastness, even.

"Uh," I pondered, "well, what else could it be? Anyway, he asks for exact ones."

"Do you mean he asks you for specific memories, Rowan?"

"Yes, specific."

"And why cannot you give him specific ones?"

"Because when he asks for them, it would take too long to find them. We—you and me—would have to talk about it for a long time, and I'd be mumbling right there in front of him, and he would be impatient, and that would make me too nervous to ask you the right questions."

"Would he care if you were mumbling if he were receiving the memories he wanted?"

That was a good point. He was so intent upon getting what he wanted that he might just overlook certain imperfections in the method of its delivery to him.

"Hmm," I mused, but decided, no, I probably wouldn't have the equanimity to converse productively with Mind under the ruthless eye of Dr. Mulgar, even operating under the know-

ledge, or assumption, that in this case, at least, he wasn't going to be particularly concerned with my elocution. "No, it won't work."

After a short silence, Mind asked, "Is there a way, Rowan, that it would..."

But I was already there: if Mind first showed me Dr. Mulgar telling me what he wanted me to see, on, for example the occasion of his next visit, then I could have Mind give me the appropriate "memories," and I could go over them at leisure, and have descriptions of them ready for Dr. Mulgar when he arrived!

The next hour or two I spent questioning Mind, first watching Dr. Mulgar question me the coming afternoon, and then, by trial and error, finding a bevy of images that I would be able to share with him. By the time we had finished, I was confident that our afternoon session would be a happy one.

Then, I got greedy. Dr. Mulgar had never tied my visions to my need to go outside; but it occurred to me that I could. If I provided him with a future that would *really* excite him, a grand scene, a vision of visions, then surely, if I asked, he would take me outside again. Convinced of this, I asked Mind to show me Dr. Mulgar at the culmination of his pursuits.

At the end of the bright road, I walked into a low ceilinged room with strange cloth-like walls, illuminated only with what smelled like lemon candles which flickered atop a dark table strewn with parchments. A mattress, covered neatly with shiny purple blankets, was tucked against one wall, and there was a bulky pile of something in a corner. Two dark chairs were pulled away from the table, and in these chairs two individuals sat conversing. One looked like an older version of the me I'd seen with the dark lady in the meadow: dark-faced, green-eyed, features both sharp and soft, a thin but compact build. He was clad in a bronze uniform with a red collar, and his face was twisted into what seemed to me like a fake smile. The other was taller, broad-chested, skin as bronze as his uniform (which was

identical to the one the other boy was wearing, but was untucked at the waist), sparkling gray eyes, and strong, handsome features. He was flashing what seemed a genuine smile as he finished, "Here he comes!"

Both turned their heads to regard Dr. Mulgar as he sidled into the room through what seemed a flap of material rather than a door. He looked pretty much the same as I knew him in the present, just a little older, with hair about half-gray. He was as vibrant, as intense as ever, or seemed so at first glance.

He started to say something to the boy who resembled me, and then, noticing the other, said, with annoyance, "Dex, where's your brother?"

This other boy, or man, it was difficult to decide which, said, with a smirk, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Dr. Mulgar motioned him out. "Joecon and I have something to discuss."

The boy, this Dex, didn't budge. "My father doesn't like you, you know. He's just using you, just like you're using him. He knows you have no chance of winning. Even though they call him a traitor, he's still loyal to Leopard. He's a fool." The boy that looked like me, this Joecon, watched both of them, wide-eyed.

"Thanks for your considered opinion, *boy*, now if you would..." He pointed at the room's odd flap-like entrance.

The bronze boy/man sighed, pointed up at the ceiling of the room, and then as candlelight flickered on the dark, cloth-like material that comprised the ceiling as it comprised the walls, flexed the top phalange of his finger. With a look of confusion more than surprise, and mixed with pain that turned quickly to agony, Dr. Mulgar clutched his chest, and then crumpled to the ground, and in one final surge of effort moaned and rolled most of the way onto his back before growing still, his eyes open but unseeing.

The boy who looked like me continued to stare, wide-eyed, first at Dr. Mulgar, then at the other boy, who was grinning like a Blood Festival mask.

“Man, that was fun!” this boy said, with relish; and then a moment later, “I mean, that guy was impossible. You know, I really didn’t need to move my finger. That was just theatrics, to enhance the experience.”

Thinking that this scene probably wasn’t one I would want to share with Dr. Mulgar, I took a minute to consider the wording of my next request, and then said to Mind, “Well, show me Dr. Mulgar at the time and place of his greatest triumph,” which worked out a little better. At the end of the bright road, I saw him in the same candlelit cloth-like room where he’d been in the previous vision, this time being addressed by a bronze-uniformed man, who told him, with emotionless officiousness, “We have word that the Mulgarian fleet has taken Aberick, sir.” Dr. Mulgar reacted to this news with grim satisfaction.

This scene, I thought, would do.

As morning turned into afternoon, I waited, by myself, with the Grail. Romulus would have to amuse himself, today; I was simply too wound up to deal with worrying about whether he’d hear Dr. Mulgar, or any of our other regular visitors, in time to give me the Grail and for me to hurry into the Main room with it before the visitor came through the front door.

And Dr. Mulgar didn’t come, and didn’t come, and didn’t come, until, growing restless, I had Mind start showing me some of the adventures, variously, of the hyacinth-eyed girl, the blue-eyed man, and the woman with the scar under her eye. This helped pass the time—so well, in fact, that I came back to my own time and place (specifically, early afternoon, on the brown couch, which was across the room from the front door) just in time to see, to my delight, Dr. Mulgar (for it was a delight to see him when I knew I was going to please rather than

frustrate him) enter the house—with, to my surprise, Dr. Bowusuvi (for they rarely came together) in tow.

The latter's presence dampened my exuberance a little bit; but even so, I ran to Dr. Mulgar announcing excitedly that I'd had another vision—"all kinds of visions!" I added, with significance. I had thought that he might doubt me (not thinking that I was lying but suspecting that I might be mis-interpreting my experience) and need to hear about what I'd seen before being satisfied that I had indeed had legitimate visions; but I could tell by his expression, of suppressed eagerness, that he believed me. He looked as if he were about to reach into my pockets.

"Let's hear what you've got," was all he said, half-laughing at my eagerness.

I started to speak; I opened my mouth to tell him about what I'd seen, to share, to give him his future triumph—I had, after all, been anticipating this moment all day, looking forward to his look of amazement, excitement, joy, pride—but something Romulus had said rose in my consciousness, and I stopped before the first word got to my tongue. A few days earlier, while I'd been pining and pining away about not getting to go outside, Romulus had assured me, "They won't let you go outside until you see what they want you to see, and once you tell them what they want you to see, there will be no reason for them to take you outside." It had bothered me to hear him talk so, but it had also calmed me down because it gave me something to think about. I'd asked, "What do you mean?" over and over again but he would give no further explanation, or couldn't, which had left me to puzzle over his words, diverting me, for a little while, from my frustration. I'd decided later that he'd purposefully given me something to think about to alleviate my anxiety; but now his words came back to me and I had the overpowering sensation that if I told Dr. Mulgar what I'd seen, I still wouldn't get to go outside. I abandoned my plan to ask him if we could go outside *after* I'd told him about the

Mulgarians taking Aberick and the other scenes I knew he was going to ask for, and instead asked, "And then we can go outside?"

His expression was unreadable. "Let's hear what you've got." Dr. Bowusuvi watched us with his usual penetrating detached-ness.

I wasn't a rebellious boy at all, I was very obedient. I did everything Dr. Bowusuvi asked of me on his daily visits, undergoing his pokes and prods without question or complaint; I injected myself religiously every night with the eye-burning black vapor; I studied everything Dr. Mulgar asked me to study, memorized what he asked me to memorize, and tried with all my heart and mind and will to have visions that would be acceptable to him. I liked him, I still wanted to please him, wanted that pat on the head, that smile of approval, or encouragement; but a resistance rose up in me, perhaps partly inflamed by Romulus' obvious dislike of Dr. Mulgar, who he called, "the demon." I was angry for perhaps the first time in my life. There was no reason why I shouldn't be allowed to go outside; why wouldn't he let me? (I wouldn't even have considered the issue if the draw to go outside wasn't so strong, I would have just obeyed without question; but the draw *was* strong, and so I took note of the reasonlessness of this continual blockade.)

I mumbled, "Outside." Nothing more: I couldn't articulate any more than that. I couldn't explain, "I will tell you my vision if you let me go outside first." Even though I had no reason to suspect that Dr. Mulgar would get angry, or punish me, or do anything except talk with me reasonably, as he always did, I was unused to anger, unused to any sort of conflict, and found that my legs were shaking, my throat dry, my hands damp, my heart thumping in my chest, my mind unable to find words.

Dr. Mulgar blinked, cleared his throat, and then, in a voice that suggested he was trying to confirm something that

couldn't possibly be true, said, "What?" If Dr. Bowusuvi, standing behind him, reacted at all, I didn't notice.

My gut hollow, my heart beating like a woodpecker, my legs shaking with a near-uncontainable violence, I sought words and found only "Outside." I pointed at the door (a reflex, almost, a physical manifestation of an attempt to say something more).

"Are you saying that you're not going to tell me what you've seen until I take you outside?" He said it calmly, with only the slimmest narrowing of his eyes, but I sensed danger, perhaps because he spoke so slowly.

I wavered, but anger held me, and I nodded.

"That's not the way it works, Romulus." Danger was imminent. A subtle change in his voice told me that something was growing in him, something I wouldn't like. At the same time, my nostrils caught a wave of something strong, not foul in the sense of Romulus' waste after it had been smoldering in his cage for a few hours, but sharp and smothery. I realized, distantly, that it was Dr. Mulgar's body odor, having somehow overcome the cologne he always wore.

The colors, red and yellow, of Dr. Mulgar's shirt spun with my innards, and the colors of the room—the green floor, the blue ceiling, the brown furniture—seemed suddenly far away, as if my consciousness, sensing pain, was fleeing my body, fleeing the room, or perhaps trying to hide deep inside my body; but I held my ground. "Outside," I said again.

"Let's have it, Romulus." This time there was definite command in his voice, and some irritation, as narrowing his eyes still further, he caught my gaze, and held it, his expression a sophisticated union of hurt, disappointment, disapproval, and forcefulness, as if at the same time as saying, "How can you treat me like this, I, who have been as a father to you? How can you do this to me?" he was also reminding me, "I am stronger than you, you cannot oppose me."

I lowered my eyes, as he had expected me to, noting, stupidly, as I did, that my socks were mis-matched: one was iron-gray, the other slate-gray. The words, “An easy mistake, to be sure,” came into my mind, spoken by an old man, and then I wondered, “Who said that?” My mind was leaping about like a pebble in a jar. I was scared, and what was more, which made my fear both strange and insidious, it was my trusted tutor, Dr. Mulgar, who I was afraid of—more afraid of than I’d ever been of Dr. Bowusuvi. Some part of me thought I could still save myself, could still change course, divert our conversation back to where it could have gone had I simply told him about my vision when he’d asked me to; but I was unable to act. I was frazzled, I couldn’t lasso my thoughts enough to say anything except “Outside,” and at some level I knew that even if I’d been able to, I wouldn’t have. Trembling so violently I thought I might fall over, I looked back up into his midnight eyes and said, “Outside.” I had jumped off the cliff.

YAAN-8

The lead aggressor strand of the group pattern reared up as if to strike.

Then, the black and beaten oak door of our little hut swung open, and Mom stepped out, covered in an overlarge gray-brown woolen coat that made her seem even smaller than she was. Her hood was down, however, revealing the freckled face that seemed to unnerve many of the farmhands with its paleness, and she regarded the mob, which had grown to eight men, with utter dismissal, not even with scorn—as if scorn would be more of an acknowledgement than they warranted. She was carrying a long, heavy object, which as she handed it to Jake, became apparent was a sword, long and straight and broad, blackened and pocked with age and use, with a worn gray hilt and pommel. I learned later that it was a practice sword, blunt, and almost twice as heavy as most fighting swords. Jake told me, “The idea is that you use the same muscles to swing it as you would with the real thing, and the extra weight really builds up those muscles. If you ask me, that’s a pile of pig feces—you’re not going to swing something heavy the same way you swing something light, so if anything, it’ll cause you to swing the lighter blade incorrectly. But what do I know? I’m just a simple farmhand.”

“It’s hers,” Mom said, as Jake accepted it; then as she returned to the door, which closed and snapped locked, he brandished it. It was heavy enough that it took both of his thick arms to swing it easily.

“That’s nice,” he said, regarding it warmly, “I’m more of a bludgeon man myself, but this’ll do.” Rook raised an eyebrow, perhaps, of everyone present, recognizing the irony of Jake’s statement: it *was* more of a bludgeon than a sword.

After drawing a heavy sideways arc in the air, the sword point catching the eye like a silver dragonfly, he dropped one of his hands from the hilt, and with what seemed an expert turn of

his wrist, reversed his hold on the sword, and drove it most of an arm length into the ground beside our chinked and creviced cobblestone patio. It oscillated there with a faint cold thrill of sound, its gray pommel level with Jake's waist.

The men's individual patterns shrunk away from this display, reaching homeward, but were held in place by the group pattern, which however, in its turn, continued to be held in place by Jake's ever-more powder-brilliant entity, this hold, in fact, solidifying as he put on his performance with the sword.

Somebody murmured, "I heard he was a Leopard, got kicked out."

Somebody else said, "If he's a Leopard, he'd kill us all in a heartbeat!"

"He's not a Leopard!" That was Hector.

"What about the fight?" A rumor had circulated the previous summer that a couple of Leopards had stopped by the Interest Town Tavern on their way from one important place to another, and that Jake, who along with Rook had stopped at the same tavern on the way home from a long day's work at Farmer Green's, had antagonized the Leopards so relentlessly that a fight had broken out. Jake and Rook, the rumor went, had fought the two Leopards to a draw. Rook told me that nothing of the sort had happened. "I imagine any two Leopards would have carved us up like roast beef. That's *if* they could be provoked to a fight at all, which I doubt. Those Leopard guys are super-disciplined, all the ones I've seen, anyway," he said, "I doubt they'd respond even to Exeter." But some people believed the gossip even so.

As the farmhands murmured amongst themselves, Rook, who kept sort of sidling in front of me so that I couldn't see what was going on, cleared his throat.

"Now boys," Jake began, his breath billowing about his head, "Ol' Drud..."

Rook cleared his throat again.

Jake threw him a questioning frown.

Rook tilted his head in a way that I interpreted as a nod at the sword.

The men continued to mumble amongst themselves, un-sureness giving way to stalling argumentativeness.

Jake shrugged, in a “So what?” sort of way, then began again, “As I was saying,” but once more Rook cleared his throat, this time adding a meaningful eyebrow raise to his nod at the sword.

Jake spread his hands, frowning again, with his best “What on earth?” expression.

Rook whispered, “The sword.”

Jake repeated his “What on earth?” expression, and Rook, with his hand shielding his voice from the men, whispered loudly, “In the ground like that, that’s bad form.”

His expression somewhere between bafflement and annoyance, Jake pulled the sword from the ground with some effort, looked around as if not exactly sure what to do with it, and finally laid it, blade flat, on his shoulder. The tip almost scraped the wood of our hut.

“Now, as I was saying,” he said to the men, whose attention had finally returned to him.

One of the men interrupted. “Exeter, that thing’s been killing our sheep!”

“And cows!”

“It laid open Farmer Green’s best bull!”

Jake was unmoved. “You sure about that?”

Somebody spluttered, “What else could it be?”

“It couldn’t be Drud, he’s got bad teeth, and no claws.”

“Come, on Jake,” Magristic Stoat objected, “He could have used a knife or something! What else could it be?” Others supported his protest with nods and utterances of assent, but I could see that the hold Jake’s pattern had on them was tightening, strengthening. They were farmers, not warriors; they didn’t really want to fight.

Jake shrugged. “A wolf?”

“No wolf could do what I saw to a full grown bull.”

“A yelg wolf?”

“What?” somebody, a Gerbil, Herb was his name, I think, said, with some alarm. This was a credible statement, and if true, cause for alarm. Jake’s pattern’s hold on them tightened yet further.

Somebody else said, in a tone meant to be reassuring but which betrayed a complete lack of assurance, “There’re no yelg wolves less than three days travel north of here.”

“I don’t know about that,” Jake said, “Rook heard up in Interest that they’d been sighted as far south as Clarks Hill. Maybe one came down a little farther.”

Magristic made bold to say, “I don’t believe that for one instant, Jake,” but his protest did nothing to break Jake’s pattern’s hold on them.

Jake said, “Personally, I think it’s a cay rafer.”

“A what?” That was Hector.

A man who worked for Hector whose name I didn’t know added, “What in the name of the Iron Testicle is a cay rafer?”

With a negligent gesture towards me and Rook, Jake said, “Shamodes?”

The attention of the men diverted to Rook, and he said, “It’s a wolf with the mental acumen of a human. Some say they can change their shape into that of a man, or that they’re men who can change into a wolf.”

Jake added (and the men’s attention turned back to him), “Drud says it was a wolf that killed that bull. He says that he killed it—he and another wolf. You ought to be thanking him! The corpse is over on Green’s land, he says; and I mean to go have a look, if you turkeys’ll leave poor ol’ Drud alone.”

The door opened, and Mom came out, leading the man of mud by the hand. He was at least a full head taller than Jake, and thickly built by human standards, thicker, easily, than Jake, and with a big, thick head. Other than his size, though (Mom

looked like a little child beside him), he could have been a human who had rolled around in river mud until a thick coat covered his entire body, face, and head—although his entity pattern, peculiarly fine, with thousands upon thousands of green and brown threads bound to each other, and to the earth itself in a way that the pattern strands of humans never are, wasn't a human one. A large white cloth bandage applied to his hip was particularly noticeable against the mud-brown of his body, the white and brown both quite striking in the cold gray of the quickly approaching dusk. He was naked, I think, though I couldn't see any genitals.

The men drew a collective breath, but he looked upon them with gentle brown eyes, and smiled, a broad friendly toothy adorable smile, bowed a little, and put up a hand, his long thick brown fingers spread wide. Then he spoke in a surprisingly high voice, in a language that gave the impression of being finer than Leniman, with long sinewy words many of which rhymed, and a rising and falling cadence, like a poem, punctuated with ear-caressing chuffs.

Mom spoke to him in the same manner, which drew gapes of astonishment and bafflement from the men, and even a “what the?” frown from Jake. Translating the action of the men's patterns to words, I murmured to Rook, “They like him—sort of.” They were afraid of him, both of his alien-ness and his size and strength, which when combined with Jake's possible swordsmanship, would make the two of them a formidable opponent; but they were intrigued by him as well, the benevolence of his manner and the charm of his smile checking their group-induced aggression every bit as much as the threat of his size and the strength of Jake's presence.

“He says hello to all of you,” Mom said. “Shall I tell him you say hello, or shall I tell him you want to kill him.” She eyed them with ironic reproval.

Jake said, “Ask him to describe the creature he fought.”

A beautiful, intoxicating exchange followed, and then Mom said, "It was a wolf, but not a Yelg wolf, I don't think. It wasn't big, it was sheer black, or nearly so. He fought it because it's been killing deer and other little animals in the woods, and not eating them—like with the bull."

"That *is* a cay rafer," Jake stated, flatly, "or was, he killed it, right? He and this other wolf?"

Mom nodded.

Up until this point, the temporary group pattern the men had formed had held fast, even as the aggressor strands of each of their individual patterns had begun to settle down; but now it began to weaken.

I whispered to Rook, "They're gonna leave, now," and he, still watching them with relaxed yet vigilant scrutiny, gave me an uncertain nod.

Hector Dallidoe was the first to disentangle himself. I watched, transfixed, as his pattern slipped out of the group pattern, the group pattern holding its form, however, until he spoke, which was, in clock time, only moments later. He murmured something to the others, one of whom murmured something back to him, this response generating a wave of murmurs flowing from one man to the next, puffs of breath mingling in the increasing cold, as, one by one, their patterns withdrew from the group pattern until it ceased to exist except as a dim red echo fading in the air.

Jake waited for them with outward indifference, but refrained from making any inflammatory remarks, seeing, I think, that things were going his way.

Drud said something to Mom in his incongruent native tongue, and she replied to him in the same delicate chuffing language.

Rook murmured to me, "Your mother seems to speak Mudman."

From within the murmurs of the farmhands came the clearly enunciated words, "I guess he seems friendly enough,"

followed by, “He hasn’t hurt anyone, after all,” the latter I recognized as Hector’s voice.

Jake asked Mom, “What’d he say?”

From the crowd came the strained whisper, “But what the hell, is that a mudman? Are they real?”

Mom said, “He’s tired; he’d like to get some sleep.”

“In there?” Jake nodded at our hut.

“I’ll offer; he may feel well enough to head back to the woods, though.”

The group’s powwow complete, Hector said, “Where’d you say that carcass was, Exeter?”

Jake shrugged. “Well, the way Drud described it to Mrs. Yaan here, I’d say it was over east of Green’s back meadow, somewhere in there.” Mom nodded corroboration.

Opening his hand as if instructing me to take it, which I did, Rook at last started towards Jake and Mom, me following.

Hector began, “I’ll send a couple of my guys out there,” then hesitated.

Rook offered Drud the same hand greeting the mudman had given the men moments earlier, and Drud returned the gesture. I waved at him, and he mimicked my motion, smiling at me. I thought he was lonely; I returned his smile. His pattern reached out tentatively to all of us, but only Mom’s returned the overture; and now mine.

“Yeah, I’ll go too,” one of the Gerbil guys said, seeming tired, or just confused.

Hector continued, “And if they can substantiate your story, then I guess he—your new friend—can stay.”

Ice as clear as the metal of the sword on his shoulder shone in Jake’s blue eyes, I could see that, now that I was beside him, and I assumed it had been there throughout the faceoff, but he didn’t say what he wanted to say; he held back, for once. “That’s mighty generous of you, Hector, but he’s not going to stay; his home’s the forest, he’ll be going back there soon.”

“You know what I mean, Exeter.” He wanted to say more, or so it seemed to me, but he was too tired, or beaten, to continue.

By this time, the men were dispersing, some heading north to Gerbil territory, some, including Hector, south to the Dallidoe farm, and a couple northeast to Farmer’s Green’s. They seemed aimless, confused, as if they were oxen hitched to a plow that had been deserted by its driver. One Gerbil began wandering onto Dallidoe territory, then started, shook his head at himself, and headed in the opposite direction, just sort of shuffling along—as were all of them, even Hector.

Once the last man was gone, Jake handed the sword back to Mom, commenting, “Well, that was something, eh?”

She just raised an eyebrow, Rook-style, at him, and lugged the weapon back inside the house, leaving Jake, Rook, Drud, and me, all standing there looking at each other, more or less in a circle.

Jake sucked on his upper lip. Rook raised *both* eyebrows. Drud eyeballed all of us, then smiled nervously. I waved at him again, and smiled, and he mimicked my actions, as he had done earlier.

“You faced ‘em down, eh?” Rook said. I could see that he was prompting Jake rather than praising him.

Jake snorted. “Good thing they’re gentle folk around here. At heart. They were upset that their livestock was getting killed, and so were looking for a scapegoat, but even then they didn’t really want to have to fight.”

Rook nodded. “Cost versus gain. Maybe with them, they needed to be absolutely sure.”

“You mean that Drud had killed that livestock?”

“Yeah, for the cost, having to get past you, which would have been to risk injury. If you hadn’t been there, they might have killed him even without being completely sure. If they were completely sure, they might have killed him even with you there. Another group might have killed both of you even

without being completely sure. Maybe. One never can tell with you humans.”

Mom tromped out of the house holding a bottle of salve, and throwing Jake, Rook, and me a quizzical look, as if to say, “Are you just going to stand around staring at each other,” started talking to Drud in “Mudman,” as Rook had named the language. With my ears, I examined the pattern of her words, and knew at a level outside of language that she was telling him he could sleep in our house tonight if it suited him, but she wouldn’t be offended if he didn’t want to, and in either case he should take the salve to treat the wound in his hip, in case he couldn’t find any horsemoss. He accepted the bottle with much thanks, and told her he would sleep in her abode with gratitude until he awoke, at which point he would go home.

After their exchange, he graced us with another wave and smile, and then ducked inside.

“He’s a gentle-hearted individual,” Mom commented, “Very refreshing.”

The brightest path of the combined ribbon flower of the four us led back to Farmer Green’s little cowyard, so I headed that way, skipping along, the three of them falling into step behind me without really knowing why, Jake, Mom, and I bundled up, and cold—at least I imagined that they were both as cold as I was—and Rook dressed in nothing but his thin-knit gray-blue pants and shirt yet seeming, still, as comfortable as ever. I trotted ahead so that they would talk about adult stuff, and I could listen in.

HAYNTA-8

Ohhhhhh! Furious, sad, unbelieving, helpless, empty-chested—you name it, I was it, as I stormed out of the building. Emerging into a day I *had* considered pleasant and cool but which now seemed noisome and oppressive, the layer of clouds overhead, which had added an appealing white coziness to the pleasantness of the day now seeming dingy gray—and an annoying dingy gray, at that, like half-melted snow in Spring—I rounded to what I considered the “back” of the Institute. That is, the side of it opposite the main gate, in front of what I considered the third Classrooms building, where among a smattering of oaks and souses and an uneven layer of acorns in and atop waves of lush yellow-green grass, a waterless stone fountain was surrounded by rings of flower bushes, prickly and flowerless in late summer.

Here, there was less foot traffic than anywhere else on the grounds. It was, perhaps, the most private place inside the Institute wall. That was another thing I hated about Clarks Hill: people were *everywhere*; even in your room, you had to put up with your roommate, and your roommate’s friends. Here on the back side, though, you could be relatively sure that at worst, a solitary student would wander by, or a couple of lovebirds would come along hoping for gropes or smooches. If the latter, they’d be disappointed that you were there, but would, in most cases, hurry away, the boy of the two perhaps gracing you with a sullen look as a parting gift, but no more. Even the janitors’ visits there were infrequent, to primp the flowers or scythe the grass, if it happened to get to “lebeeth length,” as some students called it—cleverly, in their own minds—because of the prevalence of those little biting insects in the Clarks Hill area. It was an unimportant, and therefore comparatively unkept, part of the grounds. The grass was allowed to grow to a respectable length there, the acorns were allowed to lay where they fell, the fountain and pool were cracked, and covered in black lichen.

There were even a few crumbling areas and a hole or two in the wall, above which, adding to the vague feel of disrepair here, you could see the tops of the small, stickly, trees that comprised the brushy thicket that was beyond the wall.

Finding myself alone in this private area, I gave vent to my frustration. In a muttering growl, directed at everyone, no one, and Existence, I ranted, “Why would they get rid of him? He was the best of them! By far! And not just as a person; as a janitor even! The bastards!” and such like, repeating myself over and over again with slight variations and in an increasingly agitated voice (e.g., “Why would they fire him? He’s better than any of them, by a long way! A better janitor, a better worker, let alone human being! The craven swine!”).

My query went unanswered, and in fact everyone, no one and Existence seemed wholly unconcerned with my hardship; and more than that, the edifice of the Classrooms building itself, along with the great orange wall, the pathetic treetops above the wall, the smattering of oaks in the area, the cracked stone fountain, all seemed unconcerned as well and perhaps even *happily* unconcerned, self-satisfied and content in the lack of effect my anguish had on the enduring unchangingness of their existences.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. One person, in all of the world, who I really wanted to talk to, to be with, to know, and he was yanked away from me. “One person!” I said, aloud, to everyone, no one, and Existence, to whatever deities, creators, or fateplayers there be, “Is one really too much? Huh? HUH!!!” And then, mere words unable to satisfy my thirst to vent my helpless frustration, I picked up a large brick that had crumbled from the wall, and hurled it as hard as I could at the building—at Clarks Hill Institute, at everyone, at no one, at Existence.

In the moment that I did, in a coincidence of events that was impossible to believe—as if, in fact, it had been Existence’s plan all along to work me up to the point that I would throw that

brick at precisely that place and time—a tiny black and white kitten, who (further mockery from Existence) had probably gotten onto the grounds some time earlier through one of the very holes in the wall from which the brick that I threw had fallen, darted from the shadows of an oak, crossing between me and the building. I let go the stone a split-moment before I saw the kitten; and in another, horrible, split moment, I could see by the trajectory of stone and kitten, that they were going to reach the same spot at the same time. And they did, like two magnets, their collision accompanied by a horrid, fleshy, crunch that somehow accentuated the humidity of the day, making it seem stuffier.

I ran to the kitten, trying to slide to a stop beside him, as I'd seen athletic people do, but instead almost falling on top of him. I was expecting him to be hurt, hoping whatever injuries he had sustained weren't bad. My hopes were dashed at first glance. It was clear his back was broken. He wasn't even yowling, he was struggling to pull himself forward with his front legs. His skull was partially crushed, one of his eyes bugging out as he looked up at me in utter incomprehension.

My heart thudding, my body engulfed in an unpleasant numb tingle, a jumble of distinct and indiscriminate thoughts tumbled through my mind, one following close upon the other, and mixing and meshing with each other: What!?!...He can't live, the damage is too great...How can this be? What are the odds?...I'll nurse him back to health...What, nobody's allowed to get frustrated anymore!?!...There's surely a healer somewhere in town...You bastard!...What do I do?...How can this be?...The poor little creature...You've got to be kidding me! You've got to be kidding me! I lose my temper one time! One time!

Gradually, however, a cold realization descended upon me, along with an accompanying physical coldness that superseded the heat of the afternoon, that he, pulling his broken body forward in a seeming dumb fascination with the lack of response he was getting from his hind legs, as his breaths came

quick and labored, accompanied by an occasional gasp, was suffering his death throes.

My brother told me once upon a time that if a creature was suffering, the merciful thing to do would be to kill it, if possible. I remembered his exact words: "Put it out of its misery." Clearly, the little fellow was suffering, and yet the thought of killing him was abhorrent to me. I had already killed him! I knew my brother was right, though: killing him would be an act of mercy: My whole body hot as fire, hotter than the heat of this sultry summer day, I grabbed him around the neck, and...I learned that even near death, a creature is not done fighting. He scratched desperately with his still-working front claws, drawing blood from the fat of my palm.

"Sorry," I said, "sorry!" I let him go and stroked his head gently, and he stopped struggling.

Maybe he *will* live, I thought, a gust of desperate hope blowing through me. I cradled him in my arms as gently as my shaking hands would allow, and carried him through the broken spot in the wall, into the brushy thicket beyond. After surveying the sparse collection of trees amidst the array of ferns and briars and ivies, I sat down with him at the base of a large elm nettle tree, where the day's heat was curbed by ample foliage and the cooling effect of the elm nettle's droopy, floppy leaves. The aroma of the elm nettle, wet like sage, but sweeter, lent vague comfort.

"You'll live, after all," I told him, stroking him, as he looked up at me with that horrible expression of incomprehension, "Yeah, you'll live."

I knew he wouldn't though. If he had any chance of survival, I, well, I wouldn't have known what to do, but probably I would have found some water for him, and then sought out Mrs. Camden in the teacher offices, and on my way there overcome my shyness long enough to rush around asking people what I should do; but an innate sense of the nearness of death held me, and I held him for what could have been an hour or three, until

at some point I noticed his heart wasn't beating anymore. I sat there with him another hour after that, allowing his spirit to slip from his skin, then I laid him in the first divide of the elm nettle, and stumbled home.

He never yowled; maybe he didn't feel anything. Once in awhile, he would crawl forward a little way on his front legs, but tiredness overcame him quickly, or perhaps a wordless knowledge of some sort, and he lay there, still, even purring a little when I petted him, as his breath came slower and slower.

The gloomy glow, the dusty humidity, of late afternoon had arrived by the time I got back to my room. Once alone, I fell down on my bed, just crumpled, like a man hit in the head by a stone from a sling. I was spent; I couldn't even summon the energy to be angry. There was no one, in any case, left to be angry at. The suggestion had always been in my mind, just calmly residing there, that the reason nobody liked me might just be because something was wrong with me, some essential ingredient missing or combination of ingredients awry. The distaste I had for others, the scorn I held for them, had always kept that thought at bay; but now, I knew for sure that it was true: I was *contemptible*.

I didn't cry; I had cried hundreds of times, alone in my room, on my bed, at home or here at Clarks Hill, in unfocused rage, sadness, or frustration; but I just lay there today, silent, shaking, my mind shifting spasmodically between thoughts of the poor broken kitten, the knowledge and frustration of Nolk being gone, and an inchoate certainty that things would be changed, now.

I would fit in, now; I would cease being different. I was different because I was contemptible not because I was unique or special or enlightened or clearseeing about the foibles of societal norm. I would have friends. I had considered the possibility before, of fitting in by burying my natural tendencies in an adherence to what was expected of me, but the thought had been repugnant to me; but now, I didn't know exactly how, but

I *knew* things would be different. I would do what I was told, I would listen to my teachers and parents and peers and abide by their wisdom, as well as by societal norms. I would do what everybody else did; I wouldn't kill any more kittens.

A low gasping whine escaped me, as if I was trying to breathe but couldn't, as if I'd had the wind knocked out of me, or perhaps as if I were the kitten, himself, groping for one last breath, one last moment of life. Another gasping whine escaped me, and another; and that's when the door opened and my new roommate entered.

DIRK-2

Recording P-003 [Transcriber's Note: Most pauses, mis-speaks, mispronunciations, and occurrences of "uh," "um," and "you know" have been edited out.]

Dirk: Today we're going to talk about the House of Leopard. Is that all right?

Rowan: [Nods]

Dirk: Remember about all the Houses of Lenima?

Rowan: Yes.

Dirk: I should mention that not everybody is a member of a House.

Rowan: Like me!

Dirk: Yeah, like you; but you can become a member. You don't have to be born into a House. Jayenne will adopt you into House of Falcon if you want.

Rowan: [Shrugs]

Dirk: Well, anyway, there's the hill people, of course, and hermits, and some people who are just anti-organization, you know. *Most* people around here are at least *nominally* members of some House or another. They don't all live in compounds like House of Dog, here, or tight-knit clusters of homes. There's farmsteads, for example. If you go south of here a half day's walk or so, less than that if you go steadily, there's a whole bunch of farms, just side by side by side. But they're all mixed up. The first one is a House of Horse farm, then the next one

might be House of Mouse, I can't remember, and then House of Beaver, and then another House of Horse, a couple House of Dallidoes, then a couple more House of Horses. Like that.

Rowan: Can I have some? [Points at some maple marbs that Dirk has in a bowl beside him]

Dirk: [Slides the bowl towards Rowan] So, what can you tell me about the House of Leopard?

Rowan: You want to be a Leopard.

Dirk: Why would you say that?

Rowan: [Shrugs, smiling]

Dirk: Come on!

Rowan: We're always pretending to be them—when we're playing. To be Leopards.

Dirk: That's true, but that's because we're pretending to be *heroes*. And around here, the heroes are Leopards. But you could be a hero without being a Leopard. If I had my druthers, I'd rather be a great wizard, like my brother Ralgo—he's dead, but he was a great wizard—but unfortunately, I don't seem to have any magic in me. Don't *seem* to—you never know, it might manifest later.

Rowan: [Nods doubtfully]

Dirk: It might!

Rowan: What's a hero?

Dirk: Somebody who beats the shit out of people who are mean to others or who try to enslave or otherwise control them... But getting back on topic, here, what else do you know about the House of Leopard?

Rowan: They're the bosses.

Dirk: [Chuckles] You're on the right track, but no, they're not the bosses.

Rowan: The lords?

Dirk: No, they're not lords, either.

Rowan: They wear orange and black uniforms.

Dirk: That's right, or sometimes yellow and black. They're not bosses, though, and not lords. They're sort of, hm, what would be a good word? Unifiers.

Rowan: Huh?

Dirk: For generations, there was constant petty fighting between Houses, sometimes pretty much out and out war, one House against another, or an alliance of several Houses against another House or a different alliance of Houses. The peace and strife went in waves, depending on the leadership of Houses, the results of conflicts, the year's or the decade's harvest, and I'm sure many other factors.

Rowan: Magic?

Dirk: Yes, that's probably true. If a strong wizard was born into a particular House, that House might decide they could exert some influence in their region of Lenima, or something like

that. Or if some leader had built up a House's militia—anyway, many many factors.

Rowan: [Nods]

Dirk: But in times of strife, all of this fighting between Houses would leave Lenima vulnerable to Narian invasion. They—the Houses, Lenima—always seemed to pull together just enough and just in time to fight off the Narians, and then there'd be relative peace for awhile, before the disagreements and disputes started up again. But then, about two hundred years ago, a Leniman traitor from the House of Salamander, who styled himself, "The Shark," went over to the Narians. He led them into Lenima, and started defeating House after House after House.

Rowan: Salamander?

Dirk: Yeah, it's not a House anymore. They were, if I remember right, a somewhat reclusive House anyway, what's the word, not incestual exactly, but they kept to themselves, they were self-contained, they had no dealings with other Houses, they didn't marry outside of the House, stuff like that. And they had a unique appearance, dark-skinned, but light-eyed, green or blue, with gray in their hair even when they were young—like you, sort of. After the war, they never re-formed, though. Maybe they were all killed.

Rowan: Oh.

Dirk: So anyway, the Shark almost won. I mean, for a couple of years, he never lost a single battle, despite often being outnumbered two or three to one; and he was brutal. He would torture and slaughter whole strongholds of a House down to the last person, so that other strongholds would capitulate without a battle, stuff like that. He was on the verge of winning, of

beating Lenima, of conquering the entire continent! But William Green Eagle, “The Shakis,” as he came to be known, led a ragged, rowdy army out of the northern hills, and started winning battles against Shark regiments. In time, he united the Houses and under his leadership, they beat the Shark. The legends say that Green Eagle killed him in single combat after decimating his armies.

Rowan: And he started the House of Leopard!

Dirk: That’s right. There was an aura of magic about him. I mean, the Shark had beaten all the disciplined militias of all the major houses, Tiger, Wolf, Jaguar, the Underworld, you name it, and not just beaten them, but devastated them, dominated them; then, this undisciplined bunch of mountain men came down and started holding their own against him—and then when the Houses yielded command of their militias to William Green Eagle, they started beating him decisively. Well, they—the Houses—thought of him as a savior—a Shakis. And I guess he was. And this gave him the influence to form a new and different House, the House of Leopard, which would settle disputes between the Houses, keep the peace, and of course, maintain a standing army in case of future invasions.

Rowan: So they *are* the bosses.

Dirk: No, not exactly. They don’t make laws, they don’t...

Rowan: But what they say, the other Houses have to do, right?

Dirk: No, not even that. If there’s a dispute between Houses, they, the House of Leopard, make a suggestion, and almost always, the Houses go along with it. They have quite a reputation for fairness. All the Houses feel safer with the House of Leopard defending the borders, too, that’s a factor. I mean, you

ought to see these guys! One Leopard, with a sword, could probably take twenty or thirty militia men. The training they go through must be mind-boggling. There was a Leopard who lived here, over at House of Whale. Krallum; he joined the House of Leopard a few years ago; and he's moving up the ranks, I hear. He's good friends with Jayenne, and...

Rowan: How do they...

Dirk: Fund the army? It's partly taxes, I think voluntary though, and partly there's an agricultural wing of the House of Leopard, and an industrial wing also, which partly fund the central military component.

Rowan: You like them?

Dirk: Who? The House of Leopard?

Rowan: Yes.

Dirk: Well, yeah, as far as authoritarian-esque organizations go, they seem pretty okay. Of course, it could all be propaganda, but Krallum's a nice guy, and I've seen a couple other Leopard warriors, and they're always friendly to everybody.

[Silence]

Dirk: You know what I think?

Rowan: What?

Dirk: The history books won't tell you this, but I think it's true.

Rowan: What?

Dirk: I've read all about the Shark War, and even if the Shark was a great general, and even if the Houses were unprepared and disorganized because of all the strife between them at the time, there was no way he could have won *every* battle. He was too outnumbered, especially at first. If you read the descriptions of those battles, it was as if he was three steps ahead of everybody else—it's as if he knew exactly what everybody was going to do, *always*. It's been attributed to his genius, but nobody's that smart. I submit that he actually *did* know what was going to happen. I think he could see the future. Like you. It's always gnawed at me, how could he possibly have foreseen *exactly* what all his opponents would do? And now that I've seen, in the person of you, that it's possible for the future to be seen, I'm convinced that he could—that he could tell the future.

Rowan: [Looks thoughtful; seems intrigued by the possibility that somebody else might be able to do what he does]

Dirk: And you know how I think the Shakis defeated him?

Rowan: How?

Dirk: I think the Shakis didn't have a future.

Rowan: What?

Dirk: I think he lived utterly in the present, and so had no future.

Rowan: [Thinking]

End recording.

ROWAN-9

Dr. Mulgar's face did something I'd never seen it do before: it contorted in anger. In a heartbeat, it transformed into a mask of wrath; or perhaps it was a mask that melted away, a mask of calm civility that vanished to *reveal the real*, as Jayenne might say, or uncover the demon (as Romulus was quick to call Dr. Mulgar) behind it. He certainly looked like a demon to me in that moment. I knew then that if he'd ever been truly angry with me before, he'd hid it well.

In the loudest voice he'd ever used with me, not quite a yell, he snarled, "You defy me?" and without waiting for an answer continued in an increasingly angry voice, each word louder than the one before, the last five words a spittle-laden crescendo of frenzy, "I gave you life! Without me, you wouldn't exist! You...do...not...defy...me!" After a brief pause, he went on, but by then, I wasn't comprehending any words; I was in a sort of shock, I think, hot and cold at the same time, experiencing his voice and his face, along with the sharply defined green, brown, and blue of the room, the cold paper face of Dr. Bowusuvi, and even the still-subtle aroma of mixed solid and liquid waste wafting in from Romulus' room, as if in a dream. Dr. Mulgar had never yelled at me before. It wasn't him in front of me anymore, it was a stranger, an alien, a god.

Turning to Dr. Bowusuvi, he said, "Give me it."

Dr. Bowusuvi, his wrinkled old face unreadable as ever, said, "I will do it," and stepped forward, eyeing me with the grim impassive disapproval with which he seemed to view Existence itself. Dr. Mulgar barred his way.

He growled, "Give it to me, now, old man!"

Dr. Bowusuvi's long-haired but thin-bodied eyebrows went up and his colorless eyes narrowed. He withdrew the small silver cylinder I knew so well from the inside breast pocket of his many-pocketed lab coat. He began to turn its two halves, which were separated by a cleft, in opposite directions (an ac-

tion I had always thought indicated an adjustment to the intensity of its pain-giving); but with a look of hatred, Dr. Mulgar snatched it, and glaring at the older man, reversed the directions of the halves.

Dr. Bowusuvi's eyes widened in alarm, marking the first time I'd ever seen him look anything resembling human; but while he looked on in general disapprobation, he made no protest. It was then that I noticed that his beady eyes weren't black, as I'd always thought, but blue. They just seemed black because they were clouded with what appeared to be the purple-black liquid that I injected into my arm veins every night.

As Dr. Mulgar came at me with the eye thing, I saw that his eyes, too, were full of the stuff. I turned to run, but he grabbed me, turning me around with unyielding roughness.

"You will learn obedience!" he snarled, and grabbing me by the hair and yanking my head back, he pressed the cylinder against the cheekbone just under my right eye, enunciating with chilling clarity, "You will not defy me."

And an affliction to make even the worst application of the eye thing I'd ever received from Dr. Bowusuvi seem laughable to even call it pain exploded through my head from my eye to my spine like a pulsing buzzing spear of fire, bristled with thousands of barbed spinning pins. Vaguely, and it could have been just before or just after Dr. Mulgar administered the cylinder, I heard Dr. Bowusuvi say, "You fool, you'll erase his mind!" and Dr. Mulgar growl, "Shut up, or you'll be next, you old clown!" and moments after that, just before pain rendered me senseless to the world, "Have your stooges check on him in a couple hours, and kill the other one..."

I don't think I screamed: I heard myself emit a cut-off gasp "Ahhh__g!" but no more. The infliction didn't stop at my eye, nor my head this time, but went down my neck, into the bones below my neck, my collarbone and my shoulder blades, and into the bones in my chest, and what seemed my heart, then on into my stomach and bowels, with what I imagined to be

stab wounds charged with lightning and snake venom, until at last, pain swallowed me. It's possible that I lost consciousness, but I don't think I did, I just *became pain*; there was nothing else. Thoughts and sensation left me, yet I was still *there*, still aware, still *in* a hopeless and unending agony.

Pain was everywhere, in every inch of my body, along with nausea—and a great addled-ness. I was obscurely aware of myself as an entity, but I didn't know who I was, I couldn't have said my name. My mind swam, flailed really, like someone in water who doesn't know how to swim. I sensed that I was at the top of a black waterfall, water filling my mouth and nostrils, stinging my eyes—no, not water, the purple-black stuff—carrying me towards this waterfall. I was sucked under, tossed about, turned over; I flailed and groped, struggled to swim away from the waterfall, desperation driving me, but I couldn't right myself, and was growing weaker and weaker, as pain continued to wrack every corpuscle of my body.

Fighting was painful, every movement causing renewed waves of pain in my head and the rest of my body, and was doing me no good. The harder I fought, the closer the waterfall loomed. And I was getting sleepy: It seemed to me that if I just lay back, just let the current take me, oh, I could have a few moments of peace, of painlessness, before I drowned.

It was then that I brushed up against something, some substance, a tree-like column of it, and opportunistically, I clung to it, and put my face against its rough surface as sometimes I had put it against the wall when I was trying to keep my head from spinning after Dr. Bowusuvi had done the eye thing to me.

My head spun, the black stuff buffeted me like a rushing river, pain crashed through me in waves. I hugged the thing, this column of unknown principle, clung to it, clung to it, clung to it, devoid of knowledge devoid of perception but for one impulse that became one thought making its way through the pain and chaos and blackness: "Don't let go."

For how long I clung to it, I don't know. In literal time, I suppose only a couple minutes, but the world of the mind, of the soul, is different: hours, maybe days, or longer. ("It was years," Dirk told me later.) But at some point, I found that what I was clinging to was sound, a single, lasting, note, and I listened to it, followed it, just one note, maybe two, followed it for, again, an unknown length of time, to the border of consciousness, the edge of sensory awareness, where I found that it was a wailing, or keening, close to my ears. Realizing this, I felt something hard against my back, and then something else encircling my ribs, and something wet against the back of my neck and the side of my face.

I was propped, in a sitting position, against the bars of Romulus' cage, his arms, tight around me, keeping me upright. His face, wet, was pressed against my neck, and he was emitting the lament that had pierced the black fog of my mind. I was too beaten up to think about anything at the time, but I suppose I assumed that he was crying because he thought me dead; it occurred to me later, that he couldn't have thought me dead. He was a very perceptive individual, with very attuned senses; there was no way he hadn't heard my labored breaths, or felt the desperate beats of my heart.

My eye burned and felt as if it were bleeding, and my head throbbed in excruciating ripples, leaving me aware of Romulus and of the gray room only as from a distance; but the rest of my body just felt drained, weak, trembly, only the echo of pain remaining. The room spun in slow bounces, its grayness a fog that paralleled the state of my mind. I sat there, just waiting: Waiting to recover, waiting for the pain in my eye and head to abate, waiting for strength. I felt myself breathing; I listened to my breaths, thought of nothing, just listened. At some point, I realized that Romulus was no longer crying, and I listened to *his* breaths also. I didn't notice the passing of time, I didn't think, I don't know that I *could* think, my mind was so foggy, so lethargic, I just waited, listening, feeling the solidity of my own

body, the touch of Romulus' arms and face, tasting something acrid in my mouth, looking at the gray walls, the gray ceiling, and smelling urine—his and mine, for I found that I'd emptied my bladder. The pain in my head lessened in slow increments, and I grew sleepy—almost pleurably sleepy.

Romulus' arms released me, and his voice broke into my world of sensations: "Ah, you're awake."

Thoughts and memories were slow to come, but through my sluggishness of mind a heart-jumping memory cut with the same force the barbed spear of pain had cut through my brain earlier; and somehow despite the great lethargy of my body, and the desire just to sleep, sleep, sleep, I managed to jump up and cry, "They're going to kill you! They're coming, soon!" Dr. Mulgar had ordered Dr. Bowusuvi to send his "stooges," which I assumed to be the Fatheads, over in a couple of hours, but I had no idea how long it had been since then.

Romulus tilted his head to the left, which was his usual way of acknowledging my concern about something (tilting it to the right usually indicated curiosity); and said, placidly, "Then we must leave. It is not in your power to free us?"

"Mind?" I said, to myself, as well as aloud: as shaky and muddled as I was, I couldn't keep my mouth from conforming to the inner words I formed. Suddenly I was afraid that the screaming-rod-through-the-brain of the eye thing might have killed Mind, and I repeated, in a near panic, "Mind!?"

His response was immediate, and as matter-of-fact, as free from emotion or concern as anything he ever said to me. "I am here, Rowan."

"Show me the Fatheads coming in, into this house, uh, yesterday, no, they didn't come yesterday. Today!"

I was on the bright road; I followed it into the main room, and there, watched the Fatheads open the door and come in.

"No, show me their fingers when they're pushing the buttons right before they leave." This time, I found myself

standing right in front of the door, looking directly at the cluster of buttons, each engraved with a different number, which was right above the brown knob of the door. As I looked at these buttons, the fat fingers of one of the Fatheads pressed four of them in sequence. I memorized this sequence, and then, releasing the vision, wobbled into the main room, as Romulus, curious and intent, watched me go. At the front door, I pushed the numbers Mind had just shown me. A whirring sound arose from the knob, or the area above the knob, following by a sound somewhere between a click and a snap.

I pulled the knob; the door didn't budge.

I rotated the knob, then pulled it, and the door slid open. My heart-rate increased. The warm outside wind, accompanied by a soft, all-encompassing susurrations of sound, caressed me.

"Now show me their fingers—the Fatheads' fingers—when they open Romulus' cage!" I demanded of Mind, hurrying back to the gray room. There, after Mind had obliged me, I pressed the appropriate buttons, and again there came that whir, followed this time by a soft tink. Even before I could begin fiddling around with the complex-looking opening mechanism, Romulus, who had watched the Fatheads unlock it many times, reached through, turned something, and shoved open the door with a sparkle in his eye and the subtlest of smiles.

Exiting the house, which turned out to be a drab dusty white one, I was less overwhelmed than I had been my first time outside, perhaps partly because the area itself, a sort of wasteland of yellow weeds and long grass, with no road, even, leading up to the house, just some beaten down grass, was less spectacular than the place Mulgar had taken me; but, while *less* overwhelmed than I had been then, I was still dazzled. The absolute pervasiveness of sensory input—of light, of sound, of smell, of the feel of the breeze and the temperature of the air (I say "temperature" because while this particular day the outside temperature was approximately the same as that of the inside, outside the air let me know about itself continually, that it was

slightly warm, slightly cool, while inside I never noticed it)—made each individual component of reality difficult to discern, and me slow to act. So, Romulus had to lead me.

A green forest, smiling at us below the sun, was visible in a long curve at the edge of the plain of weeds, and it was towards this lodestar we headed. Taking my hand, Romulus guided me into the weeds, which grew longer the closer we got to the forest, their feathery tops swaying above my head with swarms of gnats. Hand in hand, we strolled on, slowly approaching the forest, Romulus's nostrils dilating in a seeming celebration of the mild herbaceous pleasantness around us.

Suddenly, Romulus squatted, pulling me down with him. Moments later, a creaking sound cut through the continual *whish* of the brushing-together of weeds, followed by a clop of horses' hooves, and then a voice. What I thought must be a gnat, or other bug, crawled up my tailbone. Reaching back to rub it away, I found that it was a droplet of water—sweat. Motioning for me to stay low, and to follow him, Romulus, squatting and walking on his heels, made a smart line for the forest. Bent over, I followed as fast, and with as little noise, as I could.

It wasn't long until we came to the forest's edge. Before us an unbelievable array of shrubs, ferns, plants, wildflowers, briars, bushes, fallen leaves, and lichen-covered logs gathered like children, or worshippers, around long stout trunks that stretched up into vast clusters of dark shining leaves.

My heart swam. Romulus' eyes smiled; I could see that he was happy. The sun smiled upon our backs; the wind touched our faces. The forest seemed to welcome us, saying in a deep and at once whispering and bell-like voice, "Come in, my children." Romulus rose and stepped from the weeds into the shadow of the woods; and I followed him.

We were vagabonds.

YAAN-9

“So mudmen are real,” Jake said as we approached Lohu’s field. He said it in a way that somehow expressed both surprise and that he’d always suspected as much.

“A reasonable supposition.” That was Rook.

Lohu had returned to his solitary reverie in the southwest corner of his field, and there he remained as Mom, Jake, and I squished and glooped, and Rook glided, through the snowmelt mud that predominated all but the highest areas of the field, which was otherwise covered with patches of brown grass and hardy bushes. Above the Fierce trees that he faced, above the wild craggy forest beyond, the sky had turned a fierce rolling gray, rolling towards us behind a breeze. I peered into the pattern of the storm, and translated that pattern to images the others would understand. I announced, “It’s going to rain, not snow.”

Mom said, “Nilfnin.”

“What did you say, Mom?”

“Nilfnin?” That was Rook.

“Drud’s not here; you can stop talking Mudman.” That was Jake.

“They’re Nilfnin,” Mom said, “not ‘mudmen.’”

There was a pause behind me (I was leading our procession), a few steps of silence that stretched into half of a field of silence, and then Rook said, “The Lady Yaan and I saw a tiny dragon, and the Lady Yaan talked to him.” A small gust of forewind from the coming storm bustled past us.

Another pause followed this revelation, followed by Mom’s expressionless, “Interesting.”

Then Jake, with not a small douse of doubt-drenched sarcasm, said, “A tiny dragon, really? How tiny?”

Jake didn’t doubt Rook. He never doubted him; by the actions of their entity patterns, I knew that both of them had absolute faith in the other. Yet, Jake often *acted* and *talked* as if

Rook were a child prone to bizarre flights of fancy and irrational, insensible behavior—or just an ignorant bumpkin like the rest of their compatriots working Farmer Green's land.

This conduct didn't fit with his usual pattern of behavior. He doubted almost everything all of the farmhands said, and while sometimes obscure or oblique in the expression of his scorn, his behavior towards these men (his insults, in particular) paralleled his opinion of them, which would lead one to predict that if his opinion of someone was high, then his treatment of that person would be respectful. Yet, with Rook, this was not the case; he ribbed him relentlessly about many things that he did or said—about Rushlight, for example.

Once, he'd asked him, "You're not thinking about marrying that woman, are you?" (On the surface, he disrespected Rushlight to such a degree that he wouldn't even deign to say her name, referring to her, usually, as "that woman," in conversations with Rook; and yet I could see by the action of his pattern that his opinion of her was quite favorable.)

Rook replied, with the thoughtful consideration that was a hallmark of his participation in any dialogue, "Well, on Shamokin, there is no such thing as marriage; but I thought that yes, we could perhaps travel together."

"Really?" Jake said, in a tone that asked, "By the balls of the iron god, how can you be so ignorant?"

"Really." By *his* tone and the expression on his face (or lack thereof), Rook would have seemed to any onlooker to be insensible of the expression in Jake's voice.

"You're sure that this isn't your," he glanced at me, who was watching both of them with keen interest, and with a depth of observation they couldn't know, "this isn't the little fellow doing the decision making here?"

"Quite sure."

Jake snorted, and Rook, perceiving the snort to be an expression of disbelief, explained, with, as he would have described it, his Shamokinite patience, "One shelter is pretty

much the same as another to the little fellow, so there would be no reason for him, if he were calling the shots, to have me drag one particular shelter around with me if I were to travel. Therefore, this loose resolution, I would call it, more than 'decision,' must be based upon criteria different from that which the little fellow finds important."

"And what criteria would that be?" Jake asked, as someone who has experienced something and knows the ins and outs of that something might ask someone who thinks they know about that something but that the asker knows they don't.

Rook gave no answer; at length, Jake said, "Well? Could it be that the little fellow is subtler than you realize?"

"Pleasant company?"

Jake snorted again, with unconcealed derision, but said, "I'll allow that. But even allowing it, do you truly believe she's going to want to travel to all the same spots that you do."

Rook said, "No, probably not," without a trace of perturbation.

Jake, his eyes widening, said, "You wouldn't! You wouldn't just tag along behind her like a puppy dog? No, I suppose you would."

"No, probably not." Rook remained unperturbed

Jake spread in his hands in a, "Well, can't you see the obvious?" gesture, accompanied by a complementary expression, and then said, "You've argued yourself out of the possibility, or sense, of traveling with her, then."

"I wouldn't say that," Rook said with an expression that while not a smile suggested a smile. "A wise man once told me that you could travel many roads at once, and that if another were with you on any of the roads, it could be said you traveled together."

Jake harrumphed. "A wise man is just another term for a fool."

As we returned to Farmer Green's from the faceoff with the mob of farmhands, it was no different; while retaining, as I could tell by the action of his pattern, absolute confidence in the truth of Rook's words, Jake seemed determined (on the outside) to prove him a fool. "Tiny, like a beetle? No, a cell. Tiny as a cell, right? That would make sense."

"I'd say a little larger than a chicken. Different proportions though."

"A chicken-sized dragon? That's amazing. Indeed, *truly* amazing. Was it a baby?"

"I got the impression somehow that it wasn't a baby, when it flew overhead."

"I see. And it talked?"

"Indeed so. It conversed with the Lady Yaan for some moments."

"Did it speak Leniman?"

"I believe I heard it say a few Leniman words, yes."

"But how did it form those Leniman words without a human tongue and lips? The accent had to have been terrible."

"I was too far away to observe the speaking apparatus."

I waited for them at the fence, and then as I clambered over it, said, "He said friends of the son were in trouble, which I took to be you, Jake, and Mom. And he was right. I wonder if he's still there. And he called himself the 'eyes of the son,' and he called me 'Fajee.' Do you know what he means by all that, Mom?"

"We'll ask him if he's still there," was all she said.

"Oh, Rook," I exclaimed, remembering our conversation, about his home planet of Shamokin, that had been interrupted earlier, "tell me about Shamo..." I cut *myself* off. I shared *everything* with Mom, but I realized as I was speaking that it was possible that Rook wouldn't want her to know he was an alien and that by blabbing about it, I would be betraying his confidence. I looked from one of them to the other, hoping I

hadn't betrayed his confidence, and embarrassed that I might be hiding something from her.

Neither betrayed any impression that I'd said something out of the ordinary, however.

Rook started to speak. "Well, where to start? Well," but Mom interrupted him.

"Later," she said, "I've heard it. Let's have some silence right now."

Rook nodded acknowledgment, I noted, without even a raise of an eyebrow.

As we walked on in the silence of the cold wind, I noticed, looking back, that Jake, who moments before had been ribbing Rook with elaborate gusto, looked suddenly grim, and glum—as glum as I was ever to see him, in fact, until our wagon ride north years later.

Mom, noticing this as well, said to him, with a softness that was rare for her, "Not for awhile yet, Captain," and he nodded.

When we reached the little cowyard, the cows were gone; somebody had taken them in. I could imagine them lowing in the barn as the gray grew, the storm approached. Only Tolan and Estobbias were still there. I looked for the little dragon—Ragahootoo—in the clump of bushes he'd crashed into, but he wasn't there. Tolan, trudging, staggering after Estobbias in a rote pantomime of a chase, was covered from head to toe in mud: he looked like Drud, only a little smaller.

The wind was beginning to swirl and dance in earnest now, to "kick up," as Rook liked to say, pulling those gray clouds to the south ever closer. A speck, and then another, of cold rain, pricked the bare skin of my face. I became aware, then, that my fingertips and toes were most of the way from raw to numb, the fabric of my gloves and socks chafing the skin of my wrists and ankles. Estobbias paused a moment in his elusion of Tolan to sniff the wind.

"Estobbias, a storm's coming!" I called.

His ears pricked up; his head rolled; his eyes found me; and trotting and nickering, he followed Mom, Rook, and me out of the little cowyard.

Tolan gaped.

HAYNTA-9

“In the shadow of the greater thing,” they say in the north, where the cold strips life to its essentials, “the lesser things that seemed great dwindle to nothing.”

Within a month of the arrival of my new roommate, Little Bolo, I was recognized by everybody at Clarks Hill. I was Little Bolo’s bodyguard, or her *familiar*, as many called me. For the first time in my life, I was noticed, I was known. First-year students, peers of Little Bolo, who wondered why a third-year student spent so much time with one of their own, as well as students who had been attending class with me for more than two years and wouldn’t have been able to so much as guess my name, all knew me, because I was Little Bolo’s friend.

Of course, to be referred to as someone’s *familiar* isn’t necessarily a compliment. A sarcasm, I think, underlay its original use, and while some, if not most, of those who called me her familiar, or bodyguard, did so only because everybody else did, others shared the sarcasm, and the disdain, or in some cases jealousy, inherent in the use of such appellations. But I didn’t care: almost in the first moments that I saw Bolo, I knew I would protect her, and defend her; and there was nothing anybody could say that would sway me from my new cause. That was the greater thing. In the back of my mind there lurked a fear that Bolo found my presence cumbersome and would, in time, slough me off in favor of the many who were drawn to her like bugs to a lem torch; but that didn’t matter either.

She opened the door at peeking speed, as if she were hesitant to come in. I saw her before she saw me, the brightness of the room’s one window, which was opposite the door, illuminating her for me, while at the same time painting me dark for her; and I could see right away that she wasn’t like Pindy, or Turta. Nowhere close to either one of them. She wasn’t one of the “pretty girls,” you know, the ones everybody thinks are pretty, and are invariably boring and vacuous, devoid

of a single interesting thought—like Pindy and to a lesser degree Turta. She looked more the type who would end up having intellectual friends, who, while perhaps as unaware as Pindy and her crowd of my presence in the dorm room when they were hanging out there together, would at least, while yipping and yapping, say something interesting or humorous once in awhile.

She *was* pretty, though, *I* thought, but in such a way that only a few would think so—in an off-the-road way, you know. She was small, quite short, no taller than an average girl a couple of years younger than her, and not really thin but spry, and wearing ragged baggy clothes that made her look even smaller than she was: A pale yellow short-sleeved shirt that was obviously handed down to her from somebody older, or bigger, and long pants dusty from the road (it was to be a couple of months before I could convince her that the ankle-length skirts that I wore were much more comfortable than pants).

She had the fairest complexion I'd ever seen, lighter than mine, even, by at least a couple shades: Oh, she was red from the sun, but I could tell that her natural color was a near-ghostlike pale broken up only by the swirls and swirls of freckles on her arms and face. Her hair, too, was very very light, with a slight cast of red to it, her features unremarkable but pleasant, delicate but not fine, her face open, her eyes, one of which was brown and the other green, sincere, and uncertain. She looked as if she wanted me to like her but thought I wouldn't, or feared I wouldn't, which I thought somewhat endearing, first of all because in all my life, no one had ever sought my approval, or affection, and also because it made her seem younger than she was, and not as intelligent as she turned out to be.

Details of her appearance were unimportant in the shadow of the greater thing, however, for in the moment, I mean the *very instant* I saw her, I felt better. I couldn't say exactly *how* or *why* I felt better, but I did. Who I was hadn't changed,

what I had done hadn't changed (and if anything, my grief for the kitten was intensified); and yet I felt I could live with the fact, the reality, of those things. At some level, I could separate myself from it. I could look at it objectively. An angry girl had thrown a rock and killed a kitten. The act had been one of anger, not malice, not evil; and the fact that the girl was me was a good thing in the sense that because I now knew such expressions of anger could cause great harm to other beings, I would refrain from them, and in doing so would give the tiniest of honor to the poor little fella. Which wouldn't lessen the sorrow of his demise, but would give it the tiniest of meanings. He wouldn't cease to exist, he would exist as part of me, the more mature me, and per the reasoning of Infin Gorilla, would exist, thus, in everybody who knew me, or who knew somebody who knew me. He would be infinite. At least, that's what I told myself later, looking back over the event and reasoning out the details of my emotional state at that time; in the moment I only knew that that my state of mind went from a wracking combination of self contempt and a wild desolate desire to somehow make what had happened not have happened, to a sorrowful, even sweet, acceptance of things as they now were.

When Little Bolo opened the door, tears were running in silent paths down her face, this girl who was, I knew, going to be my new roommate, and I couldn't recall whether she'd been crying as she opened the door, or if her tears had begun thereafter; and while it would have been reasonable to assume that she was shy and scared in this new, strange, place, it *seemed* like she was crying because *I* was sad, which is unusual—most people get annoyed if you're sad, unless they're sad too—and helped endear her to me.

And there was something else about her face that made me like her right off, some other rare quality: it was devoid of judgment. Now, before you scoff, yes, I'm well aware that any conclusions reached about such a thing as whether somebody is judging you in the first moments of seeing you are likely to be

suspect, but with her, in that face of utter innocence, I could tell, there was no judgment of me, and no wondering what on earth could be the matter, just an acceptance of my grief, and an *embrace*, those different-colored eyes that made her seem simple and yet as if she could see into you, somehow embracing the real me, the whole me. She could see into me, I thought, she knew that I had killed the kitten, not in fact but in essence, and she still wanted *me* to like *her*!

I guess I knew, then, again at some wordless level, but I knew, nevertheless, what I would confirm in the coming days: that somebody as innocent and pure of spirit as she was, as devoid of meanness or judgment, and possessed of an almost unbelievable naivety, had *had* to have grown up in a bubble of absolute love and good will. And now, that bubble was gone; she was alone, away from those who had always treated her with such gentleness and love, and protected her from the harshness of life; she was alone, defenseless against the soul-sucking influences of the world outside that bubble; her charge, her guardianship had fallen to me. I didn't know what specific actions I could take to protect her, but I would not fail her: I *would* protect her against all the truth-eating goblins of this world; she would remain herself; her innocence, her purity of spirit, her kindness, would never be blighted. In some sense, I suppose, it was as if she were the kitten reborn. She *was* a little like a kitten, at first blush.

Little Bolo would have been a good roommate even if I hadn't liked her, because everywhere she went, something interesting, or, not exactly magical, but enchanting, happened. In her wake, an under-music echoed, and things, and people, shone with a not-seen, but felt, ethereal glow as if covered with a sprinkling of magic dust that captured the light not of the sun but of the spirit. So, even if I hadn't liked her, or worse, even if she hadn't liked me, I would have looked forward to seeing what she was going to do next, or what was going to happen in the circle of her passing, and what others would do in

unconscious response to her presence. I would, thus, have had something besides sleep to look forward to every day, which, with Nolk gone, and Mrs. Camden no longer one of my teachers, I would have sorely needed.

But, I liked her, *a lot*, and I didn't just look forward to seeing what she would do or say next, or what delightful little occurrence would arise from the influence of her presence or her passage, but I rejoiced in it; and I was ready at all times to protect her in case something went awry. One way I had decided for sure that I could protect her was that if she were to encounter meanness or malice, I would counter it immediately with kindness and encouragement: if some ignoramus made fun of her, or if some dark-hearted somebody reacted with hate to the light and love that emanated from her, I would intercede. I would contradict, forcefully, any mean or hurtful words directed at her, and then I would extract her from the conflict, take her back to our room, and explain to her that the person's words rose from ignorance and fear.

So let people call me her bodyguard, let people call me her servant or familiar; I had a duty to do, and I would do it.

One sheerly practical way that I helped her was with her classwork. She seemed to me to be quite bright; but she had never attended any classes of any sort, and because of this was not only unused to systematic, regimented study, but also didn't have quite the level of knowledge of subjects that it was assumed students would have at her age; and, in addition, didn't seem to think anybody would care if she didn't do a particular assignment by a particular time. So, I explained *everything* to her. I filled her in on what she was supposed to know; I gave her the foundation of knowledge she needed to keep up in her classes. And I found out that Nolk had been right: I *did* remember most of the stuff I'd learned during my first two years at Clarks Hill, which better equipped me to help Little Bolo with her stuff.

For the first two or three months of the year, I spent a couple of hours every day tutoring her. The routine of my day was: Breakfast followed by classes in the morning; lunchtime, go talk to Nolk in the walnut grove (for Nolk returned about five days into the semester, and resumed his janitorial duties—more on that, later); more classes in the afternoon, then return to my room and do all of my assignments for all of my classes, so that I would be available to help Bolo when she got back from her classes, which was an hour or so after I did. When she returned, she would relax or meditate or maybe take a short walk while I finished my studies, then I would help her for an hour or so, at which time we'd head over to the cafeteria for supper, and then either return to our room or go to the Nonagon or the library for another hour or so of studying.

By then it would be nightfall, or close to it, and I would be exhausted—pleasurably, joyously, exhausted—but with Bolo still of a mind to stay awake and experience this strange new world of Clarks Hill, we would tour the grounds, or the Nonagon, enjoying the twilight or the post-evening lights as they were called, when students roamed about with lanterns, mingling, watching the sun go down until the bells that signaled that it was time for students to go to their rooms tolled—the Bells of Yarrow, as Little Bolo named them, with her characteristic affection. After returning to our room, we would lie in bed and tell each other stories in the dark, like unto the people of Dume, until sleep came upon one or the other of us. There was a brightness to it all, even though without Mrs. Camden my classes were boring again (luckily, Yaan had Mrs. Camden for her Reading, Writing, and Language class, so I was able to live vicariously through her reports of Mrs. Camden's lectures and stories). It was a boring tinged with light, though, because I was enduring it for a purpose; it was a stress-less, even enjoyable boring-ness, an ease, a living with life, a peace with Existence.

That was the lull before the storm.

ROWAN-10

It wasn't long before I began to be aware of what, amidst the beauty and grandeur of the great outdoors, was its most insistent feature: bugs. The odors, of dirt and plant and flower, and the sounds of leaf and creature and, soon enough, water, were, of course, ever-present, but after awhile, one—I, at least—didn't notice them. They faded into the background, they became the air, the *ether*, through which we moved. The bugs, on the other hand, wouldn't let me not notice them: Assemblages of gnats flew in chaotic eddies around my head; mosquitoes buzzed in my ears and bit my neck and arms mercilessly; sweat bees swooped in and stung whatever spots the mosquitoes didn't bite; tiny greenflies landed on my arms, tickling my skin before darting away; black broad-winged beetles hovered about threateningly; ferocious-looking dragonflies bounced up and down at the edge of the forest; and a bevy of other flies, beetles, bees, spiders, ants, and moths flew, jumped, crawled, or hovered in every nook and cranny of the woods. They were *everywhere*; and this sheer proliferation of them, along with their constant harrying, made it begin to seem like they were even in the few places that they weren't, such as my pants and shirt. I kept thinking I felt one crawling on my leg or torso, only to find when reaching to brush it away that it was a drop of sweat, or nothing, just my imagination.

Three things kept me from going batty swatting at them and scratching wildly at any and every part of my body. One, Romulus, who was completely naked, and presumably quite knowledgeable about the woods, was unconcerned about them. They pestered him with every bit the relentless glee that they did me, but only a time or two did I see him so much as brush one away. I reasoned, thus, that as bothersome as they might be, they weren't dangerous. Ultimately, they wouldn't hurt you, or Romulus would be more vigilant in making sure they didn't bite him. Two, my head was throbbing, and the more I exerted

myself, the more it throbbed, which at the same time as dividing my discomfort (the head pain at times diverting my attention from the bugs, and vice versa), acted as a sobering deterrent to any extraneous movements such as swatting and scratching. And three, my attention was further diverted by the mind-bogglingly diverse array of flora that comprised my new surroundings.

It was a typical forest, I suppose. Walking through it, now, very little would catch my eye, unless I gave purposeful attention to things. But I'd never walked the ground of any forest, ever, and every thing I saw was new to me—and possessed of a complex intricacy that was bewildering: A single tree, taking into consideration the trunk, the branches, the bark, the knots, the leaves, the animal nests, and so on, offered more to the eye than did the entirety of the house in which I'd always dwelt. And that was just one tree! The forest was filled with *hundreds* of them, along with shrubs, ferns, briars, bushes, broadleaf undergrowth plants, vines, wildflowers, fallen branches and logs, and runs of ivy and weeds.

I was also worried about the Fatheads, which in theory could have helped distract me from the ministrations of the bugs, but which actually worked to accentuate the nuisance of their presence. That was when I learned that while pain can distract from pain, worry, like impatience, always accentuates it. We'd heard the Fatheads—I assumed it was them—arriving at the house even before we entered the forest, so it seemed to me that by now, they had to have discovered our absence and were probably in pursuit of us. The shirt I was wearing was somewhat bright, with horizontal stripes of red and green inviting notice from anywhere remotely nearby, and Romulus, observing it not long after we'd entered the forest, told me to take it off. Seeing my bare torso, he said, "No," and instead had me turn it inside-out. The green, as he noted, was a bit more prominent than the red on the inside, and while not a green that matched any of the flora of the forest, it did camouflage me

more effectively than the red. My pants were brown and my shoes gray, so neither of them was likely to attract notice; but I was afraid that my shirt, despite being inside-out, would betray our location.

As we made our way deeper and deeper (I thought) into the forest, Romulus kept stopping, every fifty paces or so, and when he did, he would stand, as still as one of the entitic old trees around us, and listen for a few seconds, then peer all directions into the depths of the wood, and lastly, sniff the air. I thought he was probing for any indication of pursuit. That turned out not to be the case—he knew he would hear any humans blundering through the woods after us from a great distance away—rather, he was seeking some sign of his people.

Several times we came to great patches of briar and thorn, or thickets of brush or shrubbery which I thought would cost us valuable escape time to navigate around, but Romulus, expertly guiding us, would somehow find a passage through them, sidling, for example, through a clump of ferns or broad-leaves that I had assumed was briar or nettle, or else would instruct me to climb upon his back, and then with a strength that I didn't think of then as being particularly amazing but is more impressive to me now, would climb into the low branches of trees, and move from one tree to another *over* the brush, supporting both our weights.

At some point, I got the spatial sense that the land to the right of us was quite a bit lower than the land to the left of us, and for that matter than the land upon which we walked. Concurrent with this apprehension, I realized that a breeze, cool with a subtle wetness to it that was quite effective in cooling me off, was washing over me in fits and starts, and had been for some time, accompanied by an earthy aroma (all the smells out in the forest were earthy, but this one seemed *more* earthy, somehow). It wasn't a hot day (Spring came early that year, the vegetation ahead of schedule by fifteen or twenty days, the earliest I can remember, in fact, but it was still only mid-spring,

and though warm certainly not summer-level hot), but my nervousness and exertion made it seem warmer than it was, and this occasional breeze was quite welcome.

When, fifteen or twenty paces after sensing that the ground to our right was lower than the ground to our left, that lower ground actually came into view, I realized with a little jump in the heart that it was alight. At the very first, I thought it was on fire, then quickly realized, no, it was just shining, and then, before I could actually begin to wonder how the ground could be shining, I realized that it wasn't ground at all, but water (which explained the preponderance of the dragonflies that I'd been seeing); I was looking down upon a river, shining because it was reflecting sunlight.

Even in my current state of great anxiety, it was a breathtaking sight. I couldn't see anything clearly—the brightness dazzled my eyes—but a pace or two from us, and from the track Romulus had been leading us on, the ground came to a crumbly, cliff-like edge, and from there sloped down to the river. The slope itself was much sparser of vegetation than the forest; a few trees curved towards us amid clustered sprigs of broadleaf plants, and patches of long grass or weeds bearing blooming white flowers which grew less prevalent nearer the river, where smooth stones and red clay predominated. Across the river the woods wasn't as crowded as it was on our side; there, trees—tall oaks, big-leaved tamboloyas, and white-barked birches—seemed to grow alone, in a dazzle of misty light, massive, tall as the sun, without the torrent of underbrush that Romulus and I had been picking our way through all day. I wondered whether it could be the same river Dr. Mulgar and I had gazed down upon that first time I'd gone outside, which now seemed a long long time ago.

Suddenly, I was tired, and I mean absolutely dogged, to the point of not being able to lift up my knees to take another step. I'm sure the onset of fatigue wasn't actually sudden, rather that the focus of my awareness had slipped away from the won-

der and misery of my passage through this strange new land just long enough to recognize that I had become tired, or else that I had gotten *so* tired that my muscles had re-directed my focus to *them* and away from my surroundings.

Either way, my muscles just didn't want to go on; and though Romulus, ever observant of me, slowed his pace to compensate, I kept falling behind, as, urge myself forward as I would, I kept slowing and slowing and slowing, my legs more and more refusing to bend to my mind's directive to keep moving forward. Often, to get myself to take another step, I had to grab a fold of my pants in each hand and, pulling, help my legs forward that way. Finally, despite the urgency—in my mind at least—to keep going, we had no choice but to sit down upon a fallen log and rest for a few minutes. This rejuvenated me enough to make it another forty or fifty paces, but after that, I again began lagging.

I wasn't accustomed to such sustained exercise, I was drained from the days' events, and I was definitely hungry and dehydrated (we picked our way downslope to the river, once, carefully, and sucked down a few handfuls of water, but other than that I hadn't eaten or drunk since early that morning). When I couldn't go any farther, Romulus carried me for awhile, but at length, he espied a bush covered in large leaves growing at the edge of the forest, right at crest of the river slope, and directed me to hide under it.

Carrying me to the river side of the bush, where it was easier to crawl under the branches, which like those of a spruce tree, extended almost to the ground, he pointed under it, and said, "They won't see you there." When I didn't respond (which wasn't because I was contesting his point, but because I sensed that he was going to leave me here, alone, and I was terrified by the thought), he assured me, "I will find my..." He sought a word in my language, and added, "my friends, and we will come." Pulling the lowest branches up away from the ground, he directed me to crawl in, which I did, and was immediately engulfed in dimness and an odor part minty, part sour (I didn't recognize it as

“minty” or “sour” then, of course, just as the smell of that bush). I heard Romulus go down the river slope, then back up, then into the forest and back, and then the bottom of the bush came up, admitting light, and he said, “I can’t see you from any direction. Don’t make any sounds, and don’t come out until I return.” Then he was gone.

So, here I was: Lying flat on the ground, cheek to soil, alone in the shadowy dark minty miasma of this bush, petrified, willing myself to stay motionless because every movement I made seemed a crash of sound that must surely betray my location to anybody looking for me, and holding my breath as often and as long as possible because my respiration seemed a trumpet of invitation, announcing, “Here I am, here I am!” A rock pushed against my spine, a twig jabbed my ribs, bugs seemed to be crawling *all over* me, but I didn’t move; I was afraid to. I strained my eyes to see into the forest, but the only things I could make out were the dim outlines of the leaves and branches of my bush. I would have to depend upon my ears to tell me if anyone was coming, and here, not moving, not making a sound, breathing as little as possible, I heard the forest, clearer and louder than before, the thousand scuffles and scrapes and twitters and rustles and buzzes and snaps and splooshes, even the rippling of the water below me, a veritable symphony of sound—yet quiet; anybody would say it was a quiet place.

I listened, thus, motionless, each second seeming an eternity, until, beginning in an unperceived moment, newly among the sounds discernible in this deep silent symphony arose voices. To my relief, they weren’t the harsh deep barks of any of the Fatheads, and yet to my consternation Romulus’ quiet walnut voice wasn’t among them, either. Straining my ears, I perceived that there were two voices, only, and they weren’t actually coming from the forest, but from the river, blending in with and obscured somewhat by the lapping of the water against the shore.

One of them, though higher in pitch, reminded me in some fashion of the Fatheads’ voices, blunt and harsh, but also

tinged with a shadow of the sophisticated restraint inherent in the deliveries of Dr. Mulgar and Dr. Bowusuvi; yet as different from either of them as metal from dirt, imbued (though without a particular richness of timbre) with a pure richness of *something*, of intent perhaps, clear as oil, full of wonder, inquisitiveness, and freedom. The other, though also higher in pitch, brought to mind Dr. Mulgar's and Dr. Bowusuvi's sophisticated containment, their control of the raw material of their voices, yet had in it a shadow of the bluntness of the Fatheads, and like the other was completely different from either the Fatheads' or the doctors', a whisper of fire rolling through it, but otherwise water-like, river-like—not rippling, literally, like the river, but somehow reflecting the voice of the river (I had the definite sense that if the river had a human voice, this would be it).

As I listened, these voices drew nearer to me, nearer, nearer, slowly, like a gentle rain sweeping across a plain, until at length I could make out, above the ripples and gurgles of the water, the words they were saying.

“What’s that stuff called, over there?” the one I perceived as blunt and wondering asked.

The one I perceived as the river voice replied, “It’s a species of sage, I think. Calib—Jay’s father—used to call it roseweed, or rosegrass. I’m not sure why.”

“Maybe because of the red?”

There was silence between them for a few seconds, the river rippled, the forest sang its continual song, and then the blunt wondering voice asked, “What about that?”

“That’s silvertail. It’s blooming early. That’s sweetbay there—you probably know that.”

Again there was silence between them for a few seconds, a few more seconds, and yet a few more. I thought they must have passed beyond the range of my hearing, which disappointed me, for I found that I wanted to keep listening to them, their presences, as well as being interesting, somehow

also deepening, in their facelessness, the insulation of my hiding place. But then I heard the river voice say, with a touch of excitement, a touch of encouragement, “Hey, you got one!”

The other voice lamented, “Ahh!” The river voice encouraged, “Oh well, we’ve got enough,” and I discerned what I thought was laughter. Then they fell silent again, and when I heard them next, they were definitely getting farther away.

“Look, a heron.”

“Yeah!”

As these two voices began to fade into the background of the many other sounds around me, other voices arose, well, not so much arose, as the river voices had, but intruded, cut into, blasted into, the murmuring silence of the forest. I didn’t recognize the voices specifically as those of the Fatheads, but I knew it was them, or others like them—not Romulus’ people, but *pursuers*.

I strained my ears, trying to determine what direction they were coming from, and how far away they were; but my senses just weren’t keen enough. All I could ascertain for sure was that however far away they were, they were getting closer: The voices were increasing in volume—in almost direct proportion to the diminishment of those of the river duo, I noted inanely, in the way that people in highly stressful situations mark things as their brains ascend into a sort of hyper mode in which random and often seemingly non-sensical observations and calculations, which probably always are going on below the surface, are unleashed.

The closer these voices drew to me, the more terrified I grew; and the more terrified I grew, the more I became convinced that although this mint bush *seemed* to hide me from any possible observance, the proprietors of these voices would find me. My heart raced like a kitten’s; I tried to make myself smaller, I held my breath. The voices came yet closer; the river voices faded yet farther away. I was sure they saw me, or at least knew I was near. Unable to hold my breath any longer, I

had to let out some air, which came out in what seemed a zephyr-blast of wind, which I was sure they had to have heard. I knew I had to run, and yet I was paralyzed. I couldn't move! My muscles wouldn't obey my brain; it was as if there was a disconnect between my cerebral cortex and my body, my body just a lump of flesh now, unconnected to my frantic brain. And the voices grew yet closer, the river voices so far away now that they could barely be discerned at all over the lapping of water and sighing of wind. I demanded, I *ordered*, my arms and legs and body to wriggle, to climb, out from under the bush, and to get up and run; but they wouldn't: I was paralyzed, and the hard voices were coming closer. I felt a scream arise within me, and I suppressed it, but it wouldn't allow itself to be suppressed, it rose again, and I suppressed it again, but it rose yet again, and to force it back, I screamed at it, inside my head, inside my gut, I screamed at that scream; and then my brain was flooded with darkness and scorching light, a river of blood and fire rushed through me, I felt a tremendous fluttering of giant wings; and I was on the slope, sprinting towards the river.

The sun flashed, orange-yellow, in and off the river, surrounded and banded by sparkles of white, making it seem as if I were running into light, dancing light that dazzled my darkness-adjusted eyes. Maybe I glimpsed two figures upon a raft downriver, maybe that's an impression of retrospect; maybe I screamed something, maybe I didn't. I careened downhill. I had the sensation of light and uncontrollable motion, speed that was too much for my body to sustain and that was about to convert my run into a tumble; and then I entered the light—and was in darkness.

YAAN-10

The hole in Jake's pattern wasn't formed by sadness.

Sadness: As with happiness, as well as with beauty, joy, love, freedom, and many other coherencies, there is but one word in our language to describe hundreds, even thousands, of vaguely similar patterns that coil from entities; and while some of these patterns that are called sadness did swim within the frayed and tangled ends of the strands of Jake's pattern that fringed the hole in it, their force of action upon those strands was quite limited. They hadn't made the hole, nor did they keep those strands from re-connecting across it.

Yet, these patterns were always there, intertwined with the beautiful strands of his pattern, so that, simplistically, it could be said that he was always sad, or at least that sadness was always with him. I knew this, nobody else did, and nobody else thought of him as sad, excepting possibly Rook, to some extent, so this was a thing between us, a shared thing; *but* if I were to rely on my shadow eyes, the eyes of what would be considered my physical body, then I would think that he had never been sad, except on that walk to Farmer Green's from the Corner, where we had left Drud to rest, and then again the day several years later that I left for school. That day, bouncing along the Calico Way in Hector Dallidoe's buckboard, *I* was most certainly "sad," for Mom had sent me away.

The Calico Way is a winding, undulating dirt road (and dusty that time of year, the latter half of summer) through patches of forestland, farmland, and scrubland, and a few small settlements—"a little bit of everything to enjoy," as Mom had said—but for much of the trip I wasn't paying much attention to the scenery. I was looking down at the floor of the buckboard and crying.

I was excited about going—going away, seeing a new place, seeing more of the world. I'd seen the patterns of the Dallidoes' farm and of Farmer Green's farm, and the Corner,

and the pattern of the surrounding forest, and loved watching the constant shifting of these patterns and the interplay between them, but I also sensed they were a tiny tiny portion of a much greater pattern, and I wanted to see more of that pattern, and more smaller patterns within it in all their unique beauty. But at the same time, at another level of consciousness, it seemed like I was being pushed away, and cut away, cast out, rejected. Intellectually, of course, I knew, one, that that was absurd, that Mom was simply giving me the opportunity to see more of the greater pattern of things, and two, that I was welcome back at any time, and would be welcomed back whenever I returned, by Mom as well as by Rook and Jake, and everyone else. I wasn't truly "going away," I was just going to school.

Yet Mom hadn't asked me if I wanted to go, she had told me that I was going, and my heart, whatever the intellect might say to it, wondered what I had done to be evicted. Additionally, the physical act of leaving everything I'd ever known, everybody I'd ever loved, whether or not I was being forced away or was leaving on my own, would and did cause a sentimental sadness, a wrenching of the heart, of its own.

On the day set for my departure, Hector Dallidoe was going up to Clarks Hill to make some purchases, which he planned on bringing back on the bed of his buckboard, and he had agreed to make a short detour to drop me off at the school, and so there I was.

And who was sitting with me in the buckboard? Jake. He had made a show of volunteering to come along to help Hector load his purchases onto the trailer, but I knew that Mom had asked him to accompany me. He'd sauntered up just as we were about to depart (and after Mom and I had already said our good-byes) and said to Hector, "I think I'd better come along to help." Hector, not taking the hint, had said he thought he could handle it pretty easily himself, so Jake, with his best look of fake-surprise, had said, "I don't see how that could be." Hector had just waved him away, but Jake had persevered, "You'll get

swindled. Those city fellows are way smarter than you, which admittedly isn't saying much, but you'll need me to protect your interests." To which Hector had replied, indulgently exasperated, "Exeter, the purchases have already been made, I'm just picking them up." Not to be stymied in the execution of his charade, Jake had insisted, "But you're so dumb, Hector, you'll pick up the wrong stuff, I'm sure of it," at which point Hector had finally relented and said, "Well, suit yourself." Jake, then, had said, "Well, I've got stuff to do for old Green, but if you're going to debase yourself pleading like this for me to come along I guess I'll have to!" and sitting down next to me in the back shaking his head, added, "Some people..."

I knew he was trying to make me feel better, but his silliness actually made me feel worse. By attempting to make me feel better, he was telling my aforementioned dumb heart that it needed to feel better, hence that it wasn't feeling well right now. And why wasn't it feeling well right now? Because, my intellect reasoned, something was changing. Something was *ending*.

At the same time, I didn't want him to know that he was making me feel worse, because that would make *him* feel bad, so I hid my emotions from him: I hung my head so that he wouldn't see me crying. Part of me, too, felt ashamed that I was crying, over this, this little nothing, as my intellect knew it was. Jake wouldn't cry about such a trifle; and even though intellectually, I knew that he wouldn't think less of me because *I* was crying, and even though, additionally, I knew he wouldn't ridicule me for it, and even though I'd actually wished to be the target of his jibes many times before as he so humorously derided others and never me, my heart was afraid that he would for the first time today, because, after all, nothing today was as it had ever been, and I didn't want him to, not today. So, I sat there with my hands on my knees and hung my head down, my chin against my chest, and hoped he wouldn't talk to me.

If he did talk to me, I'd have to look up to reply to him, and right away, my cover would be blown. In other words, my tears-hiding artifice was a poor one, doomed not to work, yet there was little else I could do. And it *did* work, at least in effect—he never said a word to me until I had stopped crying. The only time he spoke at all, in fact, between The Corner and the outskirts of Clarks Hill, was, as we bumped and swerved through a tiny stronghold of shacks and mills called Burpy almost exactly halfway there, to call up to Hector Dallidoe, “You better let the horses steer, Hector!” Otherwise, he was as silent as the trees we passed under, as silent as the half-grown corn and fields of grain we passed between, as silent as the cattle lounging in rolling fields of patchy grass and hazy sunshine and looking at us mildly as we passed, as we creaked along, dust curling around us, caking slowly but inevitably on our arms and legs that had become sticky with sweat in the old heat of Hobwan. Field after field, he was silent, as I hung my head and looked at the dry straw-strewn wood of the buckboard bottom and listened to the cloppity-clop of Hector's team.

To collect myself, which I thought I needed to do before getting to the school, I willed myself to focus on something besides my dejection, and started trying to think of some of Rook and Jake's worst antics—Jake's funniest jibes, Rook's most memorable understatements, their unrelenting, elaborate, thumbing of their noses at any person, rule, or institution which sought to exercise control over them, or others. But while various random images fleeted through my memory, my mind wouldn't, for some time, lock onto anything, instead ever returning to my disconsolation. Finally, though, squeezing inwardly, and at the same time squeezing my eyelids together, I began getting images. It wasn't of the funny things they'd done, though; it was of just them: Rook raising an eyebrow; Jake smiling to himself; Rook gazing down in wonder at Lake Latalla, as his exotic beautiful pattern of a hundred blues danced its human-alien dance; Jake's mask of cynical bemusement

falling away for a moment as I came around a corner to reveal a profound joy, as his entity pattern glowed with his unique powder brilliance. And more and more, these images of them were interposed with ones of Mom: washing our clothes or our dishes in the faded stone basin in our kitchen; carrying some greens across the yard; tending the firepit in our hut, the light of the fire illuminating her white, unsmiling, freckled, face with uneven light; sitting on our old couch with me, listening to me chatter, smiling every now and then with a quiet but unshakable joy that had been forged by fire, her yellow, gold, and green pattern always moving in slow, sure, careful coils.

By the time I was carried from my self-indulgence by these memories of the outward-looking lives of those I loved most, and I looked outward, myself, we had come to the area of rich estates outside of Clarks Hill. I was wonderstruck by them, because though the houses of these estates were three or four times as large as any house I'd ever seen other than Farmer Green's, and probably twice as large as his, and their yards vast, and painstakingly and elaborately decorated, their patterns were much less complex than those of the simple homesteads I was used to seeing in the country around the Corner. In those places, strands of the entity patterns of the homesteaders and their families and their friends and many others who lived in the area, were bonded together in all sorts of intricate designs, and tangled, as well, with the patterns of their animals and crops and the raw materials of their houses themselves; but here, though the houses and yards were so big, their patterns were comparatively small, and the number of interacting entity patterns that gave the place its true pattern, was small as well, which didn't necessarily make the places less beautiful than the simple homesteads I knew so well, just less elaborate.

Jake, seeing my expression, thought I was enamored of them, and, winking, said, "Nah, you don't want to live there."

I smiled, and we made small talk the rest of the way, looking at the scenery together in the sticky sunlight, first these

opulent estates, then the more rudimentary homes along the straight cobblestone streets of Clarks Hill, and then the school itself. Seen from afar, it looked more like a miniature fortress, or what I imagined a fortress might look like: a massive conglomeration of block and brick encircled by a high wall of pink and orange stone with no entry except a tall, ominous, black gate—which was, however, open.

When we came to a halt in front of the gate with a scrape of hooves and a groan of wood, it was a bit of an intimidating sight. The gate, larger than it looked from a distance, four or five paces wide, the height of three adults, with iron bars as thick as Jake's arms, gave the place not really a menace, but an official-ness that was almost menacing to me, who had grown up with little official-ness of any sort. And the rock wall, surrounding, *protecting*, the school from *what? Raiders? Narians?* only added to this feel of official-ness.

Jake jumped off the buckboard, landing on the dusty cobblestone with a slap, scuffle, and a small billowing of dust about his feet. Then he leaned back in to grab my two bags, which held almost everything I owned: all of my shirts and pants and undergarments, a cloak, a winter coat with scarf and gloves, a few books, and pencils and paper. Rook, I thought, would have grabbed the bags *as* he jumped, and had them in hand when he landed, and done it so smoothly that I wouldn't have realized he was grabbing them until he was standing there in the road with one under each arm waiting with eye-smiling patience for me to disembark. I didn't mention this to Jake though; he, while not as strong as Rook, handled the bags, which were heavy for me, as if he were carrying sacks of loose straw. I told him, instead, because it appeared he might come through the gate with me, that I could handle them. Hector was waiting for him, I said, and we shouldn't make him wait.

As he surrendered them to me, he said, "You know that Mrs. Camden's a teacher here, don't you?"

Our eyes met, and I think for the first time in many years of knowing him, certainly one of the first times, I caught him with a serious, concerned, compassionate look upon his face.

He added, then, in his more usual tone, "In fact, the first time you see her, tell her I trust that she's as ignorant and unappealing as ever."

"I trust," I told him, "that you know I'm not going to say that."

He smiled. "Of course not. You wouldn't say something like that. You're going to say that I said it." He paused, and then added, "Okay?"

When I didn't respond, he repeated, "Okay?"

"Okay, okay," I allowed, sighing, "I'll do it."

He looked at me dubiously, but said, "Okay, see you later, then." He hesitated as if he might say something more—as if he thought he *should* say something more, or *wanted* to—then, not finding the proper words, or any words at all, perhaps, he regarded me a moment longer with his sharp blue eyes, gave me a small wave, and turned to get back on the buckboard.

I caught him, though, and pressing the side of my face against his thick-muscle chest, his sweaty smelly shirt, I hugged him, to his discomfort (he put his hand lightly on my back, as if he didn't know exactly what to do), and I mumbled something about how I'd miss him; and then we parted; I was alone, facing the unknown.

As I lugged my bags through the towering iron gateway of the stone colossus that was the Institute wall, I heard Hector ask Jake if he'd rather sit up beside him now, and Jake crack, "Not really, but I suppose you'll be offended like a woman if I don't." I looked back once more, maybe to wave, I don't know, maybe for one last look at some remnant of my life up to that point, maybe because I knew what I would see; and Jake was watching me go, while Hector and the horses waited for him, gazing straight ahead, the horses at least in an attitude of infinite forbearance.

The strands of Jake's pattern that were all twisted and curled up at the fringes of the hole in his entity had opened and were twining towards me, dividing into a fine web of many tendrils, encircling me in a blind, desperate, and of course futile attempt to protect me. Revealed, to my surprise, by the opening of these long-crinkled strands were two other patterns, or, as I could see at once, replicas, echoes, of those patterns. Within seconds of being exposed, these echo-patterns, not having the self-sustaining quality that living entities do, began to dissipate, like the smoke of a pitfire.

"No," I cried, dropping my bags and running to Jake, "You mustn't! You mustn't! They'll be gone! I'll be okay, Jake, I'll be okay, don't worry about me, you have to protect them."

Surprise, then worry, then confusion, then a dawn of rudimentary understanding passed across his face in quick succession. I hugged him again, sobbing, "You have to protect them, not me."

"Okay," he whispered, "It's okay." The slightest pressure of his fingers upon the back of my head was, from him, like unto the tightest of embraces.

"You'll do anything to keep from going in there, won't you?" he said, regarding me smiling with his shrewd blue eyes, after I had let go of him. He pointed. "Now, go! And remember my message to Mrs. Camden."

Passing through the gate, I looked back one last time. Hector was nudging the horses onward, Jake was up beside him on the wide driver's seat of the buckboard, with his head hanging down, his hands clasped behind his head, and his elbows covering any possible view one might get of his face. But his pattern was whole.

HAYNTA-10

Nolk returned about five days after classes resumed. Why he had been gone, he never said, and I didn't ask. My communication with him was limited to occasional lunch-time reveries in the walnut grove. Otherwise, I never saw him; I never sought him out in the Nonagon. I was too busy with Little Bolo, helping her with her studies, and in my primary duty of protecting her from the unforgiving world. I still carried a flame for him, more than ever, in fact, but I didn't pine for him, I didn't think about him all the time; and my time with him was sweet, and stress-free. I just enjoyed his company those few mid-day moments I got to be with him. We no longer reviewed my studies, either, but just talked, the topics of our conversation ranging from anything to everything to nothing. We often talked about Little Bolo—or I did, and he listened, putting in a spare comment every now and then.

For Little Bolo was something to be talked about. In her presence, not precisely magic, but a twinkle, a sparkle—a twinkle—bubbled and flashed from the folds and creases of the air, ran in all directions like liquid rainbows, and blossomed into invisible but somehow palpable clusters of brilliant flowers; and in her wake, a certain glow lingered. It wasn't something you could put a finger on, exactly; I say a glow: there seemed a lightness about things in that wake of her passage, the world seemed at once much bigger and yet as if it recognized you, and deemed you important.

Her appearance and her manner, common yet bright, intimate yet mysterious, accentuated this twinkle of her presence. She had a kitten-like quality about her, or elf-like. An elf-kitten she was, or another, unique, fairy creature. She—and this as much as anything revealed the almost-foreigner level unfamiliarity she had with the ways of her fellows—had a habit of what seemed to me to be examining the wind. Her head tilted this way or that (like a kitten, or, I imagined, an elf), she would

gaze about in absolute wonder as her hands and fingers traced and caressed unseen presences in the air, as if she were reading a large, invisible book, doing an enormous connect the dots puzzle, or feeling an unseen object as a blind person might investigate a face. I decided that she wasn't in truth examining the wind, but rather the buildings, the statues and other structures of the grounds, the trees, the flowers, the students—all the things that everyone else would find mundane—and that her different-colored, green vs. brown, eyes misdirected my perception of her gaze to seem not to be focused on any one thing.

This seeing of things that weren't there, or the illusion, at least, that she was seeing things that weren't there, which accentuated the twinkle of her presence, was itself accentuated by the fact that occasionally when I, or someone else for that matter, said something to her, she would do her finger-tracing thing in the air before responding, the only difference in these cases from when she was examining her surroundings, being that the tracing was limited to the space right in front of her eyes. I would say something to her, such as, "It's going to be a hot one, today," and she would look as if what I'd said was incomprehensible; then she would do her "spellwork," as I took to calling it, and comprehension would dawn in her eyes, and she would respond.

"What are you doing?" I asked her, finally, one day as she painted what seemed a wild scene in the air.

"Translating," she said, as matter-of-fact as if I'd asked her the time. While her reactions to responses to her questions were usually delighted smiles, gay laughs, or looks of wonder, her responses to questions put to her were most often serious and sincere, without a trace of affectation.

"Translating. What does that mean?"

"I forgot to look at the shadows, and...and, hear them, too. Sometimes I do that, forget, I mean, if the, the landscape is

unfamiliar and there's a lot to look at—and hear. And here, everything's so big!"

That didn't make a whole lot of sense to me, but I didn't want to hurt her feelings by saying so, and I didn't know her well enough yet to pry, so I let it pass. Yet, I didn't want her to do too much of this "translating" in front of others, for fear she would be made fun of, or if she happened to do it in front of teachers or administrators, be forced to undergo psychiatric examination.

"You probably shouldn't do it in front of other people."

She laughed her little fair laugh, and said, "But then I wouldn't be able to respond to them with proper words!"

I laughed at her odd, archaic phrasing, and told her, "Well, most people will repeat themselves if you don't respond to them promptly."

"But why?"

"Why what? Why will they repeat themselves?"

"Why *make* them repeat themselves."

I didn't want to tell her that by being herself, she might subject herself to ridicule, so I just said, somewhat lamely, "Let's just keep it between us for the time being."

With a disapproving, but loving, look, she exclaimed, "You're just like Mom!"

She refrained, however, at least in my presence, from doing her "translating" in front of other people. Yet, I was worried. I couldn't be with her *always*, in her first-year classes, for example, and in any case I didn't want to become a stifling presence to her. These mannerisms, not to mention her archaic boys' clothing and the way she looked deep into your eyes when you were talking with her, I thought would get her into trouble sooner or later. *But*, everyone seemed to like her, those who noticed her: most people at Clarks Hill, students and teachers alike, lived in their own little worlds, and weren't going to notice one first-year student, even if she was a little eccentric.

As long as she followed my directives for unnoticeable-ness, she would be okay.

It was about a half-month into the year, maybe a little more, when things began to change—when the chain of events that led to me being known as her familiar began. It started early one evening as we strolled to the library to complete the day's studies. I preferred to go to the library via the outside grounds than to enter through the Nonagon, because *usually* it was less crowded outside, but today we were a little late, and the nightly gathering on the Offices/Library's immaculate lawn had already begun. As we sidled through the crowd, Little Bolo's attention was caught by Kjandolg Wayland, a veritable celebrity among his fellows because of his good looks and guitar skills. He was sitting on a flower pot with a group of students around him, mainly girls but a few boys, too, strumming, indeed, a guitar in his usual garish red blouse and singing bawdy songs to the laughter and applause of all.

The day was warm, and well-nigh sweaty; dew was already forming on the grass, which was as lush as it ever got, nurtured by the unseasonable warmth and the early autumn rains of Clarks Hill. The ground was damp and soft, the sky the deep blue of evening, laced with red-tinged clouds. It was, in short, a perfect night for music—but not, in my opinion, of the sort Kjandolg Wayland would provide, or to be enjoyed with the sort of individuals who would gather around him: smug, self-satisfied people, who would think nothing of impressing each other by making the fool of an ignorant backwoods girl.

"It's music!" she said, transfixed, as if this were the first time she'd ever seen or heard instruments being played, and with that, took a bee-line straight towards Kjandolg and his circle of revelers, ambling along in the quick free weightless way she had of moving.

Grabbing her by the elbow, and attempting to steer her gently from her course, I said, "I believe it's study-time, Miss Bolo. Maybe if they're still going at it when we're finished, we

can stop by for a few minutes.” I said this knowing full well that they would have dispersed by the time we returned from the library.

Giggling as if she thought I were joking, she slid, fairy-like from my grasp, and said, “Haynta! Let’s watch. It’ll be fun.”

I told her, in as commanding a voice as I could muster, which wasn’t very commanding, “As your tutor, I insist you come to the library,” but she just kept going, and I had no choice but to follow.

Finding the area in front of Kjandolg choked with people, she plopped down in the grass sort of diagonally behind him. From that vantage point, we could see his hands and instrument, and long black hair, but only the profile of his red, handsome, smirking face.

He was playing a jangly, wordless tune that filled the body with a happy, robust, energy, and suddenly, as Little Bolo watched him with tilted head I thought, well, maybe this isn’t so bad. His playing *was* infectious, and enjoyable. It was quite enjoyable, in fact, just to sit there listening to it and relaxing in the pleasant evening air, and everybody was so focused on Kjandolg, they probably wouldn’t notice me or Bolo. The mandolin and ngala, which were leaning against Kjandolg’s flower pot, I noticed only as background details in the rich colorful painting suggested by this little gathering—of Kjandolg in his loose-fitting fiery red blouse strumming happily upon his conical green flower pot, surrounded by the adoring upturned faces of his fellow students seated on the lush green grass touched by the redness of the setting sun, themselves dressed in bright reds and blues and oranges and purples—until Bolo leaned forward and grabbed the ngala.

“What are you do...? Bolo!” I hissed, and pointed emphatically at the flower pot, a gesture intended to compel her to return the instrument to its place, but which she responded to with decided confusion. She seemed utterly incognizant of my

alarm. I began to give voice to my concerns, but by then, the music had stopped, and alerted by the shifting attention of his listeners, Kjandolg had turned his pretty face upon us.

If he was surprised, he hid it well. A smile spread slowly across his face—a sly, dangerous smile, I thought—and he asked, “You play?”

Little Bolo shook her head, then said, “I plucked on my mom’s mandolin a few times.”

“Here’s a mandolin,” he said, offering her the one that had been leaning against his flower pot alongside the ngala, “Want to try it?” Oh boy, I thought, here it comes. He’s setting her up to get mocked and laughed at by the crowd, while he comes across as magnanimous. I plucked at the sleeve of her yellow shirt, and said, “Come on Bolo, let’s...” but she looked at me, askance, with her brown eye with what I came to know as her “brown-eye look,” and which I already knew meant “I’m going to do what I’m going to do, so accept it,” so I nodded and sat back and began making plans about how I was going to comfort her after the humiliation.

“I’ll try this one,” she said, indicating the ngala. She seemed fascinated by its long neck.

He chewed on his lower lip for a moment, as if trying to decide whether making a spectacle of her was worth the risk of damage to his instrument, then said, “It’s difficult to play.”

She said, “Okay,” and then plucked a few strings. Hideous, discordant sounds rose, incongruous, into the peaceful evening. She plucked a few more, and again, a sound to strafe the eardrums issued from the long black instrument in her hands. I looked at the half-circle of people around us, which was growing, but while many of the students there looked puzzled, or confused, none seemed inclined to laugh at her, as yet.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding and stretching the skin on his chin by widening his bottom lip, “It’s a difficult instrument to play, and sounds really bad when...”

“You play something!” she said, pointing at his guitar, “a couple bars!”

He regarded her with something between impatience and curiosity, but then complied, strumming out the first few notes of the famous (and simple-to-play), “Lords of Sa.” (It was late Sa at the time.)

She watched him like an iguana, following his hands, the strings of the guitar, and his face with acute, minute precision; and when he finished, she played the same notes on the ngala, messing up only a couple of times.

The astonishment that came into his face then made my concern for her and my discomfort about being near the center of attention almost worth it. He played, then, a series of notes a little more intricate, though still, I thought, pretty simple, and again she duplicated his notes, this time without missing a single one.

“Hey that’s pretty good!” he said, and then played something still a little more complex, which again she duplicated. The crowd was now looking on with surprise as well as delight, if for no other reason than this was something to tell their friends not present about, later.

Now, he played something that, I thought, definitely took some skill, an intricate and fast-paced, rolling cross-section of a jig; but again, she copied his notes with near-perfect precision. Before she had finished her turn, he played something else. She duplicated it; and on and on they went, soon, she no longer copying his notes but playing ones that were complementary to his, the comparatively low sound of the guitar and the high sweet sound of the ngala weaving together like the stripes of a star-filled night in a fast but gentle song.

And Kjandolg loved it. He even yelled out, “Yeah!” with his final notes. I suppose he’d been waiting for somebody to play with. And the crowd ate it up: Some looked amazed, some looked delighted, some had gotten up and started dancing,

and all were grinning; and they cheered and applauded after Kjandolg brought the jig to its end with his shout.

“Where’d you learn to play like that?” I asked Bolo later. I was pretty sure that ngalas were not cheap, and I didn’t imagine Bolo’s parents had ever had enough money to purchase one, however much they loved her. “Man you should have seen their faces!”

“Here.” As usual, she was serious and matter-of-fact in replying to my question.

“Here what?”

“Here. I learned how to play here.”

“That’s impossible. I’ve been with you every day you’ve been here, and you’ve never taken lessons. I don’t even think they teach music, here. And anyway, it would take at least a couple of years to get that good.”

“Today.”

“You’re saying that you learned to play today? You’ve never played a ngala before today? Have you played other instruments?”

“Well, my mother had an old mandolin that she played when I was little; but she sold it a few years ago. I told her not to, but she did. I always loved watching her play it.”

“Hey little miss, I think you’re incapable of telling a lie,” (which she was), “but in the reality I know, disregarding Infin Gorilla’s opinion, or is it Jumpere, that you probably have studied ngala playing for years in some reality or another, nobody could learn how to play a fairly complicated song on *any* instrument, let alone a ngala, in one day, or just by watching her mother play a mandolin. So something doesn’t add up here.”

I thought I saw a tear welling up in her green eye, so I backed off. “You know, whatever. It was great. Wonderful; it was beautiful.”

“No, it’s okay, Haynta,” she assured me, patting my arm with her bright smile that lit up the world, “I saw it.”

“Saw it? Saw what?”

“The music.”

My heart raced, because what she said was impossible yet rang true. “What do you mean, you *saw* the music?”

“Well, that’s not really the right word, but it’s the closest our language comes. It’s not really *seeing* as you would think of it, it’s none of the five senses, but all of them, as well as intuition, and the senses of direction, location, and time, it’s experiencing the whole of things, or much closer to the true, the whole, of things than we can with our senses—what I call our shadow senses. I’m sorry I haven’t told you about this before; you’re my friend.”

“It’s okay, I, you know...What? Could you start over?”

And that’s when she told me about the patterns.

DIRK-3

Recording P-003.2 [Transcriber's Note: Most pauses, mis-speaks, mispronunciations, and occurrences of "uh," "um," and "you know" have been edited out.]

Dirk: So, starting where we left off yesterday, say what you will about the Leopards, they seem to do a good job.

Rowan: I didn't say anything about them. Did I?

Dirk: It's an expression. For when you don't trust somebody, or maybe think ill of somebody in some way...

Rowan: Or think they're bad?

Dirk: Yes, or think they're bad, and yet they haven't necessarily done anything bad that you can put a finger on, or maybe they do good things, too, which mitigates the bad.

Rowan: So the Leopards are bad guys?

Dirk: [Laughs] No, no, they're good guys; but they *are* sort of the authority, you know.

Rowan: And, the authority is bad?

Dirk: Yes, usually. Well, not *all* bad, all the time; but almost always at least part bad.

Rowan: Half-bad?

Dirk: Yeah, more or less. It doesn't have to be that way, but it usually is. And actually, some people mistrust the Leopards because they're not *supposed* to be the authority. They're just

supposed to step in and solve conflicts when they're asked to by other Houses, and patrol the borders and so forth—the stuff we went over last time—but in practice, and increasingly so as the years have gone by, they take a more proactive approach.

Rowan: Oh. [Nods, seeming to consider something]

Dirk: That being said, Krallum's great. Krallum Kallum. He's a Leopard warrior who grew up down the river a ways, at House of Whale. He was friends with Vonnae and Jayenne and my brother Ralgo, who was a great wizard, I think I've told you, or would have been. Krallum's one of the nicest people you'll ever meet, and in fact all of them, Leopards, always treat civilians with the utmost courtesy. And there's been peace between the Houses for 200 years, and in that time the Narians have never again been able to mount a serious threat; the borders have been safe, it's sort of an idyllic existence here in Lenima, if you compare it to any other time in history. I mean, the Houses were *constantly* at each other's throats for hundreds and hundreds of years before House of Leopard.

Rowan: But you still don't like them—all that much, I mean?

Dirk: Boy, you really are more perceptive than you let on, aren't you?

Rowan: How come?

Dirk: Well, they *are* the authority. I don't know about you, but I don't like being told what to do.

Rowan: [Shrugs]

Dirk: Now, and this is pretty funny because it's got the House of Leopard all worried; but it's pretty scary, too. In fact...

Rowan: Yeah?

Dirk: Maybe I'd better not tell you.

Rowan: Tell me!

Dirk: Jayenne'll be upset with me if you can't sleep tonight.

Rowan: She's the *authority*, isn't she? At House of Falcon?

Dirk: You bass-tarrd! Okay, okay. Have you heard of Rahab?

Rowan: [Shakes his head]

Dirk: He was a great prophet from, well, nobody knows exactly when—the dawn of history, I suppose. He wrote the sensibly titled *Prophecies of Rahab*. All of his prophecies have come true. Of course, his wording is obscure, cloaked in generalizations which have sometimes been interpreted only in retrospect as having been accurate predictions of what was going to happen; but nevertheless...

Rowan: Uh...why...

Dirk: Well, he predicted the rise of the Shark, and the Shakis, and the House of Leopard; and he predicts the fall of the House of Leopard. When, nobody knows exactly, but some “textual experts” apparently think they have pinpointed it to pretty soon—within the next twenty or thirty years.

Rowan: [Seems unconcerned]

Dirk: He—Rahab—says that the House of Leopard will be destroyed by the spawn of two wizards. So, the House of Leopard is seeking out all of the wizards in Lenima, and whenever they

find one who has a child, or children, they make sure that his, or her, spouse, or the other parent of the child or children, has no power—no magic, you know, in them.

Rowan: How do they do that?

Dirk: I'm not sure. Wizard knows wizard, I know that. That probably has something to do with it. I don't know their precise procedure, though; that's just a wild guess. But they, the Leopards, want to make sure there are no living offspring of two wizards and that none is ever born.

Rowan: There must be hundreds.

Dirk: [Laughs] No, there's none.

Rowan: None!

Dirk: Zero.

Rowan: You're tricking me!

Dirk: No, and I'll tell you why. Rahab was probably the most powerful wizard ever, and he put a spell on the Fount of Magic at the world's center, to ensure that no wizard, or "person of magic," let's say, because not every person with magic in them becomes a wizard—to ensure that no person of magic could ever couple with another person of magic. See, apparently back in Rahab's day, when two wizards coupled, the level of magical power introduced into their child wasn't an average of the levels of the parents, nor even the sum of those levels, but a *product* of them. You know about sums and products?

Rowan: Yes! [Nods emphatically]

Dirk: Well, do the math. Let's just say a typical minor wizard has a power level of 8 or 10, and that Logan, House of Leopard's wizard, probably the most powerful wizard in the world, has a power level of 100. These are arbitrary numbers, but it'll get the point across. If two typical minor wizards coupled...

Rowan: It would be between 64 and 100.

Dirk: Yes, their offspring would be nearly as powerful as Logan, and then if *their* offspring coupled, well, you can see that with the proper planning, some greedy family of wizards could produce a child with deity-level power. Near omnipotence. Rahab wanted to make sure that never happened, that too much power was never concentrated in one person; that's why he put that spell on the Fount of Magic. So, now, if any two persons of magic come within a few steps of one another, they feel immediate, overwhelming nausea, and within moments, they grow sick, like unto being poisoned; and they'll soon die if they don't get away from each other.

Rowan: Wow!

Dirk: And yet, the prophecy of Rahab says that a spawn of two wizards destroys the House of Leopard. So, House of Leopard is all up in a panic looking for that spawn, who they think is probably a child, now—a girl, for it's a she in the prophecy. Which is pretty funny—but I'm sure they mean to kill her, which isn't so funny. And it's a little scary to think how powerful she might be, particularly if one or both of her parents was very powerful, a 50, say, half as powerful as Logan. If both were 50, then the offspring would be...

Rowan: Two thousand five hundred!

Dirk: Right! Twenty-five times as powerful as Logan. Even if one of her parents was a mere 5 and the other a 50, she'd still be two and a half times as powerful as Logan. But here's the *really* funny part, which has House of Leopard up in arms, because of all the villains Lenima has ever faced, the Shark came the nearest to defeating us. Rahab says this spawn of two wizards destroys the House of Leopard with the Shark reborn as her warlord.

Rowan: Hmm... [Pretending to be impressed]

End Recording.

ROWAN-11

Freezing water rushed into my mouth and nostrils. I flailed, with the wild energy of shock. A creature with flaccid but enormous and insistent hands clutched at me, covering my face and head with its hands. Turning head over heels, I fought it with primal desperation, even as I sought the way to the surface of the water. I managed to thrust the thing from me, but by the time I had, I had completely lost my bearings, I was running out of air, and the cold was quickly draining away my strength.

An instant before my effort to hold my breath crumbled beneath the body's impetus to gulp for oxygen, I felt a hand smaller but stronger than the creature's flaccid one grab one of my wrists, my right one, and pulling, propel me through the water with surprising swiftness. After a moment, I glimpsed light, my passage through the water slowed, and the hand let go of my wrist and grabbed me under my right arm just as I felt another hand grab me under my left arm; and I was lifted up, out of the water.

I was blinded by the sun for a moment; then I realized I couldn't breathe, even though I was out of the water. Before I could panic, however, water poured out of my nose and mouth in a powerful exhalation, I gasped for breath and found it, and found I was face to face with a person: a woman, the first female I had ever seen in person. (I had seen a few on the Grail, and at the end of the bright road.)

She said something, and I recognized her voice as the one I had thought of as the river voice; but what she said I was still too addled to comprehend. When I asked her much later what she'd said, she said, with a mischievous smile, "I said, 'You're beautiful.'" Whether she actually uttered those words in that moment, I don't know. I doubt it; but she did say it, in the way she looked at me, with a tilt of the head and a half-smile, and an expression on her face of belief arising from disbelief, as if regarding something that cannot be true but since it is, then

other things that cannot be true must be true as well—as I had looked upon the sights before me when Mulgar had removed my blindfold my first time outside in what seemed already another time, another life.

She had a strange blazing clarity about her: that is, I somehow saw her more clearly than ever I had seen Mulgar, Bowusuvi, or the Fatheads, even Romulus. They were all gray and indistinct in comparison. Of course, this impression could have been nothing more than an effect of the brightness of the outdoors, of the sun and the river, accentuated by its contrast to my struggle in the underwater darkness; but in that moment of first seeing her, she seemed more real than everything else, with her fierce gentle open face, her watery eyes of deepest green, the white scar under her right eye (mirroring the entry point of the eye thing on my own face), stark against the russet of her face and the black of her hair.

Transferring me to one arm, she beckoned with the other to someone behind me, out on the river. I craned my head to see who she was motioning to, and as I took my eyes from her, I noticed two things: One, behind her, at the top of the slope, the bush under which I'd been hiding was still unattended, no Fathead or other pursuer having decided to look for me there; and two, I was no longer wearing a shirt; water ran down my body in cold sheets and rivulets. Then, my neck having completed its crane, I caught sight of the recipient of her motion, and presumably the owner of the other voice I'd heard while hiding under the bush.

It was a boy, a little bigger than Romulus, who, when I first saw him, put me in the mind of, well, dirt. His skin was the color of the dirt of the deserts I'd seen on the Grail, his longish impetuous hair was a shade lighter brown than his skin (which I thought strange, since most people's hair, even Romulus', was darker than their skin), and even the clothes he was wearing—long pants and long sleeves—were dirty brown, ever-so-slightly darker than his skin.

He was leaning forward on a raft, of logs strapped together with thick rope, paddling towards us determinedly. A fishing pole lay crossways behind him, along with a stouter, longer pole, a pine box, a canvas bucket, and some shoes. As he neared and I got a better look at him, it seemed to me at first that he looked mean or angry, with heavy brow and an air of sullen rebelliousness, or challenge.

The river woman lifted me bare-chested, muddy, and dripping wet onto the raft, and then swung herself up beside me with smooth ease. The massive logs under me, dipping and swaying, felt simultaneously as solid and reliable as the ground and as ponderous as the water.

“Turn us around,” the river woman said to the dirt boy, her voice soft as the wind but clear as the river. The dirt boy bent even farther into his paddle-strokes, his tongue peeking out from between his lips, and in due time had us traveling slowly up the river, against the gentle current. He steered the raft closer to the shore, then traded the paddle for the long stout pole, and began pushing us along using the bottom of the river as leverage.

I watched him work, and as I did so, the river woman watched me and I watched her, and she him, and he kept looking up from his labor to steal glances at me, as well as at her. I discovered, as he propelled us forward in a somewhat zigzagging course, that the mean-ness or anger of his face, the sullenness, was a thin façade, masking a lonely wonder, a lumpy kindness. This of course, I wasn't noticing in those terms, I was just marking expression and feature that later I would equate with such qualities, but I was perceptive enough then to know that I liked him.

The river woman, I liked, too, as you can imagine. With a strange (since all of her movements were so sure and decisive) and somewhat endearing uncertainty, she began dipping her hands into the water, and washing the mud from my body. The

water was well nigh icy, and yet her hands felt warm, like biscuits, on my torso, my neck, and my arms.

“He’ll be freezing soon,” she said to the dirt boy, “stop at Grandil’s place.”

The dirt boy’s eyes widened, and he frowned in a way that asked, “Really?” but he nodded and went on.

After cleaning the mud from me, the river woman began cleaning her own feet, which were caked with mud. Her gray breeches, which went down only to her knees, revealing lean strong legs as dark as her face, were a bit muddy, too, but these she let alone. Her shirt, gray as well though touched here and there with thick red thread, wasn’t muddy at all, just wet. Its sleeves, like her pants, were only half-length, revealing arms just as lean and strong as her legs.

After finishing with her feet, she resumed her silent examination of me, as I continued my silent examination of her and the dirt boy and the florid greenery thickening the descending shoreline. Thickets of willow rose above endless and overlapping conglomerations of roseweed and silvertail, sweet-bay and whispertail, reeds and bullspears, and farther within the forest, ferns and broadleaves, with massive oaks and dragonleaves overlooking it all, and the sun, now reddening as it descended down the sky in front of us, casting an alpenglow hue upon the tops of the trees and creating a shadowy sparkling-ness all around us.

Several times the river woman seemed on the verge of saying something to me, but inhibited by that strange shyness of hers, held back; and so we just looked at each other as the dirt boy, watching both of us whenever he could spare a glance, piloted us up the river with grunting pole-stabs.

As the river woman had predicted, I began to grow quite cold as the sun’s rays became less direct and an evening breeze chapped at my wet body; and soon, I found that I was, indeed, shivering. The river woman, noticing this, was leaning forward to attend to me, when I espied two men on the shore behind her

standing on either side of a broad-leafed plant I now know to be a hello bush. Not Fatheads, but, I thought, unquestionably pursuers, and more intimidating than the Fatheads, because intelligent-looking. They were both tall, dark-haired, bronze-skinned, angular-faced, sharp-eyed, and wore uniforms of orange and black, like many of the men in the place Mulgar worked. Long swords hung in black scabbards at their hips. And they were looking at us—at *me*, it seemed like.

I *was* terrified, these men seeming to combine in their personages the physical size and strength of the Fatheads with the intelligence of Mulgar, and something else besides, an official-ness, maybe, that subtly, subconsciously, informed you that *they* weren't just *them*, they had a whole organization behind them—but I sensed that making a desperate escape attempt, or a desperate plea to the river woman to protect me from them wouldn't be the right thing to do, so I just looked at them, or tried to, with bland indifference.

The river woman, seeing my expression, froze in her forward-lean. Froze for the slimmest fraction of a second, that is (I noticed it, I think, only because she was so close to me, and because my senses were heightened by terror), before commencing to rub my arms and body in short, quick, chafing strokes, offering no acknowledgment of their presence. The dirt boy worked on, battling the river with his head down, oblivious to this subtle interplay of wits.

The river woman continued to chafe me, holding my gaze in what seemed intended to be a reassuring way, until one of the men said, "Ma'am?"

At this, she turned to face them. Watching her, only, I would have said that she turned slowly, almost ponderously, yet out of the corner of my eye I saw the dirt boy's head jerk up; and her slow, ponderous turn was executed with greater alacrity than his sudden movement. She turned with such smooth grace, I think, that her movements, though actually swift, *seemed* slow. Her muscles were utterly slack—they seemed to have

shifted into some kind of ultra-relaxation mode—and yet she, herself, seemed taut, ready. Her breaths came long and slow and silent. She raised a hand in greeting, but said nothing.

One of the men, his voice youthful but commanding, said, “Ma’am, a boy is missing, about the same age as your son, there, we were wondering if you could be so kind as to help us out.” As he spoke, he looked with shrewd discernment at her, at me, and at the dirt boy, who had stopped poling us along and was gaping at the men in amazement. The other man, who close-up I could tell was older than the first one, his hair touched with gray, examined us as well, seeming to organize us in his head, to ponder, to calculate.

The river woman weighed the man’s words, but said nothing for a long enough time that in the interval of silence in which he waited for her reply, marked only by the soft buzz of a nearby dragonfly, I began to think she simply wasn’t going to reply to him at all. But then she said, “Okay.”

“Well, first of all,” the younger of the men went on with officious immediacy, “Have you seen a boy—about his age,” he nodded at me, “or seen or heard anything at all unusual?”

“Unusual?”

“A chase. The sounds of a hunt, or chase.”

The river woman laughed—a beautiful sound, like the turn of a downhill stream through a cluster of rocks. “Hunters are silent around here.” The implied, “You’re obviously not from around here,” she left unsaid.

Without the slightest impatience, the man explained, “Running, or tearing through the trees, maybe, or yelling or screaming, or perhaps you’ve seen people, men, you might not have recognized, dressed in a way that would be unusual out here.”

“No nothing out of the ordinary,” the river woman said, her voice as soft and clear as ever, devoid of tension. “We saw a heron earlier, but I suppose that’s not what you mean.” She wasn’t looking at them with the same intensity with which they

were scrutinizing her, rather with what I would call a respectful innocence, but I got the sense that her mind was working just as quickly as theirs were, sizing them up, sizing up the words they were saying, sorting things out in her mind.

The second of the men, his voice older but less commanding than that of the other, asked, “Do you know this area well, Madam?”

The river woman shrugged. “Fairly well.”

“Where might a child go around here, a scared child, perhaps who thinks he’s running away from something or someone dangerous?” He looked at the river woman with penetrating black-brown eyes, as if trying to pry into her mind, find out what she was thinking.

The river woman, unflinchingly good-natured, scratched her forehead. “There’s some houses down yonder.” She pointed in the direction we’d come from. “Maybe he’d head for those?”

“No, probably a non-house area.” His penetrating look was easing, though, as if satisfied that the river woman wasn’t hiding anything. The first man appeared to me to be faintly relieved.

“The forest is old, with a lot of dead trees, down the same way, but east, on the other side of the river; there could be some hollow trees to hide in, there. There’s a bridge a few hundred paces down.”

The men thanked her for her time, and bowed their heads, before heading downriver.

“Polite fellows, eh?” she said to the dirt boy with a crooked smile, and he smiled, too, before bending forward with the long pole to resume his ragged navigation. Once the two men had disappeared from sight, he questioned, “Leopards, out here?” His voice was high and low at the same time—a teenager’s voice, I learned later (he was an early-maturing twelve at the time, it turned out).

The river woman nodded but said nothing.

The dirt boy pressed, "They wouldn't hur...they wouldn't do anything, would they?"

"No, I suppose not, but something doesn't add up. Maybe Jay can figure it out."

The dirt boy nodded his agreement.

I was getting colder by the minute, in the dying sun, in my wet breeches. I could see goosebumps on the river woman's arms, too, though she wasn't shivering like I was.

"Get us on to Grandil's, we need a couple blankets." As if responding to the dirt boy's previous look of query, she explained, "Grandil'll need fish, and this will give us an excuse to give him some. It'll be a trade for blankets—the use of his blankets." I looked around for fish, didn't see any, though I did smell something fairly strong, and finally decided they must be in the canvas bucket behind the dirt boy.

Most adults, I suspect, would have asked me a bunch of questions, about who I was, where I came from, what I was doing, and so on; and would have advised me, reassured me, that kind of thing, but Vonnae didn't. At some point, she said, "I'm Vonnae, by the way, and this is Dirk," but that was all, otherwise just observing me with appreciative wonder. Dirk, too, just watched me, saying very little, smiling every now and then, his lumpy smile, as if to say, "I'm nice, despite my heavy brow." And I watched him, and watched Vonnae, they were so clear, just kept looking at them, and at the silvertail and sweet bay and roseweed, and willows and towering oaks, and cattails, and flowers and clumps and clusters of all the river plants along the glowing way, and smelling the water and the fish, and seeing in the water darting little fish, and the sparkles of sunlight and dragonflies and birds and red-lined clouds crossing above. At some point, I said, "I'm Rowan," and enjoyed seeing how surprised they were at how clearly I spoke.

My shivering had become pretty uncontrollable by this time, though, and my teeth were chattering, so the river woman, Vonnae, scooting closer to me, started chafing my arms again.

Soon, her gaze shifted to the dirt boy, and in an apologetic tone, she asked him, “Dirk, uh, until...”

He looked puzzled for an instant, then understanding dawned on his face, and without any hesitation, he pulled off his shirt, which was dry, revealing a pudgy but strong-looking body a lighter shade of dirt than the rest of his skin. He passed it to Vonnae, and she wrapped it around me, its heavy texture and pleasant warmth helping control my shivering, and actually stilling the chattering of my teeth.

“We’ll have some blankets pretty soon, don’t worry,” she assured me, “We’re going to the House of Falcon, if that’s all right with you.”

I just looked at her, her words meaning nothing. I was too tired to express, or to realize, even, that I had no idea if she meant she was taking me with them to this “House of Falcon,” and if not, where I could, or should, go. I was adrift, a raft not on a river but on a sea.

It was then that on the far bank of the river, barely discernible in the shadows between two willow trees, I saw a figure.

The two of them, following my eyes, saw him too.

“Is that an elf?” Dirk cried, “Yes! It is! A real Forest Elf! Wow! Vonnae, a Forest Person, they’re real!”

“Romulus,” I said, and as I said it, he raised his hand, the way humans do, the way Vonnae had acknowledged the Leopards, “He’s my friend.” Vonnae received that statement with a slight widening of her green, but said nothing, just filed it away with the other puzzling things she’d seen that afternoon.

Dirk raised his hand in reply, mirroring Romulus’ gesture, as did I, and Romulus melted into the forest. Dirk smiled to himself; he seemed deeply satisfied. This was the first contact, minimal though it was, between the two of them, whose adventures together were to span the world.

Vonnae asked me, “You want to come? To the House of Falcon, I mean.”

I may have asked Mind to show me House of Falcon; or memories, as Mind would call them, of my life there may have come to me unbidden; but in a few seconds, I glimpsed what was to come.

I saw myself on Vonnae's shoulders as she carried me through the woods, teaching me the names of trees and flowers; I saw her spreading ointment on my legs, I saw her reading to me, and the two of us eating together, sometimes with others; I saw her preparing my food, washing my clothes, I saw myself asleep, cradled in her loving arms, and I saw in her eyes the imbyran that is said to hold civilization from chaos, and I knew from where it came, from mother to son, tonokna to innikno.

I saw myself with Dirk, my neighbor at House of Dog, romping across field and forest and stream; and I saw him sharing with me the secret places he'd found or made, explaining to me what he'd discovered or was discovering about the world.

I saw myself, then, touching the big belly of a small woman with a pale, freckled face, and she saying to me, "Her name is Yaan," and as she said the name and I felt a kick, the light of the fabled Summerlands that lie beyond the northern mountains surging through me.

And then I saw those northern mountains looming before me, the great white abyss that I would cross alone.

"You want to come?" Vonnae asked me as we floated up that evening river, and I may have nodded. I may have just looked at her. But, if she can say that she said "You're beautiful," when she pulled me from the river, then I can say that when I saw House of Falcon and the Norgold Mountains at the end of the bright road, I said, "Bring me home."

YAAN-11

Mom had instructed me to go to the offices when I arrived, and so I made my way there, which wasn't difficult, they (the offices) comprising, of the nine buildings that comprised the school, the one facing, or parallel to, the big front gate I'd just come through. There was also a wide path of stone, lined on both sides by pots of orange flowers—summertops, I thought—leading with self-proclamatory flourish from the gate to the imposing, age-darkened wooden double-doors of this first building; and if this wasn't enough, an inscription in gold on a gold-trimmed black placard inset in the old, burnished wood of the right of the two doors announced, "Offices."

Inside, the Offices building was spacious and high-ceilinged, but somehow drab, with a sterile soapy smell permeating the premises, high windows admitting only dusty slanting light, and walls, of a light burgundy color, and floors, of checkered white and burgundy tile, both polished and clean but faded and dull, with a burnished graininess about them, a hundred years of dust pressed and smashed and melted into them like minerals into river rock.

The offices of Offices were spaced evenly along narrow but high hallways, announced as well as hidden by doors of old wood smooth and shiny with many coats of a lacquer yellow and acrid with age. I found the one I was seeking, "Admissions," by looking at gold-and-black placards, similar but smaller than the one on the outside door, attached not to the doors like that one had been but to the burgundy wall beside each door. Inside, I gave a quiet and officious man the envelope that Mom had given me, and he, with no word or look of encouragement yet not the least bit of annoyance at being bothered, gave me, in exchange, a tiny roll of parchment upon which neat writing informed me of my class schedule and the number of the dormitory room that was now going to be my home.

I circled almost the entire complex, then, not because I was intending to explore the place even before taking my belongings to my room, but because I walked the “right” way from the Offices. That is, I turned right, which was the wrong way from the one I would have had to go to come almost directly to the first of the three dormitories, which as it happened was the one to which I was assigned. Going the “right” wrong direction, I went past the three Classroom buildings, the gymnasium, and two of the dormitories before finally coming to my assigned room.

As I walked, I *did* explore, in a way, despite an unspecified anxiety—a sort of a pre-exploration I called *soaking*. In this case, figuratively *and* literally: I was soaking in salty water—my own sweat; I was soaking, also, in the afternoon, the sultriness of it, and when I passed into the shadow of a grove of trees, the cool relief of the shade, and in both sun and shade, the cheep-cheep-cheep-cheep-cheep-cheep-cheep of a red dartwing who seemed to be following me around the buildings, an at-first insistent, intrusive voice that became with repetition a welcoming song that was pleasant to soak into. I was soaking, also, in the aroma of short, cut, grass, a new odor to me, for at the Corner, what grass there was grew wild and high. The smell was different. And most of all, I soaked in the pattern of the place, letting it surround me, watching the strands of many entities, more by far clustered together in one area than I had ever experienced, weave together in a vast and thousand-colored tangle, and watching my ribbon flower extend in every direction (soaking, thus, too, in the satisfaction of the freedom of knowing I could leave at any time, this knowledge giving more savor to the staying). Five hundred students lived here, Mom had told me, and thirty teachers, and others, including administrators and janitors. I wondered why not even one of the entities whose strands I could see woven together was outside on a day when it must surely be quite stuffy inside—but of

course many *were* outside, in the Nonagon, I just didn't know about the Nonagon yet.

When I arrived at the first of the buildings that I reasoned, because of their preponderance of doors and windows, must be the student dormitories, I started looking for my room. It wasn't difficult to find it, since the doors to the rooms were numbered, with figures carved right into the wood of the doors themselves—doors plain and smooth, and darkened with stain—but it did take a *bit* of looking around, my building being the closest of the three to the Offices, and thus the last one I came to. I found the one—#14—that was listed on the parchment the man in the Admissions office had given me before the sun shadows of evening began to grow very tall, however.

I was relieved to find that it was a bottom-floor room (There were three floors, with plain wooden staircases leading up to railed walkways that provided entry to the rooms of the higher floors). I'm not sure why I was relieved, but I was. The door was unlatched, though not ajar. Sensing an entity within, I hesitated, momentarily startled. I double-checked the number on the door and on my paper, before realizing, oh yeah, there are two to a room—you won't get a room to yourself, Mom had told me. I wondered, should I knock? But decided, no, it's my room too, and pushed the door open in a manner I thought non-aggressive, non-intrusive, and it rotated inward in a slow, soundless arc.

Within, a hideously distorted entity-pattern writhed before me. At least that was my initial perception of it; and only with a concerted effort did I restrain myself from fleeing. But, I stayed, and as my surprise and horror subsided, I saw that the pattern was, after all, quite beautiful, comprised of linked green and blue and aqua and teal loops and arrows and comet-tails and hoops and swirls. It was just that it was struggling against itself, parts of it unknotting itself while other parts, other sets of strands, attempted to re-knot those parts, and because these "fixer-parts," if you will, were not succeeding alone, other parts

strained from far-off areas to help with the re-knotting, and these parts, straining beyond their means, were beginning to tear and unknot as well, and still other strands of the pattern, sensing this, were grasping desperately, randomly, for anything at all to hold onto and finding nothing were reaching out, away from the main with desperate gropes, stressing the already-fraying pattern further.

Watching, I thought it must soon unravel—and I didn't know what to do. Entities grab and pull and push at and manipulate each other constantly, but they can't see one another, they can only sense one another, so it's a very inexact thing. I had, of course, conceived that because I *could* see other entities, if I were to choose to reach into them and re-arrange some of the strands of their pattern, I would have the advantage of exactitude, yet I had never done it, nor even seriously considered doing it: it seemed to me that it would be an egregious invasion to do so; I found the thought of it nauseating, distasteful.

Yet, I thought that if I didn't do something, and soon, this pattern would unravel completely—it was not righting itself, its fraying and tearing and unknotting instead increasing in pace by the second. So, I took hold, first, with a few of the tendrils of my own pattern, of the biggest strands of this pattern that were groping out, twisting, roiling, and yanking the main body of the entity this way and that. I thought that if I first reduced this overall outward pull and stabilized the pattern that way, I could work on some of the inner knots that needed mending. But these strands were too strong for me, I couldn't budge them, and they twisted from my grasp. I took hold of them again, more firmly, but again to no avail. I reached, then, into the heart of the pattern, and tied one of the unraveled knots back together. That worked, and so I moved quickly to another one, but as I was re-tying this second one, the first one came unraveled. I went back to the first one, but as I was re-tying it

again, the second one came undone, and all around, the fraying and distorting of pattern was reaching a frenzy.

“What do I do?” I thought, “What do I do?” my mind spiraling towards the frenzy of the pattern’s unraveling, “What do I do? It’ll unravel, it’ll unravel!” I wasn’t exactly panicking, but I was like the child in the fairy tale charged with the picking up and putting on the shelves all the water of the waterfall. I was overwhelmed; and if I didn’t succeed, and soon, this entity would unravel! My heart raced, I burned hot and cold—and that’s when I heard, and felt, the wings.

At the border of my memory, I recall that I could see *only* the essence, the pattern, of things, not the shell, the outer substance, the physical world that everybody else sees, and when this was my reality, I saw it wholly, I perceived the whole pattern of things, and could see the precise way everything went together. When, in order to communicate with Mom and others, I learned to see the shadows of the world, I lost this pure vision, this absolute understanding. Further, because when I first learned to see the shadows, my mind was as yet undeveloped I sometimes had trouble with the double-vision necessary to perceive the shadows and the essence at the same time, and if I were observing the shadows, I sometimes had trouble shifting my perception back to the essence of things. When this happened, I was devastated, and I panicked. I remember screaming as I strained and groped, lurching forward in an effort to see the more beautiful *real* of the world. Mom, who had no idea what I was seeing or not seeing, would say to me, “Back up,” or “Sit back, Yaan, back up, sit back, sit back,” and stroke my head and neck and hair until I had calmed down enough to follow her instructions; and then I would “sit back,” and when I did, I could see again.

That’s what I did now: I sat back. It wasn’t quite so easy as it sounds, but my resolve and my very body fortified by a great beating of wings behind, above, and within me, I was able to do it. My eyes softened, I ceased to strain to comprehend the

wholeness of the pattern before me, and thus “sitting back,” I saw in one look how every single one of the thousands of entity strands in her pattern interacted with every other one; and I knew what I had to do.

I grasped, with infinite gentleness, a tiny tendril, almost gossamer, at the heart of her pattern, and moved it with the utmost care, so as not to tear it. I lifted it as I might have lifted a newborn infant, in the direction of a slightly larger entity strand that was groping blindly for this tiny one. The larger strand caught hold of the smaller one, at which point a third strand, yet larger, caught hold of the second one, and a fourth, larger yet, caught hold of the third. Then, as if soothed and emboldened, other strands began catching hold of other strands and tendrils, re-tying unraveled knots, and soon the pattern was stabilized.

I was standing in a small yellow-white room, longer than wide, with tiny beds against opposite walls, and matching small wooden tables, small wooden chairs, small white shelves, a small closet, and small square windows arranged symmetrically on either side of an invisible dividing line that ran right down the middle of a brown tile floor. In the left half of the room, the bed was made, a few books lay on the desk, some clothing was hanging in the open closet, and a girl sat on the bed wiping her eyes and observing me in an attitude of combined surprise, chagrin, and expectation.

She was fairly short, probably only a half-head (or less) taller than me, and was wearing a loose purple blouse and baggy black leggings. She had a round face, wide hyacinth eyes, and striking black hair despite a light complexion (darker than mine but lighter than Jake’s, who was the lightest-skinned of all the farmhands at The Corner though he was usually red from the sun).

After completing the drying of her eyes, she said, in a voice that for a girl not yet a woman was quite strong and resonant, but tremulous, “Did you see me?” by which I comprehended she meant, “Did you see me crying?” Her pattern, which

to my relief was holding fast, reached for me without touching me in the way the patterns of people who have an immediate liking for you, do.

I considered pretending that I hadn't, and I probably would have if it had been, for example, Jake, but such a pretense seemed pointless and absurd after what had happened, and when it was obvious that I'd been staring at her, so I nodded.

She blushed, "Well this is embarrassing." And then she laughed. That is what I remember most about meeting her: seconds after her entity had almost unraveled, she laughed, at herself, at the awkwardness of this first meeting with her new room-mate, at the irony in existence, and it was a laugh full of richness and appreciation.

"Well, at least you're not one of the, the, the pret...." She cut herself off, and added, reddening, "This is embarrassing." Tears began to squeeze out of her eyes again.

"No it's not," I was crying, too—it had been a tense day—but instead of hiding it from her, as I had from Jake, I let my tears shine in the light coming in square rays through the windows, "You're beautiful—and so am I."

She smiled: We were friends right from the start.

THE POET-1

“Sunlight sparkled in a golden sky.”

The girl who called herself Haynta awoke with these words in her mind. Sweat ran down her face in rivulets, which flashed like her ever-hopeful hyacinth eyes in the afternoon sunlight that stormed through the window at just the right angle to make a bright portrait of her pillow and face.

Running her hands through her damp lampblack hair she wondered for a moment why these words were in her mind, and then as the mist of lethargy that often follows an afternoon nap, especially an unintentional one, began to lift, she remembered. The little dragon she had spoken with in her dream had said them to her.

“I remember, oh I remember,” he had said, in a voice that could have been that of a child or of a man a thousand years old, “The sons and mothers soared, oh, did they soar; and sunlight sparkled on a golden sky.”

“The sky was golden? What world was this?” she asked, in the sarcastic way she had of making light of what she wanted to be true and what she knew with her spirit to *be* true but which her mind wouldn’t accept. “The sky is blue, and if it were golden, it would be ugly.”

The little dragon laughed, a sound like a nalanthrite chime, and said, “You must understand not with your mind but with your spirit when a story is told.” He regarded her with his ancient black eyes and added, “When the mothers and the sons soar in the blue blue sky, the sky *is* golden, Fielder, as you know. Golden with the infinite; golden with mystery; golden with possibility; golden with the beckoning.”

“I know nothing of the sort,” she told him, “and stop calling me Fielder. What does that even mean?”

With a Mrs. Camden-esque cadence, he said, “It means gold-robe. As white-robos guide souls to the white tree, as green-robos tend the green gardens in the desert, as orange-

robes protect the everlasting flame, so gold-robes draw the golden sky above the Field and so are called Fielders of Sky or Fielders of Gold.”

Not to be turned from her desperate attempt at doubt, she said, “And while we’re at it, you *do* know that every mother is a daughter and every father is a son, don’t you? If the mothers and the sons are the ones who are so big—as you say, ‘infinite’—and who soar about so majestically in, as you say, a golden sky, then fathers and daughters can’t be little, like you. Well, I suppose daughters could be until they became mothers, but I don’t think that’s how you mean it.”

“Our physical statures are as I have described to you, Fielder,” the little dragon assured her, “the sons and mothers large, the fathers and daughters small. About that, I can put your mind at ease.”

“My mind *is* at ease, good sir,” the girl who called herself Haynta assured the little dragon, “I’m perfectly content in my knowledge that what you say cannot be true. It’s a self-negating statement.”

“You must understand with your spirit, when a story is told,” he said again, and then he took to the air, with a fluttering of wings.

Now awake, the girl who called herself Haynta wondered at the vividness of the dream, somewhat disappointed that she’d woken. The little dragon might have been full of it, but it had felt good to talk to him; it had felt like being in a lush grove of spruce and green-tips, basking in air both cooling and warming, while sunlight sparkled above, and goldfinches and bluebirds, cardinals and blue jays, yerrians and bluewings, swooped and bobbed in and out of the grove with an infinite, soothing, babble and a fluttering of wings. A place to rest one’s head in the long grass while a story was told.

The direct glare of the afternoon sun, its heat increased by the window, must, she thought at first, have lured her to

consciousness; but then she realized that her roommate Yaan, whom she affectionately called Little Bolo, was no longer in the room, and in the moment of realizing this, she recalled that just as her consciousness had crossed the barrier between sleep and waking, she had heard, in the distant way that one hears things at that barrier, the familiar little squeak of the doorknob.

“Well, that little sneak!” she murmured. She was so tired from the schedule she had set for herself, which included flourishing at her own studies and making sure that Yaan stayed caught up with hers, that she considered just letting her go, so that she could rest a little longer. She may even have said, “She’ll probably just wander around looking at things, she’ll be fine.” But then she thought, no, I’d better go after her; even if it’s just a small chance, she might get herself into trouble with that absolute pure defenseless innocent trustfulness of hers. Denying her fatigue, she roused herself, wondering briefly through which door Bolo had exited, the Nonagon-door or the Outside-door, as she had long ago named them; and then a moment before remembering that the Nonagon door’s knob didn’t squeak, she felt a *knowingness* that she had departed through the Outside-door; and the search was on.

Greeted by the clear blazing brightness of early Oliaza, she could at first only squint and blink. Her eyes adjusting, however, she surveyed her surroundings, searching first the dappled shadows of the nearby clusters of souse for the light, carefree movements of her friend, and then examining the lush plaza of splengrass that spread from her room to the Institute’s garish welcome walk for fresh indentations. Finding nothing on either of these scores, her eyes went next to the mystery tree that stood alone on this lawn of splengrass and with which Little Bolo was fascinated, and beyond that to the massive front gate of this former monasterial fortress, which would be open another hour or so. There, although she couldn’t say from this distance that her eyes weren’t playing tricks on her, she thought she glimpsed a sliver of the red damask skirt that Yaan had

taken to wearing (upon the very advice of the girl who called herself Haynta) disappearing around the corner. A light teasing laugh seemed, too, to skitter low across the grounds on the invisible colors of twinkle, overflowing with mysterious joy, and an ancient wisdom, too, understood by the spirit when a story is told.

“Bolo!” she called, “Yaan!” and ran heavily across the lawn and through the gate entrance, there slowing to a walk. Houses and trees that in this recently-constructed neighborhood seemed young and new in the shadowless gleam of mid-day, seemed old today, as evening came on—manifestations of long-forgotten spirits that had lived in this place before there were even such things as houses, perhaps. Shadows stretched towards the eastern fields like arms and fingers of these spirits, reaching towards a yesterday that they couldn’t let go. And all was silent, *too* silent, she thought, although late afternoon, at least where she came from, was a time of rest and eating, before people either came out to do their evening work, or to sit on their porches and enjoy the sliding of the day into night. No sound, not even of a breeze, broke the silent reverie of these ancient shadows, though. The cobblestone roads lay in a dead red-gray sheen, the scuff of her shoes as she shuffled forward seemed the fierce hissing snarl of a wildcat.

Her eyes turned toward the walnut grove, as if she hoped the echo of the janitor Nolk’s presence, could aid her in her search for her friend; there, a squirrel scrambled along a branch, breaking the afternoon’s deep silence. His movement disturbed a small flock of maroon-tinted yerrians, who rose with a fluttering of wings, and curled up in the eye-tricking blue above the tree, where sunlight sparkled in the sky. The silence swallowed this brief flurry of activity with such a completeness, however, that she couldn’t say for sure that it had really happened.

Finding no trace of Little Bolo in town, she decided to follow the shadows east; there, the horizon, bright when seen

from the comparative darkness of the shadows, beckoned. She followed the main road, the one which crossed between the neighborhood and the school and then curved south and became the Calico Way; but where it curved she went straight, crossing through a thin line of brush to the corner of two fields: one of hay, one in which black and white cows grazed.

The girl who called herself Haynta decided that of the two, the hayfield would make for more comfortable going. There, picturesque haystacks dotted the rolling plain, making the knee- and thigh-high grass seem an inviting carpet of sweetness. What kind of hay is that, anyway, she wondered. Timothy? Sweetgrass? Serrasa? Those were said to be aromatic. Bolo would know. The cowfield was surrounded by a twisted-board fence, a style notorious for bucking off climbers, especially non-agile ones such as herself, and while the cows certainly looked unthreatening, it was possible that a temperamental bull would be roaming about.

Nevertheless, even as she tromped through the hayfield, scanning the distances for Bolo, and half-expecting, half-hoping that she would jump out from behind a haystack laughing gaily and say, "There you are, Haynta!" she kept an eye on the cowfield as well. One never knew with Little Bolo; she might be playing with the cows.

But she wasn't, and she wasn't in the hayfield, either. At the limit of her eyesight, she detected movement in the vicinity of a farmhouse that sat, impossibly distant, like a white castle, beyond and above the endless undulations of the hayfield; but squinting through rounded hands, she saw that it was just a sheepdog trotting across a bright band of grass.

Here in the hayfield, but for the buzz of a few gnats, the whoosh of the grass against her skirt, and the crush of the grass beneath her shoes, silence reigned—a thrumming, humming silence, she thought, perhaps only the ringing in the ears that is caused by silence; and a golden silence: Gold-tipped green, waves of it, extended, unbroken, as far as she could see to the

east and south, to the road to the west and the cowfield to the north; the haystacks were turning gold as well, and even the air seemed golden, as if absorbing the sunlight that sparkled on the blue sky above. The farther one got into this hay field, the harder it was to distinguish anything from anything; all seemed golden. For all she knew, little golden people, fairies of the field, were watching her, or dancing in circles in the long grass; or perhaps other golden creatures, or monsters, of unknown size, shape, and motive, were rambling around, or *hunting*. Probably not, but creatures and monsters and fairies, while not *real*, did exist in stories; and that thrum of the silence suggested a certain lyrical energy, as when a story is told.

“Have you seen her?” she called to the cows, “Have you seen my friend? She’s about yay tall, all freckly-faced, red-golden hair.” She received a few bland gazes but no useful responses. And she walked on.

As she came at last to the edge of the hayfield, which was now adjacent to a similar hayfield, the cowfield having been left far behind, an oak and souse forest loomed before her. Peering into it, and somewhat reluctant to dare its deepening shadows this late in the day, she again heard what seemed distant laughter and then saw a flash of yellow, the color of Yaan’s favorite shirt, disappear behind a stout tree trunk and into the depth of the woods.

Although she thought that the yellow could have been a goldfinch, or else a trick of the eye caused by its association in her mind to the laughter, which itself could have been a misinterpretation of a bird’s call, she pressed onward (and inward), like Infin Gorilla pursuing that elusive infinite moment. After an initial thicket of nettle and bramble and clinging bushes, it was a relatively sparse wood, of large oak and souse and gold-tips, little understory, and a groundcover, it seemed to her, consisting only of various ivies and wildflowers. (If she’d have had the time to count the number of different plants that comprised this groundcover, she’d have been surprised at how many

hundreds she would have enumerated, but she wasn't looking for plants at the time, and in any case, it *was* a sparse wood.)

As she scanned the lengthening shadows for another glimpse of red or yellow, some part of her enjoying the cool air of the wood and its accompanying cool smell of dirt and bark and dead leaves, once in awhile calling "Bolo? Yaan?" her wavering voice fading uselessly into the continual scraping together of oak and souse leaves, she thought, with a start, that she saw a little face, dirty and big-eyed, looking at her from behind a tree, and then another from underneath a snail's umbrella, as the jilflower is sometimes called, in both cases the face disappearing so quick she couldn't say she hadn't imagined it. Frozen, and just about ready to run back the way she'd come to the relative safety of the hay field, she heard laughter again, unquestionably laughter this time, joyful laughter like Little Bolo's, riding on beckoning filaments of twarkle; and she forged onward, comforted by the sunlight that found its way to the forest floor in variegated stripes.

The forest, she noticed at some point, had deepened, with tall ferns, wide yarrs, and young goldtip trees crowding together around the larger souses and oaks, while brambles and briars began to catch at her sleeves and skirt; but she could sense, or see without knowing that she saw, that ahead, it thinned out into a glade. She caught the scent of spruce, which she thought strange since spruces didn't usually grow among oaks and souses, and at the same time she heard *voices*, and then a twittering and a low susurrations that increased in volume as she made her way forward, along with that beckoning of twarkle.

It soon became clear that this sound was the fluttering of a multitude of little wings, birds, restless, she would have said, in a tree, or trees. One of the voices, she had no doubt, was Little Bolo, the other was familiar, but she couldn't place it. It rose and fell in a poetic cadence that caressed every word as if it believed that in every utterance a story is told.

She followed the voices, never seeming to get any closer to them, until, without warning, her way was barred by a line of spruce and green-tip growing close enough together that she couldn't see anything beyond them. The smell of their resins was heavy in the air, almost like incense, along with another odor, something like honey, she thought, but not as sticky. The fluttering of wings was as loud and persistent, now, as the sound of a steady rain in the forest. The voices, of Bolo and the unknown other, continued, but she couldn't make out any of the words they were saying. A deep thrum seemed to vibrate through the earth, into her feet, into every tree in the forest; sunlight fell through the trees in a dazzling dapple of gold; fairies and other strange beings, she was strangely sure, watched her from behind logs, under ferns, and in the crooks of trees.

And suddenly she was afraid to go any farther. If she were to go through this line of trees into the glade that she sensed lay beyond it, she would be leaving the world she knew. It would be obliterated. All would be new, all would be strange; everything she had believed, everything she had been taught about the world, everything she *knew*, would be rendered obsolete, meaningless, unreal. Her life heretofore, then, would have been as nothing, she might as well have started at seventeen, and had a life expectancy of sixty or so instead of close to eighty. More to the point, the new existence that she would come to know if she stepped through might itself, at some point, be rendered obsolete, and then her life expectancy might as well be forty, or twenty, or two years, or a day. To go in there is to die, she thought; her heart thundered like a blacksmith's hammer.

"I can't," she whispered, but her hand was grabbing a branch to pull it aside, and her foot was stepping forward. The fluttering of wings was deafening for a moment and then she was through, into what could most properly be called a circle of trees, but which she still thought of as a glade, or grove. Spruce and green-tip made up the perimeter of this circle, which was

about twenty paces long and fifteen wide, standing side by side, like sentries, their branches interlocked, while a couple of gold-tips and a small oak spread branches upward within the clearing, shading a lush carpet of forest grass.

Overhead, sunlight sparkled in a blue blue *in a golden* sky. Around her, on all sides of the circle, cardinals and blue jays, goldfinches and bluebirds, yerrians and bluewings, flitted in and out of the crowded spruce and green-tip trees in dizzying combinations, variously tweeting, twittering, cheer-cheering, deedeede-ing, jeeking, and tyoo-ing. At the far end of the glade, Little Bolo was deep in conversation with a little red-gray dragon, the one from her dream, in fact, both of them seated comfortably upon a large, striated rock. The dragon turned its black eyes upon her, and with what seemed a smile, tapped Bolo's arm, "Fajee, the Fielder has arrived."

"Bolo," she stammered, "Yaan!"

Yaan beamed.

The little dragon beckoned to her with a tiny talon. "Welcome, Tahain! Won't you join us?"

As Tahain crossed the grove, a warm tingle spread through her body. Her chest felt both empty, and full to bursting, as if her organs were engulfed and buoyed by light. Her heart felt weightless, almost as if it wasn't even there, and yet it thrummed with a wild uncanny strength, as if embracing the wind, like a fluttering, no, like a great beating, of wings.

The story is told.

A story is told...

Appendix: Calendar

Lhael (“The Slow Awakening”)

Nanatoi (“Birth,” “Fire of the White Tree”)

Fildeweeray (“Path of the Stag”)

Runtani (“Rain of the White Tree”)

Janajli-Kli (“Glorious Existence”)

Sporch (“Days of the Evening Sun”)

Mowta-Wan (“Heart of Summer”)

Hobwan (“Reign of the Salamander”)

Sa (“The End of Summer”)

Oliaza (“Between the Worlds”)

Valakial (“The Coloring of the Earth”)

Thronku (“The Bridge to Shadowland”)

Ellukim (“The Darkening”)

Vathgor (“Death”)

Buuchuu (“The Long Night”)

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